



Atheism: A Christian Response

| *What do atheists believe about belief?*

Atheists' Moral Objections

An atheist is someone who believes there is no God. There are at least five million atheists in the United States,¹ and, by many accounts, it is not rare for them to experience ill will or discrimination because of their beliefs. A quick example might be seen in the April 2008 *New York Times* story of Specialist Jeremy Hall, who, if the report is accurate, was sent home early from a tour in Iraq because of threats made against him when his atheism became common knowledge.² Understanding others is an important step toward eliminating discrimination against them. This study examines the major arguments atheists make. We will also consider Christian responses to these arguments.

Since 9/11, a group of "new atheists" has emerged. In several books, they have tried to articulate the case against religion and theism in updated forms.³ Reading these works reveals at least three moral issues as central to the case atheists want to make. First, they are appalled at the evil that is done in God's name. Second, they cannot imagine what sort of God could allow the kinds of suffering we all see every day. Third, they see the indoctrination of children into the faith tradition of their parents as akin to child abuse. These three things cause them to reject any kind of belief in God.

The Moral Failure of Faith Traditions

We do not have to look hard to find religious claims supporting violent actions: the Crusades in the Middle Ages and the current conflicts in the Middle East are examples. Many Christians, Jews, and Muslims believe that their God supports certain governments, armies, and militant groups in their fights against other governments, armies, and militant groups. Many atheists con-



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clude that we would all be better off if we did not have God's blessing on our violence toward one another.

Christians often respond with two claims. They agree that many have done much that is evil in the name of God, but they argue that many have also done a great deal of good in God's name. Furthermore, they argue that atheists have done at least as much evil in the world as they have. If both theists and atheists are responsible for violence and other evils, Christians ask, does this moral objection really count against belief in God?

The answer is no, at least if the aim is to demonstrate that there is no God. The fact that people use God's name to bless horrible actions neither proves nor suggests that God does not exist. On the other hand, if the atheists' moral objection is intended to encourage everyone to judge the quality of their beliefs by the actions that result from them, then the objection has real power. There is no way to judge accurately whether the average religious person or the average nonreligious person is responsible for more suffering or violence in the world. We do not know whether theists who lose their belief in God would find other ways to justify their evil actions, nor do we know whether atheists would in some measurable way act more ethically if they were to gain religious faith. However, if we Christians find

that some of our ideas about God—or other aspects of our traditions—tend to lead us to act in ways that conflict with the highest moral ideals of humanity, such as compassion and justice, then the question of whether we need to change or eliminate those religious ideas should be taken very seriously. The atheists' argument here does not lead to the conclusion that we must give up belief in God, but it rightly calls upon Christians to assess carefully whether their claims about God lead them to act always with compassion and justice.

The Problem of Suffering

Another dimension of the atheists' moral critique of theism is what is typically known as the problem of evil or, more broadly, the problem of suffering. The basic predicament is well known: the quantity and quality of suffering in the world appear to be inconsistent with the professed nature of God as omnipotent and all loving. If God were all powerful, so the argument goes, God would be able to eliminate suffering. If God were all loving, God would want to eliminate suffering. If God were both of these, then there should be no suffering in the world. But a moment spent walking down a hospital hallway or watching news reports about an earthquake or tsunami wiping out thousands of people reminds us that the world is filled with suffering. This must mean that God cannot eliminate suffering, does not want to eliminate suffering, or does not exist. If any one of these three claims were true, it would appear that traditional Christian theism could not survive.

Historically, this argument has posed a serious challenge for Christians, who have responded in a wide variety of ways. Some have drawn on biblical passages suggesting that suffering is one of God's ways of testing or educating or punishing us. Others have rethought some of the accepted characteristics of God and argued, for instance, that God is not all powerful in the usual sense of this expression. How would you respond to the atheists' concern here? The problem of suffering need not lead us to reject God, but no Christian can remain unmoved by its appeal for compassion or unchallenged by its demand for reflection.

The Indoctrination of Children

The third dimension of the moral critique of theism focuses on how some faithful people raise their children. First, the atheist says, if a faith tradition includes beliefs that can lead to violence and hate, then children raised

in that tradition may become people who hate. No such beliefs should be taught to our children. Second, children should not be given religious labels before they are able to decide for themselves who they are: there are no Catholic or Protestant children (other kinds of categories, including political ones such as Democrat or Republican, would also apply here). Third, children must be taught to think and question for themselves on all matters that have important life implications.

