

Why I am a Christian:

in a scientific, humanistic and atheistic world

Part IV: Accountability

*I do believe that atheists have the same moral capacity as religious people. But whether that capacity is fully actualized is another question. I am afraid that while taking religion out of the moral equation may mean fewer acts of martyrdom among a few thousand people, it would also leave a huge moral vacuum for billions more. I do not believe, as Dostoevsky did, that without God everything is permitted. But it is wishful thinking and not consistent with empirical findings that people will act just as morally without religion as they do with religion. Look around – outside of religion, where does the average child formally learn about morality? Religion is the only cultural institution intrinsically committed to the moral improvement of humankind, which cannot be said of education, government, business, the legal system, or any other institution. Bruce Sheiman, **An Atheist Defends Religion: Why Humanity is Better Off with Religion Than Without It.***

A. Why religion, not only faith, is still necessary

1. Religion Defined

- Faith is a belief that there is something which transcends human knowledge that stands outside of the boundaries of this **universe**.
- This faith is most often expressed as a belief in **God**.
- Faith is organized **institutionally** in order to pass on this belief and those values we deduce from these beliefs.
- This institution is called **“religion.”**

2. Religion is still necessary

- Religion, like most institutions, is not inherently **evil**.
- It is valuable so long as it serves, and is subservient to, its **purpose**
- The institution creates an **accountability** system that supports parents and society.
- It teaches, affirms, and strengthens the **values** to which we would like our children to hold.
- Religion is necessary as a social tool of morality because morality is not being taught as pervasively and effectively in any other human institution
- Parents who try to teach their children morality and faith without the support of the institution often **fail** to instill their hoped for values: they have little or no accountability and support

3. Religion holds individuals, families, communities, and ultimately the world accountable.

B. To what does the church and religion hold us accountable?

1. Religion creates a spirit of **Gratitude**

- a. We can never appreciate the life we have without a spirit of gratitude.
- b. Gratitude looks outward
 - Most of the blessings we enjoy in life do not come from the work of our own **hands**
 - We did not earn them nor do we deserve them, including the gift of **life** itself:
 - We are not **owed** anything
 - The universe is bigger than me, but has gifted me with this opportunity for life

2. Religion encourages Generosity

“More than any other institution, religion deserves our appreciation and respect because it has persistently encouraged people to care deeply—for the self, for neighbors, for humanity, and for the natural world—and to strive for the highest ideals humans are able to envision,” Bruce Sheiman is the author of *“An Atheist Defends Religion: Why Humanity is Better Off with Religion than without It.”*

- a. Because we are blessed, we are called to be a blessing
 - 1) We were created to love God, love each other, and care for God’s planet
 - 2) We have destroyed all three of these relationships by putting ourselves first at the expense of others
 - 3) God speaks a Word of forgiveness: Jesus
 - a) Broken relationships can only be restored by the one who has been hurt: a shift in power
 - b) God initiates forgiveness.
 - God shows us forgiveness in Jesus
 - God becomes the source of forgiveness to us
 - We then return this blessing to the world
 - People of faith are those who restore relationships that are broken
 - This is not done out of compulsion, fear or force, but out of gratitude
- b. Generosity is more effectively instilled by those who participate in religious institutions
 - US charitable giving in 2007 was \$307 billion, 2% of GDP, more than any other country.
 - Christians are 38% more likely to give than the non-religious to charity (Religious people donate about 3.5 times more money per year: \$2,210/person vs. \$642/person)
 - Christians are 32% more likely to volunteer time (Religious people volunteered more than twice as often as non-religious per year: 12 times vs. 5.8 times.)
 - 88% of those who devote themselves to spiritual life give and volunteer their time
 - Only 46% of those who are non-religious give and volunteer their time
 - While the majority of the money given by Christians is given to religious institutions, they **STILL** out-give the non-religious by 14% to non-religious organizations (i.e.—Doctors without borders, MDA, PTA, United Way, etc.)

For your contemplation: Is the giving of your time and money more like that of the non-religious or the person of faith?

3. Religion is a hedge against totalitarianism

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...

US Declaration of Independence

- a. God guarantees human freedom
 - 1) The US government cannot abridge our freedoms
 - Freedom is a gift of God
 - This freedom transcends the authority of our government
 - Whether one believes in God or not, the acceptance of the philosophical concept of God protects our freedoms from an intrusive government

