



Street Epistemology

Why?

By

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Why do atheists do it? **Why** do they do street epistemology? What are the real purposes of street epistemology? What's really behind this relatively new movement?

Atheist evangelists (street epistemologists) answer me this way:

“Boghossian himself says in his book that the purpose of SE is to help people embrace reason. His thesis, so to speak, is that this will cause people to stop using faith, which he considers an unreasonable epistemology.”

“Boghossian” is Peter Boghossian, author of *A Manual for Creating Atheists*. He came up with the idea for and name “street epistemology.” Thanks to his book we have answers to questions about the “purpose” of street epistemology.

“This book will teach you how to talk people out of their faith.”

That is the stated purpose of street epistemology. That is helpful to know what atheists are doing as they approach Christians with questions why they believe in God, but it doesn't explain “why” atheists spend their time doing that. Given that atheists believe this life is all there is, why would they spend any of their limited lifetime to talk with people who believe something they don't believe. Seems like a waste of the little time they have available to them. So, why do they do it? What do they get from it?

Street epistemologists will answer the question of their purpose in many ways:

“The goal of street epistemology is to guide people into engaging their critical thinking skills and applying them to their own beliefs about the world. Street Epistemology is about teaching the most fundamental features of critical thought. It’s about helping people recognize the value of skepticism and the scientific method. It’s about illuminating the distinction between beliefs about the universe and the objective truth of the universe.” *Street Epistemology: The Basics*

“As a Street Epistemologist, you start from a position of “doxasticopenness” in which you acknowledge that the other person’s position may be correct. You should be willing to revise your beliefs if this turns out to be the case. Ideally, it becomes increasingly clear to both of you whether or not the methods can be relied upon to lead one to the truth.” *The Complete Street Epistemology Guide*

While all of this sounds nice enough, it covers up the real purpose of street epistemology. We are indebted to the creator of the system for his honesty. It is because of the book *A Manual for Creating Atheists* that we know **why** street epistemologists do what they do.

We (theists) are in their way. They (atheists) want us out of their way. One atheist told me he hoped the Christian rapture is true so that we all just disappear and they can do what they want to do without interference from us any longer. Another atheist told me that I and Christians like me are a

dying breed and will soon be gone. That goes to the desire of atheists to be rid of us all.

Contain and Eradicate

Boghossian made this strong statement during a talk to atheists about street epistemology soon after his book was published –

“I want the complete and total eradication of the faith virus.” (YouTube, 2013)

It’s important to remember when reading or listening to Boghossian that his vision is both the containment and eradication of belief in God.

Boghossian ended his manual on creating atheists with a chapter titled *Containment Protocols*.’ Boghossian views theism as a virus.

“Just as the body is exposed to toxins so is the mind. Faith is an unclassified cognitive illness disguised as a moral virtue.”

Boghossian is not the only atheist who views theism as a mental illness and theists as mentally ill. He quotes from many well-known atheist authors in his book who agree with his belief that theists should be contained –

“People who harbor strong convictions without evidence belong at the margins of our societies, not in our halls of power.” Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 2004

“Biological virus strategies bear a remarkable resemblance to method of religious propagation. Religious conversion seems to affect personality. In the viral paradigm, the God virus infects and takes over the critical thinking capacity of the individual with respect to his or her own religion, much as rabies affects specific parts of the central nervous system.” *The God Virus*, Darrel Ray, 2009

Ray believes that “religion is a virus with its own unique mix of properties.” After mentioning the HIV virus being different than a cold virus, Ray wrote that religions...

1. Infect people
2. Create antibodies or defenses against other viruses
3. Take over certain mental and physical functions and hide itself within the individual in such a way that it is not detectable by the individual
4. Use specific methods for spreading the virus
5. Program the host to replicate the virus.

Here’s what Richard Dawkins wrote about faith being a ‘delusion’ –

“The word ‘delusion’ in my title has disquieted some psychiatrists who regard it as a technical term, not to be bandied about. Three of them wrote to me to propose a special technical term for religious delusion: ‘relusion.’ Maybe it’ll catch on. But for now I’m going to stick with ‘delusion’ and I need to justify my use of it. The Penguin English Dictionary defines a delusion as a ‘false belief or impression’... The dictionary supplied with Microsoft Word defines a delusion as ‘a

persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence, especially as a symptom of psychiatric disorder.’ The first part captures religious faith perfectly.” *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins, 2008

Boghossian admits that while street epistemology is a “first step in the struggle against certainty, dogmatism, superstition, pseudoscience, and faith,” it may not be enough to move people toward a “New Enlightenment and Age of Reason.” Boghossian believes that what’s needed is a fundamental change in the way people think about and value faith, belief and conviction. He calls for the implementation of large-scale solutions to address the “problems” of theism.

