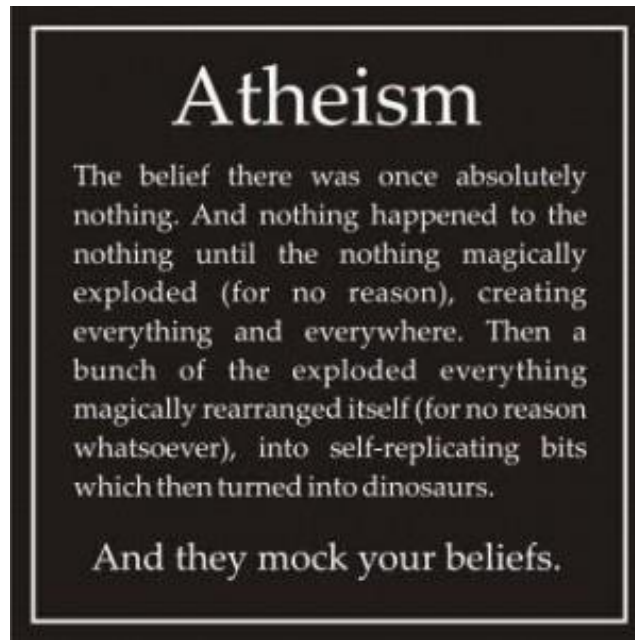


# Should I Be Making Fun Of Atheism?

*I caused a little bit of controversy yesterday by posting the below tongue-in-cheek definition of atheism on Tumblr. So I felt I should try and explain why I felt justified in passing on this caricature of the beliefs of my atheistic friends. So here are a few thoughts and clarifications in response to the comments.*



**First: Atheists should be distinguished from agnostics.**

Jon thinks atheism should be defined as *the rejection of belief in the existence of deities*—I disagree.

For the English-speaking person who does not believe in God, there are two commonly-used words which he can use between to describe his position: 'agnostic' and 'atheist'. I use the term 'agnostic' for the person who humbly admits that he does not (and in most cases thinks he can not) know whether there is a God. And I use the term 'atheist' for someone who is confident that there is no God. So, consistently with the way I use the terms, I consider atheism a belief in the non-existence of God. Feel free to tell me if you think I'm not using the terms correctly.

**Second: Atheism is not only a positive belief in the non-existence of God, but a worldview.**

After all, Atheism is an '-ism'.

Julian Baggini's '[Heathen Manifesto](#)' (which [Nic just pointed out to me](#)) is an example of an atheist who would seem to agree with me in thinking that this is a legitimate consideration. (The person who commented at the bottom of Baggini's Guardian article to say 'I don't need to follow rules of atheism, if I wanted to follow rules and be part of the crowd I could go to church' would be an example of someone who disagrees with us).

**Three: A 'worldview' is the way a thoughtful person answers the major philosophical questions that occur to him as he finds himself in the world.**

Specifically and most basically, questions of:

Anthropology: what am I? what does it mean to be human? (who am I?)

Cosmology: where am I? what is this world like?

Metaphysics: where did it all come from?

Theology: who do I thank and worship for the blessing of being alive?

Axiology: what is good? (ethics and aesthetics)

Teleology: what is it all for? where is this all going?

Epistemology: how do we know what we know?

A consistent and coherent worldview will hold compatible answers to each of these questions. And so when a group of people share convictions regarding the answer to one of those questions, they usually have similar answers to others of those questions.

**Four: Thus 'Worldview' might loosely approximate to what most Western English-speakers mean when they use the generally misunderstood term 'religion'.**

I say misunderstood, because it is generally assumed in the Christian-influenced English-speaking world that a person's religion answers the theological question. But this is not the case. To see what I mean, let us consider two different world 'religions', Christianity and Hinduism.

First, Christianity: Christianity, as we all know, defines itself theologically: that is a Christian thinks that the one we should worship is the Creator of the world who has revealed himself to the Jewish prophets (this revelation being contained in the Hebrew Scriptures) and came in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (of whom we have reliable testimony in the New Testament). Which is to say, Christians are defined by being those who worship the God of the Bible.

This immediately suggests a partial answer to the epistemological question—'we know some of what we know because God has revealed it to us in the Bible'. But this is clearly only a very partial answer, and hence Christians disagree over how to understand the nature of God's revelation in the Bible: is the Bible a Christian's absolute epistemic authority, being the infallible (ie. totally trustworthy) Word of God? or is the Bible merely a fallible human witness to God's previous revelation of himself in history? (Going with the latter position the point at which Liberal Christians disagree with Evangelicals and Catholics). And if the Bible is the infallible Word of God, is it made comprehensible to anyone who believes by the help of the Holy Spirit, or only by the magisterium of the Church? (The former being the Evangelical position, the latter being the Catholic position).

The centrality of the Scriptures (however understood), and the fact that Scripture touches in at least some way on all of the basic worldview questions, means that there is a fairly rigid outline of what a Christian worldview looks like although the precise details will differ. For example, in answering the cosmological question of what the universe is, all Christians will hold that it is the creation of an unchanging God — thus giving us a rational basis for assuming that it will behave consistently (thus providing the necessary framework to do science) and for expecting it to be beautiful (it being creatively constructed and not randomly generated). And then depending on their understanding of the epistemic relationship of scriptural and scientific authority, some will hold further that it is about six thousand years old, whereas others will hold it to be much older.

Hinduism, on the other hand, begins with the axiological question, 'What is it good to do?'. This is illustrated par excellence in the Bhagavad Gita's dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. In scholarly speak, 'Hinduism is characterised by orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy'. In lay-man's speak: to be a good Hindu does not mean to worship a particular god, or to believe a particular set of doctrines, but to observe the duties (*dharma*) of your caste. In particular, this means practicing endogamy (marrying within your caste) and commensality (eating according to caste purity rules).

