

Why God created atheists



Highland Views

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Columnist

While studying philosophy and world religions in an evangelical college, I read a number of books by the Jewish mystic philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965). I sensed even then, while emerging from a narrow worldview, that if I was going to be a follower of the rabbi of Nazareth, I'd better understand something of Jewish thought.

Reading the work of holocaust survivors Elie Wiesel ("Night" and "Dawn") and Viktor Frankl ("Man's Search for Meaning" and "The Unheard Cry for Meaning"), I also encountered Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel ("The Prophets" and "Sabbath"), Jewish biblical scholars and the ancient commentary called the Talmud.

I learned there was no "old" testament any more than there are "old" gospels. There are Hebrew scriptures and Christian scriptures, both revered by their communities.

Along the way I often turned to Buber, even carrying his most famous book, "I and Thou," in my backpack when hitching around Europe for three months after college.

Buber's writings, including "Between Man and Man," "The Eclipse of God" and "I and Thou," each gave me fresh ingredients to bake into a faith I could savor and swallow — a faith grounded in the grit and grist of relationships and service to others.

I was reminded of Buber's impact when a younger chaplain I once mentored sent me a story from Buber's wonderful two-volume collection, "Tales of the Hasidim." The title was "Why Did God Create Atheists?" That certainly caught my attention. My colleague said it made him think of me.

As many things on social media, the vignette was inaccurate, so I thumbed through my old copy of the "Tales" and found the original. It was a teaching of Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov (d. 1807):

"There is no quality and there is no power of [humanity] that was created to no purpose ... But to what end can the denial of God [atheism] have been cre-

ated? This too can be uplifted through deeds of charity. For if someone comes to you and asks your help, you shall not turn them off with pious words, saying, 'Have faith and take your troubles to God!' You shall act as if there were no God, as if there were only one person in all the world who could help this person — only yourself."

Self-righteous piety has always been a prime target for the rabbis ... modern or ancient.

Thanking my chaplain friend, I left him this reply:

"We could perhaps find (or write) a parallel story titled 'Why Did Nature Create Believers?' In my classes on John Burroughs we consider his questions about anthropomorphism: Why do humans create gods? Why do the gods always seem to look like humans?"

We can always have creative conversations about the origins of things — the springs out of which beliefs bubble. Though maybe it's more about what people do with those springs that really matters — that's the real origin of believing and, perhaps, the origin of disbelief.

Think of it this way: Two people discover a bubbling mountain spring at the headwaters of a great river that nourishes their village. One sees the verdant valley as a "sacred, divine" place and begins to build a shrine to honor the "holy presence" there. The other realizes it could be a good thing to protect this spot, so they help construct the little chapel. Together, these two villagers, with faith and without, work toward the same end.

Later, they may work side by side teaching reverent pilgrims who come to honor the natural or supernatural experience, reminding them to show care for the valley, to protect its purity and beauty.

Those who act, who live, as if there is a God might have a lot in common with those who act as if there isn't. Both could be driven to base their livelihood, their thoughts, their actions on a "higher purpose" — a human purpose. We could say that's a "natural" purpose — naturally doing what's "in our nature" to do.

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