

## *Inside the religious mind*

### **Why are Believers willfully ignorant about Atheists?**

*When believers talk about atheists, they often don't bother to talk to any first. What are they afraid of?*

**Greta Christina**

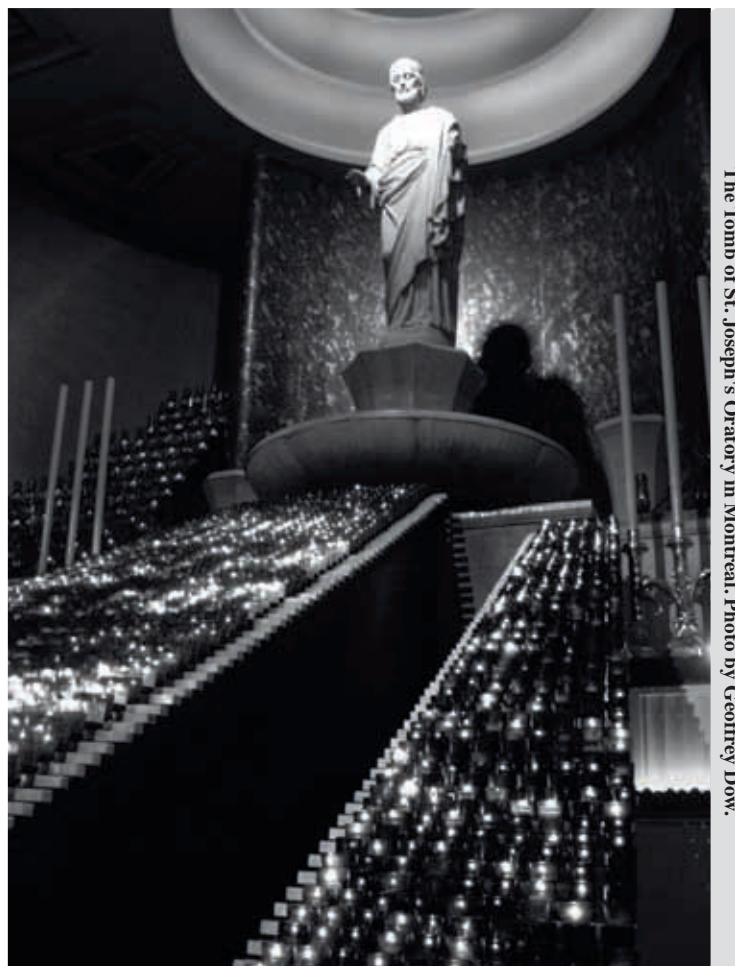
**D**id you hear the one about the Anglican minister who said atheists have no reason for grief?

I wish I were joking; I'm not. In a widely disseminated and discussed opinion piece (<http://www.kendallharmon.net/t19/index.php/t19/article/41503/>), Anglican minister Rev Gavin Dunbar made an interesting and even compelling argument that grief is necessary for love and humanity... and then went on to argue that, unless you believe in God, you have no reason to care whether the people you love live or die, or even to love them in the first place.

Again: I wish I were joking. I quote:

“The new atheists proclaim their gospel with the fervour of believers: God is dead, man is free, free from the destructive illusions of religion and morality, of reason and virtue. But then someone dies, suddenly and cruelly, like the young man known to many in ...[this parish in Eastern Georgia], who was killed in a freakish accident last weekend. And his death casts a pall of grief over his family, his friends, their families, his school, and many others. Yet if he were no more than an arrangement of molecules, a selfish gene struggling to replicate itself, there can be no reason for grief, or for the love that grieves, since these are (we are told) essentially selfish survival mechanisms left over from some earlier stage in hominid evolution. Friendship is just another illusion.”

But of course we do grieve, even the atheists. And in so grieving, they grieve better than they know (or think they know). The grieving atheist cannot provide any reason why he grieves, or why he (rightly) respects the grief of others.



The Tomb of St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal. Photo by Geoffrey Dow.

My first reaction... well, to be honest, my first reaction was pretty close to blind rage. As an atheist, I've been targeted before with bigotry, with hostility, even with hatred and threats of violence. But rarely have I encountered a critic of atheism who was so ready to deny even my basic humanity, who was so ready to tell me — and tell the world — that because I am an atheist, I see not only morality and virtue, but also love and friendship

and grief, as an illusion. I actually agree with Dunbar that grief is one of the things that makes us human... and it filled me with rage to be told that, because I don't believe in a magical soul animating my body, because I don't think I'm going to see my dead loved ones in an invisible forever happy place, I am somehow incapable of experiencing this essential humanity. My first reaction on reading this piece was pretty much to scream, "Fuck you" at my computer screen, and be done with it.

