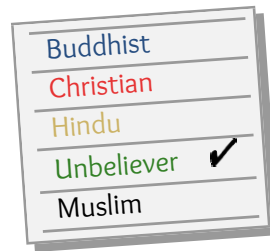


Hints at Atheism

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“It is a strange god who would make salvation depend on believing in him on bad evidence.” —Sam Harris, 2011

FOR ALL THOSE YEARS that I was a committed Christian,¹ I desperately longed for some form of unequivocal answer to my prayers, for some reception to my willed worship, for tangible reciprocation to my gestures for relationship.

Then as time passed, I stopped longing. Slowly but inexorably, things became somewhat mechanical. My prayers for God’s interventions became watered down, even insipid. I subconsciously—even surreptitiously—expected only equivocal answers, like prayers for wisdom, inner peace and direction. Inevitably, I realised that wisdom, peace and direction in life are fully attainable without belief in the Christian gods. I was taught that this attenuation of religious fervour was my own fault, or my faith was weak, or the problem was sin, either of my own doing or of Satan, some incipient archetypal antithesis of God.

Then one day—actually, a period of about two years—I realised that I was *not* to blame for God’s manifest silence. Her/His/Its ethereal impalpability was not my fault. God was silent and impalpable because, well, the Christian gods probably did not exist. Unfortunately, it was a simple explanation, however unpalatable. It was a hint at atheism.

To be sure, many religious ideologies may be palatable, but they are never simple. I think they require many intellectual hoop-jumps, discontinuities, and arbitrary assertions. Atheism requires none of these, save for its need to address the problem of the Cosmological Argument.²

But unfortunately, to embrace unbelief seems more difficult than to embrace belief. Death is final. There is no intervenor to impart purpose, relevance and comfort. We are not somehow separate from and “superior” to nature, and indeed, nor to other creatures. We do not hold some God-given right of dominion, often fatuously called stewardship. It may be difficult to move ourselves off the epicentre of reality. And there is no “family collective” in which I may experience a sense of communion.

However, what atheism—or at least, agnosticism—does provide is an intellectual freedom to pursue actively a deeper understanding of nature, and to reflect energetically on the sheer beauty of the cosmos, of life, and of being alive. Religion teaches that contentment without understanding is a virtue. After all, “Who can understand the infinite and perfect mind of God? And who should dare to?” In contrast, agnosticism teaches that contentment without understanding is *not* a virtue.

Yes, death may be final. But it sharpens life. Every single moment of every single day of being alive is something profoundly unusual, surprising and precious. I am therefore moved to reflect not just on my own life and on those near me, but on all living things. Indeed, how can I sincerely endorse my own sense of being alive without a growing empathy for life’s wider expression? It is possible for such an empathy without belief in God. This is a hint at atheism.

¹ Many thanks to Jesse Long for the correspondence which prompted this.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmological_argument