

Stella Reneke

ANTH 625

November 28, 2016

A Quarter And Counting

Interviewing Haani Husain, a young member of the rapidly growing non-theistic population in the United States

Countless. The number of faiths and religions and spiritual philosophies that the world has witnessed since the birth of humankind. Countless. Countless, and yet that diversity, the consistency of that change, the regularity of the life cycle of those belief systems, from conception to manipulation to reinterpretation to decay to abandonment to extinction, has failed to open our minds to the possibility (the likelihood, frankly) that we could ascribe to an incorrect belief. Countless times have cultures all over the planet, over centuries, observed the phenomenon of the shifting religious identity, and yet countless times have individuals all over the planet functioned as though their particular and temporarily convenient answer to the ultimate question of origin and reality must surely be the correct one. This has always been a great source of arguably unnecessary and ridiculous conflict throughout history. And in a modern world where faith is still held as vital to a person's morality and his/her ability to navigate life, even amidst the most open-minded of theists, there remains a general consensus that of all possible religious and/or spiritual ideas that one might adopt, the absolute least acceptable decision is to reject religion altogether. There's nothing quite like a genuine non-believer to spark uproar within any given religious community.

Within the pages of this document, I hope to broach the taboo subject of utter non-belief, dissipate that indignation and reflexive condemnation, and alleviate some of the pain that non-believers suffer whether they opt for spiritual dishonesty or public visibility. I hope, too, to not only help theists to understand and accept non-theists as they would any other religious perspective that diverges from their own, but also to help non-theists to better understand and accept themselves.

To begin, let's lay out some key terms. Theism, for the purposes of this discussion, will be defined as the adherence to any form of structured or unstructured faith in some higher power(s) or some set of superstitions having to do with the way the world functions. Non-theism, on the other hand, includes the entire spectrum from agnosticism to atheism. In 2014, the Pew Research Center determined that approximately 23% of Americans are "non-affiliated", with approximately 8% formally subscribing to either atheism or agnosticism. These numbers are steadily growing, indicating a clear trend towards nontheism in future generations; certainly, then, this theist/nontheist conflict demands our attention as nontheists continue to gain greater influence on world affairs and can no longer be simply dismissed as a severe minority.

As a non-theist myself, I have grappled with being the only kid I knew whose family never went to church. I have been the only one at team dinners that didn't pray before I ate. I have been in a classroom full of Southern Baptists, Catholics, Muslims, and Jews, and somehow been the only one no could understand because, "how could [I] not believe in *anything*?" This isn't a healthy way to experience the world, nor is it a compassionate outlook for the rest of the world to maintain towards non-theists. I am deeply passionate about this project because it truly hits home, so I hope that my work here will inspire a discourse, an acknowledgement of mutual

ignorance, and progress towards a more collaborative and welcoming community for all humans, regardless of theist versus non-theist identities. That said, allow me to detail the methods of my research.

Methodology

Upon determining the social identity that I most wanted to explore, I endeavored to find a subject with whom I could work easily and within the time frame of this fall semester. Since the fall of my freshman year at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I have been very much involved with a student-run organization called Secular Students of Carolina (formerly Secular Student Alliance). Naturally, then, when I needed to find a self-identifying non-theist subject, my first thought was to tap into this group and see if anyone was immediately intrigued by my proposal. I briefly described my idea to the attendees of a few of our weekly meetings, posted in our Facebook group, and offered my contact information for anyone who might be interested to get in touch with me privately, in case they wanted to remain anonymous. Five or six people showed interest in person, but the first confirmation that I received actually came from an SSC member that I had never met, who couldn't attend regular meetings, but who apparently saw my post in the Facebook group and was very enthusiastic about being interviewed. His name is Haani Husain, and he is the first of approximately 20-25 subjects who have since volunteered to be interviewed, and who will eventually become a part of an extended undergraduate research project on the non-theist identity and experience.

