

Do We Have to Choose between Aggressive Religion or Aggravated Atheism?

A recent blog post I wrote seemed to hit a nerve with some (“A-faith, not Anti-faith”). I was writing specifically about those in the wider atheist world who are angrily anti-religious, who spend their time making fun of believers, posting snarky memes, taking cheap shots, using mocking sarcasm to attack the integrity and intelligence of religious people of any kind. That’s fairly specific, I think. In my opinion, the aggravated people I’m identifying don’t reflect the vast majority of us in the secular world who aren’t interested in constantly fighting battles in a war against all religion and religious people. It also doesn’t address what I assume to be the majority of seculars who may carry residual feelings of hurt and disappointment (as I do) from their life in the world of faith, but who don’t make mean-spirited anger the centerpiece of their atheism.

I wrote in reference to our angriest members, and as I expected, got an earful of anger in return. What I learned from this “exchange of opinions” is that I should have stated more clearly that I was identifying a subset of atheists; I could have explained that I understand there are people who have been deeply hurt by their experience with faith, and that I share some of that pain. I get the fact that many describe their whole experience in their past faith tradition as “traumatic.” That should be taken seriously—and it wasn’t my intention to address those deep emotions in my original post.

The response also showed there was some truth to my “theory.”

After stating that I have my own critiques of religion and “call out the nonsense,” I also said I sometimes call out fellow seculars, pointing out alternatives to being angrily anti-religious. “You can be an atheist, secular freethinker without being an AAA (Angry, Anti-religious Atheist).” I’ve heard from some members who feel the same way. Not all of us are grievance-driven with an axe to grind.

Since it is my personal blog on my personal website, I offer my own experience, perhaps limited in its own way:

“Years of working alongside people of faith, building cooperative coalitions with them, developing collegial and personal relationships, I’m consistently sensitive to people I know and respect in faith communities (as well as friends and family who hold a faith position) … I may not agree with some of their beliefs, but I know too many good people in churches, synagogues, temples and elsewhere to disrespect them.”

My “theory,” based on years of observation, is that the voices we hear in the atheist world, specifically those who enjoy putting down people of faith, are apparently

missing a degree of “depth and breadth” when it comes to the religious world (they don’t seem to be aware or care when insulting my friends and family).

Blame it on my thirty years of chaplaincy work, but I think it’s time for seculars to take a hard look in the mirror. *What face are we presenting to the world (and each other)?* I sure hope it’s more than Hitchens and Dawkins. Because I think that face matters. One concern is for any continuing constructive conversations or collaborations between the secular and faith communities. How much could Americans United, the Secular Coalition, American Humanists or the Poor People’s Campaign get done if people were always distracted by arguing about religion?

Another concern is for those who are new to non-belief (or new to The Clergy Project) who may get the impression seculars are all negative people fighting endless battles with the ghosts of their former beliefs.

Surviving a messy divorce was a terrible experience that left lasting damage. But I didn’t form an “Ex-Spouse Club” to gather hurt and angry people to waste time denigrating our ex’s (or wives and women in general—what would be the purpose of an Anti-Wife Club?). That’s why *I didn’t become a member of TCP to join a Religion Bashing Club.* Support is great, and necessary. “Venting” can help sometimes. But the old tired battlefield mentality or smug superiority that some exhibit needs to be understood as just that kind of thinking. As a humanist freethinker I won’t engage that or encourage that. The chaplain in me would encourage those people to find something positive to build upon going forward—you don’t have to be stuck in past pain, resentment or bitterness.

