

Angsty Atheist

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I sauntered into the frat house, plastic bottle with a deceptive Coca-Cola label bulging from my back pocket. In actuality, my saunter was more suggestive of a confident hobble, but I didn't care. My body may have been ungraceful, but my eyes were steady, scouring the room for companionship as if I were the Terminator on Valentine's Day (albeit in a completely respectful manner).

It was a good day. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. From a platform, fraternity brothers flung Costco beer upon unsuspecting partygoers, like a magical monsoon. Couples, if the label applied, were already locked in holy embrace, and sexual release was the key.

I closed my eyes, breathing in the congested air. When I opened them, I saw the lights. Dancing across the wall, they mingled together to form an immaculate rainbow. I smiled at the scene in front of me, and for a second, I felt as if there were a divine presence in the room.

But then I looked around the room, taking in each element individually, the cheap Natty Light decorating people's clothes and shoes, the couples entwined such that it was a mystery whose hands were whose, and the spectacular lights coming from the ordinary disco ball. What had made me think this was divine?

I wasn't always an atheist. In fact, for most of my life, I was actually quite religious. On December 9, 1997, I was born to two Indian immigrants. Like many immigrants, they chose to adopt some elements of their new society while retaining some from their motherland. One they chose to retain was Hinduism. Many of my earliest memories consisted of *poojas*, ceremonies of communal worship, and *mantras*, religious rituals in front of idols. From an early age, I was told never to eat beef. I never questioned this order, and I never questioned my religion. Even without knowing what "being Hindu" meant, I knew that it was an expectation I had to meet.

Things got complicated when I went to school.

"... And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen." Having completed the Lord's Prayer, we left Bible class and headed to lunch. The available entrees were hamburgers and pot roast. I sat down with an apple and a carton of milk on my tray. I listened as a few of my friends discussed what we had learned in class. One posed a philosophical question: Who was more likely to get into heaven? A Christian murderer or a non-Christian innocent? Based on what we learned in class that day, they agreed on the Christian. I tried my best to go along.

Living in the Bible Belt, my parents, wary of Memphis public schools, sent me to a Presbyterian elementary school. Like many religious minorities, I grew more certain of my beliefs as they were challenged. Well, at least I thought they were my beliefs. In actuality, I knew very little about the religion I claimed I practiced. One day, a guest who came to speak during chapel, which we had

twice a week, preached the superiority of monotheism over religions like Hinduism, which advocated for paganism. As I heard the crowd laugh at the comical caricature of the god Ganesh on the PowerPoint slide, I clenched my teeth. When I told my parents about the incident later, they explained that there would always be those who would try to undermine my religion, and all I could do was to ignore them and remain faithful.

And so I did, completely convinced that Hinduism was the one true religion. Still I didn't really know what being Hindu meant, other than the fact that I couldn't eat beef and had to go to the *mandir* (temple) every so often for the important holidays. In my last year of elementary school, I was in a different Bible class when I was shown a video about an ex-Muslim man who had converted to Christianity. He explained the process by which he had realized that Christianity was the one true religion. Halfway through, I fell asleep, uninterested. Islam and Christianity seemed essentially equivalent to me.

When I was in seventh grade, my parents introduced me to our first and only *guru*, a retired neurologist who had dedicated his life to learning and teaching the ancient Hindu texts. Fluent in Sanskrit, he could translate the texts directly and explain every detail of the complicated religion. I was ecstatic; being able to actually understand what it meant to be Hindu was exactly what I needed. Every Sunday, we would go to a class, similar to Christian Sunday school, and we would study Indian texts, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Through my guru's teachings, I learned about core Hindu concepts like *dharma* and *maya* and *moksha*. For the first time in my life, I felt as if I had legitimate religious direction. I began to learn what being a Hindu actually entails. Unlike the Abrahamic religions, Hinduism doesn't have a set of outdated rules to live by. Instead, it teaches that one should seek personal growth and enlightenment. To me, this approach seemed more evolved than that of any other religion, and I began to gain a sense of religious superiority.

I've always been a skeptic, unconvinced by conclusions that lack empirical support. When it comes to religion, I always get the same response: a variant of "Because that's the way it is." When I questioned a Christian friend how he knew that the Bible was written by God and not a human, that's the response I received. When I asked a Muslim friend how she was able to unequivocally deny the legitimacy of other faiths with very similar tenets, that's the response I received. When I asked my Hindu guru why some people have long and prosperous lives while others live in squalor and pain, I didn't expect to receive the same response. "Because that's the way it is," he explained. "People are reincarnated based on how they lived their previous life. If they led a wicked life, they will be punished severely in their next." I was bewildered. "But what about young children who suffer a fate they didn't deserve? They won't remember what they did in their previous life." He replied once again, "Because that's the way it is."

As I continued learning about Hinduism, I found more core beliefs that I disagreed with on fundamental levels. "But why would God. . .?" became my catchphrase as I repeatedly questioned my guru and parents. I took a closer look at beliefs that I had accepted at face value and began to question them. I had no problem accepting them before, but now, I was trying to understand not

just what they were, but *why* they were. But when I sought answers, I received the same answer: “Because that’s the way it is.”

While I’d always been a skeptic, I’d never been skeptical as to the existence of a God. That was simply a given. But for the first time, I wondered why I was expected to worship a God. It became clear that this expectation was reinforced by religious inundation. From our Pledge of Allegiance to religious institutions on every corner to politics, religion enters almost every facet of our lives. It’s no wonder I believed in God before I even knew how to spell the word. Was there any actual proof for the existence of a God beyond these religious texts?

But I stifled this thought. I wasn’t ready to be a nonbeliever. In our society, nonbelievers are worse than criminals. A Christian may fundamentally disagree with a Muslim, but at the end of the day, both are united by the belief in a higher power. Where would I fit in this world without a religious community? My guru, family, and friends would be disappointed in me. However, at the end of the day, I just couldn’t pretend to believe in something I really didn’t. It’s cliché, but while I may have been able to lie to others, I couldn’t lie to myself.

And so, I declared my disbelief in God. The backlash was swift as people started to find out. In Spanish class, my Catholic teacher called me *ateo* (atheist) and refused to call on me. My mother, recognizing my lack of religious commitment, began to take me to the *mandir* for almost every obscure holiday. But I was happy with my decision. I was finally being honest with myself.

As I stood there at that frat party, watching the beer, couples, and lights, I found myself considering God (as one does at a booze and hormone-filled party). Do we drunkenly believe in God? Stumbling about, having the faith to find God anywhere, even at a frat party? Have I just sobered up?