Once he messaged me about getting involved, Haani and I planned a brief lunch meeting to speak in person and clear up any questions he had about the project and the interview process.

We then exchanged email addresses and I sent him the consent form and proposed interview questions so that he could ensure that he was ready to go forward. Our first interview was then scheduled in a reserved study room in Davis Library for the afternoon of October 15th, and the second interview was done in a reserved study room in the Undergraduate Library for the morning of October 25th. Each interview lasted more or less thirty minutes, and the first was recorded with the Audacity computer program, the second with my iPhone because my laptop died unexpectedly mid-interview. Both interviews have since been transcribed into a single document, annotated, analyzed, and considered within the context of outside research and publications.

At this point, I will take you through the topics that Haani and I discussed, as per the general order of the interviews, interspersing direct excerpts and indirect paraphrasing with my own commentary. Before we delve into his current ideology and world views, I think it best if we start by understanding his religious background and that of his family.

Family and Background

Both of Haani's parents immigrated to the United States from Pakistan as adults, after their marriage, so he was born as a first-generation American citizen. Their families were part of the Borah faith, which is a sect of the Shii'a branch of the overarching Islamic faith. While today neither of them is especially religious, Haani was raised with a great deal of Muslim influence because his mother believed that the best way to preserve his cultural identity and establish a sense of community was to attend a Muslim Sunday school and be formally involved with the local mosque and other Muslim children. Even so, when he made it clear fairly early on that he

had no interest in the faith and didn't care to attend the Sunday school, she didn't push too hard because, as Haani put it, "I mean, we're kids, we're not gonna get anything out of it more than we put in." And since their family is essentially a matriarchy, his mother always had the final say over the house rules; so despite any potential preferences on his father's behalf, if Haani's mother told him that he didn't have to pray every day and follow all the traditional Muslim practices, then that was that.

So it was that Haani stopped attending the Sunday school around middle school. "[T]he less you interact with it, the easier it is to get away from that, like, mindset", he says, which is precisely what happened, as it was around this same time that he first began to really openly question his faith.

"And it didn't, like, bother me at all, it was just like, 'oh, they either lied to me or they made up a story, like nursery rhymes about Humpty Dumpty aren't true, so why should this story about, um, Hymms living in a cave for five days with no food and water, and like, watching a spider's web and learning or whatever, like, why should that be true? Like, it's just a story that they tell kids 'cause they wanna teach us a lesson.' Like, that wasn't, that was fine to me."

It wasn't a particularly stressful revelation for Haani, but rather a sort of casual realization.

Hardly one to take either himself or the world around him too seriously, Haani was never deeply concerned by the idea that perhaps there's not much holding religious faith above water if one bothers to look beneath the surface. As we will see demonstrated further on, he is generally content to let religion and the religious amble on as long as no tangible harm is being done to themselves or the people and planet around them. Theism, as far as he is concerned, is not innately destructive.

Furthermore, Haani made it clear again and again throughout his collective interviews that the only legitimate foundation for a belief is hard evidence, solid facts, and sound logical reasoning. On his childhood faith, he said only the following:

“I would hesitate to say that I was, umm, a theist or a Muslim or faithful at that point in my life 'cause I feel like as a kid, you can't really make that decision. You just don't know enough, you kind of just assume what people are telling you, but it's not, I wouldn't say that you can call yourself that so early in your life.”

By the time he reached high school, however, he considered himself to be a full-fledged nontheist. As he began to read a wider array of atheist/non-theist literature, he settled more and more confidently into this stance. To my surprise, he is not at all alone in this position amongst family members. Here is a series of excerpted statements regarding the religious views of his extended family:

“On my father's side, my grandfather had a stroke a few years ago, so he's been kind of out of it, up until he died a couple years back. Umm, but my paternal grandmother is still very, very religious, and because, umm, she--so she raised all her kids pretty religious, so I would say my father's side of the family is like 80% pretty religious, especially the adults. Umm, ironically, though, because they pushed it so hard on their kids, I would say that, like, of the 20+ kids on that side of the family, so like, my first cousins on my father's side, 80 to 90% of them are staunchly a-religious, like actively rejecting their “pray five times a day”, fasting on Ramadan kind of stuff.

