

Why Evangelical Atheists are just as bad.

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Now I want to make something clear at the start; I have wavered between being an atheist and not for some time. This is because I don't believe in God, or religion. I happen to think it is all nonsense. This is a personal belief, and whilst I'm not afraid to debate it as far as I'm concerned anyone else can believe what they please. The combination of my own logical thought processes and quantum physics ought to make me a firm atheist, however just as science has disproved many religious myths, in all our greatness we have not yet answered the question "so the big bang right, where did that come from?" Scientifically speaking, we know absolutely bugger all about the origins of anything. Chances are we never will, the human brain just can't comprehend it.

So I probably am an atheist in all but name. But I don't really sign up to Atheism and I don't want to label myself as such because of what it has come to represent. Atheists can take on such certainty in their own beliefs that it almost becomes a faith in itself. This faith considers itself superior, more 'right' than all other faiths. It has evangelical adherents who try to convert everyone in their path. It ticks so many of the boxes. It even has its very own prophet, a supreme leader. Richard Dawkins draws flocks of believers to his lectures, many of whom then go home to convey the message that believing in God is stupid. Atheism no longer represents a personal lack of belief in established Gods or religion; it has come to represent almost an anti-religious stance.

I recognise that Dawkins is a brilliant man, and I agree in principle with many of his arguments. The problem is that Dawkins has become a figurehead for a view of religion that ignores basic principles of human nature.

I object to religion of any kind not in principle, but in practice. I object to the certainty with which religious evangelists reject all other religions and thrust their viewpoints upon others. Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, even the way hymns and mantras are have historically been pushed at children from an early age; much of this has historically been a means of the state asserting social control and order, a means of brushing poverty and brutality under the carpet in the name of God.

Evangelical Atheists seize upon this, and use it as justification to convert all religious believers to their point of view. They believe there is no God, and that without faith wars would not be fought in the name of religion. This is a laudable principle, but with it there is the disturbing undertone that all religions have, that everyone else is wrong and they are right. "There is no God, set aside your delusions"

The implication that all people of faith are ignorant is something we should be very uncomfortable with; more so the principle that they should be converted. Most theologians spend their lives grappling with the same big unanswered questions – "Where did we come from?" and "How does all that work then?" They have just come to different conclusions, using different logical arguments. What Evangelical

Atheists preach is exactly the closed-mindedness which they deride; absolute self-righteousness and an inability to conceive of the fact that another person of similar intelligence might firmly adhere to a different point of view to themselves.

This evangelism also ignores the need people have for answers, for reasons to get through each day. There are millions of people in this country who find hope in religion, when science can't provide the answers. How often do you see people quoted as saying how they have found God, and through God found the strength to change their lives - to get off drugs, build their careers, run faster or jump higher than anyone else. In finding God people find peace in themselves, peace that enables them to focus and excel in the rest of their lives.

In the end it is divisive and closed minded attitudes that build walls, not religious belief in itself. Were religion to vanish overnight the same tensions would still exist, such people as would seek to seize and retain power to further their own ends would still walk the earth, and wars would still be fought in their name. To suggest anything else is naïve in the extreme. It is not religion that causes wars, it is people. People fight for causes other than religion, and even in the context of religious beliefs Dawkins has become, however unwittingly, the spiritual leader of yet another faction.

Socially this type of divisive attitude is dangerous. The word multiculturalism has been grossly misrepresented in recent times. Multiculturalism should be massively positive within as society. It should be about one nation. It should be about people from all faiths, religions and beliefs integrating and mixing in a society that is brought together by common values that everyone shares. The right to hold your own beliefs, the ability to progress your career without discrimination of any kind, understanding other cultures and values.

The last governments' policies have changed the meaning of the word, so that it is now seen as completely the opposite. Faith schools that divide children according to their beliefs before their beliefs have even had a chance to form, segregating and isolating different communities along the lines of ideology. Positive discrimination and a definition of diversity (that convenient catchall) which only serves to exaggerate differences between individuals and within communities by setting up different, extravagantly funded programmes for each of them rather than concentrating on overarching, universal services for all. By implicitly identifying and focussing provision of services around the differences between people rather focussing on what unites them we have created a more, not less divided society.

The new government has taken it upon themselves to define what multicultural values should be, i.e. their values. This is idiotic and equally divisive. They have thrown the baby out with the bathwater by chopping funding for services without stopping to think about what they were supposed to do in the first place. At the same time they have retained and extended the most divisive policy of all, taking children and cutting them off from other cultures through faith schools at the very beginning of their journey to understanding and tolerance.

This them and us culture is not multiculturalism. This Atheist schism in our society is a symptom, not a cause, however it achieves exactly the same aim. Whilst on the surface it fights exactly the right battles, in practice it divides people into them (believers in religious faiths) and us (enlightened atheists).

I believe that people are entitled to be different - we need to remove the barriers that we have erected as a society, barriers which cause these differences to be exaggerated and feared rather than accepted and celebrated. These differences in faith should not be a radicalising force for harm and hate, but through a shared sense of humanity should bring us all closer together. Atheists can play a massive role in this process, but in order to properly engage in the debate they need to accept and respect the role of faith in peoples' lives.