

## RIGHT, WRONG, AND GOD

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“The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion.”

■ Thomas Paine *The Age of Reason, III*, 1794

“In a curious way, the God-fearing people of East Texas are far more familiar with sin than people in more sophisticated parts of the country, even those without religion. The ministers here rail constantly against the Devil’s handiwork. They talk about the temptations, always present, that every man and woman succumb to at some point in their lives. The ministers look out over a flock of sinners and preach the need, indeed the responsibility, for all to come to the altar and cast Satan out. Many find Jesus – again and again.

-- George Crile *Charlie Wilson’s War*

A comment was made within my hearing recently regarding a certain UU. The speaker’s tone was one of puzzlement or intellectual fascination, possibly bordering on amazement. The statement was complementary in that it observed that (the person) exhibited high standards of integrity, unselfishness, and generally moralistic living but, surprisingly, without any apparent relation to a belief in a god.

One’s initial reaction might be to quietly steal away from the speaker lest he suddenly lose his connection to his god while in your presence and immediately revert to murder, rape, and general mayhem.

Finding that thought hopefully irrational, I’ve subsequently reflected on those words and the perspective they represent.

Why would one believe the apparent influence of a god is necessary for us to live a life of integrity and unselfishness? And, lacking that influence, would one believe he or she would automatically revert to selfishness and the life of a “sinner”?

I have carefully chosen the term “sinner” for this church talk this morning. After all this IS church, albeit the wrong church to presume our chairs are filled with sinners. -- Sinners I’ll define as a shorthand label for those “making what is defined among the mainstream as the morally wrong choice” leaving the floor strewn with all the baggage the term “sinner” and “morally wrong” carries with it, hoping one of you will gather this baggage and make an engaging future talk of what you find. And my further shorthand for right / wrong issues will be integrity and selfishness without drifting off point to discuss the individual merits of these two specific characteristics.

Anthropologists state that one of the most common reasons people give for believing in God is that without the existence of a deity there would be no ultimate basis for morality. The source of this belief may be that morality, God, and religion have been so intertwined for so long that some believe there is

an evolutionary-based genetic rule underlying the connection. The secular Enlightenment concept of human rights – as expressed and fought for in the French and American Revolutions – is relatively new.

A couple of decades ago, seeing “we, the people” as inherently terrible creatures, bloody of tooth and claw, destroying each other and the world and all that ... was a very popular theme. And that image still survives in certain corners today where those who are still into species self-flagellation dwell. I’m much more a fan of Joan Marble Cook’s *In Defense of Homo Sapiens* where tribal pride and retribution, kill or be killed, is way down the list of human distinguishing characteristics. And the traits more indicative of humans being human were and are “save the children first,” order out of potential chaos, and movement toward what became the Golden Rule, theology, Ten Commandments, and our Seven Principles. In Cook’s words, “humanity and rationality are our distinguished gifts from natural selection.” For the far majority of humans, for the far majority of our written history, cooperation trumped predation. We are the descendants of those who cooperated best. Moral living and unselfishness come with that territory.

So where does this “the non-devout can’t be good people” thinking come from? Michael Martin in “Atheism: A Philosophical Justification” states, “Historically, religionists have attacked atheists for supposed flaws in their moral character: it has often been alleged that they cannot be honest and truthful. For example, in 1724 Richard Bentley, an English Christian apologist, maintained that ‘no atheist as such can be a true friend, an affectionate relation, or a loyal subject. Further, the Evidence Amendment Act of 1869 stated “atheists in England were considered incompetent to give evidence in a court of law.” A case in America in 1856 disqualified as a witness one Ira Aldrich in an Illinois case after she testified that she did not believe in a God that ‘punishes people for perjury, either in this world or any other’.” In elaborating on atheists, Martin continues by distinguishing between several types, including positive atheists who “disbelieve in god or gods” and negative atheists who “have no belief in a god or gods.” Martin further classifies negative atheists into “the broad sense of negative atheism,” where there is “an absence of belief in any god or gods,” and the “narrow sense” of negative atheism, according to which an atheist is without a belief in a personal being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and completely good and who created heaven and earth.” He doesn’t stop there, further defining a positive atheist in the broad sense, a positive atheist in the narrow sense, and so on and so on – a litany of definitions of various beliefs and non-beliefs short of that in the traditional God. I will spare you the details.

How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? It depends on how you define angel, define dance, and define the size of the head of a pin. Or in more contemporary terms, it depends on what the definition of “is” is. Such is the confusion with some regarding living morally vs. toting a Bible to church on Sunday.

