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RELIGION

Atheist credits people for success not God

By Andrea R. Richards
THE CHARLOTTE POST

Is there a God? Was Christianity introduced to slaves to allow them to repent of their sins and go to heaven or to keep them obedient, unquestioning and docile? Have African Americans been brainwashed by religion?

Norm Allen Jr., of Buffalo, N.Y., believes so. He founded African Americans for Humanism in 1989.

Even though Allen was reared as a Baptist, now he denies the existence of God. He said his mother was very open-minded and encouraged him to think critically about everything, including religion.

At the end of his religious analysis, Allen, 38, concluded there is no God.

"We believe first and foremost that we as human beings have the right to take charge of our lives instead of placing emphasis on a supreme being," he said.

Allen became an atheist seven years ago and founded an atheist group for African Americans. African Americans for Humanism has about 500 members and is based in Buffalo.

"First of all, I rejected the notion that there is a supreme being even though I did see some positive things, but there were also some negatives. Basically, I saw religion as a paradox," Allen said. "Not enough black people question religion. A negative effect of religion teaches black people to have the pie in the sky mentality and believe that

we were put on this earth to suffer.

"A positive effect of religion produced the civil rights movement. It was largely influenced by religion."

Atheists believe in the trinity of science: reason, experience and observation.

Allen said atheists do believe in helping others, but they use non-religious approaches.

"Humanists put emphasis on critical thinking, human fact and human actions," he said. "If something positive happens in our lives, we give credit to the human beings responsible for that."

Allen founded the atheist organization in 1989 when he attended a conference about humanism and saw there were no African Americans at

"Not enough black people question religion...By challenging dogmas, then you have the freedom to grow."

—Norm Allen Jr., founder of African Americans for Humanism

the meeting.

AAH members believe that "the good life" can be achieved on earth through positive thinking, the sharing of ideas and enlightened self-interest. They also acknowledge the contributions of humanists of African descent to world history, such as poet Langston Hughes, author Zora Neale Hurston and historian W.E.B. DuBois.

They also challenge religious beliefs they feel are largely

responsible for the problems plaguing African American communities.

"They (AAH members) ask a lot of questions," Allen said. "They appreciate the emphasis on critical thinking. Often times, they say there aren't too many organizations in the black community that encourage critical thinking."

He encourages other African Americans to think about the origin of religious teachings and not just believe out of tra-

dition.

"By challenging dogmas, then you have the freedom to grow."

Now, the atheist group is looking forward to targeting younger African Americans "to grow" through music. A rap group in California, Razan Kane, has expressed interest in doing atheist-oriented rap music.

"Rap music is the best way to reach young people," Allen said.

Ruth was loyal

Sunday School Lesson

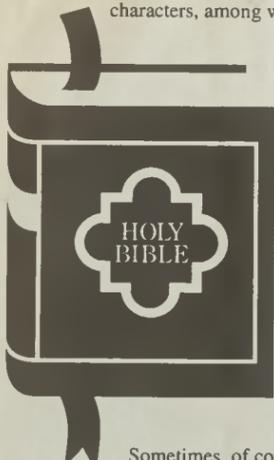
Devotional Reading: Psalm 119:59-72
Lesson Scripture: Ruth 1

This lesson and the next are based on the book of Ruth. This biblical story takes its title for the main character of the story, Ruth of Moab. In our English Bible, the book follows Judges, which provides its historical setting.

This connection is seen in the opening statement of the book, "Now it came to pass in the days when the judges ruled."

The small book seems to have several purposes. Besides showing how difficult times were during the era of the judges, it teaches qualities that God endorses: courage, duty to family, fear of God, honor, loyalty, and love. The main characters (Naomi, Ruth and Boaz) display these noble traits even under stress.

The book also warns God's people against dismissing foreign people simply because they are foreign. It shows that conversion, even by enemies, is possible and can bring blessing in unexpected ways. Another purpose of the book may be to show that David's sterling qualities could be traced to notable and honorable characters, among whom was Ruth.



The story of Ruth touches us because it gives us realistic glimpses of life in Judah prior to the time of the kings.

Americans, on average, change residences every three to five years. Ours is a mobile society. Moving is neither good nor bad of itself, but the motivations and results are often negative. We are a restless people. Many of us are without roots, family ties or close friends.

Sometimes, of course, people move for very practical reasons. Eleimelech and Naomi moved their family to Moab to escape a famine.

Work, income, food and shelter-chasing the necessities still keeps people on the move. Ruth's in-laws were by no means transient or vagrant. Once they were settled in Moab, they stayed at least ten years. When the land of Judah once again was productive and prosperous, Naomi chose to return to familiar surroundings and reestablish her home there.

Christians today must rediscover the church-family values of fellowship loyalty and faithfulness. "Church shopping" and "church hopping" have hurt the body. The spirit of community has suffered. Let us remember and return to our religious roots and be glad we are part of the family of God.

The Hebrew term hesed is one of the Bible's most powerful terms describing God's divine nature. The King James Version employs ten different English words to convey the meaning of this Hebrew term. Primary among these are lovingkindness, mercy, kindness and goodness. Other versions add loyalty and steadfast love.

When Naomi urged her daughters-in-law (Orpah and Ruth) to return to their families, She pronounced a benediction of God's kindness (hesed) upon them, even as they had shown to their deceased husbands, her sons. Later in the account (Ruth 3:10) another mention is made of Ruth's kindness (hesed).

