

How do we know what an atheist believes?



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Do you know any atheists? How would you know? They would have to say so. What makes a nonbeliever in a god or gods (the clearest definition of an atheist) any different from a believer in a god or gods? Probably not much. Observe what each is doing with their lives. I would guess there is no other way of knowing if a person believes in God or not unless they tell us.

My issue with atheism is that it doesn't tell me anything about a person. I am a man – not a “non-woman.” I am an American – not a “non-citizen-of-every-other-country.” You get the point. To declare “I am not one of those” is virtually meaningless. To go around claiming a negative – a NOT: “Not OF Them” – gives me almost zero information. Almost zero. When someone says they are an atheist, I learn they have concluded there is no divine supernatural being or reality. But that's all they have told me. I've learned nothing about who they are, what that god-decision means for them in their life, if it guides them to act differently than anyone else. I may assume things based on my personal feelings about atheism, but these are purely assumptions. Strange to say, I'd have to admit I'm an “agnostic” as to who they are. I simply don't know.

We can ponder these same questions with anyone who claims just about anything. “I am a believer in lib-

erty.” What does that mean? “I love chocolate but I don't eat meat.” Do I know you better now? “I am a Christian.” Well, now we're in trouble. This literally tells me nothing, except it's apparently important for you to assert that identity. Yet, it only raises many questions you may not be prepared for. Maybe you say you are “non-denominational” (which in itself has become a denomination, a sect of the Christian religion). Or you believe Jesus was a social reformer but not necessarily son of god. Would other “Christians” judge you “Christian”?

Roy Speckhardt, director of the American Humanist Association, questions what practical difference it makes what one believes about a Creator when making life decisions. “The label chosen to represent oneself will certainly impact public perceptions, but the practical implications are the same for atheists, agnostics and deists” (“Creating Change Through Humanism”). Greg Epstein, Humanist Chaplain at Harvard, has written that “the single biggest weakness of modern atheism and Humanism has been ... the movement's own tendency to focus on religious beliefs, when the key to understanding religion lies not in belief at all but in practice – in what people do, not just what they think” (“Good Without God”).

Stephen Prothero, professor of religion at Boston University, includes a chapter on atheism in his book on world religions, “God is Not One.” He challenges contemporary non-religious people to move beyond the angry, “evangelical,” mostly white, male “New Atheists” to embrace a friendlier, more reasonable “new New Atheism.” In Prothero's view, instead of trying to convert believers into atheists, we should have a

common hope “for a world in which children can play with other children without regard for the religious (or non-religious) beliefs of their parents.” And, as astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has stated, though he's agnostic about a Creator-God (he sees no evidence for one), he doesn't call himself an atheist. As a scientist, he thinks if the current mysteries of the universe are evidence for God, then “God is an ever-receding pocket of scientific ignorance” (interview with Bill Moyers, 2014). This “God of the Gaps” is forever the Unknown.

Am I an atheist? I don't believe I am (just joking). From my perspective, there is no divine being or anything supernatural, so it would be accurate to say that I am a non-theist. Yet, most of the time I choose not to call myself an atheist. “Freethinker” or “humanist” is my preferred, positive way of expressing how I view the world, what I believe as a secular person, since believing isn't the point. I “think” and “feel” it's right to be good – to be kind, compassionate and respectful – to others. I don't “believe” that's right and good. It makes reasonable sense to me. I suppose this is a matter of emphasis, or simply semantics, but it seems much more than that. Until both theists and non-theists can agree that being better humans together is the fundamental issue, the merry-go-round of BOBs will keep spinning. You know, BOBs? Those are the Bubbles of Beliefs that so many of us get trapped inside.

For my part, if I'm honest and a true freethinker, I have a few BOBs myself.

Chris Highland served as a minister and chaplain for many years. His latest books are “Friendly Freethinker,” “Broken Bridges” and “A Freethinker's Gospel.” Learn more at chighland.com.