

Not Caring About God Too Much: On Apatheism as Virtue

By Randal Rauser

ABSTRACT: In this article, I focus on the articulation and defense of the concept of apatheism as articulated in Jonathan Rauch’s influential essay “Let it Be.” While Christian critics of Rauch like Douglas Groothuis have interpreted him as commending an apathetic attitude toward God and religion, a closer reading suggests that Rauch is instead commending a conception of apatheism as restraint. And this concept comports well with Christian notions of pious engagement with others as well as exemplifying the self-control of Plato’s concept of *enkrateia*.

The link between 9/11 and the new atheism is well-established.¹ But that terrible day also spurred another lesser known response to religious zeal. I speak of the apatheist response celebrated by Jonathan Rauch in a pithy but very influential 2003 article in *Atlantic Monthly* simply titled “Let it Be.”² Rauch begins this brief, 994-word essay in memorable fashion by recounting an occasion when he was asked to share his religious views: “‘I used to call myself an atheist,’ I said, ‘and I still don’t believe in God, but the larger truth is that it has been years since I really cared one way or another. I’m’—that was when it hit me—‘an ... apatheist!’”³ Rauch seems to suggest in this passage that he *coined* the term *apatheism* in that moment of hazy inspiration. In fact, the term predates Rauch’s usage.⁴ Nonetheless, Rauch’s brief discussion has

¹ See Randal Rauser, *You’re Not as Crazy as I Think: Dialogue in a World of Loud Voices and Hardened Opinions* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2011), 68-9.

² Rauch, “Let it Be,” *The Atlantic* (May 2003), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/05/let-it-be/302726/>

³ Rauch, “Let it Be.”

⁴ For a broader discussion see Kyle Beshears, “Apatheism: Engaging the Western Pantheon of Spiritual Indifference,” (2016), unpublished paper.

elicited significant attention from Christian theologians since its publication and as such, his treatment of the concept is worthy of closer consideration.

The origin of the word is clear enough: “apatheism” is a portmanteau of apathy and theism. As such, it is hardly surprising that many interpreters take Rauch to be endorsing apathy about theism. Given that God is standardly defined by theologians as a being of maximal goodness, power, and knowledge who created and sustains the universe and with whom human beings are to live in right relation, the apathetic dismissal of this topic would seem to represent a paradigm case of intellectual ignobility or sloth. In the words of E.L. Mascall: “Now if anyone says that he finds this difficult to believe, I shall respect his incredulity, though I shall try to resolve it. But if he says that it is too dull to interest him or too trivial to be worth investigating, I shall be at a loss to imagine what in heaven or earth he would consider to be exciting or important.”⁵

I don’t dispute the fact that Rauch’s essay includes reference to apatheism as apathy and I shall say more about this concept below. However, in this essay I will seek to argue that Rauch is primarily concerned with a *second* type of apatheism which I will call apatheism as *restraint*. According to this concept, apatheism consists of a concerted attempt to chasten the human tendency toward fanaticism in religious commitment as expressed in antisocial behavior such as zealotry, bigotry, and affrontive expressions of proselytism and disputation. When viewed from the perspective of commending restraint, we can see that Rauch’s brief essay represents a helpful cautionary attitude toward extremism.

Apatheism as Apathy

⁵ E.L. Mascall, *The Christian Universe*, The Boyle Lectures, 1965 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 26.

Rauch's essay is commonly interpreted by Christian theologians and apologists to commend apathy as the way to negate religious zealotry.⁶ In this essay, I will consider a representative example of this type of analysis in Douglas Groothuis' book *Christian Apologetics*. Groothuis says that the apatheist of Rauch's essay has a "relaxed attitude" toward religion, a "benign indifference" in which one refuses "to become passionate about one's own beliefs or the beliefs of others."⁷ Importantly, Groothuis recognizes that apatheism, like new atheism, is an intentional response to the danger of fanaticism. However, while the new atheists responded to religious fanaticism with their own secular version,⁸ Rauch's apatheism targets all fanaticism, whether it be religious *or* secular. As Groothuis puts it, Rauch is seeking to provide a "tonic to incivility" that exudes the virtue of tolerance.

