



Interview with Dr. Michael Shermer on Religion, Afterlife, Skepticism, Politics & the future of Humanity

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Zain Raza (ZR): Welcome to acTVism Munich. My name is Zain Raza. Today we are joined by Dr. Michael Shermer, the founding publisher of Skeptic Magazine, a monthly columnist for Scientific American, and a Presidential Fellow at Chapman University where he also teaches a course called Skepticism 101. He is also the author of numerous bestselling books, the latest being *Heavens on Earth: The Scientific Search for the Afterlife, Immortality, and Utopia*. Dr. Michael Shermer, thank you so much for joining us today.

Michael Shermer (MS): Thank you for having me.

ZR: So let's start off with your journey. I think it's a great way if our viewers would know how your ideas evolved. When you were young, I read on Wikipedia and as a skeptic I'm not sure if it's true, so that's why I'm asking you the question: You were a Christian and you also studied theology in university. Talk about your early life and how your views evolved.

MS: Right. I was a Christian. I wasn't raised religious. My parents were not religious. They weren't anti-religious; that wasn't a thing when I was growing up. In high school my friends all got religion. So this was the early 1970s, California, it was the start of the evangelical movement that was getting large and politically activated and I got engaged with that and I thought, well, there must be something to it and if I'm going to do this I should do it right. So I went to a Christian college, Pepperdine University in Malibu and I studied theology.

Really I was mostly interested in the ideas, the big ideas, you know: Is there a God? Where does the universe come from? Do we have free will? What's the origins of morality? And the Christian theology had answers to these questions that I thought was interesting. And I also wanted to be a college professor, but to be a college professor you have to have a PhD, and to

have a PhD in theology you have to master Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic and Latin. And I could barely get through Spanish, I was just not good in foreign languages.

And so I switched to psychology and there I encountered science, the actual methods of science of running experiments, to test a hypothesis. I thought, Oh wow, this is very different than theology which is philosophy, which is thought experiments and arguments based on premises and all this. And this was a different thing. This was like, "Let's see if something's really true or not by running some kind of experiment".

So I thought, you know, like if we have something like resurrection: Is it true? How do we know that's true? There's no experiment to run, there's no control group or something like that. It's just this series of arguments. But I still held on to my beliefs until I went to graduate school. And in graduate school, at this university, it was a secular university, so there were no believers, or maybe there were but it was just not important. And there I lost my religion. So I was a Christian for seven years. I became a Christian overnight, quickly. I lost it very slowly, it was just like over the course of months of just thinking, "You know I don't think I really believe this any more". Mainly because the arguments weren't that good.

It was obvious studying psychology, social psychology, anthropology, sociology, that these beliefs are all constructed based on where you happen to have been born, who your family was, what period of time you were born in, what the cultural influences were, and I couldn't see any reason why my beliefs were any better than any of these other people who believe something different. So I just said, "That's it, I'm not a Christian any more". And I used to wear this little Greek fish, you know the Hebrew or the Greek symbols, Jesus Christ Son of God, Saviour, the little fish, Christian fish. And I just ripped that off and thought I'm a hypocrite wearing this thing. I didn't make a big deal about it like Now I'm an atheist, I just stopped talking about it. And that was it.

ZR: Did you face a sort of a hole like people that I've talked to told me that once they left religion they sort of felt like a depression you could say or they felt like an emptiness, nihilistic. Did you encounter...

MS: Not me, no hole at all. In fact, I was liberated. To me, I felt like now I can really engage the world because it's just me and my mind trying to answer questions about the world using the best tools we have of science and I can be part of that. So I felt like instead of getting knowledge from on high through some holy book or through prayer, through some authority; with science I could run an experiment, which is what I was doing in grad school, running experiments, and I can participate in this journey of knowledge, of trying to understand the world. And it's open-ended. Who knows what the answers are going to be?

In religion, the answers are already there and you're just trying to understand the correct answers. In science, that's not the case. It's like, "Who knows what the answer to that is? And here are some different theories, and let's test them." To me, I like that. And also I think it was liberating in a sense that I could engage different people as friends and colleagues and just people to know, because when you're in the Christian bubble, it's not that you should not be friends with non-Christians, but if you're serious about it, you pretty much want to hang out with other Christians. Or Jews hang out with Jews. Or Muslims hang out with Muslims. That's just kind of the nature of the beast and I never really liked that that much.

