

Why I Became an Atheist

Although I do not remember the exact day, I do remember when I was saved. A traveling preacher had come to the church next door and showed a slide show on the evils of rock n' roll. He preached that rock was evil, an instrument of the devil, and that those who listened to it were sinners. That night, for the first time, I thought of myself as a sinner who was going to hell; after all, I listened to rock n' roll.

As soon as the preacher gave the alter call, I made my way to the front of the church and confessed my sins. I asked Jesus to save me from the hell that I was sure I was destined to endure because of my sins. After church, I went home and smashed my tapes (the only one I remember was Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA*).

Before, religion had been a game. I could memorize things easily, and since those around me gave me encouragement to memorize sections of the Bible, I decided to memorize sections of the Bible. I soon accepted that the Bible was the word of God, and I started to take it, and religion, seriously. The creator of heaven and earth had inspired a book specifying how to live and what one had to do to please him, and so I felt I should know it.

Every summer, we went to a church camp, and learned the books of the Bible, the Roman's Road to Salvation, and were given prizes for learning and answering questions about sections of the Bible. Although I had tied for the prize a few years earlier, I finally won the camp's Bible award the year before my junior year of high school.

At the time, I was also a member of AWANA, a youth group devoted to activities and Bible memorization. I don't remember how long it was supposed to take to finish a book, but I finished two within a year. I, quite literally, earned my stripes, since one received stripes for one's uniform for finishing the various sections.

I started getting up at five in the morning to read a chapter of the Bible every day. I made it my goal to at least read the whole Bible. Of course, being Christian, I started with the Gospels, went through the New Testament, and then picked through the Old Testament. I liked the books of *Mark*, *James*, *Proverbs*, and *Ecclesiastes*. I didn't so much like much of the Old Testament, John's gospel or *Revelations*.

As was every child in the children's home where I was raised, I was in was expected to sing in the children's home choir. Either because I was tone deaf, or because I evidenced knowledge of the Bible, I started to lead the choir and between songs I would give mini-sermons based on what I had read that week. At the time, there was talk that I might be called by God to be a preacher.

While I was reading more and more of the Bible, I was being led in another direction as well. On the one side, I was being influenced by a fundamentalist Christian environment. On the other, I was being encouraged to question this upbringing by a close friend who started out as my "sponsor" or "big brother." He would buy me books and encourage me to question my own religion and to read about other religions. He bought Houston Smith's *Religions of Man*, Albert Nolan's *Jesus Before Christianity*, Ian Maccaby's *The Mythmaker*, and Shelby Spong's *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. He also loaned me several books on Zen, Buddhism, Taoism, and other religions and philosophies.

Through high school, I read these books, as well as books by popular philosophers such as Alan Watts, Carlos Castaneda, Krishnamurti, Joseph Campbell and others. At the

time, I felt as comfortable waking up early in the morning to read a chapter of the *Bible* a day, as reading the *Tao Te Ching*, the teachings of Buddha, or writings on Zen. I also read *Dianetics* by L. Ron Hubbard to evaluate its claims for myself, and familiarized myself with the different sects of Christianity (the most visible of which was Mormonism).

In the summer before my junior year of high school, these influences were jostling my thoughts; mentally, I was a ship in danger of capsizing. I could not successfully integrate these influences, nor could I easily dismiss one of them either. I don't remember what happened, but the summer of that year, I decided that something had to give. I no longer had the energy to attempt to reconcile such conflicting views. In an attempt to gain some sanity, I decided that I would embrace the fundamentalist Christianity of the home I lived in. Since we were in Florida on vacation at the time I made this decision, I threw the rock n' roll tapes I had collected since my conversion into the ocean and vowed to devote myself to God. I came back from Florida with an uneasy peace. I threw myself into my Bible studies, reading more of the Bible, commentaries on the Bible, and related religious literature. My desire at this period was to confirm what I had been told. I also lashed out at my friend, insulting his lifestyle and non-fundamentalist version of Christianity.

Part of my difficulty was that I assumed that those older than me knew everything I did and then some. So, when my guardians disagreed with me on some issue, I thought that they must have learned something new that explained why what I thought was false. I suspect this is one reason I so drove myself to read and memorize so much of the Bible, and then later to learn classical Greek and translate *Mark, James, I Thessalonians, Galatians*, and most of the book of *Acts*.

I thought that I could force the doubts and questions out of my head by tossing out some tapes. I soon realized that these were not so easily dismissed. I kept thinking, "Is all non-Christian music evil?" I started thinking of songs that I knew and trying to find out what was evil about them. I don't remember why, but I fixated on the song "Oh L'amour" by Erasure. I sang the song over and over in my head, trying to determine why it was evil. I remember mentioning the idea that all non-Christian songs were evil to my sponsor, and he asked me if various pieces of classical music were evil too. He challenged me to find the evil in U2's "Where the Streets Have No Name" or George Michael's "Praying for Time," which was playing on the radio while we were talking.