...

Umm, on my mother's side, my grandfather was not religious like at all, even growing up. He's also passed on now, but he definitely wasn't religious. My maternal grandmother was pretty--is pretty religious, I would say, but has also accepted that other people aren't going to play along with her. So, like, she kind of tells us "hey, you should pray five times and you should fast and you should thank God" and this and that, but like, she knows that we don't, and she kinda doesn't expect it out of us. So we do it because, like, it makes her happy, and it's a nice thing to do, but she knows that they don't, they don't really care. Umm yeah...and so she's, she's the more progressive of my two grandparents. Like, she can speak English now, she plays Candy Crush on her iPad. Um so, she's good. Um, I would say all of the kids in the family, in the extended family, at least, are entirely a-religious and most of--and everyone on my mom's side is pretty a-religious too."

It is not a question, given this reality of his home and family life, that he has had a much kinder atmosphere than many nontheists in which to determine his own degree of religious faith or lack thereof. I suspect, too, that the openness with which his rather expansive family addresses religion and the breadth and depth of individual faith, has led to his notably laidback, open, and intellectually-oriented treatment of the discussion of theism versus non-theism. "I can talk about how God's got some bullshit ideas, and they'd be like 'umm...you're not wrong'", he told me, laughing. This is an excellent example of a small community of people that have found a way to not only coexist, but to love and respect one another despite religious differences as stark as theism versus nontheism. In an ideal world, everyone would function this way; unfortunately, we aren't quite that advanced as a society, so I shall just have to keep writing papers and sharing research like this until we get there.

Transitioning from a discussion of family and childhood, let's move on to some of the more complex issues that Haani and I addressed in his interviews. Having explored how he developed them over time, we can now discuss how his unique beliefs affect and play a role (if any) in his daily life and in his world views.

Fate and Destiny

First, I asked him for his take on the concepts of fate and destiny. Within most belief systems, there is a consensus that we all have some sort of fate or destiny, designed to a given degree (varying from system to system) by a deity or other higher power(s). For non-theists, no such concept necessarily exists. Here is his response:

"I fully sympathize with people who crave purpose, fate, destiny, anything like that. I, 100%, think that's a human feeling to want a reason, but...two things: one, you don't need one, you don't need one imposed on you. Like if I want to go check out a book from the library, that's because I want to do that. If I want to save all of Africa from AIDS, that's because I want to, I don't need someone else to tell me to do that. I mean, just as easily I can say if I want to go kill a whole bunch of people, that's something that's on me, that's not that God has destined me to do that, or that I'm born with that fate or something like that. I think the choices that you make are choices that YOU make, and maybe your environment influences them, maybe you're born with a mental disorder that makes it more difficult for you to process things, so erratic behavior is more common, but it's still your decision. So, I don't think there's such a thing as the universally given destiny or something from the stars that has fated you to do XYZ.

*And then the other thing is that I think religion gives you a really garbage destiny. Like, why were you created? To worship this god. Why did God make you? He was bored, he thought it would be cool to have some people on their knees praying to him. What do you get at the end? You get to live in a cloud with a bunch of other people that spent their entire lives on their fuckin' knees. Like, I guess if that's the destiny you want, that's the destiny you're choosing for yourself and I'm all for you on that one, but that's a really, really lame destiny. *laughs* I understand the need for fulfillment and purpose, I just don't understand why that's the purpose that you would choose. It's so arbitrary and just--not a good one. In my opinion, at least."*

When asked about whether a person could, at the very least, discover an ultimate dream, a clear inclination or unique talent, such that it could be said that he/she was made to do "XYZ", he did readjust his statement to acknowledge that "self-discovery" was legitimate and valid. Still, he maintained that "you can discover what you have decided that you are meant to do, but...again, there's no outside thing that had predestined that you" should complete that task. "There you go, that's your ultimate purpose, that's something that you think", but it's still not a fate or a destiny in the traditional religious sense.

