

## THE BELIEF IN THE BELIEF IN GOD

Tom Kinney

July 1, 2007

Bulletin quote:

“Looking forward to the Age of Discovery rather than backward to the Age of Faith.”

Lauren Bergreen, “Over the Edge of the World”

Story of Magellen’s voyage.

Good intentions pave both roads. Religion is the problem. Religion is the solution.

Daniel Dennet, “*Breaking the Spell*”

“When I was young, I prayed to God for a bicycle but I found out God doesn’t work in that way. So I stole a bicycle and prayed for forgiveness.” --Emo Phillips

Main talk:

This morning, I would like to attempt to explore the case for religion to spark some thoughts and see what you think. A more provocative title might have been *A Buyer’s Guide to Religion*. But that’s already been taken by Daniel Dennett in his *Breaking the Spell*. I owe Dennett for a few of the following words and somewhat of a debt to Edward O. Wilson’s *Consilience* for some added perspectives and phraseology as well. I’ll let Dan Dennett introduce the subject, with my slight modifications, and then we’ll take it from there.

Most people believe in the **belief** in some kind of God, even those who can’t manage to believe in God. Why do they believe this? An obvious answer is that they want to be good. That is, they want to lead good and meaningful lives and they want this for others as well, and they can see no better way to do this than to put themselves in the service of some sort of a belief in God. This answer may be right, and THEY may be right, but before we can consider this answer with the care it deserves, we need to address the challenge. Some people—and you may be one of them—find this whole setting of the issue objectionable. I will let Professor Faith try to give a fair expression of this point of view:

“Some of you insist on treating the question of religion as if it were like whether or not to switch jobs, or buy a car, or have an operation—a matter that ought to be settled by calmly and objectively considering the pros and cons, and then drawing a conclusion about the best course, “all things considered”. That’s not how we see it at all. It isn’t that belief in the belief in God is our settled conviction, a matter of the best overall life policy we have been able to discover. It goes way beyond that! Some religions are appropriately criticized for encouraging their people to “fake it until you make it,” but they never get around to describing the wonderful state of those who DO “make it”, whose honest attempts to immerse themselves with the spirit of God and succeed in a burst of glory. Those of us who know the experience know that it is unlike any other experience, a joy warmer than the joy of motherhood, deeper than the joy of victory in sports, more ecstatic than the joys of playing or singing great music. When we SEE THE LIGHT, it isn’t just an “Aha!” experience, like figuring out a puzzle or suddenly seeing

the hidden figure in a drawing, or getting a joke, or being persuaded by an argument. It isn't arriving at a BELIEF at all. We KNOW then, that God is the greatest thing that could ever enter our lives. It isn't like accepting a conclusion; it's like falling in love."

We might reply to Professor Faith as follows: Yes, we understand this. We at UUFRR have talked extensively here about meditations, spiritual ecstasy, rapture and all that. We recognize the state you're describing, and I would offer a friendly amendment: it isn't just like falling in love. It **IS** a kind of falling in love. The discomfort and even outrage many feel when confronted by a calm invitation to consider the pros and cons of their religion is the same reaction one feels when asked for a candid evaluation of one's true love: "I don't just like my darling because, after due consideration, I believe all her wonderful qualities far outweigh her few faults. I know that she is the one for me, and I will always love her with all my heart and soul." New England farmers are reputedly as tightfisted with their emotions as they are with their wallets and their words. Here is an old joke supposedly originating up in Maine somewhere:

"How's your wife, Jeb?"

"Compared to what?"

It would appear that Jeb is no longer in love with his wife. And there are those who believe that if you are so much as willing to think about comparing your religion with others, or with having no religion at all, you must not be in love with your religion. This is a very personal love (not like the love of jazz, or baseball, or mountain scenery). But no single person—not the priest, minister, rabbi or the imam—or even any group of people—the congregation of the faithful, say—is the beloved. One's undying loyalty is not loyalty to them, singly or together, but to the *system of ideas* that unite them. Of course, people sometimes do fall in love—romantic love—with their priest, minister, or with a fellow parishioner, and this can be hard for them to distinguish from love of their religion, but I'm not suggesting that this is the nature of the love most God-loving people experience. I am suggesting, however, that their unquestioning loyalty, their unwillingness even to consider the virtues versus the vices, is a type of love, and more like romantic love than brotherly love or intellectual love.

