

Not collecting stamps

Kris King – May 14th 2011

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2011/05/not-collecting-stamps/>

Last Sunday, barely 10 minutes after I'd managed to drag myself out of bed, I got a phone call from my sister, Tam. Normally, this appalling crime warrants a stream of profanity-laden verbal abuse, but as she'd only called to let me know that Richard Dawkins was on BBC1's "Big Questions" programme, and that the topic was whether the bible was still relevant, I was quite content to drop all charges. My abject lack of tolerance for religious nonsense, and my appreciation for the works of Richard Dawkins, are two things (among many) that I share with my sister, so I was grateful for the heads up. However, since I had still to fully peel open my eyelids and let in more than just a thin sliver of daylight, I promised I'd watch it later.

"Big Questions" is your basic debate programme that, while it would like to be taken as seriously as something like "Question Time", it never will because it suffers, firstly, from airing on a Sunday morning to an audience that don't want anything too challenging and, secondly, from the fact that it is hosted by Nicky Campbell. I've nothing against Nicky Campbell per se; he's a competent enough presenter when it comes to lightweight stuff, it's just that he has all the gravitas of a trainee estate agent and so, by extension, the show ends up less authoritative and impactful as a result. By the time I came to watch the show, I was at work and so had to settle with just listening to the audio instead so, I cranked up the volume and opened up my PDF copy of "The I-Spy Book Of Logical Fallacies" by Ray Comfort (featuring a special introduction by Ray's own special-needs celebrity spokesmuppet, and partner in disingenuous twaddlemongering, Kirk Cameron). Actually, I'm kidding, Ray Comfort couldn't write such a book because the universe would suffer a catastrophic irony collapse and fold in on itself.

Within about five minutes, I was forced to cast aside the "I-Spy" book having quickly lost count of both the number of different fallacies committed, and the number of occurrences of each. Add to that a good, healthy wedge of circular reasoning, and I found myself in the familiar position of sympathising with Professor Dawkins and the frustration he must inevitably feel when taking part in these discussions. So often in situations like these there are moments when he looks deeply aggrieved, and I really can't blame him; the exercise in complete intellectual surrender that is religious belief can sometimes feel like the most atrocious kind of insult, and I don't imagine it's made any easier by the fact that, given his education, his public profile, and the generally accepted norms of politeness and social decency, he is frequently compelled to sit there and listen to apologists spouting ignorant bullshit when he looks like he'd far rather smack them in the mouth and go home.

Fortunately, Dawkins is (as far as I know) above such aggressive retorts, and quite rightly so; as one of the most well-known and outspoken atheists in the world right now, he might do the movement considerable harm if he ended up in a televised fist-fight (although you have to admit that it would be bloody funny to hear those beautifully refined, clipped professorial tones calling out the Archbishop of Canterbury with the phrase, "Come on then, you fucking toilet!"). It got me thinking about Dawkins' position as the "Atheist Pope" (as he is sometimes rather ludicrously referred to in the media) and how he, or indeed anyone of a sufficiently high profile within the godless community, is so frequently used as an incredibly weak plank in the apologists' tired old non-argument about atheism being a religion.

I'm sure it's something that's been addressed many times already, and by many different people (most of whom are way better at getting to the point than I), but every time I hear the cringe-making, vapid awfulness of the phrase, "it takes more faith to be an atheist", I just want to crawl through my monitor, shimmy down the broadband cable Andy Dufresne style, and beat the theist responsible about the face with a dictionary. The trouble is that I don't think it'll make the slightest difference because, most of the time, the purveyor of such stupidity will be someone who is either wilfully ignorant or completely dishonest. That, however, has never dissuaded me from striving to disabuse theists of this notion by continually undermining their arguments with such pesky things as

facts and logic.

"Atheist" simply means "without gods"; if you don't believe in a god of any kind, you're an atheist – end of. It's not, as some theists try to paint it, a "belief in no god" because *it's not a belief at all*; it is the *absence* of a belief (in this case, the specific belief that a god, or gods, exist). Not only is it not a belief, but it's not even a "faith-based position" (as has often been claimed) because it is the categorical *rejection* of a faith-based position; a theist claims that a god, or gods, exist – an atheist simply rejects that claim. Anything else that might get thrown into the argument is completely irrelevant; if you don't believe in a god, you're an atheist. It's *that* straightforward.

As you can see, dismissing atheism as a belief is laughably easy; dismissing the idea of it being a religion is, well ... actually that's a pretty easy thing to do too. First, we need to reach some kind of agreement on the definition of "religion" before we can say whether atheism is one (clue: it isn't). Opinions vary on this point, so I'll start with the definition of religion as found at Dictionary.com:

1. a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.
2. a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects: the Christian religion; the Buddhist religion.
3. the body of persons adhering to a particular set of beliefs and practices: a world council of religions.

So, let's put this bollocks to rest one step at a time, shall we?

a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe ...