I still remember the issue that, in retrospect, was the first step on my road to atheism. I was finishing up 11th grade and reading *The Teaching of Buddha*, published by a group promoting Buddhism. The book begins by discussing how Buddha's mother became pregnant with him,

For twenty years [the king and queen] had no children. But one night Queen Maya had a strange dream, in which she saw a white elephant entering into her womb through the right side of her chest, and she became pregnant. The King and the people looked forward with anticipation to the birth of a royal child. (p. 2)

This story reminded me of the story of an angel telling Mary that "the Holy Ghost would come upon her and the power of the highest would overshadow her," and that she

would give birth to Jesus. I was taught that Jesus was born of a virgin, and that this was important to his sinless nature

I asked myself why I believed the story of Jesus, but not the story of Buddha or other religious leaders who were supposed to be virgin born. I asked myself what was the difference between this and other stories in the Bible and the stories in the holy books of other religions. I wondered what made Jesus' miracles more believable than those written about in other religions.

As I considered the issue, I realized that I could not explain how many Biblical claims were possible, much less those from other religions. I became aware of Biblical contradictions, morally questionable commands, and statements that were simply implausible. I asked myself why I believed the Bible was true, but believed the other stories were myths. I felt that I only had a few possibilities: I had to claim that the Bible was somehow special, equally accept the stories from all the religions, or reject all the stories. Once I considered what I knew about reproduction, and how little evidence was offered either in the Bible or in other holy books to support the claims of virgin birth, I decided that I did not believe that Jesus was conceived in any way different from how everyone else was conceived. It took me some time before I was able to say this in a positive fashion: I believed that Jesus was conceived in the same way as every other human. It would take years before I was prepared to fully accept the implications of similar thoughts.

Slowly, I stopped thinking of the Bible as a special book. I found myself asking whether something was true or false, independent of the Bible's words. Slowly, I set up something outside of the Bible to judge the Bible's truth and moral commands. I asked myself why, independent of the Bible, something was good or bad. I found myself asking myself why, independent of the Bible, I should or should not act in a certain way. Once I had decided that I would decide the issue of the virgin birth based on evidence and reasoning outside the Bible, it was a short trek before I realized that I could, and perhaps should, decide other factual and moral issues with evidence and reasoning outside the Bible.

At first, this idea was simply implicit; I asked myself whether the Bible contradicted itself or what I knew about the natural world. Later, I made this line of reasoning explicit. I actively looked for evidence for the claims of the Bible, and applied similar standards to Biblical claims as to non-Biblical claims. I asked myself why I should believe the Bible more than other religious books. At first, I expected—"hoped" might be a better word—that my studies would only remove some chaff from the Bible, and leave the rest of it intact.

When I started college, I decided to pursue a double major of Classics and Psychology. I continued my comparative religious studies, while deepening my understanding of Christianity. To combine these interests, I spent from June to January of my sophomore year translating the gospel of *Mark* from Greek to English. Later, I translated the other books I mentioned earlier.

My hopes that I would find that the Bible was fundamentally a good book with some chaff were continually dampened. Once again, I was being intellectually tossed. Religiously, I did not know what I was. I was not a Christian, or an Agnostic, or an Atheist. Being a Classics major, I did what Classics majors are trained to do: I coined a

new word to describe my beliefs. I decided that I was an “apatheist.” That is, I had decided that I did not care whether or not there was a god.

One day after my sophomore year, I mentioned this to one of my good friends. He pointed out that I should care whether or not there was a god. If there were a deity, such as the one mentioned in the Bible, one would be wise to obey him.

For years, I had pursued evidence for the existence of God and the general truth of the Bible. I had discussed the issue with anyone who was interested. Fundamentally, I still believed that I could find God through reason, and that others wanted to find him by this path as well. That summer, I was jolted out of this belief.

My friend and I were walking down the street when he saw a man carrying a large wooden cross down the street. He decided that he wanted to talk to this guy, who we christened “John the Baptist.” While John was trying to convert my friend, he said that there were no errors in the Bible. I asked him if he would believe there were errors if I showed them to him. John said that he would not believe there were errors even if I showed them to him in his own Bible.

This comment floored me. I realized that at some level, belief in God required a leap of faith. God was not to be found through reason, as I had sought him, but would require this leap of faith. I realized that the majority of theists that I knew would welcome evidence that supported their beliefs, but dismiss the importance of evidence as soon as the evidence challenged them. At this point, I had to decide whether I would continue to follow the path of reason or open myself up to accepting something I could not offer evidence for. I decided to follow reason. I was no longer an apatheist; I was an atheist.

The next few months were tough for me. I was depressed as I began to realize the implications of my choice, and of the route that I had chosen: I began to realize the enormity that I faced in order to completely rework my morality. These months were a period of consciously working through many of the implications of a materialistic worldview. As one example, I remember, I would have interesting mental dialogs. The first time I said that I was an atheist, I immediately thought that God would kill me and that I would go to hell. At the time, and for months afterward, I had to consciously remind myself that since I did not believe there was a god, I could not believe that he would send me to hell.

In the years since I made this choice, I have continued to ponder religious issues, and whether there is a god. I became an atheist because I realized that I had not been given good reason to believe in a god; I remain an atheist, because nothing I have learned in these years has convinced me that that I am mistaken.

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