

## **DIALOGUE BETWEEN BELIEVERS AND UNBELIEVERS**

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### **Abstract**

Intelligent believers and unbelievers share similar doubts and ethical commitments. If education were to teach conscientiously for intelligent belief and unbelief, then more reflective and open belief for believers, more open reflective unbelief for unbelievers, and better communication between the two groups would be the outcomes. Several curricular topics are explored to illumine and develop this thesis.

In the introduction to *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (1993), I noted the surprising intellectual affinity between intelligent believers and unbelievers. We share many of the same doubts and many similar ethical commitments. If both religious and secular education were to teach conscientiously toward intelligence in belief or unbelief, we might predict three desirable outcomes: a more reflective, open belief for believers, a more reflective, open unbelief for unbelievers, and better communication between the two.

The question is what should go into such an education. I don't think courses in comparative religion will accomplish these three ends. Some such courses might, of course, because they go well beyond description and mere knowledge, and are constructed with an attitude of loving skepticism and openness. But most would not accomplish the three desirable outcomes. Indeed the result is too often a bland acceptance (in the name of tolerance) of all sorts of nonsense. What I have in mind is an education that faces the common doubts and commitments squarely and honestly.

In this short paper, I'll discuss three broad topics in which these doubts and commitments can be examined profitably. These topics are creation, God as the source of moral life, and the beauty of religion.

## CREATION

Perhaps the believer's strongest arguments for creation have always come from the very existence of the universe and of complex life on this scrap of it. Despite the destruction of cosmological and teleological proofs, most of us experience at least a shred of discomfort at the thought of a watch without a watchmaker. The universal interest in the origins of the universe and the beginnings of life should be a major topic in education, and it ought not to be divided into neat categories that fit the present organization of the curriculum.

For example, science teachers should develop a repertoire of stories from literature on the topic of creation. All people everywhere have created such stories, and that fact in itself should legitimize discussion in science classes. Consider this passage from *Huckleberry Finn*:

It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky, up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened—Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to make so many. Jim said the moon could a *laid* them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn't say nothing against it, because I've seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done. We used to watch the stars that fell, too, and see them streak down. Jim allowed they'd got spoiled and was hove out of the nest (Twain, 1982 [1885]).

Having read this passage from Twain, I am immediately reminded that there is a fourth desirable outcome likely to result from our attempts to educate for intelligent belief or unbelief—a wider, deeper cultural literacy. Surely a science teacher will find things to discuss in this passage that an English teacher would probably overlook. For example, how many eggs does a frog lay? How many stars are there in the universe? What is a “falling star”? And, of course, the usual questions: How old is the universe? When did our moon appear? When did frogs appear on the earth?

The use of creation stories in science class illustrates the possibility of communication across disciplines, and it also shows that the science teacher is literate—that he or she cares about matters other than the scientific. Done well, such excursions allow students and teacher to explore existential questions—an exploration that was once thought to be at the very heart of liberal education. That ex-

plorations of this sort can and do take place is captured in Wayne Booth's dedication of one of his books to "eleven beloved teachers," especially to "Mr. Luther Giddings who in his chemistry class taught the liberal arts" (1988).

Clearly, this facet of the present discussion is not trivial. The liberal arts were once thought to be central to a truly liberal education, and a liberal education was expected to address questions about the good life, and about growth, responsibility, freedom, and commitment. The deterioration of liberal studies into a set of increasingly narrow specialties should be a matter of considerable concern to all of us. As teachers begin to broaden their own subjects from within, we may induce a revival of interest in liberal education. This possibility should be attractive to both believers and unbelievers, and increase the ease with which we communicate with one another.

Obviously, creation stories provide a multicultural opportunity. Stories can be collected from all over the world, and when they are, one will see that the story of Eve's creation from Adam's rib is no less charming and no less nonsense than the Kiowa story of the creation of the Big Dipper. In this tale, a Kiowa boy is playing with his seven sisters in the area of Wyoming that we now identify with the Devil's Tower. By some strange power, the boy is changed into a huge, fierce bear, and he begins to chase his sisters. Badly frightened, they climb a tall tree (now the Devil's Tower) and, as the bear scratches his way upward, the girls leap into the sky, where they are transformed into the seven stars of the Big Dipper. Even today, we can see the marks of bear claws on the Devil's tower.

The recognition that many religious stories are charming nonsense need not shake the belief of believers, but it may prompt them to seek a deeper location for their belief. For example, Martin Gardner (1983), a committed theist, rejects the biblical miracle stories. After recounting several of them, Gardner remarks: "These are typical miracle tales of the sort no intelligent Christians would believe for a moment if they came upon them in the Koran." That there may indeed be a deeper religious meaning attaching to these stories should be acknowledged. But then there is also deeper meaning in fairy tales, as Bruno Bettelheim and others have demonstrated (1976). As truth, they are nonsense, but nonsense can conceal important existential meanings.

Sensitive, appreciative debunking need not destroy belief. A story told by Sara Josephine Baker is instructive. As a child, she and

her young cousins often visited an elderly aunt—a Quaker of considerable wealth and influence. The aunt read Bible stories to the children, but at the end of many she would say:

Now, children, that is a very silly story. I am an old, old lady and I want all of you to remember what I am saying. It is a silly story and there is not a word of truth in it. Don't ever let anyone tell you that stories like that are true (Berson, 1994).

