Arguing Atheism

Eric Hehner

Arguing atheism, for or against, has been an active interest in recent years, with many books and blogs popping up. I want to express my opinion about which kinds of arguments are effective. But first, I begin with some history.

History

Ten thousand years ago there were about five million people scattered thinly around the world. They had no science, and understood nothing about how anything works. Their only explanation for how something happens was that someone makes it happen. Someone back then might stumble upon a campfire, and ask: What made that campfire appear there? And someone else might answer: Thog made that campfire. The explanation works sometimes, and since they had no other kind of explanation, they used it all the time. What makes the sun move across the sky? Ra makes it move. To ancient people, the sun seemed to be about the size of a beach ball, and it seemed to be just above the clouds; not so big and not so far away, and not beyond belief that someone could be moving it across the sky. We don't see Ra making it move, so Ra must be invisible. What makes the rain fall? Same sort of answer.

What makes a body alive at one moment and dead the next? Their imaginative answer was that a magical invisible substance (a soul or spirit or ghost) enters a body (at conception? at birth?) and that gives it life, and later this magical substance leaves the body, and that causes its death.

These answers raise new questions. Where does Ra (the sun god) live and who are his relatives? Where does a soul come from and where does it go? The ancient people lacked science, but they didn't lack imagination. They invented many gods and many stories about them. Different people invented different stories, and they fought about whose stories were the truth.

Fast forward to Rome in the year 312 CE: Emperor Constantine decided that Christianity is the true religion, and a few years later Emperor Theodosius decreed that Christianity is the only allowed religion in all of the Roman Empire, which included most of Europe. That is why Europe, the Americas, Russia, Australia, and some other regions, are mainly Christian today.

Present

We have come a long way. We now know a lot about the structure of the universe, about the conversion from mass to energy, about computing and communication, about the functioning of living organisms, and even about how life began on this planet, and evolved into the amazing variety that we see.

In the previous paragraph, the word “we” is very misleading. The people who know these things are scientists. What proportion of the world's population are scientists? The estimates that I was able to find, admittedly rough, say something like 0.0005, or one-twentieth of one percent, or one in two thousand. The other 99.95% of the world's population who are not scientists do not know much about how things work. They can use a cell phone and even a computer, but they have no idea how it works. They can say “Being a lawyer is in her DNA.”, but they have no idea what DNA is. They don't know how nuclear power works, or how it generates electricity.
Some of the people who are not scientists understand that, even though they do not know how things work, things do not work by magic. They accept that scientists have figured out how things work, or at least have gone a long way toward that understanding. In the USA, that's about 10% of the population; in Canada, about 20%; in Europe, about 30%; in China, about 60%. The remaining 40% or 70% or 80% or 90% of the population still believe that a magical person (God) makes things happen, and that a magical substance (soul) enters and leaves a human body. An athlete who has just scored a goal points skyward, at God, to thank him for allowing or causing the goal; apparently these athletes do not even know that the Earth is round, and that athletes around the world are pointing in all different directions. The vast majority of people today are almost as ignorant of science as the people of ten thousand years ago. “We” have not come a long way.

**Science versus Religion**

Science is a method of viewing and understanding the world. So is religion. There are people who accept the scientific view and reject the religious view. There are people who accept the religious view and reject the scientific view. There are people who consider the two views to be complementary: together they provide greater understanding than either view alone. There are people who believe that some aspects of the world can be understood only through science and not through religion, while other aspects of the world can be understood only through religion and not through science.

In religion, the source of knowledge is authority, which could be a person or a book or a combination. Challenges to accepted belief are discouraged. In the past, the penalty for heresy (challenging accepted belief) was death, or torture until repentance; that's very strong discouragement. Even today, some Islamic religious leaders still issue death sentence fatwas against heretics. Torturing and murdering heretics has been dropped by some modern religions, but they may consider atheism to be immoral and evil. Some religions, and some religious people of all religions, are open to some degree of challenge, perhaps to the details of the religion rather than to the core beliefs. But the official position of the religion has to be to discourage challenge to authority because authority is all the religion has.

In science, authority counts for nothing; the only source of knowledge is evidence. Science doesn't have “beliefs”; rather, it has best currently available explanations. Science welcomes challenges to its current explanations, and is always eager to embrace better explanations, especially when new evidence comes to light. But scientists are people, and people are not perfect, and it must be admitted that some scientists sometimes discourage challenges to their current explanations. But the scientific ideal is to welcome challenge. Science is self-correcting, whereas religion is self-protecting. The goals and methods of religion and science are incompatible.