Atheism says *nothing at all* about the universe or, in fact, anything other than that one doesn't believe in a god. Big Bang theory, however, does, and so too does creation hypothesis (I refuse to call it a theory on the grounds that it isn't one), but neither of these have anything to do with atheism. Sure an atheist is more likely to agree with big bang theory because it is backed by an enormous weight of supporting evidence, but it's not mandatory. On this point, atheism is *not* a religion.

especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies

The definition of "god" varies wildly, depending on who you ask. It is, however, fair to say that, any "superhuman agency or agencies" capable of creating the entire sod-mothering universe and everything in it would **absolutely** fulfil *any* criteria anyone might have for the definition of a god. Given that atheism is entirely about the lack of a god belief and nothing else, this is a no-brainer; on this point, atheism is *not* a religion.

usually involving devotional and ritual observances

Ramadan, passover, lent, easter, christmas, yom kippur, hanukah, the list of religious ritual observances is huge. Now, go and find me a single atheistic ritual observance – I'll wait. Actually, bugger it, I won't wait because I can save you the trouble by telling you that you won't find a single one. An individual atheist may observe certain rites and rituals, but there's nothing that we all follow because atheism doesn't dictate such things to us. It doesn't dictate *anything*. On this point, atheism is *not* a religion.

and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs

Human morality, ultimately, doesn't come from any doctrine of faith. It may be codified by it (the most obvious example being the ten commandments of the old testament), but to imply the teachings of a given religion are, in any way, the source of morality is completely idiotic. By that logic, no-one had any idea that adultery, theft, or murder were bad things until the bible told them so and that, by removing such teachings from their lives, atheists are utterly devoid of any moral compass. What horse-shit! Skipping over the fact that non-believers represent less than 1% of the US prison population (and what that says about the morality of the faithful), we can go straight to the demonstrable fact that our morals come from our being a social species that depends on one another. It's in our mutual interest to get along and not act like dicks towards everyone else because your ability to survive in a world that has rejected you for behaving like a complete tool will be

severely compromised. Atheism dictates no moral code and, on this point, it is absolutely *not* a religion.

a specific fundamental set of beliefs and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects

Have you ever tried to get a bunch of atheists to agree on something? There's a reason it is often referred to as "like herding cats". When you don't subscribe to any kind of dogma, you are far more dependent on your own thoughts, ideas or opinions, and not those of others – atheism really doesn't lend itself to any kind of religious-style group-think. Since the third definition from Dictionary.com above is merely an extension of the second, we can rule that out here too. On these points, again, atheism is *not* a religion.

And that's it! Well, almost. Since I'm in a generous mood, and because I'd like the theists reading to think they could still actually win this argument (false hope makes them happy, after all), I'll also throw in the following common aspects of religion, not mentioned in any of the definitions above.

1. built around a central figure
2. a recognised central text
3. notions of, and emphasis on, the profane and the sacred

So, last chance, theists! Place your bets (unless you're a muslim, obviously) ...

built around a central figure

I've been accused by friends of often hanging on the words of Richard Dawkins (the initial inspiration for this rant), and pretty much defending anything he ever says, but that really isn't true. I've pointed out a number of times, for example, that I don't agree with his use of the phrase "poisonous religious nonsense", because that's like saying the same thing three times. I've also pointed out that I don't agree with Christopher Hitchens' stance on the Iraq War, just like I've highlighted areas of disagreement that I have with Sam Harris, or Daniel Dennet, or anyone else for that matter. As I've mentioned, Dawkins has often been referred to as the "Atheist Pope", but to suggest like this that he is the central figure of atheism is patently absurd. He is simply probably the most *well-known* high-profile proponent of atheism, of which there are many (I've already mentioned three others), and he is not liked by everyone – do a Google search and I guarantee you'll find plenty of atheists who hate Dawkins, or Hitchens, or anyone else the religious have tried to claim is our "leader". Atheists may agree with many different people, but they don't line up behind anyone in the same, lemming-like fashion as practised by the religious. On this point, atheism is *not* a religion.

a recognised central text

To be honest, this is pretty much the same argument as above. "The God Delusion", "God Is Not Great", "The End Of Faith" ... which of these is our central text? Or is it one of the many thousands of other books written by atheists over the centuries? What about the works of Thomas Paine? The written works of the contemporary, or "new" atheists (many of us despise that term, but that's a rant for another day) have as many supporters as detractors, so tell us, believers, which is the "atheist bible"? The truth is, there isn't one, and you're all just desperate bell-ends for even going down that road ... on this point, atheism is *not* a religion.

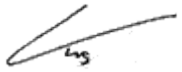
notions of, and emphasis on, the profane and the sacred

I refer you to the argument above on the idea of a moral code. Atheism dictates nothing, let alone definitions on what is considered profane or sacred. This is entirely down to the individual, just as it is with a moral code and, like morality, religions merely codified these ideas. es, they added a few of their own, such as declaring their respective figures and symbols sacred (or any criticism of them profane), but that was just somewhat akin to a corporation doing what it could to protect its trademarks. What is profane or sacred to you will undoubtedly not be for everyone. On this point, atheism is *not* a religion.

So, there you have it ... I'm not sure who coined the following phrase (I'd love to know), but I've always thought it hit the nail right on the head. I leave you with it now to act as another nail, this time, hopefully, in the coffin of this total non-argument.

If atheism is a religion, then bald is a hair colour, and not collecting stamps is a hobby

I warmly thank you all for bearing with me while I told you all about this fascinating pastime ...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'L. S.' or similar, written in a cursive style.