

On Atheism and Religious Pluralism

1. Until the late eighteenth century “atheism” was an epithet hurled at opponents who denied the God you believed in.
 - a. Axial religions were accused of being no better than atheists in their condemning the divinization of heavenly bodies and natural forces.
 - i. Christians were accused of atheism for their demonization of the natural and civic gods of Roman and Greek cultures. In fact they were at times martyred for doing so, especially after earthquakes and other natural disasters seen as punishment from the gods.
 - b. Similarly Socrates was executed for undermining belief in the Greek gods.
 - c. And Mohammed will condemn Idolaters, defined as any faith not part of the “Religion of the Book: monotheistic Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Zoroastrianism for example will be relentlessly persecuted in Persia. Zoroastrianism either went underground in mystical Islam or Sufism, many of its greatest mystic poets, especially Rumi, were Persian. (Ibn Sina?) Or they fled into exile into India in the area around Bombay becoming known as Parsis, from Persian.
 - d. Israelite axial prophets condemned the Canaanite gods not simply as rivals of Israel’s god, Yahweh, but increasingly as idolaters. Secularizing their sacred objects into works of human art at best.
2. However Deism soon evolves from critiques of axial Christianity to atheism. From God as designer who does not need to interfere or repair his device to God not existing at all is a short step.
 - a. The mathematician Laplace argued that if one had a complete scientific theory and knew the position and motion of all bodies at any one moment of time, one could predict the rest of the history of the universe. What appears as contingent events or even random chance are merely apparent, a function of human ignorance. Today this is called “the theory of everything”.
 - i. Napoleon was said to have asked Laplace in response, “But where does God fit into your theory?”
 - ii. Laplace responded “I have no need of that hypothesis”

3. As we have already seen Darwin's theory of evolution accelerated the rise of atheism, particularly among scientists, who increasingly conflated their 3rd person impartial observer orientation, or the scientific method with rationality altogether. Reasoning that did not appeal to evidence was irrational, religion was superstition, an illusion
4. Capitalism was an accelerant to the secularization of society. From optimizing God's glory, human activity was to optimize human happiness (utilitarianism) if not to simply optimize profit (libertarianism), the new sacreds were no longer spoken about in religious terms.
 - a. Sacred rituals, including seeing what you do for a living as a sacred calling, became "secularized" into a "career" or a "job."
 - b. On the other hand to live a godless life was no longer synonymous with living an immoral life. Morality could be justified through universal principles justifiable by reason alone, whether by Kant's categorical imperative of always acting in accord with reason, or Mill's rational optimization of happiness, that is, human fulfillment.
 - i. Kant continued to believe in God but he denied that God's existence could be proven by science. Rather he proposed a different route to proving the existence of God: morality. Kant argued that the existence of God is necessary to justify *acting* rationally rather than doing whatever you can get away with. For to act morally, we have to believe that we live in a moral universe, where virtue is ultimately rewarded and vice inevitably punished. But since that clearly does not always happen in this life, we must believe in an afterlife where virtue and happiness, human fulfillment, do coincide.
 - ii. In other words, for acting rationally itself to be rational, we must have faith in reality being rational. But only the existence of a rational creator can justify our faith that we live in a rational universe. Or to put it more simply, faith in God just is ultimately faith in reason itself. What modern science holds sacred, its understanding of God, just is pure reason.
 - iii. Thus Kant argued the truth of rational religion's creed of God, freedom and immortality, not on the basis of *scientific* reason but on the basis of

moral reason; not through a rational proof but in order to live a rational life.

- iv. For Kant this also meant all religious beliefs called for a moral interpretation. Jesus' miracle stories may or may not be literally or historically true. What matters is their moral truth, the lesson they have to teach us for how to choose rightly, live a good Christian life and ultimately be saved. As with Valentinus and Origen, for people with a free will, always susceptible to both inspirations to do good but also temptations to do evil, it is the moral interpretation of Christ's life and teachings that matters.
5. Freud was one of the most significant atheists in the early twentieth century
 - a. He denied all three doctrines of Deism, claiming that God, freedom and immortality were all illusions to soothe our anxieties and console us in times of suffering.
 - b. In effect, religion was a "cultural neurosis" that could prevent individual neurosis. While not "rational" it did serve to soothe anxieties especially around death through the projection of a protective divine father figure or a nurturing mother figure. God as Father not only protects but also judges how we conduct our lives. God as mother mystically holds us in her lap or envelops us in her womb.
 - c. Freud argued that to face reality without illusion takes great courage. Ordinary people "can't handle the truth" but need their religious illusions to avoid becoming neurotic or falling apart. Meaning itself, Freud argued, is a subjective projection. Objectively the world has no meaning, it does not care whether we live or die, suffer or thrive. Facing this truth head on and clear eyed calls for heroism.
 6. Nietzsche presents the most provocative vision of a world without God. Its a world without objective meaning, where all values are subjective interpretations, objectively irrational.
 - a. He imagines Zarathurtha, the first axial prophet, for whom all cosmotheistic gods were idols, proclaiming in the town square that "God is dead". But shadows of

God still lingers in our belief in an objective morality and objective truth. Belief in reason is also ultimately a leap of faith.

