

Should We Mock at Religion?

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Many people, perhaps the majority, hold that although we should freely express our atheistical views, we should carefully avoid mocking at religion. Such mockery does, of course, gravely offend the sensibilities of religious people. It is held that in the presence of religious people we should speak in terms of respect about their beliefs, however ridiculous or indeed offensive we find them, especially when they are being taught to children who are too young to reason for themselves. I have not noticed that religious people show the least respect for the opinions of atheists, or refrain from speaking of them in the most derogatory terms; they seem to expect that their own views are the only ones worthy of respect. In the present century we have seen the rise of what might be termed secular religions, systems of belief which are held with utter fervour, contempt for evidence, and held to justify the most atrocious and inhuman acts. I refer to such world-wide cults as Marxism-Leninism, Maoism and the brand of Fascism that gripped the German people under the Nazi regime. I think that it is justifiable to refer to them as religions for they differed only from the better established religions such as Christianity, Orthodox Judaism, Islam and Shinto in that they do not postulate a supernatural God. These secular religions have been short-lived in our twentieth-century experience, although there is no guarantee that they will not rise again to power at some time in future history. To some extent they resemble the dominant religion during one period of the Roman Empire in which the Emperor was held to be a God, and to be worshipped as such, at least in some parts of the Empire. Religious figures such as Stalin, Hitler and Chairman Mao were, to all intents, regarded as God during the latter part of their reigns and it was blasphemy, and punishable by death, to ridicule them.

I have noticed that many Christians did not hesitate to mock figures such as Stalin, and pour scorn on Marxism-Leninism in the presence of devout Communists; they did not seem concerned that they were deeply hurting the feelings of their listeners. Yet if anyone expressed the opinion that Jesus Christ was a silly twit and much of what he was alleged to have said was nonsense, boring platitude, contradictory and just plain silly they would feel that this was in very 'bad taste'. Some centuries ago they would have demanded that the speaker should be imprisoned, hanged or burnt for expressing such opinions, but now that they have lost their power in Christendom they can only fall back on 'bad taste', although there are still trials for blasphemy in this country, as Nicolas Walter points out.¹

1. I have never encountered a devout Christian who will seriously debate the point that Jesus Christ (if he ever existed) was simply a very conceited young man, equal in his brass-faced conceit to Stalin, Hitler or Mao. Why should we treat this man of straw, whose very historical existence is in doubt, with special respect?²
2. Why should we treat all the muddled blether attributed to him as being beyond criticism? The Christian story is no better and no worse than any other recorded mythology, and we must acknowledge that its emotional power is comparable to that of other legends. We acknowledge the dramatic power of the legends of Oedipus, Orestes, Iphigenia, Medea and other Greek myths; but to pretend that these things actually happened, and to teach children that this is true and not to be questioned, is to tell them a pack of lies.

The Christian Bible, Old Testament and New, is part of our cultural heritage and, written as it is in the magnificent language of Jacobean English, it is a valuable piece of literature and children

¹ N. Walter, *Blasphemy: ancient and modern*, London: Rationalist Press Association 1990.

² For a discussion of the historicity of Christ, see G.A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?* London: Pemberton 1986.

should certainly become familiar with it as part of their general education. Someone who does not know who Noah was, or Samson, or Judas Iscariot, has certainly missed out in part of his education just as if he had never heard of Oedipus or Odysseus. What the modern Christians have done is an act of cultural vandalism. They have taken the Jamesian Bible and vandalised it by rendering it into 'modern' English. Thus legendary happenings, such as the feeding of the four thousand, told in the original Jamesian translation has a certain dignity and grandeur appropriate to legend:

And Jesus saith unto them, How many loaves have ye? And they said, Seven, and a few little fishes. And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the ground. And he took the seven loaves and the fishes, and gave thanks, and brake them, and gave to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude. And they did all eat and were filled: and they took up of the broken meat that was left seven baskets full. (Matthew 15, 34–37, The King James Bible)

It is almost poetry, and we can accept this impossible happening as a piece of romantic hyperbole, like Samson killing ten thousand men with the jawbone of an ass! But what have the modern churchmen done with it? They have pretended that it actually happened and reported it much as it might appear in *The News of the World*.

'How many loaves have you' Jesus asked. 'Seven' they replied, 'and there are a few small fishes'. So he ordered the people to sit down on the ground; then he took the seven loaves and the fishes, and after giving thanks to God he broke them and gave to the disciples, and the disciples gave to the people. They all ate to their heart's content; and the scraps left over, which they picked up, were enough to fill seven baskets. (The New English Bible)

A conjuring trick worthy of Uri Geller! Told like that, it is a monstrous lie devised to deceive children and the simple-minded, and deserving to be mocked and ridiculed.

