

What Motivates Atheists and How Christians Can Respond

For most people, many of the most fundamental beliefs they hold, such as their moral beliefs, their beliefs about the meaning of life, and their religious beliefs, are not based on arguments, but are *basic* beliefs. It would be surprising then, if things were completely different when it comes to atheism. Of course, atheists often stress that their position is based on arguments. I will analyze the various non-argumentative motivations for atheism. I show how these motives can be recognized and make a proposal as to how we can take them into account when we do philosophy of religion.

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. Relatively few religious believers believe in God on the basis of arguments.
- 1.2. This in fact applies to many of the most fundamental things we believe in.
- 1.3. If this is true, then it is likely that the same applies to atheists when it comes to their atheism. Evidence on which I base this claim.
- 1.4. Thomas Nagel as an example.
- 1.5. Three reasons why we should ask why atheists are atheists.
- 1.6. Why this is important for apologetics and evangelism.
- 1.7. Sincerely seeking God without finding him.

2. Misguided Epistemological Frameworks

- 2.1. The idea that belief in God is rational only if it is based on sufficiently strong arguments.
- 2.2. The idea that one should avoid prayer, participating in liturgy, Scripture reading, and so forth in order objectively to assess the evidence for God. E.g. Daniel Garber.
- 2.3. What is needed here, is not arguments for the existence of God, but arguments against the underlying epistemological assumptions.

3. The Ideal of Being an Independent Thinker

- 2.1. Being an independent thinker and intellectual authority.

2.2. Life as an adventure and pre-established meaning and purpose.

2.3. Two examples: Louise M. Antony and Anthony Simon Laden.

2.4. Video fragment: Lewis Wolpert.

2.5. How should we deal with this when we encounter it in apologetics and evangelism, especially in personal conversation?

- Admitting the churches' mistakes.
- Asking ourselves whether we've left the hard intellectual work to others.
- Show that there is plenty of room for thinking critically in the Christian faith.
- Showing that complete intellectual independence is a myth.

4. Following heroes

4.1. One admires Bertrand Russell or Friedrich Nietzsche for their courage, rhetoric, or intellectual power. Atheism is an inextricable part of their philosophy.

4.2. Presenting Christian heroes, especially Jesus Christ. Doing Christian hagiography.

5. Disappointing and Traumatic Experiences

5.1. Everyone has traumatic or at least disappointing experiences, atheists have them as well. Stewart Shapiro's experience as an example.

5.2. The irrationality of such experiences leading to atheism.

5.3. Video fragment: Garrett Hardin.

5.4. Elevator trauma as an example: what is needed is personal conversation and therapy, not arguments.

6. Caricatures of (Belief in) God

6.1. Caricatures can be willingly embraced or be the result of ignorance.

6.2. Examples of caricatures.

6.3. The primary thing to do here is *not* to provide arguments for and against the existence of God, but to provide knowledge, such as statistical evidence, historical evidence, etc.

7. Moral Repugnance

7.1. Moral repugnance towards God or religious believers. Fernando Savater as an example.

7.2. Examples of what atheists find morally repugnant about God.

7.3. Examples of what atheists find morally repugnant about religious believers.

7.4. The irrationality of this motive.

7.5. Example: video fragment, Richard Dawkins.

7.5. How should Christians deal with it?

- Careful biblical exegesis.
- The limitations of our moral intuitions.
- A moral discussion, even with God, is part of the Christian faith itself.

8. Unwillingness to Surrender One's Status or Possessions

8.1. The road downwards.

8.2. Luke 9:23-24.

8.3. Conversion. Confrontation in honesty and love, prayer.

9. Relational Obstacles between God and Man

9.1. Examples of relational obstacles.

9.2. Mat 5:23-24.

9.3. Implications.

10. Other Non-Argumentative Motivations for Atheism

10.1. The feeling that religion is losing more and more terrain to science.

10.2. Peer pressure (e.g. in academia) or pressure from the culture one lives in, in which atheism or at least non-belief is the presumption.

10.3. Aesthetic repugnance vis-à-vis the chaotic and emotional nature of many religious gatherings.

10.4. Certain character traits, such as autism.

10.5. A distorted relationship with one's own father, as psychologist Paul Vitz has argued.

11. What Does This Mean for the (Ir)rationality of Atheism and Theism?

11.1. As the adherents of Reformed Epistemology, such as Alvin Planting and Nicholas Wolterstorff, have shown, belief in God can be rational, even if there are no sound arguments for the existence of God.

11.2. None of the above motivations for atheism could make atheism rational.

11.3. Also, any other kind of ‘atheistic experience’ could not make all by itself make atheism rational. The atheist always needs some kind of argument. This means that there is a justificatory asymmetry between theism and atheism.

11.4. This also means that it is possible for the atheist sincerely to seek God and nonetheless not to find him. We can help him/her by removing obstacles that stand between him/her and God.

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