Boghossian calls on street epistemologists to “stigmatize faith-based claims like racist claims.” He recommends a three-stage process similar to the model used in the civil-rights movement –

1. publicly brand the use of faith as an inappropriate epistemology
2. using faith as a justification is unthinkable
3. faith, like the idea of slavery being acceptable, will go away

Public Health Crisis?

“A simple thought experiment reveals how the God virus works to dull critical thinking. The God virus infects an individual and then inoculates against other viruses ... Priests, imams, ministers, etc., carry the virus and infect new people.” Darrel Ray, *The God Virus*, 2009

Boghossian named several groups, including churches, that he believes actively promote “the spread of unreliable epistemologies.” He calls on street epistemologists to view the spread of their beliefs as “a public health crisis.”

What does he mean by that?

“I want to add my voice to the growing number of people who argue that we must reconceptualize faith as a virus of the mind (Brodie, 1996), and treat faith like other epidemiological crises: contain and eradicate.”

What would that look like? Boghossian recommended several things for street epistemologists to do –

- Stay informed – study, read, watch YouTube debates with leading apologists.
- Contribute – your time, your talents, write, raise money, “vote for candidates who support reason.”
- Experiment and publicize – “Develop and test your own strategies to fight the faith virus” – including magazines, books, YouTube, plays, letters to the editor, songs, editorials, etc.
- Form academic-community partnerships – high school and university partnerships
- Treat faith as a public health crisis
- Financially cripple purveyors of faulty epistemologies – “financially cripple any institution that propagates a faulty epistemology, starting with the most egregious perpetrators: religious institutions – tax-

exempt status of religious organizations must be removed – these measures would deal a serious financial blow to religious institutions, and also restrict their ability to proselytize.

- Create skeptical (atheist) children
- Remove religious exemption for delusion from the DSM

Atheists have been talking about financially crippling churches and religious schools for years. They see that happening in another decade or two as legislative and judicial branches of government become more secular and open to making the change to laws and judicial determinations.

Removing the religious exemption for delusion from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) is another target of the atheist community. The DSM is published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and atheists want the religious exemption removed so clinicians could identify belief in God as mental illness.

“Removing the exemption that classifies a phenomenon as an officially recognized psychiatric disorder legitimizes research designed to cure the disorder.” *A Manual for Creating Atheists*

Boghossian and other street epistemologists believe that getting the religious exemption removed from the DSM would lead to research and treatments for theists. They envision a day when religious people could be institutionalized (against their will if necessary) and treated with drugs and other modalities until the person no longer believed in anything other than what “professionals” determined was safe for society.

[That idea reminds me of a book I read when I was a young person called “1984” by George Orwell.]

Cultural and Political Crisis?

“When Christianity finally disappears from North America in the next few decades, we can get on with the business of living in a natural, rational world and watch the ‘supernatural world’ disappear.” Atheist quoted in *There Is No God: Atheists In America*

Another big concern atheists have about religious people is their impact on culture and politics. The way religious people think and vote causes atheists and other non-religious people social and political challenges to the way they want to live their lives. Many atheists, including street epistemologists, are working to change that by pushing for changes in how religious people are perceived in society. Their goal? The eradication of religion.

“The perfect world for me would be you wouldn’t have the religion. Everything would be based on evidence and science and people would treat each other well regardless of it.” *There Is No God: Atheists In America*

Drs. George Yancey and David Williamson of the University of North Texas published an excellent book several years ago titled *There Is No God: Atheists In America* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013). They surveyed thousands of people about cultural and political issues. They

published the results of their findings from more than 1,700 atheists who responded and direct interviews with dozens of atheists from across the United States. Here are some quotes from the interviews that shed light on the concern atheists have about the influence of religion on culture and politics –

“Keep your religion to yourself. Proselytizing should be forbidden and punishable by imprisonment. Inmates should be exposed to large, daily doses of logic and reason so they can return to society as rational, thinking people.”

