

TRANSADVOCATE

God Does Not Love Trans People

By Guest

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Abstract

This guest Transadvocate post comes from Natalie Reed. Reed describes herself as “a magical young woman who lives in the mists and pines of Vancouver, British Columbia, where she fends off the oppressive gloom and darkness basking in the warm glow of her laptop, thinking things about stuff and writing stuff about the things.” You [...]

Article

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He doesn't love anyone. He's not there at all.

I'm sorry.

Lately there have been a number of posts circulating throughout the trans blogosphere making statements to the effect that God loves and accepts His transgender children, and that being trans is not necessarily in conflict with being a religious believer, or even a Christian, Muslim or Jew. While I perfectly understand the motivation behind these posts, and why people feel such a strong need for this message, I nonetheless find it very deeply problematic, and kinda sorta feel a bit of a compelling need to address it. See, I honestly believe that religious faith is inherently dangerous and harmful, that we, the queer community, often are especially victimized by it, and especially ought to understand its potential harms, that the danger is an element of the underlying definition of religious faith itself rather than simply particular sects, beliefs or institutions based upon it, and that we are doing ourselves a pretty big disservice in constructing apologetics (or encouraging them) designed to ease the dissonance between our identities and the belief systems we hold dear.

That dissonance is a gift.

I believe there is something both tragic but very human to it, as well. Something reminiscent of a victim of abuse, long after escaping the relationship, still on some level wanting to feel forgiven and loved by her abuser.

Given that I'm an atheist blogger, on a prominent “new atheist” network, who is very committed in that aspect of her beliefs, it was more or less inevitable that I'd have to address this issue sooner or later, even though when compared to people like PZ Myers and Greta Christina, I'm a very soft-spoken,

wimpy, spineless sort of atheist, who rarely openly expresses her rage and anger. But the reason I'm doing this now, and risking the fall-out it could trigger, is because this past week has seen the question of God's love of trans people or lack thereof, and the relationship between transgenderism and religion, come much more out in the open than it typically is. Right now, the question isn't a spooky background noise, it's a big scary monster jumping out at me.

The first of these posts initiating this discussion was by the typically wonderful Monica Roberts of Transgriot. It's an excellent blog, and provides a much-needed voice from trans women of colour. I can't, however, simply look the other way when people I respect (no matter how much) begin openly supporting ideas I find deeply problematic and dangerous. Shortly after, on Wednesday, this post appeared on Liar, Lunatic Or Lorax, featuring a collection of links geared specifically towards reconciling transgenderism and religious belief. Later that day, Jillian Page, a lovely woman who I once had the privilege of meeting very briefly at a TDOR event in Berri Square, and blogger with the Montreal Gazette, threw her own two cents in.

To be honest, I've been, and still am, very, very nervous about writing this post. Like I said, as far as Gnu Atheists go, I'm wimpy as they get. I know some people are going to be very hurt and angered by this. Some people are going to feel threatened or attacked. I'm going to alienate some of my readers and supporters.

Even simply suggesting on twitter that I was planning this response ended up resulting in some extremely angry reactions from some of my allies in the trans community, like Stephen Ira and Ira Gray. I was accused of arrogance, ethnocentrism, imperialism, shallowness, never having thought about the race or class implications of atheism and religion, ignorance of the more complex aspects theology such as theodicy (NOT relevant to my criticisms), and confusing the institutions of Abrahamic religions with religion itself (which I was not... when I say I think all religious faith is dangerous, I mean I think all religious faith is dangerous, up to and including non-abrahamic, non-organized, and even highly personal forms of religious faith).

But I need to speak about this. I feel it's important. When I see problematic and potentially very dangerous, harmful ideas being uncritically accepted by our community, and what critical examination is voiced being met with outright hostility, that is something I need to address, no matter how much controversy it risks, or what friends I may lose.