The difference between science and religion is epitomized by their attitudes to the words “faith” and “skepticism”. To religious people, faith is a virtue; it means belief in their religion without needing evidence, or even against evidence. To religious people, skepticism is perverse; it means doubting their religion. To scientists, believing without evidence, or against evidence, is perverse, and doubting whenever evidence is absent or weak is a virtue.

As science has progressed, religion has retreated. I do not mean that fewer people are religious; I suspect that the fraction of religious people has decreased, but there are no reliable numbers older than 50 years to say how many people were religious in the past. I mean that the claims
made by religion have retreated when confronted with undeniable evidence. The Earth was formed by gravitational forces acting on the debris from stellar explosions approximately 4.5 billion years ago. The Earth is approximately spherical, not flat. The Earth is one of many planets orbiting one of many stars, and is not the center of the universe. Life began spontaneously on this planet about 4.3 billion years ago, and may have begun independently on many other planets. On this planet, life evolved from common ancestors to many different forms. We are animals, not so different from other animals who communicate with each other, who think and plan, who have hopes and fears. On each of these points, the major religions fought against acceptance of the scientific evidence because it contradicted religious beliefs. Ultimately, grudgingly, most religions have accepted most of the scientific evidence by modifying or retracting the conflicting religious beliefs. Some people still deny the evidence in order to retain their religious beliefs.

Social progress has also caused religious retreat. Religions have claimed that sexism, racism, and homophobia are ordained by God, but in some parts of the world the more progressive religions have retreated from their sexist, racist, and homophobic past.

The kind of retreat preferred by some people is disengagement. God used to be actively in control of everything that happens. Now God mainly watches without interfering. But if you worship God enough, and pray to him hard enough, God can still steer events in your favor, if he wants to, which he rarely does.

The kind of retreat preferred by other people is abstraction. God used to be human-like, living in heaven, with wants and plans and abilities. Now God is just a quality that's everywhere and nowhere. Albert Einstein believed in God, but when asked what was the nature of his god, he replied that it was the entire universe. That's a good choice because it definitely exists, but it's not a god you would pray to.

Stephen Hawking has a story about the time the Vatican hosted a conference on the physics of the early universe. Many famous physicists were gathered together, and just before the conference started, they were addressed by the Pope. He wished them well in their enquiries concerning the first few moments after the Big Bang, but he admonished them not to enquire about what caused the Big Bang, or what led up to it. That, he said, was God's domain. What the Pope did not know was that the subject of Stephen Hawking's presentation was exactly what the Pope told them not to think about. The Roman Catholic Church had retreated so far, but it was still drawing a line.

There is a strong correlation between education and atheism: the more educated you are, the more likely you are to be atheist; the less educated you are, the more religious. The correlation is even stronger between scientists and atheists: 93% of the members of the U.S. National Academy of Science are atheists. But the correlation is not perfect: there are some well educated religious people and some uneducated atheists. There are people who are both scientists and religious. Perhaps they are scientists when at work and religious the rest of the time, or perhaps they compartmentalize their brains, relegating some aspects of their lives to science and other aspects to religion, not allowing the different aspects to confront each other. But they cannot be both scientists and religious about the same aspects at the same time. That's because science and religion have conflicting goals and methods.
the Origin of Life

Some people are fond of saying “No-one knows how life began.”, because those people don't know. But scientists do know. They don't know the exact time and place, but they do know that it was somewhere in the ocean about 4.3 billion years ago. When certain molecules that were present in the ocean then happen to encounter each other, there is a tiny chemical event that creates a self-reproducing molecule. When a self-reproducing molecule encounters certain ordinary molecules, the reaction produces two self-reproducing molecules (and that is why it is called self-reproducing). As time passes, there are more and more of these self-reproducing molecules. Chance encounters between self-reproducing molecules produce more complex self-reproducing molecules. Eventually we get primitive versions of protein molecules. Some molecules stick together. As time passes, the complexity of the molecules and groups of molecules increases. Eventually it is complex enough to call it life. The early stages of this progression can be done in a laboratory, greatly speeded up, by forcing all the “chance encounters” to happen. But most people don't know this.

People who, faced with the laboratory evidence, accept that life could get started this way, still have a problem: probability. On any given day, the chance that the right molecules will bump into each other to get life started may be very very low, perhaps so low that we can call it virtually impossible. It would take a miracle, and that's God's job.

If the probability that life gets started on any given day is \( p \), then the probability that life gets started in a period of \( d \) days is \( 1 - (1-p)^d \). I don't know exactly what value to assign to \( p \), but to illustrate the calculation, let me suppose \( p = 0.00000001 \), or 1 in one hundred million, which is extremely small. In ten million years there are \( 3,652,500,000 \) days, so the probability that life gets started in a period of ten million years is \( 1 - (1-0.00000001)^{3652500000} \), which is \( 0.999999999999999889 \), or \( 99.9999999999999889\% \). In other words, it is virtually certain that life will get started, given long enough. And since the formation of the Earth, there have been 450 consecutive periods of ten million years. No miracle needed. Even though this is just high school math, most people don't know it.