And as a Christian evangelical, you were supposed to evangelize, go door to door. I didn't

really like doing that, you know, “Hi, I’m here to tell you about Jesus”. You know, I could tell people didn’t like that that much. But I pressed on, including to my own family and friends, you know, “Hey let me tell you about Jesus”. They were relieved that I wasn’t doing that any more. That felt good to be back in good graces with my family again. But mostly, I felt just liberated.

ZR: Let’s talk about skepticism. You also teach a course on that at the Chapman University. Could you talk about what it actually means for an individual, what sort of repertoire do you need for that? And also talk about its significance today.

MS: So my course at Chapman is called "Skepticism 101: How to think like a scientist" and I’m teaching my students, basically, critical thinking. How to use reason and science to understand the world and be aware of all the impediments to that. All the cognitive biases like the confirmation bias and the hindsight bias, self-justification bias. These things disrupt our pathway to understanding truth because our brains are not wired to discover truth, our brains are wired to reinforce what we already believe to be true for other reasons.

These are kind of the things I teach students how to think, not what to think. And this extrapolates to everybody. So the whole Skeptic Magazine that I publish, skeptic.com - our website, it’s dedicated to teaching people how to think. We’re not here to tell you what to think about this or that conspiracy or alternative medicine or whatever, but these are the tools we have to figure out if something is true or not. You try it yourself. So to that extent, it’s good for individuals, it’s good for society. We all want to live in a world where it’s based on reality – to the best extent we can understand reality and not based on authority and dogmatism and mysticism and pseudo-science and all these things that we combat.

ZR: You just mentioned that we’re not wired for the truth. Can you dig deeper on that?

MS: Yes, what I mean is that our brains evolved to be more like lawyers’ than scientists’. A lawyer’s job is to defend his client to the best of his ability even if it means selecting evidence only to make him look good and the other side look bad. In science, we’re not supposed to do that, but that’s what our brains do. So let’s say I am already a Christian or a Muslim or whatever and I believe these central tenets of my faith – I’m only going to look for evidence to support it. I’m not going to look for evidence that contradicts it and that’s a problem if you want to understand what’s true.

So the methods of science are designed to go around that process, to say, “No, no, you have to look for the disconfirming evidence and the things that could falsify your theory, and if you don’t somebody else will.” And that’s the open-endedness of science. The peer review process, the fact that it’s a social process where you’re not just sitting in a room hatching ideas and deciding which ones are true by yourself, you have to engage with other people and go I got this idea of what I think the explanation for this is - now let me tell you what my idea is and you tell me if you think I’ve gone off the rails. And you go “No, Shermer, you’re crazy, that can’t be right. Alright, let’s run an experiment and see if your idea or my idea is the better one. Or maybe they’re both wrong.” So that’s what science is designed to do, is to get around this human psychology of always wanting to believe what we already believe and look for

contradictory evidence.

ZR: So what are the limits to skepticism? I've heard some people say, for example, "You can't be really skeptic, because if you would be one, then every time you enter a room you would ask: Is this floor stable? Will the ceiling fall on me?" On the other hand I've heard people say like, "I am so skeptical, I'm always thinking about what others are thinking about me, I'm questioning myself." Is this insecurity, is this skepticism? What would you say is the correct balance that one should have when it comes to skepticism?

MS: The rub is to find the balance between being open-minded enough to accept radical new ideas that turn out to be true versus so open-minded that your brains fall out and you believe every crazy thing. So, walking into the room and wondering, is this chair going to hold me up? I don't need to be that skeptical because I've had so much experience with chairs that I know 99.999% chance it won't collapse. So I don't really need to worry about that. To the point where this would be just paranoia. You couldn't get out of bed, this would be a mental illness.

So you don't want to go that far. But you don't want to just believe everything either. There is some balance in there. How do you find the balance? It depends on what the claim is, what you're confronting there like "I need to know whether that is true or not." Then that depends on what the evidence for that particular claim is. So skepticism isn't just like this blanket, "I don't believe anything." I believe all sorts of things. I believe the Big Bang theory of the origins of the Universe, because this has held up for over half a century now with a gazillion experiments and data sets and so on. Theory of evolution: you know, that's true. Germ theory of disease is true. Plate tectonics explains the continents and so on, and so on. There's lots of theories in science that are very well-proven. There's others that are not as well-proven.

There's still others that are speculative like the multiverse theory or string theory. These things we don't know. What's the explanation for consciousness, the so-called hard problem of consciousness? We don't have a theory that everybody agrees, "Yep, that's probably the right theory." So, there you have to keep an open mind and say, "Well, ok, let's run some more experiments and let's keep working on that problem."