The reason I find these assertions of God's love for trans people, or the compatibility of religious belief with being transgender, problematic is not anything as direct or basic as the way that most mainstream forms of Abrahamic religions have targeted and victimized LGBTQ people (though that certainly relates and I do find this adds a particularly tragic dimension to it, as noted above). If that were the case, then presenting alternative religions without this history of discrimination would be a sufficient challenge to my claim that religious faith is itself dangerous and harmful. And if that were the case, creating new variants of religion that are accepting of queer identities would be a beneficial and worthwhile thing to do.

But as much as it may be a bad habit of the atheist movement in general, I am not confusing "religion" with "Christianity". My attitude does not single out Christianity for criticism. My criticism is towards religious faith itself. And in fact, my attitude is not based on any special or unique animosity towards

religion, but rather due to refusing to provide special deference of special consideration towards those beliefs, ideas and concepts that are deemed religious or spiritual. Instead, I choose to hold such beliefs, ideas and concepts to the same standards I hold all beliefs, ideas and concepts.

I identify as a skeptic first, atheist later. Skepticism is a process of remembering to question assumptions, to hesitate, to doubt, to consider other possibilities. You weigh those possibilities based on evidence and thought, and come to a tentative conclusion, which is open to being modified. It's a system of precaution, designed to cope with how irrational and silly our brains can be, how quick we are to base our beliefs only on what we want to believe rather than what makes the most sense, and how incredibly fallible our perceptions, perspectives and interpretations are. Our brains are inefficient, gooey little things that do lots of weird things, and aren't remotely up to the epistemological demands we place on them. So... skepticism. It helps.

That could be our motto, actually. "Skepticism. It helps". What do you think?

In the same way that I am a feminist because that is where I arrived through applying skepticism and critical thought to gender, I am only an atheist because that is where I arrived through applying skepticism and critical thought to questions of the divine. I consider all ideas the same way. And when applying thought to the question of God or gods, and holding those questions to the same standards I hold any other, the conclusion one arrives at is that as emotionally and psycho-socially rewarding as a belief in God may be, there's just no good reason to trust that assumption. In terms of the observable world, there's no evidence supporting it, and plenty of evidence counter-indicating most religion's conceptions of it. And in terms of the "unknowable", and that which we can't possibly understand or observe, there's no reason to worry about it. It might as well not be there. "That of which we cannot speak we must remain silent."

Faith is the opposite of skepticism. Faith is "just knowing". Under ideal circumstances, a person derives their conclusions from observations, facts and thinking things through. If new perspectives, new ideas, new considerations, new arguments, new observations or new facts come along, we adapt the conclusion. Faith asks us instead to work backwards. We have the conclusion already. Thought, perspectives, observations, facts and interpretations are structured to support the conclusion. Facts that contradict it are either denied, or re-interpreted and re-framed until they can fit with the original conclusion. For instance, if the initial conclusion is that God created man and woman, and for a man to don a woman's clothing is a sin, then suddenly finding yourself trans puts you in conflict with the conclusion your faith states MUST be the case. So instead of reconsidering the initial conclusion, and accepting that maybe the whole God thing isn't quite right, you either adapt the facts (suppressing your trans identity and attempting to conform) or you re-interpret and contort your perspective until it all fits together somehow. He made you this way because He loves you. He made you this way to test your strength. He made you this way because suffering brings you closer to Him. Etc.

Faith is dangerous because it is the opposite of thought. Because it deliberately silences, halts, and suppresses thought. It asks us to simply accept, and not to question. It says that evidence is unnecessary. It becomes a belief that is "above" criticism. Therefore any action taken on account of that belief does not need to consider its consequences, its danger, or who it harms. You don't consider anything at all, really. All the usual intellectual and ethical precautions that keep us from making mistakes get thrown aside. You "just know". Like George W. Bush "just knew" the invasion of Iraq was

the right thing to do.

I do not believe religion is the root of all evil. But I believe absolute certainty is the root of a whole lot of it. The failure to accept the possibility that you have things wrong is the fastest track to doing something terrible. Faith deliberately suppresses the considerations and checks that keep us from absolute certainty.

