

No Theist is Atheist Towards Anything

Note: this is part of a series of short and informal essays I'm writing for my own clarity, and which may be of use to other atheists. They express my reactions to some things I repeatedly hear my fellow atheists say that I simply don't agree with. I hope this kind of diversity might not be a bad thing. Your comments are welcome at alex_colias@hotmail.com

I've had this little exercise in semantic antics thrown at me a few times now. Strange how our species differs, both in the ways we think, and in the ways we treat ideas. I usually don't go around asking "Where did you get that from?" because it just seems too confrontational and a bit rude, especially during informal conversation. But when I hear the same quip from a few people, almost word for word, I start seeing visions of Mr. Peabody didactically dancing in my head. From googling around a bit I gather this little pretzel may have come from Richard Dawkins... or maybe Stephen Roberts. Here's what I found:

We are all atheists about most of the gods that societies have ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further. – Richard Dawkins on several web sites of atheist quotes, without any source listed (not sure what's in print or when)

But this sure seems very similar to what's below. Please note that all the ellipses are in the original – I didn't skip any text:

From http://freelink.wildlink.com/quote_history.php

Brief history of The Quote... "I contend we are both atheists, I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours."

...Stephen F Roberts

...Yep, that's me! I am the author of the above quote which has become a bit of a popular statement throughout the net (and some in the real world too).

...I first used The Quote as a tag line for postings on the newsgroups alt.atheism and talk.atheism at some point before October 1995. I don't remember exactly when I started using it, and unfortunately lost my mailer that would have contained the archive. The earliest records that DejaNews.com have is back to 1995, and by October 1995 it appeared (sic) 'widespread' in taglines, so I must have originated it sometime before then. Most likely early 95 or late 94.

...The Quote is an original quote that came from an online debate I was having with religious people in the newsgroups. I used the a (sic) similar comparison in a debate when my opponent wondered why I ignored the evidence for god, and in return, I wondered why my debate opponent chose to ignore the evidence for Shiva, or Zeus, or any of the other possible gods.

...I then slightly refined and shortened it the next day to the 'modern' form it is now to use in a tagline. Within days, The Quote was in use by others in their taglines (I added my name as an attribute a few weeks later when people asked me if it was my original quote).

...About a month later, I made another variation of the quote that also appears sometimes: "We are all atheists, some of us just believe in fewer gods than others"... but it never quite got the popularity of the original :-)

Since that time, I've occasionally ego-surfed to see how the quote has moved out around the world.

Interestingly, as the quote moved out, it seemed to become attributed to "other" Stephen Robertses (sic). Its (sic) funny sometimes to see who people attribute the quote to.

I've also occasionally been accused of plagiarism (sic) and stealing the quote from others.

I have no doubt that others have said similar things throughout time (afterall (sic), its (sic) not like the general concept of atheism was made up by me). But I didn't know about any of the others when I first penned the quote (remember this was 94-95, there was no wikipedia or google to look things up with).

I just had the luck to put together the phrase right at the dawn of the modern Internet age. :-)

My, what a tangled web the web can weave! Maybe it's just a coinkydink, as the Three Stooges might say. And clearly, some phrases quickly become a part of common speech in one swell foop, without any easily determined source. If I had to guess about where some fellow atheists are getting this, I'd go with Richard Dawkins, because the phrasing seems to be more similar to the quote attributed to him, and he's a popular figure nowadays.

But either way the basic idea is the same. So the question is, is the basic idea correct? Is anyone who doesn't believe in a particular god really an atheist towards that god, but at the same time a theist towards another god or gods? If we assumed that there were only 100 possible gods, is a monotheist something like 99% atheist, and only 1% monotheist? Of course I don't think so, or I wouldn't be writing this ;-)

I consider this misuse of the word atheist a cute rhetorical device and nothing more. We categorize general positions regarding belief in a god or gods by using terms like theist, deist, and atheist. When someone says "I'm a Christian", they are not an atheist in any sense of the word. To say so simply nullifies the meaning

of the word atheist – a straightforward negation of belief in any god at all. On the flip side, and by definition, Christians don't believe in any god except their own. Same goes for any monotheist. Of course, there are polytheists, universalists, some hybrids (such as Mormonism, which may more properly be considered polytheistic), and so on. Saying to a monotheist that we are the same except we atheists go one god further is a funny joke, but it avoids defining the real difference, which is much more profound.

The real difference lies in the relationship between faith, belief, and evidence, or what constitutes a sufficient reason for belief. An atheist wants evidence; blind faith simply won't do. An atheist wants evidence that leads to a specific conclusion, as opposed to randomly choosing between one of many possible, and possibly convoluted, explanations. There is even a method for determining evidence involved for some of us atheists, called the scientific method. But if we use the word atheist like these amusing quotes do, we aren't really defining the difference between a monotheist and an atheist clearly. That's because the reason why monotheists don't believe in other gods is self-defining – they believe in only one god, period. It's not because they become all rational when it comes to other gods and suddenly require evidence. Moreover, if there was evidence that pointed to a different god than their own, they still wouldn't budge.

So we atheists might say that monotheists insist on having faith not only without evidence, but even contrary to evidence. Some theists may even distort the nature of what constitutes evidence, but that's another matter. The point is that the relationship to evidence we as atheists require is not related to their kind of belief in the slightest, or they wouldn't be monotheists in the first place. This means there is a much wider chasm between a monotheist and an atheist than simply one god more or less. To typify the difference as if it were a minimal numeric unit or primarily a question of degree would be untrue. And if atheism is about anything, it's not about winning arguments, it's not about convincing others how right we are, it's not about being clever - in my book, above all, it's about being true.

In any case, after trying to check out the origin of this quote I'll be more careful to give credit where credit is due. If I'm repeating someone else's idea, it just seems fair to say so, instead of coming off like it's my own. If I don't end up looking like such a whiz kid, well, maybe I'm not such a whiz kid. I guess I'll have to learn to live with that. Maybe that's the price for trying to be true.