

A Brief Guide to Atheism

The problem of 'faith' in irrational beliefs

All major religions, from Christianity and Islam to Greek and Norse mythology, were created by people long ago, attempting to make sense of the world – to explain what they did not understand. Religions thus represent societies whose knowledge of science and understanding of 'how the world works' was extremely limited, as reflected by the many factual errors and logical inconsistencies in, for instance, the Bible and Qur'an.

Traditionally, arguments about the existence of God have been based upon the assumption that God might exist; while this is not surprising given the prominence of God as a concept in our culture and society, it is not a logical starting point – we do not usually believe something for which there is no concrete, convincing evidence until it is disproved. It is more useful to assume that the universe and life are the result of (and are subject to) natural/logical processes, such as the laws of physics: assuming that a logical explanation exists is preferable to blindly accepting an unfounded, irrational explanation invented long ago. The fact that we have not yet determined an explanation for (for instance) the creation of the universe does not weaken our starting point – surely it is better to recognise that we cannot explain something than to simply invent an explanation arbitrarily.

Followers of religious faiths often say that their beliefs are not a matter of rational thought, but somehow go 'beyond' this – that it is a matter of faith. Ignoring logic and science creates an obvious problem: any religion could then be correct in its views, or none at all – the Cookie Monster could be the creator of the universe just as easily as God or Allah. By suspending logic, all evidence is irrelevant, and no alternative is more likely than any other, it is simply a matter of choice or conditioning/indoctrination. There is no concrete, convincing evidence of a higher power, but there is plenty of evidence against religious beliefs.

In direct conflict with this sense of 'faith', many Christians attempt to reinforce the credibility of their standpoint by pointing out that Jesus was a historical figure and that the Bible is a historical document, unwittingly drawing attention to a fundamental problem of all religions. Religions elevate certain circumstances to the status of evidence that 'proves' their validity. Firstly, there is the problem of historical distortion – 'facts' can easily become extremely distorted over a substantial time span (such as the history of Christianity), or they may have been recorded inaccurately in the first place. Secondly, the existence of different religions, all based on circumstances constructed as evidence, whose world-views are mutually exclusive (Jesus was a historical figure; so was Mohammed; the same applies to the Dalai Lama – we do not believe him simply because he is real) again reduces adherence to any one religion to an arbitrary choice or the result of conditioning.

The functions of religion

Religion fulfils a number of obvious psychological and social/cultural functions. It codifies patterns of social behaviour (formulating such behavioural codes appears to be a powerful human urge, giving rise to laws, morals, etiquette, and other rules governing behaviour in specific circumstances), explains significant questions that have not been answered by science (how was the universe/earth/life created? what happens after death?) and provides a source of hope and comfort. It is easy to recognise the workings of these processes in ancient belief systems, for instance the ancient Greek or Norse gods, who provided explanations for natural phenomena as well as representing figures on whom to blame misfortune, or to whom to pray for good fortune. Today, we do not take these religions seriously because their workings are so easily recognised, but they (like today's religions) were once powerful, and their followers believed fervently.

For obvious reasons, it is more difficult to recognise such processes in current religions as we often lack the necessary perspective. However, if we consider that religions reflect the cultures/societies that create them, it becomes clear how Christian doctrine, for instance, reflects the social behaviour patterns, intellectual concerns and values of a society very different to our own. That is why Christianity has been gradually losing its appeal for several centuries now – many of the rules of behaviour it prescribes are no longer relevant to today's society, while the answers to scientific/philosophical questions it provides are increasingly at odds with progress in the sciences. The different incarnations and varieties of dogmatic religions such as Christianity and Islam through the ages continue this reflection of the societies that uphold them (despite the fact that dogmatic belief systems tend to

preclude change and variation; the urge to codify behaviour and prevalent attitudes – even when they change – is evidently stronger than the urge to uphold dogma at all costs). The different interpretations and applications of Islam are an example, as are the variously puritanical or open-minded versions of Christianity throughout its history, from holy wars and the Inquisition to today's more open-minded climate.

Particularly shallow agnostics sometimes suggest that the development of belief systems by practically all cultures somehow suggests that a higher force must exist – in other words, that the human urge to formulate religious beliefs is an articulation of some sort of innate knowledge of 'our creator'. This view completely misinterprets a very important point: the creation of religions by different cultures/societies reflects not on the existence of a higher force, but on human experience. (Similarly, the once widespread view that the earth was flat reflects not on the earth, but the way it appears to us.) We seek comfort in explanations of the origin of life, foreknowledge of the afterlife, and benevolent or compassionate higher forces that we can appeal to with some prospect of being heard and indulged. This explains why religions are attractive, but it does not make them any less misguided.

The advantages of atheism

Embracing atheism involves recognising its considerable advantages over the superstitious beliefs that have traditionally surrounded us and significantly influenced the way we think about the world, often at an almost instinctive level. It is essential to accept that we cannot explain everything we may want to know – we may never fully understand how the universe came into being; perhaps we are not capable of discovering or understanding it. Religions have arbitrarily invented answers to such questions (and the explanations have often been either strikingly unimaginative or completely ridiculous); atheism accepts that, while there are explanations, we do not (yet) know what they are. Accepting this also requires a sort of 'faith' – the courage to recognise the limits of human knowledge, while knowing that the world 'makes sense'; in other words, that it is governed by logic. Many atheists find this more comforting than the easy but implausible answers provided by religion.

Accepting that there is no afterlife is less attractive, but nevertheless true. It is easy for us to accept that organisms like animals and plants simply die; it is more difficult to admit that the same must be true for humans, because we can only experience the world through our own consciousness, making the idea of the cessation of this consciousness (in other words 'non-existence') seem somehow counter-intuitive.

Morals

Religious activists often lament the 'declining morals' of society, not recognising that this is a contradiction in terms. A society's moral code is defined and produced by that society (just as religions are created by society): Christianity codifies the behaviour deemed acceptable by the society that produced it – 'morals' are one aspect of such a behavioural code. It seems natural that a moral code formulated so long ago is no longer relevant. If some aspects of modern life seem immoral to some people today, it is important to keep in mind that the opposite also applies: many aspects of life in early Christian times, for instance, would seem utterly wrong to us today (our concepts of 'basic human rights' were not current two thousand years ago). The association of morals (an understanding of what is 'right' and 'wrong' – i.e. attitudes to what is socially acceptable) with religion is thus a false one; societies produce their own moral standards, and these change and evolve with society (consider, for instance, changes and refinements in the law and social etiquette).

A preoccupation with 'right and wrong' is a positive human impulse, contributing to a fair and healthy society, and it seems natural that there will be friction between those who see themselves as upholding a society's existing values and those who represent its changing and developing views and priorities. Given that the formulation of morals is a societal process, the basis of moral behaviour is perhaps the imperative that individuals must contribute positively to society; it should be clear that acts of kindness, for instance, will generally be in accordance with ideas of 'moral behaviour', while acts of aggression will not. It is 'right' to act in a way that affects oneself and others positively, while it is 'wrong' to act in a way that harms oneself and others – the kind of rational and intelligent thought that underpins atheism supports this reasoning. Merely details of what we consider right or wrong have changed, reflecting the changing realities of society. Atheism is thus decidedly not immoral; on the contrary, it recognises morality as a process (not an objective set of rules) that attempts to realise society's best interests.