While Groothuis recognizes that Rauch's apatheist seeks to avoid fanaticism, he also insists that Rauch thereby places "tranquility above truth." In short, Groothuis believes that Rauch's pursuit of civility is a misbegotten attempt to secure peace at the cost of setting aside critically important theological, metaphysical, and ethical questions. This attitude, so Groothuis says, "is antithetical to the teaching of all religions and sound philosophy: that we should care about our convictions and put them into practice consistently."⁹ In short, Groothuis charges Rauch with a toxic attitude of intellectual disinterest which dissolves into a fundamentally anti-Christian intellectual sloth.¹⁰ As Groothuis sees it, the real cost of Rauch's misguided response to

⁶ For example, Dinesh D'Souza argues that Rauch's apatheists "don't care" whether God exists and that they are, in effect, practical atheists "because their ignorance and indifference amount to a practical rejection of God's role in the world." *What's So Great About Christianity* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2007), p. 24. While D'Souza doesn't reference Rauch here, he does refer to him on page 36.

⁷ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 150.

⁸ See *You're Not As Crazy As I Think: Dialogue in a world of loud voices and hardened opinions* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2011), 63-70.

⁹ Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 151.

¹⁰ Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 150-52.

dogmatic incivility is a failure to love either God or neighbor. He makes the point by quoting Rauch's observation that his Christian friends "betray no sign of caring that I am an unrepentantly atheistic Jewish homosexual." As Groothuis soberly observes, "For the serious Christian, however, an attitude of apathy over the eternal destiny of another human being is not an option."¹¹ Consequently, though apatheism may be borne of a noble desire to avoid conflict, it sacrifices the pursuit of truth in the process, and thereby becomes a textbook case of a cure that is worse than the disease.

Apatheism as Restraint

I do not dispute that one can find in Rauch's essay evidence for an intellectually ignoble apathy about theism and related metaphysical and existential questions. That much is certainly implied by his opening anecdote in which he recalls stumbling upon the idea after "a couple of glasses of Merlot."¹² Rauch does appear to convey an apathetic attitude toward religion as when he writes, "it has been years since I really cared one way or another." Thus, one could reasonably conclude that his own personal attitude toward God and religion is indeed somewhat *apathetic*.

However, we should be careful to distinguish Rauch's *personal attitude toward God and religion* from *the concept he is defending*. It is the latter that is our primary concern here. And as regards that concept, I will argue that a closer reading of "Let it Be" supports the conclusion that Rauch is, in fact, proposing apatheism as a *principled* commitment to restraint. Moreover, far from being antithetical to Christian belief, apatheism as restraint is, in essence, a modern equivalent of Plato's virtue of *enkrateia*, the exercise of self-control over one's emotions and actions.

¹¹ Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 151.

¹² Rauch, "Let it Be."

The restraint reading begins with the point that Groothuis himself makes: namely, that Rauch proposes apatheism as a way to avoid the dangers of fanaticism. It is also important to underscore the point that Rauch's target is not religious fanaticism, per se. Rather, he targets fervent fanaticism generally, and it can be exemplified in atheistic or secular attitudes as surely as religious ones. As Rauch writes:

the hot-blooded atheist cares as much about religion as does the evangelical Christian, but in the opposite direction. "Secularism" can refer to a simple absence of devoutness, but it more accurately refers to an ACLU-style disapproval of any profession of religion in public life—a disapproval that seems puritanical and quaint to apatheists.¹³

Thus, Rauch has as little sympathy for the "hot-blooded atheist" fighting *against* religion as for the fire and brimstone street preacher fighting *for* it. In short, for Rauch the problem is not which theological view you are fighting for, but rather that you are *fighting* at all.

At this point, it may help to illustrate the kind of behavior that Rauch is seeking to avoid. And to that end, I will briefly summarize two examples of fanaticism or dogmatic incivility beginning with a religious example. When I was a teenager I was taught that we had to do street evangelism by going out and accosting people with this question: *Do you know where you would go if you died tonight?* I still remember two young women shaking off our religious intervention with a forceful riposte: "Leave us alone!" My companion, undeterred, followed them down the street calling out with increasing fervency, "*But you have to believe!*" Meanwhile, I channeled my evangelistic fervor in another direction, by emptying a newspaper box holding copies of the

¹³ Rauch, "Let it Be."

