

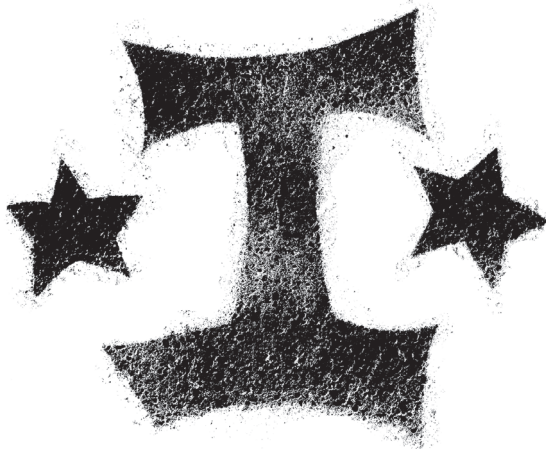
**Advice
for SPIRITUAL
Revolutionaries**

HOLY ★ RASCALS

RAMI SHAPIRO



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO



The mind of a
RASCAL
an unauthorized
autobiography

Truth is one.
Different people call it by different names.
All of them are wrong.

RR

PROLOGUE A Holy Rascal Manifesto

Religiosity is the human capacity for making meaning out of the raw facts of human existence. Brand-name religions have abandoned the making in order to worship the made. While religion at its best calls us to a community of the curious and a unity beyond dogma and tribalism, religion at its worst calls us to worship the very things that divide us and to pit people against one another in the name of one fantasy or other.

Using humor, play, and fearless joy, holy rascals free people from idolatry and open them to the creative art of meaning making at the heart of human religiosity. In so doing we free brand-name religions from the madness that robs them of creativity and meaning as well.

We welcome all religious teachings that promote dignity, justice, compassion, humility, respect, awe, and love for all beings. We reject all religious teachings that promote fear, hatred, and the exploitation or demonization of the other. And we shun all Gods who sanction violence in this world or the next.

**The God® who can be branded
is not the Eternal God.
The same is true of the God®
who can be copyrighted.**

RR

We call upon peoples of every religion to cleanse their texts and teachings of violence, injustice, and hatred; to boldly speak out when their religion is hijacked by evil; and to continually move their religion beyond the zero-sum world view of us *against* them and toward the nonzero world view of all of us together.

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INTERVIEW WITH A RASCAL **AltGuru Talks with Rabbi Rami**

AltGuru Should I call you His Holy Rascalness Rabbi Rami?

Rabbi Rami Rabbi Rami is fine. I only use that title for state dinners.

AG And how often does that happen?

RR Never, but I like to be prepared. I was lecturing in New Delhi with His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who, by the way, is not my favorite: when it comes to Dalai Lamas and Doctors Who, I prefer the Ninth, and I was tempted to have myself introduced in a similar fashion, but then I considered the bad karma that might accrue and went with Rabbi Rami instead.

AG Do you believe in karma?

RR No, but I could be wrong. That's why I'm ready to join every religion on the off chance that one of them might be right.

AG Where's the integrity in that?

RR Integrity? I just want to be on the winning team. I don't want to be burning in hell and have the guy burning next to me lean over and say, "Well, at least we have our integrity." Screw integrity! I want the brass ring.

AG And the brass ring is?

RR Heaven, Nirvana, the Pure Land, salvation, reincarnation as a rich guy—all the marketing promises religions make to entice me to join and convince me to pay.

*Karma is the invention of the powerful
used to explain to the powerless why
they are not among the powerful.*

RR

AG There are so many competing rings; which one do you pursue?

RR I pursue the ones that agree with me.

AG So you are the final arbiter of truth?

RR Of course. If you believe in “this” and not “that,” it is because, for whatever reason, “this” makes more sense to you than “that.” There is no way to know you’re right; you just follow your gut or your conditioning and then deny you are doing so in order to pretend you are not the final arbiter of truth. But you are. There’s no escaping it.

AG Is there no such thing as Truth with a capital T?

RR I think there is, but I don’t think it can be put into words and marketed to us as a “this” or a “that.” You come to Truth when you free yourself from “this” and “that.” And once you’re free from “this” and “that,” you’re free to play with “this” and “that” for the sheer joy of playing. This is what Ch’an Master Seng-Ts’an meant when he said, “Seek not after Truth; cease only to cherish opinions.” Free yourself from the truth claims of religion and see the Truth to which no religion can lay claim.

AG Where did the term *holy rascal* come from?

RR From Sister Jose Hobday, a Seneca elder and Franciscan nun. After listening to a talk I gave at the Aspen Chapel in Aspen, Colorado, Sister Jose called out, “He’s a holy rascal!” It stuck.

AG Do you know what she meant by it?
RR Holy rascals use the language of the holy—religious language, spiritual language—to unmask the absurdities of religion and spirituality. Holy rascals aren't against religion; we only want people to see religion for what it is—a cultural construct—rather than what religions claim to be—absolute Truth.

AG What does it mean that religions are cultural constructs?
RR All religions are human narratives carrying the memes and metaphors we use to create meaning out of the raw facts of our existence. We are meaning-making animals. Religion is a vehicle for creating, preserving, and perpetuating meaning.

AG So religions aren't true?
RR Religions carry Truth the way a thermos carries coffee. You drink from a thermos; you don't drink the thermos itself.

