

In God's Country

Thanks be to the American
Atheist

Tim Cavanaugh

*The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O'Hair, by
Bryan F. Le Beau, New York: New York Univer-
sity Press, 321 pages, \$29.95*

BEFORE THE U.S. Constitution, before long division, before sentence diagramming, the teachers at Blessed Sacrament School made sure I absorbed three lessons: that John F. Kennedy, America's greatest president, had been a Roman Catholic; that my left-handedness, a condition barely removed from mental retardation, would prevent me from ever achieving the sumptuously rounded, deftly tilting style of penmanship necessary for success in adulthood; and that Madalyn Murray O'Hair was, quite justly, the most hated woman in America.

While I shared the nuns' disapprobation of O'Hair, whose lawsuit against the Baltimore school system helped remove organized prayer from public schools, their argument that she was a national menace seemed at the time—the mid-1970s—as fantastical as the dogma of transubstantiation. The claim that O'Hair had made it “illegal to pray in schools” didn't square with our daily schedule of devotions. A few years later I transferred to public school, where December sing-alongs of “Silent Night” and “Oh Dreidel” foiled my expectations of godless sterility. If such post-sectarian neutrality was the mess O'Hair had made, it seemed an eminently reasonable mess.

It was in considering O'Hair as a figure that I saw the nuns' point. Mother of two illegitimate sons by two fathers, a Central Casting battle

ax more cunning than brainy, driven by a sense of miserable but conscientious maternalism, O'Hair made her case against religion as no polished lawyer or pointy-headed academic could have. She was one of us.

At the time she had already become a pre-Jerry Springer sideshow attraction, with touring debates against the Rev. Bob Harrington (“Chaplain of Bourbon Street”) and get-a-load-of-this appearances with Mike Douglas and Phil Donahue. O'Hair's angry lack of polish marked her as the kind of mom who might single you out for bitter sarcasm when it was her night to work the Little League refreshment stand. By the time of O'Hair's 1995 murder, the few Americans who noticed seemed to think she'd gotten what she deserved. That we all may owe Madalyn Murray O'Hair a debt of gratitude is a truth rarely acknowledged.

The achievement, and the downfall, of Bryan F. Le Beau's *The Atheist* is to whip O'Hair's flabby popular image back into shape, to show the dialectical brilliance she mixed in with her sailor talk, the intellectual muscle packed into that flower print muu-muu. This book fills an important gap in O'Hair biography. Until now



» Goodbye, Space Child

are troves of misdirected speculation about how various optimistic futures would look and how they would work. Misdirection also marks the work of such design institutions as Germany's Bauhaus, with its elite notion of a stripped-down, barely furnished world to come that the “workers” would gladly occupy. The American science slicks were a lot less somber about the future than were the European intellectuals, but far more insightful. The actual future turned out to be one of material, individuating plentitude and not at all of minimalist class conformity.

Space Age speculation drew on both of these approaches, and of course the Space Age stands out among various futures because, like the Atomic Age that it overlapped, it seemed to be taking shape. But only some of it—communications satellites, for example—reflected people's desires. Much of it was a state program established for geopolitical reasons, as part of the competition with the USSR, which meant that it was to follow the trajectory of the state's needs. As those needs shrank, as bureaucratic and budgetary issues buffeted NASA, the Space Age that depended on the state's shrinking dreams got ever smaller too.

Politically mandated futures don't develop, because the forces behind them are artificial. While many of the scientific achievements of the space program were certainly impressive (and many have indeed »

we've had to make do with bitter tell-alls by former associates or books such as *Madalyn Murray O'Hair: "Most Hated Woman In America"* (1998), a true-crime quickie written by Jon Rappaport and published by Truth Seeker, a rival atheist organization O'Hair was trying to take over just prior to her 1995 murder.

The Atheist is at heart an intellectual biography. For Le Beau, the evolution of O'Hair's atheist doctrines is where the real action is. Whole chapters, including a stretch of more than 100 pages, go to paraphrasing O'Hair's philosophy, as it was detailed in public comments, a diary, a radio program, and writings such as *Why I Am an Atheist* (1966) and *Freedom Under Siege* (1974). O'Hair, as represented here, lays out a compelling case against religion and for atheism as an honorable, inspiring system of belief. Whether that system ever

crossed the frontier into faith is a bit of woolgathering this book rarely indulges.