This was not a source of anxiety for Haani at all, as many theists tend to assume must be the case if one cannot rely on the faith that one surely has some purpose at all times, even an unknown one. On the contrary, he told me, quite exasperatedly, the following:

"[I]t's not something I struggled with 'cause it's just the way things are. Like, you're not going to agonize over why you can't open this locked door...it's locked...you don't have a key, you don't have any way of getting the key, this is not a problem for you. It's a non-issue, just walk

away and go to a door that you know how to open. I don't know why people would want to agonize or worry about something that doesn't really affect them."

Love and Soulmates

The second abstract topic discussed was that of love and soulmates. I asked if he believes that there is a perfect romantic match out there designed specifically for each person, and if so, how he thinks this match came to be (i.e. conscious design by some higher power, or sheer odds based on the billions of people there are in the world); if not, I asked if he thought that the concept of soulmates could still be reasonably reconciled with a non-theist viewpoint. I found his response particularly interesting:

"I, I mean, and this is gonna sound sexist and I acknowledge that, but I feel like that's a thing that girls worry about, or that people tell to girls that like--- 'cause there's just so much emphasis that "oh you have to get married, you have to have kids", 'cause that's apparently all you can do, as someone with a uterus inside of them. And I think that's just kind of dumb. One, that you--there's no need for you to go out and find someone to spend the rest of your life with and get married or whatever. And two, I mean, statistically speaking--as someone who's trying to pursue a career in statistics--there is someone out there in the world that does mesh with you better than anyone else in the world, but the odds of them being--that you meet them, are pretty low. Not super low, because the odds that I'm gonna mesh with, like, someone in Mongolia are pretty low 'cause there's already not a whole bunch of things that we have in common. So it's gonna be someone probably from around your area, but it's still pretty low that, like, the person you meet and marry and finish life with was the one person who was made for you. I just think

*that it's kind of a silly idea...just live your life, man, like it's okay, good--it doesn't have to be perfect, good is good enough. *laughs* In my opinion. Low expectations is what I'm all about."*

By this point, in what little time I'd spent with him, the pattern of his thought processes had already become fairly clear. For every belief statement that he made, he required of himself a full list of logical steps to his conclusion, and before asserting an opinion on just about anything, he made certain to justify the validity of his claim(s) and seemed compelled to qualify them based on whatever degree of expertise he felt he was bringing to the discussion. He did this with every subject, as is clearly observable from start to finish in the transcript of our conversations, and as I will try to convey herein. Somehow, he managed to turn even the highly sentimental and deeply personal topic of love and soulmates into an evaluation of statistics and psychology.

In my experience, this is highly typical of a nontheist individual, as it is typically this basic mindset and personality type that lends itself to the objective dissection of even the most sacred (literally) ideas. As likely works to his advantage in day-to-day dealings, Haani is also remarkably skilled at spinning even the most provocative statements in such a way that only the prickliest individual would be stirred to significant offense--and he did this even when speaking to me, a fellow nontheist that he knows, more than likely, agrees with him. As he noted himself early on in our first interview and again in our second, he is not at all a confrontational individual. In my humblest of opinions, we could all stand to learn a great deal from him with regards to the use of this tactic in our discussions of theism and nontheism. The less feathers are ruffled in the course of such discussions, the more each side is able to absorb from the other, and the better and stronger the relationships between the two in the end.

