

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO HELP FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF "THE WAY"

The Atheist's Dilemma

By Jordan Monge

I don't know when I first became a skeptic. It must have been around age 4, when my mother found me arguing with another child at a birthday party: "But how do you know what the Bible says is true?" By age 11, my atheism was so widely known in my middle school that a Christian boy threatened to come to my house and "shoot all the atheists." My Christian friends in high school avoided talking to me about religion because they anticipated that I would tear down their poorly constructed arguments. And I did.

As I set off in 2008 to begin my freshman year studying government at Harvard (whose motto is *Veritas*, "Truth"), I could never have expected the change that awaited me.

It was a brisk November when I met John Joseph Porter. Our conversations initially revolved around conservative politics, but soon gravitated toward religion. He wrote an essay for the *Ichthus*, Harvard's Christian journal, defending God's existence. I critiqued it. On campus, we'd argue into the wee hours; when apart, we'd take our arguments to e-mail. Never before had I met a Christian who could respond to my most basic philosophical questions: How does one understand the Bible's contradictions? Could an omnipotent God make a stone he could not lift? What about the Euthyphro dilemma: Is something good because God declared it so, or does God merely identify the good? To someone like me, with no Christian background, resorting to an answer like "It takes faith" could only be intellectual cowardice. Joseph didn't do that.

And he did something else: He prodded me on how inconsistent I was as an atheist who nonetheless believed in right and wrong as objective, universal categories. Defenseless, I decided to take a seminar on meta-ethics. After all, atheists had been developing ethical systems for 200-some years. In what I now see as providential, my atheist professor assigned a paper by C. S. Lewis that resolved the Euthyphro dilemma, declaring, "God is not merely good, but goodness; goodness is not merely divine, but God."

Joseph also pushed me on the origins of the universe. I had always believed in the Big Bang. But I was blissfully unaware that the man who first proposed it, Georges Lemaître, was a Catholic priest. And I'd happily ignored the rabbit trail of a problem of what *caused* the Big Bang, and what *caused* that cause, and so on.

By Valentine's Day, I began to believe in God. There was no intellectual shame in being a deist, after all, as I joined the respectable ranks of Thomas Jefferson and other Founding Fathers. I wouldn't stay a deist for long. A Catholic friend gave me J. Budziszewski's book *Ask Me Anything*, which included the Christian teaching that "love is a commitment of the will to the true good of the other person." This theme—of love as sacrifice for true good—struck me. The Cross no longer seemed a grotesque symbol of divine sadism, but a remarkable act of love. And Christianity began to look less strangely mythical and more cosmically beautiful.

At the same time, I had begun to read through the Bible and was confronted by my sin. I was painfully arrogant and prone to fits of rage. I was unforgiving and unwaveringly selfish. I passed sexual boundaries that I'd promised I wouldn't. The fact that I had failed to adhere to my own ethical standards filled me with deep regret. Yet I could do nothing to right these wrongs. The Cross no longer looked merely like a symbol of love, but like the answer to an incurable need. When I read the Crucifixion scene in the Book of John for the first time, I wept.

No Walk in the Park

But beauty and need do not make something true. I longed for the Bible to be true, but the intellectual evidence was still insufficient.

So I plunged headlong into apologetics, devouring debates and books from many perspectives.

I read the Qur'an and Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. I went through *The Skeptic's Annotated Bible* and looked up Christian rebuttals to apparent contradictions. But nothing compared to the rich tradition of Christian intellect. I'd argued with my peers, but I'd never investigated the works of the masters: Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Pascal, and Lewis. When I finally did, the only reasonable course of action was to believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But my head and my heart suddenly switched places. Though I began to know the evidence for the Scriptures, my head full of answers, I began to feel distant from the story that had brought me to tears a month prior. When reading through the Passion narrative on retreat on Cape Cod in the spring, I remained utterly unmoved. I went out to pray.

I walked to a pond surrounded by trees and began praying by the water's edge. I felt disconnected from God, from the friends I'd begun to hold dear, from my body itself. I begged God to make it all click, as a test for me to know that he was there. After an hour with no progress, I started to walk.

Following the pond to a stream, I began climbing through the surrounding thicket to see if I could reach the ocean a little ways down. I kept pausing, thinking, *Do I want to go back? I left all my stuff behind*. But each time, I renewed my steps, believing that I couldn't quit until I'd made it to the end. I wouldn't forgive myself if I just gave up and went back to where I'd started. I had some sense of direction of where I needed to go, but I didn't know how to get there.

I climbed over branches and under bushes, sometimes going in the opposite direction for a while when the bramble grew too thick. I treaded lightly through marshes only to have the mud swallow my leg up to the knee. After pulling myself out, I started walking through the stream, since I figured I couldn't get any dirtier, and the ground seemed to be most trustworthy along the middle of the river where the water had worn the path. So I followed it until the last light of day was waning.

I quickly realized that my journey through the briar patch was an apt metaphor. I'm trying to get somewhere, but I'm not sure how to get there. There's no clear path, so I must proceed by trusting my instincts. I might even go off in the opposite direction for a little while. In the end, I may arrive right back where I started. But that's okay too, because I'll get there with a clearer head and everything will be waiting for me when I'm done. It won't be easy. Sometimes I'll get mired in the mud, or caught up in thorns. But I'll make it through, though not without a few cuts.

If I wanted to continue forward in this investigation, I couldn't let it be just an intellectual journey. Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). I could know the truth only if I pursued obedience first.

I'd been waiting for my head and my heart to be in agreement. By the end of the church retreat, they weren't completely in sync. Many days they still aren't. But I realized that the unity could come later. If my heart had agreed at one point, and my head agreed now, then my heart would follow. I couldn't let a malfunctioning heart delay the logical course of action, the obedience required by true faith.

I committed my life to Christ by being baptized on Easter Sunday, 2009.

This walk has proved to be quite a journey. I've struggled with depression. I would yell, scream, cry at this God whom I had begun to love but didn't always like. But never once did I have to sacrifice my intellect for my faith, and he blessed me most keenly through my doubt. God revealed himself through Scripture, prayer, friendships, and the Christian tradition whenever I pursued him faithfully. I cannot say for certain where the journey ends, but I have committed to follow the way of Christ wherever it may lead. When confronted with the overwhelming body of evidence I encountered, when facing down the living God, it was the only rational course of action.

I came to Harvard seeking Veritas. Instead, he found me.

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