



DO YOU NEED FAITH TO BE AN ATHEIST??

There is a curious meme circulating among believers, promoted by those of the fundamentalist Christian apologetic variety, to the effect that "it takes more faith to believe in atheism than to believe in God." A whole book has been written by well-known apologists Norman Geisler and Frank Turek entitled I Don't Have Enough Faith To Be An Atheist.

This curious idea represents a serious retreat from, even a repudiation of a central element of Christianity, that of religious faith. It presupposes that faith is a bad thing or at least something that one should try to have as little of as possible. It is a shocking departure from the teaching of the biblical Jesus who prizes "great faith" and rebukes those of "little faith." With faith so small "as a grain of mustard seed," he says at Matthew 21:21, mountains can literally be moved about and "nothing shall be impossible to you." Yet here are modern Christians boasting that they rely on faith less than do unbelievers!?

The Bible famously teaches that:

"faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." [Hebrews 11:1]

That is, faith is expectation without a basis in ordinary perception. This is consistent with instances in which Jesus talks about faith, such as when he "marvelled" at the "great faith" of the centurion who expects that his servant will be healed at a distance if Jesus will "speak the word only" [Matthew 8:8-10] and reproaches his disciples for being "of little faith" because they are fearful of a violent storm at sea [Matthew 8:26] before Jesus calms the winds and waters. For it is nowhere near reasonable to expect such miracles.

The 20th Century British mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell said of religious faith:

"We may define 'faith' as the firm belief in something for which there is no evidence. Where there is evidence, no one speaks of 'faith.' We do not speak of faith that two and two are four or that the earth is round. We only speak of faith when we wish to substitute emotion for evidence."

Yet here is how Geisler and Turek explain what they mean concerning faith in their book:

"We mean that the less evidence you have for your position, the more faith you need to believe it

(and vice versa). Faith covers a gap in knowledge. And it turns out that atheists have bigger gaps in knowledge because they have far less evidence for their beliefs than Christians have for theirs." [page 28 of the PDF electronic version]

This is quite a different idea, that faith "covers a gap in knowledge." We see here also that "your position" and "beliefs" are taken to be the starting point with the task being to come up with supporting evidence and faith used secondarily when evidence is insufficient. This is classic "god of the gaps" special pleading. Yet they themselves later say that:

"Truth is not dependent on our feelings or preferences. Something is true whether we like it or not." [p 52]

Amazingly, their entire book rests on such confused and confusing statements. They recycle the same old tired – and tiresome – arguments for the "reasonableness" of theism and misrepresentations of theology's critics that have not succeeded despite centuries, even millennia, of effort.

Atheism, of course, is just the absence of a belief in god(s). And it requires no faith not to have a belief. Nor does it require faith, as Russell pointed out, to believe in something where the evidence is clearly in support of it.

What is more problematic – and is more often the case, probably more often than we may realize – is when evidence does not clearly point one way or another. Even when the evidence does appear strong, it may be that we have overlooked facts, or other ways of putting the facts together. It may be that we have not yet discovered relevant facts or thought of other reasons that bear on a question. Thus we should never be so attached to "our positions" and "beliefs" or even what is our honest best understanding that we lose our willingness to give it all up for something better. This is the problem with faith as a commitment to "cover the gaps." Because the gaps are important reminders that our understanding is limited and can be mistaken. They goad us to do better.

Believers usually deny the possibility that they can be mistaken. But they, too, are aware of the limitations even of their faith when they talk about their deity's "mysterious purposes," when they ac-

knowledge ignorance about the purpose and meaning of the "divine plan" and struggle with such questions as why there is evil and many other problems which divide them. What they fail to see is that the limitations of human understanding are made wider and deeper – and new and bigger ones created! – by a willingness to "cover the gaps" with supernaturalism. Why not simply admit that we don't know? Why not admit that we could be mistaken? And, more to the point: why not simply admit that what we mean by "knowing" or "knowledge" sometimes simply does not apply?

We human beings have a strong desire and drive to try to figure things out. It bothers us not to know things, not to have answers to our questions. Geisler and Turek say that "the five most consequential questions in life" are:

"Where did we come from? Who are we? Why are we here? How should we live? Where are we going?"

Of course, these questions are framed and phrased to support their theological commitments. But questions very like these are among the most enduring, persistent and puzzling that humans can ask. Indeed, it is a job simply to "unpack" and figure out what is or can be meant by such questions and what might be acceptable answer(s) to them. But there comes a point at which we may – indeed, we must – admit that we don't know.

Then it is a matter of whether one can tolerate this. People like Geisler and Turek apparently cannot, except when it comes to their deity's "mysterious ways." Ignorance and uncertainty is a fact of life for everyone, whether they realize it or not.

For example, absent any justification to suspect that our next-door neighbor – or even our best friend – is plotting to kill us, we have to live with the possibility, however small, that that is exactly what they are doing. After all, people do kill others all the time. It happens a lot more often than getting struck by lightning. And we may worry about that too! How we deal with such questions, whether practical or existential, may come down to psychology.

We can allow ourselves to be governed by fear and uncertainty. We can lie to ourselves by "covering the gaps" with faith. Or we can follow the example of the 20th-Century theoretical physicist (and 1965 Nobel Prize winner) Richard Feynman (1918-1988), who expressed his own feelings this way:

"But I don't have to know an answer. I don't feel frightened by not knowing things, by being lost in the mysterious universe without having any purpose, which is the way it really is, as far as I can tell, possibly. It doesn't frighten me."

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- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
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Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Freethought Book Club: Coming June 28th! Same time and place as Salon!

Communitas Dinner Groups: To Be Announced!
Have Another Idea? Email or call us about it!

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
"HAPPY BIRTHDAY
RELIGIOUS LIBERTY"
(and do we need it?)**

**>> Sunday, July 5th, 2015 <<
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- take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the
frontage road east just past Best Western)**

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