



HOMOSEXUALITY, BLASPHEMY, AND OTHER VICTIMLESS CRIMES

Why I traded in fairy tales for reality



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HELLO, MY NAME IS RYAN, AND I AM ATHEIST

It took me more than three years to abandon my faith in Jesus after I started scrutinizing my beliefs. Obviously, when someone asks me how I lost God’s Holy Fire, I can’t fit my answer into a lunch conversation. I’m writing this so that I can be a little bit more thorough, clear up some confusion, and perhaps—if I’m lucky—change someone’s view of atheism.

DEFINING ATHEISM

Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. I have never claimed (nor will I ever claim) to know with absolute certainty that no god exists. When I call myself atheist, I simply mean that I am not compelled to believe in any specific god. Perhaps the most precise moniker for myself is “agnostic atheist.” But I tend to eschew the “agnostic” qualifier, even though it is technically correct, because I feel like it is often used synonymously with “undecided.” In fact, I find the notion of a supernatural being to be somewhat plausible, so I can understand why somebody would be tempted to call me a deist. But I only find this notion to be plausible, not likely; I certainly do not believe that there is a god. Even if I did, deism is a passive belief that would not influence my life in a way that differs from how atheism currently does.

I’ve had conversations with people who call atheism a religion, so I feel the need to add that atheism is only a religion to the extent that “off” is a TV channel, “bald” is a hair color, and “not smoking” is an addiction.¹ With that in mind, I try to avoid using the word “atheist” as a noun; I prefer to use it as an adjective. That’s why I say “I am atheist” rather than “I am *an* atheist,” even though both statements are equally true and equally grammatically valid.

HOW DID I LOSE GOD’S HOLY FIRE?

Like everyone else, I was born without religious views. But I grew up in a very religious family, and I was absolutely serious about the beliefs I inherited. I can probably count on my fingers the number of Sundays that I didn’t attend church from the day I was born until the day I finished high school. Five years ago, nobody would have guessed that I would one day identify myself as atheist.

My journey to atheism began in 2009, but the story really began when I was in elementary school more than a decade earlier. Because I was so unruly and unfocused in second grade, my parents pulled me out of the public school system and homeschooled me, thus allowing them to teach me young earth creationism as science.

1997-2008: TEACH ME WHAT TO THINK, NOT HOW TO THINK

Lest I give the wrong impression, I’m compelled to start by saying how thankful I am that my parents homeschooled me for the three years that they did. As far as discipline is concerned, this was exactly what I needed. Under my mother’s 24/7 supervision, my behavior improved drastically during second, third, and fourth grade. Having a math major for a mother, I was given a top-notch math education. I didn’t have classmates to slow me down by asking questions about

¹ I wrote a tongue-in-cheek poem called “I’m Addicted to Not Smoking” in 2009. It got 6 likes on Facebook.



material I understood immediately. Thanks to my mother, I mastered sixth grade math before I finished fourth grade. For the purposes of this writing, though, I'm about to elaborate on where my parents went wrong, so I must rush to point out that the following paragraph is a criticism of the main thing my parents did wrong among many things they did right.



My science education gave a literal interpretation of primitive bronze-age allegory priority over actual science. One of my strongest memories from being homeschooled was when my mom and I were watching *Bill Nye the Science Guy* together. The title sequence showed a common illustration of human evolution, prompting my mother to turn off the TV and lecture me on evolution. I still recall her oversimplified misrepresentation of evolution. She told me that scientists saw monkeys and said, "Hey, they've got arms and legs like ours, their faces kinda look like ours, and we both have hair... we must have come from monkeys!" Towards the end of fourth grade (when my parents were preparing me for a return to public schools), Mom told me that in public

schools, they're going to try to teach me evolution²... and I remember her exact words: "They are *wrong*. God made us; do you understand?" I nodded. "The Bible tells us that we were made in the image of God, not the image of monkeys."

During my senior year of high school, I got into a casual debate about evolution before psychology class one day. The three basic perspectives were all represented: there was a husky, stubble-faced, know-it-all white guy who ascribed to atheistic evolution. There was a scholarly, popular, trendy, well-spoken black girl who spoke in support of theistic evolution. And then there was me, the sheltered suburban white boy who argued dogmatically for special creation. The girl and I dismissed atheistic evolution with one sentence: "Look at how complex and well-designed we are" (an argument I can't wait to address in the next chapter). The atheist and I found a point of agreement when I asked the girl "If you're going to give God credit for creating us, why not give Him credit for creating us the way He says He did?" And, of course, my position of special six-day creation was (rightfully) met by both of my adversaries with a scoff and the phrase "Evolution is observable, provable science." It took a year for me to realize how stupid I looked that day.

I had never honestly looked into evolution. As far as I was concerned, I knew that it was false, and that was all I needed to know. And if I ever had any doubts, I could reassure myself with the fact that my mom and dad believed in six-day creationism. Surely people as brilliant³ as my parents would do their research before telling me evolution is a lie.

² She apparently forgot that we lived in Oklahoma, where, even in 2013, evolution still isn't taught as fact.

³ To be clear, my use of the word "brilliant" is not sarcastic. My mom and dad are geniuses, but they've never been required to learn evolution. I bet they'd believe evolution if they ever learned it properly. Maybe.



2009: BASICALLY THE MOST CONFUSING YEAR OF MY LIFE

During my routine internet browsing, I stumbled across a YouTube video titled “Re: 5 Questions for an Atheist.”⁴ It caught my attention, so I watched it, and the author made some points I’d never considered before. I decided that it was time to “own my beliefs,” and started working on a response to his video. In an instant, I saw a new future for myself: I would be the next C.S. Lewis; the next Josh McDowell; the next William Lane Craig! I would be known as “Ryan T. Wilson, renowned Christian apologist.” People would always remember when they watched my YouTube responses to atheists and realized that Christianity was the only belief system that made sense. These atheists would one day greet me on the streets of gold and thank me for taking the time to show them the light. Great would be my reward in heaven.