ZR: What do you think about afterlife? I was talking to our cameraman today and he meant that there is a sort of an afterlife, metaphorically more or less, because if you already exist in time and space, you have already left a time code of your existence and even your memory somehow that you leave behind on this planet kind of exists forever. Is this sort of the afterlife concept, or what do you think about the afterlife?

MS: That's the subject of my latest book *Heavens on Earth*, in which I deal with all those kinds of theories. So, allegorically speaking or metaphorically speaking, when I die I've left behind, not just my kids – so there's some of my DNA still carrying on in the gene pool so to speak – but also my work, my books, my words, my ideas may still float around in the memosphere for a lot longer after my body is gone. But that's not what most people mean by immortality. They mean, I want to keep going somewhere else after my body is gone.

And in the grave that somehow my pattern of information, my consciousness, my

point-of-view self that exists floats off the brain and goes off into the ether somewhere - that's what most people think of when they think of the afterlife. I'm going somewhere else. And there's no evidence for this. Absolutely none. I've looked at every theory about this, it's not even logically sensible in that way, I mean: what continues on? Where is this soul? We know the brain pretty well, that's where memories are stored, and there's no memories that are going to float off anywhere. The memories are 100% tied to the neural states of synaptic connections between neurons and we know that when a part of the brain is damaged through stroke or injury or tumors and what not, Alzheimer's, dementia - those memories are gone. Forever. They're gone.

So no brain, no mind. No mind, no consciousness. No consciousness, no soul. And so, if you want to have this idea that I live on through my work and my kids and so on, that's fine. That's a kind of immortality, but it's not the kind of immortality most people want. And that, I'm afraid, is not available.

ZR: Let's talk more about religion. You've uncovered or debunked so many stories and bizarre mysticism. Can you talk about how many religions there are and what kind of makes them all similar or different?

MS: This is one of the things I discovered when I was young and still a Christian. In graduate school, for fun, I just took some courses in anthropology, for example, just to see what this was all about, I didn't know much about it. There I discovered this world of all these other religions. This was the time when I kind of launched into the study of mythology, Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, and comparative world mythology and comparative world religions and it was like. "Holy crap, there's like ten thousand different religions!".

There's the major ones but each of the major ones branches off and they branch off and so on. There's like thousands of different gods throughout history, tens of thousands of religions for the last ten thousand years and each one of them claims to have a purchase on the truth. And yet they are contradictory, and they each claimed that they're based on this holy book that the Creator of the Universe wrote. Unfortunately he wrote many such holy books and they contradict each other. How are we going to tell which is the correct one? Can't. So to me that is evidence that humans made God, not vice versa.

ZR: Let's move to politics and religion. I find it quite interesting to talk about this, because on the right or extreme right one could argue that religion is criticised but in a way to hide racism. For example, the AfD here in Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland, criticises Islam but leaves out all other religions. What I'm particularly interested in is the left. Why is it so reluctant to criticise religion. I mean, I think if you're criticising the economic system, which is a social system, if you're criticising US wars – shouldn't this be part of criticism as well?

MS: Totally. The left has lost its mind when it comes to Islam. They are not afraid to criticise religion. If I go after the creationists and I debunk the fundamentalists and I refute the resurrection of Jesus, and so on, my left liberal friends are right behind me: "Yeah go

Shermer, go, cause it's a bunch of bullshit, let's nail 'em." And then if I go now let's talk about Islam: "Oh, no no no no... That's a religion of peace, we must be respectful to our brothers and sisters of that peaceful religion". It's like, "Wait, why?"

I think the answer is because the left and liberalism embraces a kind of openness to other people's cultures that we don't want to go down the pathway of our ancestors centuries ago where we persecute the Jews for example. So this kind of comes on the heels in the 1960s of the realisation of how bad the Holocaust was. And look what happens when you target a particular people for their religion. So we must protect religious freedom.

That's true, we absolutely should. People should be free to believe or not whatever they want. But that's different than critiquing the claims of a particular religion, the ideas behind it. So we must make a distinction between critiquing people or attacking people and attacking ideas. We're just interested in the ideas. I don't care who you are personally as long as you leave me alone [laughs]. Respect my rights, I respect your rights. The freedom for you to swing your arm ends at my nose, okay? We have to respect each other's freedoms. After that, believe whatever you want as long as you don't harm other people.