Religion and Culture

When we spoke about his family and their religious traditions, Haani mentioned that many of them, particularly those in his generation, mostly played along during holidays and rituals rather than actually committing themselves wholly to the Muslim faith. To bridge into our discussion of the separation of religion and culture, I asked him if he thinks (based on the aforementioned behavior) that it is valid and reasonable to still appreciate all of those things that are part of one's culture and community while subtracting the faith element. Here's an excerpt of the main point he made:

“Yeah, I mean...any holiday is arbitrary. Like, why do we celebrate the day of our birth? Some cultures don't do that. We do it because we feel like it, everyone needs a day off to celebrate and relax, have fun and be with your family and stuff. So any celebration is arbitrary, arbitrarily chosen. People have, since the advent of religion, inserted God in there, or some saint in there, some Jesus in there, but I don't think that's what makes the holiday, despite it being come from a holy day. So, I have no problems separating them. Like if I want to go to someone's Christmas party and they're all about Jesus the whole time, I'm not gonna be mad at them or say “hey you need to--not everyone here is about Jesus”. Like, if you wanna talk about Jesus on your day, talk about Jesus on your day, whatever you wanna do, it's up to you. If you're gonna be antagonistic about it, then maybe we have a problem, but most people aren't, I think that's not usually an issue that comes up. I would say that because religion is so prevalent, it's a huge part of culture in most places, if not all, and it is arguably difficult to separate the two, but if you, from an academic standpoint, it's a pretty efficient solution where you view religion as a part of the culture, but you don't have to acknowledge any of the religious tenets or faith-based axioms that

are proposed, and you can just look at it as a system where people worship certain things and do certain ways, but not necessarily as a truth statement.”

The example that followed was a description of Ramadan, the traditional holy month in which Muslims fast the entire day and feast at sunset. For Haani, it seems that the most valuable part of celebrating holidays such as this one is the social aspect. He places a great deal of importance upon community and the formation of strong bonds with other people, connecting and learning to laugh, interact, and celebrate together, for whatever reasons. He also took a moment to point out the value of the fasting experience, specifically, in learning to appreciate your fortune and understand briefly the plight of those who have less than you. He says that during religious events like Ramadan, he can go, listen, and “try to look for the real life messages that they’re tryna deliver, without having to acknowledge or subscribe to the idea that some mystical being in God has decreed ‘this’ and so it is ‘this way’.” He makes the statement:

“I would say yeah, there’s definitely a difference between the two (culture and religion), though certainly there is some, if not a lot, of overlap. I would probably not even consider myself culturally religious, even though I do participate in these ceremonies, I would say that I actively make it a point to disassociate myself from the religion...without being rude, of course, I’m not tryna like cause a conflict or anything, but...I guess it’s kind of a personal decision how much you choose to disassociate yourself from the religious background of the traditional ceremonies, as opposed to going along with it and being like “there’s probably some truth in here somewhere.”

In any case, he clearly does not share the Muslim identity even as he attends the celebrations, which would indicate that participation in religious practices must not necessarily entail religious

faith. Therefore, a separation, at least mental if not physical, of religion and culture must be valid.

Antitheism

Before we really dug into antitheism itself, we touched a bit on the difference between religion and religious institutions. I asked Haani if he had different feelings towards organized religion and institutions versus just having a faith of some sort, outside of the traditional religious structure (i.e. the Catholic church system and the influence of the Pope, versus the belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost and all the Catholic saints).

In answer, he shared a story about a series of tragic car accidents that occurred while he was in high school, killing five people that he knew personally or as friends of friends. He explained that for at least one of the girls he knew who had lost loved ones in these accidents, her faith that those loved ones were then in heaven with God, enjoying a beautiful afterlife, is what got her through her grief. He then said the following:

“So, there’s something to be said about being able to derive comfort from the pure faith, but then also it leads--I feel that if you’re having these blind faiths, it makes you...you basically are using it as a crutch, ‘cause at least as far as I’m concerned, as far as I know, it’s not the case that--you’re kind of kicking the can down the road...not, not quite...it’s in the state of denial, but on the other hand, the state of denial doesn’t hurt anyone, so I guess it’s not really all that bad.”

Ultimately, Haani seemed to conclude that while he thinks it is perhaps a flimsy support system, pure faith seems to provide enough support to get many people through very difficult times, and of that, he cannot be too critical.

