

God Spoke a Word: *Respecting Other Faiths*
Part 1—*Acknowledging our Biases*

Introduction: We all have biases that inform our view of the world, and it is important that we acknowledge them so that they not become a stumbling block to learning and interacting with others.

I believe that there is a God...

1. I do not **know** that there is a God
 - I am a **doubting** believer
 - Doubt is a sign of **rationality**, not a lack of faith
2. My belief is based upon a number of factors, including, but not limited to:
 - the influence of my family, friends and culture
 - **scientific** knowledge, which does not preclude the plausibility of God
 - the philosophical framework of the Bible that still accurately reflects the human **condition**
 - the human need to be **rooted** into a shared tapestry and story
 - personal and communal transcendent experiences that I interpret as the **activity** of God

I have faith in God...

1. Faith is belief put into **action**.
 - There are many things in which we believe but in which we do not put our faith—Maybe you believe that Elvis is still living, but are you actually going to change your life for this belief?
 - Since I accept that there is a God, I accept that this God must be a **formidable force** and one with which humanity must reckon. The presence of God has implications for how we live our lives and how we interact with each other.
2. I, therefore, live my life in a manner that is **reflective** of my belief in God

I am a Christian...

1. We Christians have a unique perspective on God
2. Our belief is that God has revealed himself to be a God of **relationships** and of healing
 - Jesus is God’s healing message and **love story**
 - We Christians often use the word “salvation” and apply it to the work of Jesus; however, this word is also the same Greek word that we translate as “healing”

I believe that we Christians have a purpose...

1. Our purpose is to **announce** God’s love and healing to the world
 - We are called to love **others**
 - We are called to care for God’s **creation**
2. Any person of faith who works to tear down and destroy is a renegade, does not represent God, and has lost his or her way.

I do not believe that our purpose as Christians is to guarantee the theological purity of others
...There is very little we can claim to “know” about God.
...God transcends the universe, therefore, to believe that our parochial perspective of God is all that there is to know about God is an arrogant self-deception. God is bigger than any box in which we can place God.
...whenever we try to use our “special” knowledge about God to manipulate people to join our congregations, to reject and demonize another faith, or to give money that is used for our own prosperity, we have become the very thing that Jesus opposed.

There is only ONE law...

1. Love
2. Which cannot be:
 - **Instituted**
 - **Regulated**, or
 - **Legislated**
 - When it is, it ceases to be love (therefore, there is no such thing as a Christian nation).

The only people Jesus ever condemned were religious leaders...

1. If God were to condemn anyone today, it would be:
 - **Us Christians** who place schismatic stumbling blocks in front of those who seek God
 - **Religious leaders** who use their “*special knowledge*” to control and limit access to God.
2. I am not a **universalist**, however.
 - There is not a place for everyone in God’s kingdom.
 - We choose to exclude ourselves by **refusing** relationship with God.
 - Religious people will have the most difficult time getting into heaven, because we will want to set God straight: “...*but, you aren’t allowed to save that Buddhist.*” “*That guy was an atheist, so how did he get here? ... he didn’t even believe in you, like I did...*”

God is working to bring ALL of creation into relationship with him...

1. Christian evangelism is about offering the gift of love and relationship with God
 - a. God is a good and gracious God
 - b. Evangelism is about being God’s **truth-teller** and **hope** giver
 - We remind people that they are created in God’s **image**
 - We tell people that God wants a relationship with **everyone**
2. Evangelism isn’t about putting people into line with our schismatic theology and traditions

We Christians do not have a corner on the God market...

1. Non-Christians can have valuable **insights** into the nature of God
 - They are NOT “**Satan**” inspired, as some Christians believe
 - God is always faithful to reveal himself to all people of every country
 - There is so much we can learn from each other if we just listen to each other
2. There are at least four ways in which God is revealed, and two of them are not uniquely Christian.
 - a. God is revealed in **creation**

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat. Psalm 19:1-6

- b. God is revealed in our **conscience**

For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them. Romans 2:14-15

It is not God that the world has rejected. The world has rejected religion and Christians as a source of God’s love. We have brought this on ourselves by our own hatred, and by the stumbling blocks we have placed in front of people, and the disrespect we pay to others by condemning that which we do not understand.

c. God is revealed in **Jesus**

- Sometimes we are the stumbling block that prevent people from understanding the message of Jesus
- As Ghandi, a famous Hindu leader once said, “*I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.*”

d. God is revealed in the **Bible**

- I believe that the scripture is the Word of God and is **normative** for our faith as Christians...
- It was tested over **thousands** of years before the canon of the scripture was established.
- The Bible is not, however, a legalistic document of “*rules to live by.*” It is a story of God **interacting** with humanity.