Popular accounts of the search for extra-terrestrial life talk about finding planets in the Goldilocks zone. That means finding planets that are not too hot, not too cold, not too wet, not too dry, and so on. Originally, the Goldilocks zone was a religious argument for the existence of God. If Earth were just 20° warmer or 20° cooler or 20% wetter or 20% drier or the air had 20% more oxygen or 20% less, then life as we know it would not be possible. The delicate balance that we have is so improbable that it must be the work of God. As often as this argument has been made, it has been debunked. It makes me think of someone who walks down a road just after a rainfall, and sees an irregularly shaped pothole filled with water. He is amazed that the pothole just exactly fits the water in it. If the pothole were any smaller, then that water would not fit in it. If the pothole were a different shape, then that shape of water would not fit in it. This person concludes that the pothole must have been created to fit the water. He is amazed that the pothole just exactly fits the water in it. If the pothole were any smaller, then that water would not fit in it. If the pothole were a different shape, then that shape of water would not fit in it. This person concludes that the pothole must have been created to fit the water. Obviously, the water fits the pothole, and life on this planet fits the conditions on this planet. Life here formed from the matter that is here, and evolved to fit conditions that it found and that it created. And the conditions have changed a lot over the eons. Those species that could not adapt to the new conditions died, and those that could flourish. There are extremophiles living at hundreds of degrees, in deep freeze, in extreme pressures, in extreme chemical concentrations, without oxygen, and in all conditions that can be found anywhere on Earth. There is no Goldilocks zone.
I expect that life is plentiful throughout the universe. It might not be carbon-based; it might not be reliant on water; it might not resemble life on Earth. My concern is not whether we will find life on other planets, but whether we will recognize it when we find it.

the Appeal of Religion

Religion means different things to different people. It can include any or all of the following.
- belief in the supernatural, such as God, souls, miracles, the devil, angels, ghosts, heaven, hell
- an ethical framework, and an authority (person, book) to consult
- myths, ancient and modern
- music, such as gospel music and religiously inspired symphonies
- various celebrations on special holy days each year
- family customs
- a mutually supportive community (church, synagogue, mosque)
- charity
- religious emotion

The part of religion that conflicts with science is belief in the supernatural. Some parts of religion have good psychological and social value. Family bonds are strengthened by shared beliefs. A church or synagogue or mosque provides a mutually supportive community where you find friends, and maybe a spouse; it is a place where you feel you belong. The good parts of religion cannot easily be separated from the bad; all of these aspects of religion are tangled together, dependent on each other. Belief in the supernatural is woven into the ethics, the stories, the music, the family customs, and the charity. The fact that religion provides a framework for all your life's activities is very appealing. Asking someone to give up their religion may be asking them to give up their entire way of life.

A strong appeal of religion is that it provides absolute answers to both questions of fact and questions of ethics. That's the answer because God says so. (Actually, the bible or a priest says that God says so.) A religious absolute answer is so much easier than years of scientific study, and more satisfying than science's best currently available answer. A religious absolute answer is so much easier and more satisfying than secular ethics' equivocal search for the kindest and fairest answer.

Religion is taught to people when they are young. You tend to believe whatever you are taught when you are young as if your life depends on it. That's because your life often does depend on what you are taught when you are young. Don't eat that, it's poison. Don't run into the street. Evolution has produced uncritical children because children who doubted what they were told tended to die young and not reproduce. Later in life, when someone contradicts what you learned early, your childhood feelings of fear are rekindled, and you may become angry when your foundation is challenged.

The love of God, or the love of Jesus, is real. It can be passionate; it can fulfil the natural need to love someone; it can fulfil the need for a caring and protecting parent. To be given a target for your love, and be told that your love is reciprocated, has strong appeal.

Some people who have doubts about religion remain religious due to Pascal's Wager. If they are religious and religion is false, there's no harm done, but if they aren't religious and religion is true, God will be angry and they'll go to hell. So it's safer to be religious. The appeal, or perhaps motivation would be a better word here, is fear of the consequences of being atheist. But those consequences are part of the religious beliefs in question. From an atheist point of view, the
consequence of being religious is wasting large parts of one's only life on false beliefs. Furthermore, Pascal's Wager does not tell you which religion you should believe in order to be safe; it could be any of the existing religions, or any of an infinite number of others that can be imagined.