It is surely no accident that the language of romantic love and the language of religious devotion are all but indistinguishable, and it is similarly no accident that almost all religions (with a few austere exceptions, such as the Puritans and the Shakers and the Taliban) have given their lovers great beauty to entice their senses; dramatic architecture, with decorations applied to every surface filled with music, candles, incense, and pageantry. The inventory of the world's great works of art is crowned by religious masterpieces. Thanks to Islam, we have the Alhambra, and the exquisite mosques of Istanbul. Thanks to Christianity, we have the cathedrals of Europe. You don't have to be a believer to be entranced by Buddhist, Hindu, and Shinto temples of surreal intricacy and balance. And such music! From Handel's MESSIAH to those seasonal marvels, the Christmas carols, and the stories they set to music, are themselves compositions of extraordinary emotional power.

We have been given a lot to love, and not just spectacularly beautiful art and stories and ceremonies. The daily actions of religious people have accomplished uncounted good deeds throughout history, alleviating suffering, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick. Religions have brought comfort of belonging and companionship to many who would otherwise have passed through this life all alone, without glory or adventure. They have not just provided first aid, in effect, for people in difficulties; they have provided the means for changing the world in ways that remove those difficulties. As Alan Wolfe says, "Religion can lead people out of cycles of poverty and dependency just as it led Moses out of Egypt". There is much for religion lovers to be proud of in their traditions, and much for all of us to be grateful for. And much to prompt a strong belief in the value of a belief in God.

The fact that so many people love their religions as much as, or more than, anything else in their lives is a weighty fact indeed. Love is blind and, because love is blind, it often leads to tragedy: to conflicts in which one love is pitted against another love, and something has to give, with suffering guaranteed in any resolutions. In a world in which baseball fans' love of their teams led them so to hate the other teams and their fans that murderous war accompanied the playoffs would be a world in which a particular love, pure and blameless in itself, led to immoral and intolerable consequences.

Love is not enough. Have you ever had to face the heart-wrenching problems of a dear friend or relative who has fallen head over heels in love with somebody who is just not worthy of her love? If you suggest this to her, you risk losing a friend and getting slapped in the face for your trouble, for people in love often make it a point of honor to respond irrationally and violently to any perceived slight of their beloved. It's part of the whole point of being in love, after all. When they say that love is blind, they say it without regret. It is commonly understood that love SHOULD BE blind; the whole idea of assessment should be off limits when it comes to true love. But why? Common wisdom doesn't answer, and hardheaded economists have long dismissed the idea as romantic nonsense, but the evolutionary economist Robert Frank has pointed out that there is in fact an excellent (free-floating) rationale for the phenomenon of romantic love in the unruly marketplace of human mate-finding: (I'll paraphrase his academic phraseology in the interest of time and clarity.)

Because search is costly, it is rational to settle on a partner before having examined all potential candidates. Once a partner is chosen, the circumstance is changed. Uncertainty is destructive and each party wants to make a binding commitment to remain in the relationship... It becomes an intrinsic bond, one in which the person is valued for his or her own sake. And precisely therein lies love's value as a solution to the commitment problem.

Murmuring that your lovers' looks, earning power, and IQ meet your minimal standards would probably kill the romantic mood, even though the statement is statistically true. The way to a person's heart is to declare the opposite---that you ARE in love because you can't help it. This demonstrated (or at least passionately professed) helplessness may be as close as one can muster to a guarantee that you are not still shopping around.

The parallels with the belief in a particular religion are obvious. To search is costly in time and brainpower—the church of our upbringing is established, paid for, and easy. Like most believe in marriage, most believe in believing. So maybe we look around a little bit and then decide to fall in love.

Has our evolved capacity for romantic love been exploited by religious memes? It would surely be a Good Trick. It would get people to think that it was actually honorable to TAKE OFFENSE, to attack all skeptics with fury, to lash out wildly without concern for their own safety—let alone the safety of the person they are attacking. Their beloved deserves nothing less than this, they think: a total commitment to eradicating the blasphemer. Of such stuff are fatwas made, but this meme is not at all restricted to Islam. There are plenty of misguided Christians, for instance, who will contemplate with relish the prospect of demonstrating the depth of their commitment by raining abuse for daring to question the love they have for their Jesus. Some don't pause to consider that any such action would actually bring dishonor to their faith.

Some of the saddest spectacles of the last century have been the way zealots of all faiths and ethnicities have defiled their own shrines and holy places, and brought shame and dishonor to their causes, by their acts of fanatical loyalty. In the late 80's, my Yugoslavian cohorts, Serbs, educated me that Kosovo has been a holy place to Serbs since the battle of 1389, but it is hard to see how Serbs can continue to cherish its memory after recent history. By destroying the "idolatrous" Buddhist monuments in Afghanistan, the Taliban dishonored themselves and their tradition in ways that will take centuries of good works to overcome. The killing of hundreds of Muslims in reprisal for killing of dozens of Hindus in the temple in Gujaavat besmirches the reputations of both religions, whose fanatical devotees should be reminded that the rest of the world is not just unmoved by, but sick and tired of, their respective demonstrations of their devotion. What would REALLY impress us infidels would be an announcement, unilateral or joint, that the contested sites are henceforth to be considered the Halls of Shame, no longer holy but, rather, a reminder to all of the evils of zealotry.