We all recognize the vulnerability of children, and no sane and caring person wishes them harm, so any suggestion that belief in God connects with the harm of children must disturb us. In this case, the accuracy of the suggestion clearly depends on previous conclusions about the irrationality and dangerous implications of belief in God, but turning children into representatives of some religious, political, social, or other cause or view they cannot even understand, much less consider carefully and critically, is certainly offensive. Furthermore, teaching them to be uncritical about faith issues that are understood differently by people around the world and through the ages may perpetuate much that is good, but it will also certainly perpetuate much that is evil. The world needs faithful people and faithful Christians who are trained to ask questions and to seek the best possible answers, not just repeat what they have been told.

Having said this, I believe that most of us who were taken to church and taught to think and live as Christians when we were children do not consider that upbringing to have been harmful to us. Good parents know they must let their children become independent adults, which includes enabling them to have opportunities to question profoundly and think clearly. There is enormous flexibility and variety in Christian understandings of God and the world, and Christian faith should always resist both rigid thinking and hateful action.

Evidence, Reason, and Faith

In addition to its many moral objections to theism, atheism challenges how theists think. We must all base our beliefs on evidence, says the atheist; to do otherwise is simply irrational. Since there is no evidence for the existence of God or for God's activity in the world, it would be irrational to believe there is a God, especially one who intervenes in the world in any way. Therefore, we must reject theism.

For the atheist, only those things that every reasonable person can accept should be counted as evidence. As one example, a reasonable person will accept the Bible as evidence of God's existence and activity only if she or he already believes in the value of the Bible for telling us about God. The words of the Bible, then, count as evidence only for theists (and only theists from certain traditions, of course), not for every reasoning person. Exactly the same thing would be true of Islam's Koran or Hinduism's Bhagavad-Gita, to take other examples: they count as evidence only if someone is already inclined to believe what they say. The same thing is true, according to the atheist, of other sources the theist would try to use as evidence. Again, believing in God is not rational.

Atheists make another argument that reaches a similar conclusion. Drawing on a time-tested philosophical standard, the atheist notes that, if nothing would disprove the existence of God to me, then I am not making a rational claim when I say that God exists. Suppose I say that unicorns exist. If nothing could possibly change my mind—not reading about the history of unicorn stories, not searching the entire world and finding none of them—then one could legitimately consider my claim for the existence of unicorns to be either meaningless or irrational or both. Likewise, says the atheist, if there are no facts that could possibly change my mind about the existence of God, then it is difficult to see that I am actually saying anything intelligible when I speak of God's existence and activity. What it means to be rational in one's beliefs is, at least in part, to know what would count against them.

Part of the atheist's point in these arguments is to draw a distinction between believing things rationally—based on evidence that is acceptable to all reasonable people—and believing things solely by faith, or without evidence. Christians, among other theists, will quickly reject this argument as an unhelpful way to think about faith and evidence. For the believer, faith is not belief without evidence; it is the heart's deep commitment to a claim or perspective. All people, atheists and theists alike, place their faith somewhere. Atheists may tend to place their faith in reason's ability to discover truth through rationally acceptable evidence. Christian believers, on the other hand, place their faith in certain claims (God is love, for instance) that have shown themselves able to support Christian meaning making and successful moral living through the centuries. These claims are tested daily, both for the ways in which they fit or do not



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fit with the Christian community's texts, traditions, and experiences and as they are lived out in the world. Atheists and theists alike depend on both faith and reason in their search for truth, though they may understand and apply these ideas in different ways.⁴

Here is a brief example. In the atheist's view, the claim that God loves us has no support. There is no evidence that could possibly support such a claim, nothing that the reasonable person, starting from a nontheistic position, would be expected to accept. Further, there is no contrary evidence that could convince the theist to deny the claim. The claim must, therefore, be rejected.

On the other hand, from the point of view of the Christian believer, the claim that God loves us expresses a deep life commitment she or he has made. It is a commitment that has been found to be helpful as she or he tries to live well and make sense of the world, and it is an idea that is supported by multiple voices in the broad tradition in which she or he operates. In their commitment or lack of commitment to religious faith claims, theists and atheists alike try to make life choices that must then be judged by their ability to enable us all to live together peaceably and morally and with meaningful lives. To the extent we can do this, both atheism and theism can be enriching, even though they look at the world very differently.

Atheism goes too far in its assertion that religious belief is irrational, and the theist goes too far if she or he makes unexamined faith claims. Biblical texts and Christian traditions must be rationally and morally assessed if they are to stand the test of time; this assessment has always occurred in Christian circles, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, but engaging in it always makes us better Christians.

Religion Is a Human Creation

The final atheist critique to examine is the claim that religion—and, therefore, the idea of God—is solely

the creation of human beings. This claim depends to a great extent on what atheism has to say about evidence and reason, so we do not need to consider it fully. It is certainly true that religions are to some extent human inventions, but even if they were entirely so, this would not show that there is no God who is active in the world. However, recognizing that we have a hand in the creation of our religious traditions should inspire us to admit that we make our religious claims tentatively. After all, the reality of God may be quite unlike our ideas of God. Perhaps this atheist challenge can encourage Christian believers to be even more intentional than in the past about creating and maintaining rational and moral beliefs and practices.