Cognitive psychologist, Susan Blackmore developed the “meme machine” concept. She writes, “From an early age children are brought up by their Catholic parents to believe that if they break certain rules they will burn in hell forever after death.” (Why she singles out Catholics I’m not sure.) She continues, “The children cannot easily test this since neither hell nor God can be seen, although He can see everything they do. So they must simply live in life-long fear until death, when they will find out for sure, or not. The idea of hell is thus a self-perpetuating meme.” There may be something to this “God is meme” argument in the sense that all religions employ techniques to increase their membership, to compete against other religions, and to perpetuate themselves into future generations. Church “customers” need to be there to get their supply of integrity and unselfishness, a quantity in high

demand, and, in some minds, available no where else. Of course, if the demand is not there, they would quickly go the way of the Neanderthals and eight-track tapes , so says Blackmore.

Religion did evolve as the social structure that enforced the rules of human interactions before there were such institutions as the state or such concepts as laws and rights. In small groups, sociologists say 300 or less, we do not need religion and gods to enforce the rules in the immediate family where the ties are close – family discipline and loyalty suffice. Most parents do just fine. But when we move out from the circle of extended families and into the community and society, other mechanisms are needed to deal with the strays to ensure that all people are kind to one another.

We've discussed in *God Tracks*, that the more enlightened now realize survival of the fittest should really read, "survival of the ones who have learned to cooperate best." Since our reputations as cooperators must be built over time, we must show consistency from day to day, week to week, and year to year. It would be difficult to fake being a cooperator in order to fool your fellow community members for any length of time.

Anthropologist William Irons shows that religion, in addition to providing rules, morals, and enforcement (and numerous other benefits outside the scope of this discussion), furnishes a splendid opportunity to prove related characteristics of loyalty and commitment to the group. If I see you every week in the pews, every month at the confessional, getting circumcised, being bar mitzvahed, not eating meat on Fridays, singing the psalms to the Lord, facing east to pray, taking the bread and wine as the body and blood of the savior, going to war in the name of God, and even willing to risk death for our group, we know you are someone we can trust. That sort of commitment is hard to fake. If our self-image is that of an honest person, not only are others more likely to perceive us as honest and unselfish, we ARE more likely to be honest and unselfish. We are all fairly good at detecting cheaters and liars, so in order for the cheater or liar to get away with his offense, he has to work very hard at appearing honest. Even if deception is the original intent, in time, with repetition of the ritual, self-deception may take over, thus we've made an honest man out of him. Either way, through literally millions of iterations of real-life game-theory events in the course of a lifetime, we learn who are the cooperators and who are the defectors, who is moral and unselfish, and who is not. Early religions for purposes of guiding moral living may have this deeper root of building loyalty and testing cooperation.

To an anthropologist the varied god answers offered from the thousands of religions and billions of people around the world are scientifically interesting in trying to understand the cultural causes of the diversity of belief. But from a believer's perspective, the differences are emotionally significant because they tell us something about our personal values and commitments. And values and commitment beliefs, religiously based or not, are part of how we are perceived.

In the book, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990*, the authors point out that for the past two centuries American church membership rates have risen from less than 20 percent at the time of the Revolution, to 35 percent by the middle of the nineteenth century, to over 60 percent today. Bully-pulpit preachers who remind us regularly that we are slouching ever further toward cultural depravity and godless hedonism could not be more wrong.

The change in values, integrity, selfishness, etc. are harder to nail down during that 200 year period. Researchers do recognize crime waves with the 1860's being five times higher than the 1960's. Another crime peak occurred during prohibition. And yet another during that 1960's and 1970's. The crime rate from 1960 to 1979 increased over 250% before it began to drop during the 1980's, a drop that is continuing today. A primary problem with this historic data is that there is meager records of crimes that were dealt with on the spot, victim to perpetrator, before it was more fashionable to report crime to the police and courts for action. On the spot means -- BAM or BANG, case closed.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century social scientists predicted that with the advent of universal public education and the rise of science and technology, culture would become secularized and religiosity would dramatically decrease. This "secularization" thesis has been thoroughly refuted, as religiosity continued to increase through the end of the last century and into the present one. Is this an integrity and selfishness concern?

A 1920 in-depth study on religion and morality focused on a mid-western town with the study alias "Middletown." Revisiting in 1980, the researchers concluded that a Rip Van Winkle, having slept through the intervening 60 years, would wake up to see no significant difference in the degree of behaving or misbehaving prevalent in the community.

Comparing nation to nation, culture to culture, is fraught with pitfalls and bear traps when considering the religion vs. morality issue. But plowing ahead anyway; consider survey results in the industrialized nations that report belief in God and in heaven in the U.S. at 95% and 84 % respectively. Those god and heaven numbers for Great Britain are 76% and 57%. Moving down scale, France is 62 % and 27%, almost no heaven in France. And the orderly and polite Japanese? The gods column scores 39% with heaven at 20. Do Americans operate at five times the morality and integrity as do the Japanese and double the French? When it comes to industrial spying, yes. But elsewhere, it's a topic for debate.

