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Good Atheists

Some days, all I do is close my eyes and try to see if one of the lawyers in my mind's court can come up with anything to stump the other. Any interesting questions are fair game, and no questions are dismissed until I've come up with an answer.

To the disapproval of many of my fellow Americans, I do not believe in God. My disbelief in contemporary religions is matched by the religious believer's disbelief in every religion but their own, but my skepticism goes one deity too far for many people. I don't claim to be absolutely certain about God's nonexistence—at least not more or less than how I feel about things like ghosts, psychics, and undetectable fairies in gardens, which all equally lack credible evidence. That's not an attack on religion any more than a prayer is a crusade against atheism; it's just an honest report of what I believe in my head and my heart. But before I even get a chance to explain myself, I'm often branded as an arrogant know-it-all. The truth is that I welcome discussion, and if someone comes along and convinces me of their beliefs, then I'll readily admit it.

However, I do not welcome the hateful, close-minded treatment of atheists that American society has deemed acceptable and made normal. We haven't done anything to deserve being demeaned as immoral people leading meaningless lives, and yet that is exactly how we are commonly slandered.

“No, I don’t know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered as patriots,” said George H. W. Bush when he was campaigning to become president in 1987. “This is one nation under God.”

Instead of being appalled by such blunt discrimination, Americans decided that sounded fine and voted him into office.

I wasn’t always an atheist though. I was raised in a loving Catholic family, and for most of my childhood, we went to church together every Sunday. As soon as I was old enough, I signed up to be an altar server, and within a few years, I had earned the highest possible rank. I even wanted to become a priest for a while.

I’m ashamed to confess that I too used to have a very negative opinion of atheists though. I always prided myself as someone who considered every side of an argument, and yet up through my early teenage years, I arrogantly spewed claims that atheism made no sense and that anybody who didn’t see this must be unintelligent. But I never said anything like what my favorite priest told me.

One day when I was walking home from school, some questions about God occurred to me that my fourteen-year-old mind couldn’t immediately come up with answers for. Since there was a park on the way, I decided to take a detour through the moist, freshly cut grass and the perfectly trimmed palm trees to sit and ponder for a while in the shade of the gazebo at the center. I folded my arms, closed my eyes, and let the lawyers in my head begin arguing their cases. By the time the breeze had evolved from pleasant to bone-chilling, I still didn’t have all the answers worked out though.

My church coincidentally was across the street from the park, so I decided to stop by the parish and see if the priest had a moment to see me. I'd gone to him many times before and felt close to him. He always had good, intellectually satisfying answers.

I only had to wait for a few minutes before he invited me into his humble office. The spartan, off-white walls left only enough space for a crucifix, a bookshelf, his mahogany desk, and chairs for both of us, but there was a warmth in how the priest welcomed me into the space that made the stuffiness bearable. It also helped that he opened a window and let the sunlight wash over the room. We sat down, and I began to ask him my questions.

"Father if God is all-powerful and can make anything, does that mean He can make something more powerful than Himself?"

"Being all-powerful means being able to do all possible things, which He can. The Lord is infinitely great, and He'll always be the greatest of all things. So no, he can't make something more powerful than Himself."

I mulled it over for a minute, decided I liked his answer, and moved on to the next thing I wanted to hear him explain. At school, we had just been introduced to *Dante's Inferno*, which raised questions about God's idea of justice.

"Father, is it true that everybody who isn't a baptized Christian goes to hell? Even babies and people like Gandhi?"

"Several centuries ago, the bishops met to discuss this. The conclusion they eventually reached was that the Lord judges everybody personally and that he loves all of His children. That's why he gave everybody around the world a natural sense of right and wrong. He wants us to be with Him in heaven, so we all have it within our power, even people who never come

to know Jesus Christ.” He must have seen the worried look still on my face because he chuckled reassuringly. “Yes, somebody like Gandhi would almost certainly be in heaven. And I’m sure he takes care of the babies.”

That was a huge relief to hear because the alternative would have been very difficult to reconcile with my most basic sense of fairness.

Now it was time for my last question of the day. This one wasn’t an interesting question I’d stumbled across and just wanted to hear his answer to. I had come up with this one completely on my own. The other two questions had been serious too, sure, but this one was more concerning because I had been totally unable to come up with any answer whatsoever.

“Father, if God told Abraham that his mission was to spread His Word, then why didn’t He just appear to everybody with His Word like He did for Abraham?”

