

Welcome Home, Atheists

I recently received an e-mail lamenting a mutual friend's conversion from Christianity to atheism. As a person trying to follow Jesus myself, I think that such conversions might be welcomed. To declare oneself an atheist (especially in the midst of an ostensibly Christian culture) is to take one's spirituality seriously. It is—potentially at least—to look carefully at oneself and one's deepest values and declare to others, "I believe in *this* and not in *that*." Christians can welcome such reflection: Knowing which God one worships is a major step forward.

We may forget that the early Christians were considered atheists by the Romans and persecuted as such. (They were also considered blasphemers by Jewish religious leaders of the time.) Atheism has a worthy heritage.

When you name yourself an "atheist," you're declaring that you "don't believe in God." Well, which God don't you believe in? If it's the God who claims that you're worth saving because you believe certain things about Jesus (while people who don't believe those things are damned), I don't believe in that God, either. If it's the God who intervenes in the material order to cure certain people of their illnesses (particularly those who pray to "Him") while allowing 25,000 innocent children to die every day around the world, I don't believe in that God, either. If it's the God who insists that the world is only 4,000+ years old, I don't believe in that God, either. If it's the God who ... well, you get the idea.

The Bible was written in a pre-scientific world. The biblical writers' understandings of the ultimate realities (life's meaning, human ethics, the nature of community, humanity's goals, the nature of God, etc) were wrapped in the cultural presuppositions of the age. There has been a powerful and regrettable tendency within Christianity to confuse those cultural presuppositions with the profound truth available through careful study of the Bible. Most declarations of "atheism," it seems to me, are primarily renunciations of one's childhood beliefs in a grandfather God who dispenses favors to those who believe that "He" exists while denying those favors to others, a God who acts against the physical laws of the universe, a God who is a "being" with a human-like consciousness, etc. A decision to take God seriously enough to shed one's childhood fantasies should be welcomed. Then the real conversation begins.

Just to be clear, I'm not terribly welcoming of the recent rise of a brand of annoying, aggressive atheism (countering, I suppose, the equally annoying aggressive brand of

Christianity) that seems more interested in provoking the culture wars than understanding the nature of our world. These writers have generally taken the most fundamentalist, literalist understandings of the nature of God, defined *that* as religious belief, and then attacked it. Both the fundamentalists and the aggressive atheists accept the same childish conception of God and then fight about whether “He” exists or not. It’s a stupid debate. The ancient Hebrews refused to pronounce the Hebrew word for God (transliterated, it was written YHWH without the usual vowel marks) because they believed that God could not be defined and that any description of God would be profoundly incomplete. No human description of God could adequately describe God’s character, most certainly not those characterizations of a grandfather God with supernatural powers.

But I prize the opportunity to engage the honest seeker who no longer believes in God. If you no longer believe in that God, what’s your real god? Money? Fame? Power? Sex? ... or love, compassion, nonviolence, and forgiveness? We all recognize something as our god, something to which we give ultimate allegiance; what’s yours? What does the moral universe look like to you? Where does it derive its power? On what basis do you make decisions? What gives your life meaning? Does it help you to gather together with others who recognize the same ultimate power?

Followers of Jesus, it seems to me, should welcome the atheist home. It turns out that many of us probably don’t believe in the God they’re rejecting, either.