By the end of the day, I had come up with thoughtful replies to each of the points made by the author of the video. I never posted a direct response to YouTube, but over the next few months, I did upload a few videos poking fun at some of the arguments against creationism. The feedback was overwhelmingly negative, and I took this persecution as a sign that I was doing the right thing. I decided to go after the holy grail of creationist apologetics: a video disproving evolution.

In an effort to avoid sounding like I didn’t know what I was talking about, I researched what I was going to be talking about. I wanted to know what I was arguing against so that I could actually argue against it (a mindset unfortunately absent from many people I encounter on both sides of most debates, not just this one). As it turned out, the evidence for evolution was actually pretty compelling. Not only does evolution have a strong case, but the criticisms I’d heard before were entirely fallacious.⁵ This shattered my worldview completely.

But at some point, I found a video about theistic evolution. I discovered that several Protestant denominations⁶ have publicly supported the teaching of evolution in schools, and learned that the allegorical interpretation of Genesis was suggested before Charles Darwin was born. I realized that maybe I could continue to believe in God. Fueled by a newfound reassurance that my beliefs were true, I was determined to be unstoppable as a Christian.

2010-2011: A NEW HOPE

The two years that followed represent the most spiritual⁷ phase of my adult life. I was excited to serve God by teaching His word to younger children and being around to influence them. On multiple occasions, I made the 200-mile drive from my college dorm in Stillwater, Oklahoma to my old church in Frisco, Texas to help out with the youth group. I didn’t just do it because I was popular with the middle school students; I genuinely loved the students and families I was serving. I really felt like I was doing the Lord’s work. During that time, I had a feeling of purpose and a renewed joy, and you couldn’t convince me that it wasn’t God working in me.

⁴ The video has since been taken down; I’d include a link otherwise. For what it’s worth, it was posted by TJ Kirk under the YouTube username TheAmazingAtheist.

⁵ Suggested resource: [HTTP://EN.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/OBJECTIONS_TO_EVOLUTION](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Objections_to_evolution)

⁶ Notably absent from this list was the Southern Baptist Convention, my denomination at the time.

⁷ In case you don’t know, “spiritual” is a Christian word meaning “ultra-religious, but in a good way.”



I had reconciled science with Christianity in my own mind, and I didn't feel the need to keep researching what I believed. In fact, if I ever looked into what I believed, I only entertained arguments from Christian websites and Christian friends. Towards the end of this phase, I would have described atheist YouTube channels and atheist websites the same way I described pornographic websites: "It's tempting to see what's there, but I know I shouldn't because it will only take me away from God." But things would take an interesting turn near the end of 2011, when, in a moment of weakness, I finally caved in to temptation. I opened my eyes and ears to the claims presented by atheists.

2012: THE YEAR EVERYTHING CHANGED FOREVER

While my roommate spent Christmas with his family, I had hours of free time and an apartment all to myself... two things I wasn't used to at all. I spent a lot of my free time watching the first six seasons of *How I Met Your Mother*. I spent the rest of it watching atheist videos on YouTube, reading articles debunking various claims made by Christianity, and scouring the internet for intellectually fulfilling rebuttals from Christian apologists. My search for Christian answers was in vain, and I regretted ever questioning my beliefs.

"WELL, THAT WAS A DISAPPOINTMENT"

Early in 2012, I got invited to watch the documentary adaptation of the Lee Strobel book *The Case for Christ* at an acquaintance's house after church. This excited me for several reasons: it was a chance to discuss compelling proof of Christianity, I was promised a free lunch, and there were rumors that a certain young lady I fancied would be attending.

The lunch was delicious, but the girl I liked didn't show up, the discussion—while good—had very little to do with the documentary, and the documentary sucked.

When I say the documentary sucked, I don't mean the editing or the cinematography, as cheesy as they both were. The information itself was terrible! It was all the same lazy arguments I'd already heard, but this time, they were presented so poorly that the underlying logical fallacies were made more obvious.⁸ No Baptist would overlook the same fallacies if they had been present in a Mormon documentary. If it had been a Muslim documentary, the logic wouldn't sway a Jew to convert to Islam. The arguments were great for helping a firm believer remain deluded, but I knew that an honest skeptic would outright reject the information Strobel was providing. That was more disappointing than the absence of the aforementioned lady friend.

"YOUR BROTHER ISN'T GAY; HE JUST HAS A BOYFRIEND"

While all of this was going on, my parents found out that my brother had been dating a guy for a couple of months. They told me how concerned they were for him and asked if he had told me anything else they should know. Perhaps they were just trying to keep me informed on what the family was going through. I felt like they were possibly trying to recruit my help in influencing my brother to become straight. Either way, I was already starting to question my stance on homosexuality, and this shocker motivated me to reevaluate⁹ my stance entirely.

⁸ I'm considering watching it again; if I do, I'll make a few game boards for Logical Fallacy Bingo.

⁹ I hope I'm being clear with my use of the word "reevaluate" in lieu of the word "change."



I wasn't surprised that my brother had a boyfriend. We all knew that he was "different." I wasn't even surprised by the fact that my parents opposed this lifestyle; I expected them to. What baffled me was my dad's assertion that was reminiscent of the notorious Pray the Gay Away program: "You don't have a gay brother; you just have a brother who struggles with same-sex attraction." They were talking about my brother like he was infected; as if he needed to be cured; as though gay people can turn themselves straight.¹⁰

To be fair, I know that my parents' intentions are loving, and I don't know of a more loving way they could handle the situation while remaining true to their belief that being gay is wrong. They didn't disown him, they didn't force him to move out of their house, and they didn't bombard him with homophobic remarks in the vein of "God Hates Fags." But because of their religion, my parents still found it imperative to constantly remind my brother that his lifestyle was an abomination before God. I could see that this was taking an emotional toll on him. I knew I couldn't stay on the fence for very long.