Can God's Existence Be Proven?

Over the centuries, philosophers and theologians have developed a number of ways to try to demonstrate that there is a God; these arguments are commonly known as proofs of the existence of God. Although there are almost no philosophers and theologians today who think that any of these arguments actually show God's existence, the arguments have been important in the historical debate between theists and atheists, so they are worth our consideration. Here are the four arguments that have received most of the attention.

The first argument is a version of the cosmological argument, and it begins by reminding us that everything has a cause. Whether it is an engine, or a baby kangaroo, or a study on atheism, or a church building, or an idea for a new invention, everything has a cause and would not exist or happen without that cause. But the series of causes cannot go back in time indefinitely; at some point, a cause that is itself uncaused must be reached, and this First Cause is what we call God.

The second argument, known as the teleological argument or the argument from design, calls our attention to the order in the world. In one traditional version of this argument, a person is described as walking in the woods and stumbling upon a watch. Everyone would recognize that such a complex mechanism must have been designed by someone, and this is also what we see when we look at the world. Just as the watch calls our mind's attention to the watchmaker, so the order in the world calls our attention to the Designer, whom we call God.

These arguments have a number of problems, but the most obvious one for Christian theists is in the arguments' final moves. When the cosmological argument names the First Cause as God or the teleological argument names the Designer as God, they are moving too quickly. There is no immediate reason to assume that the First Cause or the Designer would have the attributes usually assigned to the Christian God. Even if we could prove that a First Cause or a Designer must exist, we would still be very far away from the God of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

The third argument is known as the ontological argument. This one is rather different from the others, in that it begins with the idea of God. The argument says that God is, by definition, perfect—nothing can be greater. If God were *only* an idea, though, God would not be perfect and there would be something greater: a God that really exists. This is actually a much more complicated argument than it seems, but virtually everyone who has studied it in detail has concluded that, clever as it is, it does not demonstrate that God exists.

The final argument is called the argument from religious experience. This argument is not really designed to show that God exists, although it is sometimes used that way; instead, it is an attempt to show that there are good reasons for believing in a dimension of reality that is beyond us. The claim is simply that the quality and quantity of religious experiences make their authenticity probable and suggest that at least some of theism's claims are true. One of the challenges to the argument when it is used to demonstrate that there is a God is simply that most of the ways we think of God—as *all* powerful or *all* knowing, for instance—cannot be experienced. It *might* be possible to experience God's power, though even this claim has its problems, but it is difficult to imagine how it could be possible to experience that God is *all* powerful.

In the end, these arguments do not demonstrate that there is a God, but they might point the theist to valuable ideas that are helpful in thinking about the God in whom she or he already believes. Reflection or meditation on such issues as the perfection of God, the supposed design of the world, or the value of religious experiences may lead the theist to helpful theological places or to an enhanced devotional life.

Conclusion

Whatever else may result from the exploration of the arguments atheists make against theism, working through the arguments can lead Christians to live more faithfully. Here is a brief summary of what we have learned.

- We must always be very careful about claiming divine support for any of our views or actions, and we should judge these, in part, by their moral quality.
- Belief does not rely on evidence in the same way as that found in scientific explorations. On the other hand, one cannot simply claim anything one wants to claim and give faith as a reason. Christians and other theists must carefully and critically evaluate Scriptures, traditions, and religious experiences as part of their attempts to live faithful lives.
- Christians should be careful to teach children to live moral lives and to develop critical thinking skills about religious things, including the existence and nature of God. This is consistent with being raised within a theistic tradition.
- Theism is not going to disappear from the planet or the United States anytime soon. That means we should all work together to create the most compassionate and just understandings of God's work imaginable.

- Whether we agree with what atheists have to say or not, ill will and discrimination against them is never right, and Christians should speak out against it wherever they see it occur.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. A 2007 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that 1.6 percent of Americans define themselves as atheists. See <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>. Other surveys have put that percentage as high as 9 percent. For this and statistics for other countries, see Phil Zuckerman, "Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns," in Michael Martin, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 47–65.
2. Neela Banerjee, "Soldier Sues Army, Saying His Atheism Led to Threats," *New York Times*, April 26, 2008, accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/26/us/26atheist.html>.
3. A list of these books and some Christian responses can be found in the Leader's Guide that accompanies this study.
4. For a more detailed look at the issues of faith, reason, evidence, and how Christians come to "know" things, see Michael F. Duffy, *The Skeptical, Passionate Christian: Tools for Living Faithfully in an Uncertain World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006).