

# In Reply To Atheists

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have been reliably informed by friends who attended a recent series of debates between believers and atheists that the atheists won, hands down. In one way this upsets me, as a believer. But in another way I am delighted that false or inadequate arguments are shown up for what they are. In pursuit of truth, even arguments that appear to win a debate must be shown to be wrong if they are. The God Squad has tended to argue that religious people are generally better and that religions have brought more good than evil to the world. I have to say I am on the side of the atheists here.

There is absolutely no area of human activity I can think of, no ideal or dream, which has not been systematically plundered and destroyed by its most faithful adherents in the pursuit of power and triumph. Whether it is football, politics, art, music, or tiddlywinks. (I must tell you sometime about the Cambridge University Tiddlywinks Club in 1963.) When humans get involved they fight over the pettiest of things, argue over minutiae, and turn everything into a power struggle where the original goals and dreams become distorted. Sadly, religion is the same.

It might be argued that no one has yet bested the true and tested, so-called Ten Commandments as the moral touchstone of society, and they are a product of religion. One could counter that that several thousand years of their integration into the morality of human societies of all sorts have so distanced them from the original inspiration to have made them (minus the parts about God, of course) almost human nature. Some, indeed, argue that human nature is intrinsically good. This is codswallop—otherwise primitive tribes in Papua New Guinea would not be warmongering cannibals.

I do believe that humans need a moral system that overrides human mental ingenuity. As Hobbes said, humans left to their own devices are nasty and brutish. And the more intelligent are capable of justifying almost anything (as it was once said of Bertrand Russell, “The Higher the Brow, the Lower the Loins”). But still the contribution of morality neither proves the existence of God nor does it make up for the sins of religion, any more than do great works of architecture (built on the bodies of thousands), art, or music do.

If it were simply that atheists attacked religious abuse or credulity I'd be with them almost all the way. The weakness of their position lies simply in the arrogance of claiming to know what is not and could never be. Agnosticism is one thing. It is reasonable to say that one does not know anything about what people call God and has had no direct experience of anything spiritual or Divine, that one imagines death to be the end, like finally falling asleep. But to say, “I know there is absolutely nothing else in the universe beyond what I experience,” is to arrogate the very omniscience they complain about in God.

If believers are guilty of wishful thinking, atheists are guilty of wishful

doubting. Imagine I said to you, "There is no such thing as love. I can understand physical attraction and the pleasure of sex, but love is myth. It does not make any sense and it is responsible for countless deaths and agonies and tortures." You would laugh and say, "Well, clearly you have never been in love." Indeed, to someone who has never experienced God it is as meaningless as trying to describe the taste of butter to someone who has never tasted it. Impossible, of course, but that doesn't mean butter cannot have a taste.

Atheists love to make fun of religious rituals. They are an easy target, but then so too are all conventions, rituals, and ceremonials of royalty, clubs, and societies. Most human rules and regulations are petty and infuriating. It is easy to make fun of a gentleman showing courtesy to a lady, or indeed eating with a knife and fork instead of his fingers. If it is claimed that ceremonies like male circumcision (totally different from female circumcision, because no sense or organ is permanently removed or incapacitated) impose inestimable psychological and physical damage on defenseless children, I would argue our societies do far more lasting damage by allowing people to get married without preparation and by imposing parental neuroses on innocent children, not to mention corporal punishment and child abuse. And if we balk at seeing animal slaughter then we ought to ban all killing of all animals for human food and be done with. But until we do, and until we have irrefutable scientific evidence of pain experienced rather than guesswork, which we do not, it cannot be used as an argument against religion alone.

The debate is healthy. Religious fundamentalists tend to be both arrogant and intellectually sloppy. So a good challenge is necessary. But the challengers need to be pricked too. False arguments are not going to do it. I do not believe there is any watertight proof of the existence of God. This doesn't mean God does not exist. Empirical physical or scientific proofs are for the physical world, not the spiritual. Even if in the past great minds thought they had proofs, in all humility I assure you they did not. But God can survive absence of proof just as much as love defies logic, yet thank goodness most of us continue to fall head over heels at last once in our lives.

I had a very useful and valuable debate with the English philosopher Anthony Grayling at YAKAR in London in 2002. We ended most amicably with an appreciation of both points of view, and that's how it should be. Victory is often an accident of debating skills. Valid arguments survive.