CrossMark

WHY AREN'T YOU TRYING HARDER TO CONVERT ME?

Guy Almog

Missionaries that try to convert us can be rather annoying. Missionaries that keep trying to convert us even after we explicitly refuse to be converted are even more vexing. However, in a weird and paradoxical way, they actually deserve much more moral credit than the 'nice' religious people who do not try to shove their religion down our throats.

Assume you open your door to an unexpected knock. 'Excuse me, do you have a minute to talk about our lord and savior Jesus Christ?' 'No thanks', you answer and close the door. Another knock follows a few seconds later. 'Yes?' you ask behind the closed door. 'We're really sorry to bother you, but, it is very important that you hear what we have to say.' 'Please go away before I call the cops', you answer angrily. 'Okay, we're going, but we'll be back again soon in case you change your mind.' So annoying! Right? Maybe, but as it turns out, this kind of people deserves much more moral credit than you think.

Let's try to examine this issue through another example. Imagine that you are out for a nice evening stroll and suddenly see a stranger collapsing right next to you. What would you do? The normative and moral reaction would (hopefully) be rushing over and trying to assist this stranger according to the circumstances (calling an ambulance, for instance). If you see a friend in trouble, you would probably be even more attentive.

Now, imagine that this stranger (or friend) is walking down the street and is about to fall into an open and very deep, manhole. It is dark, and it seems that she does not notice it and is going straight towards it. You *believe* that if

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she does not stop, she could get seriously injured or worse. Accordingly, you shout to her 'Hey! Watch out! There's a hole right in front of you!' However, from the look in her eyes and the increased pace of her gait, it is clear that she thinks you're some kind of creep, and that she doesn't *believe* there is an open manhole in front of her (by the way, she forgot her glasses somewhere). If you have any bit of conscience, you would still try to shout 'watch out!' or even, if all else fails, to physically shove her to the side. Right? After that, I would like to imagine that you would call the local authority and report this hazard. Maybe you would even stay there a bit longer to make sure that nobody else falls down the manhole, or to arrange some kind of makeshift warning sign just in case.

But now imagine the same scenario from a different perspective. You are not there, but someone else, let's call him John Doe, is there and sees the stranger walking down the poorly lit street towards the open manhole. John *believes* that if she does not stop, she could get seriously injured or worse. However, unlike you, John just stands there and watches. Regardless of what actually happens in the end (maybe she falls and breaks her leg, or dies, or maybe she notices the manhole at the last moment and manages to elegantly step aside) we are likely to say that this John Doe fella is a real… well, despicable person, if we were to keep a civil tongue. What kind of a person just stands idly by in this kind of a situation? A morally bad person is one of the more obvious answers (John might be suffering from some kind of severe anthropophobia which makes it impossible for him to warn the stranger, you might try to suggest, as a possible excuse for his behavior, but let's keep things simple and assume that John does not have any phobia or physiological condition that could alter his moral behavior in such a fashion).

Let's take this example another step forward. Assume that you are in the same situation, only this time you *believe* that the manhole is not just a road hazard, but a pit leading to hell! In other words, you *believe* (don't ask me

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why) that anyone who falls into this pit will be doomed to experience hellish torture *forever!* It is thus rather reasonable to assume that you would be much more vigilant in your efforts to save others (friends or foes) from falling into this pit. If the city does not heed your repeated phone calls and does not send someone to seal this hellish pit right away, you would feel a moral obligation to stay there and warn the passing pedestrians to stay away from it. You would call your family or friends and ask them to come with the necessary equipment for securing the area around the pit and making sure that no one falls into it until a more permanent solution is found. Right? Even if several passersby call you a 'lunatic' or a 'nutcase' and think that there isn't any hole or pit – and definitely not one that leads to hell – on the pavement in front of them, you would still insist that they should kindly move to the other side of the street. They might not believe that this pit is real, but you do, and accordingly you believe that you just saved their souls from an eternity of hell.

Can you see where I'm going with this? Assume, once again, that John Doe is in the same situation. He believes that the pit is a highway to hell, but unlike you, he just stands there and watches as a stranger approaches it without noticing. Again, it is irrelevant whether the stranger actually falls and reaches hell or just breaks a few bones. John *believes* that anyone who falls down this pit will reach hell, which is quite literally the worst thing that could ever happen to anyone. He could have *easily* saved the stranger, or at least warned her repeatedly, but he just stands there and watches. Accordingly, it is not enough to simply call him 'despicable' or 'morally bad'. No, he has now attained a whole new level of moral badness. He is literally diabolical.

Let us now assume you are a non-Christian that has a Christian friend who *truly believes* that hell and heaven exist, and that accepting Jesus Christ as your lord and savior is the only way of reaching heaven rather than hell (I know that there are many different kinds of beliefs within

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Christianity with different views of hell and heaven, but let's keep it simple for the sake of the example). In other words, this so-called friend of yours believes that when you die (which, by the way, could happen at any moment), you would reach hell: A place of eternal pain and suffering! If she weren't constantly trying to find ways to 'show you the light' and save your soul from this eternal nightmare, how could she possibly be considered your friend?

Heck, if I were to believe that heaven and hell actually exist, and that only people who regularly wear purple hats, for instance, get to go to heaven instead of hell, I would be spending most of my time trying to convince people to wear purple hats. I would even give away purple hats to anyone who might accept them (luckily, I don't believe in hell or in salvational purple hats).

All this makes me wonder. Why, then, do the many religious people I know, and even those I know in a fairly superficial way, not try harder to convert me?! Maybe they *do not really believe* in hell and heaven (contrary to what they claim in public)? Or, even worse, maybe they *do not care* if I end up in hell? Even if they merely believe that my soul would not go to hell, but would rather be annihilated, I still find their silence rather inconsiderate.

So, the next time someone asks you if you have a moment to talk about our lord and savior Jesus Christ / Jehovah / The Flying Spaghetti Monster / Chuck Norris, reject them with a smile on your face, and keep a warm spot for them in your heart. Their beliefs might be ludicrous, and their methods of preaching annoying, but their intentions are admirable.

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