While O'Hair delights in mocking Catholic archaisms, biblical literalism, and other easy targets, she's equally tough on modern liberal theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Buber, and skeptical of the notion that Americans left religious intolerance back in the Old Country. She resurrects 19th-century atheist heroes such as the forgotten Republican jurist, polymath, and orator Robert Green Ingersoll, and coopts famous religious dissidents as atheists in all but name. Watching O'Hair cut through "freethinker" and "humanist" labels is as enjoyable as seeing a catty queen out "confirmed bachelors."

O'Hair's lectures include sustained notes on U.S. history, almost

a national counter-history, in which church-avoiding George Washington and stern foe of superstition Thomas Jefferson support church/state separation out of exasperation with religion rather than sympathy for it. There's a quibble over the addition of apocryphal religious phrases to the "Mrs. Bixby" letter attributed to Abraham Lincoln. In one riveting tale, O'Hair tracks the 19th-century history of efforts to establish a state religion.

Le Beau's version of O'Hair's personal history is less impressive. O'Hair led an interesting life, but Le Beau, a historian of documents rather than persons, seems unwilling to put much flesh on the bones. He appears to have conducted no interviews, relying on published sources for his portrait of O'Hair. Since she had almost as many enemies as there are Americans, this means the narrative draws heavily from derogatory works, most notoriously *My Life Without God* (1982), an autobiography and conversion narrative by her apostate son William Murray.

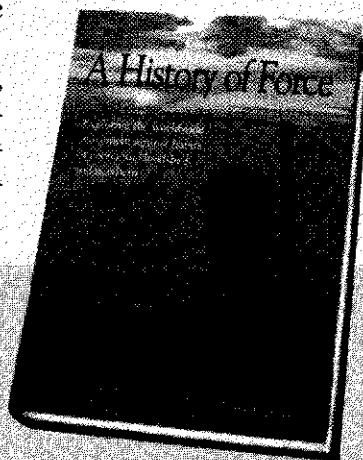
From these, a sketch of O'Hair does emerge. A quintessential New Deal daughter, she knew the American state firsthand, through World War II service as an officer in the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, in jobs with the Social Security Administration and local governments, and by obtaining various postwar government loans.

How she formed her ideas about the church, on the other hand, remains a mystery. In her own comments on the subject, O'Hair claimed to have come to atheism in a teenage intellectual awakening after reading the Bible through in one weekend. In her elder son's telling, O'Hair's quar-

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rel with the Almighty had less noble beginnings. The Catholic Army officer who knocked her up with William refused to divorce his wife. In one family legend, the pregnant Madalyn stood in an electrical storm and challenged God to prove his existence by striking her dead.

Whatever its cause, her Miltonic refusal to serve came to the nation's attention beginning in 1960, when Madalyn Murray (she would marry Richard O'Hair later in the decade) filed suit against the Baltimore Board of Education, objecting to mandatory Bible readings and prayer ses-

O'Hair's critique of prayer in public schools left untouched the central question of whether public education's mission of molding acceptable citizens is legitimate.

sions. *Murray v. Curlett*, as the case was called by the time it reached the Supreme Court (after being attached to *Schempp v. School District of Abington Township*, a similar case in Pennsylvania), was widely credited, and promoted by O'Hair herself, as the dramatic reversal of a rising tide (stirred by Cold War anti-communism) toward public prayer. Le Beau revises this impression. The legal heavy lifting in deciding that even nonsectarian prayer in public schools violated the First Amendment's Establishment Clause had already been done in *Engel v. Vitale*, an earlier Supreme Court decision. *Murray v. Curlett* went beyond *Engel* mainly by clarifying its conclusions.

O'Hair's greater misapprehension about her case was that it heralded a victory for atheism. School boards

had for several years been watering down prayer through mush-mouthed nondenominational language. Amicus curiae briefs for *Murray v. Curlett* were filed by the American Jewish Committee and the Synagogue Council of America (though not by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith). Edward and Sidney Schempp, O'Hair's co-plaintiffs, were Unitarians. The Supreme Court's decision did not favor atheism but merely acknowledged what Justice Tom Clark called America's "diversity of religious opinion."

O'Hair soared in the 1960s, building a comfortable personal fortune out of her American Atheists organization and carrying her war on religion to new fronts: sublunary Bible broadcasts by NASA astronauts, the "In God We Trust" inscription on U.S. currency, and so on. Big shots such as Billy Graham, however, gradually learned to steer clear of O'Hair, and she herself was uncomfortable with the absurd antics her position required. The Rev. Bob Harrington tour seems to have caused her intense private shame, and she quit after a few lucrative months.

