



Dirty, rotten, immoral, godless, evil atheists

I was recently interviewed by a journalist from [Free Malaysia Today \(FMT\)](#), in which she asked me on what I thought about the [recent 2017 study by Gervais and his associates](#) regarding the near worldwide bias against atheists. The prejudice against atheists isn't really news to me, but what was news was Gervais's study reported that even atheists were found to be unconsciously biased against their fellow atheists, thinking them immoral.

[My FMT interview was published today \[PDF article\]](#), but sadly a great deal of what I said in the interview was not published. Consequently, the FMT article was a little emasculated. So, I think it wise to publish my full opinion and remarks here for posterity.

The strong distrust of atheists should not really surprise us. There is a tendency in many countries, including secular ones, to be biased against atheists. In the US, for instance, the [Gallup poll in 2015](#) revealed that atheists were the second least trusted group of people, and the American people would rather have a Muslim than an atheist as their President. Bias against atheists is even stronger in highly religious countries like Malaysia, where for one to come out as an atheist can be socially very detrimental. A recent statement by a Malaysian government minister, for instance, have called all atheists, in his own words, ["to be hunted down vehemently"](#).

The recent results from the study by Gervais and his associates are not unique because they are supported by the findings from other studies. But unlike

previous studies that were smaller in scope and limited to only participants in the Western countries, Gervais's recent study is much more comprehensive, covering over 3,000 people across 13 countries (including secular and religious countries) in five continents.

Gervais's study reveal our preconceived notions or bias against atheists, that atheists are morally bad. But we need to be careful not to extrapolate or misinterpret Gervais's findings to mean something they are not. They cannot be taken as evidence that atheists are indeed morally bad -- or even good. Science is not a democratic-like process. Just because the majority share the same opinion does not make the opinion factually true. Instead, science often reveals what seems at first to be common sense or intuitively right to be at the end inaccurate, if not entirely erroneous. A [2016 study by CSIRO](#) (The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation), for instance, reported that nearly two thirds of Australians said it was "common sense" that climate change was not real and even if real, not human-induced.

Studies like Gervais's are really, at the fundamental level, asking us two questions: why is religion so important to us, and what is morality and is it only derived from religion?

How many gods have we humans worshiped, past and present? One [encyclopedia of religions I read says 2,500](#), another 4,000 to 5,000, and if we include the various Hindu gods, one estimate even reported over 33 million gods. The world has currently over 7 billion people, and about 85% of them hold onto some sort of religious beliefs. Atheism is growing in some parts of the world, but the religious still far outnumber the atheists. Why are we humans so religious? Why has religion survived and thrived throughout human history? Some religions, like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, have persisted for centuries, but this is not true for most religions. The average lifespan of a religion is 25 years. Religions literally come and go, but our desire to worship "something" persists. Religion is not a fluke, a one-off, short random event in our human history.

Religion is evolutionary by-product of human cognition. We use religion to help us to find meaning, to make sense of our world and our purpose. Unlike animals, we have an innate propensity to find meaningful patterns out of seemingly random or chaotic events. We seek to understand how our world works, why it works -- and who caused it. It is insufficient for us just to know the "hows" and "whys". We

also seek to find explanations of events in terms of agents; that is, determining who or what have caused those events. Even children as young as three years tend to invoke supernatural reasoning to explain phenomena they do not understand. And these agents are perceived by children to act for a purpose and not by chance -- and these agents need not be visible. Children find it easier, for example, to accept that plants and animals are brought about for a reason rather than they arose by chance or for no reason. In other words, we tend to be religious rather than not.

Religion is important to many people because their identity, hopes, culture, and moral system are derived from their religion. To many people, morality is by default some very complicated code of conduct that requires supernatural definition, justification, and guidance.



Many believe our morality can only be derived from supernatural code of conduct. (c) Stéphane Bidouze @ fotolia.com

But morality is actually a very simple concept, so simple that many people find hard to believe it at first: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This so-called Golden Rule is essentially: if we want to be treated nicely by others, then be nice.

Even primates have shown to have some sense of morality too. Chimpanzees, who cannot swim, have been observed to drown in zoo moats trying to save others, and they have also been observed to console others. In a classic experiment where given the chance to obtain food by pulling a chain that would also deliver an electric shock to another, rhesus monkeys would rather starve themselves for

several days than cause pain to their companions.



Morality in animals? In a classic experiment where rhesus monkeys would rather starve for several days than cause pain to their companions because pulling a food chain brings food to them but delivers electrical shocks to their companions. (c) ake @ fotolia.com.

If forsaking religion is bad, then there should be some evidence that secular societies tend to fail or be worse off than religious societies. Yet, scientific studies consistently show the opposite: that the tendency is people in secular countries, compared to those in religious ones, are more involved in charity work; are more trusting of strangers; have higher IQ scores; have lower levels of prejudice, ethnocentrism, racism, and homophobia; show greater support for women's equality; are more appreciative of science; and have higher rates of subject well-being. Secular countries also show higher economic growth, higher democratic stability, and better governance than religious countries.

At the end, the results from Gervais's recent study is interesting and important, for they highlight how strongly inclined we are toward religion and how many of us still see morality on a supernatural basis.

But perception is not proof. Our perception is limited by our personal experience and myopic perspective, and it is strongly influenced by our bias. Science have instead shown that the link between the absence of religion and moral deficiencies is not as clear, strong, or straightforward as the majority of us like to

believe.