As Christians, the Bible is THE text we agree upon and in which we find meaning and the message of God. However, we can still find value in other books, even those that are not our scriptures. For instance, I find transcendent value in *The Lord of the Rings*, Bulfinch’s *Mythology*, Homer’s the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, and *Beowulf*. Others may find it in the writings of Joel Olsteen or Billy Graham. What books inspire you?

3. Are there other ways through which God communicates to humanity?

- **Science?**
- **Music?**
- Other people?
- **Sports?**

Something to consider: What can we learn from others about how God communicates to us? Perhaps we Christians are too limiting of God, and therefore miss so much of the richness of God and the wonders of this beautiful human tapestry.

I believe that the world is a MUCH better place because of people of faith...

1. Despite what some atheists such as Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins say
2. Some atheists have several ready-made narratives that, in their mind, “*prove*” that religion is the most destructive invention of humanity. The evidence of history does not support the narrative of these radical atheists.

“Religion is a journey of many generations that provides us with a starting point to dig down and find the depth of our soul. Religious traditions—with their accumulated wisdom, practices and an extensive chart of wrong paths taken in the past—can help us stay “with it” until we touch the bottom. Religion is here to stay, simply because human beings will always put their efforts together in making good— or evil—happen. But it is in a religious community that a robust personal spirituality can develop where it matters most. In community, our personal spiritualities cross pollinate with one another, and interact with the wisdom and strength handed down to us from our religious tradition. In turn, our present contribution can be shared with others in such a community and passed into the future. To live is to be spiritual. To live well is to be religious.” Samir Selmanovic, author of ***Its Really All About God: Reflections of a Muslim Atheist Jewish Christian.***

Atheist fable #1—*Religious wars have killed more people than all the other wars combined.*

WRONG: 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: wars are 10 times more likely to be fought over non-religious reasons. The secular political systems of the 20th Century are responsible for WW I, WW II, the Russian Revolution, the Korean War, Vietnam War, which together, killed more than 100 million people, more than all of the wars in history combined. Religious wars are actually only a small blip on the radar screen of history, so the belief that religion is the prime cause of destruction in the world is truly a great marketing deception and victory by the radical atheists.

Special Note: I am not making a blanket condemnation of atheists. There are many great, noble and moral atheists that deserve our respect: i.e.—Bruce Sheiman and Samir Selmonovic. I am using the qualifier “radical” atheists. In this category, I would include the likes of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris. How do I define “radical?” Anyone whose world perspective precludes the plausibility of an alternative interpretation and whose stated values are betrayed by their hatred. Just a word of caution: I would include many Christians in this same category of “radical.”

Atheist fable #2—*The Dark ages prove what religion does when it is in charge*

WRONG: The term the “Dark ages” is a biased, Euro-centric term, based on the belief that Roman civilization was the pinnacle of human ingenuity and knowledge. Therefore, according to scholars who use the term, the “Dark Ages” began with the fall of the Roman Empire, and these so called dark days didn’t pass until the Renaissance. However, Rome’s growth was fueled by expansion, not innovation. Their economic model was not sustainable, especially once it met resistance in the East (the Turks), and the West (the Huns), which led directly to Rome’s economic and military collapse and the loss of its status as a world power. In the void left by Rome, no one European country could centralize the power in the manner of Rome.

Contrary to popular belief, this void was actually fertile ground, not a dark age, and led to a period of great innovation seeing the expansion of trade, travel, exploration, individual rights, and the decentralization of education, all of which laid the foundation for the Renaissance. The engine which made possible these innovations was the church, which had become the great patron of the arts and of science and of discovery. There are, certainly, stories of the church colluding with political power which led to destruction, and this should not be minimized. However, the political models of this age were secular fiefdoms that, by their very nature, were corrupt and trampled upon the rights of the peasants. The church was the balance to the power of the secular political systems and it was the champion of the individual, of discovery, and of religious freedom.

Point of interest: Most contemporary scholars use the term “Middle Ages” as opposed to the “Dark Ages,” in acknowledgement to the fact the Middle Ages were not so dark as once thought.

Atheist fable #3—*All of the good that religion does would have been done anyway*

WRONG: And to think, atheists claim not to have a “*belief system*..,” For Hitchens and his ilk to claim that all of the good that religion has contributed would have been discovered by secularists ignores the fact that secularism itself is a direct result of faith’s journey. The truth is this: had the people of faith not been the prime mover in terms of scientific discovery and humanistic advances, there would not have been a secular movement, and many of the innovations inspired by people of faith would have taken centuries, if not millennia to be discovered. It is because these institutions now exist that secularists can lay a claim to a share of these values. It was people of faith who turned the tide and provided the momentum necessary to create the systems of society that are important to us.