The presidency of born-again Christian Jimmy Carter, followed by the high profile of evangelical Christianity under Ronald Reagan, demonstrated even to O'Hair that she was on a long slide toward irrelevance. The final insult came in 1989, when a Moscow Book Fair crowd ignored her atheist literature while grabbing 10,000 free New Testaments.

O'Hair's personal life brought frequent sadness. Son William, on whose behalf she had filed *Murray v. Curlett*, turned out to be a disappointment, a thrice-divorced drunk who handed his first child, Robin Ilene Murray, over to his mother to raise. Following a historic bender and a nonlethal shooting incident with the San Francisco Police Department, William found Jesus in a dream that seems to have been plagiarized from the Emperor Constantine. O'Hair's husband died slowly and painfully of cancer, American Atheists struggled for funds, and the atheist message, as measured by magazine subscriptions and mailing lists, found few takers in the United States.

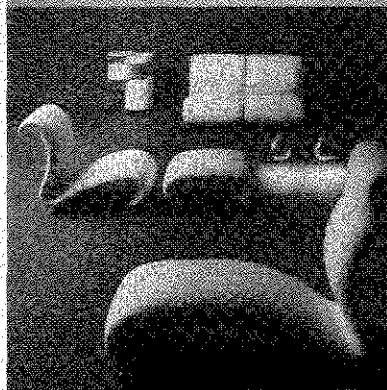
» Goodbye, Space Child

changed people's lives), the cultural Space Age that author Topham examines in his pages was an illusion. The stuff of future fashion, and future junk, was a design fad, rather like the design enthusiasm for Egypt that followed the unearthing of King Tut's tomb.

"The space age entered the home as a child's plaything," writes Topham, "but from the toy box it threatened to take over the whole house." Did it? Even if it didn't, his is nevertheless a good formulation. The future that lies in a toy box is a serious future. It reflects real fantasies, not political needs.

There's a Space Age still waiting to emerge from such a box, one into which a real Space Child—in fact, a future full of them—will be born.

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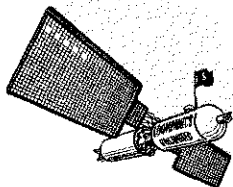
Le Beau's challenge in telling this story is that the principal players—Madalyn Murray O'Hair and the two family loyalists, second son Jon Garth Murray, and granddaughter Robin—are all dead. In 1995 all three were kidnapped by three men (one a former employee at O'Hair's office), held captive for a month, forced to empty their bank accounts, and finally murdered. Even then the crime was used to damn O'Hair; until

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the family's remains were found in 2001, rumors abounded that she had absconded with her organization's funds. The details of O'Hair's case have been explored in Rappaport's book and in a splendid episode of the A&E Network's *City Confidential*. Le Beau is mercifully brief in his treatment of it.

Assessing O'Hair's legacy, Le Beau is skeptical, ungenerous, and, I think, mostly correct. Atheism has found little traction, though it is largely tolerated with nonchalance. Nor is society noticeably more comfortable with the critical approach to religious belief O'Hair advocated. (Witness the ease with which Americans accepted the notion that the September 11 attack, the most dramatic expression of religious belief in our time, was the work of a few knaves out to hijack a great religion.) Ostentatious displays of piety that would have been considered in poor taste in O'Hair's time are near prerequisites for high elective office. The nation appears comfortable in a state of indeterminacy with regard to God's presence on our money and in the Pledge of Allegiance.

How then did O'Hair contribute to expanding freedom of conscience? Her case might be easier to make if her devotion to freedom had been clearer. O'Hair's flirtations with Sovietism (though somewhat mitigated by her later efforts to push communists away from the atheist movement) are indicative of an approach that attacked the church but rarely, if ever, the state. Her critique of prayer in public schools left untouched the more central question of whether public education's mission of molding acceptable citizens is a legitimate one. Rather than trying to remove

the nonprofit tax exemptions for churches, she might have asked why for-profit organizations must pay taxes in the first place. Is it any less absurd to pledge allegiance to an inanimate object than it is to mention God in the course of that pledge?

But religious freedom expands mostly through paradox. Martin Luther, a churlish priest and an anti-Semite even by the standards of his day, moved the question of individual conscience to the center of Western moral thinking. New England settlers, true believers in election and preterition, helped found a country where free will is given vast rein. Dante Alighieri, the most pope-intoxicated literary genius Europe ever produced, was also an early proponent of the separation of church and state.