Jehovah's Witness magazine *Awake!* and tossing them in a nearby dumpster. If we couldn't win souls, at least we could prevent the JW's from damning them!¹⁴

Of course, Zealotry is not limited to religious people. For our second example, consider Barbara Ehrenreich's description of growing up in a fervent secular household:

I was raised in a real strong Secular Humanist family—the kind of folks who'd ground you for a week just for thinking of dating a Unitarian, or worse. Not that they were hard-liners, though. We had over 70 Bibles lying around the house where anyone could browse through them—Gideons my dad had removed from the motel rooms he'd stayed in. And I remember how he gloried in every Gideon he lifted, thinking of all the traveling salesmen whose minds he'd probably saved from dry rot. Looking back, I guess you could say I never really had a choice, what with my parents always preaching, “Think for yourself! Think for yourself!”¹⁵

Whether the issue is wannabe Christian evangelists preaching repentance and destroying JW literature or a secular evangelist preaching freethought and stealing Gideon's Bibles, the same fanaticism is on display. Both teen Randal and Barbara Ehrenreich's father exhibited zealotry, the expression of excessive zeal in their beliefs. Further, this zeal expressed itself in bigotry and intolerance toward the beliefs of others, particularly evident in the effort to censor alternative views by destroying magazines or stealing Bibles. And finally, both exhibited an affrontive style of proselytism and disputation whether it was teen Randal accosting people in the street with the threat of hell or Mr. Ehrenreich always preaching “Think for yourself!” (One can only imagine

¹⁴ For all the gory details, see *What's So Confusing About Grace?* (Canada: Two Cup Press, 2017), chapter 7.

¹⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich, “Give Me That New-Time Religion,” *Mother Jones* (June/July 1987), 60.

the fireworks if young Barbara had *actually* dared to think for herself by, of all things, becoming a Christian.)¹⁶

Like Rauch, I applaud the move away from this kind of antisocial, in-your-face fanaticism, whether it be religious or secular. And this brings me to a critical point: Rauch's apatheism as restraint is not simply a matter of becoming lazy about religious belief. Rather, it represents a sober and determined commitment to chasten our own innate impulses toward fanatical zealotry, bigotry, and affrontive proselytism or disputation. There is a good reason why this is advice worth considering. Everyone is familiar with the maxim "Never discuss politics or religion in polite company" and we all know why. Religion and politics are topics which are uniquely able to inflame passion and stoke division. Given that human beings clearly have a tendency toward fanaticism and conflict in matters of religion (and irreligion), Rauch proposes we determine to guard ourselves against a lapse into overly zealous, potentially intolerant, and excessively aggressive behavior. Rauch puts the point like this: "it is the product of a determined cultural effort to discipline the religious mindset, and often of an equally determined personal effort to master the spiritual passions. It is not a lapse. It is an achievement."¹⁷ This is a critical point. Rauch's apatheism is not merely a lapse into *not caring*. Rather, it is indeed an achievement, one in which you *care how you care* by chastening your radical tendencies. Far from being mere laziness or intellectual sloth, this type of apatheism is an earnest discipline.

Consider an example from that other incendiary field: politics. A married couple, Steve and Darlene, are travelling to the house of Steve's parents for Thanksgiving just after the 2016

¹⁶ It is also worth keeping in mind that the target of such fanatical behavior is not limited to members of an outgroup, for it can equally target in-group members. Indeed, sometimes the pursuit of group purity encourages an even more rigorous enforcement of group solidarity. Witness the irenic Philip Melanchthon who, late in life, sadly commented that he welcomed his impending death so that he might "escape 'the rage of the theologians.'" Cited in Williston Walker with Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz, and Robert T. Handy, *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Scribner, 1918, 1985), 528.

¹⁷ Rauch, "Let it Be."

presidential election. While both Steve and Darlene campaigned for Hillary Clinton, Steve's dad was a big Trump supporter. As they drive, Darlene coaches Steve not to get into an argument with his dad about the president-elect: "Don't take the bait, Steve. I don't care if your dad wears his MAGA hat and "Lock her Up" T-shirt all through dinner. I *forbid* you to talk politics. You need to control yourself!"

The same advice that Darlene gives to Steve to avoid an incendiary topic and with it the risk of lapsing into fanatical behavior could likewise be given to the religious devotee with similar inclinations. For example, I recently saw a T-shirt that read, "If you can't afford seminary, pick a fight with a Calvinist & get lectures for free." The shirt elicits a laugh and a knowing nod in people because they have met the Calvinist who is exceptionally earnest in sharing his views. Nor is this tendency limited to Calvinists. Indeed, Christian history is littered with the carnage of religious extremism that occasionally verged into the fanatical and violent. And the line between pious enthusiasm and dangerous fanaticism can be thin, indeed.