Questioning things is extremely important, as is being able to adapt our ideas. For a long, long time, the basic assumption, taken on faith, was that human beings are divided into two binary, discrete genders. All of us trans people are intimately aware of the incredible harm and suffering that has been done to maintain this unexamined assumption. Why accept the danger of unexamined assumptions, the importance of questioning, and the value of being open to reconsidering your views under most circumstances, but when the question concerns the spiritual, we then take the opposite position and suddenly embrace faith- “just knowing”? Like how others “just know” that if you have a penis you’re a man and if you have a vagina you’re a woman (“it’s common sense!”)? What makes religious ideas any different than others, and creates a different standard by which they should be challenged or considered? Why offer them this special deference? Just because people feel strongly about it? Some people feel very strongly about how much they hate trannies, too.

I’ve talked before about how adopting the language of religious dogma in order to challenge it, such as asking Christians to be more like Christ bears the risk of them following that towards a different interpretation of Christ than the one we had in mind (such as the infinitely tolerant and forgiving all-loving dude on a permanent ecstasy roll), and I’ve also talked before about how even moderate and level-headed versions of religious belief help insulate and normalize the more dangerous religious believers, and how while religion doesn’t always result in harm that doesn’t mean it’s harmless. Religion doesn’t really make a good person any more good, nor does it really make a good person bad, but it can definitely make a bad person a lot more dangerous, by giving them conviction, certainty, and an excuse.

Queer people ought especially understand the danger of giving people an unassailable justification, having someone have a “higher power” to claim is above the ethics of our world. Many of us have been killed on account of such absolute convictions, and the decision not to question the orders from on high. I have trouble understanding how any queer person can not be keenly aware of how dangerous this kind of thinking is, not be afraid of it, or even make excuses for it.

These considerations are in play here as well... saying “God loves trans people” has absolutely no more underlying justification, evidence or substance than does “God hates fags”. Neither party has any evidence on which to base this, and both are just extrapolations based on assuming God’s will ought reflect their own. We cannot possibly know how God feels about anyone (entertaining briefly the possibility that He even exists). When you introduce “God loves trans people” into the dialogue, you have nothing backing you up with which to cause a transphobic religious believer to accept your message or reconsider their position, but you have just validated, supported and helped normalize his belief in God- a God that he probably thinks hates us very, very much. Congrats! You spur on religious belief which, more often than not, maintains a climate of bigotry towards LGBTQ individuals. You insulate and protect them. You assent to the foundations of their hate, which they claim as justification. Asserting there is a God, and supporting the human tendency towards religious faith (whatever its form), does nothing but bolster the underlying principles on which the Westboro Baptist Church is based. If we wish

to fight these organizations, we can't do so simply pitting our own intuitive, faith-based assumption of God against theirs. We need to attack the foundation: the idea that faith is a good, or at least harmless, thing, and that God's will is what matters and takes precedence over secular considerations and ethics like "hey, maybe it's kinda uncool to go around hating the fuck out of people just because they happen to have a non-normative gender or sexuality. Maybe instead of worrying so much about the unknowable divine, we might try to make things in this world not so shitty for queer folk".

I honestly have no idea why contemporary Abrahamic religion has tended towards such hatred of queer people. It's not treated the same way in all religious circumstances, and there are some religions where it was offered varying degrees of conditional acceptance... the trans priestesses of Cybele in ancient Greece, India's Hijra, the eunuchs in certain contexts of Christianity and Islam, the Two-Spirit identities in various First Nations spiritual systems, similar beliefs in early Norse paganism wherein those who could transcend the boundaries between genders were supposed to be better able to transcend the boundaries between the material and immaterial worlds, etc. But in all of these contexts you can still find mistreatment of queer people justified by faith, and faith itself... faith does not bode well for trans folk, particularly in our current culture.

