

## My atheism

Kris King – October 6<sup>th</sup> 2010

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2010/10/my-atheism/>

I'm not sure when I became an atheist; in a way, I guess I always have been. Sure, there have been times when I dipped my toe in the waters of faith, but I always felt rather hollow, usually to the point of dishonesty, when I did. I didn't really, deep-down believe what I was trying to persuade myself I believed and, on the very few occasions in my life that I actually prayed, I felt like a complete fraud; wishing out loud to a being I didn't believe existed for shortcuts to problems I was either unable, or too lazy, to solve myself.

Actually, now that I think about it, I *do* know when I became an atheist ... like everyone else in the world, I was *born* one. A baby has no more knowledge of the concept of a god than it does of the purpose of the Large Hadron Collider, and to label a child as having a particular religious belief is ludicrous – you might as well label them a Marxist; they don't understand these ideas and so can't possibly have any kind of opinion on them.

I'll always be thankful that my parents never imposed such ideas or beliefs upon me; in our house, god was less of a spiritual or metaphysical concept than it was a somewhat loud announcement that a hammer had interfaced sharply with a thumb, and the only time we'd ever see the inside of a church was for weddings, christenings, and anything else that was deemed necessary to placate certain older members of the family. Even then, I don't think they saw it as anything more than observing particular traditions. My family were largely agnostic, often bordering on apatheistic; we didn't know and, quite frankly, we didn't much care.

I suppose what I'm really trying to understand is when I became *aware* that I lacked a god belief. There have been a few moments in my life where the hypocrisy, arrogance, or plain-old silliness of religious faith was somewhat exposed to me – the most notable happened when I was at St. Richard De Wych, a Church of England middle-school in Droitwich, Worcestershire. I was 11 years old and a burgeoning geek, with a reading age a good 5 years ahead of where it should be. A family-friend, having noted my nerdy, intellectual leanings from a young age, would regularly lend me books I otherwise wouldn't have come across. I read "The Lord of The Rings" at the age of 10, and had fallen completely in love with "The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy" a little while before.

At this point, I had been reading another borrowed gem, "The Omen", and, having finished it, passed it on to my best friend at the time. Unfortunately for him, he was caught with it in Mr. Lawrence's R.E class; unfortunately for me (at least in the short term), he very bravely named me as the real owner of the book when it was confiscated (thanks, Mat). So, there we were, the whole of my year, all sat in assembly when Mr. Lawrence comes marching out of his classroom right over to where I was sitting. Hurling the book into my lap he uttered words I would never forget; "*I don't want to see this satanic filth in my school again, you little anti-christ*".

At first I was embarrassed for myself, singled-out and bollocked in front of the rest of my year. As time passed, I instead became somewhat embarrassed for Mr. Lawrence. To me, it was just a book, a story, a fiction, and it had upset him for reasons that it would take me a while to understand. By then, however, the damage had been done, and my already tenuous relationship with the notion of belief was forever changed. It seemed to me that belief was something for the insecure, the fearful, and the ignorant, and this endures in me to this day. I don't mean to suggest that those who believe in a supernatural creator are nervous, cowardly idiots ... well, alright, some of them are ... what I'm saying is that I don't know any believers whose faith, insofar as it endures beyond childhood indoctrination, cannot be attributed to at least one of those criteria.

The insecure worry over where and how they fit in; what is my place in the world? What is my purpose, my meaning? Why am I here, what's it all about? Such questions frequently lead to the hypothesising of some grand purpose to existence, an overarching scheme or meaning, and this inevitably leads to the idea that something, or someone, must be both the architect of this end-goal and the ultimate arbiter of whether or not you achieved it. Problem: "I can't imagine that my life has

no inherent meaning". Solution: god.

The fearful worry about good and evil; is there justice in the world? Will bad deeds be punished and good ones rewarded? How can we be sure that the guilty never get away with their crimes? Such questions often lead to ideas about an all-seeing judge who keeps an ever-watchful eye on the wicked and will make them answer for their transgressions. Problem: "I can't believe that there are people who might never have to pay for the crimes they've committed". Solution: god.

The fearful also worry, perhaps more than anything, about death; what happens when I die? Is it the end? Does everything I am simply cease to be? No one wants to imagine that, one day, every one of their biological functions will come to an end and that everything that makes them who they are is gone. Never again will they laugh, cry, love, hate, or hold even a single conscious thought, and the only thing that will remain of them are memories in those they leave behind. Such concerns regularly lead to the notion of a life beyond this one where we continue into eternity. Problem: "I am totally, utterly, shit-scared of dying". Solution: god.

The ignorant worry about how things work; where did the universe come from? Where is it going? Is there anything outside it? Before it? After it? They have many questions that don't have answers, but see their lack of knowledge as some kind of weakness. They see "I don't know" as an answer to be ashamed of, rather than one that has been responsible for driving human progress and discovery more than anything else in history. It doesn't matter if they have the *right* answer, just as long as they have *an* answer. Such thoughts frequently lead to an all-encompassing, cop-out panacea; a response to every unexplained phenomena and unanswered question as a way of avoiding having to admit that there's something they just don't know. Problem: "I have no clue how stuff works". Solution: god.

I'm not saying that because I'm an atheist I'm not, nor have I ever been, insecure, fearful, or ignorant ... I make no bones about the fact that I'm often troubled by my place in life, I'm really not up for dying any time soon, and there's a whole bunch of stuff that I have absolutely no knowledge about whatsoever. The difference is that I'm *comfortable* with that ... I'm comfortable with life having no inherent meaning, because then it can be whatever *I* want it to be – life's purpose is to *live*, and its meaning is whatever we ascribe to it; it is the sum of our experiences, and of those with whom we choose to share our time along the way.

I'm comfortable, albeit reluctantly, with the idea that, one day, I am going to die. If our existence is eternal, our existence is meaningless; what are our achievements worth if we have forever to achieve them? Life, and all that we do with it, is more valuable precisely *because* it's finite ... an eternity of consciousness would be the most unbearable torture a sentient being could ever endure (I don't really trust anyone who wants to live forever, because they clearly haven't thought it through). I want to live a good amount of time, having done a bunch of things that I want to do, and exit my body with a final conscious thought; "That was cool, but I'm ready for bed now".

I'm comfortable admitting that there are loads of things I don't know. Without the willingness to concede our ignorance, there would never have been the desire to find the real answers. Instead of discovering bacteria and being driven to develop the means to fight it, we would all still be dying in our 30s under the mistaken idea that demons were responsible. Were it not for those who can say, "I do not understand this, but I'd *like* to", we would still be cowering before every eclipse and sacrificing small mammals for the safe return of our life-giving sun.

When all is said and done, a painful truth is far better than a comfortable lie. Yes, we're all going to die; yes, we don't know how shit works; yes, there are criminals who get away with it, and life only has meaning if we give it one. The inability to face up to these facts doesn't dissolve our insecurities, our fears, or our ignorance; it *reinforces* them, with blind faith acting as an Elastoplast to our problems. To quote the good Dr. Gregory House, "Religion is not the opium of the people; it is the *placebo* of the people".

I don't proclaim myself better than a believer for embracing reason and critical thinking (although perhaps maybe I should) ... I just wish they had the courage to face their insecurities, their fears, and their ignorance, let go of the security blanket, and see reality as it truly is.

