

Religious Indoctrination

An Essay
by
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Introduction to the Electronic Version

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My early religious indoctrination was in the Southern Baptist Church—not a very auspicious beginning. By the time I was about ten, I began to see some chinks in the facade that was a ritualistic part of my Sunday life and the guiding force in my daily conduct. The people I saw inside the church didn't seem to be the same people I saw once they had walked out the door and down the steps to the street. As an impressionable young boy, this made no sense to me.

I was also greatly confused by the Bible itself, and this confusion was extended by the realization that the Sunday school teacher was as confused as I was. How could all these contradictory things be believed at the same time? How could God be creative, merciful, and forgiving with one hand and destructive, pitiless, and vengeful with the other. I think it was around in here that I began to sense that the biblical God was little more than an excuse for the dispassionate acts of nature and the wanton acts of society, though I couldn't have stated these conclusions at the time.

By age twelve (I was slow even then), I finally decided that I could no longer deal with the weekly affronts to logic and the forced association with the hypocrisy of the congregation. Besides, what I was being told in church about the nature of the world just didn't seem to match the world I lived in every day. I found lots of excuses not to go to church as part of my adolescent angst, and by fourteen only darkened the doors for Easter services and funerals.

But childhood conditioning is deep and requires years of purposeful thought to overcome, if it can ever be escaped. This is a frequently applied truth in the case of racial prejudice, and it should be equally applied to the insidiousness of religious indoctrination. The purpose of both these types of childhood conditioning is to prevent seeing the world as it really is and to substitute instead someone else's wish for what it should be. Put succinctly, psychological conditioning, no matter what its stated purpose, is really rendered to deny reality to the subject—in the case of religion, to ensure that dogma will triumph over reason.

If one were religious, it might be said that the power of rational thought was a gift from God. I would prefer to avoid this metaphysical prescription and say it is an inevitable condition of life. It is certainly the power that separates man from the lower forms of life as we know it.

Why then do the formalized religions of the world seek to deny rational thought to their followers? Because formalized religions are organizations; because organizations attract people interested in leading; because people interested in leading are most frequently seduced by power; because people in power want to increase and perpetuate their power. This is not meant to imply that religious leaders are in some way evil; it is only to say that religious leaders are but mere mortals and subject to the weaknesses of being such.

The great irony of the large and formalized religions is that they have pretty universally tried to rationalize and codify their positions through the use of the very rational thought processes they would seek to deny their followers. In doing so, they have frequently advanced the cause of rational thought, even if their

efforts were subsequently dogmatized and consequently trivialized by the power structure (in Western culture, we thank you Messrs. Anselm and Aquinas).

While the readers of this essay are most likely to be more familiar with Christianity, it is important to note that Islam is virtually indistinguishable in its basic precepts and structure from Christianity. Their God is the same God. It is only the difference between the myths surrounding Jesus and Mohammad that are significantly different.

Both religions have followers with a liberal interpretation of their beliefs and followers with a zealous interpretation of those beliefs. While the religious liberals of both faiths make an effort to accommodate reality and rational thought, the zealous would deny reality and rational thought in favor of myth and a necessity to believe in an idealization of the meaning of life that is impossible (so far for me at least) to derive from rational thought. They have traded rationality for faith.

To question this trade-off presents us with the central paradox of metaphysics, for to question is to ask for a *rational* explanation, a proof of truth (see my essay: "The Ultimate Paradox, and Whether Pigs Have Wings"). The concept of faith denies the very need for rational explanation by claiming to embody all truth. Consequently, there is no middle ground between true faith and rationality, although all of recorded history shows us that most of the energy spent in philosophical thought has been expended in trying to find it.

So where does this piece of rational thought leave us? It leaves us with the world we see today where the majority of people who profess to be religious (belief in a higher power not subject to the laws of the known universe) are fooling themselves and the very vocal minority of religious zealots are wreaking havoc on existing social structures.

Social structures have relied on rational thought for their formulation and existence since society grew too large and complex to be subject to the whims of the strongest member. Since man dreamed up the concept of religion, it has been mostly at cross-purposes with society. At best, it has been an application of what we would call matrix management today.

As we know from its practice in today's business world, matrix management requires a delicate balance of the two organizational structures that seek to derive some benefit from the arrangement and a dedication to compromise in areas of inevitable conflict. If the balance isn't maintained and the compromises made, then the construct self-annihilates. This inevitable imbalance has been the downfall of most of man's carefully constructed cultures through history.

Since such a delicate balance is required between societal government and religious government (like it or not, that's what the organizational structures of the world's major religions really are), it is easy to see what will happen when the rationality of societal government is overpowered by the irrationality of religious government. Society will crash. The rule of law as we know it will be lost. The fundamental freedoms of choice and the individual pursuit of happiness will be denied by those who think they act in our best interest.

Alarmist again? Definitely! The concept of American democracy is being hijacked. In its simplest definition, democracy is the rule of the majority. Our

forefathers knew two-hundred and fifty years ago that simple democracy had all kinds of pitfalls and they wanted nothing to do with it unless there were checks and balances installed.

