

Do We Need Religious Belief?

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Since we developed the faculty to reflect over our own existence, we have asked three fundamental questions: Where do we come from (Creation)? Why are we here (Meaning of Life)? And where do we go (Death)? Throughout history, religions have — with various success — tried to answer these questions. In the Americas and Europe, Christianity is the most widespread religion; it has influenced our society deeply and conditioned our value system and way of thinking. Particularly the image of an external, but personal, all powerful and all knowing benign, male god who watches us and interferes in human affairs is well rooted in our consciousness, whether we like it or not.

Whereas an American, when asked the question: „Do you believe in God?" will always proudly proclaim „Yes, of course!" a European will look slightly embarrassed and either say no or answer „Depends on what you mean by god."

I recall having to reject the traditional concept of God when I was about six years old and my intellect sufficiently developed to deal with spiritual matters. I remember very well one day I walked over a graveyard holding my father's hand, when I asked him: „Do you believe in God?" "No, I don't," he said and looked at me with a caring smile. "But I do," I proclaimed very proudly. "Well, that's very good," he said. The fact was, that I *did not* believe. Why did I lie to my dad? Probably because I felt I had to say what I thought people would expect a six-year-old kid to say. I used the terms „believe in" and „god" in a very intuitive way and only much later did I learn that these words must be defined very precisely, if you want to use them properly in discussions.

The incident with my father happened shortly after I had given up believing that Santa Claus really existed, and I felt very much the same way with the god concept. The grown ups wanted me to believe in a fairy tale they did not believe in themselves. For me it became a mystery — and it still is today — why so many people in the world hang on to a story which is so obviously easy to disguise and why so few dare to stand up and reveal the hoax. I felt like being in the fairy tale „The Emperor's New Clothes" by Hans Christian Andersen, one of my best-known countrymen. Everyone knows the truth, but nobody — apart from a little boy — dares to speak it out.

Most people use their intellect and mental faculties in everyday life, but when it comes to religion, they suddenly become gullible and seem to switch off their common sense. I am amazed every time I talk to born-again Christians who claim that the Bible should be taken literally. They are not always ignorant but very convinced of their case. However, they oversee — or rather choose to ignore — that the Bible contains many contradictions and unclear translations. The New Testament is not an accurate testimony of Jesus' historic life but a gathering of stories written by different authors in several languages, selected and put together 300 years after Jesus' death by church leaders with a very clear political goal. The Bible contains both profound insights on how we should live our lives as well as justification for murder and brutal violence. This makes it possible to derive practically any assertion from the Bible you might fancy, hence my claim: „Bring me any statement, and I will find a quotation in the Bible supporting it".

When I recently saw the film *Harry Potter* and read the critics about it, I found the warnings that the film could be harmful to children because of its dealing with wizardry and superstition particularly amusing because they came from Christian fundamentalist groups. At Christmas 2001, a Protestant minister in Alamogordo, New Mexico, arranged a public burning of the book. If a Church service is not wizardry, you tell me what it is! The incantation used by conjurors: „Hocus pocus" derives from the Latin mass, where the priest turns toward the altar with the wafer in his hands saying, „Hoc est corpus" (This is the body).

Self-righteous and lecturing people turn me off, but if I encounter sincere religious feelings or practices based on love and respect for others, I instinctively feel a deep reverence and compassion, even if it has a foundation I cannot agree upon. The importance of religion in public life has diminished a lot, particularly in Europe, and it is therefore very odd for Europeans to watch American politicians on television referring to god or emphasizing how

much they pray. A European politician doing the same would immediately lose his credibility and lay himself open to ridicule.

I have many times returned to Christianity and sometimes discovered new aspects but never found the answers to „The three fundamental questions" plausible. That Christianity as most other religions contains many admirable ideals does not change the fact that we have to take a stand regarding the core message: God sent his son to Earth and this son died on a cross for our sins and resurrected three days later.

I suffer from an incredible curiosity towards life; I want to know *why*. My approach is rational: what is explained needs to be plausible in order for me to believe it. I suppose this attitude is probably formed by my technical education as an engineer, and I am well aware that not all people have the same need to comprehend logically what is explained to them. Why do I feel obliged to reject the Christian model? Because I observe the world around me, and what I see does not fit with what the model expresses. The world was not created in six days 3761 BC, as claimed, and nobody can walk on water. I do not see God rewarding the good ones and punishing the bad ones. Christianity's biggest dilemma is its explanation for God's nature. If He is almighty, omniscient and benevolent, why does He allow suffering? I am well aware of the fact that one needs not be an engineer to notice this inconsistency; in fact all devoted and reflecting Christians struggle with this dilemma at some stage in their lives.

