

Carl Sagan: Quotations on Freethought & Religion

1. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. [Carl Sagan]
2. Such reports persist and proliferate because they sell. And they sell, I think, because there are so many of us who want so badly to be jolted out of our humdrum lives, to rekindle that sense of wonder we remember from childhood, and also, for a few of the stories, to be able, really and truly, to believe--in Someone older, smarter, and wiser who is looking out for us. Faith is clearly not enough for many people. They crave hard evidence, scientific proof. They long for the scientific seal of approval, but are unwilling to put up with the rigorous standards of evidence that impart credibility to that seal. [Carl Sagan]
3. One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We're no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us. It is simply too painful to acknowledge -- even to ourselves -- that we've been so credulous. (So the old bamboozles tend to persist as the new bamboozles rise.) [Carl Sagan, The Fine Art of Baloney Detection]
4. Finding the occasional straw of truth awash in a great ocean of confusion and bamboozle requires intelligence, vigilance, dedication and courage. But if we don't practice these tough habits of thought, we cannot hope to solve the truly serious problems that face us -- and we risk becoming a nation of suckers, up for grabs by the next charlatan who comes along. [Carl Sagan, The Fine Art of Baloney Detection]
5. I maintain there is much more wonder in science than in pseudoscience. And in addition, to whatever measure this term has any meaning, science has the additional virtue, and it is not an inconsiderable one, of being true. [Carl Sagan, The Burden Of Skepticism]
6. In science it often happens that scientists say, 'You know that's a really good argument; my position is mistaken,' and then they actually change their minds and you never hear that old view from them again. They really do it. It doesn't happen as often as it should, because scientists are human and change is sometimes painful. But it happens every day. I cannot recall the last time something like that happened in politics or religion. [Carl Sagan, 1987 CSICOP keynote address]
7. The idea that God is an oversized white male with a flowing beard who sits in the sky and tallies the fall of every sparrow is ludicrous. But if by God one means the set of physical laws that govern the universe, then clearly there is such a God. This God is emotionally unsatisfying... it does not make much sense to pray to the law of gravity.

[Carl Sagan]

8. You can't convince a believer of anything; for their belief is not based on evidence, it's based on a deep seated need to believe. [Dr. Arroway in Carl Sagan's Contact (New York: Pocket Books, 1985)]
9. A celibate clergy is an especially good idea, because it tends to suppress any hereditary propensity toward fanaticism. [Carl Sagan, Contact, pg 244]
10. The major religions on the Earth contradict each other left and right. You can't all be correct. And what if all of you are wrong? It's a possibility, you know. You must care about the truth, right? Well, the way to winnow through all the differing contentions is to be skeptical. I'm not any more skeptical about your religious beliefs than I am about every new scientific idea I hear about. But in my line of work, they're called hypotheses, not inspiration and not revelation. [Dr. Arroway in Carl Sagan's Contact (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), p. 162.]
11. What I'm saying is, if God wanted to send us a message, and ancient writings were the only way he could think of doing it, he could have done a better job. [Dr. Arroway in Carl Sagan's Contact (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), p. 164.]
12. Anything you don't understand, Mr. Rankin, you attribute to God. God for you is where you sweep away all the mysteries of the world, all the challenges to our intelligence. You simply turn your mind off and say God did it. [Dr. Arroway in Carl Sagan's Contact (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), p. 166.]
13. The question [Do you believe in God?] has a peculiar structure. If I say no, do I mean I'm convinced God doesn't exist, or do I mean I'm not convinced he does exist? Those are two very different questions. [Dr. Arroway in Carl Sagan's Contact (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), p. 168.]
14. My faith is strong I don't need proofs, but every time a new fact comes along it simply confirms my faith. [Palmer Joss in Carl Sagan's Contact (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), p. 172.]
15. You see, the religious people -- most of them -- really think this planet is an experiment. That's what their beliefs come down to. Some God or other is always fixing and poking, messing around with tradesmen's wives, giving tablets on mountains, commanding you to mutilate your children, telling people what words they can say and what words they can't say, making people feel guilty about enjoying themselves, and like that. Why can't the gods leave well enough alone? All this intervention speaks of

incompetence. If God didn't want Lot's wife to look back, why didn't he make her obedient, so she'd do what her husband told her? Or if he hadn't made Lot such a shithead, maybe she would've listened to him more. If God is omnipotent and omniscient, why didn't he start the universe out in the first place so it would come out the way he wants? Why's he constantly repairing and complaining? No, there's one thing the Bible makes clear: The biblical God is a sloppy manufacturer. He's not good at design, he's not good at execution. He'd be out of business if there was any competition. [Sol Hadden in Carl Sagan's Contact (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), p. 285.]