In these terms, Madalyn Murray O'Hair may have had a lasting impact. She chased religion into the private sector, and there it flourishes, through homeschooling, through church-sponsored schools serving every creed, in overtly religious programming on network TV, in countless "spiritual" bestsellers. Most or all of these would have been anathema in the era of big-tent Cold War liberalism; in an age where the individual's duty to the state is no longer so clear, we live with them comfortably. Lately even some atheists have gotten into the act, demanding to be called "brights" and respected for their deeply held beliefs. Such a wild ending could only have been cooked up by a master storyteller, but God, as we know from His published works, has little appreciation for irony. ■

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In **Saying Yes**, Jacob Sullum of *Reason* argues that illegal drug use should be viewed the same way as drinking, with an emphasis on temperance rather than abstinence. Sullum rejects the idea that there is something inherently wrong with using chemicals to alter one's mood or mind. He uses compelling stories about real people to illustrate the point that there is such a thing as responsible drug use.

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Every Man a Demiurge

A matrix of your own

Jose Walker

IF YOU WANT to understand the *Matrix* trilogy, think of it as a capsule history of baby boom rock. The original *Matrix* is a three-chord riff of a movie: a simple, familiar idea—"What if reality is a great big fake?"—amplified and transformed into an irresistible hook. *The Matrix Reloaded* is a 1970s concept album: sprawling, pretentious, and ultimately incoherent, but brimming with ideas and virtuosic displays. And *The Matrix: Revolutions* is an over-the-hill pop star recycling someone else's material—the sort of music you'd hear on a Michelob commercial circa 1987.

Revolutions was already slated to be the final installment of the series. But even if it weren't, its chilly critical and commercial reception should guarantee that we won't find ourselves awash in ads next summer hyping *The Matrix 4: This Time It's Personal*. Indeed, this turgid tale marks the decadent stage not just of a Hollywood franchise but of a briefly vibrant genre.

In the late '90s and early '00s, a wave of films played with the notion that what we experience as reality is a false and perhaps malevolent illusion. The idea wasn't new—it was at least as old as Plato, and it had provided the backbone for many movies already—but suddenly it was everywhere: in *The Truman Show* (1998), *Dark City* (1998), *The Matrix* (1999), the Canadian *X-Men* (1999), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), the TV series *Harsh Realm* (1999–2000), *Waking Life* (2001), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), and others. The broader idea of prowling about in someone else's virtual world

turned up in still more places, from *What Dreams May Come* (1998) to *Being John Malkovich* (1999) to *The Cell* (2000). The quality of the films varied widely; the idea in their core did not.

You can credit part of this glut to

imitation. But too many of the projects were created simultaneously and independently for that to explain everything. For whatever reasons, audiences at the turn of the century were receptive to paranoid thrillers about inauthentic realities. Call it the demiurge cycle, after the Gnostic notion that our world is governed by a mad ersatz God.

With *Revolutions*, the cycle stops—not because hardly anyone seems to like it but because, unlike its two predecessors, it barely bothers to engage the idea that set the *Matrix* trilogy in motion. No longer trapped in a false world devised by an evil intelligence, our heroes are now trapped in an anthology of war movie clichés; no longer skeptical and alienated, they repeatedly proclaim the truest sort of faith. When critics comment on the demiurge genre, they usually cite the novelist Philip K. Dick as its patron saint. Well, there is no trace of Dick in *The Matrix: Revolutions*, unless he secretly ghostwrote an episode of *Battlestar Galactica*.

It's possible that I'm burying this genre too soon. By the time you read this, John Woo's *Payback*, based on one of Dick's early short stories, will be in theaters. And the author's best book, *A Scanner Darkly*, has been floating around indiewood for years, attached to such names as Richard Linklater and Steven Soderbergh. But neither of those stories really fits the virtual world formula. And while

Hollywood has optioned several other Dick tales, it remains to be seen whether they will revive the genre or simply confirm its death.

Of course, when Dick wrote about alternative realities, he went further than most of the movies he inspired. If the king of the world builders was J.R.R. Tolkien—the man who devoted so much of his life to creating the Middle Earth of *The Lord of the Rings*, complete with an elaborate philology for his imaginary languages—then Dick was the fellow who confessed, in an essay called "How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later," that he liked "to build universes that *do* fall apart. I like to see them come unglued, and I like to



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