

Would this same teenager be upset if her little brother got a permanent marker and drew dinosaurs on the teddy bear she'd had since she was two? At worst, he's damaged a raggedy old toy that wouldn't fetch \$1 at a garage sale, so there's no reason for her to care, right?

Would she be upset if her band got to play at a school dance and a bunch of kids threw water balloons at them? The band wasn't being paid so they didn't lose anything, and the water-balloon assault was more entertaining than the band's music (which, the balloon throwers assure her, stunk). So where's the harm?

The fact is, we all have things, practices, or traditions that we value but that others don't care about. So long as these things don't hurt anyone, the moral atheist doesn't attack them. There's no reason to, and many reasons not to.

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SHOULD ATHEISTS DISRESPECT RELIGION?

A Question of Moral Atheism

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If the atheist is striking out at religion because religious behavior feels like an attack on atheism, then odds aren't bad that the atheist is not really mad at religion, but rather mad about how religious people are treating him. Some atheists think that there's nothing wrong with disrupting or disrespecting religious things because religion is false and therefore has no value. But even if these things mean nothing to an atheist, they do have value to religious people. And if you disrespect things that others consider valuable, you can't demand that they respect things that you consider valuable. For example, consider an atheist teenager who, forced to go to church with her parents, makes loud snoring noises during a moment of what is supposed to be silent prayer, or who grinningly hands out ham sandwiches at a family picnic that is supposed to be kosher. In both of these cases, she thinks she's not really doing anything wrong since religion is false so talking to God or keeping kosher mean nothing.

IS THERE ANY reason for an atheist to respect people's religious beliefs and practices? Or is it "open season" on the ridiculous things religious people think and do? For example, some atheists actively disrespect religious practices by making a show of not waiting for grace to be said before eating a meal with religious relatives. But what is the point of such disrespect? If this is intended as a demonstration of atheism or to show that the atheist thinks religion is "stupid," then the performance is likely less than effective. People may remember the atheist's behavior as rudeness or condescension and conclude that such behavior goes along with a lack of religious belief. Alternately, they may simply think the atheist is a jerk. If the disruptive behavior is intended to make it difficult for people to practice their beliefs, then the atheist is inviting payback in kind. In fact, no matter how you slice it, this kind of behavior is problematic from a philosophical standpoint.

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QUESTIONS OF MORAL ATHEISM:

INSTRUCTIONS

We appreciate your interest in helping us spread information about moral atheism! To make copies of this pamphlet for your own use or to share with friends, follow these simple steps:

1. Print pages one and two of this document, one on each side of the same piece of paper (if you don't have access to a duplex printer, print page one, put the page back in the paper tray upside down, and print page two — depending on the type of printer, you may have to experiment a bit).
2. Cut the printout in two, using the thin rules across the middle of the page as a guide.
3. Fold the two pieces of paper in half, making a pair of small pamphlets.
4. Keep one of the pamphlets to read, and give the other away to an interested friend or stranger.

That's it! If you have any questions, suggestions, or comments, we invite you to share them by leaving a comment on blog.iamanatheist.org. Thanks!