American belief-in-god and belief-in-heaven polls all range in the high 80's to low 90's. But there is a reverse correlation with level of education. Heaven scores 94 percent among those with no college -- and then falls, level by education level, to 75 percent of the postgraduate students. Note though that ALL these belief numbers are increasing. If one's prejudices say integrity and lack of selfishness are heaven sent, or hell feared, one might expect a similar deterioration of morality with increased level of education. Maybe a person's take on a god requirement for integrity and unselfishness has ties here.

What is driving religious growth? Is it a backlash against a spate of selfishness and immorality? University of Chicago sociologist of religion, Andrew Greeley, thinks not. "Humankind is born with two incurable diseases, life from which it inevitably dies and hope which hints that death may not be the end. A conviction that life does not end with death is a tentative endorsement of the validity of hope." The "product" sold by these religious "corporations" competing in the spiritual "marketplace" is life after death. Sales are on the rise. All market indicators are positive. Being a non-sinner may be the coin of the realm.

According to Greeley, as the century progressed, a free market of religious competition increased and diversified, causing religions and churches to compete with one another for customers. His paper, "*Pie in the Sky While You're Alive: Life after Death and Supply Side Religion*," Greeley demonstrated that while belief in an afterlife among protestants is high, that belief rose considerably among non-

protestants as well. Even those with no religious affiliation showed an increase in belief in life after death, from 31 to 50 % . These statistics, says Greeley, fly in the face of our intuitive thoughts about the rise of science and the decline of religion: “A furious battle is raging in social science about religion. Traditional theories have emphasized the decline of religion as part of an inevitable process of “secularization.” In the face of scientific progress, the growth of rationality, and the elimination of superstition, religion is seen as retreating, as Durkheim said it would, to the periphery of society.” But Greeley’s data, along with the polls cited above, show that Durkheim, along with Time Magazine’s *God is Dead?* issue and Nietzsche were wrong, dead wrong. Why? Greeley tests an interesting theory of supply-side religion:

“They argue that the “demand” for religion is relatively constant since the need for “compensation” because of death and suffering is a given in society and that the different levels of religious behavior that one can observe in various regions of the country like the United States and various countries are the result of the available “supply” of religious services. In a controlled religious marketplace, they assert, religion becomes a lazy monopoly because the Established Church (or Churches as in Germany) need not compete for “customers”. On the other hand, when there is no legal monopoly, various “firms” must compete for “customers” and hence provide more industrious personnel and more services. In such situations, religious activity increases. If you believe we can not be good without God, market forces should drive us to be getting gooder.

At the implementation level, one aspect of this being good WITH god has always puzzled me. When going to confession for stealing five chickens, is it OK to say, “Father, I confess. I stole ten chickens. May I be forgiven?” and then pick up the other five on the way home?

The facetious comment at the opening, fearing the speaker, is how Richard Shermer, author of *How We Believe*, refutes those claiming the necessary God/moral link. What would you do if there were no God? The question can be followed by an additional question that draws the denouement: Would you commit deception, robbery, rape, and murder, or would you continue being a good and moral person? Either way the argument is over. If the answer is that the individual would quickly turn to deception, robbery, rape, or murder, then this is a moral indictment of their character, indicating they are not to be trusted because if, for any reason, they turn away from their belief in God (and most people do at some point in their lives), the plug is pulled on their constraints and their true immoral nature is revealed; we would be well advised to steer a wide course around them. If the answer is that people continue being good, moral, and unselfish, then apparently you can be good without god. Sometimes we UU’s can be a bit arrogant as we share our perceptions on god and religion. The right, wrong, and god relation may be critical to some and self-fulfilling in others. A friend of mine stated recently that his god succeeded in restraining him from vengeance after the young father of my friend’s first grandchild killed the four-month-old baby about six weeks ago. My friend dug the grave and buried the little girl himself in the family cemetery in the woods less than a mile from our house. He said it took a week for the police to catch the murderer and about the same amount of time for my friend’s god to suppress his hunt and kill impulse. We need to resist that tendency toward arrogance. We need to be very careful when we mess with other people’s gods -- they’re important and needed. That is one of the take-home points today that occasionally gets lost in our sometimes arrogant perspective on what we do or do not believe as opposed to our neighbors.

