

Questions and Answers

1. You've written many books on creativity—more than fifteen. Why a book on atheism from you now?

Like many lifelong atheists who want to communicate the beauty and wisdom of the atheist worldview and lifestyle, I'd wanted to write a book like *The Atheist's Way* for a long time. But the publishing industry had shied away from books of that sort. Then, when several atheism books became bestsellers, a few publishers took a second look at their reluctance and stretched in the direction of providing atheist authors with a platform. This is a book that I've wanted to write for a long and now the times allow for it to appear.

2. What is the central message of *The Atheist's Way*?

There are three central messages. The first message is that there are no gods and that the use of god-talk is a betrayal of our common humanity. Anyone who plays the god card is playing a dirty trick on his fellow human beings. The second message is that a paradigm shift is needed from seeking meaning to making meaning. Until people realize that human-sized meaning does not exist until they make it, they remain stuck embracing supernatural enthusiasms or else pining for meaning. The third message is to describe a beautiful and attractive atheist lifestyle, full of effort and ethics—a complete way of life—that I hope people will decide is exactly right for them.

3. What's the real harm in believing in gods?

The harm is that it makes a person more stupid than he or she would otherwise be, more authoritarian, and more antagonistic to solving our shared human problems. It amounts to a complete betrayal of our common humanity. The instant a person gives in to the urge to answer difficult questions about the facts of existence with false, slogan-sized supernatural answers, he makes himself a smaller, more frightened, less democratic person, lowers the critical thinking bar, and endangers our freedom. Just imagine that I started mouthing the made-up belief, "God says that blue is bad." Wouldn't you immediately begin to fear that your blue rug puts you in some undeserved danger? People should not do that to other people.

4. Why should it matter to the rest of us whether or not a person believes in gods?

A belief in gods is not an innocent thing. It is a position vis-à-vis the world and vis-à-vis one's neighbors. It is a refuge for scoundrels who want their views to count more than the next person's, it is way to enslave the minds and hearts of children, it provides cover for bigotry and prejudice, it causes sharp divisions among people, and it makes the world a less rational and a more dangerous place. Therefore it should be the hope of every thoughtful person that beliefs in gods wither away and the practice of every thoughtful

person to indict god-talk as a betrayal of our common humanity.

5. Certainly you believe that people have the right to believe in gods?

People have the right to smoke cigarettes—but they shouldn't. It's harmful to them, their loved ones, and innocent strangers. We are so clear about this that we do not allow them to smoke where their smoking can harm others. For exactly the same reasons, we keep religions out of our public schools. People have the right to believe in gods, but they shouldn't. Just as fewer and fewer Americans smoke cigarettes, because the truth about its harmfulness has penetrated our shared consciousness, my hope is that fewer and fewer Americans will betray their neighbors with dangerous god-talk. They have the right to their beliefs; and I hope that they will shed them.

6. Your book is also being billed as an “atheist lifestyle” book. What does that mean?

When you're an atheist, you're obliged to figure out how to live as an atheist. It isn't just that you're convinced that god-talk is a human contrivance and a human weakness. That's only a small part of it. It's a complete vision about the finiteness of your time on earth, your intimate relationship to nature, the sources of your values, and all things human. If you're addicted and intend to recover, you recover as an atheist. That's how an atheist recovers—without god-talk. If you're an artist and intend to create,

you sit down and create—you don't wait for divine inspiration. That's how an atheist creates—by doing it. Atheism supports and demands a completely atheistic lifestyle, a way of life free of supernatural enthusiasms, full of personal effort and responsibility, and beautiful in its clarity and honesty.

7. Isn't atheism a sure road to depression?

The contemporary person, believer and atheist alike, has plenty of reasons to get depressed. Some of that depression may be bedrock biological; some of it may be cultural and social, having to do with the face we're forced to put on at work and the bombardment of bad news that greets us on every media outlet. A lot of it is existential and has to do with the way that, as modern people, we have peered behind the curtain and know, whether we admit it or not, our exact place in the universe. Believers and atheists share these risk factors. But in fact believers are more likely to get depressed than atheists, because they must also keep a false belief system afloat and buy into ideas like original sin and hell. The simple proof that they get more depressed than atheists is that believers comprise the vast majority of Americans; and antidepressants are the most prescribed drugs in America. Who but believers are taking all of those antidepressants?

8. Where do atheists get their values and morality?

How does a believer decide whether to stay at home with his sick child or go off to war? He thinks about it, brings

forth his cherished principles and his ideas about right and wrong, and makes an agonizing decision. That's how every human being who is not brainwashed into accepting the slogans of god-talkers decides what is right for him to do. He thinks about it, using his brain and his natural sense of ethics. Every moral person is moral by virtue of the fact that he is trying to be moral, that he is making the effort to think through what is right and wrong. An atheist who is thinking through what is right to do is more moral than a believer who is mouthing some authoritarian slogan.

9. Isn't atheism something of a fad?

Atheism is as old a tradition as the world's religions. 2500 years ago Heraclitus wrote, "Religion is a disease." At the same time, Aristotle explained, "Men create gods in their own image." 2000 years ago Cicero wondered, "What old woman is so stupid now as to tremble at those tales of hell which were once so firmly believed in?" When the disciples of Confucius wanted to debate the spirit world he reprimanded them, "Why talk of spirits when you do not understand men?" For thousands of years intelligent men and women have been identifying god-talk as man-made and religions as scourges. Atheism is not a fad: it is a vibrant tradition and our best hope for the future.

Additional questions:

- Some atheists don't mind the word "spiritual" and others do. Where do you stand?
- What do you mean when you say that it is "time to make a paradigm shift from seeking meaning to making meaning"?
- Do you have any particular thoughts about atheism and children?
- You say that people are hampered by not having what you call a "shared vocabulary of meaning." What do you mean by that?
- Is *The Atheist's Way* a departure from the other "new atheism" books?
- What are your top three reasons why people should stop believing in gods?
- What are the three most important things for an atheist to do to maintain a robust atheist lifestyle?
- What would you say to a believer who has some doubts about his or her beliefs?
- What can people do who want to support and promote atheism?
- How can people learn more about what you do?