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Subject: A psychological question: "choose to believe"

Posted by [Spoony](#) on Sat, 15 Jan 2011 13:19:14 GMT

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as i'm sure you've noticed, i've debated a lot of religious people lately. there's one thing that always comes up, which seems to me what religion invariably boils down to - the threat of hell. of all the christians i've debated (a great many), only one never mentioned or alluded to it, and one other didn't believe it. for all the talk of love and salvation, this threat is what it always comes down to in the end.

i have three objections in response to it.

firstly that there are several contradictory religions that make this threat. the pope says only catholics are going to heaven and all other non-catholic forms of christianity are 'defective'. many protestant churches say the reverse is true. islam says all non-muslims are going to hell. clearly at least some of these claims are flat out wrong, so it becomes a question of who has the evidence (none of them)

secondly the person making the threat is putting themselves on one side of a particular moral question, or rather two questions:

Is freedom of religion a right we humans deserve? And if you say no to that, is torture an acceptable punishment for not being the right religion? like i said, every christian i've debated has come down on the wrong side of this moral question, i.e. the anti-freedom-of-religion and pro-torture side. but they try to justify this extraordinary position with my Thirdly.

thirdly there's one phrase that they always use when explaining why we atheists don't have freedom of religion and why we can be tortured for not being the right religion: "choose to believe". it's supposedly acceptable for us to be tortured forever for not being the right religion because we made a conscious choice in the matter. we've been warned, we've been told what the punishment will be if we persist in this crime, and we choose to continue in our atheism. well, if that were true, the person making the threat would still be fanatically opposed to freedom of religion and would still be pro-torture, but here's the odd thing. "choose to believe"? that's a baffling phrase. since when is belief a choice? does my mind work differently to these people? i could choose to pretend to be a particular religion if i felt it necessary (and for so much of history, many people really did feel it necessary and for good reason). i can choose to go to church or mosque and i can choose to pretend i'm praying. what i cannot choose to do is believe something. really, i can't. am i in the psychological minority here? am i the only one who cannot instruct my mind on what it must believe?

or is anyone going to put their hand up and say "yes, i can choose what to believe, i don't know why you can't but it's a shame you're going to be tortured for it"?

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