

Do Atheists Have to be Anti-Faith or Anti-Religion?

Since the religious terrorism of 9/11 a number of books have appeared by atheists that are staunchly anti-faith and anti-religion, placing many of the evils of modern society at the feet of religion. These include Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*, Daniel Dennet's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, and Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great*. All are best sellers.

For example, Sam Harris stated that, "Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity – a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible. When foisted upon each generation anew, it renders us incapable of realizing just how much our world has been unnecessarily ceded to a dark and barbarous past." He also suggested that, "The danger of religious faith is that it allows otherwise normal human beings to reap the fruits of madness and consider them *holy*." The subtitle of Hitchen's book, *How Religion Poisons Everything* is indicative of his stance.

As an atheist I agree with the vast majority of what these authors are saying. However, I have never been an anti-religion or anti-faith atheist and even prefer the term non-theist, since it has less of a negative connotation. It is important for theists to realize that not all atheists are adamantly anti-religion or anti-faith. Given that I have been a scientist for half a century and strongly believe in the scientific method as the best means of finding the truth, and that faith is accepting something despite reason, how could I be so tolerant of faith and religion? The answer is that I take a more nuanced view than a blanket rejection. A number of issues are relevant.

First is the subject of spirituality. While spirituality is often defined in terms of relating to things that are metaphysical, supernatural, religious, or pertaining to God, I prefer a broader definition of a feeling of being connected with something greater than one's self. While that can be God or other supernatural beings, it can also consist of feeling connected to nature, the universe, one's family, spouse or friends. Thus, there is much room for being spiritual but not religious. As described in other articles, studies of the biology of spirituality suggest it is largely associated with the temporal lobes, is genetically hardwired, is pleasurable, is critical to the evolution and survival of man, and will never go away.

Studies of spiritual experiences induced by psychedelic drugs show that induced feelings of leaving the room and being in contact with non-human beings was so strong and so powerful that rational subjects were convinced it happened even though they realized that they never left the room and that real contact was impossible. These studies indicate that while external stimulation of the temporal lobes and hippocampus most often record real events such as voices, other sounds and events, the effects of internal stimulation, such as by direct brain stimulation, temporal lobe epilepsy, near-death or drugs, may also be perceived as totally real. This carries with it the lesson that even though our rational brain knows certain things could not have happened, at the same time it needs to give our spiritual brain its space, to sometimes believe in things, or feel good about things, that could not have happened. That is one part of the nuance.

A second part of the nuance is that as thinking human beings we should always defer to rational, fact and science based thought. However, on some occasions a bit of wondrous spirituality occasionally leading to having faith in something can still allow peace to exist between our rational and spiritual brain.

A final part of the nuance is that not all religions or belief systems are the same. A number of belief systems including atheism, non-theism, agnosticism, secular humanism, Buddhism, Jainism, Unitarianism, Universalism, Reform Judaism, some Presbyterian faiths, Taoism, and a belief in the teachings of Jesus where the miracles of Christianity are seen as religious metaphors rather than real – generally allow our rational and spiritual brain to live in peace. Other faiths, like those involving a belief in a personal God that answers prayers tend to stretch the credibility of our rational brain, but not necessarily to the breaking point.

By contrast, I view those religions that believe in the literal truth of the bible, believe the earth is less than 10,000 year old, believe Darwinian evolution is wrong, believe homosexuality and stem cell research are evil, believe their God is the only true God, and that their sacred book is the only true sacred book, or believe in killing, exterminating, or leaving-behind those of other faiths – stretch the rational brain into incredulity and are more likely to lead to religious intolerance, wars and terrorism.. Those and mostly those alone should be subject to the disdain of anti-religion, anti-faith atheists

About the Author

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