Since September 11, 2001, some have often thought that perhaps it was fortunate for the world, if fortunate is a word compatible with this event, that the attackers targeted the World Trade Center instead of the Statue of Liberty. The fury with which many Americans would have responded to the unspeakable defilement of our cherished national symbol, the purest image of our aspirations as a democracy, may have made a sane and measured response extraordinarily difficult. This is the great danger of symbols—they can become TOO "sacred." An important task for religious people of all faiths in the twenty-first century will be spreading the conviction that there are no acts more DIS-honorable than overreacting to "infidels" of one stripe or another for merely "disrespecting" a flag, a cross, or a holy text.

Dennet points out that by asking for an accounting of the pros and cons of religions, we risk getting poked in the nose or worse, and yet we persist. Why? Because we believe that it is very important to break THIS spell by questioning and get us all to look

carefully at the issue: ARE PEOPLE RIGHT that the best way to live a good life is through religion? William James confronted the same problem squarely in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

“I am no lover of disorder and doubt as such. Rather do I fear to lose truth by this pretension to possess it already wholly.

So we continue our questioning, our search, our journey, which, in turn, can become a religion in itself, a belief in the belief in the value of the exploration, the questioning, the sorting among the truths. But are there guidelines that can be helpful?

The more radical of the Enlightenment writers, conscious of the implications of scientific materialism, moved to reassess God Himself. They invented a Creator obedient to His own natural laws, the belief known as deism. They disputed the theism of Judaeo-Christianity, whose divinity is both omnipotent and personally interested in human beings, and they rejected the nonmaterial world of heaven and hell. At the same time, few dared go the whole route and embrace atheism, which seemed to imply cosmic meaninglessness and risked outraging the pious. So by and large they took a middle position. God the Creator exists, they conceded, but He is restricted to the constraints of his own handiwork.

Deistic belief, as evolved to the present day, has given scientists a license to search for God, to hunt for God Tracks. More precisely, it has prompted a small number to make a partial sketch of Him (Her? It? Them?) from their professional meditations. He is material in another plane but not personal. He is, perhaps, the manager of alternative universes popping out of black holes, who adjusts physical laws and parameters in order to observe the outcome within the realms of his “free will” experiment, an experiment which may or may not be subject to termination by his superiors, as we heard a few months ago. Maybe we see a faint trace of Him in the pattern of ripples in cosmic background radiation, dating back to the first moments of our own universe. Alternatively, we may be predestined to reach Him billions of years into the future at an Omega point of evolution – total unity, total knowledge – toward which the human species and extraterrestrial life forms are converging. Edward O. Wilson in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* states that he has read many such schemes, and even though they are composed by scientists, he finds them depressingly non-Enlightenment. That the Creator lives outside this universe and will somehow be revealed at its end is what the theologians have been telling us all along. This is the cardinal tenet of scientific understanding: Our species and its ways of thinking are the product of evolution, not the purpose of evolution.

The dispute between Enlightenment deism and theology can be summarized as follows. The traditional theism of Christianity is rooted in both reason and revelation, the two conceivable sources of knowledge. According to one view, reason and revelation cannot be in conflict, because in areas of opposition, revelation is given the higher role – as the Inquisition reminded Galileo in Rome when they offered him the choice between

orthodoxy and pain. In contrast, deism grants reason the edge, and insists that theists justify revelation with the use of reason.

Faith, some argued back, cannot submit itself to the debasing test of rationality. Thus we have the Popes of history vs. the schoolboy who Mark Twain quoted as saying, "Faith is believin' what you know ain't so."

The fatal flaw in deism is thus not rational at all, but emotional. Pure reason is unappealing to most because it is bloodless. Ceremonies stripped of sacred mystery lose their emotional force, because celebrants need to defer to a higher power in order to consummate their instinct for tribal loyalty. In time of danger and tragedy especially, unreasoning ceremony is everything. There is no substitute for surrender to an infallible and benevolent being, a commitment called salvation. And no substitute for formal recognition of an immortal life force, the leap of faith called transcendence. It follows that most people would very much like science to prove the existence of God...but not to take the measure of Her capacity.

---