In the subsequent discussion of structured religion and institutions like churches and mosques, he agreed that many of those institutions give lots of charitable donations, run charity events, send volunteers to disaster areas, etc.. However, he does not believe that the good deeds outweigh the bad when you have these same institutions simultaneously assaulting LGBTQ+ rights and denying women the right to abortions, etc.. He also said that “[he] can’t see what religion brings to the world that can’t be done by literally anything else.” He then mentioned that in his high school in Lexington, Kentucky, “several of my highly religious friends actively denounced ‘evolutionism’, as they called it...soo...um...it’s a little awkward when the structure of religion puts you at odds with reality, but when that structure also gives you a lot of other good things, it’s hard to say that this is out and out bad.” He went on to say that “you can have these kinds of structured communities without religion, so they’re [religions are] kind of extraneous. So if I had to say good or bad, with no in between, I would say bad. But that’s with some hesitancy and some---not ignoring what they do bring to society.”

As he continued his evaluation, he determined that the most frustrating thing about religions is their flexibility as a tool for both good and bad:

“[A]ll the religions can equally be used to support progress and “love thy neighbor” kind of good stuff, just as well as like “kill the infidels” and “burn people to the ground that don’t share our beliefs” kind of thing.

...

They’re very malleable, I think that’s a good word. It’s all about whatever charismatic leader is fronting the movement at the time, so I mean, as loathe as I am to say it because I think it’s a

very unfair and actually, more or less wrong, characterization to make, ISIS is pretty effectively using Islam as a front to justify their misdeeds, to put it lightly.

...

[Y]ou can twist words however you want...so right now...the most malice is coming from that group, I would say, right now...and that's not so much the fault of the religion as the politics of the region.

...

I wouldn't say any religion is better or worse. I would say the people in charge are better or worse at a specific time."

When asked explicitly if he would consider himself to be an antitheist, he said that "it's probably healthier for everyone involved if we can disassociate ourselves from bygone, outdated belief systems that really have no bearing on our reality, as we know it", but he did not seem inclined to actively participate in the antitheist movement to dismantle and eliminate religion. If anyone were to approach him to speak about theism versus nontheism, he would be happy to have a candid discussion; however, he made it clear that he would never go around knocking on doors, the way he has repeatedly experienced conversion attempts on behalf of religious people. Interestingly, he briefly considered that he might feel differently if nontheism were not such a minority. He quickly discarded that thought, however, stating that "it would feel a little oppressive" to actively try to turn people off of religion, even if given the upper hand in what he termed a "power dynamic kind of thing--'cause there's the issue of: who are we to say what's right and what's wrong?"

He finished with a statement that rather succinctly conveys his thoughts on the whole antitheism issue: “I think that as we keep educating people and expanding our knowledge base, I think that the trend towards nonreligion will only grow. It seems kind of inevitable to me, at least.” So for Haani, the antitheism movement is unnecessarily aggressive, and he sees no need to join it.

Politics, Medicine, and Education

I have combined, here, the last three miscellaneous topics that I asked Haani to discuss with me, in an effort to gather a complete picture of the ways in which his nontheism has influenced his perspective on some major world issues. These are politics, medicine, and education.

When asked if politics has any place whatsoever in politics, he gave me a resounding “no”:

“[E]ven if I was a religious person, I hope that I would be smart enough to know that I’m not in a position to tell other people what to do or what to believe. Like, if I can sincerely hold a belief, it’s entirely feasible for me to know that this person next to me has a very feasible belief in the opposite direction. So, I may think that he’s wrong, but I also think that it’s wrong that people like insanely hot buffalo sauce. Like, I think that’s gross. But that doesn’t mean I tell people that you can’t eat buffalo sauce.

...

[Y]ou should evaluate [political] position and ideas as objectively as you can, and not through the subjective lens of a religion.”