During the 1930s when Hitler and Mussolini were extending their power, the cartoonist David Low produced a series of very funny satirical cartoons depicting them in various clownish situations. These men were responsible for very great villainy, but moral condemnation was not enough; they could be cut down to size most effectively by being mocked as clowns. Later, when Hitler and Stalin formed a pact and dismembered Poland, Stalin also became the butt of Low's satirical brush, and depicted not only as evil but as a blundering oaf. I think that we should not fail to expose the ridiculous aspects of religion and to prick the pomposity of priests and their gods and icons with satire.

Children are too immature to appreciate the extensive harm that religion has caused, and continues to cause, world-wide. However, we can and should show them the ridiculous aspects of the solemn and powerful figures who strive to intimidate and corrupt them by pretending that a set of thumping great lies are sacred truths. We will enlighten them more effectively by showing that priests and churchmen are clowns peddling piffle, than attempting to explain the full tragic consequences of their religious endeavours. Full understanding of the meaning of religion, which is like a mental disease of humankind, will come later.

Belief and make-believe

Belief and Make-believe is the title of one of George Wells' books.³ Children learn to discriminate between fact and fantasy very early the Beanstalk, Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, Aladdin and his Lamp, and Sindbad the Sailor, but they do not believe that such exciting adventures ever took place in reality. They can easily accept that the Christian myths, or those of other religions, are similarly in the realm of fantasy, and not that of reality. Our various folk-festivals, which we should all enjoy, have their associated myths; Christmas has the baby in the manger, the three wise men following a star, etc. (myths that date from many centuries before their alleged occurrence at the time of King Herod), but there is also the myth of Santa Claus travelling with his reindeer over our roof-tops. But while children enjoy these myths, they soon appreciate that anyone who seriously pretends that reindeer really do clatter over our roof-tops is a joker, a buffoon, a jester at the feast who is not to be taken seriously.

But when churchmen solemnly pretend that all sorts of impossible marvels really did take place, and demand that children should believe them on pain of punishment, these people are both clowns and bloody liars and should be recognised as such by children.

I have been referring to children and the attempt by religious people to abuse and corrupt them by attempting to make them accept that a pack of lies is sacred truth. But what of mature and intelligent adults who claim to believe in the literal truth of what their Church (or other religious institution) teaches? Here we must examine what we mean by 'belief'. Do they really believe, or do they only believe of themselves that they hold such absurd beliefs? This question is one of considerable psychological interest.

By analogy, I must refer to people whom we regard as mentally sick, and appear to believe, perhaps temporarily, that they are someone other than themselves generally famous or notorious historical figures. When working at the Maudsley Hospital I was seeing a patient who apparently believed that she was Joan of Arc, and demanded that she be treated as such. This lady suffered from a condition known as manic-depressive psychosis, a disorder in which the manic phase is of a temporary nature, but during which the person may be subject to extraordinary delusions. When she was coming out of her 'high' and returning to normal, no longer claiming to be Joan of Arc, I was able to discuss the matter quite rationally with her. I asked her if it had worried her during her deluded state that she, a medieval woman, was living in twentieth-century London. She said no, because she never actually *believed* that she was Joan of Arc; she knew all the time that she was a housewife, but acting in the role of the medieval figure was so immensely gratifying to her that she could not bear to admit, either to herself or to others, that she was not the historic figure she claimed to be. We must consider whether an intelligent and well-balanced adult who claims to believe all the nonsense that his religion teaches, is in a similar position. He cannot bear to admit, even to himself, that it is all rubbish, for such an admission would have serious consequences for his emotional life and mental balance. 'Losing faith' sometimes brings on a mental breakdown, and I have known this happen with a devout Communist who 'lost faith' at the time of the Soviet crushing of the Hungarian rising in 1956.

Intelligent but religious adults may also be compared with small children who go through phases of acting out a fantasy over a short period.

³ G.A. Wells, *Belief and Make-believe*, La Salle, Illinois: Open Court 1991.

A little boy may go through a phase of apparently believing himself to be a squirrel, and demand that he be treated as such as far as is compatible with his normal life. When his hair is brushed he insists that it is to be referred to as his 'fur'; he asks to be given plenty of nuts, and accumulates a store of them under his pillow. Sometimes he will eat his tea up a tree. He goes to school quite normally, and tolerant teachers must overlook his squirrel-like behaviour provided that it does not disrupt the classroom. The acting out of such fantasies by children is generally quite brief, and sensible parents do not mock his squirrel role but are indulgent towards it. But is it true to say that he believes that he is a squirrel.

Some intelligent adults may go through a period of apparently holding a quite bizarre belief with great fervour, without being otherwise mentally unbalanced. I remember that at the LSE there was a group of young women who belonged to a James Dean Club. James Dean was a man that they firmly believed that Dean was still mysteriously alive and actively performing. This belief was very rewarding to them and acted as the social cement that held the group together. When they acquired steady boyfriends they dropped away. Their sisterhood was rather like that of nuns who are supposed to believe that they are Brides of Christ'. But can we really call this 'belief'?

