

“Aggressive atheism”, anyone?

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Bob Bury

“Anything I say about religion is aggressive because it’s wrong, and nothing they say about their belief is aggressive, because it’s right. It’s very difficult to argue with that sort of arrogant certainty.” Bob Bury takes his gloves off.

We’ve heard a lot about “aggressive atheism” one way or the other in the last week. I’ve been accused of it myself, and what it seems to mean is any atheism which dares to speak its name. Religious believers are so accustomed to the protection historically afforded by the reluctance of the media, or anyone else, to criticize religious belief that they see any dissent at all as ‘aggressive’.

But then, why wouldn’t we be “aggressive” (if that’s what it must be called)?

For centuries, religious evangelists have promoted their beliefs using everything from threats of eternal damnation to incarceration and torture. Now that dissenters have at last found a voice, it’s perhaps not surprising that our comments sometimes get a bit edgy. OK, the inquisition doesn’t operate any more, but the threats are still there. I was threatened myself, ever so nicely, online, only this week. I was posting in a medical discussion forum which had strayed onto dangerous hallowed ground. I described how a creationist had threatened me (and he really meant it) with eternal damnation in the fires of hell because I couldn’t accept that the earth was only 6000 years old, and yet if I even mention the fact that belief in the centuries-old writings of scientifically unsophisticated peasants might be inappropriate in the 21st century, I’m the one that’s being ‘aggressive’. One of the other medics on the forum replied that the creationist wasn’t being aggressive because he was simply ‘stating the facts’. In other words, anything I say about religion is aggressive because it’s wrong, and

nothing they say about their belief is aggressive, because it's right. It's very difficult to argue with that sort of arrogant certainty and self-righteousness.

And that's the trouble with religion, isn't it? It's not the beliefs themselves; if someone insists on believing that the bread really turns into the body of Christ, and it makes them happy, that's fine by me. I can even accept that a person could hold that belief and still be an entirely competent doctor (or airline pilot or chartered accountant or plumber) because it does seem that otherwise sensible people are able to compartmentalize religious belief, selectively suspending the rules of evidence and common sense which govern their behaviour in every other aspect of their life and work. After all, [I did it myself for forty years](#) before seeing the light. The problems arise from that absolute certainty that they are right. In extreme cases it can lead to young Muslims going happily to their deaths if they can take the 'infidel with them, and to redneck Christian evangelists deciding that publicly burning the Quran is a really neat idea. Very Christian.

Humanists, on the other hand (and I hope I'm not speaking only for myself here) thrive on doubt. Doubt and uncertainty is good – it's how we have progressed from believing that the sun is dragged into the sky by the sun-god every morning to a point where we can send space probes to Jupiter and beyond. It's how we expand our knowledge. We have examined religious belief, and applied the same criteria of evidence and common-sense which we use in every other aspect of our lives, and have decided on the balance of probabilities that the concept of a god that concerns himself with our lives is so unlikely as to be insupportable. Of course, if a hand appeared from the clouds tomorrow and gave me a cosmic clip around the ear, I would absolutely be prepared to revise that opinion. Equally, if I died and found myself at the pearly gates with St Peter smirking superiorly, I'd greet it with a shrug. It's that sense of unlimited possibilities and openness to the unexpected that makes rationalism such an exciting and inspiring philosophy, and which imparts to scientific discovery a glorious sense of excitement which far exceeds anything inspired by the Bible's catalogue of magic tricks.

It is instructive that the online discussion thread I mentioned above was deleted by the website's owners shortly after the exchange in question, and this is the

fate of most threads which stray on to holy turf. The discussion groups on this site include a large number that are non-medical, and there used to be a religion forum, which generated some really enjoyable and instructive debates between believers and non-believers. There isn't one any more – the owners had to take it down after due to threats of legal action. Threats which didn't, if I recall correctly, come from the atheists. It's that aggression thing again, you see – if you don't share my beliefs, you need to keep quiet about it; only the religious are allowed to evangelize. It's difficult to avoid the suspicion that religious sensitivity to criticism is an unacknowledged admission of the fact that their faith is such a tender flower; it must be sheltered from the chill wind of agnosticism, lest it wither and die. Mine did, thank God.

Bob Bury is a consultant radiologist in Leeds. He is approaching retirement, and looks forward to more time for hill-walking, fishing and writing.