

## Loosing My Religion, Becoming an Atheist

### *Dialogue with Mohamed Azeez*

**Mohamed:** First, I want to thank you for your unflinching candor in revealing your spirituality and philosophy. I would like to begin by emphasizing our commonalities. We both had a conservative religious upbringing that has caused a great deal of consternation for the both of us. At least partly, I think this was because religion was the dominant identity marker that was imposed on us, and it did not fully capture the full breadth of who we thought we were. This caused an identity chasm that led to each of us reacting strongly to the subject of religion and God—albeit in very different ways. Additionally, we now both believe in the primacy of skepticism and empiricism in the inquiry of God and faith. With those commonalities as the foundation, here are some questions for you.

I'm sorry that the imperative “no” and its derivatives were the early lessons in life for you. How did that—what was essentially a child rearing practice performed by *your* parents (couched in a fundamental Christian narrative)—eventually mutate into a complete disavowal of God? In other words, why do you associate a child rearing decision by *your* parents with the broader tenets of God and religion?

**Josh:** That's a great question. Actually, you already have the basic framework of my answer implicit in your question. As you stated, through my socialization process my religion was completely tied up with my parents' beliefs and practices. When they spoke, they spoke

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with the authority of God, as they interpreted it. Thus, when my father spoke, God spoke. When I rebelled against my parents, I was told that I rebelled against God.

Religion is the combination of belief and ritual, which shapes both individual and collective behavior. As an atheist, I of course deny the existence of any transcendental or metaphysical being called “God.” Instead I focus on the actions of real individuals or groups who act in concrete ways. I became very aware early on that my parents practiced an overly harsh version of Christianity. I had secular friends and other Christian friends who grew up in much more relaxed and permissive homes, and as a kid I tried to spend as much time away from my own home as possible because I had more freedom away from home. When it came time to really question my beliefs, the actions of my parents were a prime example of the danger inherent in fundamentalist evangelical readings of the Bible. Thus, when I think about religious belief, I can draw from my own childhood to vividly identify the logical conclusion of a literalist interpretation of the *Bible*. My parents literally thought they did everything right and proper according to the laws of their God, and in many ways, they were right. Their actions were often based on specific verses in the *Bible*. They were Godly people living Godly lives and they lived according to their holy book. They were model Christians in many ways.

So, when I reject Christianity, or any organized religion, I reject the concrete practices of my parents and people like them. Or I reject the concrete practices of your average Muslim because I completely reject most of the injunctions and commands of the *Qur'an*. Intellectual tenants and behavior practices are connected together. So in a way, my rejection of religion is concretely embodied in my rejection of my parents’ way of life.

**Mohamed:** W

Josh: dd

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**Mohamed:** Your parents' religious and moral pedagogy, based on fear, is rather disconcerting to hear. Do you think that you would have arrived at a different opinion on God and faith had you had a more moderate, intellectually-grounded religious experience? Doesn't your aversion to God and religion stem from your counter-authoritative impulse, rather than based on any rational grounds? Asked another way, do you suppose that had you had a stronger faith instinct, and a more moderate, intellectually-grounded religious upbringing, that you might have been able to carve out your own unique religious motif that that was suitable to your life experiences and philosophy?

**Josh:** I have often asked myself a similar question. My rebellious nature (which I still have) was created by a socialization process that bruised my inquisitive and strong personality. Had I grown up in a permissive and open household then perhaps I would have been able to explore my personal boundaries more freely and never feel the need to completely question my inherited religious beliefs. There may be something to this.

But my real "fall" from grace came in college when I was exposed to new people with new ideas. And I've always had a drive to find answers to the "big" questions of existence – to ask "why" when others just follow orders. This led me on a path of exploration that I'm still on. I've come to my conclusions about every issue of concern because the evidence and logic makes sense. There is no religious tradition that makes sense to me. And while I do admire and feel comfortable with liberal-minded theists and their liberal interpretations of their faith, I am still aware of the danger lurking at the edges of their tradition due to the antiquated nature of the various "holy" books. Nietzsche said it best, and his sentiments have been echoed by others that I admire, including G.B. Shaw, Walt Whitman, and Albert Camus: The old religious books, rituals, and ideas need to be swept away and a new "religion" based on reality must take hold.