Atheist fable #4—*Faith equals non-thinking.*

WRONG: The fact that it was people of faith that created the scientific method is evidence enough that the radical atheists are defining “faith” in a manner to suit their own narrative and confirm their own biases, rather than looking at the actual evidence. In all of our lives, including that of the scientist, facts run their course and have their limits: when we come to the end of facts, we humans operate on faith.

- We sit on a chair with little concern that it might collapse, because the evidence and experience of our lives indicate that the chair is solid. However, events beyond our knowledge may have changed the circumstances. Nevertheless, we sit in faith, believing that the chair will hold our weight.
- We fall in “love.” There is a limit to what we can learn from the evidence of our relationships. At some point, we run out of evidence and must take a leap of faith.
- Scientists discover facts, but the picture is not complete. Therefore, models are built upon the best available information. For instance, at one time, it was believed that dinosaurs were cold blooded animals, since much of the evidence pointed in this direction. This was taught in our schools. It was a leap of faith (called a hypothesis) based on the best evidence available. Some scientists countered that a cold blooded dinosaur was not plausible. Their opinions were ridiculed. However, there is plausible evidence, as suggested by some scientists, that dinosaurs may have had mixed circulation systems.
- Faith in God is based on a plausible assumption that the universe is ordered, that this order can be known, and that this order is created by that which exists outside of the boundaries of our universe. Therefore, the universe is not just a cosmic accident. Scientific evidence has actually proven that there is something beyond the boundaries of this universe: is it just another material process or is it God?

What contributions do people of faith make?

1. People of faith give more and volunteer more than those who do not believe in God
 - 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 volunteer 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.) All information is from samirselmanovic.com, by author Samir Selmanovic, a new NEW atheist who believes that Atheists and people of faith need each other

“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.***

2. People of faith created the **scientific method** of discovery
 - a. The scientific method was created by Christians who believed that the world was:
 - **Ordered**
 - Therefore, this order could be **known**.
 - b. Secular models of thinking, at the time, did not acknowledge an ordered universe, and would not, therefore, have discovered a method of scientific study.
 - c. The irony is that secular humanism owes its very existence to people of **faith**, without whom, the method of scientific discovery would not have been invented

Dr. Loren Eiseley (1907-1977), a Professor of anthropology, a science history writer and evolutionist, concluded that the birth of modern science was mainly due to the creationist convictions of its founders. *"It is the CHRISTIAN world which finally gave birth in a clear articulated fashion to the experimental method of science itself ... It began its discoveries and made use of its method in the faith, not the knowledge, that it was dealing with a rational universe controlled by a Creator who did not act upon whim nor inference with the forces He had set in operation. The experimental method succeeded beyond man's wildest dreams but the faith that brought it into being owes something to the Christian conception of the nature of God. It is surely one of the curious paradoxes of history that science, which professionally has little to do with faith, owes its origins to an act of faith that the universe can be rationally interpreted, and that science today is sustained by that assumption."*
From ***Darwin's Centenary: Evolution and the Men who Discovered it***

3. People of faith created numerous institutions from which society benefits.
 - Secular forms of government built upon individual **freedom**
 - **education** for the masses (including women)
 - **universities**
 - social systems to assist the **poor**
 - the creation of **hospitals**
 - abolition of **slavery**
 - **equality** of men and women
 - the **civil rights** movement.

Bible Study

Respecting Other Faiths

Week 1: Acknowledging our Biases

Begin with Prayer, thanking God for life and for the opportunity to gather together and to consider those things of transcendent value.

Read:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat. Psalm 19:1-6

Say:

This passage in the Bible claims that God is written into the fabric of the universe, evident for all to see. Everyone looks at the same sky, and is, therefore, able to deduce something about the nature of God. Let us discuss those things that are evident from the world in which we live.

Discuss:

What do you believe is the nature of God?

- a. List 5 Characteristics that you think reflect God's character.
- b. Let us share these characteristics.
 - Which ones did we all write down?
 - Which ones do we all agree upon?
 - Are there any with which we disagree?
 - Why?

Watch Video:

Discuss:

1. How does your belief influence your life?
2. List the 5 values that are non-negotiable for you.
3. How does your belief affect your relationship with others?

Close with Prayer, thanking God for the love and grace that God has written into the universe, for the rich variety of people that God has created. Pray that God would draw us all together as one people.