

ATHEIST TOO

Not too long ago, I had a super interesting encounter on a flight from Denver. As I took my seat and started reading my book, it became obvious that the guy sitting next to me was looking over my shoulder catching a few curious glances. He must have seen the word “God,” or some other religious terminology, because rather casually, he said, “Looks like an interesting religious book.” Then, after a short pause, he said bluntly, “I’m an atheist.”

Evidently he was an outgoing guy looking for some conversation. So I said, “Actually, I’m an atheist too.”

Clearly, he was a little surprised.

He was like, “Seriously? You’re an atheist?”

“Yeah, absolutely!” I told him.

Then I threw him an unexpected curve ball. I said, “Describe for me the God you don’t believe in.”

He was clearly jolted by the statement. But I knew there was some definable picture of God in his head that gave rise to his atheism. He went silent. So I thought the conversation over. But then, after thinking for a moment or two, he said, “You know what I mean? A super powerful supreme being out there somewhere in the sky that rules over us with absolute control.”

He paused again, and then plowed forward.

“Before we’re even born God decides who gets to go to heaven and who’s going to burn in hell forever. Of course, we have no say in the matter. He’s Mr. God Almighty. It’s His universe, so how dare anyone question Him. He can do whatever He jolly well pleases.”

He was on a roll now, doing a great job of defining his atheism.

And mine, too.

“It’s all utter nonsense,” he said. “And we’re supposed to love this tyrant. I don’t even like Him, and I think liking someone has got to come before loving them. It’s more like a monster than a God!”

“Yeah. I totally agree. It’s a pretty diabolical picture, huh?”

“Yeah,” he said, “I don’t know how anyone can believe in such a God.”

“But, hey,” I continued, “I want to ask you something else. I mean, hypothetically, just for the sake of

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discussion, “What if a God, the exact opposite of the one you’ve just described, could exist? Would you want Him to?”

He was jolted again.

“What do you mean? Like what?”

He asked . . . so I offered a different picture.

“Well, what if a God could exist who was nothing but total goodness—perfectly just and perfectly merciful all the time to everyone. A God who would always do the right thing toward every person. A God who would give everyone freedom to decide their own destiny and would never torture those who decide against Him. A God who would literally rather die than commit an injustice against any person? If a God like that could exist, would you want Him to?”

I could see this was new territory for him, but after thinking for just a few seconds, he said what any rational person would say:

“Well, sure, I’d be a fool not to?”

Then he said, “Yeah, but of course we can’t just manufacture whatever God we want.”

“Yeah, your right,” I said. “But listen, I totally resonate with your atheism, because I find many of the popular views of God as repulsive as you do. I believe that the one and only true God is beautiful in the extreme, and you’ve just said that you can’t help but want that kind of God to exist. Well, I simply do believe the very thing you would like to believe.”

“So you’re not really an atheist?” he asked.

“I am in the sense that I don’t believe in the cruel, tyrannical God you’ve described. But I do believe in God. Although the God I believe in is nothing like the God you don’t believe in. So as far as I can see, you haven’t rejected the God I believe in, because, the fact is, you’ve never even considered Him. I’m asking you to believe in a God of sheer beauty and perfect goodness, and I commend you for not believing in the false picture of god you were raised to believe in.”

His mental wheels were turning.

Actually, I’ve found that many people who say they’re athiests simply find a particular picture of God repulsive. They can’t accept a self-serving, threatening tyrant who’s out to control us or damn us. They reject the only option they’ve been taught, while somewhere in their hearts they desire a God worthy of their love and worship.

Well, what if . . .

What if the God who does exist is nothing at all like popular religion portrays God to be?

What if God is love in the strongest and most beautiful sense imaginable?

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