Although some progress has been made since the Enlightenment to ground moral values in nonreligious, metaphysical concepts such as “rights,” and to construct a secular system by which one can live a meaningful and moral life with or without any belief in God, we are a long way from finding agreement among scientists and philosophers about whether, say, abortion is moral or immoral; whether lying is permissible in certain circumstances (you look like you’ve lost some weight, dear); whether we have free will or are determined, how to operationally define good and evil; especially about such subjective matters as meaning and purpose of human existence. We have opinions on these questions, of course, but there is no consensus (and considerable disagreement) among us as a society and even us as UU’s. Another take-home is the suggestion to think about the right / wrong aspect of these issues from the side opposite your normal perspective.

As E.O. Wilson points out in “On Human Nature” regarding we who take a more secular, humanistic, and scientific approach to these issues. We are small in number and, compared to religion, largely impotent as a social force. Studies show, for example, that following the 1992 Los Angeles riots it was religion that helped rebuild the looted and torched neighborhoods, not business, not government, and certainly not the humanists. Perhaps it is because religion has a 10,000-year head start on these other social institutions, or perhaps it is because that is what religion does best. But the notion that religion will soon fall into disuse would seem to be belied by the data of both science and anecdotal observation. While those outside mainstream religion may manifest commendable moral traits, or act with admirable social consciousness, they do so in an expression of their humanity. Impotent? We UU congregations must make that decision, community by community as we exhibit our integrity and unselfishness.

Modern life leaves many people feeling insignificant and a bit lost. Maybe this prompts selfishness. If you were living a spiritual life – and believed you were helping to end suffering – that could make you feel quite potent. From Martha Sherrill’s “*The Buddha from Brooklyn*,” “there is nobility in sacrifice – any sacrifice. And as much as I didn’t want to admit this, there is in fact a sort of ladder that people seem to ascend in order to be liberated from self-concern and see themselves as part of something larger. And sometimes people do ridiculous things to get there.” The rub, of course, is in finding that larger something without losing yourself along the way. It is the journey of a lifetime, a voyage we all must take if we want to find deeper spiritual meaning.

Duke University philosopher, Owen Flanagan, in “*The Problem of the Soul*”, sees it this way: ...it is the quest: “It is becoming worthy, and noble. It is the most we can aim for given the kind of creature we are, and happily it is enough. If you think this is not so, if you want more, if you wish that your life had prospects for transcendent meaning, for more than the personal satisfaction and contentment you can achieve while you are alive, and more than what you will have contributed to the well-being of this world after you die, then you are still in the grip of illusions. Trust me, you can’t get more. But what you can get, if you live well, is enough.”

It is enough for Flanagan, and the (roughly) 60 percent of practicing scientists who have no defined belief in God or an afterlife. Although not a true scientist, merely a fan of science with a wishy –washy position on god, it seems to be enough for me. But will it ever be enough for the masses? Can we convince hundreds of millions of people – even billions of souls – that the scientific / humanistic world view is good enough? That a good life, with integrity and selflessness, is enough of an end in itself? And God is a separate issue. The realist in me remains pessimistic. Even suggesting that as a goal may be ill-advised.

Can a life of integrity and unselfishness be a sufficient theology? One of the neat things about UUism is that you get to develop your own belief system. So there's no excuse to not live it because you created it.

To help make those decisions, we can remember the words of Saul Bellow: "A Man's Character is his Fate." We must excuse Bellow for his un-Unitarian choice of words, but "A Person's Character is his or her Fate" improves the political correctness, but not the resonance.

We will allow Dr. Laura to close as she simplifies this last 25 or so minutes with: "Now go do the right thing."

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Extra Stuff—

Seventeenth-Century philosopher and religious thinker, Baruch Spinoza – "I have made a ceaseless effort not to ridicule, not to bewail, not to scorn human actions, but to understand them." When it comes to religious, it is especially difficult for any of us to apply this principle consistently. Stephen Jay Gould "You cannot understand the human condition without understanding religion or religious arguments." Richard Shermer "How We Believe":

This is the white hat, black hat question we need to ask ourselves as we fall into the trap of categorically condemning others. When you think of those bad guys, and here you should feel free to pick your favorite category of bad guys whether they be greedy corporate executives, polluters that control the local sewage plant and refuse to upgrade it, illogical activists who stop trains moving nuclear waste to safer storage sites, irresponsible automotive engineers who sacrifice safety for profit, the myriad of bureaucrats and others lined up to gorge themselves at the public trough at the taxpayers expense, or narrow-minded devote believers – Christian, Islamic, or whatever – frequently, as we overcome our cockiness about knowing sufficient about their business and increase our knowledge of these individuals and their activities, we find people of high morals and integrity, similar to how we perceive ourselves. And, hopefully, they will also learn that the black hat they have placed on our heads because of our profession, affiliation, nationality, or whatever will also bleach in the sunlight of understanding – hopefully at least to a rather light tint of gray.