

Is God Worth Believing In?

If I were not an atheist, I would believe in a God who would choose to save people on the basis of the totality of their lives and not the pattern of their words. I think he would prefer an honest and righteous atheist to a TV preacher whose every word is God, God, God, and whose every deed is foul, foul, foul.

- Isaac Asimov, scientist and writer (1920-1992)

I believe that Asimov, like many atheists, claimed to be an atheist not because there is no evidence for the existence of a supreme deity but because he saw the many flaws and hypocrisies of the organized religions around him. In other words, it was not God that Asimov didn't believe in but the various forms of God touted by organized religions. The former may be true also, but that was not his point.

Pope Benedict, like many predecessors, urges the world to make peace. Yet his words indicate that he believes that Christianity is the only true religion, that Roman Catholics belong to the only true church and that Jews do not subscribe to anything that may be called a religion at all. Some of those Jews live in Benedict's home country, the one that was responsible for killing millions of Jews during the Second World War. Benedict, in effect, excluded Jews from the Catholic heaven.

There isn't a religion in the world whose clerics profess chastity that is not under attack in the courts today for cases of sexually violating women in their congregations and children in their personal care.

One of the first things that children learn about the God of their religion is that He is mysterious, unknowable, supremely powerful and all-knowing. Then most of them proceed to dictate to their parishioners and followers how they should behave and what they should not do, based on information they have received directly from God. That's the same "unknowable" God.

Every religion claims that their God is better than the Gods of other religions., even if the Gods are really one entity. Every religion claims that their devout followers will receive an escort into heaven before any non-believers, some even claiming that non-believers in that particular faith cannot possibly go to heaven anyway.

Every religion claims to believe in peace, yet almost every war since the end of the Roman Empire has been either started or supported by religions. In the Second World War, both the Allied countries and the Axis powers claimed to have the support of God--both of the same God.

Asimov, I believe, was soured by the claims about God made by the religions he knew. He knew many religions. By their standards, he was an atheist.

By his own standards, maybe not. He was a public atheist. He said he "would believe in a God who would choose to save people" yet the Gods of most religions have not chosen to or been able to prevent most of the atrocities of history, such as the genocides of Holocaust, Rwanda or Kosovo/Albania.

Perhaps what atheists are saying is that they want a God they can believe in, not one supported by fantasy and fiction invented by power hungry religious leaders. Maybe they want a God they can trust, as opposed to the Gods proposed by religious leaders who can't back up their claims and put spin on any apparent failures or deficiencies of their deities.

Organized religions constitute the largest unelected human power structures in the world. They hold power equivalent to that of elected governments, but are not accountable to anyone (except in recent violations of laws).

No one expects a religion to be able to prove the existence of God. That would be a violation of their own beliefs, given that God is unknowable by definition. But people seeking answers to their most important questions about life and afterlife deserve to be served by people who can be trusted and who will not distort the truth, whatever that may be.

Religious leaders and their devout followers who want to persuade others to join them should be prepared to follow their own life guidelines, but publicly and privately.

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