

A Brief Introduction to Non-Belief

The USA is a very religious nation. Around 85% of the population is religious, in fact, with the vast majority being Christian. That leaves around 15% of us that aren't religious, with a small minority of us being non-believers (atheists and agnostics). Chances are you're one of the Christians. This pamphlet is for you. There's no way to cover every aspect of non-belief in so small a space, but I hope to answer some of the most common questions and dispel some of the most common myths. I've organized this pamphlet by presenting the common questions I hear, each of which is followed by my response.

Why are you mad at God?

Non-believers don't believe in any gods. That may sound obvious enough, but there are a fair number of people that just don't seem to grasp that. A lot of people seem to think that non-believers are angry with God, or that they just don't want to follow His rules. But the reality is that we just don't think that a god exists. How can you be angry with something that you don't think is real?

Why don't you believe?

Most non-believers in the USA were formerly religious, and have since shed their belief. There are many different reasons that can lead one to first begin questioning religion – the inconsistencies & contradictions of the Bible, learning about other current religions, learning about ancient religions that predated one's own, etc. However, the main problem with religion to most non-believers is simply the lack of evidence.

This really is the biggest change in mindset from when I was religious. To many religious people (myself included when I was still Christian), faith is all important. But stop and think about this. In almost all other areas of life, we demand evidence. The more fantastic the claim being made, the stronger the evidence we demand. If your friend said he had eggs for breakfast, you'd probably believe him because that's a pretty mundane claim. But if your friend claimed to have eaten breakfast with the president, you'd probably be a bit more suspicious and demand a bit more evidence than simply taking his word for it. Why should we demand less evidence when it comes to matters of religion? To say that a specific book written a few thousand years ago by a specific culture is the divinely inspired word of an all-powerful being that created the entire universe and everything in it, is certainly an extraordinary claim.

The other problem with faith is knowing how to trust it. You may believe very strongly that you're right, but so do countless Muslims, Jews, Hindus, tribal shamans, etc., even right down to believing that they can feel their gods' presences. How can you be so sure that your gut feeling is right and theirs is wrong?

I guess it's important to discuss the standards of evidence here. To some people, seeing the Virgin Mary in a potato chip is evidence of a miracle, but most people

would consider such sightings no different than finding shapes in clouds. Unlikely events aren't evidence of the divine, either. After all, your chances of winning the lottery may be one in a million, but someone still manages to win it every week. Likewise, emotional appeals or arguments from consequences are not evidence. For example, you may feel that a life without God would have no meaning (a claim I address on the next page), and this may make you feel uncomfortable. But that's only evidence for how you would feel, not for a god's existence. Reality is what it is no matter how it makes us feel.

I suppose this is the section of this pamphlet that could go on the longest – discussing all the different arguments people use to support their religion, and pointing out all the reasons why non-believers don't find those arguments convincing. Rather, I'll conclude this section with the following questions – Looking around at the world, religious affiliation seems to be mostly an accident of birth. So why, out of all the possible religions in the world, do you think you've chosen the correct one? If you imagine that you were born in a different country and brought up to believe in a different god, what reasons would it take to convince your alternate self that your actual religion is true?

Can you prove that God doesn't exist?

It is very, very hard to *prove* that something doesn't exist. It's much easier to demonstrate that something exists. That's why we usually put the burden of proof on people making the claim that something exists, and why you'll hear many non-believers say that it's up to the religious to prove that a god exists.

Look at it this way. Imagine talking to someone who believes in leprechauns. How would you prove to them that leprechauns weren't real? You could point out that there aren't any reliable sightings of leprechauns, but maybe they've heard stories from friends of people who've seen strange things in the woods. You could mention that rainbows don't have ends, so it's silly to think there might be a pot of gold at the end of one, but maybe they'd say that's just an old wives tale that doesn't have anything to do with real leprechauns. They might even bring up how many people have sincerely believed in leprechauns throughout history. The point is, there's no evidence that leprechauns don't exist, just a complete lack of credible evidence that they do exist.

Where did everything come from?

We can study the universe, and our studies so far have revealed a long, rich history going back to the big bang, but that's as far as we can go, and we don't know what might have come before the big bang or what might have caused it. We may never know. That's the simple, honest answer.