The appeal of religion is primarily emotional, and the arguments against religion are primarily intellectual. For most of the people of the world, their emotions are stronger than their intellect.

**Stages of Religious Development**

I want to identify three stages of religious development.

- tribal religion
- tolerant religion
- atheism

Calling them stages of religious development isn't quite right; atheism is not a stage of religious development any more than adulthood is a stage of childhood. I do not mean that an individual necessarily goes through these stages, though they might. All individuals begin their lives as atheists, and perhaps become religious if they are taught religion. They may return to atheism later, or perhaps not.

I intend these stages to be what humanity as a whole goes through. But we do not go through these stages together; different societies are at different stages. My extremely rough guess is that 40% are in the tribal religion stage, 30% are in the tolerant religion stage, and 30% are in the atheist stage.

In the tribal religion stage, you mistrust people who are not believers in your own religion. Many wars and conflicts have been fought, and are still being fought, between religions. Some religions prohibit their members from marrying anyone who is not a member of their religion, or insist that the outsider must convert to their religion. And in some countries, you cannot hold a public office without declaring your allegiance to the national religion. All of these behaviors are part of tribal religion.

In the tolerant religion stage, we each pledge the following.

- I accept your right to follow a different religion from me.
- I accept that you can be a good person even though you have a different religion.
- I respect you for your good qualities (kindness, intelligence, ...) even though you have a different religion.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to make these pledges to a person in the tribal stage who is not reciprocating, and may even consider you to be evil. The tolerant stage is difficult to maintain, even toward others who are reciprocating; you cannot think your own religion is true without thinking that other religions are false, and it's not easy to respect people whose beliefs are false in your opinion, and whose ethics you strongly disagree with.

The tolerant stage is characterized by freedom of religion; the atheist stage is characterized by freedom from religion. Atheists may consider themselves exempt from the tolerance pledges above; atheists do not have a religion vying for space in the spectrum of religions; atheists disavow all religions. But I think a tolerance pledge is very important for atheists too. So I would like to modify the pledge as follows.

- I accept your right to follow your choice of religion, or none.
- I accept that you can be a good person no matter what choice of religion you follow, or none.
I respect you for your good qualities (kindness, intelligence, ...) no matter what choice of religion you follow, or none.

It is difficult for an atheist to pledge respect to someone whose religious beliefs are ridiculous to the atheist. It is even more difficult for an atheist to pledge respect to someone whose religious ethics are barbaric in the opinion of the atheist. If, in the future, atheists form the majority, then religious people will need protection from atheist discrimination. China is already majority atheist, and Europe is not far behind.

For the sake of peace, we need people to move out of the tribal stage. For the sake of science, we need people to move into the atheist stage. Unfortunately, the gap between these two stages is too wide to make the move directly. Most of the movement right now is from the tribal stage to the tolerant stage. The TV program “Little Mosque on the Prairie” is a good example. Another example is the insistence of politicians (notably George W. Bush and Tony Blair) that the fight against al-Qaeda and ISIS is not a fight against their religion. But al-Qaeda and ISIS are in the tribal stage, and they insist that their fight is religious.

My preference, as an atheist, is that we keep all the religious stories and music and celebrations, but we downgrade them to culture. We are pleased to share our ethnic costumes and ethnic foods and ethnic music with people of other cultures. Likewise we can tell the old religious stories and sing the songs and celebrate the special days with other people, without asking them to commit to anything, and with no suggestion that the stories are true. This downgrading has happened already with stories about Zeus and Apollo and Thor. Stories about God are like stories about Superman. Stories about Jesus are like stories about Merlin the Magician. There's no reason to stop telling them; we just have to stop believing them.

**Arguing Atheism**

Atheists use a variety of ways to try to persuade religious people to adopt atheism. One is logic. The atheist points out the myriad of inconsistencies and impossibilities in religion. But logic is a weak argument to most people on most issues. Logic says nothing to the emotional appeal of religion. The audience for whom this kind of argument is effective consists of people who are barely religious, who have very little emotional commitment to religion, and who can follow and appreciate logical arguments. That's a small audience.

Another kind of argument used by atheists is insult and ridicule. But insults and ridicule never convinced anyone of anything. This kind of argument is counter-productive. It makes religious people think that atheists are nasty, and not worth listening to.

All arguments of all kinds are quickly forgotten; what's remembered is who says it. What's most persuasive to most people is whether they know, like, and respect the person who is making the argument. That's why most people have the same beliefs as their friends and family.

It must be as unpleasant for a religious person to hear someone preach atheism at them as it is for me to hear someone preach religion at me. Do not preach atheism; teach science, and atheism will follow.

[other essays]