

Magicians say their craft makes them see faith as just hocus-pocus

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

October 27, 2011

c. 2011 Religion News Service

(RNS) Magician Penn Jillette and his shorter, quieter partner Raymond Teller have mystified audiences around the world with their card tricks and other illusions that would make even Harry Houdini proud.

With a Showtime TV series that seeks to disprove supernatural beliefs, including religious ones, the duo have long been a public face of atheism and skepticism.

Now, Jillette, in his new book, "God, No!," says he has little use for performers who try to use magic tricks to lure audiences into a spiritual message. Magic doesn't make someone an atheist, he says, but it makes it a lot harder to be a believer.

"It's always astonished me how any magician can be spiritual," he writes before lambasting magicians who connect the loosely mystical or the vividly Christian with sleight-of-hand. "It seems like depicting the most important event in one's philosophy with a \$19.95 trick from a joke shop cheapens it a bit."

Jillette, 56, is not alone in his views. A number of prominent and influential magicians say they connect their magic to their lack of religious beliefs. They've done enough hocus-pocus to understand the lure of religious belief, but their evidence-based view of the world is also why they don't buy it.

"As magicians, we stand in the doorway of wonder and lead people through," said Joshua Jay, a New York-based magician, atheist, and author of "Magic: The Complete Course."

"But the price I pay as a magician is that I, myself, can never experience magic again. ... The more you understand about magic the harder it is to make a leap of faith because we know so much of what people think remains unknown is not

supernatural."

No one is suggesting that interest in magic turns someone, presto-chango, into a skeptic or unbeliever. Indeed, the Fellowship of Christian Magicians has members all over the world, and magician Jeff McBride holds a popular gathering of magicians who align magic with the mystical.

But the list of current and former professional magicians who are skeptics and/or atheists includes not only Penn and Teller and Jay, but also James Randi, Jamy Ian Swiss, Banachek and Joe Nickell.

"It isn't automatic that if you learn magic you'll become a skeptic of the supernatural," said D.J. Grothe, president of the Virginia-based James Randi Educational Foundation, which debunks supernatural claims and was founded by Randi.

"But knowing magic does give you a leg up on how the mind works and how easy it is to be deceived. And from there, skepticism can be a fortunate result."

While some religious groups consider magic the work of the devil, it hasn't always been the case. Early civilizations elevated holy men, and their rituals were often seen as magic by their tribes.

In the 17th century, Archbishop of Canterbury John Tillotson speculated that the term "hocus-pocus" was rooted in the Latin "hoc est corpus" in the Catholic Mass, when the bread and wine is mystically transformed into Jesus' body and blood.

In 1584, the English nobleman Reginald Scot published "The Discoverie of Witchcraft," in which he held that magic and witchcraft must be rejected by reason -- an idea that contemporary skeptics embrace.

Very quickly, magicians lost their mystical status and became stage performers. Houdini, perhaps history's most famous magician, dedicated much of his career to exposing charlatan mediums and spiritualists.

Jay cites Houdini as an influence. Like Houdini, he was raised Jewish. What drew him to magic at age 7 eventually drew him to skepticism and, finally, atheism.

"It is a curiosity to understand how things work," he said. "I always tended towards atheism, but magic made it OK. It sort of nurtured that quest for

understanding the underpinning of things and the love of science."

Jillette came to magic, skepticism and atheism differently. At age 11, his parents gave him an "Amazing Kreskin" game that purported to be based on extra-sensory perception. Unable to make the tricks work, Jillette hated magic because he felt it was based on lies.

In his 20s he met Randi and Teller, and came to believe that magic could illuminate truths -- about the universe, the brain, humanity, everything. Today, he says magic, skepticism and atheism are "my whole life."

"I came to magic because of being a skeptic," he said in an interview. "I think that sharing the truth with other people matters. That's all. It matters for aesthetic purposes, artistic purposes, emotional purposes and I think it matters for morality."

Not all magicians -- even those who are skeptics -- agree that magic and spirituality don't mix.

"I think there is a deeper and more real link between magic and spirituality than between magic and atheism," said Eugene Burger, a teacher of magic who also holds a divinity degree. "I think for most people who have moved from magic to atheism it is based on a false generalization -- that because some things are tricks, all things are tricks."

Burger, a self-described skeptic, sees a spiritual image in the famous magic trick where three separate rings become joined as one. It's really a metaphor for how broken people want to be restored, he said.

"The magician has a role to play," Burger said. "It is reminding people who grew up in a highly technological society of things we are in danger of forgetting. Things are not always what they seem to be. Magic says what you think is impossible might be possible after all."