

## On Religion

There's a lot of interesting material for discussion in a subject area we normally tend to shy away from. As a general rule, that area is not only divisive but, I would imagine for many teachers, potentially dangerous. They could lose their jobs over it, in other words. As the saying goes, you can't argue religion or politics. In our world, we just can't argue religion. I can't say that I've talked about it all that much myself, at least here. My goal is to inform and/or entertain, not to piss people off. So I've avoided the subject because of all its landmines.

So much for that.

The debate world, by default, does not make arguments that appeal to religious beliefs. Our task is to employ a combination of evidence and logic in aid of reasoned discussion of issues. Religion, on the other hand, employs neither evidence nor logic. Therefore, an appeal to religion would not result in a reasoned discussion of issues because that is not what religion is about. Religion is about faith. Faith, by its very nature, is a suspension of logic and empiricism: the mind accepts as true ideas that are not logical and for which there is no evidence. Faith, therefore, appears to be a very special aspect of human thought, because unlike most human thought, it runs on a track that accepts things unquestioningly versus the tracks that question everything. Abraham's willingness to kill his son at the command of God is one of the great examples of faith over all else. There is no way Abraham can do this without a most powerful faith (and trust) in the Almighty. This faith and trust is notably rewarded when God relieves Abraham of this burden after he has proved himself worthy.

So faith does not rely on logic. But the point is not that faith is illogical, in the purest definition of the word. Instead, it's a-logical. It's in another realm from logic altogether. It is not measured by the tools that measure logic or facts. It is not thought of in those terms. There is much writing by religious people on this subject; for example, there are plenty of teachings in the Roman Catholic religion on faith that are very much along these lines. Having faith asks you to accept things because you accept them. You accept them not because you can prove them but *despite* the fact that you cannot prove them. That's what faith is all about.

The need to maintain faith without resorting to logic seems to apply to all religions. (Otherwise one of them would be demonstrably, provably true, and that would be the end of all the others.) The study of the role of religion in human society (absent the actual truth of religion in human society) demonstrates a number of things, chief among them being that the vast majority of people in the world do maintain a belief in religion. We can extrapolate from this a number of possibilities. One is that people have some sort of need for religion in their lives, and therefore invent religion to fulfill that need. Another is that there is indeed a spiritual world, and the variety of religions extant in the world are our attempt to understand that spiritual world. That spiritual world is, by definition, beyond our limited human understanding, so we do the best we can trying to figure it out. Often we have what we consider divine revelations to help us along, i.e., books or signs

that we interpret as the emanation of the divine. Some religions like to think that their revelations are somehow the true ones, and everyone else's revelations are untrue. Other religions take a more ecumenical view, trusting that most revelations are indeed divine, and simply different from culture to culture because, as I said, the spiritual world, while it does exist according to their thinking, is beyond the limits of human understanding. This sort of thinking leads one religion to respect another religion. Thinking that your religion is better than someone else's religion, on the other hand, leads to things like holy wars (the ultimate oxymoron).

Faith is not only logic-defying, but deeply held. One is not a proponent of their religion at the same level that one is a proponent of, say, their local baseball team. The latter is an arbitrary commitment that can take on an appearance of depth, but is never more than just fandom, even when engaged in rabidly. There are a lot of the trappings of religion in fandom, though. One is a fan of a team for reasons that defy logic and evidence, and one supports one's team over other teams through thick and thin. But, ultimately, it's just being a sports fan. It is subscribing to a belief in an alternate universe (sports) for the purpose of recreation or, perhaps at its deepest level, self-identification because that sport is, for the self-identifier, the key pastime. It can even be an obsession, but it is never comparable to religion even when it is metaphorically a religion. Religion holds the power of eternal life and death, of explaining the mysteries of the universe, of connecting the human to the divine. For even the biggest sports nut, none of these are possible returns on fan investment. Comparing sports fandom to religious fervor merely allows us to begin to understand the sports fan; it does not make sports and religion identical.

As I say, religion is the realm of eternal life and death, of explaining the mysteries of the universe, and of connecting the human to the divine. That is why it is so deeply held. There can be nothing of greater importance than these ideas to the human mind. From a structuralist perspective on secular society, the hierarchy of concern is self then immediate family then extended family then friends then community, etc., in a long line of formative moral binds (although, at times, they can be juggled, for instance when a soldier gives his or her life for country). Religion is the transcendent idea preceding even the self, taking the structuralist to a level beyond the secular: the divine, then self, etc., etc. By definition, therefore, nothing can be more important to the individual than religion. And religion not only tops the hierarchy, but it transcends all the other levels.

Religion, in other words—i.e., belief and faith—is, among those who possess it, an absolute primary. Is it any wonder, therefore, that we don't want to argue about it?

As we said, religion is both primary and transcendent. What you believe about your religion probably takes precedence over all else, and it probably provides meaning or context for all else. Religious belief is mental Ground Zero. And as we also said, because religious belief relies on faith rather than logic and experience, it is different from most of our empirical approach to life in general.

