

Why I Still Believe

Some of my best friends (and even a few relatives) are atheists. No, really. My experience with people who choose *not* to believe in a supreme being doesn't fit the conventional

atheists/agnostics than I do around some Christians. Oh-oh. You're wondering about me. But don't worry. I am not now, nor have I ever been, an atheist or even an agnostic.

But wait—there's more. I've read many books by popular atheist apologists such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins

desperate grasping at straws—as if the authors are trying to overcome their own uncertainties and doubts.

I am reasonably sure that I exist. Beyond that, all I have is my five senses, and I can't be a hundred percent sure that they are true and accurate—much less second or third-hand information from books, word-of-mouth and the media. I simply don't have enough information to conclusively prove something as ineffable as God's existence. But that doesn't mean I don't believe in him. **My belief in God does not rest on propositional logic.**

God, of course, fully understands why some choose not to believe in him, and I suspect he's not intimidated by that. He's well aware that more than a few of my atheist and

God, of course, fully understands why some choose not to believe in him, and I suspect he's not intimidated by that.

agnostic friends have suffered tragedies, losses and disillusionments in life that have affected their faith. They conclude that God is not interested in them, their struggles in

I've read many books by popular atheist apologists...I have learned much from them and discovered many new perspectives. My faith was not destroyed. If anything, it seemed to be strengthened and matured. They are not my enemies.

Christian stereotype. Maybe I'm missing something, but most of my atheist friends have proven to be generous, ethical and principled. As far as I can tell, many enjoy good marriages and are successful in their professions. Many are clear, rational thinkers. Most of them seem to respect the fact that I believe what I do.

I realize that there are atheists who are stingy, unethical and whose personal lives are plagued by chaos and immorality. But to be fair, this describes a few professing Christians I have known. These issues are just part of the human condition. Frankly, at times, I feel more comfortable around some

and Daniel Dennett. I have learned much from them and discovered many new perspectives. My faith was not destroyed. If anything, it seemed to be strengthened and matured. They are not my enemies.

"Proving" God Exists?

By now you may have figured out that the thoughts I want to share with you will not include logical proofs of God's existence. Years ago I thought I knew how to prove God's existence, but now I realize it's way beyond me. Hundreds of books attempt rational proofs for God. Sadly, the ones I've read are sprinkled with circular reasoning, faulty logic and

in God

by Monte Wolverton

In spite of the fact that this "job description" of the Supreme Being is not the one revealed by Jesus, this is the kind of god often touted by religious institutions.

particular or the sufferings of humanity in general. Sometimes their disillusionment is spawned by early and painful experience with legalistic, performance-based religion.

Giving Up on God

My father, for example, was raised in a devout, institutionally Christian family. While my grandmother and aunt diligently attended a Methodist church, my grandfather enjoyed branching out and visiting local camp meetings. Writing in his journal at the age of 15, my father reported, "I gave myself to God." He also wrote that he might become a "preacher" someday (which actually happened, much later). But within the year, my grandfather would abandon his family. A couple of years later my aunt would tragically die in her early

twenties. After these painful events, my father would give up on God for over a decade.

My uncle Gary became an atheist for different reasons. As a young man he was offput by the mistreatment of workers by unscrupulous businessmen. This was in the first part of the 20th

Middle-men minions of a religiously predictable and satisfying god are always eager to help us learn what buttons to push to get the best results from him...

Century, before the labor laws we take for granted today. From his vantage point, institutional Christianity was more concerned with preserving the status quo than bringing about reform. His experience led him to conclude (correctly) that "religion is the opiate of the masses"—a tool for the powerful to keep

the common people under their control.

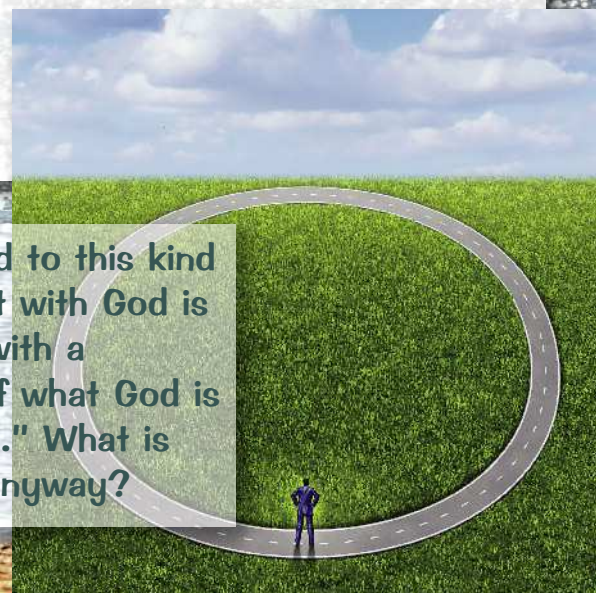
God's Job Description

I wonder if the road to this kind of disillusionment with God is not paved with a misunderstanding of what God is "supposed to do." What is God's "job," anyway? We imagine it is his job to make things better for us—to make the world a better place for humans to live. We also might imagine it's his job to

create and enforce standards of behavior. When human beings are unjust and wicked, we expect God to punish them. When human beings are good and kind, we expect God to reward them.

Of course, if *we* haven't been good, we expect to be

Iwonder if the road to this kind of disillusionment with God is not paved with a misunderstanding of what God is "supposed to do." What is God's "job," anyway?



able to do something to atone. Some kind of sacrifice, ritual or observance should do the trick. After that, we expect to be able to ask God for things, and we expect that he will deliver in a timely and appropriate manner.