For the casual reader, it may stand to reason that I left Christianity so I wouldn't have to condemn my brother's choices. So, before anybody jumps to that conclusion, I want to emphasize that this situation did not change my beliefs. More than anything, it influenced me to learn more about *why* I believed what I believed. In the same way, in American football, the play clock doesn't dictate what play the offense will run; it only serves to motivate that team to choose a play more quickly. I've also described this situation's role with another sports analogy. It's like a third-string player on a basketball team scoring four points off the bench in the last two minutes of a fifty-point win. Did that player contribute to the victory? Technically, yes, but he wasn't the difference between a win and a loss. I feel like I would still be atheist today even if I didn't have a gay brother. But I can't leave him out of the story any more than a team manager could leave the third-string basketball player off of the stat sheet.

"SORRY, I CAN'T AFFORD THAT"

It's hard to say exactly when I stopped believing in Christianity, mainly because it was a transition, not a sudden change. But I can say when I *realized* I no longer believed what I claimed to believe. In February 2012, the college ministers at the church I attended began talking about a spring break mission trip to New Mexico. I don't remember exactly how much it would have cost to go on that trip. What I do remember is my reaction when I found out. It wasn't a reaction along the lines of "That's more money than I have," or "That's an outrageous amount of money to spend." My initial gut feeling was, roughly translated, "I don't believe the message of Christianity strongly enough to invest that much money in spreading it." If it had been a retreat, I would have spent the money. If it had been a trip to an Oklahoma City Thunder game, I would have found a way to go. But the fact that it was a mission trip deterred me.

Of course, I wasn't ready to drop that bombshell on everyone. When people asked why I wasn't going, I lied. I went with the plausible explanation of not getting enough hours at work to justify the expense. Some people heard me say that I wouldn't be able to get the time off work, another

¹⁰ If you're straight, try to imagine a world in which heterosexuality is taboo. Think of the closest friend you have who is the same gender as you. Imagine being told *that's* who you should marry and have sex with.



lie. Looking back, I'm sure some people saw right through both excuses. But they kept people from badgering me about not going on the trip, which is all I wanted at that time.

"I DON'T EXACTLY BELIEVE IN GOD"

On April 7, 2012, sixteen years to the day after I had prayed to receive Christ, I made a phone call that would change my life forever. I was calling my best friend¹¹ to wish him a happy birthday, and after an hour and a half of catching up, he nervously told me about some of the things he had done lately... things that Christians typically frown on. It felt like how I imagine Catholic confession feels, except I was the priest. After he finished spilling his unholy guts to me, there was a long pause. I knew he was waiting for me to come down on him with Bible verses, but I realized that I simply couldn't do it with conviction. So, for the first time in my life, I said out loud what I already knew in the back of my mind but was afraid to admit: "I don't exactly believe in God."

In that moment, I expected one of a hundred possible responses. Was he going to say we couldn't be friends anymore? Would he say he didn't believe me? Perhaps I was about to have a religious argument with my best friend on his birthday. My heart raced as my mind raced through all the ways this could end badly. But to my surprise, my statement was met almost instantly with "Oh, good, me neither!" A burden was lifted off of my shoulders. I realized that I wasn't the only one seeing the world with new eyes. But at the same time, I was terrified. Now I was officially living a double life, which I knew I couldn't continue for long. Everything I loved about life—my favorite people, my favorite activities, my best memories—came from church. Leaving was the hardest decision I ever made, but it was the only way to ease my internal conflict, and it was certainly the correct choice.

"MANAGERS HAVE TO WORK ON SUNDAYS"

The timing was awkward to say the least. I was still teaching Sunday school and leading a middle school small group on Wednesday nights. At the beginning of the year, I had volunteered to help with a two-day theatrical production at church, which, at the time, was still two months away. I wasn't just doing easy behind-the-scenes work; I was cast as the title character, and my lines were written specifically for me. I couldn't just make someone else play my character. I *was* my character. People at church were counting on me to memorize my lines, and I didn't feel right about abandoning everyone before I had fulfilled my obligations. Compelled by my sense of empathy, and reassured by the story of Scott Kerr's 1998 departure from the band Five Iron Frenzy,¹² I decided I could wait just a little bit longer before leaving the church.



¹¹ He and I used to perform skits together for the youth group. He took his convictions just as seriously as I took mine.

¹² Basically, the guitar player for a Christian band stopped believing in Christianity, but before leaving the band, he finished the year's shows and helped find his replacement. What a thoughtful guy.



I had it all figured out. The end was in sight; in less than two months, the production would be over, the school year would be over, and I could stop showing up for church without confrontation. Obviously, my friends would notice within a few weeks, and they would start sending me Facebook messages asking where I went. I could just tell them that my job needed me to be available on Sunday mornings (which wasn't a lie). I could say that I no longer felt called to serve in the youth group (also true, when you think about it). Eventually, people would put the pieces together. But when they did, they would see that I didn't start a bunch of arguments before I left. *They* would be the ones starting arguments about their religion. I wouldn't have to be the one who appears hostile, so if I lost friendships over this, I could make a case for it not being my fault. It was fool-proof.

"HE THOUGHT YOU WERE KIDDING"

One evening in June 2012, I was hanging out with my old roommate (who had just moved out). At some point, I told him I was done going to church, then I immediately proceeded to make a joke about my situation. He laughed and the conversation continued. But, as I understand it, something just didn't sit right with him after I left. He became worried that I really didn't believe in his god. Like any good Christian, he told the college pastor from our church, who wasted no time in scheduling a lunch meeting to discuss my beliefs.

For about an hour, the college pastor and I sat down and talked, mainly about the relationship between evolution and Genesis. In hindsight, perhaps I should have talked about other things, as this left him under the impression that evolution was the foundation for (rather than the gateway to) my lack of belief. Either way, I left with the feeling that we made no progress and that we were both just arguing to argue. I appreciated his concern but didn't (and still don't) find it necessary.