“I would like to see their influence contained outside of politics and schools, but that is just an enforcement of the separation of church and state that we are already supposed to have.”

“They are mental retards. They are against abortion, science and reason. They want to use their advantages to dictate the political agenda in America.”

“In fact, religion almost ALWAYS medals in politics—it always has and it always will, because again, it can’t stand alone. It needs support from the state, and over time has established such support as a standard right that religion solely enjoys—never to be debated or even considered.”

“They [the Christian Right] seriously inhibit free thinking and intellectual advancement and promote war and a single belief system. Because they apparently have more children than other members of the general U.S. population, they have too much of an influence on future generations.”

“They have a fascist agenda. They are against gay rights, and the reproductive rights of women. They are ultra-nationalistic, and support conservative ‘family values’ but do not clearly define those values.”

“They should be restricted from voicing any opinions or solutions based on, revolving around or referring to any religion. Any failure to do so should result in that individual/or group being barred from political/government activity.”

“Keep all religions out of government and vice versa; no faith based initiatives, no holy wars, no tax exemptions, no national days of prayer, no creationism taught in public schools, no political decisions based on religious beliefs.”

“Separation of Church and State. Freedom FROM religion. I don’t understand why our politicians re-interpret the constitution and get involved with religion anyway? No involvement whatsoever of the State and religion. Why do the two have to be connected? Why can’t we have a strictly secular government?”

“Laws should be enacted against certain behaviors or practices that unfairly favor the Christian Right. Clergy, for example, should get no special treatment, as they do now with certain tax laws.”

“I strongly believe that all churches should be taxed. They are not religious organizations. It is impossible to separate your religious beliefs from your political beliefs emotionally or logically ... Tax the churches.”

“I think they should not be allowed to deduct from their taxes the sum of the donations they make to religious organizations and that churches should not be exempt from taxation. These things are unfair and unconstitutional.”

“I believe in the separation of church and state even though they don't. I realize that if given the chance they would legislate me out of existence while I on the other hand, recognize their constitutional right to their particular madness.”

“So there's an ideal transition and then there would be an ideal, once you've kinda killed off religion, the transition probably just needs to be where we already are in America of separation of church and state, and continual progression of scientific learning.”

“[I support] laws against their proselytizing and against their being in any form of government.”

“I think religion has no business either in school or in government.”

“We need more money spent on secular education, so less people become religious bigots.”

“There should be a law against brainwashing children. And laws that give a child the right to a sound education that teaches the wealth of knowledge we now have at our disposal, not just desirable bits and pieces.”

“I think that the intertwining of religion and politics that our country has had since the late seventies, early eighties is, long term, a bad thing for the country.”

“Trying to interject their religious beliefs in public schools, politics, society....They are worse part of America, and as long as they have influence over politics, society we cannot progress as a country/people. We will only regress, as we have for the past twenty years or so.”

“So anyway, the biggest problem and concern I have with organized religion is I see it as a means to control the masses by the pew.”

“I find that their attempts to force religion into both politics and classrooms is disgusting. Promoting ‘Christian Science’ through political movements instead of providing evidence in support of their ‘Theories’ such as Intelligent Design, Abstinence only Sex Education, and School Prayer, which have been shown through actual scientific pursuit to be false at best.”

“There are specific characteristics of the religious right that are harmful to the body politic: authoritative micro-politics (of a fascist variant), anti-intellectual attitudes, repressive sexuality, us-versus-them dichotomy and a dogmatic insistence of counterfactuals, despite all evidence in front of them. Specific policy proposals range from the ridiculous to hateful.”

“They want to impose their irrational concepts (dogma, theology) on other people. They let their leaders, who I think may often be corrupt, lead the members against their own best interests.”

“I guess the sexual deal, it’s like sex is such a normal human function and when you put a log of religious stuff on it, it gets weird and it gets funny and then you can shun people for getting pregnant and having sex and you can just do all kinds of weird stuff.”

“I support a woman’s right to choose whether or not to abort her fetus. I believe that homosexuals should enjoy the same rights as heterosexuals. I believe in evolution. By and large, Christian fundamentalists oppose these views.”

What's Next?

We've looked at **who** street epistemologists are, **what** they do and **why** they do it. What's next? Their strategy: **how** they plan to accomplish their vision of eradicating religion. Stay tuned for the next part of our special series on *Street Epistemology*.

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Faith and Self Defense