Faith leans towards intuitions. And queerness is always counter-intuitive. It by definition exists in contradiction to the assumed norms of gender and sexuality. The common sense remark earlier? Faith and common sense have a lot in common. "Common sense" takes something as a given rather than critically examining it. "Common sense" suggests trans identities are not legitimate. It says it's silly to question whether men are really men and women are really women. It says vagina = woman, penis = man. It says that homosexuality is aberrant and wrong. But not simply accepting intuitions and common sense... valuing questions, thought, diverse perspectives, diverse experiences, reconsideration, fighting against the myths and superstitions and misunderstandings with education and facts... that is how we'll build acceptance for queer people.

So why the hostility towards my saying I was going to write this article? Why did trans people react so negatively? Especially considering the brutality with which LGBTQ people have been treated by religion, and how much religion has been and remains the primary obstacle in our struggle for equality and basic human rights. Why was my statement that all religious faith is dangerous casually said to "reek of ethnocentrism"? Why did people immediately jump to such vitriolic and harsh assumptions about my motive and position? A lot of the arguments that seemed to pop up are articulated in this piece by Morgan M. Page, *Queerly Religious*, on *Pretty Queer*. Most of the time, I think *Pretty Queer* is pretty good, it even features occasional contributions from Imogen Binnie who is quite possibly one of my favourite people in the universe, and I do respect Ms. Page quite a bit, but in this piece...well... she kind of makes a lot of really offensive assumptions about queer atheists. Which seem to be assumptions entrenched amongst a lot of queer folk who are sympathetic towards religious belief.

Her principal argument seems hinged on the assumption that all queer atheists have negative attitudes towards religion merely because they've made the mistake of confusing religion in general with "The Big Three", and more so the institutions surrounding them. As I said earlier, that is simply not the case. When I say all religion I do mean all religion.

Buddhism is often held up amongst more left-wing circles (such as the queer community) as an example of a religion that is "harmless", and can mesh with our current post-modern moralities and worldviews. But

I don't for a second believe that Buddhism doesn't carry the same dangers. I don't for a second believe that there has never been a rapist in a Buddhist culture who told his victim to not worry or be so upset, because after all, this world is merely illusion and dust. Buddhism holds many of the same destructive attitudes as does Christianity in terms of accepting whatever horrible situation has been inflicted upon you in this world and to not ask for better because this world doesn't really count. Like Christianity, it teaches us not to work towards improving our world and our lives and taking joy in it but instead to invest our hope in the possibility that there's "something else". Like Christianity, it teaches us to feel ashamed of our desires. Like Christianity, it teaches us that suffering and ascetism are to be embraced as holy. Like Christianity, it has a strong current of patriarchy and positions men above women in its institutional ranks. Like Christianity it teaches us not to be concerned with "worldly matters"... like say the fact that our body does not match our gender. Etc.

No. ALL religion is dangerous. The ONLY way that I honestly accept Buddhism as being a bit less harmful than Christianity is on the basis that it encourages actual thought and meditation rather than just accepting scripture. It's also more philosophically sophisticated. So like some of the more scholarly branches of Judaism, it has the benefit of not teaching the rejection of thought and exploration wholesale. But it still ultimately places those holy ancient teachings as paramount and unassailable. Thought is good, but only in the context of thinking about your faith, within the assumptions of that faith. It still asks you to "just know" stuff. Still claims that much of what it says is "beyond" human understanding and thought and questioning and insight, but at the same time also claims to know the nature of those things that are beyond human understanding, thought, questioning, criticism and insight.

So on this basis at least, my disdain for religious faith is not ethnocentric. It is dispersed globally.

Page also argues about how religion has at times been used an instrument of protecting queer people, and pushing for their rights. That in some situations, communities, cultures and points in history, certain religions or religious structures were the only safety and support that queer people had.

This is a valid point and she's correct. But it doesn't address any of the problems with faith that I've described. Guns and bombs have been used in the service of just revolutions and wars. But that does not make guns and bombs harmless and snuggly. The fact that something can occasionally be used for just ends does not make it any less dangerous or capable of being used for unjust ends. And like guns, more often than not, religion is not put to service for the protection of the weak and vulnerable. Like guns, more often than not, religion is put to service to maintain the positions of the strong and powerful.

