

The Last Acceptable Prejudice

by Jamie Kelly

As the dwindling twilight slowly faded through the large French doors of the dining room, I sat nervously in my seat at the table. I was a strapping young lad of seventeen and a senior in high school, eating my first big family dinner with my girlfriend at the time. As busy as I was concentrating on making a good first impression, I had momentarily forgotten that her family was Catholic. Suddenly, that little thought reared its ugly head: “Jamie, would you like to lead us in grace?” her mother asked. My heart skipped a beat and a lump instantly formed in my throat. “Uh...,” I stalled and stammered as my mind raced, trying to think of a way to tactfully decline or possibly choke myself with a dinner roll. And I had been doing so well....

But perhaps a little explanation is in order. I am an atheist. I don’t believe in a god. This doesn’t mean that I hate others’ religion or beliefs; they just aren’t what I believe. Being an atheist has impacted my life more than any other decision I’ve made. While this nation was founded upon the idea of religious freedom, many people today do not view atheism favorably. Throughout my life, my less-than-common religious beliefs have left me at odds with many of my peers, although understanding and acceptance of our differences is, at times, obtainable.

My parents raised me in a Christian Methodist home and although I wouldn’t say that religion played a huge role in my upbringing, my mother felt it was important that we attended church as a family. However, I never really felt like I fit in. Everything I learned in Sunday school contradicted what I was learning in public school. Religion just didn’t make sense. My skepticism grew with age, and by twelve it had grown to outright non-belief. I continued to attend church, however, to comply with my parents’ wishes. I thought I would be failing them if I told them what I really believed.

Harvard Law Professor Alan M. Dershowitz offers this explanation for how I felt:

One reason why so many disbelievers are unwilling to acknowledge their views with intellectual honesty is that the religious establishment has managed to persuade large segments of the American public that there is some correlation between belief in a supernatural God and human ethics and morals. (2)

This association between religion and morality is a question that has been raised constantly when I tell people about my beliefs. “Well then, what’s stopping you from just killing people you don’t like?” “What’s to stop you from just stealing things, instead of paying for them?” These questions support the idea that America links morality with religion. People assume that without religion there would be no reason to act “morally.” However, this notion is simply false. The world got along fine before the advent of Christianity; philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle lived hundreds of years before Christ, and to this day their writings are held in the highest esteem for their moral principles.

Even in the 20th century, examples of the false relationship between religion and morality are abundant. Dershowitz explains,

[H]istory has shown that if there is any correlation between belief in God and personal morality...it is as likely to be a negative as a positive one. Surely as much immorality has been committed in the name of religion as any other cause. The millions murdered by cynical, godless tyrants such as Hitler and Stalin are dwarfed by those killed in the names of Jesus, Muhammad, and Jehovah throughout history.

Surely religion is not the sole basis for morality. In truth, most of my beliefs and actions correspond with the values held by Christianity and other religions. I act the way I do not because of a fear of suffering in the afterlife or upsetting God; I act the way I do because of my own moral integrity.

For an action to be truly moral, it should be done for morality’s sake; it should not be done out of fear of a higher power. To act differently simply to gain something (i.e., access to heaven) is more immoral than to act simply out of goodness, without any expectation of a later reward. Frank R. Zindler, a retired professor of biology and geology, agrees: “Ethical behavior—regardless of who the

practitioner may be—results always from the same causes and is regulated by the same forces, and has nothing to do with the presence or absence of religious belief” (1). According to Zindler, despite what is commonly believed, there doesn’t have to be a connection between morality and religion; it is possible to be moral without being religious.

I “came out” about my non-belief to my parents at age thirteen. For a while, they brushed it off as part of a rebellious phase, but eventually they came to recognize it as legitimate. Since that time, they’ve started going to church a lot less, mainly because my brother and I are older now, and the family is busier. They still attend when they can, and there are no hard feelings between them and me. My peers, however, were not so easy to win over. While my closest friends didn’t care one way or the other, they would often use it as a leverage point in typical teenaged banter. Those not quite as close to me were oftentimes confused or shocked by my decision. One girl in my sophomore history class told me that I would “burn in Hell, just like all others who don’t accept Jesus.” Her words stung, and my ears burned red with embarrassment in front my class. While it didn’t bother me that she didn’t agree with my beliefs, it did bother me that I had been victimized by prejudice in this day and age.

This bigotry concerns atheists the world over. Attorney Eddie Tabash had this to say in his address at the Godless Americans March on Washington in 2003: “I submit that bigotry against a person just because that individual rejects unproven supernatural claims is every bit as destructive of the quest for a just and enlightened society as is bigotry against someone on grounds of race or ethnicity.” Religious bigotry has become the last acceptable form of prejudice in America. I’ve experienced it throughout middle school, high school and even college. I don’t understand what I’ve done to those who ridicule and belittle my beliefs. Do my beliefs offend them? Misconceptions and misunderstandings pervade this bigotry, yet most are unwilling and/or unable to discuss our differences in an intellectual and mature manner, making any sort of understanding an almost impossible goal to achieve.

However, this isn’t to suggest that coexistence is impossible. Just as there are those who judge and oppress, there are those who strive to reach understanding or, at the very least, respect our differences. Which brings me back to my story....

I continued to stall, desperately willing myself to somehow disappear from the table; it was clear that the request for me to lead grace had made me uncomfortable. My girlfriend jumped in, and throwing me the proverbial life preserver, she started grace. I lowered my head and breathed a sigh of relief. I was safe for the moment. As time went on and I grew to know her family better, we discussed my beliefs openly and sensibly and although they weren’t exactly thrilled, they did not judge. They saw past the superficial differences that have ensnared so many others throughout my life and came to realize that inside, morally and ethically, we aren’t that different after all.

Works Cited

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