When Bertrand Russell, who was a self-proclaimed atheist, was asked at a lecture by a student how he would react, if he after his death he would ascend to Heaven and be received by the Lord himself, he answered: "Well, I would say: 'I am awfully sorry I didn't believe in you, why didn't you give me more evidence about your existence?'" Russell hits a central point: There is just not enough evidence that supports the Christian model. Since the renaissance, religion has slowly but steadily lost ground to science and — what is even more devastating — it has been displayed as a human-made projection of our longings and imaginations, created undoubtedly with the best intentions, but with the limited knowledge available at the time of its formation. How the concept of god has developed throughout history is brilliantly described in *A History of God* written by Karen Armstrong, a former catholic nun who studied religion in Oxford and now teaches rabbi students at Leo Baeck's College in London. She has also written several books on Islam and is an honorary member of the Association of Muslim Social Sciences.

How come that Christianity has been so successful? How could the number of followers increase from a handful to over one billion in less than 2000 years? Through memes — opinions procreating and spreading in peoples' minds according to the same laws as genes do it in the biology world. The main driving force is also to survive and multiply. These are seven ingredients for the creation of a successful religion:

A Model: Take some existing myths and legends and create a model explaining the Three Fundamental Questions. Make sure it provides a „packet solution" with easy-to-understand and satisfying answers.

A Book: Change the stories so the copying is not so obvious and gather them in a book. Do not worry if the stories are inconsistent or incomplete; this will actually turn out as an advantage. Avoid criticism by claiming the book has divine origin.

A Problem: Find things everyone enjoys and call them bad and sinful. Find suitable justifications in the Book. Give the followers rules to follow, which clearly distinguish them in everyday life from their surroundings. The more absurd the rules and the more ridiculous the followers appear, the better.

A Solution: Promise those who believe in the model a reward, like salvation or eternal life. Make sure that whatever is promised, should *not* be testable.

A Fan Club: Make a fan club with a strong hierarchy and make the reward exclusive for the members. If somebody questions the model, say that it cannot be understood rationally, only through unconditioned, blind faith.

Exclusivity Rights: Protect the model by making it dogmatic: The Book cannot be discussed or doubted. In case parts of the model lose their credibility or the hoax becomes too obvious, give in a bit. Say it was a misunderstanding to understand the model literally, it is actually meant to be symbolic.

Bonus Program: Explain that is important to convince others of the correctness of the model. Give bonus points for recruiting new members. Most important of all, fight competition, if necessary with violence.

I do not think my proposed theory of religion-creation is unusual; many people in the Western world find traditional religions do not give them satisfying answers. They might turn to alternative religions such as Scientology or Shamanism or to pseudo-religions such as astrology, aura reading, or even to Communism as it was the case for many Europeans in the mid 20th century.

But which alternative does the reflecting modern person choose, who is not content with a package solution? Which god concept do other religions have? Some religions have many gods, some one, some get along without any at all. Some have a personal god, some an impersonal, some locate god outside, some inside the human mind. Various symbols and images are used.

Jews, Christians and Muslims are particularly proud of being monotheists and look down upon „primitive" polytheism. The truth is that Judaism initially practised monolatry (the recognition of many, but worshipping of only one) and only gradually developed into monotheism. The 1st Commandment of the Mosaic Laws says, „Thou shalt not have other gods before me." What is so dangerous about the „other gods" that this commandment must be put in the first place? It more looks like a contest where somebody wants to convince the audience of the superiority of *his* particular god over other competing gods. To believe that Yahweh will reward me for having worshipped only him by supporting me and my tribe in the struggle with neighbouring nations is a bit like making him the symbol of my football club or Britannia, the goddess of the British, Helvetia (the lady on the Swiss coins), the goddess of the Swiss, and Uncle Sam, the god of the USA. In my opinion this reflects neither a particular spiritual nor civilised attitude.

Hinduism is said to have thousands of gods. I recall a discussion some time ago with an Indian friend, who suddenly claimed that Buddhism was much older than Hinduism. I got disturbed, because I remembered very well having learnt that Buddhism appeared 2,500 years ago as a reaction to the much older Hinduism and its caste system. I took me some time to find out what my friend meant. „Hinduism" is actually a concept the British introduced in the 18th century when they colonised India. Indians just knew „religion," which might include worshipping Krishna, Shiva, or Vishnu, or perhaps Jesus, Mohammed, or other prophets. None is better than the others. The interesting thing is that all these gods are considered manifestations of "The One" or "The Wholeness," helpers to approach the Unknown, the Inconceivable. So Hinduism is in my eyes true monotheism!