This might be a good analogy. Imagine that you have a headache, a pounding in the back of your brain that won't go away. You visit the doctor, who performs all the possible tests

and discovers that, beyond any doubt, there is nothing wrong with you. What happens when the doctor tells you this? Does your head stop hurting? Of course not. Whatever you feel, you feel, and someone telling you that you don't feel it is patently absurd. That you feel the pain is incontrovertible, even if, objectively, there is no reason for you to feel the pain. Just because you're not sick doesn't mean your head still doesn't hurt.

Philosophers have juggled around the complexities of what is objective reality and what is subjective perception since the first powwow in the cave lo those many years ago. We intuit that there probably is an objective reality, but we realize that each individual brain may perceive that reality differently. Each individual brain has no ability to know anything beyond its own perceptions. Thus we piece together what we think might be objective reality by pooling our subjective perceptions. (And this can, at times, be a bad thing: study your Foucault, for instance, if you want to understand the nature of relativism in the 20th Century.) We are each a relativistic brain possessing its own share of objective reality.

The nature of knowledge, meanwhile, is variable. For instance, I know for a fact that Nightingale McQueen played Prissy in "Gone with the Wind." But then you come along and tell me, no, it was Butterfly McQueen, not Nightingale McQueen. I realize that you are right and I was wrong. Henceforth, I will store Butterfly in my brain instead of Nightingale. The thing is, this is just some random piece of information in my brain. I have no investment in it's being correct or incorrect. I don't really care. It can be this fact, or that fact. Whichever. It is just an item on the shelf, replaceable by another item, if the need arises. I do not define myself by what is on these shelves; they're just storage areas for data.

Another form of knowledge is derivational. That is, I have worked it out on the basis of various premises. It is the result of my own active mental processes. For instance, I have studied anthropology, and know all the various branches of early hominid. I can name every fossil line from the missing link to Sarah Palin. The problem is, all of a sudden they discover a new skeleton in the Olduvai Gorge, and the whole process of human evolution needs to be rewritten. Now, this may be harder for me to accept than the Nightingale Butterfly problem, because while that was just some random fact, the process of evolution is one that I have studied in depth and one on which I have reached various conclusions. My brain has been put to processing use beyond just mere storage. Still, when the new skeleton comes along, I can rethink everything I've thought before and work that new piece of information into what I already know. After all, the accumulation of knowledge about this subject before I knew about that skeleton was also a process of adding new information and evaluating it, so now I'm just continuing the process. Even when it requires a total paradigm shift, I can handle it. It is the rational part of my brain doing its job, which is reasoning: it is the business of absorbing new information, new thinking or perhaps rethinking. Whatever. It may be harder for me to make the shift for the new skeleton and a total new picture of evolution than it was with Nightingale Butterfly, which was simply a substitution of one fact (erroneous) for another fact (correct), but I can do it eventually. My investment in my prior knowledge was deeper than N/B, in that I had worked for it, but it was not self-definitional. Even if my job were

anthropologist, I could make the shift, because that's part of an anthropologist's job, to update the paradigms when a new skeleton is found. In fact, it's the so-called scientific method, to test ideas against the evidence at hand (and vice versa). The scientific method pretty much explains how the brain does its rational thinking on a philosophical level, whether or not we're talking about science.

So, we see two types of knowledge, simple and complex. But both are flexible. Unlike the pain in my head, which I *felt*, these were simply pieces of information in my head, mere thoughts that I *knew*. Tell me that they're not there, so to speak, and I have no problem with it. But tell me that the pain in my head is not there? Sorry, my head still hurts. Even though it is only what I think rather than what I have had demonstrated to me as true, my brain still accepts it as true, and more to the point, true beyond analysis or refutation. If I feel the pain, the pain is there.

Religious belief, based as it is on faith rather than rational process, is like the pain in the head, not because it's real or unreal (that's not my point) but because we feel it rather than rationally deduce it. At the point where we move from reason to faith, we leave reason behind. We believe what we believe because we believe it. Religion is not random facts like N/B, or knowledge we've worked out like science. It is things that we believe because we believe them, and because we choose to believe them. And, because they are prime, transcendent beliefs, they are probably even more unshakeable than that pain in our head. What it boils down to is, not only is religion the most important thing to many people, it is also a thing that is not subject to rational evaluation. This is why you can't argue with someone about their religion. People believe their beliefs because they believe them, and they are of primary importance to them. You come along with some mere rational objection, and the religious person doesn't care. Their beliefs, formed by faith rather than rationality, are not subject to rational evaluation. It's pointless to attempt such an evaluation. You're the doctor telling me my head doesn't hurt. Sorry, but it does hurt. You can't tell me otherwise.

