

Are Atheists and Theists Morally Equivalent?

by Rich Deem

Introduction

Do people need God to be good? Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Chris Hedges's *American Fascists*, Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great* all claim that theism (and Christianity in particular) is morally inferior to atheism. Dawkins goes on to claim that religion is a form of child abuse that should not be taught to young children.¹ However, a recent study by Reginald W. Bibby, Board of Governors Research Chair in the Department of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge, Canada, shows that atheists rate several moral values less important than theists do.

Morality Among Atheists

The rise of the "New Atheism" has led to the claim by its major proponents that atheism is morally superior to theism and that the world would be better off if the world's population were composed entirely of atheists. A new study raises doubts about that claim.

Religion and morality

Christians are far more likely than atheists to be part of groups that work hard to instill values about being good to other people, and having good relationships. The teachings of the Bible emphasize values such as honesty, love, forgiveness, patience, and generosity. Many of these values are not emphasized in social circles dominated by atheists.

Importance of moral values

A survey of 1,600 Canadians asked them what were their beliefs about God and what moral values they considered to be "very important." The results of the survey are shown below:

Moral Values of Theists vs. Atheists²

Moral Value	Theists	Atheists
Honesty	94%	89%
Kindness	88	75
Family life	88	65
Being loved	86	70
Friendship	85	74
Courtesy	81	71
Concern for others	82	63
Forgiveness	84	52
Politeness	77	65
Friendliness	79	66
Patience	72	39
Generosity	67	37

¹ See http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/religion_as_child_abuse.html.

² Good Without God, But Better With God? by Reginald W. Bibby
(http://www.reginaldbibby.com/images/PC_10_BETTER_WITH_GOD_OCT0807.pdf)

Although the differences between theists and atheists in the importance of values such as honesty, politeness, and friendliness are generally small, moral values emphasized by religious beliefs, such as Christianity, including patience, forgiveness, and generosity exhibit major differences in attitudes (30%+ differences between theists and atheists).

What really concerns me is that only half of atheists think that forgiveness is very important. Either these people have not been married or maybe married multiple times, since a lack of forgiveness in a marriage is a sure recipe for disaster. Couple that moral belief with a perception that neither patience nor generosity are very important, and it seems that the divorce rates are likely to go up significantly in the near future.

According to Professor Bibby, Grandma is the “symbolic saintly person in the clan. So valuing Grandma also means valuing many of the things important to her. In successive generations you have a lingering effect of morality. But further down the road generations get further removed from the sources of those values. That’s where it gets tricky.”²

Conclusion

Contrary to the claim of the “New Atheism,” it seems that atheism leads to a decline in the perception of the importance of many personal moral values, especially those that have a big impact on interpersonal relationships. Since these new atheists are still being influenced by persons of traditional religious moral values, it seems likely that the importance of these values will diminish even further in the beliefs of the next generation of atheists. According to Reginald Bibby, the author of the study, “To the extent that Canadians say good-bye to God, we may find that we pay a significant social price.”³

³ Social virtues linked to faith: Decline in religion may bring decline in civility, study warns Charles Lewis, *National Post* (<http://www.centerforinquiry.net/uploads/attachments/Social%20virtues%20linked%20to%20faith.pdf>)