In spite of the fact that this “job description” of the Supreme Being is *not* the one revealed by Jesus, this is the kind of god often touted

But read your newspaper or click on your news app. The innocent are suffering, the guilty are not being brought to justice—and darn it, this god is not answering prayers to our satisfaction.

by religious institutions. Middle-men minions of a religiously predictable and satisfying god are always eager to help us learn what buttons to push to get the best results from him (if you're not getting good results it's because you didn't push the right buttons).

It's complicated, you know. This god is a stickler for protocol. These things must be done at precisely the *right time*, in precisely the *right way* and with precisely *right attitude*. *Otherwise there's hell to pay*. And it's no one's fault but your own.

This god is a stickler for protocol... Come to think of it, this god operates pretty much the same as the gods of pagan religion.

Come to think of it, this god operates pretty much the same as the gods of pagan religion. They grudgingly reward good, furiously punish evil, and perfunctorily answer a prayer

now and again in return for an occasional sacrifice.

Reality Doesn't Fit the Stereotype

But read your newspaper or click on your news app. The innocent are suffering, the guilty are not being brought to justice—and darn it, this god is not answering prayers to our satisfaction.

Apparently, he has failed miserably at making the world a better place. So when atheists disbelieve in this kind of god, frankly, they're right. He doesn't exist.

My faith in this kind of god began to unravel a few decades ago. In my case, the

unraveling did not occur because of painful personal tragedies, nor did it occur because of my outrage at oppression and injustice in the world. It occurred because I was forced to face catastrophic flaws in my belief system.

Thankfully, I was blessed to be in a position where supportive friends and family helped me work through the issues and catch sight of the real God, even as the unreal god faded away. Confidence in him would sustain me through later personal adversities.

So far I've offered reasons

Apparently, he has failed miserably at making the world a better place. So when atheists disbelieve in this kind of god, frankly, they're right. He doesn't exist.

not to believe in the god of human expectations and institutions. But what about reasons to believe in the authentic God of grace? Why do I still believe in this God? At the risk of opening myself to all sorts of criticism from people who are much more intelligent

than me, I'll give the only answer I've been able to come up with so far: Because I want to.

I know, it sounds way too simple. I guess it boils down to something Julius Caesar observed: "Men willingly believe what they wish." At some point, after all the discussion, argument and pondering about the nature of God, we have to decide what we wish to do, out of our own free will.

Belief in God

1) Do we wish to believe in no God at all? 2) Do we wish to believe in an angry, vindictive, persnickety, quid-pro-quo god? Or 3) do we wish to believe in a caring, forgiving God who has a good purpose behind his creation, and behind this challenging world we live in—a God who walks with us through all our suffering as well as our joy? Please note that *the first two options are not supported by the New Testament, but the third one is.* If we choose it we may end up making radical changes in the way we approach our fellow human beings.

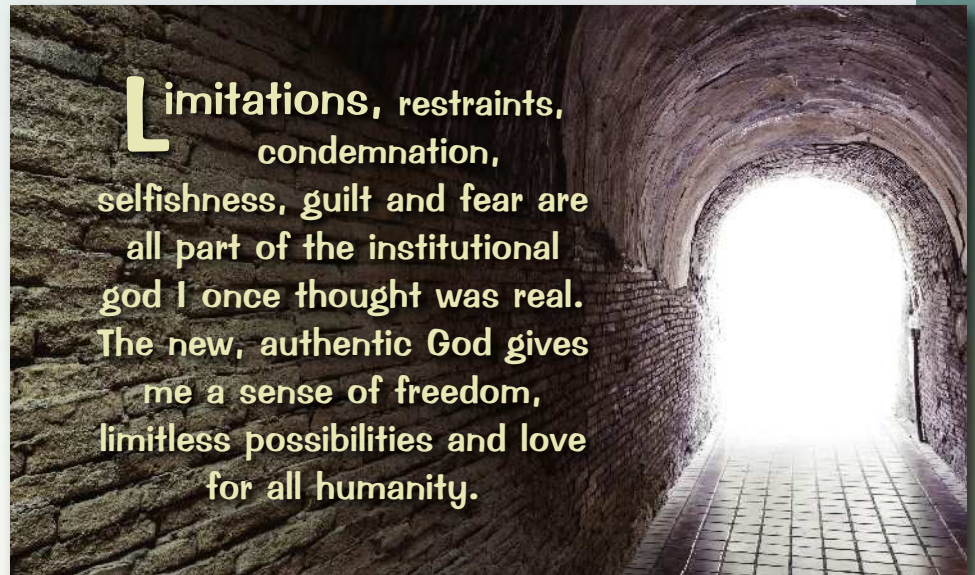
I'm not at all concerned with the eternal disposition of my atheist or agnostic friends, or for that matter, of anyone. My confidence

in the God of mercy and grace assures me that they will be well taken care of.

After having believed in the religious god for a good portion of my life, I

condemnation, selfishness, guilt and fear are all part of the institutional god I once thought was real.

The new (in my experience), authentic God



wish to believe in the God of grace. The one who revealed himself in the person of Jesus, whose "job" is not always to prevent us from suffering, but to experience our human suffering with us—and teach us about his nature in the process.

Such a belief is both a gift from God, and something we decide to do out of free will. Some of my atheist friends might think I'm limiting myself, but I don't look at it that way.

Limitations, restraints,

gives me a sense of freedom, limitless possibilities and love for all humanity. Who wouldn't want to believe in Him? □

Award-winning author, syndicated editorial cartoonist and Associate Editor of Plain Truth and Christianity Without the Religion magazines, Monte Wolverton lives with his wife, Kaye, in southwest Washington, near Portland, Oregon—the least religious U.S. city according to the Public Religion Research Institute.

