

Faith No More

I could tell you how I morphed from a young Catholic boy, sweet and epistemically snug in my first communion cardigan, to a middle-aged skeptic comfortable with existential uncertainty. I could describe how the death of a child rattled my preconceptions about an all-good creator and led me on a spiritual search through theology, philosophy, biology, cosmology, mythology and history, ultimately leading to a rejection of all things supernatural.

I could try to convince you that we reside in a purely naturalistic universe. I could attempt to demonstrate the human authorship of all of history's gods and the holy books ascribed to them. I could labor to show the historical, scientific and logical fallacies of many of religion's claims. All of this could be done.

But these aren't the reasons I abandoned my belief in God. The reason has nothing to do with the substantial evidence for the nonexistence of a deity. They have only solidified my position. The reason I'm an atheist has everything to do with the entire lack of evidence for a god.

Theism makes a positive claim about the nature of reality: "God exists." Atheism is simply the lack of that belief. Atheism makes no claims. Therefore, the burden of proof falls exclusively on the theist. Yet, the fact that we continue to debate the topic of God's existence proves theism has thus far failed its probative responsibility. Certainly, if God manifests himself in reality, we should be able to detect him in some way. If he doesn't, then he would be indistinguishable from nonexistent and should be treated accordingly. Yet, no one, ever, not even once, has been able to demonstrate anything supernatural. And so we are told to take it on "faith."

Faith means belief without – and, increasingly these days, against – evidence. Faith, therefore, is intellectually dishonest. Faith creates a false certainty, which subjugates rationality. It makes good people do evil things and it makes otherwise intelligent people say and do senseless things. It forces its influence where it has no business. It flies airplanes into buildings.

Faith is arrogant. It places humanity at the center of the universe and each believer as the apple of the creator's eye. It makes Republican presidential candidates, our governor included, trade power of prayer stories at a Christian breakfast while rescue workers in Nepal search for thousands of missing people who just had their rickety roofs dropped on them by "an act of God." Faith of this kind has long kept itself immune from critical discourse, often with violence. No more.

That is why I'm writing this. To stand up and be counted with those who believe science has eliminated gods from the necessity of creation, complexity, order, morality and truth. I hope to maybe plant the seed of doubt in someone's mind, the way it was planted in mine, and possibly move another person away from superstition and tribalism toward reason and acceptance of the beautiful and humbling fact that we are of

the cosmos, not the point of it.

I want other nonbelievers to know they are not alone. In some places, apostasy can get you killed; in others, just shunned and ostracized. I know a number of people who think like me but are afraid to be open about it for fear of how their family, boss or social group might react. As people increasingly leave faith behind, being openly secular could amount to the next great civil rights issue.

A Pew Research Study published in May found religion sharply declining in the nation. The number of people who identify as Christian has fallen quickly (78.4 percent in 2007 to 70.6 percent in 2014), while those who report no adherence to a faith continues to grow (16.1 percent to 22.8 percent). Most strikingly, 35 percent of millennials report being “religiously unaffiliated” – atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular. And as our numbers continue to grow, and religion continues to exert its improvident influence, atheism is getting more organized and more vocal. Even here in Milwaukee.

Last April, Milwaukee hosted its first atheism convention. The event was put on by Mythicist Milwaukee, a local group of unbelievers that exposes the mythological roots of modern religion. The turnout far exceeded expectations, with more than 100 people of striking diversity packing a local hotel ballroom. “It’s an exciting time,” says Sean Fracek, one of the group’s founders. Although Milwaukee is behind many cities in the development of its secular community, the cause is picking up steam quickly, says Fracek. Mythicist Milwaukee will host a second convention in September and is expecting a far bigger turnout.

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Another local group, the Southeast Wisconsin Freethinkers (SWIFT), which brings skeptics and unbelievers together to discuss atheism-related issues, is also growing. One of the most prominent and active atheist organizations in the country is the Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF), which brings legal action against church and state violations, and it resides in Madison.

One leader of the FFRF was Dan Barker, an ex-evangelical minister who now writes books, speaks and debates theists on God around the world. Barker also co-founded the Clergy Project, which offers support and financial aid to clergy who have lost their faith and want to leave the pulpit. Nationally, there are now dozens of atheist, humanist and secular organizations fighting back against the intrusiveness and dishonesty of religion. Globally, there are thousands of such entities.

And as science continues to squeeze gods from the gaps of our understanding and people move away from religion’s narrow-minded worldview, us nonbelievers stand ready to have a new conversation about humanity’s place in the universe. One based on 21st-century philosophy, science and rationality, not first-century literature.

It’s time to leave the mythology behind. It’s time to stop thinking about the hereafter and focus on the here

and now.

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