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Otherwise, we live a lie – perhaps a comforting lie, a nice lie, a lie that makes us live better lives, but still a lie. I'm after truth.

And what is a “faith instinct”? Is that something you just made up? Are you saying that people have biologically programmed instincts for faith in the supernatural? On what evidence is such a notion based? If there is convincing evidence then I would be open to such a notion, but I've read much of the anthropological and psychological studies of religion and I've never heard any scholar talk about a “faith instinct.”

**Mohamed:** W

Josh: dd

**Mohamed:** You've proclaimed hostility to authority and to all of its subversive trappings. How would you dispel the notion that your disbelief in God and religion is just a visceral, pull-back reaction to something that you have associated with your parents and their authoritative ways? By that I mean, if your parents were being dogmatic and imposing about the merits of eating broccoli three times a week for arguments sake, wouldn't you be inclined to reject broccoli given your aversion to authority?

**Josh:** Yes, down with broccoli! And there was a time when I was first living on my own when I stayed out all night, slept till noon (or later), ate junk food (and no vegetables), and drank inhuman quantities of alcohol. And yes, much of this was a visceral rejection of all those horrible rules from childhood. Not just from my parents, but also from schools and other bullying sources of authority. But you know what? Some of those rules make a lot of sense and they are actually good for you. Now I do eat many vegetables that were once forced on me in childhood. I have adopted many actions or manners because they are socially good, useful, or kind, even though I was forced to do these things by parents, pastors, or school principals. But

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there are some things I will never do. I will never force my children (or my students) to be something they are not. I will never command people with no logical reasoning behind my requests. I will never believe in a “God” without some logical proof that demonstrates the existence of such an entity. There is a difference between legitimate and illegitimate sources of authority. Its not that I reject all authority, far from it. I reject illegitimate sources of authority – the definition of which is probably best left for another time.

**Mohamed:** W

Josh: dd

**Mohamed:** Were there things that your parents were obstinate about with respect to your life that you didn’t outright reject? What were they? Were they wrapped in an identity marker similar to the identity that religion and theism bring?

**Josh:** Well, this question is very vague and a bit confusing to me. Your usage of “things” is very unclear and it does not logically fit with your last question, so I will separate the first two questions from the last question.

Yes, there were some *Biblical* ideas and social practices that I was taught by my parents, which I still hold and practice. Just because I reject the Christian “God” does not mean that I reject every idea or practice of Christianity, and the same goes with other religions that I have rejected. While I reject Christianity, I admire the humility and radical egalitarianism of Jesus, as well as the other Jewish prophets. I admire the bravery and tenacity of Paul. I love the beauty and open philosophy of Rumi’s Islam. I agree with many of the yogic insights of the *Bagavadavita*. My parents instilled in me an ethic of hard work and meritocracy, which I still practice. My parents were good, kind people that were always ready to help those in need and give unselfishly. I carry this ethic with me as well.

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You seem to imply that all good social practices are somehow tied to ethnic or religious systems, which is false. You don't have to be a Christian, a Muslim, or Jew to be kind or to practice self-sacrifice. Nor do ethical practices necessarily lead to "identity markers," as you call them. Just because I hold doors for strangers does not mean that I have some cosmic "door-holders" nature, nor would I necessarily identify with other people who hold doors for strangers. You seem to suggest that behavior must be tied to a specific cultural system, and I reject that. Human creativity allows people to act as please for reasons of their own. And while I share many of the same ethical values as much of humanity does not mean that we share any specific sense of identity. Identity is a complex process and is beyond the scope of this book. But in terms of my own thoughts on identity and cultural groups, I must quote the great comedian Groucho Marx: I wouldn't want to be apart of any club that would have me as its member! There is much truth here. Identity can be comforting and socially useful, but it can also be constrictive and dangerous. Identity is like a handgun: use it when you must, but don't carry it around with you all the time because it might go off and hurt someone.