16. The Earth is an object lesson for the apprentice gods. 'If you really screw up,' they get told, 'you'll make something like Earth.' [Dr. Arroway in Carl Sagan's Contact (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), p. 286.]
17. Part of my message is that we're not central to the purpose of the Cosmos. What happened to me makes us all seem very small. [Dr. Arroway in Carl Sagan's Contact (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), p. 420.]
18. (When asked merely if they accept evolution, 45 percent of Americans say yes. The figure is 70 percent in China.) When the movie Jurassic Park was shown in Israel, it was condemned by some Orthodox rabbis because it accepted evolution and because it taught that dinosaurs lived a hundred million years ago--when, as is plainly stated at every Rosh Hashonhan and every Jewish wedding ceremony, the Universe is less than 6,000 years old. [Carl Sagan, _The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark_, p. 325]
19. I would love to believe that when I die I will live again, that some thinking, feeling, remembering part of me will continue. But much as I want to believe that, and despite the ancient and worldwide cultural traditions that assert an afterlife, I know of nothing to suggest that it is more than wishful thinking. The world is so exquisite with so much love and moral depth, that there is no reason to deceive ourselves with pretty stories for which there's little good evidence. Far better it seems to me, in our vulnerability, is to look death in the eye and to be grateful every day for the brief but magnificent opportunity that life provides. [Carl Sagan, 1996 in his article In the Valley of the Shadow Parade Magazine Also, Billions and Billions p. 215]
20. The politicians and the religious leaders and the weapons scientists have been at it for a long time and they've made a thorough mess of it. I mean, we're in deep trouble. [Carl Sagan, A&E Biography interview]
21. Life is but a momentary glimpse of the wonder of this astonishing universe, and it is sad

to see so many dreaming it away on spiritual fantasy. [Carl Sagan]

22. In many cultures it is customary to answer that God created the universe out of nothing. But this is mere temporizing. If we wish courageously to pursue the question, we must, of course ask next where God comes from? And if we decide this to be unanswerable, why not save a step and conclude that the universe has always existed? [Carl Sagan, Cosmos, page 257]
23. Skeptical scrutiny is the means, in both science and religion, by which deep thoughts can be winnowed from deep nonsense. [Carl Sagan]
24. Many statements about God are confidently made by theologians on grounds that today at least sound specious. Thomas Aquinas claimed to prove that God cannot make another God, or commit suicide, or make a man without a soul, or even make a triangle whose interior angles do not equal 180 degrees. But Bolyai and Lobachevsky were able to accomplish this last feat (on a curved surface) in the nineteenth century, and they were not even approximately gods. [Carl Sagan, Broca's Brain]
25. We should be teaching our children the scientific method and the reasons for a Bill of Rights. With it comes a certain decency, humility and community spirit. [Carl Sagan, on secular morality]
26. One prominent American religion confidently predicted that the world would end in 1914. Well, 1914 has come and gone, and - whole the events of that year were certainly of some importance - the world did not, at least so far as I can see, seem to have ended. There are at least three responses that an organized religion can make in the face of such a failed and fundamental prophecy. They could have said, Oh, did we say '1914'? So sorry, we meant '2014'. A slight error in calculation. Hope you weren't inconvenienced in any way. But they did not. They could have said, Well, the world would have ended, except we prayed very hard and interceded with God so He spared the Earth. But they did not. Instead, they did something much more ingenious. They announced that the world had in fact ended in 1914, and if the rest of us hadn't noticed, that was our lookout. It is astonishing in the fact of such transparent evasions that this religion has any adherents at all. But religions are tough. Either they make no contentions which are subject to disproof or they quickly redesign doctrine after disproof. The fact that religions can be so shamelessly dishonest, so contemptuous of the intelligence of their adherents, and still flourish does not speak very well for the tough-mindedness of the believers. But it does indicate, if a demonstration was needed, that near the core of the religious experience is something remarkably resistant to rational inquiry. [Carl Sagan, Broca's Brain]

