

## **Faith Tectonics - the power of religious belief**

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To what extent does religious belief make a difference in the way people understand and conduct their lives?

In our culture, the conventional wisdom goes something like this: it all depends upon how religious a person is. It makes virtually no difference to an atheist, while a religious fanatic thinks about little else. The majority fall somewhere between these two extremes. For them, religious belief may supply moral guidance, or at least reinforce moral standards, and most people believe (or at least hope) that God exists and that there is a life after death. But for the vast majority, everyday decisions and concerns seem to be the same whether one is atheist, Hindu, Christian, or whatever. In short, the majority view most of life as religiously neutral.

As a result of investigating religion for over 30 years, I have become convinced, however, that the popular wisdom summarized above is completely false, and that religious belief has the most decisive influence on everyone's understanding of the major issues of life across the entire spectrum of human experience. This influence is exercised upon all alike, regardless of whether they consider themselves religious in the conventional sense or, and regardless of whether they consciously reject the religious traditions with which they are acquainted.

The greater part of the influence of religious belief, however, remains hidden from casual view. Among the reasons for this is that people everywhere are prone to two alluring mistakes concerning religion. One is to suppose that all religious traditions are basically like the one(s) with which a person is familiar; that for every major doctrine or practice in any one religion, there is an equivalent doctrine or practice in the others. The other is to suppose that the similarities between religious traditions must lie in their most obvious and outstanding features. These two mistakes help to keep hidden from view the true nature of religious belief, and thus disguise its influence.

At the mention of the "true nature" of religious belief, I can imagine many a raised eyebrow. After all, haven't scholars been debating the definition of religious belief for at least 300 years without coming to any appreciable agreement? Aren't many experts in the field of world religions now convinced that no definition is even possible? Isn't it true that how we see the relation of religious belief to the rest of life depends on just how such belief is to be defined?

The answer to these questions is certainly "yes". But while finding a universal definition for religion is a knotty problem, to be sure it is not nearly as daunting as some contemporary scholars have made it sound. In fact, despite the prevailing current opinion, I think the correct definition of religious belief has been discovered and rediscovered time and time again by a large number of thinkers holding a wide variety of viewpoints. It was known to virtually every ancient

Greek philosopher, for example, and has been recognised in this century by William James, A. C. Bouquet, Norman Kemp Smith, Herman Dooyeweerd, Paul Tillich, Hans Kung, C.S. Lewis, Mircea Eliade, Will Herberg, and Robert Neville, among others.

The natural way to begin to look for a definition is, of course, to look for common characteristics among the type of things to be defined. If we can discover a set of features which *all* things of that type have, and which *only* things of that type have, we can be reasonably assured of having a good definition. Due to the great variety of religious beliefs, however, this task is exceedingly difficult. We can safely start by saying that a religious belief is (**page 78**) any belief in something as *divine*, but the problem is that conceptions of the divine are so startlingly diverse as to allow for no universal common element. What, for example, does the idea of God in Judaism or Christianity have in common with the Melanesian idea of Mana, the Shinto idea of Kami, the Tao of Taoism, or the Nothingness of Theravada Buddhism? It is precisely this difficulty that has led so many thinkers to despair of ever coming to a definition of religious belief.

But there is another way of searching for what is common to all religious belief and thus defining it. Instead of looking for common features in the diverse conceptions of what it is that is believed to be divine, the common element could be sought in the *meaning* of divinity itself. The difference is analogous to the ways of understanding and answering the question: "Who is the President of the United States?" The most obvious answer would be to name the person who holds the office. But the question could also be understood as being about the *office* of the Presidency rather than about any particular office holder. In that case the answer would begin: "The President is the person who has the following duties and powers in the Federal Government of the United States ..." and would go on to give a job description for the office of President.

My suggestion, then, is that past attempts to find a common element among religious beliefs have failed because it was sought within the description of alleged holders of the office of divinity. The alternative is to seek the defining commonality in the description of the office of divinity itself. If we do so, the outcome is radically - and happily - different; for while there is nothing common to all the various candidates for divinity, there is striking unanimity concerning the status of divinity itself!

Every religious tradition I am aware of agrees, that divinity must include the status of *utterly non-dependent existence*.

