

Why Am I a Nonbeliever? – I Wonder...

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Plato says that philosophy begins in wonder. What he doesn't tell you is that many things *end* in wonder too. One of the things that ended for me as I sought to conform my life to an ever-expanding sense of the world's wonderful complexity was religious belief. And with each succeeding – often exceeding – level of discovery, such belief has come to seem even more a thing of the past.

The world never had any difficulty inspiring wonder in me. But as a boy and as a teenager and right into early adulthood, I felt a sense of wonder filtered through belief in God. It was the majesty and glory of God I heard in the keening winter wind, and saw in sunlight spreading across waves of prairie grass after a thunderstorm. Having believed in Christ since I lay in my crib, listening to my God-intoxicated father singing me songs he wrote about Jesus, I tended for some time to organize my religious experiences Christianly. I was moved by the dramatic, wonder-inducing juxtaposition found in a book which summed things up this way: “The humble carpenter of Nazareth was also the mighty Architect of the universe.”

But everything changed when I stepped away from my isolated and isolating life on the Manitoba plains and broke my childhood pledge never to live in a city or darken the doors of a university. What I swiftly discovered was that my Christianity had sought to confine the world within a rather small package! The world could not be thus confined. Carefully smoothed into a Christian shape, it kept bursting free. And I discovered that even without God or Christ, wonder remained.

From biblical criticism and the history of the ancient Near East I learned that the New Testament was decidedly a human construction, a shining record of personal liberation in places but also pockmarked with all the prejudices and proselytizing aims of its authors, through which the voice of Jesus was multiply refracted. That voice might, historically speaking, have had any number of cadences: gentle Jesus meek and mild might actually have been an apocalyptic prophet; the smooth-talking rabbi of tradition may very well have been an illiterate (though no doubt charismatic) peasant. Careful academic study showed, moreover, that what were for me central Christian doctrines could not be found clean in the pages of the Bible but came to us through a complicated and often compromised process, in which the emerging Christianity sought to define itself and – in very effective but rather unloving ways – suppressed dissent.

But could God still work through the flawed vessel of Christianity? Could an experience of God mediated by Scriptures somehow confirm ideas whose Divine origin was cast into question by history? Such arguments might have had a chance with me had it not been for all the *other* things I was discovering. Religion and religious experience, I noted, were found throughout human history and around the world in many forms that could hardly be reconciled with Christianity. And despite the horrifying behaviour that had often received religious sanction, examples of ethically vibrant lives could be detected in all of them. Moreover, Hindu wisdom, Buddhist wisdom, Taoist wisdom introduced interesting new ideas, at least at the practical level, which did not always sit well with Christian teaching as I knew it. Lao Tzu's thoughts on working with the grain of nature, for example, arguably mark out a different path than the agonistic, sometimes bulldozing, mainstream Christian approach.

Had I remained enclosed within a Christian community, feeling a loyalty to religious kith

and kin or my former self alone, I might have turned a blind eye to all of this. I might never have explored these new facets of itself that the world was seeking to reveal. But instead walking through row after row of library books which beckoned to me, seeing in my imagination and on the street the faces of honest and sincere souls from around the globe, I moved further and further from my Christian beliefs, discovering (in what I still regard as a very discerning youthful zeal) a *new* loyalty to intellectual integrity come what may, and to all who seek to embody truth, whether Christian or non-Christian, religious or non-religious. Ironically, I was aided and abetted in this by the values of humility and honesty and commitment to what seems deeply right that came with my Christian upbringing. Walking this suddenly redirected path wasn't easy. It hurts to have your neat picture of the world torn to shreds; your emotions left jangling. But no one said that a commitment to live in wonder, straining for real insight and understanding, comes without cost.

With the messiness of the world more clearly in view, and having set aside the theological cookie-cutters that would have returned a tidy order to my view of things, I truly saw the problem of evil for the first time. Part of the puzzling complexity of the world, itself capable of inducing a kind of numinous state when seriously engaged, is the horrific suffering it contains. This needs to be faced openly. When thus faced it is hard to combine with the idea of a loving personal God. And so a much more fundamental religious belief of mine – belief in *God* – came to be directly challenged. During the tumultuous time when I was losing Christian belief I remember looking at the Sun and saying to myself “Well, at least I still believe in God!” But that was not to remain the case for long.