Remarkably enough, despite the fact that religious belief is non-rational—again, it is not irrational, which is something else altogether, which I'm not going to go into because I'm not arguing about the content of religion but the nature of belief, which are two different things entirely—most people on the planet are religious, and do hold religious beliefs. This is rather curious, in a way, and points to a few possibilities. Maybe there's something about being human that requires spirituality, or maybe spirituality is an objective reality and our religions are indeed our ways of approaching that inherently unknowable concept. It doesn't matter. (It also doesn't matter how we acquire this belief, although the usual method is via the family transmission of culture from generation to generation.) The point is, most people do believe, whatever it is they believe in, and whether or not what they believe in is true.

With one tiny exception. There are no atheists in foxholes, as the saying goes. But, damn, there are an awful lot of atheists in debate rounds. Ask these debate people to evaluate something with a religious aspects, and they're at a total loss. They simply cannot get past the rational/objective: "You believe in *what*? That's preposterous."

Well, yeah. It's faith. It is non-rational, by definition. But, young padawan, you'd better get it into your head that this doesn't make it any less real to the people who believe in it (who, by the way, might be right). And so often non-believing debaters want to attack the belief rather than the structures that contain it.

In this path lies madness...

So far we've established that religion is a concept based on non-rational thought that is, by its nature, at the core of believers' perception of reality. At which point you say, okay, this is all well and good, but what does it have to do with debate?

I'm taking off from a particular reaction to one topic, but the reaction was not limited to that one topic, and has arisen in the past where there have been religious areas at play in a resolution. The issue in the topic at hand was a religious objection to immunization; the atheistic debater's reaction was, "That's just stupid."

Again, the one thing you'll notice in what I've been writing is that I haven't addressed the content of religious belief. Nor will I. Because of the nature of religion, one can never address the content of religion as a starting point for discourse. You can't argue about it, in other words, not only because of the close holding of the belief but also because of faith's lack of rational structure. You cannot argue against something that does not respond to argumentation. As I said initially, religious beliefs are a-logical, outside the realm of logic. Argument is a tool from the realm of logic. Arguing about religion is like using a power saw to play the piano. It's the wrong tool for the job.

This is why we don't use religion as the warrants for our claims in debate. If we are arguing a moral question, most likely our religion provides clear warrants for a particular position. But to make a claim and warrant its truth as its being the word of God would not allow for much subsequent discussion. If I quote Joe Biden and you quote God, then pretty clearly your source outranks my source. So what we do is look for ways of making ethical judgments other than our religions. And if you think about it, good ethical judgments grounded in secular thinking ought to be roughly what our religions tell us anyhow. Good ethical judgments, for instance, tell us not to kill and steal and so forth, with no appeal to religious doctrine. We can make ethical determinations, in other words, without appeal to religion that are nonetheless congruent with religion.

Still, we do come up against issues where we are arguing in rounds about religion. In these cases we cannot argue religion's content (in the case in point, the reason a religion might object to immunization), because that is irrelevant to the discussion, and impossible to change (because, being religious, it's non-rational and core). What *can* be argued in any situation I've ever seen where it's come up, is the *role* of religious versus secular concerns. That is totally debatable, and we see examples around the world of almost every possible combination of religion and secular in different cultures ranging from the totally separate to the totally intertwined. To evaluate what they mean, we need to step back from the content to the structure, to look not at what is being said but how its

being said. We must look at the religious and the secular as societal structures, and evaluate their interplay abstractly, with an understanding of what religion is and what society is, absent a concern with the nature of a particular religion or a particular society.

Are you feeling structuralist yet? Are you doing the Caveman dance? The pulling away from the study of content to the study of structures was one of the milestones of 20th Century scholarship. And as far as I can tell, it's the only way for debaters to meaningfully address issues of religion in society.

Back to the example. The X people won't be immunized because it is against their religion. Responses?

- "This is scientifically wrong because immunization yadda yadda yadda whatever." Not a good response. Why? Because you're arguing the content. The X people don't give a crap about what science says, and all the science in the world won't change their minds. So even if you're right, you're not solving the problem.
- "Society must prioritize public health concerns over private religious concerns." A much better response (although I'm not necessarily saying it's the correct one). Here you're allowing for the X people to believe whatever they want to believe, but addressing the issue in a "what do we do when secular and religious conflict" mode, regardless of the content of the conflict.

I hope you understand what I've been trying to say. In a nutshell, I'm suggesting that you, first, understand what religion is, and, second, begin to think about ways of addressing it that take that understanding into consideration. Your beliefs or my beliefs or anyone's beliefs are beside the point, but the role those beliefs play in arenas outside of the purely religious are very much the point. You can't argue religion, but you can argue *about* religion, in other words. That's the bottom line. And considering the religious nature of the society we live in, and for that matter the planet we live on, it's probably good advice. People can believe whatever they want to believe, and they do, in vast numbers. That's fine. When their beliefs cause a conflict beyond the boundaries of religion, that's not fine. And that's the ground on which we can stand as debaters.