Before we conclude we should consider what Rauch says about Christians who are apatheists. This is a particularly important point because while Groothuis's reading would make some of Rauch's statements appear especially damning, when read with the appropriate nuance I propose that they actually reveal admirable exercises of holy wisdom fully congruent with love of God and neighbor. Here is how Rauch describes apatheistic Christians: "Most of these people believe in God ...; they just don't care much about him."¹⁸ Certainly that *sounds* damning. And Rauch further explains that this lack of care for God then extends to one's neighbor as well. He writes:

¹⁸ Rauch, "Let it Be."

I have Christian friends who organize their lives around an intense and personal relationship with God, but who betray no sign of caring that I am an unrepentantly atheistic Jewish homosexual. They are exponents, at least, of the second, more important part of apatheism: the part that doesn't mind what *other* people think about God.¹⁹

Thus, Rauch describes Christians who “don't care much” about God *or* their neighbor. Even if what I've said thus far about Rauch's apatheism as restraint is true – that is, even if it largely consists of an admirable determination to constrain the tendency toward fanaticism on incendiary topics – surely at least *this* attitude is problematic, is it not? After all, a Christian is called to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love their neighbor as themselves. But Rauch appears to describe quite the opposite attitude with Christians who don't particularly care about God *or* other people.

While this might seem to be the case, I would argue that a closer reading of Rauch can defend him against this charge. While Rauch says that apatheistic Christians “just don't care much” about God, he immediately adds that he knows many apatheistic Christians who “organize their lives around an intense and personal relationship with God”. This presents us with a puzzle: how can it be that these individuals do not *care* about God if they organize their lives around an intense and personal relationship with him?

The answer, I would suggest, is that Rauch is using the word “care” in a very particular way with respect to public expressions of religious fanaticism. In other words, “care” is understood here to consist of visible displays of devotion and piety. But it should be clear to any Christian that such visible actions do not thereby constitute a truly devotional life; indeed, they

¹⁹ Rauch, “Let it Be.”

may even run counter to it. For example, when Jesus instructs on the discipline of prayer he advises his listeners to pursue private devotion rather than grandiose, public displays (Mt 6:5-6). Thus, so-called publicly visible care has little to do with one's fulsome love of God.

Fair enough, but what about Rauch's observation that his Christian friends "betray no sign of caring" that he is "an unrepentantly atheistic Jewish homosexual"? Once again, we need to keep in mind Rauch's very particular understanding of "caring." These Christians may not "care" in the sense of engaging in public and visible displays whereby they confront and condemn Rauch's beliefs and actions. But that hardly entails that they do not truly care about their non-Christian brother. Indeed, for all we (or Rauch) know, they may pray for him for *hours* a day. One simply cannot gauge another person's devotional commitment based solely on public demonstrations of piety.

Keep in mind that Rauch knows these individuals have deeply devout Christian faith. Their religious commitment is no secret to him. Furthermore, it would presumably be commonly understood between parties that if Rauch had any questions about their faith, he would be more than welcome to ask. We can assume that the door is open for further conversation, should he be interested. With that in mind, this essay gives no hint at present that Rauch *is* interested. So it should be no surprise that his friends have opted not to broach the subject of religion at this time. Rather than interpret them as *apathetic*, one could readily interpret them as wisely *restrained*, choosing to share life together with their non-Christian friend, being careful not to repel him with off-putting displays of zeal, bigotry, or affrontive proselytism or disputation, and always waiting for a future opportunity to share when he may be open. To be sure, another Christian may prefer a more confrontational engagement with the non-Christian. But while some disagreement is bound to occur, we should at least agree that the behavior of Rauch's friends is not clearly

apathetic in the way Groothuis assumes. Indeed, it is fully consistent with love of God and neighbor.

Conclusion

In this paper I've sought to argue that while a superficial reading of Rauch's pithy essay "Let it Be" may suggest a trite expression of apatheism as apathy, a careful reading of the entire essay suggests a far more defensible position of apatheism as restraint. Far from advocating for an ignoble intellectual sloth, Rauch instead makes an important point about chastening our own tendency toward radicalism. Within that context, he also offers a more judicious conception of devotional commitment to God and neighbor, one which is centered on the interior life rather than external, visible displays of piety and devotion. In short, apatheism as restraint embodies the ideal of *enkrateia*, the principled internal wisdom and exercise of self-control over one's passions. From the perspective of judicious restraint, one may even speak of apatheism as *virtue*.