It might come as surprise to many Westerners that Islam, which builds on Judaism and Christianity, has what might be called a „rational concept" of God. Allah is not a personalized god and can according to the Koran neither be fully understood nor perceived. His or its nature is not accessible to human beings and is beyond our conceptual world. Funnily enough, this acknowledging of a transcendent god is the same conclusion Buddhists as well as the mystics in the other monotheistic traditions (such as Meister Eckhart among the Christians and Spinoza among the Jews) arrived at.

Humanism focuses on human beings and their interactions. Tolerance, mutual esteem and respect for the individual are key messages. Some humanists are gathered in the Unitarian Church, a religious movement spun off from Christianity when it was unthinkable to be an atheist and not belong to a religious group. Its roots go back to 17th-century's Protestantism and the Enlightenment. Unfortunately, Unitarianism is not so widespread in Europe as in the United States, where several of the nation's founders were Unitarians. I feel a deep respect and affiliation with the Unitarians, who deny Christian dogmas such as the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. This fact, that Unitarians reject the core beliefs of Christianity, makes them more like „pseudo-Buddhists in Christian robes" or „closet atheists" because they have kept some of the Christian Church's external framework and symbolism. Traditions are reassuring and the Unitarian Church might not be a bad solution for logically reflective people with a Christian background and a spiritual need.

For me, Buddhism is the religion best suited to the inquiring, rational thinking modern mind. A Buddhist is not required to mix spirituality with myths and fairy tales and can avoid stories with people walking on water, flying through the air and turning water into wine. Buddhism has its superstitious myths and legends too, but they play no important role; they are more meant as an aid to understanding something that cannot be described rationally, in a way similar to how music or poetry does it. An old Veda legend says:

Once upon a time, mankind's nature was divine. Because the human beings did not behave well, the gods decided to take away the divinity. They discussed where to hide it. „We must find a place they will never look.“ "What about the top of the highest mountain?" said one. „No, they go everywhere and will eventually search also there.“ "What about the deepest hole?" another god suggested. „No, man is so curious, he will look all over.“ "Now I know," said one. „We will hide the divine on the bottom of the deepest ocean.“ "No, even there he will go searching some day." The gods were really uncertain, until one of them suddenly said: „I know of a place where he will definitely not search: within his own heart." And this is where the Divine is still hidden this day today.

Buddhism has—as opposed to Christianity—no conflicts with the modern scientific view of the world. Because it is tolerant and free of dogmatic thinking everything can be questioned—even Buddha's own teachings—and one must only accept what one understands. Buddhism is very analytical and reminiscent in many ways of modern psychology. Liberation is achieved through insight and understanding, not through submission or blind faith. The most important insight in Buddhism is that everything is perishable, nothing is permanent, not even Buddhism, not even God.

Many people do not consider Buddhism a religion and call it atheistic because it apparently does not have a concept of god. This is not quite correct; it neither proscribes a particular god concept nor denies the existence of a god. It is left open to the individual to believe what he or she finds appropriate. In his teachings, Buddha avoided affirmative statements about god; if he was obliged, he preferred expression such as „the Unconditioned" or „The Ultimate Truth" He meant that the risk of saying something wrong was too high. To make assertions about god is for many Buddhists almost blasphemous! This view is interesting enough and also present in our Judaeo-Christian tradition. We find it in the 2nd and 3rd Mosaic laws „Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of any thing" and „Thou shalt not take the name of the lord thy god in vain."

The famous astronomer Carl Sagan, an avowed atheist, liked to challenge religious leaders he met by asking them how they would act if it was proven that the core of their religion turned out wrong. This was, of course, only a provocative and hypothetical question, but the answers were very interesting. Most of the leaders said with more or less resentment that such a thing was completely impossible. According to Sagan, only one of them gave a sensible answer: The Dalai Lama. After having discussed for a while which scientific discovery would shake Buddhism the most, they agreed that it would probably be that reincarnation does not exist. (In countless conversations with Buddhist monks I have tried to understand what reincarnation is, and I slowly reach the conclusion that it does *not* exist, at least not in the form in which the term is generally understood. However, this is *my* problem and a different story altogether).

The Dalai Lama thought for a while and then he said with a subtle smile: „Well, then we have to change Buddhism." He added, however, that he considered such proof „very hard to deliver."

Buddhism has my deepest respect not only because of its humble attitude towards life and emphasis on compassion, insight and tolerance. It appeals to me also because it is founded on the same principles as the scientific method: experimenting and observing are the basis of all scientific endeavour. Science is noble in its purest form; it does not want to promote a particular position or opinion; it is only interested in the truth, even if it is unpleasant or disappointing. Scientific knowledge is neither static nor absolute as many people would like it to be, but mutates and adapts constantly: One physical law is replaced when another and better is discovered. Furthermore, physical laws are truly universal: Maxwell's equations are the same for engineers, Hindus and extraterrestrials, and both George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden must obey Newton's 2nd law.

