**Did Christianity Contribute to Atheism? By Thailer Jimerson**

Recently, I’ve been doing a lot of research into atheism in order to better understand the ideology with the ultimate aim of constructing some bridges between belief and unbelief. It seemed there would be no better place to start than in the most obvious: its most outspoken proponents – who many have referred to as the “New Atheists,” including the likes of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens.

After all of my studies, I’m beginning to develop a theory that could possibly promote dialogue between the two camps, or, at the very least, aid us in our understanding of the (fairly) recent growth and popularity of unbelief.

**My theory: atheism is the bastard child of Christianity**.

Let me clarify. Atheism as we have it, is really a phenomenon that could have only come in and through biblical religion itself. There is a very real sense in which Christianity paved the way (however obliquely) for atheism - especially Protestant Christianity. It’s almost the most skeptical and anti-religion of all the religions, I think.And this means, among other things, that there is more in common between Christianity and atheism than perhaps either camp would care to admit – at least initially (while, at the same time, too, not denying the world of difference between them).

*There are a few reasons why I believe this*:

1. **Christians were the first “atheists”.** Christianity is the first religion that really did away with the religion. This is not a well-known fact, but check early stories of Christians, church history, and especially first century Roman writing: Christians were referred to as “atheists”. The interesting question is *Why*? Think about it. They had neither temple, nor priests, nor sacrifices. They abstained from the temple feasts and religious parades because they believed that Christ was their temple, Christ was their High Priest, and Christ was their sacrifice. Paul almost unequivocally disposed with a ritualistic relationship to God, even equating some practices of Judaism itself with paganism (see Ga.4.8-11; Co.2.20-23). I’m almost certain that, sociologically and historically speaking, Christianity paved the way for truly atheistic thinking. A divorcing of morality from God, then just dumping God himself. Freedom taken to the nth (though unintended) degree.
2. **Christians technically only believe in one more God than atheists, but the amount we disbelieve in is nearly the same.** There are millions of gods to believe in and atheists only deny the existence of one more God than Christians. In a world of polytheism and pluralistic thinking, it was very odd to deny the existence of another tribe’s local deity. But consider the zeal of countless Israelites who were mainly atheistic in their anti-gods propaganda save one God, the true God of Israel.Find the most dogmatic atheists and compare them to the most evangelistic Christian. You’ll find that same relentless hunger for what is true, and to do battle, even to death, for it; there is that relentless anti-theism of all the little “g” gods that mankind has so clearly made up; there is that vehemence against religious abuses, hypocrisy, and the ignorance that fuels a ritualistic understanding of God.
3. **New Testament Christianity promotes the separation of church and state.** I was surprised to hear Christopher Hitchens extol the democracy of America and say that we ought to be more grateful of the separation of church and state. He provided a perspective that I’d not considered. For example, if you were to live in England (his native land) you would have to pay a religious tax to the Anglican church since the queen is technically the head of their church. Go to Germany, and you’ll find the same. Regardless of your beliefs, you’ll pay a tax to the Lutheran church. In America, however, we don’t require such and that’s due in large part (ironically) to the protestant spirit alive in our country’s forebears when establishing this democracy. The spirit that led them to flee the state church of their homeland. As with many things, this model has been freeloaded by anti-theists as a great freedom, again, only this side of the cross.
4. **Christianity created a society safe and ethical enough to dispose of God.** Miroslav Volf is a Croatian theologian at Yale. Living through the Balkan genocide and seeing violence and real evil firsthand, he delivers scathing critiques of liberal ideologies that divorce morality from God or let go of it altogether, trusting that “we can all get along.” (A good example of such is seen in atheist Penn Jillette’s humorous statement: “Every time someone says we need God to have morality otherwise ‘everyone will get raped and murdered’ - my only answer is this: I do rape all the women I want. I do murder as much as I want. And how much I want to is zero.”) Fact is, thinking like that is hopelessly naive and woefully ignorant of how things really are in the world. This atheistic naivety *only comes this side of a society of democracy and freedom and liberty from those who originally feared God and adopted the ideals and ethics of Christ himself*. In other words, Christianity obliquely contributes to atheism because its ethic created a society safe enough, and imposed (some) morals deep enough, that people felt safe enough to dispose of the God who gave that very society and those very morals. However, many non-western intellectuals vehemently disagree with the sentiment that “we don’t need God to be moral and we can trust our common sense to guide us morally” because they’ve seen those atrocities man is capable of first hand. Atheists, like Israel before them, have entered into a world they did not create, and have benefited from a society their ideologies did not contribute to – and have wholesale disposed of God. “Take care lest you forget the LORD your God …when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them… then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt….Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth’ (**Deuteronomy 8.11-17**).

However, despite these commonalities, there lies a great difference. Among the greatest weaknesses of atheistic ideology is that (despite their cries to the contrary) they have no objective moral framework to either support their search for the truth (since truth can’t exist without God), nor their critiques against the evils of the church (since evil can’t exist without God). Like many atheists, I share that subjective craving for truth and repugnance for church hypocrisy. But I see the person of Christ as the only solid power behind such a forward movement. But if there is no objective truth beyond my fickle, momentary anger, why all the vehemence - and how long would it ultimately last?