With regard to religion's conflict with scientific advances and interference in medicinal practices, he said:

"[A]s far as I'm concerned, religion and technology, especially medicine, are very much at odds when you've got people that say 'this worked for me so it should work for everyone' when other people are saying 'well this worked for a hundred people, so it'll probably work for you too.' It's more like a thousand, but yeah. I don't think they're compatible. Coexist, maybe, but compatible? No."

As for religion and education, he recognized a finer line between accommodation and propagation:

*"Definitely there's a line, it really depends on where you want to draw it, there's a little bit of a personal decision...[T]here's a lot to be had as far as history and stuff like that, so it should definitely be taught in schools, at least from a historical, cultural, maybe even from an economical perspective, definitely a social studies kind of class, kind of thing. Obviously in college, here at UNC, we have a Religious Studies program. I'm studying modern Catholicism, it's, I think, a pretty informative class, I felt no pressure to convert to Catholicism. *laughs* So I think that's a pretty good system to learn about religion and get it from as objective a lens as possible.*

...

I think there's an argument to be made for giving religious people and religious practitioners some privilege and some leeway as far as practicing their religion, but I would say you should be careful about giving too much."

In short, Haani firmly believes that religion has no place whatsoever in either politics or medicine, and that with regard to our public schools, religion can be a danger and a detriment to a child's education if allowed too large a role.

Haani's Closing Statement

Before wrapping up our second and final interview, I invited Haani to add any additional information that he felt should be on the record, and address any issues that he felt deserved reiteration, concerning his personal nontheism and/or nontheism as a whole. Here is his final statement:

*"I guess I'll talk about it 'cause I'm--so for my Catholicism class we had to watch a movie *Criest*. It's a 90s movie about a priest who is gay, so he's going out having gay sex, there's some pretty nice gay sex scenes in there, and then one of his parishioners is a 14-yr old girl whose father is making her have sex with him. So it's about sexuality in the church, and do you break the sacrament of the sacred confession or do you do the right thing and make sure this child gets help? And can you still follow the faith if you're doing something that is blatantly said not to do in the Bible, like have homosexual relations? So, the movie was pretty good, it was from the 90s, so obviously I don't think it's something that people would like as much now, but it really reminded me like how backwards people--like if people want to fully subscribe to a religion, how far back you can go. Because we've made a lot of progress as far as understanding sexual orientation, appreciating people's differences in lifestyle choices and stuff like that. And the more you want to subscribe to religions that were made back in the year 0, you know, the year 500-whatever, when those progresses weren't made, it's really, really easy to slip back. And so, I*

don't know, I just want to reiterate that while religion has certainly done some good things, it's really not a modern practice and it doesn't belong in our modern society."

Over the course of this project with Haani, a number of themes have surfaced. The first of those is the high degree to which he values logic, reason, and research. Haani expects and demands significant evidence to justify both his own conclusions and those of others, with regards to the way the world does and should work. The second theme is his belief that religion is simply an inevitable primitive stage of humanity's maturation process, and that it is naturally fading out, and therefore is not worth taking too seriously, let alone physically warring over, unless tangible harm is being caused to people or the environment. And the third and broadest theme that Haani, himself, would like us to take away is that there are undoubtedly pros to theism, but that in the final judgment, they are vastly outweighed by the cons.

Context

In order to utilize this singular story to illustrate certain points about nontheism in general, I think it's important to first speak about nontheism as a collective movement. Many people, both theist and nontheist, associate nontheism most strongly with atheism, which is merely one end of the spectrum that nontheism encompasses. For those who make this mistake, it is also painfully common that the only voices with which they are familiar are two of the most infamous and non-representative figures for atheism: Richard Dawkins and Bill Maher, both of whom are widely considered, by both theists and their fellow atheists, to be unnecessarily nasty and extreme, even if strong in reasoning and evidence to back their rather bold positions. In my experience and as can be deduced from the sheer popularity of the piece, many self-identifying

non-theists can relate much more closely to the rhetoric of Ricky Gervais, a British actor, writer, and comedian whose fame stems both from his talent as an artist and his habit of commenting on social and political controversies. In 2010, he released a statement that the Wall Street Journal quickly published, explaining and justifying his atheism. While he writes the way that he speaks, and that is profanely, bluntly, and very much tongue-in-cheek, Gervais' statement aligns perfectly with the sentiments that many of us would like to express, Haani included. Not only does he lay out some reasons for his atheism that Haani professed to share, but his general approach is also similar to Haani's: religion is unnecessary, it has nothing to do with morals, and eventually it will die out on its own, but until then, it's only permissible when it's not harmful.