Not only the problem of evil threatened belief in God. I soon sensed another problem – the *hiddenness* argument for atheism. That's what it's called today, of course. Back then I was just thinking about why, if there is a loving God, there should be people like me, onetime fervent and loyal believers who, when they come into a context of genuine inquiry, where truth and understanding are valued for their own sake, find their belief dissipating instead of strengthened. Suddenly the world seemed to include this interesting possibility: that a certain kind of nonbelief might *itself* be evidence that nonbelief is the right way to go. For why would God permit His or Her own existence to be hidden even from those who are willing to see it, ready to exult in it again? Indeed, wouldn't a loving personal God have good reason to prevent such obscurity? After all, it is part of love to be open to explicit relationship – what loving parent or sibling or friend would ever allow this possibility to be taken completely away, if he or she could help it? And such relationship can't even get started without the *belief* that the relationship partner exists.

By now it felt like the floodgates of insight were opening. I started to see that the religious beliefs so central to my wonder experiences of the past would need to be shed if the world were to reveal more of itself to me. Openness to surprising changes in understanding was leading me far away from belief in a personal God. And other arguments for atheism and against religious belief emerged as, in the years that followed, I sought to live out my newfound vocation as a philosopher.

But even if all of the arguments for atheism I have discovered after more fully surrendering to wonder, to the unexpected, to the fascinating strangeness of the world turned out to be unsound, I would remain a nonbeliever. I might not be an atheist, but I'd certainly be an agnostic as part of a wider skepticism about religious belief. This wider skepticism has been

growing in recent years from new insights about the world's evolutionary structure and the very early stage of development our species presently occupies within it. My new skepticism, an *evolutionary* skepticism, represents the deepest reason I would give today for not being a religious believer of any kind. And through yet another strange twist that I am still in the midst of navigating, it appears that in the depths of evolutionary religious skepticism can be found the seeds of new life for religion.

The best point of entry into this new way of thinking is the uncontroversial scientific finding that, although it must eventually succumb to the Sun, our planet may remain habitable for another *billion* years. I think human science, philosophy, and religion are quite far from absorbing the staggering implications of that figure. Even dividing it by a thousand yields a period of time – one million years – that our evolving brains find very difficult to really take in. We must nonetheless try to come to terms with this question: What might humans on Earth, or beings resulting from speciation beyond humanity as we know it, or wandering humans setting new evolutionary processes in motion on Mars or elsewhere, or beings resulting from gene manipulation or artificial intellectual enhancements, or intelligent beings that evolve again on Earth, perhaps many times over, whether from apes or precursors other than the apes – *what might such beings be able to come up with in the way of new ideas given so much time?*

Apply this now to religion. The contrast between what may yet appear and the piddling few years of religion planet Earth has seen so far could hardly be more stark. It's easy for us to forget how ill-prepared our species may be for ultimate insight, what with the flashy technologies that have led us to so dominate and alter the planet. Behind all the camouflage there is still an emotional primitiveness and a considerable propensity to violence. We are not so very different in these respects from the humans who first invented religion perhaps 50,000 years ago, whose violent tendencies may still be inscribed in our genes. It is here, in this rather less than congenial environment, just a nanosecond ago in evolutionary terms, that religious ideas, ideas about things ultimate in reality and value we today respectfully call 'traditional' and 'venerable,' began to emerge. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised – or regretful – at their passing. And perhaps, by the same token, we should begin to wonder what new religious insights may arise if and when we manage to flush some of the immaturity out of our system, and go through the evolutionary changes that, oh, say, another 100,000 or 1,000,000 years would bring.

Adding now to this skeptical mix just a little more openness to the new, applied with the philosopher's interest in imaginative vision and conceptual clarity, one can see that rational religion not only might evolve over eons of time, but might do so in our own lifetime, if we let it. In an evolutionary frame of mind, thinking of religion diachronically (existing over time) instead of synchronically (at a time), one must be open to the idea that rational religion will look very different at an *earlier* time than at *later* ones. One must be willing to think of many aspects of religious life as we have known it thus far, such as religious belief, as possibly representing examples of immature overreaching that will flower into something more mature and rationally appealing with a bit of careful digging and watering.

In my most recent work I have begun the digging and watering. Who knows what will grow? But one thing seems clear to me – if there *is* a form of religion appropriate to our time, it will be a *skeptical* form of religion: religion without belief. From beings like us, to whom the mud of early evolution still clings, Plato's wonder asks for no less.