When I was still a Christian, the question that always bothered me was, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' The problem was, even God was a something, so saying that God created the universe still didn't answer the Big Question, since there was still the problem of where God came from in the first place. Saying that God just always existed didn't satisfy my curiosity any more

than assuming that the universe itself has always existed (which is a possibility if the universe cycles between big bangs and big collapses).

Besides, there are a lot of things we don't understand, but we don't jump to the conclusion that every unanswered question must mean that a particular religion is true. This is what's known as a God of the Gaps Argument, and it doesn't hold up very well over the long run. If you use gaps in current knowledge to justify your belief in a god, then your god will just get smaller and smaller as we learn more and more and fill in the gaps.

What about your soul? What happens when we die?

Technically, atheism and agnosticism only imply doubt about deities, not the soul. Practically speaking, though, the same demand for evidence that leads most non-believers to doubt the existence of a god also leads them to doubt the existence of souls. On top of that, there's all the evidence that shows just how much the physical processes in our brains control our memories and personalities. If there are such things as souls, it makes one wonder just what they actually do.

Speaking for myself, I can say that the idea of ceasing to exist does bother me some, but that also makes life all the more precious, and gives us that much more reason to make the most of it.

On the other hand, as the saying goes (often credited apocryphally to Mark Twain), "I was dead for millions of years before I was born and it never inconvenienced me a bit."

Aren't you afraid you might be wrong?

No more so than you are. If you're Christian, just consider that Muslims think you're wrong and will end up in Hell. If you're Muslim, just consider that Christians think the same thing about you. And there are lots and lots of other religions with their own versions of a hell. Do you stay up at night worrying if you've picked the right religion?

Isn't life meaningless without God?

I hear this quite often, but I'm not sure I understand what people really mean by 'meaning,' or what meaning is added to life if a god did exist. When I was a Christian, I knew I was supposed to be good to other people and to worship God, but that was more of a demand than a meaning. Even if I was part of God's plan, that still just made me a pawn, and I doubted that the grand meaning of the universe was simply to be entertainment for a deity.

Maybe I'd explain this better if I went back to the question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' As I already wrote, hypothesizing God didn't answer that question for me even when I was still a Christian, because a god is still a something. So if I can't answer why there is a god, how does invoking that god do anything to provide an ultimate meaning for the universe?

How can you be a good person without religion?

I could be a smart alec here and ask how you could be a good person *with* religion. If you only do good deeds because you think it might get you the reward of heaven, or you don't do bad deeds because you want to avoid the punishment of hell, then those are pretty selfish reasons and most people wouldn't consider your intentions to be very good. However, I don't think that's the way most people think.

Empathy is innate to the vast majority of people. You don't need a holy book to tell you that hurting somebody is wrong, or that the Golden Rule is a good way to live your life. And most people don't actually derive their morals from studying scripture, anyway. For example, many southerners used the Bible to support slavery in the antebellum south. Now, most people rightly consider slavery to be an abomination. Nothing in the Bible has changed. You can still find the same passages that tell you how to treat your slaves, but most people use their own morality to come up with different conclusions than did the slave owners.

Why do you care so much? Why did you bother to write this pamphlet?

Well, the noble reason would be to say that it's for a love of the truth. And honestly, that is part of the reason. The universe is such a grand, wondrous place, that's all the more enjoyable when you view it without a filter. Looking back on when I was a Christian, it was almost like I was experiencing the world through a haze, and I do want to share that clear sightedness with others.

There are more pragmatic reasons, though. Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." If people kept their religion private, I probably wouldn't be as motivated to write this. However, when people use religion as an excuse to bomb clinics, fly airplanes into buildings, interfere with school curricula, discriminate against homosexuals, treat women as inferior, etc., then I feel obligated to speak out.

There's also the fact that non-believers are deeply mistrusted in this country. I came to my atheism through honest inquiry. There's nothing dishonest or sinister about my worldview – it's simply the way I think the universe is. I could no sooner *choose* to believe in a god than you could *choose* to believe in fairies. I don't want to live in a society where people question my integrity simply because I believe in one less thing than they do.

Is this pamphlet the best argument you can offer for non-belief?

Since this pamphlet was intended as a brief introduction, I wanted it to be something short enough that people would actually read. If you're interested in something a bit longer, with more reasons and examples, I have several essays available on my website at: <http://www.jefflewis.net/religion>

There are numerous other websites and entire books on this subject, as well.

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