"I SOLEMNLY AFFIRM"

Leaving Christianity was the biggest decision I made in 2012, but I also want to briefly address how it affected the second-biggest decision I made: joining the Navy. For the previous three months, I had kept quiet about the fact that I didn't believe in any god. But while I was at MEPS on September 25, I realized I didn't need to hide; more importantly, I realized I no longer *wanted* to hide. When a secretary asked for my religious preference, I cheerfully replied "none." When swearing into the military, I took the oath in a room full of recruits who were reciting the same oath. We were told that if we believed in a god, we could use the phrase "I solemnly swear" and end the oath with "so help me god." Those of us who identified as non-religious could say "I solemnly affirm" and omit the last phrase. I loved the looks I got when I used the word "affirm" loudly and proudly while everyone else in the room used the word "swear." Ah, Oklahoma.

2013-PRESENT: ALL I DO IS SIN, SIN, SIN NO MATTER WHAT

It didn't take long for me to lose count of how many people expressed their hopes that I "won't lose my morals" after I left Christianity. I'll go into more detail about the relationship between religion and morality in the next chapter, but I think this is as good a place as any to lay out a few details about my personal life.

- I have never smoked tobacco or marijuana. I've never taken any illegal drugs.
- I have no tattoos or piercings, and I have no interest in changing that.



- I don't eat babies.
- I have been drunk three times. The last time I was drunk was in October 2012, during which time I decided not to get drunk again.



Bro, Jesus may not be real, but id rather belevee in that than.be drunk again. This fuxking sucks. ... But I'm an atheist, so in not going stop getting dunk for Jesus.I'm going to stop getting drunk because it's not what I want to anymore.

text message I drunkenly sent to a close friend, 10/25/2012 3:22 am



If you only gather one thing from what I'm writing, I hope you'll realize that I'm still the same person I was before. I still enjoy football, basketball, and baseball. I still drink ridiculous amounts of Dr Pepper. I still make lame puns in a silly effort to amuse anybody who cares to listen. I still make a point of doing nice things for people. I just believe in one fewer god than I used to.

ARGUMENTS I NEVER WANT TO HEAR AGAIN

Strangely, the phrase "I'm atheist" often gets taken as an invitation to argue religion. I call this strange because in my experience, phrases like "I'm a Muslim" and "I'm Jewish" never elicit a defensive retort from my Christian friends. But I digress. I hear a lot of the same things from lots of different Christians, and it gets old. I'm not writing this section to prove that there is no god.¹³ It is simply a list of my "favorite" Christian arguments and a brief explanation of why they don't work on me.

LOOK AT HOW COMPLEX AND WELL-DESIGNED WE ARE

Complexity does not imply design unless the organism is irreducibly complex. Darwin himself admitted that "If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed, which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, [evolutionary] theory would absolutely break down." Creationists ignore this comment when accusing evolution of being unfalsifiable (and thus unscientific). The irony is tragically lost on these people who use irreducible complexity in an effort to falsify evolution. Perhaps the most famously touted example of supposed irreducible complexity is the human eye, the evolution of which is well-documented.

¹³ If you're looking for proof that there is no god, write down in your own words why you don't believe in unicorns. Then replace every mention of the word "unicorns" with "God." You will either doubt the existence of unicorns slightly less, or doubt the existence of your god slightly more. Either way, I'm happy.



In reality, arguments from complexity and design are two of the weakest arguments in existence. For one thing, the great horned owl has better vision than humans. Almost all breeds of dog have better senses of hearing and smell than humans. Cheetahs can run faster than humans. Does your god care more about owls, dogs, and cheetahs than he does about his own children?

IF WE EVOLVED FROM MONKEYS, WHY ARE THERE STILL MONKEYS?

This is a horrible misrepresentation of evolution. People who ask this question demonstrate that they have absolutely no working knowledge of what they're arguing against. Among other things, this is an obvious example of a straw-man argument: no scientist *ever* claimed that we evolved from the species of monkey we see today; instead, we have a common ancestor who lived millions of years ago. Suppose your last name is Miller, your mother's maiden name is Jones, and her sister married a man named Mr. Smith. This argument is like pointing to your Smith cousins and asking your brother "If we as Millers came from Smiths, why are there still Smiths?" You didn't come from Smiths, but you and your Smith cousins are related through the Jones family.

People who argue against evolution are on the same level as people who argue that the sun orbits the earth. To remain logically consistent, when discarding evolutionary theory based on the first two chapters of Genesis, you'd have to discard plate tectonic theory based on Psalm 104:32 (which could be interpreted to mean that earthquakes are caused by God looking at the earth). I'm not a qualified authority on the topic of molecular biology, but I can tell you that evolution is true, and I can say it with the same certainty with which I say the sun rises in the east. Thankfully, most of the Christians I've encountered have accepted evolution (or at least think they have).

THE SECOND LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS

There was a time when I believed that evolution was proven impossible by this law. Thanks to people like Ray Comfort, a lot of otherwise educated people hold the same view. But the Second Law of Thermodynamics does not apply to Darwin's theory; this law applies only to closed systems, wherein no energy can enter or exit. Evolution takes place in an open system, which receives outside energy from the sun.

HERE ARE SOME SCIENTISTS WHO BELIEVE IN GOD

That's nice. Did you know that, according to a survey published in the June 2007 issue of "The Nation," 93% of the members of the National Academy of Sciences reject the concept of god? Statistically, this means that for every Christian scientist you can tell me about, there are *at least thirteen* other scientists who have already heard arguments for your god and were not the slightest bit compelled by them. This argument overwhelmingly supports my position over yours. I'll be the bigger man here and admit that the original argument, an appeal to authority, is a logical fallacy. But I'm sure that didn't matter to you when you thought it supported *your* view.

Instead of relying on a statistic to shoot down this argument, I'll counter with a more equivalent argument. Here are some pastors who do not believe in god: CLERGYPROJECT.ORG.

IT TAKES FAITH TO BE ATHEIST

It does take faith to be atheist, much in the same way that it takes faith to believe that there isn't a colony of pink unicorns populating the moon. Sure, there are close-up photographs of the moon



that don't show any unicorns of any kind, but who are *you* to question the existence of those unicorns? For all we know, scientists probably manipulated those moon photos the same way they manipulated evidence for evolution and the big bang. Those sneaky bastards and their atheist agenda.

