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My Own Kind of Faith

“Well, what do you think happens to us after we die?” This is the question that almost always follows when I tell people that I’m an atheist. “Do you think nothing happens? Do you think we just cease to exist?” The intent of these preliminary questions isn’t to understand my argument or perspective. Rather, I find that they are most often a test. If I were to respond to these questions with something like, “Uhh... I don’t know,” then I would almost immediately be met with either an invitation to that person’s next church service or with a battery of questions intended to poke holes in my reasoning and to show me the error of my ways. However, if I were to respond with, “Of course that’s a slight oversimplification, but yes. Death isn’t so black and white, but there doesn’t seem to be any physical evidence of an afterlife,” then the curious interviewer will usually shrug and change the subject, having realized that they will be hard-pressed to convince me that an afterlife exists. Over time, I have found that I think differently than many people, especially when it comes to religion. Some are content to accept what they hear as fact, like the existence of an afterlife. Of course, everyone has their reasons for having faith. I, however, have trouble accepting these teachings that, to me, seem to have no factual basis.

I was not always this cynical about religion. I grew up going to church every Sunday, saying a prayer before every meal, and avoiding saying, “I swear to God,” at all costs. In the sixth grade, I told my entire church congregation that Jesus Christ was my Lord and savior and became a confirmed member of the First United Presbyterian

Church of Dale City. However, as I matured, I began to notice places where religion just did not seem to add up. I noticed places where the words from the Bible conflicted with what I saw happening in real life. Even a younger me knew that surviving inside of a whale would not be as easy as Jonah made it out to be. It was not an instant change, but rather a gradual increase in the confidence of my own reasoning. Between my education at school and my own research into the subject, I eventually became confident enough in my reasoning to utter the words, "I'm an atheist."

Though I have never been met with discrimination or hate, I know many atheists are discriminated against every day. According to a University of Minnesota study, "atheists are the least-trusted group in the United States."¹ I think this distaste for atheists really comes from our inquisitive nature. Atheists and free thinkers historically tend to question commonly accepted beliefs and challenge the status quo. Luckily for me, instead of outward hate, I am usually met with that battery of questions. Typically, people begin to try to stump me or back me into a corner, attempting to make me submit to their clearly superior logic. Or sometimes, they pose questions that I cannot answer, or state a point that I have no response to. However, instead of beating me into a religious submission, this actually motivates me to learn more. I look to the Bible, the Internet, my peers, teachers, and even church leaders for more information. It has always been important to me that I never assume any religion to be wrong. My goal is not to disprove religion, but rather to uncover what I think is the truth. Another tricky thing about religion is avoiding the false dichotomy of saying a person is either this or that – Catholic or Protestant, Christian or Muslim. In reality I have found that this is far

¹ Miller, Pamela. "U of M study finds atheists are least trusted." *Star Tribune*, March 24, 2006. <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/edgell/home/Strib%20Atheist%20Faith%20and%20Values.html> (accessed April 29, 2012).

from true. There is actually a lot of grey area when it comes to religion and everyone treats religion in his or her own unique way.

One of my best friends, Jake, is also a confirmed Presbyterian. He went to the same church as me, completed the same confirmation class, and stood on the same stage with me as we confessed that Jesus Christ was our Lord and savior. So, naturally, as I began to question my own beliefs, he was one of the first people I turned to. When I started to ask him questions about religion—particularly about the Old Testament of the Bible—I was surprised to hear what Jake had to say. He said, “I actually look at all the stories of the Old Testament as metaphors. I have a hard time believing they actually happened, but I think they teach valuable lessons.” This blew my curious little mind. Jake’s faith was as strong as ever, but he had these ideas about his religion that I had never heard before. To my knowledge, this is a pretty unique idea that some Christians don’t believe.

Despite all the questions I had for Jake about this belief, our conversation was actually significant to me for a different reason. It showed me that most people think differently than I do. Like me, Jake found the stories of the Old Testament to be a little far-fetched and difficult to accept as reality. We were both taught that these stories were fact. In my doubt, I looked for hard evidence. I wanted proof that these events happened. Jake, on the other hand, was more content to just alter what he had learned to consolidate his two conflicting views.

I inquired further. I asked my other friends about their beliefs and I found that this ideology was actually pretty common. My friend Brendan, for example, was a Catholic altar boy. He grew up and was regularly involved in the church. I asked Brendan about

the Catholic belief in transubstantiation – the belief that the bread and wine consumed during communion are changed into the body and blood of Christ.² Brendan was also taught one thing by his religion, but believed another – that transubstantiation does not actually happen. Sure, this wasn't as dramatic as Jake's change to his beliefs, but it again showed that people can be taught one thing and actually believe something completely different to help consolidate their beliefs.

So, why was I different? Why did I find myself constantly struggling with these questions when my friends were so content to edit their beliefs? Again, for me, it came down to evidence. For whatever reason, I cannot believe something that conflicts with my logic unless it has some kind of physical evidence to back itself up.

The irony of my quest to replace faith with fact is that it eventually led me to the realization that I have my own form of faith. I came to this realization one day when attempting to explain my thoughts on the origins of the universe to my friend Chris. Chris is a devout Roman Catholic and is always a formidable opponent when it comes to informed religious debate. The topic of faith versus fact was a common theme of many of our discussions. On this particular day, I was explaining the mechanics of the Big Bang Theory to Chris. Eventually, the inevitable question came: "Well, what happened before the Big Bang?" he said. I knew of some hypotheses for what may have existed before the Big Bang, but these models are extremely complicated. Since I know how difficult these models are to prove with facts, I usually conclude with, "Well, nobody really knows what happened before the Big Bang." At this point, a faithful follower of God will usually take this opportunity to question the credibility of the entire

² "transubstantiation." Cambridge Dictionary Online.

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/transubstantiation> (accessed April 29, 2012).

preceding argument. Chris, however, took a different approach. “So, at this point, you don’t have evidence to support your argument, right?” he said. I nodded. “So, would it be a stretch for me to say that you have faith that *something* existed before the Big Bang?” I paused and considered this for a moment. Eventually, all I could do was sigh and admit, “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

Chris’s goal was not to attack my logic or reasoning. Instead, he made me realize that neither of us knew for sure. But I still prefer my reasoning—I like that I have evidence that makes logical sense and supports my worldview up to a point. I still think religion is difficult to logically reconcile and nearly impossible to support. However, what Chris had shown me was that his religion and my reason led us both to the same faithful end. In the end, my faith was no better than Chris’s or any other religious follower.

In Plato’s *Republic*, Socrates is quoted saying, “I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing.”³ This doesn’t mean that the pursuit of knowledge is futile. Instead, it just means that acknowledging your own ignorance is the path to true wisdom. I still want everything I believe to be supported by evidence. Someday, science may be able to definitively tell us what existed before our universe. However, this would doubtlessly only lead to more questions that require the same faith as the ones before it. In the end, the inevitable limits of my own knowledge force me to admit that I do not know everything. And since I don’t know everything, I must have faith that the world exists in the way all my previous research and reasoning suggests it does, as I and so many others struggle to uncover the truth of it all. This is difficult to do when I have such reluctance about the idea of faith. I think differently. I need evidence

³ Adam, James, and D. A. Rees. *The republic of Plato*. Second ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963.

to keep my curious mind at ease and to be comfortable that this world makes some kind of logical sense. But in the end, my faith is no better than anyone else's.

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