AG Yet religions claim to be true.
RR Yes, and often exclusively so. For example, Jesus teaches the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31), a teaching common to all religions, but it is Jesus's divinity and not the Golden Rule that defines Christianity's claim to being true. If it were the rule, Christianity couldn't claim superiority over any other religion that teaches the rule.

*Religions go bad when the
search for Truth is replaced by
the preservation of power.*
RR

When I compare wash powders Sudso and Osdus, I suppose that I am comparing similar chemicals and that my choice of one over the other could easily be reversed. . . . [This is not the case with religion.] The Muslim does not view Christianity as a very similar product that with a bit of tweaking could be every bit as attractive. . . . The religion to which one adheres is the truth; the religion one rejects is the world of the devil.

STEVE BRUCE, in *Religions as Brands*

AG Is the religion of the holy rascal true?

RR Holy rascality isn't a religion, and holy rascals come from all religions and none. While we have no official theology, we are drawn to the Perennial Wisdom at the mystic heart of all religions: All is God, Brahman, Reality, Universe, the Mother, the Absolute, however named; you can know Reality directly; knowing Reality leads to living justly, kindly, and for the benefit of all; and knowing Reality and living justly, kindly, and for the benefit of all is the true calling of humanity. Our task is to free religion from the parochial and irrational and for the perennial and sane.



**Toto,
I've a feeling we're not
in Kansas anymore.
Dorothy**

AG So Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Buddha are fictional characters?

RR Almost certainly. While I don't doubt that Jesus was a historical figure, the Jesus we know from Saint Paul and the authors of the Gospels is the creation of Saint Paul and the authors of the Gospels. Jesus of Nazareth is not nearly as important as Jesus of narrative. Does it really matter whether Jesus or the Buddha preached the teachings attributed to them? Not at all; it is the wisdom in the teachings that matter, not their historicity.

AG So holy rascals are the exposers of stories?

RR Holy rascals are spiritual culture jammers who use humor, play, creativity, and critical thinking to reveal the human origins of religions and how religions mask their true origins behind the conceit of divine origins. Religion is a human construct for the creation, preservation, and perpetuation of meaning and meaning making. Sometimes religion becomes corrupted into fear-based systems of control that promote enmity between people and the economic and political elevation of a privileged religious, financial, political, and military class. Holy rascals pull back the curtain on that ruling class to free people from blindly following them. We want people to know that the "divine" behind the "divine right of kings" is simply a puppet of the kings themselves.

*Sweetheart,
even Kansas isn't in
Kansas anymore.
Toto*

Once you realize that every religion is using the same claim as Coke—"It's the real thing"—you cannot help but realize that, like Coke, every religion is filled with fizz.

RR

AG Holy rascals reveal the emperor has no clothes, then.

RR Absolutely. Without clothes, the emperor is no longer emperor. The clothes are the stories the emperor tells in order to justify being emperor. This works only if the emperor can convince us that these stories are really histories. Holy rascals examine these stories to reveal the constructed nature of the emperor's power and use humor to free people from stories that no longer serve a universal quest for global justice, compassion, and meaning.

AG What do you mean by "brand-name religions"?

RR A brand is a story developed for a specific product that distinguishes it from similar products. A brand-name religion is a religion whose story distinguishes it from other religions. The Jewish brand is "We are God's Chosen People." The Muslim brand is "We've got God's final Prophet and uncorrupted Revelation." Every clergyperson is marketing a brand. That's why a Methodist can no more discover that Krishna is Christ than the marketers of Coke can discover that Pepsi is "the Real Thing" or than the marketers of Pepsi can discover that Coke is "the Choice of a New Generation."

AG Are you saying religion is the same as Coke and Pepsi?
RR Like religion, Coke and Pepsi compete against each other over story, market share, and shelf space, but—and here is where religion differs from other products—the good people at Coca-Cola don't seek to keep Coke drinkers from marrying Pepsi drinkers, and the good people at Pepsi have yet to declare jihad on those of us who prefer Coke, and neither imagines the other will burn in hell for their soft drink preference. Of course, I can't speak for Dr. Pepper.

There can be no doubt that *branding as a concept* is applicable to religious phenomenon. Religions . . . have brand names: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Christian Science. They normally have . . . easily recognizable *brand logos*: the cross or fish for Christianity, the Yin-Yang for Taoism, the star and crescent for Islam, the Lotus flower for Buddhism, the star of David for Judaism. They have “brand stories” (myths) that are embodied in rituals, objects, works of art, buildings, and clothing.

JÖRG STOLZ AND JEAN-CLAUDE USUNIER,
in Religions as Brands

AG What about clergy? Do we really need them?
RR Sure, but to see why, let me change analogies for a second. Clergy are like Dungeon Masters in the Dungeons & Dragons role-playing game. If you want to play the game, you need a Dungeon Master to weave the story. If you want to play the game called Catholic Mass, for example, you need Catholic priests to literally turn wafer and wine into the body and blood of Christ. No one else can do that. So Catholic priests are essential to the Catholic game. The same is true of other clergy in the context of their games.

AG Calling religion a game seems demeaning.
RR All life is a game or a complex of games, so the issue isn't game or no game, but what kind of game you are playing. There are two kinds of games: finite zero-sum games and infinite nonzero games. The goal of finite zero-sum games is to win at the expense of the other. Tennis, for example, is a finite zero-sum game. The goal is to end the game by defeating your opponent. The goal of infinite nonzero games is to keep the game going. Playing rather than winning is the point. Friendship is an example of an infinite game. The goal of friendship is to keep the friendship going, not to end the friendship with one friend winning at the expense of the other.