It amuses me that Christians call atheism a faith-based position as if faith is a bad thing. It may take faith to be atheist, but I'm more than happy to put my faith in the findings of intelligent men and women who wear lab coats, especially if they don't ask me to get out of bed early on Sundays to apologize for being human.

IF I AM WRONG, I LOSE NOTHING; IF YOU ARE WRONG, YOU LOSE EVERYTHING!

There are so many fun ways to shoot this one down, I don't even know where to start. It's sad that I even have to address Pascal's Wager, but amazingly, two people from the last church I attended have used it on me and thought they were making a good point. Here's why it's bullshit (please excuse my French).

1. *It assumes that Christianity and atheism are the only options.* What if we're both wrong and Allah is the one true god? Then we both lose everything.
2. *It assumes that I get to choose what I believe.* Why don't you believe in leprechauns? Is it because you consciously choose not to, or because you're not compelled to?
3. *It implies that your god is going to be fooled by me pretending to believe.* If you think I can fake it and trick your god into letting me into heaven, why do you think I need him?
4. *It states that believers in a false religion have lost nothing.* In reality, you've lost time and money, and it didn't get you any closer to your god because your god isn't real. You know, hypothetically.

WHERE DOES MORALITY COME FROM?

Religion and morality are like milk and cereal. You do see them together sometimes, but you certainly don't have to have one to have the other. The only reason anybody thinks they go together is because humans have been putting them together for as long as we can remember.

Besides, do you really get your morality from the Bible? Is Exodus 20:13 the only thing keeping you from going on a murderous rampage? Why, clean-shaven friends, don't you get your morals from Leviticus 19:27? Would you offer your two virgin daughters to be gang raped in the place of two angels? According to Genesis 19:8, you can make that offer, or at least you could back in the day. And as long as we're getting our morality from the Bible, I think I'm going to rape the girl I have a crush on. As long as she's a virgin, Deuteronomy 22 says that this will make her my wife in God's eyes. In fact, the Bible never specifically condemns rape the way it condemns lying, stealing,



Morality is doing what is right regardless of what you are told. Religion is doing what you are told regardless of what is right.

Anonymous



murder, and various forms of blasphemy. Although, to my great amusement, OPENBIBLE.INFO lists Luke 1:31 as a result when you search for “rape.” You don’t have to be atheist to get a kick out of that one.

“If I could stop a person from raping a child, I would. That’s the difference between me and your god.” –Tracie Harris

Before you hastily add that Jesus came to free us from Old Testament law, tell me where it says which ones He came to free us from. Jesus never spoke about homosexuality, yet so many Christians are certain that “that part” of the Old Testament still applies. I’ll get to my tirade about Biblical interpretations later, but for now, I hope you’ll realize that you don’t base all of your moral decisions on a careful and thorough interpretation of your holy book.

Honestly, I don’t know where morality comes from. I personally think it may be a quirk in our evolutionary history, as detailed by Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion*. I’ll propose a theory that loosely bases itself on evolution: men who display empathy towards women are more likely to, uh, *pass on their genes*. All joking aside, I really don’t know. But morality most definitely does not come from any religion. Dawkins said it best: “Would you commit murder, rape, or robbery if you knew that no god existed?” Like Dawkins, I strongly doubt that any of you would answer that question affirmatively. An immoral world needs empathy, not religion. I don’t need the threat of eternal torture or the promise of eternal reward to motivate me to do good things. An understanding of actions and consequences is more than enough motivation for me.

There are certain morals that are ubiquitous across all cultures and religions. People tend to agree that stealing is wrong. People agree that lying is wrong (despite the fact that we all do it). There does not appear to be a culture in which murder is acceptable. And in the spirit of fairness, I will admit that Hebrews 8:10 is logically consistent with this phenomenon. It is not ridiculous for Christians to believe that their god has written his laws on the hearts and minds of believers and nonbelievers alike. But I see this the same way I see the creation myth: it’s just attributing an unexplained phenomenon to a god rather than seeking an honest explanation.

HISTORY PROVES THE STORY OF JESUS

No, it really doesn’t. Although history provides sufficient evidence for the existence of a man who called himself Jesus, it doesn’t prove that he was the son of your god. I’ve heard so many appeals to history, and most of them are false or severely flawed.

HUNDREDS OF WITNESSES SAW JESUS AFTER HE RESURRECTED

Well, guess what? I’m going to assert that I made ten consecutive shots from midcourt during the halftime show at an Oklahoma City Thunder game. You seem doubtful, so I quickly add that 18,203 fans were inside the arena to see it. Now do you believe me? You don’t? You want more proof? You want names of some of the skeptical people who were there?

Let’s up the ante a little bit. Instead of talking about an incredibly improbable achievement in sports, we’re talking about something that is literally impossible as far as we know: a man coming back to life three days after dying. To convince me, you’re going to need a lot more than just a list of people who died 2,000 years ago, no matter how skeptical you say they were.



THE DISCIPLES WERE WILLING TO DIE FOR THEIR BELIEFS [CITATION NEEDED]

As a matter of fact, only two of the twelve disciples have their deaths recorded anywhere in the Bible: Judas Iscariot, whose suicidal hanging is described in Matthew 27:5, and James (son of Zebedee), whose capital punishment was recorded in Acts 12. Christian tradition maintains that John the Evangelist lived into old age, and this lines up with recorded history (as far as I know). Surely there are secular records corroborating these accounts and documenting the martyr deaths of the other nine, right?

Wrong.

Google it. Look it up on Wikipedia.¹⁴ Many Christian scholars freely admit that there are no accurate or reliable records chronicling the deaths of the disciples. Christians and Catholics tend to agree that Andrew and Peter were crucified for spreading Christianity, but ultimately, the most reliable source of this information is Catholic tradition. One parallel comes to mind instantly: the story of Christopher Columbus. In kindergarten, I was taught that Columbus was the only Spaniard who knew that the earth wasn't flat. Never mind the fact that scientists had already determined over a thousand years earlier that the earth is round. Forget the fact that Columbus wasn't even Spanish. Despite the lack of basis in facts, even educated Americans believe the version I was told in kindergarten. Christians are so quick to tout the accounts of the disciples' deaths, completely unaware that these accounts are the same thing: urban legends lacking real historical support.

But let's give this argument its best possible chance, which is done by assuming that the postulate is factually correct. That's to say, we're going to simply assume that some of the original disciples really did die for Christianity. What does this prove? The Jonestown cult is really the only counterexample I need. But we also have proof that Joseph Smith was constantly persecuted and eventually martyred for his beliefs. Does his martyrdom mean that he wasn't making it all up? Does the story prove that he was for real? Does it lend any credibility whatsoever to the Latter Day Saint movement? I don't doubt that he genuinely believed what he was preaching, but I didn't become a Mormon when I learned this. And somehow, I doubt that any of you did either.

And in the off chance that you still find this argument to hold merit, let's investigate the willingness of the disciples to die. Again, assuming they actually died for their beliefs, how do you know they all died willingly? The argument hinges on the blind assumption that they were given the opportunity to renounce Christianity to avoid being killed. The problem is that, according to tradition, the disciples were killed by governments, not by civilian enemies. Do you know of any murderer who avoided the death penalty by promising not to murder anyone ever again? When was the last time you heard of a police officer saying to a bank robber, "Just put the money back in the vault and we'll forget this ever happened?" The disciples may very well have tried to no avail to renounce their message shortly before they died. All except for Peter, of course, as we all know that he would never deny Christ.¹⁵

¹⁴ LOL, CITATION NEEDED

¹⁵ That was a cheap shot, and I apologize for twisting part of the Bible to support my point. Christians would never do that.



Ultimately, nobody should be swayed by the assertion that the disciples died for Christianity. As impressive as the argument sounds on the surface, it completely lacks both support and significance.

JESUS FULFILLED PROPHECIES THAT WERE WRITTEN SEVEN HUNDRED YEARS EARLIER

Internal consistency is not the same as truth, boys and girls. I don't believe that the Old Testament proves the New Testament any more than *The Phantom Menace* proves *Return of the Jedi*. Without complete reliance on the New Testament, there isn't historical support for Jesus fulfilling Old Testament prophecies. Most secular historians agree that Jesus existed, but there is considerable debate as to whether or not we can trust the accounts of his miracles. Obviously, this is a highly partisan debate: Christians (and, to some extent, Muslims) will argue that the New Testament describes real miracles, whereas atheists will argue that these were all made up. It's hard to find truth in a debate when virtually every debater has an agenda.

If you have solid evidence that Jesus did, in fact, perform miracles, and that he fulfilled all the prophecies you say he did, I'll be a Christian again in no time. But before you start, bear in mind the words of Carl Sagan, who cautioned that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," and Christopher Hitchens, who is paraphrased as saying "what is asserted gratuitously may be denied gratuitously." The burden of proof, my friend, is on you.

I'd like to briefly digress to address a serious issue that often arises at this point in the debate. Some of you may be waiting for me to describe how the story of Jesus was predated by a thousand years by closely paralleled stories of Egyptian gods like Horus, Osiris, and Isis. But the theory that the New Testament is based on Egyptian mythology is itself mythological. This suggestion was first purported early in the twentieth century by English writer¹⁶ Gerald Massey, and was rejected by Egyptologists almost immediately due to lack of historical support. It's sad that atheists use the Horus parallels to disprove Christianity while simultaneously bashing Christians for blindly accepting unfounded claims. I hope it won't be said of me that my claims lack a basis in fact.

THERE WAS A HUGE SURGE OF CHRISTIANITY SHORTLY AFTER THE TIME OF CHRIST

By the time Muhammad died, Islam dominated the Arabian Peninsula. Scientology spread quickly after *Dianetics* was published. I'll concede that, if Christianity is true, one would expect it to spread quickly after Jesus began appearing to people. If Christianity hadn't spread very quickly, I'm sure atheists would gladly use that as an argument against the authenticity of the Bible. But for all we know, Christianity could have just been the flavor of the month, just like almost every enduring religion was when it began. There isn't much evidence to differentiate the early spread of Christianity from the early spread of every religion Christians dismiss.

YOU INTERPRETED THE BIBLE INCORRECTLY

My response to this one never changes. Did you consult an Imam to make sure you understood the Koran correctly before dismissing Islam? Did you read the Koran *at all* before deciding that Allah was not the one true god? How much time did you spend studying the Vedas before

¹⁶ He wasn't even a real historian; he was merely a poet, but I guess he didn't know it.



rejecting Hinduism? I've never read or analyzed anything written by L. Ron Hubbard, yet I seriously doubt you fault me for laughing at the concept of Xenu.

I don't have to attend a seminary-level hermeneutics class to argue that Christianity isn't true.¹⁷ When you understand why you haven't properly investigated every religion besides your own, you will understand why I haven't properly investigated yours. And when you understand why you dismiss all other possible religions, you will understand why I dismiss yours.

Besides, look at what the Bible is: a collection of confusing, sometimes conflicting Bronze Age documents with unverifiable authors, subjectively translated by imperfect humans into hundreds of different versions. Clearly, plain communication was not a priority for your god. You have a right to say it's because he works in mysterious ways. I have a right to say it's because he's imaginary.

On a related note, to the evolution deniers, you interpreted science incorrectly. Did you Google "proof that evolution is true," carefully analyze the evidence, and conclude that it was probably not true? Or did you just Google "proof that evolution is false" and blindly accept whatever you found? Perhaps you should also Google "proof that the youth are revolting," just because.

ATHEISM FAILS TO EXPLAIN WHY WE EXIST

This argument sounds like a child on a playground saying "God exists because everything that exists must have had a creator, except for the creator I believe in, because I say so."

Even when I was a Christian, this argument didn't make any sense to me. I will concede that the initial argument is factually correct, but it's inconsequential: atheism does not explain anything,



A good explanation has predictive power and can explain why things are one way and not another. "God made it that way" has neither quality.