Hesed has been defined as "covenant love" such as that of friend with friend, marriage partners with each other, and child of God with God. The significance of this quality is such that none of these relationships is ideally possible without it. Without loyal love, these relationships to sour or many times they are broken altogether. May this divine quality characterize each of us.

Closing the gap: In a move that will help bridge the gap between the church community and the gospel industry, Savoy chief executive Milton Biggum has pacted with Henry Lyons, president of the 8 million member strong, Nashville-based National Baptist Convention Inc., to record a National Baptist Convention mass choir at the group's annual September meeting.

Recruiting efforts are presently underway for the choir, which would be the first in the history of the convention. Biggum, who as a Baptist pastor, is a member of the convention, is excited.

"We're going to organize the mass choir, which means they are going to a new music convention within the National Baptist Convention," he said.

"We're going to open up the door to gospel music artists to come in and sing for the convention, and those artists do have to be just Savoy artists."

In the meantime, Biggum is prepping Shun Pace's latest effort, "A Wealthy Place" for release next month and is set to work in April on the next album from the New York Restoration Choir with Donnie McClurkin.

Going for Grammy gold: You can bet John P. Kee will be on hand in Los Angeles on Feb. 28 for the 38th annual



Shirley Ceasar

Grammy Awards. Believe it or not, the trip comes with his first-ever Grammy nomination for his latest release, "Show Up" with the New Life Community Choir. He'll face off with Donald Lawrence & the Tri City Singers ("Bible Stories"); the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir ("Praise Him...Live"); Hezekiah Walker & The Love Fellowship Crusade ("Live in New York"); Milton Brunson & the Thompson Community Choir ("Shout") in the category of "best gospel album by a

choir or chorus."

Meanwhile, squaring off in the coveted "best traditional soul gospel album" category are James Moore with the Mississippi Mass Choir - "Live At Jackson State University," the Blind Boys of Alabama - "I Brought Him With Me," Shirley Ceasar - "Shirley Ceasar Live...He will Come," the Mighty Clouds of Joy - "Power," and Pontella Bass - "No Ways Tired." Best contemporary soul gospel album nominees include Yolanda Adams ("More Than

A Melody"); Doug Williams ("Heartsongs"); CeCe Winans ("Alone In His Presence"); Anointed ("The Call"); Daniel Winans ("Not in My House"); and "Motown Comes Home." Congratulations to all of the nominees. (There really are no losers in this group.)

Coming attractions: It was easy to see why the Mississippi Mass Choir is the top choir in the gospel industry, as its members laid tracks on their fourth recording late last month. Recorded live at Jackson State University, standout cuts include "Lord, We Praise You" (almost assuredly the lead single) and "Holy Place," a stirring tribute to the late Frank Williams (with Melvin and Doug Williams sharing lead vocals). Other featured guest included Walter Hawkins, Milton Biggum, Bryan Wilson, and James Moore. The project is tentatively slated for a summer release.

This week's scripture:
"Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin; but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God,"
Philippians 4:19.

Religion and mental illnesses

By Carl Cooper
SPECIAL TO THE POST

Traditionally the African American church has always provided assistance and help to families and individuals in need of help and understanding with a problem in their personal lives - families and individuals may turn to the church for help with any number of concerns, from marital difficulties to drug and alcohol abuse, and mental illnesses.

We can see this type of support from black churches in providing a source of strength and spiritual guidance for congregation members. However, the alliance between clergy and mental health centers and mental health professionals working together has been lacking in the African American clergy. Unfortunately, this lack of cooperation between African American clergy and mental health centers and professionals has contributed to misunderstandings and fear about mental illness within the African American community in Charlotte.

I believe the African

American churches more than ever need to provide opportunities for a segment of the African American population who are mentally ill by offering volunteers and outreach programs to serve the needs of the mentally ill. The African American church is an ideal place to promote a better understanding of mental illness within the African American community because of the long-standing trust that African Americans have for their churches. I believe the African American churches can provide a vital role in ending this division by becoming advocates for the mentally ill.

I challenge African American clergy to give their churches and congregations a mission to become actively involved with the mentally ill. A good example of this active alliance and participation is exemplified in one church in Charlotte. An alliance between St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Charlotte and the local alliance chapter for the Mentally Ill are working together to provide a drop in center for the mentally ill to socialize and receive acceptance, feel welcome and loved, make new friends, have a

good time and not feel threatened. This ministry provides St. Luke's the opportunity to be a friend to those special people who find themselves so often isolated from society and needing somewhere to socialize. I challenge African American churches to become proactive in providing outreach programs to the mentally ill person and their families.

If there are any African American churches in Charlotte who would like to provide or sponsor outreach to the mentally ill, please contact the local chapter for the Alliance for the Mentally Ill at 333-8218.

Carl Cooper is a mental health professional and a member of the local chapter for the Alliance For The Mentally Ill.

Myths and Mental illnesses affecting African Americans:

There are many myths-untruths about mental illness within the African American community which tend to self-perpetuate misunderstandings about mental illnesses.

First of all mental illness are equal opportunity diseases. They do not discriminate by race. Mental illnesses know no boundaries - it affects people of any age, race, gender, or religious affiliation. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) studies indicate that there are approximately 28.9 million adults suffering from some mental illness disorder in America.

African Americans suffer no more or less of these disorders. The prevalence rates for most major depression, panic disorder - do not significantly differ for African Americans and non-African Americans. The mental illnesses are real illnesses, not emotional weaknesses or personality deficiencies. They are diagnosable and affect African Americans at similar rates to the general population.