

Loosing My Religion, Becoming an Atheist

Dialogue with Ian Chung

Ian: Early in your essay, one of your remarks is that “We do ‘right’ not because we want to. We do ‘right’ because we fear the consequences of doing ‘wrong’”. This remark seems to serve as the basis of several claims implicit in your essay. Does this remark imply that fear serves as the basis of “right?” Are you saying that that fear is propagated by religion, and thus, that religion is an unhealthy conveyer of principles and morality?

Josh: The basis of authoritarianism is the threat of force and punishment for disobedience. Thus, society is kept orderly through fear. Fear replaces rational or moral justification. Most religions conceive of "God" as an authoritarian ruler and they sanction authoritarian and hierarchical human relationships. As a kid, our family and our religion were both dominated by authoritarian conceptions of power and morality. You do what is "right" because you are told to. Now the actions in question may or may not be morally justifiable. Certainly, there are actions in the Bible that can be seen as both morally upright and morally reprehensible (both of which can be tied to the direct commandments of the authoritarian Jehovah or Christ). But the issue is not the underlying rightness of the behavior but the process by which it is taught or enforced. I am reminded of an old joke told by the Nobel prize winning German physicist Werner Heisenberg, "What was God doing before He created the world? God was busy preparing Hell for those who ask foolish questions."

Since the introduction of liberalism and democracy on a large scale in the 18th century, older conceptions of authoritarianism have been condemned in principle as antiquated monstrosities. When 21st century religions, like Christianity and Islam, propagate ancient

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authoritarian ideas and customs, I find these religions to be a threat to liberal and democratic values, and thus, in ethical terms "evil." To invoke the Kantian principle, humans should be treated as ends not means. Thus, ideas or customs that crush individual freedom or inhibit critical thinking in the name of some God-invoked ideal are barbaric remnants of the ancient world that we must leave behind us.

Ian: Your essay claims that we do "right" because "we fear the consequences"; however, there is another side to doing "right" – the positive side. While the Gospels in the *Bible* portray Jesus as exhorting listeners to "fear him who has the power to cast you into hell," he also is portrayed as healing on the Sabbath and forgiving the woman caught in adultery and about to be stoned. This suggests that doing "right" may serve as the basis for a positive good, which accords to the Augustinian claim that evil is simply a deprivation of good, without which existence is lacking. So is not the motive of fear only one side of the argument? Are not many theists and Christians motivated by inherent values and not the "fear" of consequences?

Josh: Certainly. I was not making a total claim, but on the whole I think authoritarian structures of thought and government are based more on fear and authority than on the intrinsic goodness of actions. I think that Jesus can be held up as a moral exemplar in many ways, and I find much that he did inspiring. However, I see most Christians practicing versions of their religion that would make Jesus cringe. I just saw a blurb on John Stewart's *Daily News* with Christian minister who uses the bloody combat of mixed martial arts to save souls for Jesus. Words and deeds should be aligned in some way and if one is going to be a follower of Jesus, then one would have to be poor, pacifist, communist, and wander the world doing good deeds. You don't find many people who practice values because of their inherent goodness. Morality is

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a tool that we use because it helps us in some way. Thus, most people's morality is highly opportunistic.

Ian: Throughout your essay, remarks are made about forsaking the fundamentalist religious upbringing. Once forsaken, other values are adopted. A pattern then emerges: on the one side, the forsaken religious precepts; on the other side, the new “freedom to” values. C. S. Lewis writes that “like tends to gravitate to like.” Without making judgments of right and wrong, this pattern of your development seems to support Lewis’s claim – that values tend to polarize and like values tend to gravitate together. In “Abolition of Man,” Lewis lists a set of values common to all religion. Does not all this suggest, very strongly, that something like objective values do exist?

Josh: I don't exactly understand your "like tends to gravitate to like" comment, but I think you are asking, do objective, commonly-held human values exist. Of course they do. Socio-biologists, anthropologists, and sociologists have been studying human morality for some time and there does exist a template of "universal" values, although there is no consensus on the exact makeup of the list. Altruism is one such universal value that exists in many different species, and it is inherently useful for group solidarity and group survival. But just because a set of "universal" values may exist does not lend any credibility to the existence of a "God." In fact, just the reverse. If the biological, psychological, and sociological basis of value and morality can be explained and shown to exist in a wide range of species than this is yet more evidence to support the theory of natural selection.

Ian: Your essay in the final paragraph claims that the burden of proof rests on the theistic believer. This “burden of proof” claim is a notion presupposed by an Enlightenment empirical epistemology, which makes it a sort of poisoning of the well – that empirical proof is

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needed to prove a transcendent claim or, in other words, that empirical proof is needed to prove something empirically improvable. For “proofs” do exist: the Teleological argument, the Ontological argument, the Moral argument. Does not the burden of proof demand, then, seem unfair?

What is more, if a legal understanding is taken with the burden of proof demand, then I would say that the burden falls on the non-believer. For even in legal courts, where direct empirical proof is lacking, testimony (and circumstantial evidence) carry great weight, even towards convictions. Taken on the testimony of the majority of humanity, then, on whom lies the obligation of the burden of proof?

Josh: This is nonsense. First, just because some theologians have offered up arguments to prove that "God" existed does not make those arguments logical, cogent, or true. In fact, these theological arguments you point to have all been demolished time and again. You might as well try to argue that the Earth is the center of the universe for it is on the same intellectual footing as arguing for the existence of God. There is no logical evidence, pure and simple.

Your claim that the burden of proof is unfair is preposterous. And assuming that the majority of humanity held the same belief about a "God" (which they certainly do not), this would not prove the existence of "God." This is a classical fallacy, the bandwagon appeal. By this standard, magic, witches, Santa Clause, and many other imaginary entities would exist. The majority of people on this planet have little to no formal schooling and have a tenuous epistemological understanding at best. Human beings believe a lot of weird and unsettling things. I'm not saying that the majority of people don't have knowledge, but most people do not know *why* they know, nor can they *explain* or *prove* their so-called knowledge in any reasonably valid way. Belief in witches may in fact help order a society and explain certain empirical

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phenomenon; however, I would not want to return to the days were all important decisions were made by shamans and priests. Critical thinking, logic, evidence, and the technology of science works much better.

Because your antiquated beliefs don't stand up to modern epistemological methods, you want to role back the clock and use ancient standards. By your method, if I can get a majority of people to "believe" that I'm the King of England when then I *must* be the Kind of England. This is utter nonsense. What you fail to grasp is that the technology of science works much better than ancient tools of mythology, theology, and common law. Your example of the court simply proves my point. The prosecution has the burden of proof. They must prove their claim true using reasonable evidence to show that the defendant is guilty. And the judge arbitrates the law and checks the jury because 12 regular people cannot always be trusted to get things right. But by your standards, we don't need laws or juries. In order to find out if something is true or false, or if someone is guilty or innocent, we would just take an internet pole and whatever the majority decides *must be* true. Do you seriously want to live in a world like that?