27. In a democracy, opinions that upset everyone are sometimes exactly what we need. We should be teaching our children the scientific method and the Bill of Rights. [Carl Sagan & Ann Druyan]
28. It means nothing to be open to a proposition we don't understand. [Carl Sagan]
29. There are many hypotheses in science which are wrong. That's perfectly all right; they're the aperture to finding out what's right. Science is a self-correcting process. To be accepted, new ideas must survive the most rigorous standards of evidence and scrutiny. [Carl Sagan, Cosmos television series]
30. I worry that, especially as the Millennium edges nearer, pseudoscience and superstition will seem year by year more tempting, the siren song of unreason more sonorous and attractive. Where have we heard it before? Whenever our ethnic or national prejudices are aroused, in times of scarcity, during challenges to national self-esteem or nerve, when we agonize about our diminished cosmic place and purpose, or when fanaticism is bubbling up around us-then, habits of thought familiar from ages past reach for the controls.
31. The candle flame gutters. Its little pool of light trembles. Darkness gathers. The demons begin to stir. [Carl Sagan, The Demon-Haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark]
32. If we're capable of conjuring up terrifying monsters in childhood, why shouldn't some of us, at least on occasion, be able to fantasize something similar, something truly horrifying, a shared delusion, as adults? [Carl Sagan, The Demon Haunted World, p. 109]
33. If some good evidence for life after death were announced, I'd be eager to examine it; but it would have to be real scientific data, not mere anecdote. As with the face on Mars and alien abductions, better the hard truth, I say, than the comforting fantasy. [Carl Sagan, The Demon-Haunted World, p. 204 quoted in 2000 Years of Disbelief, Famous People with the Courage to Doubt, by James A. Haught, Prometheus Books, 1996]
34. If you want to save your child from polio, you can pray or you can inoculate....Try science. [Carl Sagan, The Demon-Haunted World, p. 30, quoted in 2000 Years of Disbelief, Famous People with the Courage to Doubt, by James A. Haught, Prometheus Books, 1996]
35. Since World War II, Japan has spawned enormous numbers of new religions featuring the supernatural.... In Thailand, diseases are treated with pills manufactured from

pulverized sacred Scripture. Witches are today being burned in South Africa.... The worldwide TM [Transcendental Meditation] organization has an estimated valuation of \$3 billion. For a fee, they promise to make you invisible, to enable you to fly. [Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World*, p. 16, from James A. Haught, ed., *2000 Years of Disbelief, Famous People with the Courage to Doubt*]

36. In Italy, the Inquisition was condemning people to death until the end of the eighteenth century, and inquisitional torture was not abolished in the Catholic Church until 1816. The last bastion of support for the reality of witchcraft and the necessity of punishment has been the Christian churches. [Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World*, p. 413, from James A. Haught, ed., *2000 Years of Disbelief, Famous People with the Courage to Doubt*, by James A. Haught, Prometheus Books, 1996]
37. If we long to believe that the stars rise and set for us, that we are the reason there is a Universe, does science do us a disservice in deflating our conceits?...For me, it is far better to grasp the Universe as it really is than to persist in delusion, however satisfying and reassuring. [Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark*]
38. At the extremes it is difficult to distinguish pseudoscience from rigid, doctrinaire religion. [Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark*]
39. Avoidable human misery is more often caused not so much by stupidity as by ignorance, particularly our own ignorance about ourselves. [Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark*]
40. Think of how many religions attempt to validate themselves with prophecy. Think of how many people rely on these prophecies, however vague, however unfulfilled, to support or prop up their beliefs. Yet has there ever been a religion with the prophetic accuracy and reliability of science? [Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark*]
41. Is it fair to be suspicious of an entire profession because of a few bad apples? There are at least two important differences, it seems to me. First, no one doubts that science actually works, whatever mistaken and fraudulent claim may from time to time be offered. But whether there are any miraculous cures from faith-healing, beyond the body's own ability to cure itself, is very much at issue. Secondly, the expose' of fraud and error in science is made almost exclusively by science. But the exposure of fraud and error in faith-healing is almost never done by other faith-healers. [Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark*]

42. Our species needs, and deserves, a citizenry with minds wide awake and a basic understanding of how the world works. [Carl Sagan, The Demon-Haunted World]
43. Advances in medicine and agriculture have saved vastly more lives than have been lost in all the wars in history. [Carl Sagan, The Demon-Haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark]
44. Virtually every major technological advance in the history of the human species-- back to the invention of stone tools and the domestication of fire-- has been ethically ambiguous. [Carl Sagan, The Demon-Haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark]