

So You Don't Believe In God?

Chad Hetman

"So you don't believe in God?", is what people usually ask immediately upon finding out that I'm an atheist.

"Well, there are lots of things that I don't believe in. But yes, I don't believe in God or any other gods, or ghosts, goblins, unicorns, fairies, pixies, angels, satyrs, centaurs, leprechauns or harpies."

Two questions that usually accompany that first question are "Why don't you believe in God?" and "How long have you been an atheist?".

"Why? Why don't I believe in your god,...'God'? The same reason you don't believe in other gods like Vishnu, Mithra or Odin, or believe in ghosts, goblins, unicorns, fairies, pixies, angels, satyrs, centaurs, leprechauns or harpies. The same reason you don't believe the world is flat or that the sun revolves around the earth."

"Well, of course I don't believe in other gods, God says there aren't any, and I never heard of those before anyway, but I think there may be ghosts, you know, like spirits or souls, and that other stuff isn't real, except for angels. And I don't know what a harpy is...and, uh, what do you mean about the sun revolving around the earth?".

It is this part of the discussion, the explanation of why one is and how one can be an atheist, that comprises the usual bulk of conversations with theists. However, I chose to focus on the other question - "How long have you been an atheist?".

It's a question almost every atheist has been asked and a question that has caused every one of us to stop and go' "Hmmmm, I'd have to say I've been an atheist ever since....", while explaining our personal revelation.

I often tell people the story about me at the age of four questioning a priest that visited my family and with my book of dinosaurs in hand asking if Adam and Eve were cave men and how come there were no dinosaurs in the bible even though dinosaurs were here millions of years before people. All he could come up with was "maybe", "it may seem like that" and "the bible talks about the beasts". So for the most part, I've used that incident as the basis of when to determine the time period in my life that I "became an atheist".

But the thought pops into my head of what defines someone as an "ATHEIST".

What is an atheist? For believers, the definition is you don't believe in God, their god. I grab a dictionary, look up atheist. Atheist (a'the ist) n. person who does not believe in the existence of God. Well that's pretty damn ethnocentric, making the entire definition of not being theistic, based solely on, as they say, "not believing in" or "denying the existence of" their single deity. Would that make a Hindu or Buddhist an Atheist? Another example of the Xians trying to make their myth the center of the universe.

So what really is an atheist? By word analysis, an atheist is a non-theist, someone without theism, without a god or gods. But by true definition, an atheist is much more than that. An Atheist is someone whose perceptions of the universe are based on reality, based on scientific fact and evidence, logic, reasoning, unbiased inquiry, and processing and evaluating evidence and facts as they present themselves. It is open-minded intellectual honesty. And because of this, the atheist comes to the simple conclusion that gods, including the big "G" god, are mythical, personified creatures that are nothing more than the inventions of ancient cultures and primitive people. So in other words, perceiving the universe free of superstition, myth, cultural folklore and the bigotry and intolerance that often go hand in hand with them.

So when did I begin to experience this unbiased and unshackled perception? When I was four, five, maybe eight, twelve or twenty? Was it when I adamantly declared "There Is No God"? No.

I was born an atheist. I wasn't born being religious and believing in god(s). I didn't come out of the womb singing hymns, speaking about a god or gods, or making any symbolic gestures in reference to any deities or how these supernatural creatures wanted me to live my newly started life. No, my major concern at the time was grabbing at anything my little fingers could grasp and making my way to a nipple. Even as I began taking in all the sounds, colors, sensations, and smells that were new to me and finding how they related to the instincts I inherited, at no point did a deity or any supernatural creature present itself welcoming me to life (like a good host or hostess should) and explaining what the meaning of life is, what my purpose is and how to best perform for the after-life auditions. Nope. And amongst all the instincts bound up in my genetic code, was there any instruction manual or warrantee information type of data, explaining that although I will never experience, witness, or find any evidence or proof to support the fantastic claims and tales of how life is being controlled behind the scenes, that there is, however, a concise and absolute supernatural world and hierarchy. No. The alleged characters from this supernatural realm didn't even provide instructions on how to find food and water, to talk, to read, or how to perform the various rituals that must be performed in order appease the ego of god or gods so that the universe may be altered for my singular gain. That includes animal/monetary sacrifices, cannibalistic ceremonies, singing songs in gaudy little buildings, candle lighting and sending psychic messages to the phantasm(s) whenever I wanted to beg or bargain to fulfill my selfish desires. No preprogrammed explanation that I had inherited a detrimental and undetectable essence that would require a trained professional to produce magical water and use it to wash away the bad magic curse while reciting some reinforcing incantations. This was to ensure, I'm told, that I would not be tortured for eternity in the "after-life", and this magic wash would be my bus pass to the supernatural kingdom of bliss. As the ceremony certificate states, I "Am a child of God because God has made you His child through

this act." and that "The life 'I' now live is not 'my' life, but the life of your risen Lord living in you." and I "have been buried with Him in baptism". Eeek, Spooky and Crazy! No warning either that like all males, I was made in the image of an all knowing, all powerful and perfect god, but it intentionally gave all of us a "defective" penis that would require immediate cosmetic surgery - without anesthesia.