7. That God does not exist shakes Zarathustra to his core. He suffers the anxiety, abandonment, despair and nausea that Sartre identifies with the recognition of freedom. He compares the result to being adrift at sea on a rowboat out of sight of land. There is no Cartesian certain foundation on which to ground the meaning of our lives. Which way to row? Nothing is objectively sacred. What is sacred is up to you. So how choose?
8. The townspeople dismiss Zarathustra as crazy, like those in the cave react to Socrates when he returns. He is over-reacting being melodramatic. Denying God changes nothing. Laplace was right, God is irrelevant. Religion is irrelevant.
9. Whereas for Zarathustra: there is nothing *more* relevant, for without God nothing has any objective meaning or value. "I have come too soon" Zarathustra concludes. God is dead but his shadow lingers. People think life is still meaningful because they have yet to think through or live out the implications of God's death.
 - a. The physicist Steven Weinberg once memorably put it: "the more science learns about the universe the more meaningless it all seems."
10. Let me leave you with a concluding parable from Nietzsche:
 - a. *Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowledge. That was the most arrogant and deceitful minute of A world history. But nevertheless it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die.*
11. In the twentieth century we find three waves of atheism:
 - a. Religion is an illusion and life is meaningless. Meaning is but a subjective projection onto an objectively meaningless universe. This is Freud and Nietzsche's understanding. Atheism calls for courage.
 - b. Religion is irrelevant and one can take it or leave it. It's a private matter. No big deal. No God hardly means that life has no meaning. Meaning is not found but made by each of us through our freely chosen goals.
 - c. Religion is dangerous and needs to be stopped. This approach arose after 9/11 when terrorists flew planes into buildings in the name of God. Religious faith is always backsliding into mimetic scapegoating. It's just not safe. Scientists have a

moral obligation to disabuse people of their religious faith, and convert them to place their faith in reason, that is, in science.

12. As we enter the twenty-first century and the virtual age we see the rise of religious pluralism in which faith and doubt go together. Internet enabled communication and transportation means that one knows and lives around others who do not share what you hold sacred. We are all always vulnerable to FOMO, fear of missing out. Especially when afflicted by evil, rather than leaning into one's religious faith, one could also question it. Others seem to be living just fine without faith. maybe one has made the wrong choice, leapt the wrong way. This mixture of faith and doubt though also applies to atheists who while they don't believe in God, must believe in something, whether it be reason or freedom or nature or whatever. When they suffer affliction and see religious friends happy and successful they may well wonder whether they are missing out on something.
13. In the end you have to believe in something, you have to hold someone or something sacred in order to have meaning and purpose in our lives. Losing faith really entails changing faith. The question in a pluralistic culture is not about losing one's religion so much as in times of confusion, unhappiness, affliction, whether or not to double down on what you believe is most important or change your religion.
14. So doubt can explain *why* someone might change their religion. But *how* could someone change their religion? What might persuade someone to explore a new religion, if not a rationally compelling argument or being shown undeniable evidence?
 - a. Attending a religious service like a wedding or a funeral and being so moved by the ritual, that one decides to pick it back up, or if it is unfamiliar, to explore it further, try it out, so to speak.
 - b. Or one might engage in what was once a religious practice but for a secular purpose, like yoga for stretching exercises or a martial art for disciplining mind and body, and then want to learn more: not just about the practice but about the beliefs and general way of life in which that practice is embedded.
 - c. Or one might read a novel in which the main character is embedded in a different religion, or one reads a book or even takes a course that intrigues you to learn more about it (hint).

- d. Or one may be moved by the testimony of others for whom religion has enabled them to find meaning and purpose. Or by listening to someone bear witness to their religious conversion, a story of being lost, and then found, feeling dead and then reborn.
15. So while the intrinsic value, inherent in the performance of a given religious ritual is by definition not accessible to an outside observer who does not himself or herself practice the ritual, there are ways in which a spectator might be intrigued to explore becoming a participant, even without fully knowing ahead of time, what exactly it is that they are getting into. One can take a “leap of faith” and see if one likes how it affects your mood and morality, even if what one can appreciate initially is very preliminary. As Jesus advises his followers in evaluating prophets: a tree is known by its fruits. So taste it. Take a bite of the apple. Or as he invites his initial disciples, “Come and see.”