But Hinduism allows for a diverse range of answers to most of the other questions. Specifically, let us consider the theological question. A Hindu can worship Krishna, Shiva, or Kali, and be a good Hindu regardless. A Hindu can think that all of these are but manifestations of the cosmic divine energy and that it doesn't matter which you worship, or a Hindu can worship one exclusively and believe that it is mistaken to worship another. A Hindu can even be theologically atheistic.

Hence, some argue that Hinduism, "is not correctly described as a religion but rather as a civilization".

Note that I am not saying that Christianity is better than Hinduism because it provides a more rigid worldview, I am just saying that if we use Christianity as a default to give us an answer to the question of which parts of a worldview a 'religion' provides answers to, then we will certainly misunderstand the other major world religions.

#### **Five: No individual has a worldview which is entirely consistent and coherent.**

This is why it is worth challenging each other whenever disagreement arises, and indeed even occasionally provoking disagreement. As Proverbs says, 'Iron sharpens iron'. This is why discipleship needs to be an ongoing process.

I include myself in this category and if you think I am being inconsistent with reality, my own human nature, or the Bible, then I want you to tell me so that I can change and become more consistent.

#### **Six: There is probably only one entirely consistent and coherent worldview.**

This is why it is difficult for secularism to co-exist comfortably with religion. But I won't go into this now.

#### **Seven: Humour is a legitimate tool in demonstrating the incongruity of someone's beliefs.**

To see this we must step back and consider how humour works. The theorists say we laugh at things for three reasons: Relief, superiority, and incongruity. In the first case laughter is the physical mechanism by which we reduce psychological tension. In the second it is a social mechanism for making us feel better about ourselves at the expense of others (for Plato, this is why some laugh at ugly people). And in the third, humour is the result of an intellectual realization.

Now, if someone is laughing purely because of physically uncontainable tension, then we'll probably regard them sympathetically and excuse any resulting breach of social etiquette. But if humour is being used as a social device to make someone else look stupid and yourself look stupid, then it is unkind—and hence Simon and Anjali (both Christians) have understandably taken exception to my post. But there is a third option: we laugh because we realize the ridiculous incongruity of things.

These can be things that a comedian makes up for the specific purpose to be funny. So Rowan Atkinson says things can become funny in three ways: by behaving in an unusual way, by being in an

unusual place, or by being an unusual size. And so for example we get the brilliant Eddie Izzard suggesting to us the idea of Darth Vader being in an ordinary canteen.

But these can also be incompatible convictions that a person holds. And by laughing at a person's incongruous beliefs, we are thus able to show the inconsistency of their worldview in a way that is more interesting and enjoyable than merely having a boring discussion. To keep this from being unkind, the Golden Rule must be obeyed: so we must be prepared to have our own worldviews exposed to humorous critique. In particular we should be able to laugh at ourselves.

So make fun of me: I won't mind!

**Eight: I don't think Atheism can give satisfactory answers to the metaphysical, anthropological, or epistemological questions.**

*'Atheism: The belief there was once absolutely nothing. And nothing happened to the nothing until the nothing magically exploded (for no reason), creating everything and everywhere.'*

This, as Theo correctly saw, is the Cosmological Argument in its *reductio ad absurdum* form. Now, the cosmological argument does not show that the God of the Bible created the universe, but it does show that a belief in the God of the Bible is compatible with a lucid and logical answer to the metaphysical question of where this all came from.

As a worldview, 'Atheism' ('Naturalism', 'Heathenism', 'Rationalism' — take your pick) also has at some point to come to terms with the metaphysical question, 'Where did this world come from?' The main possibility being—correct me if I'm wrong—the multiverse explanation.

To which we give you the thoughts of the scientist Paul Davies: *As one slips down that slope, more and more must be accepted on faith, and less and less is open to scientific verification. Extreme multiverse explanations are therefore reminiscent of theological discussions. Indeed, invoking an infinity of unseen universes to explain the unusual features of the one we do see is just as ad hoc as invoking an unseen Creator. The multiverse theory may be dressed up in scientific language, but in essence it requires the same leap of faith.*

'Atheism' is also faced with the anthropological question, 'Who are we?', which goes hand in hand with the question of 'Where did life come from?'. The answer to this latter question being something like 'random chemical processes generate amino acids which then form simple cells which evolve'. Which might or might not convince you, but is in a similar vein to this:

*'Then a bunch of the exploded everything magically rearranged itself (for no reason whatsoever), into self-replicating bits which turned into dinosaurs'*

But if we are the product of random chance, and thus exist 'for no reason whatsoever', then a consistent worldview must address the implications of this. Albert Camus faces the question most frankly, and sees that if there is no God, then there is no basis for our necessary conviction that our lives are meaningful. Hence 'Il n'y a qu'un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux: c'est le suicide' (There is but one truly serious philosophical question, and that is suicide).

And this is not just a theoretical issue. In 2004, the American Journal of Psychiatry reported the following: 'Religiously unaffiliated subjects had significantly more lifetime suicide attempts and more first-degree relatives who committed suicide than subjects who endorsed a religious affiliation.'

Nine: I do think Christianity offers a worldview that is rationally coherent and consistent with reality.

And so I encourage you to consider it.

Read the Bible, do an Alpha Course, ask a thoughtful Christian why they believe what they believe.

Go on—we won't bite.

And we'll try not to make fun of you!

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What's your worldview? How would you answer my [seven worldview questions](#)? And are you ready to laugh at your own worldview?