What then is 'belief'? There are some physicists who are devout Christians. Ask such a physicist whether the mass of the planet Earth was diminished by about nine or ten stone when Christ left it and ascended to Heaven, and what does he reply? Inwardly he may be somewhat disturbed and annoyed that you are trying to bait him by ridiculing his belief.

Outwardly he will probably remain calm and try to demonstrate that it is an ignorant question that cannot properly be answered because the questioner does not properly understand the nature of science or religion. He believes that he believes, and it would be emotionally catastrophic for him to admit doubt.

Does mocking harden belief?

In some cases mocking hardens the outward expression of belief. The manic patient who claimed to be Joan of Arc, the little boy who said he was a squirrel, the students who claimed that James Dean was still alive, the Communists who worshipped Stalin or Mao, the physicist who said that of course Christ ascended to Heaven, would all be more strident in their affirmation of belief if they were mocked. But in the long run mockery will create a climate of scepticism in which the intended victims of religious propaganda will be less vulnerable, and some of the 'believers' may eventually come to admit to themselves that they truly do not believe such a lot of nonsense, and it is merely a crutch on which they have to depend because of their personal inadequacy. They may learn to do without this crutch, and to trust their own rational judgement. Eventually, like the lady coming out of her manic state, they may admit to themselves that they never really believed in the nonsense, but that claiming to believe it served a purpose for a time. It is possible that humanity may eventually outgrow the tragic legacy of religion, with all the bloodshed and strife. Humanity may become rational and humane.

Flogging a dead horse?

A. N. Wilson, the well-known biographer, novelist and erstwhile Christian apologist, writes:

'It is said in the Bible that the love of money is the root of all evil. It might be truer to say that the love of God is the root of all evil. Religion is the tragedy of mankind.'

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Very true, and being of this opinion also, I find it heartening that a man of his intellectual power should have shaken off the chains of irrational belief that were put upon him as a child.

Christian apologists sometimes use the argument that people of considerable intellectual power, such as Dr Johnson, were religious. But a man's beliefs, his deepest principles, are not simply the product of his intellect; they are powerfully buttressed by emotion, and all too often maintained by fear. The weak and terrified child lives on deep within us long after we have attained adult status. Although fear and intimidation are at the heart of religious indoctrination, children's positive emotions are also manipulated. The myth of gentle Jesus, the darling baby cradled in the manger, is played up every Christmastide, and the pathos of the crucifixion is invoked, with the monstrous implication that it is he or she, the little child, who is somehow responsible for this cruel torture because of acts of sin! Yet it is this same Jesus who, according to the Gospel of St Matthew, declared: *'Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword'* (Matthew 10, 34–36).

There are plenty of similar contradictions in the Gospels to bemuse and confuse the child, and they are not a source of weakness, but of strength, as they serve the essential purpose of religion: to administer a resounding slap in the face of reason and common sense.

If one refers to all the cruel horrors that are practised in the name of religion, religious people declare that there is nothing wrong with Christianity (Islam, Judaism, etc.); the horrors, they say, are due to the wickedness of human nature. The fact is that although people can be cruel, intolerant and irrational enough when acting in their own personal self-interest on occasion, they are infinitely more beastly when acting in the furtherance of a religious purpose, as history and modern tragedies bear witness. Strengthened by religion, ordinary weak, moderately selfish and sometimes kindly human beings can become transformed into monsters: monsters of arrogance and intolerance, unflinchingly flouting all human values, because they believe that somehow they are doing it to the greater glory of God.

By castigating religion like this in the late twentieth century in Britain, am I merely flogging a dead horse? Non-believers can regard the Church of England, and other such religious bodies, with amused tolerance, and do and say what they please. But what degree of freedom of thought, speech and action we have achieved has been hard won through centuries of struggle, and such freedom as we have is tenuous. Among the preachers who coo to us so gently over the radio, are those who would dearly like to get back to the days when their ancestors imprisoned, hanged and burnt us for questioning their power and dogmatism. The death threats against Salman Rushdie demonstrate that fanatics in Britain can get away with open incitement to murder and snap their fingers at British law. It is permissible because it is a matter of religion! A. N. Wilson speaks truly when he says that 'Religion is the tragedy of mankind'.

I have dealt mainly with the Christian religion in this essay, but of course all I have written applies equally to other religions all over the world, including the non-theistic religions that some people like to designate as 'political'. Anarchism implies not only atheism but active struggle against religion itself, and where satire proves an effective means of combating it, then we should

⁴ A.N. Wilson, *Against Religion: why we should try to live without it*, Chatto CounterBlasts No. 19, London: Chatto & Windus 1991.

certainly engage in mockery and not be deterred by any feeling that religion holds any special right to immunity.

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