Is atheism a valuable alternative? Unfortunately the word has a negative meaning, probably because theists have fought those with different opinions by calling them heathens or atheists. To be an atheist simply means that one — contrary to the theist — does not believe in god. Most people who are atheists have accepted atheism out of choice, not out of ignorance or lack of alternatives. Unfortunately atheism offers no package solution and provides no explanation to the Three Fundamental Questions. Since the Big Bang theory first appeared, science has to a great extent answered the First Question: where from? I doubt it will ever be able to answer the Second: what for? But is it necessary to know the purpose of life? Many atheists say such a question is meaningless (Buddha said it is „inappropriate" and

„meaningless speculation“), that it has the same relevance as asking what meaning the coffee cup next to my PC has. Life just *is* and does not pretend to have a meaning.

Does the atheist reject the existence of God? Some atheists are convinced that there is no god, others-like me-just find that the evidence is insufficient. And just as one cannot prove God's existence, one cannot disprove it. Therefore every „devoted“ atheist must be an agnostic, which funnily enough is the same conclusion, the most spiritual people within Judaism, Christianity and Islam come to — the mystics, those who reach deepest into the understanding of the Divine.

What does it mean to „believe in God“? When discussing this question with Buddhists-or for that sake with atheists-one has to get used to defining precisely what is being discussed. When we use the three-letter word "god," the Judeo-Christian image automatically pops up in the minds of most of us. Other religions have other definitions. Which is the largest common denominator? In the late 11th century, the Benedictine monk Amselm of Canterbury defined God as „that, where over nothing higher can be imagined.“ I think this is a definition theists, agnostics and atheists can agree upon. But can this „Nothing Higher“ be defined further? Has It created the universe? Where did It come from itself? Does It interfere in human affairs? Has It written a book and sent us prophets? Has It declared some people chosen and others not? Does It order us to eat fish on Fridays and to wear hats on Sundays? One must relate to these questions when asked „Do you believe in God?“

Is it necessary to believe in God in order to live a moral life? Is it not true that religions encourage an altruistic and ethical lifestyle? Theists claim that their set of moral rules is given by their god. If there is no god to tell us to live a decent life, why do it at all? Atheists do *not* need a supernatural power to live a moral life; living a moral life can be just a natural thing or a choice. The Buddhist abbot and teacher Ajahn Sumedho says: „As a human being one has contrary to the animals the possibility of choosing — as a sacrifice to society — voluntarily to submit to certain rules such as not to take any living being's life, not to steal and not to lie.“

Ajahn Sumedho once said in a speech that he would be very satisfied if for a start people would refrain from killing each another (never mind the animals) for the time being.

I have never understood why it should be considered particular admirable to be „deeply“ religious. I think being a convinced atheist deserves more respect because it requires the courage to stand on one's own feet and face reality as it is. In my eyes, religious people choose the convenient solution, like "Pascal's wager," named after Blaise Pascal, the 17th century French mathematician who said:

It makes more sense to believe in God than not to believe. If you believe, and God exists, you will be rewarded in the afterlife. If you do not believe, and He exists, you will be punished for your disbelief. If He does not exist, you have lost nothing either way."

Personally, I prefer the alternative, „The Atheist's Wager“:

It is better to live your life as if there are no Gods, and try to make the world a better place. If there is no God, you have lost nothing and will be remembered fondly by those you left behind. If there is a benevolent God, He will judge you on your merits and not just on whether or not you believed in Him.

Some of the most admirable persons I have met are Buddhist monks. They submit to a very strict set of rules of conduct from the idea that if you do good deeds, you do well for yourself. Whereas devoted Christians believe that human beings are born sinners, Buddhists believe that the true human nature is love, and that is what we should encourage. Buddhism is pacifistic and has — unlike the monotheistic religions — no blood on its hands: No war in history has ever been fought in the name of Buddhism.

Am I an atheist? I have a deep respect for sincerely religious people, but I do not believe in god as an objective idea, as anything that can be defined. Ajahn Sumedho states very beautifully and clearly in one of his talks: „The Ultimate Truth cannot be understood, but it can be realized.“ He means that it is something that must be experienced directly, it cannot be explained, you cannot understand it by believing in something or somebody or by listening to a teacher or guru, but you can *live* it. This is what the mystics have been saying for centuries.

All religions based on love and respect for others can be used as tools to search for „The Ultimate Truth.“ I may never find it, but I will probably continue to search for the rest of my life.

Recommended

sources:

Douglas H. Harding, *Religions of the World*
Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World, Science as a Candle in the Dark*
Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*
Clifford A. Pickover, *The Paradox of God and the Science of Omniscience*
Gary Greenberg, *1001 Myths of the Bible*

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