Even as I learned to talk, my constant barrage of questions were never nipped in the bud or answered by a god or gods. I am sure that like myself, no person was ever born with the preprogrammed idea that thunder was the result of God rearranging furniture or bowling, that the earth was made in seven days or that a Jew made a big boat that housed all the species of the earth during a planetary flood a long, long time ago.

So it is without question, that I was not born with religion or being religious. As far as I know, there has never been anyone who was born being religious with a preset belief of a deity. You know what? I was born an atheist!

You were an atheist at birth too. We were all born as atheists. That's right, Pat Robertson, Jimmy Falwell and GW Bush were all born atheists. All the popes, all the prophets, all the saints, and all the clerics throughout time were born atheists. The Jews, the Xians, the Muslims, the Rastafarians, the Buddhists, the Pagans, the Wiccans - all born as atheists. They all had to "learn" to be religious.

We're all born atheists, but shortly after birth is when we became victims of misinformation. Most of which was given to us by what had been the sole suppliers of all that we had learned since our birth, our family. Some myths we quickly discovered to be false, Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, the Easter Bunny, the wine drinking angel of Passover, etc. As soon as we became inquisitive or skeptical, the truth would be revealed by surprised and laughing adults with the explanation that it was a cute story and it made our youth pleasant to have fun, placating fantasies in it.

Like dominoes, each fantasy would eventually fall. A cute, simple, little domino for every cute, simple, little fantasy. And each toppled over from the pressure of inquiry, one after the next until we finally came to the last domino. It wasn't cute, little or simple. It was complex, huge, ambiguous, contradictory, and had been rigidly constructed, supported and defended since day one. This last fantasy wasn't a once a year or whenever a tooth came out of your skull event. No, it was weekly, sometimes daily, even hourly enforced and defended - regularly and ritually. And we learned that the more we too supported and defended this fantasy, the more we would be rewarded. Rewarded with the psychological benefits of a delusion and mental self defense mechanism along with receiving praise, approval, acceptance, gifts and love. Punishment, of course, was scorn, rejection, disapproval, ostracism, embarrassment and physical abuse.

Unlike the ending of Scooby Doo episodes, when the mask is pulled off, the tricks and illusions revealed, and the handcuffed and arrested perp exclaims, "I would have gotten away with it, if it wasn't for those meddling kids!" it is usually us who are led away and the perps are treated like heroes as they exclaim, "Don't let your mind deceive you, you must keep your faith strong!". Much like the child who informs his or her peers that there is no tooth fairy or Santa Claus, we are also punished for ruining the fantasy and spoiling the fun. Except in our case, "Santa" is used to declare supremacy over others, used to justify wars, to justify the imprisonment, torture and killing of innocent people, and used as a tool to mislead and influence the unthinking masses. And lets not forget about those great tax breaks, school vouchers and government faith based funding. So we are not punished for just spoiling the fun, we're punished for exposing an establishment of power built on lies, for exposing an ongoing fraud. We're a threat to the establishment and in turn a threat to the identity of the people who flock to it for their regular fix.

At one point or another, however, most people would look beyond this fantasy. It may have been an accidental glimpse, a led expedition by peers or in a classroom, or even an independent search, but it only resulted in them turning back away from reality, eyes shut in fear of the uncontrollable vastness, only reopening their eyes with blinders in place, swearing to never look away from that last domino ever again. They hoped no one had seen their straying from the flock, for this would surely result in punishment. It was too much for them to handle, it was a weight they could not bear. They vowed to never stray and once again lost their thoughts and themselves in the comfort of the herd.

We, for some reason and at some point, kicked that last domino aside, setting out to learn all we could about what lay beyond it and we have been persecuted ever since for being those who left the collective, those who are deemed the enemies of the last domino and the enemies of the people who need it. Oddly enough, we all look back and see that once large and ominous domino to be rather small and brittle. A small, brittle and simple domino, just like all the rest, but held up by a mountain of people.

We all have had times when our perceptions were askew from trying to find patterns that were not there and filling in the gaps and questions with quick and easy anthropocentric assumptions, but for the most part, we were led astray by our families and communities. The generation we looked to for information and wisdom, set out to ritually infect us with myths that gave them comfort, that gave them simple answers to hard questions and gave them a sense of identity and community, just as it had been done to them as children. But for some reason, it didn't take with us. It didn't stick. While others developed full blown God Pox, we got a little rash that soon cleared up and we eventually returned to the path of reality. The path we all first started on.

So next time someone asks you, "When did you become an atheist?" you can say "I was born an atheist.....and so were you!"