My second reaction was a desire to carefully, painstakingly, as patiently as possible, explain to Dunbar exactly how and why atheists value life and experience grief, and to go through his piece with a fine-toothed comb taking apart every ridiculous myth and piece of misinformed ignorance. That project might take weeks, though, since his piece is so full of it. So I'll just touch on the worst of it.

The most crucial point: Saying that life, morality, reason, virtue, and emotions such as grief are physical processes — this is not the same as saying they are illusions.

Yes, atheists think that morality and virtue, love and friendship, reason and grief, are physical phenomena with no supernatural component. We don't understand exactly how this works —humanity is very much in the early stages of figuring out consciousness — but an overwhelming body of evidence strongly points to that conclusion, and atheists understand and accept that. Whatever consciousness is, it is almost certainly a construct of the brain. And we think social experiences, such as morality, virtue, love, grief, are emotions and mental constructs, which evolved in us to help us survive and flourish as a social species.

But that is not the same as saying they are false. It is not the same as saying they are illusions. It is not the same as saying they have no meaning.

In fact, for many atheists, the fact that consciousness, love, grief, and such are physical products, actually invests them with more

meaning. Many atheists — I'm one of them — look at the fact that consciousness is a physical construct, and are filled with wonder and awe. We look at the fact that, out of nothing but rocks and water and sunlight, this wildly complex biochemical process called life developed, and then evolved into forms with the capacity for consciousness, and then evolved into forms with the capacity for communication and compassion, ethics and altruism, love and grief... and we are gobsmacked.

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Four billion years ago, the Earth had rocks and water and sunlight — and now, it has not only consciousness, but consciousness that is able to step out of itself, and to connect with other consciousnesses, and to suffer when these other being are lost — as much or more as we suffer any direct injury to ourselves. That is wondrous beyond my power to express in words.

What's more, many atheists look at the idea that we create our own meaning, not as a loss of meaning, but as a gain. We feel that life and morality, love and grief, have more meaning — not less — because we create that meaning for ourselves, instead of persuading ourselves that it was handed to us by an invisible creator, who's mapped out the meaning of our lives and handed it to us wholesale. And for many atheists, the fact that life is finite makes it more precious, not less. It makes us value it more highly — and it makes us grieve its loss more deeply.

Yes, atheists think that life and morality, love and grief are all part of the physical world. But that doesn't make it less real for us. That makes it more real. The physical world is the one we know really exists. Atheists aren't the ones insisting that the true source of life and morality, and love and grief is an invisible, intangible, supernatural being that nobody can agree on, and that we have no good reason to think exists. Accusing us of seeing these things as illusions is the height of irony.

The Parthenon is a human construction, too. That doesn't make it an illusion, or meaningless. That's one of the dumbest ideas I've ever heard.

But after I'd thought about all this for a while, my urges to both blind rage and line-by-line demolition gave way... to a baffled irritation, focusing on one big question:

### **Couldn't he have asked us?**

Couldn't Dunbar have gone down to his local atheist organization and asked them, "You know, I don't get it about atheist grief — if you don't believe in God or the soul, why do you value life and grieve over death?"

Couldn't he, at the very least, have spent 10 minutes Googling the phrase, "atheist grief"? If he had, he would have found: the Grief Beyond Belief support network, several news articles (including one by me) about the Grief Beyond Belief support network, an atheist grief support group on the Atheist Nexus social network, an article titled "Grief Without God" on the <http://richarddawkins.net> web site, a book titled *Godless Grief* ... I could go on and on. If he'd pursued any of these abovementioned avenues, he could have been directed to any number of other essays, journal entries, blog posts, works of fiction, pieces of music, pieces of art, and long, thoughtful, heartfelt conversations about this exact topic, and answering his question about why atheists grieve before he'd ignorantly bloviated about it.

Why didn't he do it? What was he afraid of finding?

