ARE ATHEISTS IMMORAL?

SOME PEOPLE SAY ATHEISTS ARE IMMORAL.

They might argue that, if you don't believe in a god, then there is no reason to be good or to care about the consequences of your actions. They say they can't see any reason why you wouldn't always act in your own self-interest. Without religion, its guidance, laws, and the promise of reward and punishment, some people believe the world would be a much more selfish and cruel place to live.

> 'If god does not exist, then everything is permitted'.
>
> **FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY,**
> The Brothers Karamazov

Some people argue that, whether a god exists or not, it might still be better that people believe in one.

The French philosopher Voltaire said *'If god did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him'*. Rumours circulated that he would not allow his friends to discuss their atheism in front of the people who worked for him: *'I want my lawyer, tailor, valets, even my wife to believe in God. I think that if they do I shall be robbed less and cheated less.'*

QUESTIONS:

- Do you think the world would be a kinder place with or without religion?

- If religious belief did make people kinder, would that be a reason to promote it even if those beliefs were not true?
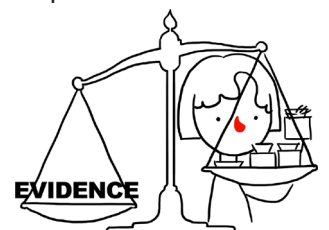
LOOKING AT THE EVIDENCE

Whether believing in a god makes one's behavior better or worse is an **empirical** claim. That means it is a claim that can be tested. We can look at the evidence to judge whether it is true.

Although some non-religious people choose to behave badly, it is clear that many are good people. It is also clear that while many religious people perform acts of kindness, religious belief does not always succeed in motivating people to be good.

What does the evidence show? Research appears to show that countries with larger non-religious populations do not have higher rates of crime or suffer other negative consequences. In 2009 the Global Peace Index assessed countries' involvement in foreign wars, rate of murders, and number of people in prison. The results showed that the most peaceful countries were those with more atheists and fewer regular worshipers[1]. Other analysis shows that more religious countries are less democratic[2] and have higher levels of corruption[3].

This does not necessarily mean that a more religious population is the cause of these problems (it may be the other way round – the existence of such problems could cause more people to turn to religion – or it may be that something else is causing countries to become both more peaceful and more non-religious). However, it does add some support to the argument that atheists are no less moral than the religious. Many humanists therefore believe that if the world becomes less religious, we would not need to worry that kindness and compassion would disappear or that society would collapse.

1 www.patheos.com/blogs/epiphenom/2009/06/atheist-nations-are-more-peaceful.html

2 www.patheos.com/blogs/epiphenom/2011/01/less-god-and-more-democracy.html

3 www.patheos.com/blogs/epiphenom/2014/01/religious-countries-are-most-corrupt.html