Another thing I find very troubling and offensive about Page's post is how she sneeringly describes atheism as "trendy". You know where I've seen this tactic before, being used to belittle someone's identity and act like rather than being a genuine expression of self it's only trying to hop on a hipster bandwagon? It's exactly what I've seen said of "trendy" queer people. In the same tone. For the same purposes. It's also a "Shut Up, That's Why". "Psssh... why should I listen to this. You're just trying to be cool. But I'm above all that."

I do perfectly understand the way that challenging religion and describing it as dangerous or harmful can be threatening. Really, I do. It's a challenge to something that is deeply interwoven with an

individual's identity. This is part of how religion works, in fact... these are ideas that have survived and propagated precisely because they offer a great deal of emotional, psychological and cultural rewards and comfort, while exacting considerable emotional, psychological and cultural costs to give up.

These challenges to religion can end up becoming particularly threatening and hurtful when speaking to communities for whom religion plays more than simply a dogmatic or institutional role. This is particularly true when speaking of people of colour and other minorities.

In such situations, faith and religion is not simply a governing institution or weekly lesson in what you are and aren't supposed to do or be. For minority groups, under threat of larger and more powerful majority cultures, religion can provide a glue that holds the community together, and through which the communal identity can be enacted and maintained despite the threat of assimilation (or annihilation).

When such communities and groups are under threat from a privileged majority, just as trans people are, it becomes very difficult to extricate criticism of the dangerous aspects of the religion, dogma or faith from what may be ethnocentric bigotry, or desires to impose one culture upon another.

But just as recognizing cissexist or heteronormative bias amongst the privileged is not necessarily an attack upon cis or straight individuals, or an attack upon cisgenderism and heterosexuality itself, it is entirely possible to look at the problematic aspects of religion or faith without that being a criticism of religious believers, or a criticism of whatever positive things are often attached to religion, such as community identity, art, music, poetry, ritual, myth, metaphor, morality, charity, etc.

(it bears note that I believe each and every one of those things is possible in a secular context. Everything good that can occur in both secular and religious contexts, like art and charity, and everything bad that can occur in both contexts, like genocide and bigotry, are irrelevant to the discussion of the pros and cons of religion)

When we position atheism as somehow a "white, privileged" thing, and imagine that the religious beliefs of people of colour are somehow different, and need to left alone, we also buy into some seriously messed up racial narratives. It's imagining a fundamental Other, and a racial essentialism. It enacts the concept that science, rationality and education are for the whites while the racial out groups are "soulful", "intuitive". It helps maintain the distribution of education only to the privileged, while excluding PoC from these discourses as though they can't be expected to keep up.

A trans latina e-friend of mine has been tweeting a bit with me a bit about how this kind of attitude can end up seeming deeply patronizing and appropriative. As though we need to handle the "poor trans women of colour" with kid gloves, like they can't understand these concepts the same way we do. Pushing them away and deepening our enactment of their identities as Other even as we claim to be doing this "for" them, to "protect" them from those atheist meanies who "forcefully" take away the religion they "need" due to their more vulnerable position. All the while happily criticizing the religious institutions of white culture (Christianity) but treating religions of The Other as different, deserving of deference (or even reverence), not to be questioned or held up to critical inquiry.

A very key concept here is the accusations against atheism that it is colonial or imperial in nature seeking to convert people to a particular cultural view. Atheism does not seek to "convert" in any meaningful sense. Religion creates converts through emotional manipulation and other more overt forms

of coercion. Atheism simply discusses, educates and asks you to think things through for yourself. It does not make any promises, like “we’ll rid of suffering!” “you’ll find everlasting life!” or “you’ll attain enlightenment and inner peace!”, nor does it make any threats like “you’ll go to Hell!” or “you’ll be endlessly reborn into lives of anxiety, desperation and suffering!”. It just asks questions, and asks you to ask yourself questions.