Consider, for example, the traditions mentioned earlier. For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, God is the creator of everything other than himself. He is "just there"; there is nothing that he depends on for existence, while all else depends on him. According to Taoism, the Tao is not a being distinct from the universe; nor is the Tao a personal God. In both these ways, the Tao is not like the biblical idea of God at all. Yet the Tao too depends on nothing but itself for its existence. The

same holds true for the Hindu idea of Brahman-Atman. Even the Theravada Buddhist who takes the divine to be an infinite Nothingness - and who therefore would not be willing to speak of its *existence* - still believes that Nothingness to be utterly nondependent while all else (even if all else is illusion) depends on it. The Melanesian idea of Mana is that of an independent force which controls (at least some of) what happens in the nondivine part of the world. Mana is not god; it is not personal and is not worshipped. Its divinity is due to its *nondependence*, not to its connection with any worship or ritual. The same is true of the idea of Numen in ancient Roman religion, and of Homer's *Okeanos* and Hesiod's *Chaos* in ancient Greece. In the Greek and Roman teachings, the gods and goddesses are worshipped not because they are identical with the divine, but because they are beings that are more like the divine than humans (e.g. they are immortal) and so have more divine power than humans have. In these religions, then, the gods are not identical with the divine, but depend on the divine. By contrast, some forms of Taoism and Buddhism do not believe there are any gods in addition to the nondependent divine, while the Biblical religions believe that divinity is identical with the one and only true God.

The fact that the divine may be thought of in radically different ways, each sharing the common features of nondependent existence, has several important consequences. The first can be seen in a few of the traditions just mentioned: worship is not an essential part or necessary consequence of religious belief. The Theravada Buddhist does not worship at all, and neither do some Taoists and Hindus. Consequently, despite the strong tendency of many people in our culture to equate (or at least strongly associate) religious belief with worship, the two are not necessarily connected. The second consequence is that being an atheist does not preclude having a religious belief. It is merely the denial of the existence of God or of gods; it is not a rejection of any and all nondependent existence. Thus it is instructive to note that a number of religions do not believe in "gods" at all but still regard something as divine - as did the Buddha.

This is a crucial point for understanding the extent and power of religious belief. For if any belief in something as utterly non-dependent is a religious belief *no matter how the divine is conceived*, then it will follow that many beliefs which are not ordinarily thought of as religious, and which have no worship attached to them, are in fact religious beliefs all the same.

For example, the materialist who believes reality to be either exclusively or basically physical is thereby elevating matter/energy to the same divine status as the Christian God or the Hindu Brahman-Atman. The materialist does not, of course, sing hymns to force fields or pray to quarks; materialism does not have any equivalent to worship or salvation. But it surely has something which it regards as existing independently, and which is the direct surrogate for a *creator*. And so do a number of other supposedly non-religious and anti-**(page 79)**-religious ideologies. For instance, the belief that there are no gods is sometimes expressed by saying that there is only the universe and nothing else. But in that case, there would be nothing for the universe to be dependent upon. The

universe would therefore have nondependent existence and would thus itself be divine.

But is it really the case that all people believe something or other to be divine? I think the answer to this is "Yes". Do I mean that all people and ideologies hold such a belief consciously and fervently? Here the answer must be "No." For many it is an unconscious assumption rather than a belief they have clearly articulated to themselves. But if religious belief can be unconscious, and even fail to express itself in worship, how can we know it to be universal? I believe its universality has two types of evidence. The first is its cultural omnipresence. As far as we know, all peoples and cultures have had some religious belief since the beginning of the human race. The best explanation for the existence of such a longstanding and pervasive feature of human life is that it is somehow rooted in human nature, in what John Calvin called a "sense of divinity" found in all people. In other words, the cultural consistency of religious belief points to an innate human disposition to know that upon which everything ultimately depends.

But even if that is true, it still would not show that such a tendency could not be repressed and defeated by individuals who are sufficiently determined to do so. Is religious belief really universal in the sense of being unavoidable?