@TakeThatDarwin on Twitter, 4/3/2013



nor is it meant to. Whereas Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are systems of belief, atheism is a single belief. Perhaps what people mean to say is that *science* fails to explain why we exist. But true as this may be, as an argument for your god, it is still an obvious non sequitur. I try to refrain from using this question in conversations because I would run the risk of sounding hostile, but I just want to ask: "How in the world is this evidence for your god?" Atheism doesn't explain existence, therefore your god is the one true god? By this logic, I could make up an equally valid religion by asserting that ponies are the reason we exist! The fact that your religion offers an explanation for our existence does not make your religion true and it does not make your god real.

¹⁷ If you really want a list of people who studied the entire Bible at a seminary and concluded that it can't be true, I'd like to once again refer you to CLERGYPROJECT.ORG.



This argument is really just a subset of the “god of the gaps” fallacy. Basically, someone who ascribes to this erroneous mindset will point to questions science can’t yet answer, calling these unknowns “proof (or evidence) of god’s existence.” It’s like automatically blaming O.J. Simpson for any murder case with no leads.¹⁸ I take issue with this mindset, not because I don’t believe in your god, but because it inhibits scientific discovery. If everybody were content with the religious explanations of scientific unknowns, you wouldn’t have your smartphone, your air conditioner, your allergy medicine, or any idea what’s happening beyond the horizon.

IF YOU DO NOT BELIEVE GOD EXISTS, WHY ARGUE AGAINST HIM?

If someone were to walk into a busy mall and loudly announce that there is a bomb in the bathroom, how would everyone react? How many people would simply say they have to see it to believe it? People tend to agree that the best thing to do is to assume there really is a bomb and react accordingly. Even if you aren’t presented with real evidence of a bomb, that’s not a risk you want to take blindly.

With that being said, I see your god the same way I see this hypothetical bomb threat. If there is a god, I understand very well how important it is to live and plan my life accordingly. But I refuse to live my life in fear of a god who isn’t there. Evangelists are the people running around the mall screaming “There’s a bomb! There’s a bomb!” influencing other people to run around the mall screaming the same¹⁹. Scientists are the people who calmly examined every square inch of the bathroom, came to the conclusion that the threat was unfounded, and are trying to restore order so that business can continue as usual. Do I know for sure that there’s no bomb anywhere in the mall? Of course not. But every person who has claimed to have seen a bomb has been unable to prove it. More compellingly, it’s been over 2,000 years and the mall still hasn’t blown up. So while you’re all walking around the mall, legalistically following absurd rules in an effort to appease an imaginary bomber, I’m the guy who’s trying out the massage chairs at Brookstone, eating a fro-yo from the food court, and encouraging people to join me as I enjoy the life I know I have.

Another version of this argument is, put simply, “Why do you try to prove that there are no gods when you admit that this can never be proven?” Nobody has asked me this specific question, but I’m sure some of you who Googled “questions for atheists” found this one and have wanted to ask. I don’t speak for all atheists, but in general, I don’t think atheists are actually trying to prove that there is no god. We’re not making up a god then arguing against that; we’re arguing against the actual claims made by actual religions. At most, atheists will usually only claim to have proven that theistic gods don’t exist. We are only trying to demonstrate that the existence of a god is very unlikely, which we do by arguing against the claims made by theists (and, on occasion, deists).

SCIENCE EXPLAINS THE HOW; RELIGION EXPLAINS THE WHY

This is a defense used by many Christians when trying to reconcile the differences between science and religion. It’s a pretty convenient defense because, with just two conjoined independent clauses, you automatically excuse every religion from rational scrutiny. It’s nothing more than an attempt to distance religion from falsifiability. But a universe with a supernatural

¹⁸ The obvious difference, of course, is that we all agree that O.J. Simpson is real.

¹⁹ “The end is near,” anyone? ;)



and personal creator would be observably different from a universe without one. The question of whether or not there is a god, and which religion is true, is a scientific question. For you to genuinely believe that science and religion can't overlap, you inescapably have to believe in a non-intervening god. This rules out the gods characterized by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and effectively leaves deism as your only choice. Deism isn't a religion, so this *non-overlapping magisteria* argument is virtually self-defeating.

QUESTIONS FOR CHRISTIANS

The questions that follow are intended to be rhetorical, but I would never ask a question I wouldn't want answered. If you want to answer these questions, send your responses to RYAN.T.WILSON+ATHEISTQANDA@LIVE.COM and perhaps I'll respond, either in a reply email or in a future update of this paper. Some of these questions sound rude, so I'm going to ask you to take me at my word when I say I mean no disrespect.

DID YOU CHOOSE YOUR RELIGION OR DID IT CHOOSE YOU?

If you had been born in theocratic Afghanistan, you would almost certainly be a Muslim for the first part of your life. But suppose that on your eighteenth birthday, you moved to a secular nation where no authority is requiring you to follow any particular religion. You would be free to evaluate all the evidence and come to whatever conclusion you saw fit; the only difference is that you would be starting with a Muslim bias rather than a Christian one. What do you think you would believe today? Would you still be a Muslim? What would it take to persuade you that Jesus was the human manifestation of God, and that Muhammad was just a man whose supernatural experiences never happened? How do you explain away Muhammad's supernatural experiences using methods that don't cripple the accounts of the miracles performed by Jesus?

Geography is not the only thing that determines a person's religious views. That is not what I'm trying to suggest. Instead, I want you to consider what it would take to convert you to your religion if you had spent most of your life firmly believing something different... especially when this different belief relies on many of the same arguments.

HOW MUCH FAITH DO YOU REALLY HAVE?

Suppose you are diagnosed with cancer. Assuming you want to be healed, here are four of the ways you can go about this.

OPTION A <i>PRO-SCIENCE ANTI-CHURCH</i>	OPTION B <i>PRO-SCIENCE PRO-CHURCH</i>	OPTION C <i>ANTI-SCIENCE PRO-CHURCH</i>	OPTION D <i>ANTI-SCIENCE ANTI-CHURCH</i>
Take medication. Never pray.	Take medication. Pray every day.	Refuse medication. Pray every day.	Refuse medication. Never pray.
Stay at the hospital. Avoid the chapel.	Stay at the hospital. Attend the chapel.	Avoid the hospital. Attend church.	Avoid the hospital. Avoid church.