- 2) This claim does not sit well with secular humanists
 - They claim that God is not **necessary** to human freedom
 - Liberty, in their view, is a human right that we just agree upon
 - Freedom, then, is granted and sustained by **government** and secular institutions
 - However, what government gives, government can and does abridge and take away.
- b. Christian faith is a **higher** form of morality than one legislated by the state
 - 1) The state legislates the **limits** to my freedom
 - a) That which is enforced by law is an obedience of **compulsion**
 - It is not a sign of **generosity** or of charity when the state confiscates the resources of one citizen and gives it to another
 - Compulsion by law is a lower morality than the law of **love**
 - b) The business of government is the distribution of **power**
 - c) God is a restraint on the **arrogance** of power
 - The desire for power is the cause of **suffering**
 - This is the 2nd of the 4 noble truths of **Buddhism**: *suffering is caused by desire.*
 - It is the lesson learned from Genesis 2 and 3
 - Faith demonstrates its ability to comprehend the travails of humanity that are inherent in any political system we may put into practice
 - d) We need God in order to remind humanity of our appropriate **place**: we are a part of the created order, and whenever we place ourselves over top of creation and others, destruction follows.
 - 2) Christianity eliminates the limits to my **responsibility**
 - The Christian has one law: love
 - This love cannot be legislated or limited
 - Love **fulfills** every good law
 - The compulsion of the Christian to love is one of gratitude, not of law
- c. Christianity **transcends** the law of government
 - Christianity existed before every modern government came to power
 - Christianity will exist long after every contemporary form of government fails
 - Christianity does not **depend** upon government to thrive or survive

Did you know that...

...the "new" atheists (Hitchens, Harris, Dawkins, et. al.) blame virtually all oppression and war on religion
...this is based upon their ignorance and over-simplification of human history and conflict (proving that even people who think of themselves as "smart" suffer from confirmation bias)
...according to the Encyclopedia of Wars by Charles Phillips, of the 1,763 catalogued conflicts throughout history, only 123 were religious in nature (proving that, while religion has caused pain, suffering, and oppression, other factors have been a more significant contributor to the oppression of humanity)

- d. Doesn't Christianity share the perspective of communism?
 - 1) The early church was **communal** in nature (Acts)

- sharing in common was a **choice**
 - they could accept to live in the community, but this was NOT a prerequisite of being a Christian
 - they could leave the community of their own **free will**
 - Christ was at the **center** of this communalism
- 2) Communism does not have Christ at its center.
- It is a human made institution
 - It is, like all forms of government, enforced by law and the threat of force
- 3) Christianity loses its moral imperative and **authority** when it aligns itself with any political system

In My Opinion: There are many oppressive political tools that are used to gain power: the stifling of conversation/speech; the marginalizing of opponents; oppression through legal maneuvering and political force. These are political tools, not religious tools. However, they have been employed by religion, and when religion does use the tools of oppression, it needs to be held accountable. When Christians, in the name of a loving God, oppress, it is doubly distressing and evil: who then will stand in the gap for the oppressed if the church is the oppressor? This is the unpardonable sin: people of God who use force to acquire power or for financial gain. How can we, who have known the love of God, act in a manner that would oppress others? Oppression, however, is NOT a religious problem or a faith problem, but a human problem: we don't need the excuse of God to oppress one another.

The atheistic fundamentalists (*some* of the “new” atheists and secular humanists) while believing that we ought to have freedom of religion, would like to legislate limitations directed at people of faith. Often discussed is whether faith should preclude a person from being a teacher, scientist, doctor, or even a parent (since teaching a child about God, in their opinion, is tantamount to child abuse). (*PLEASE understand that I am only talking about the MOST extreme anti-theists: it is my belief that MOST do not hold such extreme, immoral and untenable views. Unfortunately, it is the extremists who get most of the attention of the publicity, just as is true of Christians.*)

This is VERY similar to the limits that the European communists placed upon Christians. Contrary to popular belief, the communists NEVER outlawed Christianity. Atheism was the official state dogma, and it was the goal to rid the country of religion. It did so through discriminatory and oppressive legislation directed at people of faith. Christians could not go to college. They were, in some cases, sent to psychiatric hospitals to be cured of the “delusion of belief.” Priests and clergy were threatened with imprisonment for preaching “non-approved” sermons, hosting youth groups, teaching children about faith, and more. Christians could not belong to the political party, and therefore could not get decent jobs or housing. Christianity was marginalized to make it unpopular. Churches could not take offerings, publish books, or use metals and other building materials in the construction and repair of their buildings. The attempts by the new atheist to claim that communism and totalitarianism is religious in nature and the result of Christianity is that of philosophers with NO personal experience of a totalitarian state who are ignorant of history and the oppression of the church and the people of faith within these totalitarian regimes.

4. Religion creates **community**

- a. One of the underlying principles of faith is that we are created to care for **others**
 - It is a recognition that universe is bigger than me, so it is not **about** me
 - I have a place **within** the context of others
 - I live my life recognizing and being respectful of the needs, wants, and desires of others.
- b. A second underlying principle of faith is that we are created to care for God's **creation**
 - Since the universe is bigger than me, it does not **belong** to me
 - This world is NOT ours to do with as we please.
 - We are but **stewards** of that which preceded us and which will exist long after we are gone.

My Opinion: It is a common misperception by anti-theists that Christians only live for heaven. Unfortunately, this stereotype has often been confirmed by how some Christians misinterpret and abuse the scripture. Therefore, it is difficult to blame anti-theists for their characterization of Christianity. The truth is that one of the primary purposes of our faith is the putting into practice the kingdom of heaven on this side of the kingdom: loving God by loving others and caring for creation. This living out the faith of the kingdom is dangerous when Christians believe that this is to be accomplished by colluding with government and power: it is damaging to the message of Christianity. For Christianity to maintain its prophetic voice and its ability to transform lives, we must not align ourselves with any political systems or power.