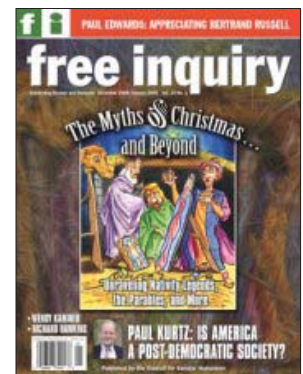


Where Are the Moral Believers?

By **Guy P. Harrison**

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Satan exists, say hundreds of millions of Christians around the world. But he is evil, so they reject him as a supernatural being worthy of worship. They do not pray to him for help in landing a new job or overcoming an illness, and they do not follow his instructions. Because of moral failings, this god of sorts is denied their love and obedience. But why do they only judge the devil? Why don't believers scrutinize all gods in this way?

Pointing out examples of the Jewish/Christian god committing, commanding, or condoning slavery, violence, and sexism—as described in the Torah and Bible—is a favorite pastime for many atheists. Yes, it may be no better than a grown-up version of pulling the wings off of flies, but it is undeniably fun to watch a believer squirm trying to explain how slavery and stoning were somehow OK in “Bible times.” It is even more entertaining to watch smoke rise from the ears of the devout as they attempt to defend the “God of love” for his genocidal rampages.

Some atheists ridicule such exchanges, and they have a valid point. Arguing over a god's moral character is a lot like debating the aerodynamic qualities of Santa's sleigh. Still, there may be a real benefit to enlightening believers about the character of their gods. If pursued, it should be done only to challenge a believer's loyalty to a god, however, not to make the case for nonexistence. After all, a god does not have to be nice in order to be real. Strangely, this pattern of belief coupled with morally based disobedience is virtually nonexistent when it comes to the popular gods. We just don't see millions of believers in the Jewish/Christian/Islamic god, for example, shunning him solely for his moral crimes. There are no large organizations campaigning against religion from the moral high ground rather than the perspective of disbelief. There are few, if any, anti-god books written by theologians who still believe in a god. Rebellion need not be tied to nonbelief, so where are the righteous rebels who stand against gods who have done great evil? Where are the moral believers?

Fear of hell or some other divine punishment for refusing to follow a god does not seem to be an adequate explanation, not when one considers history's long roll call of courageous heroes. Across cultures and across centuries, good people have suffered banishment, imprisonment, torture, and execution because they refused to bow down before evil human leaders. It seems likely that a significant number of believers would rebel in the same way, if they faced up to the serious faults and crimes attributed to their gods. Fear of torture and execution in the present (in reality) must be at least somewhat comparable to fear of a god's wrath in some vague afterlife to come (in belief). Most Christians are probably good people with a reasonable grasp of right and wrong. They know,

for example, that it is wrong to kill children. (“At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon . . . there was a loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead” [Exodus 12:29, New International Version].) They also are likely to agree that it is wrong to punish children for the crimes of their fathers. (“He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation” [Exodus 34:7, NIV].) But they are loyal to a god who has done these things.

Why aren't millions of believers saying, “Yes, I know my god is real because the universe is intelligently designed and I believe that the [Bible, Koran, or Torah] describes him accurately. However, based on the actions of this god. I cannot follow or worship him because I am a decent human being.”

I have long believed that religion will be educated out of humankind eventually. It may take many centuries, but it seems probable. After all, polls show that belief goes down as education goes up. And most of the extremely smart and educated people (such as elite scientists) already don't believe in gods. But what if it never happens? What if educational levels do not continue to rise as they have over the last few thousand years? Or what if the cosmos is just too big, too complex, and too scary for most people to ever accept rational explanations and lingering mysteries? If so, eroding believers' loyalty to their gods and encouraging greater respect for basic morality may be the way to go.

Militant atheists who are concerned with the proliferation of RMDs (Religions of Mass Destruction) may be missing an important point here. After all, it is not gods who inflict so much ignorance, hate, and violence upon the world. (Gods almost surely do not exist, remember?) The source of trouble, indeed, may be belief itself, but the direct cause of the many problems we are all burdened with is that so many people try to please gods by following their orders and their example. Consider the fact that millions of people believe in ghosts, but no one worships them in tax-free buildings under the guidance of trained professionals. Ghosts are just not respected in the way gods are. Therefore, the concept of ghosts is not pushing evolution out of classrooms or motivating people to strap bombs around their torsos. With ghosts, it's mostly just a case of gullible people wasting a bit of space in their skulls with nonsense and causing relatively little harm to the world.

Wouldn't it be nice if the gods lost their grip on humankind and fell to the status of mere ghosts, no longer able to command vast armies of believers? Even if millions still believed them to be real, it would be a vast improvement. Imagine if the gods were condemned to roam forever in fantasyland with no one willing to follow them. While this might not make for an atheist's paradise, it would at least be a far better world, one where believers no longer work to please divisive and violent gods at the expense of all humanity.