

But because God is infinitely merciful, He sent a portion of Himself to Earth as a human to be killed, and this killing of an innocent divine being in human form became a sacrifice of such significance that it serves to justly offset the sins of anyone who accepts it. This allows both justice and mercy to be served.

Or so they say.

Is justice served if a father willingly goes to jail for the crimes of his child? Would a merciful judge allow such a sentence to be carried out? Can justice ever be served by the execution of an innocent? Is it just that those who believe in Jesus are not punished for their sins while those who have not heard of Jesus are eternally tormented? And why would an infinitely wise and loving God create a universe where something so bizarre had to be done to maintain balance?

As a moral atheist, I can appreciate the Christian desire to keep their philosophy consistent and find a solution the mercy vs. justice conflict. But, to me, it all sounds too contrived to make any sense.

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CAN GOD BE BOTH MERCIFUL AND JUST?

A Question of Moral Atheism

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committing a crime. If we are all more or less flawed by nature, God's infinite mercy might lead Him to forgive all sins. But would this be just? Justice is the administering of punishment that is appropriate for a crime. An infinitely just being would always assign appropriate punishment — no more, no less. In the context of this discussion, justice gets us in trouble because there is no good, objective way to assign it. Is it just to let a murderer avoid jail because his violence is motivated by insanity? It might be. Is it just to punish someone eternally for disobeying the command of an infinite being? Perhaps. Then again, perhaps not. There is no yard stick by which we can measure such things. Christians sometimes argue that humanity is so sinful that everyone falls short of deserving to go to Heaven. Allowing humans an ultimate reward when they are "soiled" by sin would not be just, so God cannot allow it.

THE CHRISTIAN GOD is sometimes described as both infinitely merciful and infinitely just. But is it logically possible for one being to have both of these qualities? Mercy means having pity or compassion for somebody in one's power. It is typified by the judge who gives a man a lower sentence because the man's crime was motivated by need instead of by greed. What, then, would infinite mercy be? One could argue that infinite mercy would mean moving as far as possible in the direction of mercy — that is, always forgiving crimes. One could also argue that infinite mercy means having infinite compassion for the wrongdoer and acting accordingly. If the wrongdoer is truly unrepentant and had no excuse for committing a crime, an infinitely merciful being might still think punishment was in order. But this runs into a problem when the infinitely merciful being is God. Because God has complete understanding of human frailties, it may be that there is no such thing as a sinful human who has no excuse for

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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!
