

Why we atheists care about religion

Ottawa *Citizen*, Saturday 8 August 2009, p. B7
Halifax *Chronicle Herald*, Monday 17 August 2009
Reprinted Corner Brook *Western Star*, Monday 17 August 2009

Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 420-5825
mark.mercer@smu.ca

Atheists, at least most of us, would be happy to see the faithful lose their religion. Many of us, indeed, are keen to disabuse them of their beliefs. We write critically about religion, we advocate atheism, some of us even spend money to put ads on buses.

Our animus toward religion has struck more than a few observers as paradoxical, even inconsistent. It's like we're on a crusade for a new religion. Just at the moment the old religions have sworn off proselytizing and taken up tolerance, atheists zealously embraced the project of converting the masses.

We can right away set aside one complaint about this, the complaint that atheists are attempting to ram their beliefs down other people's throats. Maybe they are, but so what? As long as the tactics don't involve brainwashing or intimidation, ramming beliefs down others' throats amounts to no more than drawing people's attention to something or attempting to engage people in discussion. That's fine; a society marked by critical discussions in the streets is something to cherish. We should happily let anyone with something to say do her best to ram it down people's throats.

The serious complaint isn't that to speak critically in public about religion is loudish or bothersome. It is, rather, that public atheists have only a poor understanding of religion. Moreover, because of their poor understanding, today's public atheists are repeating all the errors religion has managed to purge from itself.

There is much to this complaint. In seeing our way through it, we will both narrow and broaden the atheists' critique. We need to narrow it where that critique applies to only a few phenomena within religion and to broaden it where it's not just the attitudes of some believers that are at issue.

Atheists love to note that most religious beliefs are either plainly false or plainly unsupported by evidence. No one can believe that Jesus loves him, say, or that one's salvation is contingent on one's sincerely asking God for forgiveness, without having left evidence and reason far behind. Atheists also love to note that the faithful often venerate their authorities and follow them for no better reason than tradition. Blind obedience to authority, we know, has caused much suffering. Thus, atheists conclude, the religious have traded reason for authority and, perhaps worse, thereby pose a threat to all of us.

It's at this spot that the critique needs to be both narrowed and widened, for religion isn't always about belief while obedience to authority is not limited to the religious. For many of the faithful, religious attitudes are not beliefs at all—and they are

not hypotheses, either, or any other sort of cognitive attitude. They are more akin to emotional attitudes and moods. They are forms of attunement to the world, like optimism is, or the feeling that whatever happens, one is safe.

To the charge of blind obedience, the faithful respond that their fidelity to their communities and traditions isn't at all properly characterized as obedience. The faithful love their communities and derive much of their sense of self from them. What appear to atheists to be authorities are in fact more like teachers or parents, people whom one freely loves and who happily make available to one the wisdom of their experience. Like teachers and parents, they listen as well as talk. We're often critical of our traditions, the faithful say, and they change and adapt as our communities acquire even more experience. Would that this had been true of the Soviets and the Nazis and the many other godless butchers the world has seen. Faithful or not, people are just as given to following orders to torture others.

Fair enough, the atheist should respond. Nonetheless, she adds, not all the faithful experience their faith as you do yours. Many take their religious beliefs indeed to be beliefs, to be claims about what is true with regard to events in history and the ways of the world, evidence and reason be damned. And these people, because they disdain evidence and reason, will blindly follow their authorities.

Here the atheists and many of the faithful can agree. It's not religion, in all its wide diversity, that is the problem. It can't be—religion has no essence, there's nothing that's common among the faithful. The problem, rather, is dogmatism: the sense of certainty and the refusal to face the possibility that one is mistaken that goes along with it. The faithful for whom religion isn't about belief or obedience can join the atheists in criticizing, by argument and example, the superstition and dogmatism both reject.

But if that is the heart of the atheists' critique, then even as it fails to apply to all religion, it must apply to much that isn't religion at all. It must apply to dogmatism in politics, science, art, anything. It applies to ways in which some people are atheistic. One who is not dogmatic about something is critical toward it. That is, he or she is willing to criticize, or to have criticized, any belief on the matter or other attitude she possesses. And he or she is prepared to reject any belief or other attitude that doesn't survive criticism. This is not easy.

The key matter isn't religion, and the key divide isn't between the faithful and the atheists. The key matter is orientation to the world. The key choice is between being dogmatic and being critical.