This is the question I keep coming back to. I wish I could say this was an isolated incident. It's not. I can't count the number of opinion pieces I've seen from religious leaders, speculating fervently on how atheists clearly have no basis for morality, and reject religion only so we can be free of its rules ... when they could have simply Googled the phrase "atheist morality," and found out just how passionate most atheists are about right and wrong, and where we think the basis for this morality lies. I can't count the number of opinion pieces I've seen from religious leaders, blithely

opining about how atheists have no meaning to their lives, how atheists have no joy, how atheists hate God, how there are no atheists in foxholes ... when, again, a simple Google search could have disabused them of these notions in ten minutes.

And this refusal to hear what atheists say about ourselves extends beyond the pulpit and the opinion pages. It's distressingly common among ordinary citizens in everyday life. On a regular and frequent basis, atheists are criticized — vilified, even — simply for being open about our atheism. When atheists run billboards and bus ads saying simply that we exist and are good people, there's almost always an angry, intensely offended reaction from religious believers: protests, boycotts, demands that the ads be taken down, even vandalism. Transit companies will sometimes stop accepting any religious or controversial ads entirely, rather than let atheists advertise with them. In fact, a bus company in Pennsylvania recently rejected an ad from an

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atheist organization — an ad that literally had nothing on it but the URL of the organization, and the word, "Atheists", The mere act of atheists saying, "We exist" —is enough to send many believers into fits, accusing us of being offensive, provocative, mocking, flaunting, and hateful. The mere act of hearing atheist voices sends far too many believers into a rage.

### **What are they afraid of finding?**

Now, I'm sure some believers will read all this and say: "But atheists do the same thing! They live in their atheist bubble, they imagine what believers think and feel, and they don't ever talk to us to find out!" And sometimes, that's true. But not usually. According to the US Religious Knowledge Survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, atheists on average, are better informed about religion and religious believers than believers are. In fact, atheists are generally better informed about the specifics of given religions than the believers

in those very religions. We know a lot more about them than they do about us.

It's important to remember that most atheists were once believers. We're familiar with religion because we've believed it ourselves.

And it's important to remember that, in most of the world, religious belief is the dominant culture. Atheists have to be familiar with it. It's shoved in our faces regularly. Our friends believe it, our families believe it, our co-workers believe it, it's all over the media. We can't be ignorant of religion. We're soaking in it.

Believers, on the other hand, are not soaking in atheism. Many atheists are trying to change this, of course, and are working to make atheism more visible and harder to ignore — but there's still a huge amount of ignoring, and of ignorance. And far too much of this ignorance is willful and deliberate. People ignore us, even when they're supposedly trying to figure us out.

Why? When believers write, talk and think about atheists, and about what they imagine atheists think and feel — why don't they bother to ask us? What are they afraid of finding out?

I've read and talked with a lot of believers — and with a lot of atheists who used to believe. And it's hard to avoid the conclusion that, if believers actually found out how atheists think and feel, it would present a serious challenge to their beliefs.

When you look at the most common arguments for religion, and against atheism, you'll find that most of them aren't actually arguments. They're not attempts to look at the evidence and logic supporting theism and atheism. They're attempts to deflect the question. They're attempts to shield religion from ever being seriously questioned. The notion that any criticism of religion is intolerant; the idea that religion shouldn't have to defend itself in the marketplace of ideas; the endless parade of "Shut up, that's why" arguments that typically get marshaled against atheists... it all exists to protect religious faith from ever being seriously examined. Not to mention the more obvious attempts to silence atheists -- like preventing atheist high school students from organizing clubs, and overt bullying and harassment of atheists, and blasphemy laws in theocracies that put atheists in prison and even

execute them. Religion is like a house of cards — protected by a massively strong fortress.

And one of the largest pillars in this fortress is the bigoted mythology about atheists. The idea that atheists are amoral? That our lives lack meaning and joy? That we're atheists only so we can reject religious rules? That we hate God? That our atheism is shallow; we reject it and embrace religion when faced with suffering and death? That we have no basis for human emotions like love and friendship and grief? It's hard to avoid the conclusion that all this mythology exists to keep believers from listening to anything we have to say.

The very existence of atheists and atheism is a challenge to religious belief. Religion relies on social consent to perpetuate itself. Religion is the Emperor's new clothes ... and if enough people start saying out loud that the Emperor is naked, it's going to be harder to ignore the guy's pecker hanging out in the breeze.

It's easier to ignore the voices of atheists if they're marginalized. It's easier to ignore those voices if people can pretend that we don't care about right and wrong, that we think everything is physical and therefore nothing matters, that we see love and compassion as illusions, that we have no reason for grief. It's easier to ignore those voices if people can pretend that we're not quite human.

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