Certainly it could be said that reading Gervais' piece only provides the perspective of one other non-theist and therefore fails to contextualize Haani's perspective, but I disagree. As a long-time member of the non-theist community, having interacted personally and through a variety of media with a great number of nontheists, I can confirm that Gervais has rather explicitly and eloquently projected on a massive stage that which many millions of people like Haani and I have felt for years, and as a result, his statement is regularly shared, discussed, and reaffirmed amidst nontheists across the Western (at the very least) world.

My point, essentially, is that despite the stereotypes and the angry voices that are somehow usually the loudest, many of us are not as antitheist as is so often assumed. Many of us (including Haani) wouldn't even identify as genuine atheists, which is a much harder stance on the validity of religion than agnosticism. In actuality, the most common stance is much more moderate, though firmly secular.

I would also like to briefly address the assumption that nontheists are often fleeing poor experiences with religion and/or religious people. Haani's story is a prime example of a nontheist that very smoothly, naturally distanced himself from theism as a result of his own research and reasoning. Nontheism is not merely a reactionary ideology, and while it can certainly be said that people do occasionally reject belief systems as a form of shallow rebellion, those people need not be the face of non-theism on a larger scale.

Finally, it's important to discuss Haani's identity as a first generation American in tangency with his identity as a nontheist. There is a definite trend amongst first generation Americans of "westernizing" or assimilating through a steady distancing from their family's traditions, culture, and religion. In a case such as Haani's, this could certainly play a part in his early decision to venture outside of his Muslim friend circle, to leave the Muslim Sunday school, to research religion and nontheism, etc.. However, I think it's equally reasonable to argue that even if, as a first generation Pakistani-American, he was likely to become a more moderate, westernized theist than his Pakistani relations, that would not necessarily have pushed him to full nontheism. In fact, if his subconscious goal had been simply to fit in with the average American, he still would have been better served to convert to some form of Christianity, which he evidently did not do. The push to nontheism came from his pursuit of knowledge and literature, and his own logical reasoning, not from his incidental status as a first generation American.

Conclusion

This project has been an incredible learning opportunity for me, and I hope that by sharing his story with me and with you, Haani has also benefited from the articulation of his

ideas and his unique way of looking at the world around him. I hope that by gaining a better understanding of the ways in which a person's nontheism tints his/her interpretation of major issues, such as purpose, love, community, politics, and education, theists and nontheists alike might learn how to interact more peacefully and productively on a daily and a long-term basis. Even in the smallest of ways, I hope that I have helped to demystify what is widely a misunderstood concept and a group of people that are almost universally scorned, mistrusted, and oppressed.

The moral differences between theists and nontheists are not as vastly different as is easy to believe at first glance, and if we can find the common ground that's been buried impossibly deep for so long, then we can walk forward together to establish a society that is welcoming to members of any and all belief systems, on the grounds only that we respect and care for one another. That's all we really need.

Works Cited

1. Gervais, Ricky. 2010. "Why I'm an Atheist." *The Wall Street Journal*.
<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/12/19/a-holida-message-from-ricky-gervais-why-im-an-atheist/>
2. Kruzykowski, Katerina G. 2011. "Reconciling Two Cultures: The Experience of Immigrants and First Generation Americans from Non-Western Countries". *Social Sciences Journal*. 7(1):11-22.
3. Pew Research Center. 2015. "America's Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow". *Religion & Public Life*.
<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>