



David Hines © 19 November 2017

I'm relatively new to being an atheist. I took that step in my mind back in 1986 .... but it was mixed in with my Christianity..... and I didn't join an atheist organisation till five years ago ... so I'm speaking today as a learner. And I want to focus on what difference it makes to our lives. Because atheists, Christians, humanists, Jews have a lot in common, which is possibly more important than the things where they are different.

But I still believe the differences matter .... in practical ways

Like: do atheists have a different attitude to science? Yes; global warming was an election issue for many atheists this year.

Do they have a different attitude to morality; yes, laws about gay marriage were changed in Australia a week ago, and atheists worldwide would have welcomed them. And do we have a different way of changing a light bulb? Yes! I found that out to my surprise two weeks ago.

## 1. Changing a light bulb

My wife Marion is a Christian and a couple of weeks ago she asked me to change a light bulb in our lounge. Like many atheists I get to do the technical jobs round the house.

And Marion does more of the hospitality and the shopping.

The main bulb in our lounge had blown, and Marion had bought a new one.

So I got a ladder from the garage (because it's dangerous doing this standing on a chair).

Then I switched the light off at the wall (so I wouldn't get an electric shock). Then I locked the braces on the ladder (so it wouldn't fold underneath me, like happened once before).

Then I climbed the ladder, and **unscrewed** the old bulb and then --- I did a double-take. The old bulb was a screw-in one, but the new one in the box was a bayonet bulb. So I said to Marion: you got the wrong kind of bulb. I'll go and buy a screw-in one.

She didn't question that. But she said take this other bulb back and change it. And I said do you know where you got it from? And she didn't.

At this stage I felt very uncomfortable. And I said, I'm not going to look stupid and expect someone to change a bulb that they didn't even sell you.

She said, why not try it anyway. She seemed to be doing this by intuition.

So I said: where's a good place to buy bulbs? She said Lighting Plus in St Lukes. So I figured, aha that's probably where she got it. so that's where I went.

And I told my embarrassing story to the salesman and he said: **No problem**, we sell that brand and we can change it for a screw-in bulb. Was I relieved!

So I handed him the box with the light bulb in it and he said. Hang on, this **is** a screw-in bulb already.

And I said I'm sure it said bayonet on the packet. And the salesman said, yes, it's very confusing. On one side they have a picture of a bayonet but on the other side there was a picture of a screw-in. So I looked inside the packet and sure enough, it was a screw-in bulb.

Did I feel stupid.

So my conclusion is. Atheists and Christians do have a different way of changing a light bulb and mine is not always better, but I would still rather be an atheist..

## 2. Do atheists and religious people have different ideas about science?

So that leads on to my next question - do atheists and religious people have different ideas about science?

It seems obvious that they do. All the atheists that I know look to science to explain how the universe got started. They believe the universe began as a tiny dot 13.7 billion years ago, and that it has been expanding ever since.

Whereas some religious people think it was created by God 6000 years ago, complete with all the animals in six days..

Most atheists think living things evolved into different species very slowly, by natural selection.

Some religious people believe in evolution as well, but many of them don't go the whole way with it. For instance, Catholics believe our bodies by evolution, but our souls were added by God personally, after our bodies evolved to the required level of intelligence.

Other religious people believe God steered evolution in some way, to make a world that is good for living things.

Atheists don't go with any of these compromises. They believe in evolution without the extra twists and turns. And they believe the world was not created to be good for living things. In fact evolution treats them quite brutally.

My favourite example of this comes from Richard Dawkins ... he says when you look at specific cases of evolution, things may **look** well designed, but it's an illusion..

instance cheetahs and gazelles are both superb runners and both **seem** very well designed for their environment, and for speed. But when you look at the separate way that cheetahs have grown faster over the generations it is because the slower ones were outrun by their prey, such as gazelles, so they starved to death. And similarly gazelles have also become faster over generations, because the slower ones couldn't outrun cheetahs and they got killed before they could have babies. But if you try to

see a divine purpose in this you have to ask .... **overall** is this process designed for the benefit of cheetahs or gazelles? And the answer is that overall it doesn't benefit either of them. They both have miserable lives and starve or get eaten. I have a lovely photo of a mother cheetah and her five babies, but the commentary says only one in five of their babies will survive to adulthood; the others get eaten by lions.

And the cheetahs are not just competing with the gazelles for speed, but they are even more competing with each other.

Another story is told by Richard Dawkins to show how vicious this competition can be. Two hikers are in a forest and they meet a bear. One of the hikers sprints off as fast as he can. The other one stops and puts on his running shoes. And the first hiker says you can't outrun a bear, even with running shoes on. The second hiker says; no but I can outrun you.

So evolution is cruel, and if God was controlling it, God would be cruel too.

And, in fact this is just the latest in a series of arguments that the world was not designed by god. going back two and a half thousand years. Numerous sceptics, believers and atheists, have said the world is full of suffering, and could not have been designed by a caring god.

