

I am comfortable with contradictions. I take solace in meditating on the many opposing views about how someone is supposed to live or act and in accepting people for how they are. I like nonjudgmental compassion. I like to make up my own mind about right and wrong and don't want to be guided by a religious higher power. My belief is that, most of the time, when we judge others, that we are wrong. In this essay, I explain why I don't follow a religious belief system. I will start by defining belief, belief system and religion, each in turn.

The Webster dictionary defines a belief as a feeling of being sure that someone or something exists or that something is true. By extension, a belief system is the set of beliefs that are held by a person or society about what is right and wrong and what is true and false. Religions are based on belief systems that depend on a higher power. The Oxford dictionary defines religion as: "The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or Gods." In religions, the source of knowledge about what is right and wrong comes from a super human source. In the world's monotheistic religions – such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism – the source of knowledge about our place in the world and the manual for proper conduct are contained in books such as: The Torah, the Bible, the Koran, and the Avesta.

These books purport to contain instructions from higher powers. While I appreciate the many good ideas in these books, I have also found many ideas I don't like and many contradictions within them. For example, Corinthians 6:9–10 says that certain types of people "will not inherit the kingdom of God." The list of such people begins with fornicators, idolaters, and adulterers, and it ends with thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers, male prostitutes, and sodomites. It feels wrong to me and my belief system that, for example, sodomites should be singled out for denial into heaven.

The Bible, like all great religious behavioral cookbooks, is full of contradictions. For example, in Deuteronomy 32:4, Moses observed, "Everything He does is just and fair. He is a faithful God who does no wrong; how just and upright He is!" If God created our genetic code, and if our sexual disposition is a genetically inherited trait, and if God is "just and fair," then how can God make a whole group of people, such as homosexuals, simply for the purpose of excluding them from heaven.

Due to the many contradictions in religious belief systems, I have concluded that I must take matter of determining right and wrong into my own hands. For me, meditation and mindfulness allow me to ponder contradictions and come to full acceptance of others, and at the same time to determine my own life path.

According to the Pew Research Center, there are over 2 billion Christians and nearly 1.7 billion Muslims in the world. This means that over half of the world's population believes in a cookbook moral belief system. Their projections also indicate that these numbers are set to rise. There are many reasons as to why religion is believed in by so many people. There are many different types of religion and many different ways to practice in a religion; it all depends on the individual. But I wonder if most individuals decide to have the faith they have for themselves or if we are nurtured to believe. Almost every religious friend I have has been raised in a religious family and has been nurtured their whole lives to believe in their specific God and religion. The beliefs of someone's family and social circles, among other factors (for example race, class, gender etc.) seem to influence what people end up believing in. For example, if someone is raised in Saudi Arabia, they are likely to become a Sunni Muslim. If someone is raised in Utah, they are likely to become a Mormon. People's adoption of faiths seems to be more a function of their environment than a conscious choice.

Even though I understand that religion can give people meaning and purpose, if religious beliefs are taught to people, and if there are many different religions (none of which can prove that their God is better than the others'), then perhaps learning to believe in a religion is like being "enculturated." The dictionary defines enculturation as: "the gradual acquisition of the characteristics and norms of a culture or group by a person, another culture, etc."

I used to believe in God when I was little. My grandmother is Catholic and I was baptized as a child. Many of my friends also believed in God. I found comfort in believing. I felt protected and safe. It was also relieving to know that I had somewhere to go after life, which made me less afraid of dying. I am fortunate in that I have travelled to many countries for months at a time (Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Czech, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, France, Britain, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, etc.). My certainty in God began to change through foreign travel. I began to question my religious beliefs when I learned about peoples' different faiths and inconsistent interpretations of God. How could there be so many different ways to define God and his supposed expectations on us? Then my dad, who is an atheist, showed me that there was an option that did not require believing in a God. I am surprised that it was not scary discovering there was another option and it was very easy for me to become atheist. Why do people need religion? Is there a comfort in it? Do people need some sort of answer?

There was a pastor (a friend of a friend's parents) who attended Harvard for religious studies. I was fascinated by him because of the fact that he studied many different belief systems such as, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and atheism...yet still kept faith in his religion, Christianity. I wondered, given the exposure he had had to so many different faiths, how he knew that his faith was the "true" faith. Why did he have so much conviction in his own faith despite all the evidence that faiths could be arbitrary? Was his faith nurtured into him from childhood or did he find it later in life? Did his faith swell from inside him or was he pushed into him by others with his faith.