OPTION A <i>PRO-SCIENCE</i> <i>ANTI-CHURCH</i>	OPTION B <i>PRO-SCIENCE</i> <i>PRO-CHURCH</i>	OPTION C <i>ANTI-SCIENCE</i> <i>PRO-CHURCH</i>	OPTION D <i>ANTI-SCIENCE</i> <i>ANTI-CHURCH</i>
Take doctor's advice. Never talk to pastors.	Take doctor's advice. Take pastor's advice.	Never talk to doctors. Take pastor's advice. ²⁰	Never talk to doctors. Never talk to pastors.
Read health books. Never read the Bible.	Read health books. Read the Bible.	Shun health books. Read the Bible.	Shun health books. Never read the Bible.
Ask for donations. Never ask for prayer.	Ask for donations. Ask for prayer.	Refuse donations. Ask for prayer.	Refuse donations. Never ask for prayer.

Which option do you think leads to the highest survival rate: A, B, C, or D? I'm certain²¹ that none of you would choose Option D. I would predict that most of you would be most comfortable with Option B. So here are the questions that follow:

- Which would you choose if A and C were your only options?
- How much more effective is C than D?
- Is B more effective than A to the same extent or to a greater extent?

WHY DOES YOUR GOD RELY ON HUMANS TO WRITE THE BIBLE?

If it is so important for your god to communicate with us, why does he choose such a circuitous method? An omniscient god would know how confusing it would be to speak to his children through the ambiguous allegories and metaphors that make up much of the Old Testament. Why can't his words be taken literally? An omnipotent god would be able to transcribe the Bible himself. Defining morality, explaining our nature, and teaching us how to attain salvation is a pretty big task for a perfect god to delegate to his imperfect creations.

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT YOUR GOD PREVENTS TRAGEDIES?

Most Christians realize that an omnipresent god cannot be banished from public schools by a Supreme Court ruling on the constitutionality of state-sanctioned prayer. But in the wake of the Sandy Hook massacre, some of you helped circulate one of the dumbest pictures I've ever seen on Facebook. It says one on side "Dear God, why do you allow violence in schools? -Concerned student." The other side reads "Dear student, I'm not allowed in schools anymore. -God." Hopefully, I'm not speaking to very many of my friends on this one, but to those of you who shared that picture... do you really believe that school shootings would stop if we forced students to say a Christian prayer before class? If so, how many cases of child molestation did your god prevent in Catholic churches? I'm not trying to say that evil can't exist in a world with a benevolent god. But I don't see any correlation between obedience to a god and likelihood of surviving tragic events.

²⁰ Fun fact: your pastor would be legally required to advise you to talk to a doctor. Gee, I wonder why.

²¹ Read: optimistic



WHY DOES YOUR GOD COMMAND YOU NOT TO TEST HIM?

When you read Luke 4:12, where Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:16, it is obvious that your religion is like a smoke detector that says “DO NOT TEST.” Would you trust your life to a smoke detector that tells you on the packaging that it can’t be tested? I wouldn’t! I want to make sure it works! Don’t you find it somewhat suspicious that your god doesn’t want you to test him to make sure he’s there?

QUESTIONS I DO NOT CARE TO ELABORATE ON

- How can you speak in tongues and not realize you’re full of crap?
- Do I need to kill Christians (like Saul did) to be worth a personal visit from your god?
- What are the first, third, and fourth laws of thermodynamics?
- Does prayer have a demonstrably higher success rate for Christians than for Muslims?
- If your god is in control,²² why do you look both ways before crossing the street?
- Is the phrase “no supernatural being holds us accountable for our actions” really more of a free pass to commit atrocities than the phrase “every sin can be forgiven?”
- What Old Testament verse was Jesus referring to in John 7:38?

CLOSING REMARKS AND ANTICIPATED OBJECTIONS

The questions I asked in the last chapter probably didn’t stump anybody. I dare say that this is because my readers subconsciously buy into irrational rationalizations. How often do you accept nonsensical characteristics of your god because you’ve been told that “his ways transcend human logic?” How many of my questions did you answer by saying “God works in mysterious ways?” Let’s take one last look at some of the questions I asked.

QUESTION	ANSWER <i>ASSUMING GOD IS REAL</i>	ANSWER <i>NOT ASSUMING GOD IS REAL</i>
Why do you trust science when you could just pray?	Because God is the one who gave scientists their brains	Because your god is imaginary
Why did humans have to write the Bible?	Because God wants to involve us in His divine plan	Because your god is imaginary
Why do bad things happen to Christians <i>and</i> atheists?	Because God works in mysterious ways	Because your god is imaginary
Why doesn’t your god visit me personally?	Because that would take away free will	Because your god is imaginary

²² I listened to a certain Twila Paris song several times after typing this phrase. I don’t agree with the message, but I have to admit that Christians make some darn catchy music.



QUESTION	ANSWER <i>ASSUMING GOD IS REAL</i>	ANSWER <i>NOT ASSUMING GOD IS REAL</i>
Why is it so random which prayers get answered?	Because God already has a perfect plan	Because your god is imaginary
Why do believers feel the need to look both ways before crossing the street?	Because it is written “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test”	Because your god is imaginary

You’ll notice that I don’t have to use cliché rationalizations and excuses when I stop assuming that there is a god. In fact, the world makes more sense when we stop pretending that your god is real. I am much happier and much more intellectually fulfilled now than I ever was as a Christian.

I don’t miss being a Christian. I don’t miss the absurd practice of having to open a book to find out what I believe. Atheism gives me the right to only believe what can be proven. It gives me the excitement and freedom of finding my own purpose in life. The universe is not any less beautiful when you shed the lens of ancient religion and look at it for what it is. I am happy. I am free. My name is Ryan T. Wilson, and I am atheist.



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