

The Rationality of Faith

“There is no God, but don’t tell that to my servant, lest he murder me at night.” — Voltaire



[*\(Wikimedia Commons\)*](#)

From a Western standpoint, modern political discourse is often quick to discard religious faith as irrational and antiquated. When we hear political arguments based solely on religious values and ideas, skepticism is an almost instantaneous reaction—and justifiably so. The lack of empirical or objective evidence to justify religious faith poses an unsolvable epistemic problem for those who intend to be diligent in developing their ideological convictions. Faith is an insufficient tool to build trust and credibility; saying that religious faith is irrational (without making value judgements about its utility) is plausible.

However, using this thesis to assume that atheism must then be rational, whether because it opposes faith or because it constitutes a “more likely truth,” is an extremely common logical mistake. After all, if for practical matters we reduce our understanding of the atheist position to a disbelief in a deity (hard atheism), we are simply looking at another unsubstantiated affirmative claim about the existence of God. From this, it follows that believing in nothing on a spiritual level is merely a variant of religious belief; the difference between the two is exclusively demarcated by the content of the belief, not its foundation,

structure, or source. For instance, the difference between hard atheism and Christianity is the same as the difference between Christianity and Islam.

At this point, one may fairly point out that this equivalence of hard atheism and religious faith suffers from a fatal burden of proof problem. Is it not up to theists to prove that the deities they claim to exist do indeed exist? And is it not, in the meanwhile, completely rational to believe they do not? While logically sound, these questions fail to consider the fact that we are lacking satisfactory alternatives for existential explanations. Considering that the uncertain origin of existence is beyond our capability of empirical investigation, wherever there are two different affirmative statements on the existence of God, these will share the burden of proof equally.

This reasoning begins to drive us away from hard atheism towards soft atheism or agnosticism, where disbelief in God is replaced by a lack of belief in God that suspends judgment. To illustrate this point in a clearer manner, consider the following murder mystery scene:

You find the corpse of a man with multiple stab wounds on his back. There is no murder weapon, no suspect, and no other clue at the scene suggesting that a homicide took place. You are at a complete loss and there is no feasible way to continue the investigation.

Now, despite the lack of evidence, you certainly would not say that a unicorn is to blame for this attack, but you also would not say that the man died of natural causes. Both of these statements would be equally irrational. The fact that the exact cause of the man's death is a complete mystery means that any affirmative statement trying to explain his death will bear an equivalent burden of proof. If you do not find a culprit, it is not more likely that there is no culprit altogether. Instead, this situation calls for a suspension of judgment, a lack of belief, or in simpler terms an "I don't know."

While completely unsatisfactory, this agnostic position seems to be the only rational one available to us. If we do not have any evidence to make any sort of affirmative claim, the only reasonable thing to do is to not make a claim in the first place.

The utility obtained from agnosticism is that of intellectual and philosophical integrity. When one is not tied-down to dogmatic belief systems, one has more flexibility to explore existentialism and be diligent in

their pursuit of truth. However, in this context, rationality and intellectual integrity come with many non-trivial trade-offs that might be sufficient to push people away from agnosticism.

The cost of renouncing religious faith in this agnostic manner can be deeply burdensome, potentially becoming a slippery slope towards the same irrational pitfalls found in hard atheism. You probably have a family member, friend, or acquaintance who is passionately religious. Convincing them that their entire world view is fundamentally irrational would very likely not do them any good. It is nobody's inherent responsibility to deal with their existential dread in a scientifically correct way; not everyone is capable of bearing such a responsibility, and even those who are probably do not have the time. As a result, society demands faith.

"There is no God, but don't tell that to my servant, lest he murder me at night."

- Voltaire

(According to Yuval Noah Harari in *Sapiens*)

Religion, as irrational as it may be, is extremely successful and efficient at setting a one-size-fits-all moral code that practically anybody can understand and follow. It is only natural that people seek an anchor for their value systems, which has historically been religion. The utility offered by religious faith sacrifices intellectual integrity for practicality and existential comfort, an understandably appealing deal. On the other hand, despite hard atheism's equivalent practicality (also as a consequence of its dogmatism), this position does not help anyone answer any questions regarding the values or conduct to be upheld in society, leaving the demand for faith largely unsatisfied. It is impossible for one to justify their behaviour through atheism alone, thus, a new anchor is needed.

This unsatisfied demand leads to the main issue motivating the analysis carried out until now. When people demand faith but do not want it from religion, they look elsewhere for grand narratives that might justify their conduct and moral compass. These alternatives far too often involve political ideologies, as these are the most readily accessible sources of paternalistic moral agendas. Unfortunately, establishing ideologies as anchors allows politics to permeate into people's identities, subsequently threatening democratic political discourse in a fundamental way. People now put their personal identity at stake when

discussing political matters, disincentivizing the principal factor that motivated people to quit religion in the first place: rationality. If one's value systems inherently rely on their ideology, one may become attached to them and the investments made in them in a possessive way without ever intending to examine its rationality. They are potentially exposed to collective and polarizing beliefs, and politicians may harness these ideologies as a form of propaganda. Integrating ideology into one's identity will often lead to dogmatism, making it impossible to achieve the academic honesty and care that politics necessitates.

That is not to say religious people cannot fall for the same political dogmas. Especially when there exists a clear intent to impose religious faith or values through the state, a religious individual will be equally exposed to politizing their own identity. However, provided that religion is sufficiently separate from one's ideology, meaning that faith does not fanatically intrude as a priority over real policy issues, it may serve as a buffer zone between personal fulfillment and politics. If there already exists a solid anchor justifying one's value systems, it is less likely that one will feel the need to find a new one in politics. In contrast, hard atheism offers no such buffer zone.

It is for this reason that the assumption that hard atheism is rational is so dangerous—and that being able to identify such a fundamental dogma is so important. Contending that hard atheism is rational enables political parties to become more polarizing and ideologies more radical. To avoid this, hard atheism should be given the same treatment as religious faith. Perhaps the most responsible way of organising society may be for one's view on faith, whether religious or agnostic, to be a means of individual development separate from politics, which plays a role of collective guidance. However, modern politics utilizes atheism to progress under the guise of 'rationality,' further contaminating the individual identities of the Western world with polarization, division, and resentment.