But from the position taken by this sort of critique of atheism, ANY act of attempting to share ideas is somehow colonial, imperial or coercive. Which ends up being awfully hypocritical in terms of how they are attempting to “coerce” me into agreeing with their position that I should not question religion... those darned privileged religion-apologists! Imperialistically imposing their accomodationist dogma on me! Grrr! (shaky fist)

And so the wheel turns, and we find a means of positioning religion again as above questioning, again acting like we ought to hold some ideas to a different standard than others. Treat some as special and off limits and not to be discussed. Treat some beliefs as “just is” and some claims as okay to make without any substantiation, even if those beliefs and claims bring harm to others. And so the same old concepts and habits remain entrenched, and religion finds a post-modern armor to protect it from a post-modern world: “respect for other cultures”.

Funnily enough, I’m a lot more post-modernist in my general attitudes and worldview than most people in the skeptic and atheist movement. I believe very strongly in the importance of recognizing the influence of one’s subject position. But the moment I stop believing that’s the priority, and start feeling other considerations take precedence, is when it starts being used as a means of shutting down dialogue, silencing criticism, and telling us not to question, not to think, and not to raise our voices when we see a problem. That’s when I’m more than happy to ditch awareness of relativism and insist on the right to dialogue. I will question other cultures to the same extent I question my own. No more, no less.

This brings us around, though, to the issue of why this all emerges so strongly in the trans community. Why, if we have been so thoroughly victimized by religion in the past, and religion has been used as justification for institutionalized discrimination, denial of our rights, denial of our identities, being pushed out of our families and communities, and even being assaulted and murdered why do we go to so much trouble, and to so much risk, to assure ourselves that we are still accepted and loved by this Patriarch, and that we can still find a location within this abusive system of belief? Why when we are the embodiment of what many religions describe as hateful, sinful and wrong, do we still seek to find a place within them?

Although I’ve at length described why my criticism of religion and faith is universally applied to all religion, and not ethnocentrically centered on Judaeo-Christianity, I think this particular issue, emerging as it does from a Christian-dominated culture, is indeed connected to Christianity.

Christianity teaches us to seek acceptance, approval and love through external sources. It teaches to base our sense of worth and goodness on how well we can meet the expectations of an externalized deity representing all the positive assurances that we could provide for ourselves, while assuring us that not seeking this externally but rather accepting ourselves is pride, and a sinful lack of humility before God. It gives an infinite set of sins for which we are to feel as much guilt as possible, inescapable in their

breadth, and even if we can avoid them, we are given original sin to feel guilty about. And then it offers the true forgiveness, the only absolution, through its One True Path.

The system is rigged to doubt our own feelings and our own self-worth, and to only seek it through the person that created this system and the feelings of guilt and internalized shame in the first place. We have no control over whether we forgive ourselves, or feel happy and worthwhile and secure in who we are, all of that power is handed over to the external deity, embodied through The Church. It is a classic abusive relationship. Teach the victim to feel no sense of self-worth, and be completely emotionally dependent on the abuser.

This conditioning is very, very, very hard to escape. Much like a victim of abuse may go on hoping her abuser still loves her and forgives her even long after escaping the situation.

And this may be why trans people still want to feel loved and accepted by God, despite how abused we have been by this system of belief. Because we were never empowered or taught to provide acceptance and forgiveness to and for ourselves. Our whole lives were defined by being taught to feel ashamed of who we are. And if the only way we ever learned to feel absolution for guilt and shame is through God, that is where we'll seek it, even when in every other way we have turned our backs on this system and began the walk towards being proudly who we are.

Trans people, sisters, brothers, neithers, boths... please stop worrying about whether or not God loves you. What matters most is whether or not you love you.

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My deepest gratitude to The Crommunist for help with some of the more tricky and sensitive aspects of this post. Anything about this post that pissed you off, feel free to blame it on him. Whatever it was you didn't like, it was his idea.

cross-posted from Sincerely, Natalie Reed

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