

Irreligious believers

Ottawa *Citizen*, under the headline “Why belief in God doesn’t equate with religion,”

Thursday 9 September 2010

Also published in Regina *Leader-Post*, 9 September 2010, and Windsor *Star*, 9 September 2010

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Suppose you believe God exists. Should you be religious?

By “God,” I mean a being worthy of worship. To believe that a being worthy of worship exists is to believe that a creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists exists, or so at least I would contend. But for this discussion, it doesn’t matter. We may each fill in however we wish what would make a being worthy of worship.

By “religious,” I mean worshipful. That includes loving God and His creation, and striving to understand and occupy the role God has assigned you. It also includes having faith in God’s goodness and power, a faith that expresses itself in the joyful realization that everything happens for the best in God’s unfolding plan.

So, again, suppose that you believe that God, the unique being worthy of worship, exists. Should you worship God?

Now, of course, only a person who doesn’t believe that God exists can be an atheist. But it’s a mistake to assume that only an atheist can live like an atheist, that is, live without religion. One can believe and yet be indifferent to the existence of God—that’s not impossible psychologically, it’s not even particularly rare. Irreligious believers might well be quite common in contemporary society.

Our question is whether one who believes God exists should, nonetheless, live like an atheist, indifferent to the existence of God. What are the advantages to a believer of being irreligious? What are the disadvantages?

We can right away dismiss from consideration a host of purported disadvantages. To believe that God exists is not to believe that Hell exists or that one risks being condemned to Hell. It’s not even to believe that one will survive death.

That one will suffer at God’s hands for one’s irreligion, either in this life or the next, is not something a believer should take for granted. On the contrary: given that divine punishment and condemnation appear, at least on the surface, to be inconsistent with God’s goodness, a believer can require sound argument before running to religion scared of God’s wrath.

No, the advantages and disadvantages of religion versus irreligion cannot have to do with any rewards or punishments God supposedly bestows, either in life or after life. They must have to do with the differences religion makes in the here and now.

The great difference to quality of life that faith makes, say the religious, comes from the sense of purpose, the sense of being appreciated, and the sense of safety that a religious orientation to life brings. A religious person understands her or his life to be meaningful, to be a necessary part of a magnificent whole. She understands her efforts in living to be appreciated by God, even if by no one else, and this comforts her and invigorates her. She feels safe in God's love, knowing that whatever happens, she cannot really be harmed, for whatever happens is what ought to happen. Whatever pain or sorrow she experiences in life she understands to be justified by its place in God's plan for the universe and for her.

It's easy to be attracted to religion for the sense of purpose, of being appreciated, and of being safe that it provides. It's also easy to be repelled by these things. The advantages for life of being religious are bought at the price of self negation and, even, self abasement. For the religious, it's someone else's plan and purpose that gives her life meaning, not her own. Everything she does she does for the glory of God, not for her little self. Her pain and sorrow are meaningful as a contribution to something outside herself, beyond her choices. They are, thereby, taken from her. This is just as true of her joy and sense of accomplishment.

An irreligious person, whether a believer or not, wants to claim his life for himself, to live it as his own. If he is to have a purpose, he wants it to be his own. He'd rather his suffering be meaningless than part of a project he didn't choose for himself. If he believes that a Creator exists, he is, perhaps, grateful to Him for his existence, but not in the way a servant is grateful to his master.

Irreligion, then, is to be commended as integral to living one's life as one's own.

This attitude is, certainly, self interested or even selfish. But self-interestedly to take possession of one's life as one's own isn't necessarily to live selfishly. An irreligious person can be caring and concerned for others, generous, and decent. Her concern, generosity, and decency, though, stem from her own choices, not from the requirements of God.

Whether God, the unique being worthy of worship, exists or not, the question whether to worship remains open. Even believers, or so I have argued, have excellent reason to decline religion.