Now that set aside, you can say, "Hey Shermer, I think that Mohammed went to heaven on a winged horse or whatever", and I'm like, "OK, what's your evidence for that? Let's talk about the historical evidence for this claim or the resurrection of Jesus, or did David or Moses really exist?" Whatever it is, we can talk about that and be as critical as we want. So I think the left has kind of been derailed by this confusion between these two different things and thinking, well if I attack your beliefs about the resurrection or Moses or Mohammed, I'm attacking you personally. And of course we're not. And so we have to get over that.

ZR: According to my observation, critical thinking, skepticism, flourishes with good economic conditions. For example, if we compare countries like Germany or Scandinavian countries where criticism or skepticism levied on religion is much higher than let's say Saudi Arabia, where inequality is high - you know just a few kings control what happens there. In Pakistan, it's the same thing. If you go to many countries... Do you think science educators are not doing a good job in connecting economics with critical thinking?

MS: I'm not sure it's an economic issue because you can find counter-examples to that where different poor countries have different levels of religiosity or whatever. A difficult question is why is America so much more religious than Western European countries where a century ago, Western European countries were just as religious as we are in America. What happened? After the Second World War everything changed and countries like Sweden or Denmark, and now Germany is catching up, the figures are almost reversed of what they are in America. In America, 90% of the people believe in God and in Sweden it's like 10% of the people believe in God. What happened?

There's two theories about this. One is that if your government has a tight social safety net and takes care of everybody, universal health care, take care of the poor and handicapped and mentally ill and unemployed and so on, there's nothing left for religion to do. Now religion was replaced by science centuries ago as the tool for explaining the world. Religion gave that up. But it's still been active for the last two centuries of providing social care for people that need help. Manning the soup kitchens and taking care of the homeless and things like that. In America we still have that problem. There's a lot of homeless people, there's a lot of people

that are living in poverty, and so religions are kind of a privatised social safety net. European countries don't need that because the government does it. So religion has lost its cachet as well as its usefulness. That's one explanation.

ZR: So should science educators be more proponents of better governmental systems in foreign countries or should they talk about this more? For example, Sam Harris talks about a basic income. This would create the time and space perhaps necessary for critical thinking to flourish. Would you say this is somewhere that science educators have failed?

MS: No, I would say the goal of science educators should be to promote science and critical thinking and reason and let people get to their non-religious beliefs through that avenue. I think that's a more effective tool than say a head-on attack on religion – for science educators. Now if you're a social activist working as a humanist, atheist, whatever, that's a different thing. Like maybe you're a humanist and you're fighting for reproductive rights of women in countries where they don't have those rights like we do in the west. That's not science education, that's something else.

I think it's kind of a division of labour of who is doing what. With Skeptic Magazine, we focus primarily on science and science education. We're not activists in promoting civil rights and women's rights and so on because that's just not what we do. I'm a 100% behind that, I believe that personally, I support humanist groups that do that, but that's just a different activism source.

ZR: If we look at the news, the headlines, one could assume that there's moral stagnation. We've had ISIS rise in 2015, made major headlines. Donald Trump is making news every day – MS: Every hour [laughs] – ZR: There's climate change. The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists just moved the [Doomsday] clock to 2 minutes to midnight. Is it moral stagnation? Will humans progress? Are you optimistic or are you pessimistic?

MS: [laughs] I am an optimist. You see I have this, *The Moral Arc*, moral progress, see these are arcs that are arching upwards. It's not inevitable. We have to fight for it. We have to work at it every day. There's no force of nature driving this forward. But it's more like a jagged curve, like the global warming curve, it's not like that, it's like this. The climate deniers point to the down part. You have to look at the overall trend going up. Even though we have a little bit of a backsliding with economic nationalism, political populism, authoritarianism, Trump, Brexit, and so on – sort of two steps back, but there's three, four steps forward. We're being pulled upward even though there's some few setbacks.

Again, it's not like this is a slide backwards, we're heading back to the reenactment of slavery and taking women's rights away. No, that's not going to happen. Little local hotspots, we have to focus on those and get back on track. This too shall pass. I assure you I'm old enough now to have seen this happen over and over and over again, where everybody panics like this is the end of the world, you know. Nixon and then Reagan and then Bush. In America, every new cycle of administration changes, I hear this, "It's the end of the world, this is it, it's all over, we're marching backwards to the Dark Ages...". No, no we're not.

ZR: Dr. Michael Shermer, thank you so much for your time today.

MS: You're welcome.

ZR: And thank you guys for joining us today. Don't forget to subscribe to our YouTube channel and to donate, otherwise we can't produce independent and non-profit news and analyses. My name is Zain Raza. See you next time.

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