Here my answer is still "Yes", based upon a second type of evidence which comes from an unexpected source. This is the discovery that *no highly abstract theory, such as those of science and philosophy can fail to be regulated by some religious belief functioning as its presupposition!* Moreover it can be shown that the contents of such theories vary with the contents of the religious presuppositions regulating them, ie that they depend upon a presupposition about that which itself is nondependent. [Note: *This thesis is developed in Roy Clouser's book The Myth of Religious Neutrality University of Notre Dame Press 2nd edition 2005.*]

If this is so, no one who accepts any highly abstract theory of science or philosophy can succeed in eschewing all religious belief, and religious belief has a relation to the rest of life which is like that of the earth's great tectonic plates to the earth's continents and oceans. The movement of these plates is not apparent to a causal inspection of any particular landscape, and can only be detected with great difficulty. Nevertheless, so vast are these plates, so stupendous their power, that their visible effects - mountain ranges, earthquakes, volcanoes - are but surface blemishes compared with the forces that produce them. Similarly, the great historic traditions of religious teaching, and the institutions devoted to their preservation, are but the visible effects of religious beliefs which are far more powerful and pervasive than all institutions or organized systems put together.

Although, it goes against the conventional wisdom, this thesis is far from being a mere intellectual curiosity. Let me briefly illustrate its importance by indicating how it bears upon the prevailing assumptions of Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers about how religious belief relates to reason and theory making.

The majority of theologians, philosophers, and scientists in each of these three traditions have long assumed that because not all people believe in God, and because some people insist they have no faith whatsoever, that religious belief is not common to all people. Having failed to define religious belief properly, they have mistaken the lack of *professed faith* with a lack of *all faith*. Consequently, they see rational thought as innate to human nature but not religious belief. Instead, they regard faith as a special gift given to certain people by God, which enables them to accept revealed truth inaccessible by reason alone.

But if reason can really operate independently of faith, then faith is unnecessary to theories because it is obvious that nonbelievers (assumed to have no faith whatever) have developed theories in the sciences and philosophy that are undeniably brilliant. The prevailing view admits this, but contends that faith is only necessary to gain knowledge of the supernatural realm, while reason is sufficient to know the natural world on its own. In this way, faith and reason are taken to be two distinct sources of information about two distinct realms of reality, so that even for those with faith the two relate only externally. That is to say, whatever is revealed by faith may not be contradicted by reason; theology and science must always be brought into harmony along their interface.

This entire picture of the general way religious belief relates to reason and theory making is seriously askew, however, if faith is a natural and inevitable function of the human personality, and if whatever is regarded as divine actually controls theory making. If this is so, then reason is always faith-directed reason, and no scientific or philosophic theory can be religiously neutral.

This means that the prevailing idea of harmonizing religious belief with scientific and philosophic theory is equally deficient. It is not enough to regard a theory as religiously acceptable provided it doesn't contradict any specific theological doctrine. This is because theories presupposing a particular faith do not always openly contradict the doctrines of an alternative, incompatible faith. For this reason, mere logical consistency between a theory and the doctrines of faith is not (**page 80**) adequate to rule out their deeper incompatibility at the presuppositional level. No tradition should ever assume that a theory is acceptable just because it doesn't contradict any of its specific doctrines. Instead, each religious tradition should seek to revise existing theories or develop new ones that presuppose their own idea of the divine. The only alternative is to allow theories to be accepted as neutral while they covertly smuggle in alternative, contrary, ideas of divinity.

The practical consequences of this last point are far-reaching where our system of education is concerned. First, education that is confessionally explicit (i.e. education that is avowedly Jewish or Christian or Hindu or whatever) cannot adequately reflect its deepest convictions simply by adding its theology (and/or worship) to the curriculum. Religious differences cannot be restricted to particular subjects, but must extend over the whole range of human experience since they generate distinct perspectives from which all things are interpreted. Second,

public education must stop pretending to be religiously neutral. Rather than alleging its neutrality, public education should instead affirm that is religiously *open*. A public education must be one in which the interpretations of the various subjects reflect whatever religious perspectives its faculty happen to hold, and one where those perspectives are not allowed to be a condition for faculty employment or advancement. Moreover, to be fair, it must also allow parents greater freedom to choose schools for their children that most closely reflect their own beliefs.

Finally, it cannot be overstressed that such a pluralistic education - no less than a confessedly unified one - needs to be aware of the religious roots of its diversity. It needs to deal with these differences in an atmosphere of openness and mutual respect rather than declare the entire issue of religious belief off-limits. An off-limits policy toward religious belief can only succeed in excluding from education the most basic presuppositions of all inquiry and learning and thus result in pedagogical HARA-KIRI on the very threshold of genuine insight.

(Prepared by BCW: Tuesday, 17 October 2006)