There was no good, satisfying answer this time. The conversation drifted all sorts of directions, from vague statements about Abraham having been very good to the even more vague mysteriousness of God’s divine plan for the world. We drifted to the necessity of that plan, and from there, to the necessity of God’s existence. Then, he said it.

“People that are atheists might as well just kill themselves,” he said in the same objective tone as his answers to my other questions. “If they truly believe that life has no meaning and that there is no afterlife, then why wouldn’t they?”

That was all I got.

I went home troubled by everything. I hadn’t meant for my questions or his answers to be connected at all, but suddenly they were, and they lined up in a way that deeply bothered me. The doors to my courtroom exploded open, and an endless stampede of shouting lawyers burst in.

Why couldn't God appear for atheists if that's what they needed? He was all-powerful, wanted us to love Him, and had done it for lots of prophets, so what was holding him back? Saul hunted Christians down before he got his vision and became Paul, so why not peaceful atheists?

Those puzzle pieces didn't fit together, so the whole picture came into more serious doubt than ever before for me.

A year passed, and more lawyers crammed their way into my cerebral courtroom to present new cases and reopen old ones, intensifying the chaos much faster than my inner judge could issue rulings.

Why did atheists need God at all to be good and have meaningful lives if all the other types of non-Christians didn't? I still believed in heaven but didn't strive to be good just to get in, and I sort of felt like anybody who was only good for that reason was really just being mercenary. So why should atheists need to believe in heaven to be good people? I believed that people should want to be good for good's own sake, and that sentiment seemed to fit fine with atheism.

Finally, by age nineteen, the lawyers in my mind had begun to whisper about the possibility that atheism was valid. At first, I was ashamed of myself. I didn't want to be an atheist. It didn't make any sense, but even though I didn't believe in Jesus Christ anymore, I still felt a tremendous sense of guilt about hurting his feelings since I was so used to thinking of him as a loving friend and invisible playmate like I had since I was little.

Eventually, I could admit to myself that I had become an atheist, but it was a secret I was still uncomfortable with. I was worried about what my family would do when I told them.

Finally, when I was twenty, I mustered the courage to talk to my mother about it. I was visiting home after my first semester away at college. We were sitting on the living room couch,

and had just finished watching a news report about a terrorist attack in India. She commented on how terrible it was while peeling an orange.

“Mom, I think I’m an atheist,” I said shakily, frozen as I anxiously waited for her reply.

She set the orange down after a few seconds of contemplation and stood up. “You don’t think it might just be a phase?”

“No, I’ve been thinking about it for a few years now.”

“When did you decide to become an atheist?”

“I didn’t decide to become an atheist,” I explained. “A better way to put it is that I gradually accepted I was one. It wasn’t so much a choice as it was an acknowledgement.”

“Is it that you just don’t like the Catholic Church anymore?”

“I don’t hate the church. I just don’t believe in God or heaven or hell.”

She nodded, and I could tell that she still thought it was probably just a phase, but at least she wasn’t mad at me. She had accepted me as an atheist, and I was very relieved about that. The reason I’d chosen her was because I’d known she’d still love me no matter what, but it still hadn’t been easy. I certainly don’t intend to bring it up with most of my relatives, but if it does come up, I’ll be able to speak honestly about my beliefs since I know I have the love of the people who truly care about me.

Unfortunately, the distrust and mischaracterization of atheists in America is still widespread. Religious groups have met with the White House for decades, but in the beginning of 2010, an atheist group called the Secular Coalition for America visited for the first time in history. President Obama didn’t even meet with them personally, yet religious groups were outraged that they were even allowed in.

Council Nedd, chair of the organization In God We Trust, told reporters, “The fact that this meeting is happening at all is an affront to the vast majority of people of all faiths who believe in God. The President should tell the American people whether he believes these groups’ hate-filled views to be ‘mainstream’ and worthy of his supposedly inclusive administration.”

In other words, Americans are offended and confused by the very idea of atheism. Indeed, some of the people I grew up with have gone so far as to accuse me of actually hating God and being a knowing agent of the devil. Other old acquaintances don’t even believe that I could possibly truly believe that there is no supernatural cosmic force of any kind. These types of conversations rarely last long. I’m more careful now of who I talk to, although I don’t feel like I should have to act like my disbelief is a dirty, shameful secret any more than the religious should have to hide their beliefs.

Therein lies one of the many purposes that my life can serve. I can be proof to the religious that atheists have the same potential for moral completeness as everybody else. Mankind doesn’t need the supernatural to exist or be complete. We can live both virtuously and happily without it. By living, I and every other atheist that strives for good proves that religion has no exclusive claim on morality.