One of the most powerful arguments for is in the book of Job in the bible. It is a fictional story of a good man called Job, who had all sorts of tragedy hit him one after the other. Then his three friends start discussing with him, what bad things he had done that made God do this to him.

One friend had a theory that Job's suffering was a punishment from God, for evil things he must have done. Job argues that his suffering is way out of proportion for it to be a punishment. Then a second friend tells Job it's not because you are bad; but God is testing you, to make you a better man. And Job rejects that. And a third friend says life may be unfair during your lifetime, but God will repay it by doing good things for your children. And job rejects that; and says I want to see justice in my own lifetime. And another friend says -  
god is punishing you because you are too argumentative.  
And in the second to last chapter God joins the argument and says: I'm the creator. I don't have to explain myself to humans.

Another version of this argument was given by the Greek philosopher Epicurus who died in 270 BCE: He asked four questions about God:

- Is God willing to prevent evil but unable to do so? Then he is not omnipotent.
- Is God able to prevent evil but unwilling to do so? Then he is evil himself.
- If God is willing and able to prevent evil then why is there evil in the world?
- If God is neither willing nor able to prevent evil, why would you call that a God?

And in the 18th century, David Hume wrote a dialogue of three characters:

- .... one of them argues that the world is so good it must be designed by God;
- another argues that the world is so bad, you need God's help to cope with it,
- And the third character turns the other two debaters in each other, and says it seems the creator of the world is neither good nor evil but the creator just lets things happen in terms of the laws of nature.

Hume wrote this 100 years before evolution was discovered, but evolution seems to have proved him right. In evolution we have millions of stories of the ways living things get shaped by their environment, but none of them needs a god to make it happen.

Over the past few years, I've heard lectures from several religious speakers who believe in evolution, but still think there's room for a god in there.... and they all criticise Richard Dawkins and say he is not fair, because he doesn't deal with **their** kind of God.

But I think those three sceptics were very much aware that there were numerous ideas of God. And they all like weak excuses for God, not theories backed up by evidence.

As an atheist in church, I still sometimes use God as a figure of speech for the spirit of love, or for the power behind the universe. But I don't think you can use both metaphors at the same time. Love is something that evolved in mammals as they cared for one another, to help them survive. But so are fear and pain. And in many cases they win out.

And if we want a world where there is more love and compassion than now .... it can be done, but it will take a massive human effort, with no guarantee it will succeed..

## Examples of inflated ideas about the world

So that's what atheists believe, but does it matter?

Not always, but sometimes it matters a lot. One example this year is global warming, where conservative Christians think it doesn't exist. And their reasons include the Bible creation story, which says the world was made for us to dominate. And another is the story of Noah's flood, where after the flood ends, God promises Noah that he will never again send floods like that. In future, the seasons will follow reliably till the end of the world.

And for this and other reasons, President Trump has denied the reality of global warming, and refused to sign the Paris agreement on global warming. That is a huge failure of common sense for the whole world, led by people who believe in God.

A CNN article I read a year ago questions whether Trump is a Christian. It seems he did does come from a profit-seeking kind of Christianity.

But the article says conservative Christians are backing him anyway, because he supports parts of their agenda, like getting ;prolife judges into the supreme court. But many Christians would be shocked at his attitudes.

One of Trump's supporters, Senator Tim Walberg said last May, that he wasn't concerned about the effects of climate change, because if there's a problem, God will fix it. Walberg is an evangelical pastor.

In contrast with that, most atheists I have met believe strongly in global warming being caused by humans and say we should get together to stop it. The NZ Rationalists and Humanists association that I belong to, rewrote its priorities a couple

of years ago. One of their top priorities was to fight global warming. and they see these passages from the Bible as a key part of the problem.

I must admit, growing up in a liberal Christian church we didn't take those ideas literally. We did think humans had a special role in creation, but it was a role of being stewards of the world, with a responsibility to look after it. So this is certainly not an idea that all Christians believe.

But I am concerned that many children are brought up not believing in biology, and evolution - whose careers are limited by their anti-science beliefs. Or the anti-science beliefs of their parents; who don't understand what their kids are learning, or oppose it.

I am also concerned at the number of citizens who are handicapped in their citizenship, and think we don't need to deal with climate change.

And people who don't follow medical advice when they are ill. And try alternative medicine.

They also miss out on the inspiration of science, which is constantly revealing amazing new things about the universe.

And they miss out on the intellectual challenge and inspiration of it

I think there is some place for myths about creation, provided they are not interpreted literally. A number of Jews I've discussed this with say they don't believe the world was created in seven days.... but they like to sing about this story, because it's telling them to celebrate creation every seven days. It's a seven day cycle of gratitude, not a seven day explanation of life on earth.

## A third issue where atheists and religious people differ

And a third issue where atheists and religious people think differently is where the authority for our moral values comes from.

The Bible has hundreds of instructions that are supposed to come from God, and hundreds of moral stories that include a God of Justice and love.