The Harvard religious studies graduate was very forgiving of others who did not share his faith in Christianity. He was happy to believe in Christ and let others believe in Mohammad or whatever other religion connected them to some sort of morality and feeling of being loved. But not all religious people have developed such an accepting point of view about others. How should we judge the idea of people having a religion when people become extreme in their points of view? What should we say about faith when a faithful person thinks that they are being moral by not being accepting of a gay person or a person of another faith or a person who wants to do something they don't agree with - such as have an abortion? Should we banish that person's faith?

Perhaps these people would be intolerant regardless of whether they were religious or not, but maybe their religion gives them a fancy way to justify their close-mindedness? That is the problem with religion, if it is brainwashed into us, it can be used to teach us to see others as less than ourselves. It can oppress our natural affection for other humans, and reduce our natural tolerance, and lead us to becoming judgmental. There are so many different points of view about what is wrong or right. For example, there are cultures where homosexuality is accepted and those in which it is not. Should the existence of these different points of view be seen as a threat to one's beliefs or a reason to question one's beliefs? Or, should we stamp out those who don't believe what we believe? How can a society be made up of people who believe in different interpretations of morality?

I question faith. For me, it has a multitude of meanings and manifests in people's lives in many ways. Faith is very individual and means different ways of living and acting according to personal faith in a religion or belief system. I think religion is often used as an excuse to "sin" and then be forgiven. Many people use the excuse of being religious to hurt others; for example, to hurt gay people. Religion has become very jaded and has, in many cases, become a competition. ("My religion is better than yours.") I worry about the absolute mindsets that people with faith develop. At the same time, I don't know enough to tell them not to believe. I personally do not have a belief in any religion, nor do I judge others for having one. Humans know too little to judge each other.

Given how humble I feel about what I know, I am surprised by how certain others are in their faiths. How can anyone make the decision to believe or not believe in anything? I suppose for the religious person it all depends on who, where, and in what circumstances they were raised. Or, perhaps a person experienced a miracle and became a believer. To me, it doesn't matter; whatever people want to believe in is absolutely their choice as everyone deserves the right to experience life exactly the way they want to experience it. I perceive flaws in having a faith and yet I do not feel that I have the right to tell people what to believe. If I tell people what to believe, then I am starting my own religion and brainwashing system and contradicting my own idea of not judging others.

We are born onto a small planet in a vast universe. We are surrounded by strangers, by nature and cities, and can feel confused and overwhelmed. We need a rudder to guide our daily lives and tell us that the world makes sense. We turn to supernatural belief systems to explain those things that science has not yet discovered and we turn to our faith to tell us how to treat others. But which faith is the right faith? As already mentioned, my travels have made me unable to accept a single faith. Living in the United States has also allowed me to see that different faiths can co-exist. I believe strongly in not having our government ruled by religion. I am the proud ancestor of one of the co-authors of the First Amendment separating Church and State. It is my deep respect for allowing others to have their faith, which makes me totally adamant that no one religion should have control over the power system. That is why even though I am an atheist who thinks religious beliefs can do harm, I still believe that all religions deserve to be respected. There's a certain beauty in letting others be themselves and letting you be yourself. The way we allow all religions to be in the United States creates a form of balance and mental peace in each of us. We can each choose what beliefs give us comfort and yet are protected, by the First Amendment, from others forcing their beliefs. In the United States, we have people who have come from all parts of the world and who have many different beliefs. Some are Jews, or Muslims or Christians and some do not believe in God at all. The US shows that we can all get along, even though we are all brought up to think differently about the world.

In conclusion, even though any one religion may be too domineering over a particular black sheep group, when a lot of religions are allowed to co-exist, as they do in the United States and when the government is not ruled by any one religion, then the worst of any religion can be neutralized and the best of all the religions has a chance to come out. Most of all, as Americans who are protected from other's religions by the First Amendment, we are able to see many beliefs and thus be unshackled from anyone of them and can be free to find new meanings. For me, pondering the ideas of other religions, in a meditative state, helps me to make up my own mind, not because, I believe in God, but because, like my Founding Father ancestors, I believe in myself.