If someone had an awful experience with their Baptist or Pentecostal or Mormon (or anything) background, it’s completely understandable they would have some hard feelings and harsh words for those specific traditions. What I’m questioning is the irrational leap to judging every faith and every person of faith in the same light (as many religious zealots do to atheists). *If someone is proudly “anti-religious” then they must respond to followup questions: Why are you anti-Quaker? Why are you anti-Buddhist or anti-Jewish?* When Hitchens says, “Religion poisons everything” or Dawkins rails against “the God delusion,” let’s be honest and get more specific. Listen, I’m in full agreement there are aspects of religion that are poisonous and there are definitely people who are stuck in delusional thinking about a deity (as long as we admit there are aspects of atheism that can be poisonous). But dismissing it all and disrespecting them all, leads me to wonder where this is coming from. Hence, my blogpost where I

raise some questions, not to put down anyone (though it seems some of the AAA's have a reaction) but to. . .raise some questions, such as this main question:

Does a person have experience relating to people of diverse faith perspectives, not only their own particular former tradition?

We can all sit around and hash over negative stories around the campfire screen, but what about the good things we did, the decent folks we knew, positive stories we could tell? If you can't think of any, I'm truly sorry. There are many of us who have some good stories to tell, who still have relationships with people of faith. Let's hear more of those.

I'm looking for balance, not sugary pollyanna stuff. If your church was all about faith and praise, never doing a damn thing in the community, that's terribly sad. I'd be angry too. But I wouldn't waste time slamming that church. I'd look around for what good IS being done in whatever community.

What concerns me is the extent to which an atheist (either before or after their deconversion) has learned about the *wide spectrum of religious experience* across the globe. Have they had any positive interactions with people who are *not* fundamentalist, evangelical or pentecostal? I have respect for a secular person who says they reject what they learned in Bible college while admitting they never were exposed to more liberal biblical studies. I have respect for someone who says they reject the basic tenets of the Christian faith they were raised in but can't say they have deep knowledge of other faiths. I have respect for a person whose main ministry was preaching without living the "gospel"—social justice work, etc.

I have a great deal of critique of my own Presbyterian roots (interlaced with Evangelical and Pentecostal), but I know many reasonable and respectable people who are still Presbyterians, and I was never a Methodist, Episcopalian, Lutheran or other kind of Christian. Do I have more general critiques of faith and religion itself? Sure, a lot. But before dismissing the diverse beliefs and personal lives of every person who claims a faith, I ought to get to know them, learn something about what their community is doing. If we say we don't judge immigrants or POC or any others who may be different from us, why reserve prejudice for anyone of faith?

That seems basic to freethought as a reasonable, honest practice.

I suppose this raises another issue: *if we don't want the religious community (let alone the media) to generalize and characterize all secular people as the same, why would we do that with all religious people?*

On either side I would state, as I do in the post, I think a person who makes these generalizations and judgments exposes a certain narrow experience. This is not to say I have better experience and don't have my own judgements. I can't get inside your skin and you can't get in mine. We all have a lot to learn. With an open mind, I wouldn't be faithophobic any more than Islamophobic or transphobic.

Maybe what I'm most interested in for myself is the *humanistic face of freethought*. I don't often refer to myself as an atheist in part for the reasons addressed here. I choose not to be associated with the "militant wing" of non-believers—indeed sometimes, with a touch of irony, I find myself cleaning up the "mess" from the latest attack on "those stupid religious people." I will continue to speak up in defense of freedom of religion and conscience, and I have said before I don't see religion going away, so I think it's much more productive to find ways of working with those faith communities *who are open to it*, and those seculars *who are open to it*, than dissing them all to score AAA points (or RRR points: Raging, Righteous, Religious).

One of the first newspaper columns I wrote (in 2016) was about "devotion." The only other regular columns in the Religion section consisted of a "devotional" by an evangelical pastor and the "My Answer" column by our famous neighbor Billy Graham. I wrote: "The secular community cares about our shared world too, since it's the only world we know for sure. Seculars are not all anti-religious. We are your neighbors, and maybe your friends and family."

That's the attitude "my wing of atheism" will continue to present to a world that needs a more non-aggressive, humanistic alternative to the "online outrage machine." I think we have something to offer much better than aggressive religion and aggravated atheism.

Chris Highland
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(this essay was previously published on "Rational Doubt," formerly a blog for non-theists on Patheos)