

A Religious Libertarian?

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Libertarians are commonly atheists. Probably it's because the independent-minded child that denies at age 19 both left or right is also likely to have already denied the silly stuff his parents say about God to him at age 14. Or earlier. My father, born 1915, was raised Irish Catholic, coming home at age ten crying that a priest had told him that he would go to Hell if he did . . . what? Some venial sin at worst, for what can a 10-year old boy really do? His indulgent mother said, "Bobby, you don't have to go back to that church." So he didn't, deciding his religious life on mature reflection at age 10.

That's my preachment to my atheist-libertarian friends. "Dears," I say pleadingly, "do you really want to rest at arguments, commitments, ways of life that seemed sooooo cool to a 10- or 14- year old boy?" (The girls, I find, are less dogmatic.) "Have you read a serious book about religion at age 30 or 50?" They reply, "No, why would I do that? I already know it's rubbish. I decided it was at 19 or 14 or 10." The same, alas, is true of political commitment. Most people stop thinking about political philosophy or evidence at, say, age 21, and never, ever change their minds. You hear callow thoughts about, say, imperfections in markets emerging from the lips of 69-year old English life lords. Likewise the New Atheists, so-called, such as

Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and (the most reasonable of these) Sam Harris. If you ask the biologist Dawkins why the bibliographies of his books assaulting religious belief, which he equates with Jerry Falwell and the denial of evolution, contain not a single item of systematic theology, say, he will reply: “I already know it’s rubbish.”

I was a few years ago at a little conference on evolution at the Konrad Lorenz Center outside of Vienna, with, mainly, biologists. We were having a nice dinner downtown, and I sat across the table from the young academic woman who had organized the meeting. It emerged that I was a Christian—Episcopalian, the Frozen Chosen, Catholic Lite, its progressive branch (my present priest is a woman; my last two priests have been gay; how cool is that?). She was *astonished* that anyone at a conference on evolution—or I suppose much of anything else involving evidence and reasoning—was a Christian. I gently explained to her that I had no doubts that Darwin was right, and Jerry Falwell is wrong. We Episcopalians regarded Falwell as sooooo vulgar, besides being culpably ignorant about the easy consistency of science and religion.

Likewise at a conference at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies at La Jolla about the same time, cheekily entitled “Enlightenment 2.0,” with Dennett and Harris in attendance, I stood up and admitted to being a woman of faith. Silence. I might as well have ripped off my blouse and waved it around while dancing the hula. “Praise Him with the psalter and harp. / Praise him with the timbrel and dance.” In fact such ecstasy is all the atheist sees in religion. He doesn’t want to acknowledge that the dervishes are theologians, the *Hasidim* sharp arguers in the *shul*, the Dalai Lama no dope.

What’s astonishing to me, in turn, is that the fiercely dogmatically atheist and anti-clerical people, of which Europe has now a great number, growing rapidly for example in

Ireland, have so little understanding of their own deep culture. I wonder what they think was motivating Dante and Velazquez and Bach. The notion is that religious people must be *stupid*. Apparently, then, the millions of believers in European or Middle, South, and East Asian history, not to speak of animists and others worldwide, are simply nitwitted to think that there is probably something more. Thus Isaac Newton (admittedly a secret heretic about the divinity of Christ). Thus the professor of physics at Cambridge who held a chair like Newton's, and worked on quarks and Feynman integrals, John Polkinghorne, who gave it up to become an Anglican priest, and now writes elegant short books to the number of 26 about science and religion. (You're invited.)

I've been pretty much a libertarian since about age 25, just barely satisfying the old formula that someone who is not a socialist by age 16 has no heart, but that someone who is still a socialist at age 25 has no brain. (Listen up, Bernie.) Reading Nozick when it came out in 1974 drove out almost every remnant of socialism. The remnant that remains is that I'm a "bleeding heart libertarian," as they say on the website (you're invited), or a "humane liberal," as I want you to start calling it. I also call myself a Christian liberal/libertarian, which gets people angry at me. I must be doing something right.

I've only been a Christian since 1998, age 56, three years after changing gender. Long afterwards I realized that the gender change and the spiritual development were probably related. Something More. Religion is not the Baltimore Catechism and the nuns to enforce it. It's not, as the New Atheists suppose, propositions at all. The former nun and religious writer Karen Armstrong points out in one of her excellent books about religious history (another invitation, dears) that until the unhappy attachment of faith to physics in natural religion c. 1700, religion was a practice, not a set of dogmas. Consult Jews for this idea. The word "religion" may come

from Latin “connect,” and the word “belief” certainly from the Germanic “love, loyalty.” It’s not a list of commandments, even the pesky seventh, but a loving commitment to a path.

Maybe someday I will discover some terrible inconsistency between libertarianism and progressive Anglicanism, and have to abandon one of them. I doubt it. On the contrary, the core of Christian theology is free will. God does not want us to be his pets, but autonomous individuals, able to choose evil as well as good, and living therefore in a real world in which the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 can happen. If we lived in Eden, no. But we chose.

The central notion in uber-libertarian Austrian economics, “human action,” entails precisely the same point. As against the Marxism I espoused age 16, or the Samuelsonian Chicago-School economics I came to teach ten years later, real choice is involved in both a Christian life and in commercially tested betterment. By contrast, orthodox economics nowadays views people as entirely reactive, like pigeons maximizing utility under a constraint, like grass seeking light and water optimally. No. God made us in Her image. (Oh, a side note: my Anglican God is a black lesbian middle-aged overweight single mother with three children who lives in Leeds and works at the Tesco. Get ready.)

If you really want to test your atheism, read David Bentley Hart’s *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (2013). I got into correspondence with David, about baseball and cricket, for example, and tried to get him to revise his views on economics and politics. No go. David is a brilliant (Greek Orthodox) theologian, but didn’t make it through the 21–25-year old window for further reflection.

So, please, dears, read and reflect, as grownups. It’s what we do at *Reason*, eh?