But atheists would say we don't need God to tell us what to do. We can work it out for ourselves. This is part of atheism, but it is also part of humanism - atheism and humanism are two sides of the same thing.

Our Sea of Faith organisation in Auckland heard a lecture from a Humanist leader, Sara Passmore a few months ago. And she outlined their principles of morality.

And I'm quoting from the statement of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, which she belongs to.

A humanist is someone who recognises that we, human beings, are the most curious and capable curators of knowledge in the known universe. To gain knowledge, we must use our reason and experience to understand the world. And we may create or partake of the great artistic fruits of humankind to

enhance our emotional palettes, deepen our empathy and enrich our understanding. But we reject any reliance on blindly received authority, or on dogma, or what others may claim is divine revelation (because we don't believe we get tip-offs about truth from a supreme being beyond time and space.

To act well, we must take responsibility for ourselves and others, not for the sake of preferential treatment in any afterlife (even if we believed in it, that motivation wouldn't make our actions good!), but because the best we can do is to live this life as brilliantly as we can. That means helping others in community, advancing society, and flourishing at whatever we do best.

A humanist is someone who finds value in themselves and each other, respecting the personhood and dignity of fellow human beings, not because we are made in the image of something else (we are a product of evolution, not the product of a divine plan), but because of what we are: a sentient, feeling species, with value and dignity inherent in each individual.

- I agree with all of that.
- I note that the Unitarian Principles are very similar, and are also in fact a humanistic statement.
- I learned most of my values from liberal Christianity, but I believe these too are humanist in character ... they too are based on empathy and reasoning about the consequences, here on earth.

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## So there is an overlap, but there are also differences

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One I'd exemplify from a statement by the Methodist founder John Wesley in one of his standard sermons. He was opposing people who asked God for special guidance in how they should make choices. One example of what they did was casting lots, to get an answer from God when they couldn't work it out themselves. And Wesley said don't trivialise God, by asking him to make ordinary decisions. And he said God gave you reason. Use your reason.

However, he himself would sometimes cast lots if it was a really tough decision. One occasion was when he had a tough decision to make on whether to publicly oppose his friend George Whitefield who was a Calvinist. He couldn't figure this out by reason. So he cast lots, and published it.

This sounds laughable today.

But not so laughable are the many other issues, where the two moralities head in different directions.

A good example of these exceptions is belief in different roles for men and women. A number of Christian denominations still do this, as do many Muslims, and Hindus.

Another is their opposition to same sex marriage, or other kinds of gender identity difference.

And their opposition to abortion.

And I think it's significant that these special exceptions are declining, as the influence of Christianity is declining.

But when you hear these religious people defending these things ... they too often use humanistic reasoning ... they talk about the unborn child's right to life, and children's right to have male and female role models.

It's not as if the Bible specifically opposes these things, to make them exceptions

My view is that these things like sexual biases, were in the past regarded as humanistic values, but they were given superhuman ratings, by virtue of recognition of past religious leaders, and then seen as divine sanction, by seeing these people are representatives of God. I think this happened to Jesus. He saw himself as human, but his friends turned him into a god after he died.

And I believe this has happened thousands of times, over individual stories and pieces of wisdom. they started off as humanism, but ended up being seen as commands of God..

One example is the Golden Rule, which is respected by Humanists, Jews, Christians, and I understand was also taught by Confucius and a dozen other religions. I believe it came to be respected for humanistic reasons, because it worked in all their different cultures.

When Jesus taught the Golden rule, he didn't claim divine authority for it.... he was one of several Jewish leaders of his time, who were reflecting on the hundreds of Jewish laws, and working out which were the most pivotal. How did they work it out? I believe they worked it out by reason. As many people still do.

But now it's seen by some Christians as a command from Jesus. Along with other bad examples, like banning remarriage of divorcees. When it gets into human rights issues, this conservative religious morality comes out and does real harm.

## Atheists rating of Christians

But just as some religious people have blind spots when it comes to conservative moral issues....

so some atheists have blind spots when it comes to religious morality. They cannot tell the conservative religious people from the progressive ones .... and hate us all uniformly.

So I would add a new ethical principle, new to me anyway. Part of the Golden Rule should be to give the benefit of the doubt to people from different religious backgrounds:

- Just because people come from a different religion does not necessarily mean they have a narrowminded morality.
- Just because they quote from the Bible or the Koran does not necessarily mean they have a blind faith in those words.
- And even when we strongly disagree with their ethical beliefs, we need to look for common ground, and to create a public area of life where we listen to each other and work for our common goals.

- One of those common areas, I believe, should be respect for science.
- Another should be respect for democracy,
- and giving other people the same human rights that we expect for ourselves.
- And providing schools where children from all religious backgrounds can work together and all feel welcome.

Part of our religion, and part of our atheism, should be learning to cooperate across these differences.

Morality is not our private possession ... we need to work it out by consensus.

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