

Wednesday, November 17, 2010

A Knock at the Door

One morning recently I was home minding my own business, when suddenly there was a knock at the door. I wasn't expecting anyone, so I had no idea who it might be. When I opened the door there was a well dressed young man standing on my doorstep. In the distance behind him I saw two other young men, also well dressed, poking around the neighbor's yard across the street. I suspected that he was a religionist out evangelizing.

Before he had a chance to say anything to me, I greeted him:

"Good morning," I said. After a slight pause, I asked, "Are you LDS?" I suspected LDS because he was going door-to-door, but I noticed that he wasn't wearing a name badge, as Mormon missionaries typically do, so I had to ask.

"No," the young man answered. "I'm a Jehovah's Witness."

I was a bit surprised because most JW's who have approached me in my home cold call in pairs (this fellow was alone), they tend to be middle-aged women, and always have their Watchtower magazine-tracts clutched in their hands. This guy had a small bible in his hands, and definitely wasn't a middle-aged woman.

"Ah, a JW, eh?" I replied. "Well, you're going to be disappointed with me."

"Why is that?" he asked.

"Because I'm an atheist. I don't believe in any gods."

He looked a bit puzzled, and after a moment he asked, "Why don't you believe?"

Of course, it's all too typical for theists to treat belief in invisible magic beings as the default position of the human mind, and to treat non-belief in such fantasies as some kind of anomaly that needs to be explained. This young man had come to my house, stepped onto my property, knocked on my door, and is now requiring me to explain why I don't believe in his god. From my perspective, this is no different from going up to some stranger and asking why he doesn't believe in Blarke the WonderBeing.

Even though his question stems from an improper understanding of the mind, I was happy to take the opportunity with this young man and practice my own version of "reverse witnessing." After all, by asking me such an open-ended question, he put me in charge of the direction of the conversation. So I was happy to address his question:

"Basically, I don't believe your god is real because I made the choice to be honest to myself," I said. I briefly explained: "I was at one time in my life a Christian. But I knew deep down that I faced a pivotal decision for my life - either to be honest and admit that I didn't think it was all true, or to evade honesty and pretend that it was all true, even though I really didn't believe it."

Although I wasn't being confrontational (he was coming to me, not vice versa), the young man stood there silently with a puzzled look on his face, keeping a safe distance and not quite knowing how best to respond to my statement. Of course, he couldn't say that I wasn't answering his question, for what I stated speaks directly to what he asked. In fact, he seemed very alone, staring bleakly back at me, almost completely motionless, like a child before an adult who has tasked him with a monumental chore.

I realized that he was caught off guard and had no ready reply to what I had said, so I asked him his name. He said, "James," and I reached out to shake his hand, and he met mine and we shook.

“Glad to meet you, James,” I said, hoping my courteousness would help him relax and not be so anxious. I wanted him to hear what I had to say, and if his defenses were piqued, he might just blather past me.

He finally asked (something to this effect), “How can you be so certain that God is not real?”

“Think about it,” I said, “no matter what argument one might present for the existence of a god, we are still left with no alternative to our imagination as the means of having awareness of it.”

Then I pointed to some objects across the street behind him: “Take a look at that tree, the fence, the street. You see these things with your eyes. You perceive them through a physical process. This mode of cognition - perception - will not give you awareness of any god. You have to *imagine* it behind everything you see, everything you perceive.”

“But,” James boldly interjected, “you don’t see the wind, but you believe it exists. You see its effects, that’s how you know it’s real.”

“It may be true that I don’t *see* wind, but I do *perceive* it, such as when it blows on my skin, like right now.” And there was a bit of a cold breeze blowing at this time. “Remember,” I had to point this out, “sight is only one of our modes of perception. We also sense by touching, tasting, smelling and hearing.” Why is it that theists tend to overlook these?

I continued: “I can imagine that your god is lurking behind that tree over there, making it what it is and governing its every action by an act of will. But we can’t ignore the fact that this is the imagination at work.”

James did express agreement here. “That’s true, but” - and you knew this was coming - “the Bible is God’s word, and it contains prophecies that could only have been fulfilled if he were real. I’ve studied this. I know it’s true,” he insisted.

Since he raised the notion of “divine prophecy,” I asked: “James, do you know what midrash is?”

“No,” replied James.

“Midrash is an ancient Hebrew method of literary interpretation. Biblical authors often re-interpreted stories that predated them by retelling them using motifs that are familiar to the intended audience, with the intention of bringing out some hidden truth contained in the original. Often the result of this process can appear to be a fulfillment of some past promise. It’s really an invention.”

Of course there’s much more to midrash and bible prophecy than merely what I had indicated to James. But in the flurry of a brief verbal conversation, the approximate is often the best that one is capable of offering. Also, James did not introduce any specific prophecies for discussion, so there was no opportunity to explore the issue any further. Too bad, as I had a lot to say about the New Testament!

It was clear that James found my words unsettling, but didn’t have any rehearsed position to offer in response. He noticed that his two colleagues who had been harassing my neighbors across the street had concluded with their call to their house, and were starting back to their van, which was parked across the street from my house. I could tell that he was ready to depart, so I tried to express my last point to him briefly.

“James,” I said, “you’re obviously very young and have your whole life ahead of you. I know you’re not going to concede to me that your god is imaginary. You don’t have to, I already know this truth. You need to recognize this fact for yourself. When you lay down at night and you’re alone with your thoughts, think about what I’ve been saying. Make that choice to be honest with yourself. It’s going to be a difficult choice, but you have nothing of value to lose by being honest. Maybe one day, some months from now, you’ll understand what I’ve been saying.”

At this point he was clearly anxious to get going, and said goodbye as he was turning away. I stood there and

watched as he climbed into the van with the other missionaries. I can only imagine what their conversation at that point might have been. I suspect the other two tried to soothe James, while he promised himself never to come back to my door again. I hope not, but I wouldn't be surprised if that were the case. Really, I wish I had had the presence of mind to invite all three of them in and sit down to discuss the matter with me, but I was home with my daughter, and she deserves my attention.

by Dawson Bethrick

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