They added the Bill of Rights to protect basic human rights and to protect the minority (an issue they were sensitive to since the colonies had been the basic escape for the oppressed minorities of Europe). To suit their world of poor communications, they decided on a representational form of democracy and a tiered system of voting that they thought would allow the voter to exercise the greatest rationality in the casting of his vote for someone he knew to be of high ideals and capabilities rather than the person actually running for the highest office. While some compromises had to be made to suit the vast Christian majority of the colonies, they specifically provided for the separation of church and state.

These guys were not idiots. They were some of the best thinkers of the times, and they were steeped in the rationality of the Enlightenment. They gave us the best balanced governmental system they could devise to suit the world in which they lived and could anticipate. Not only that, they knew that change was inevitable and provided as best they could for flexibility in the system and for the systems ability to change itself as circumstance required. But they made it very hard to change the basic set of principles on which the country was founded.

Above all else, this country has been great not because it is a democracy, but because it has scrupulously protected the basic rights of the minority while carrying out the will of the majority. This has been a continuing compromise of which we can all be proud.

Minorities are loosely thought of as ethnic or religious groups, but this way of thinking denies the real basis for being a minority. That basis is values, values that usually arise from being in a specific race or ethnic group, hence the confusion. We need to focus on this broader and more inclusive definition of minority—a non-plurality of voters having a different set of values than the voting plurality.

It matters not whether these different values arise from rational or irrational thought (or non-thought, for that matter). What matters is the right to have different values rather than have the values of others imposed on you because the others think their values are right, good, and true and yours are wrong, bad, and false.

These values are after all (though sadly) mostly a matter of opinion, since the vast majority of people fail to arrive at their values through the process of rational thought. That vast majority either never recovers from values promulgated during early childhood conditioning, accepts without thought the values currently popular in the society in which they live, or has their values provided for them by those in control of their government or their religion.

Early childhood conditioning by parents or other authority figures is the first, slightly formal mode of education received by a child. As such, it has the power to provide remarkable benefits or serious limitations in a person's growth toward maturity. If this education presents information as dogma rather than reasoned conclusion which the child may question and be provided with reasoned

answers, they are being conditioned to the acceptance of unreasoned information as truth, and our perception of truth is the foundation of our values. The acceptance of information as truth without question from figures of authority leads to totalitarian governments, racial prejudice, religious fanaticism, oppression of minorities, genocide, and all other manner of crimes against humanity.

When parents and other authority figures provide information as reasoned conclusion to children, they are engendering the roots of the reasoning process and setting the stage for the child to make reasoned judgments in the conduct of their lives. When the child learns that the process of reason is the basis for making value judgments, the child not only can but is subtly encouraged to reassess value judgments as more knowledge is accumulated.

For the religiously zealous, this is tantamount to opening the door to Satan (or whatever bugaboo employed by that religion). It is far safer to teach the child the only true way to view the world rather than risk their later reevaluation of beliefs that have no reasoned basis. Consequently, it is easy to see why this is the espoused dictum of most major religions. Remember that these religions are controlled by mere mortals that want to extend their power base along with their sometimes genuine desire to save souls (whatever they might think that means).

By definition there is little that can be done to dissuade the zealot, either how they conduct their lives or how they condition their children. There is some hope though for those who are more moderate and not afraid that their faith will falter under scrutiny. These people need to be encouraged to avoid dogmatizing their children, even though it is a much easier course than taking the time and patience to present rational explanations for children's questions, and to instill the sense of value dynamics that will be necessary for them to get along in society. Such encouragement might work for some, but the majority will always take the easy way out. Unfortunately, that's dogma—stipulated truth without reason.

What keeps this world going, however, is reasoned truth through the process of rational thought. All of science and technology depends on it. Without the foundation of science and technology, society would collapse to its more primitive forms and individual freedom would once more be victim to tyranny of the strongest. And that's after ninety-nine percent of the world's population had either died from attrition or killed each other as a result of the loss of societal civility. Not a very savory possibility for mankind.

Society will either rise to the occasion of saving itself or apathy will give control of education and government to those that are incapable of forming values based on rational thought. Whichever way the struggle goes, it will probably not happen in my lifetime, but I would like to live long enough to see the current trends reversed. I would like to see education in my country shrug-off the effort to fetter its teachings of rational thought by the substitution of faith-based truth. But I'm not encouraged by the fact that one state has already mandated that creationism be taught in the public schools and others seem to be giving it serious thought.

I'm also discouraged when my government feels it has a mandate from God to bring democracy to all the nations of the world, whether it fits those nation's

values or not. Not only will we bring it to them, but we will do it by force where necessary, even when it means thousands of innocent people will die for our zeal.

It is all too reminiscent of the salvation of souls by the methods of Torquemada, the bringing of Christ to the heathens of Africa along with untold disease and suffering, or the final solution to racial purity in Europe envisioned by Hitler. This is why history is so valuable in the classroom, not because it preaches absolute values, but because it provides solid examples of what not to do again as well as what has worked so far.

But the nub of the problem is childhood conditioning by those that are incapable of employing reason in their own lives and therefore perpetuate that inability in their children. Only the acquisition of knowledge can hope to reverse the indoctrinations of childhood. The universal education envisioned by our forefathers could and should be working to de-program our children by teaching the processes of rational thought that allow us to de-program ourselves, and thereby providing the opportunity of upward intellectual mobility in future generations. It worked quite well for a long time, but irrational religious fundamentalism is poised to reverse that trend. We are well down the road to replacing rational thought with faith-based truth. God save us all.