Through all the years of Bible-reading by their seemingly pious old aunt, the children never told their parents that they were actually receiving their first lessons in skepticism. Although these lessons did not destroy faith, they did sharpen a capacity for critical thought. The children were encouraged to think about their faith and what it rested on. They asked such questions as: What was essential? What role did the “silly stories” play?

Both religious and secular education can provide opportunities for sharing creation stories, and the stories should not be confined to English class. If I am right in observing that all human beings through all of life have wondered about creation, it seems odd that the topic and human interest in the topic are so rarely discussed in school. Probably we fear intruding on or ridiculing the religions of others. But, surely, learning how to criticize appreciatively is one of the major aims of an education that works toward intelligent living. Because criticizing appreciatively is difficult is not a reason for omitting it from the curriculum.

It should also be noted that many believers and unbelievers hang on the edge, so to speak. Believers argue about the nature of the creator, and unbelievers debate whether to speak about a creator or merely creation. Discomfort about a manifest creation without a creator can lead at most to deism, and deists are but a thread apart from atheists. Something more is needed to induce belief in or faith in a personal God. Many of us settle for the universe of Spinoza and Einstein (and we waver even on this). Kant expressed the dilemma well:

Unconditional necessity, which we so indispensably require as the last bearer of all things, is for human reason the veritable abyss. Eternity itself, in all its terrible sublimity . . . is far from making the same overwhelming impression on the mind; for it only *measures* the duration of things; it does not *support* them. We cannot put aside, and yet also cannot endure, the thought that a being, which we represent to ourselves as supreme amongst all possible beings, should as it were, say to itself: “I am from

eternity to eternity, and outside me there is nothing save what is through my will, *but whence then am I?*" All support here fails us (1966 [1781]).

### GOD AS THE SOURCE OF MORAL LIFE

This is the sticking point for many intelligent unbelievers. It is not always epistemological issues that drive people away from theism; it is often moral considerations. Since the middle 1800's, many people have abandoned traditional religion because they can find no evidence that God is good. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for example, thought it was ridiculous to suppose that the universe was controlled by a "tender loving fatherly intelligence," and John Stuart Mill refused to call him "good" unless God could measure up on at least the standards human beings apply to one another (Noddings 1977, 117). James Turner writes:

Declarations of unbelief often sounded more like acts of moral will than intellectual judgments. [Robert] Ingersoll said that "I cannot worship a being" whose "cruelty is shoreless." Darwin was so appalled by the harshness of natural selection that he could no longer bring himself to believe in God: better that this horror should have sprung from blind chance. Or listen to Henry Adams, reacting to his sister's death: "The idea that any personal deity could find pleasure or profit in torturing a poor woman, by accident, with a fiendish cruelty known to man only in perverted and insane temperaments, could not be held for a moment. For pure blasphemy, it made atheism a comfort" (Turner 1985, 207).

It is not surprising that views such as those described by Turner became more widespread in the late nineteenth century. Human beings seemed to come awake at that time to the problems of human (and even animal) suffering. As Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., put it:

We have learned the doctrine that evil means pain, and the revolt against pain in all its forms has grown more and more marked. From societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals up to socialism, we express in numberless ways the notion that suffering is wrong which can be and ought to be prevented, and a whole literature of sympathy has sprung into being (Turner, 206).

Oddly enough, the changing emphasis in Christianity (especially Protestant Christianity) from sin and just retribution to love and mercy led many erstwhile believers to question their faith. Embracing the message of love, wanting themselves to be moral and compassionate, they began to ask hard questions about the nature

of God. After all, a human being who behaves like the God of the Pentateuch would hardly be considered compassionate and probably not even moral. In what way, then, was God necessary (or even helpful) for moral life?

The inference to a good God is a far greater stretch than the inference to a creator. We are surrounded with creation; it is manifest. But we are not surrounded with goodness, and we have little reason to suppose that goodness is somehow intended. William James admitted that, in their unblinking view of reality, the “sick souls” or pessimists were probably more nearly accurate than optimists:

Here on our very hearths and in our gardens, the infernal cat plays with the panting mouse, or holds the hot bird fluttering in her jaws . . . . The normal process of life contains moments as bad as any of those which insane melancholy is filled with, moments in which radical evil gets its in-nings and takes its turn. The lunatic’s visions of horror are all drawn from the material of daily fact. Our civilization is founded on the shambles, and every individual existence goes out in a lonely spasm of helpless agony (1958 [1920], 138).

I confess that, for myself, it is unthinkable that an all-good God would have created a world in which its creatures have to eat one another in order to survive. The only possible solution short of atheism and naturalism seems to be polytheism of some sort—belief in (or a tentative imagining of) a metasystem in which a community of ethically imperfect creators works and struggles toward something more nearly morally acceptable. Why consider such a possibility? I suppose the answer to this points again to the doubts and commitments shared by intelligent believers and unbelievers. Although we doubt, many of us are impelled to communicate with something beyond us. We do not want to communicate with an evil deity, and so we must posit a good one. But clearly the good one, if it exists, is neither all-powerful nor all-knowing—and maybe not even all-good (Jung 1973).

I said above that the “only possible” solution short of atheism seems to be some form of polytheism. That is, of course, not strictly true. A standard solution is to say that manifest evil will someday be converted to good, that we cannot know God’s purpose, that we must have faith that good lies somehow behind our present suffering. This is a “possible” answer but it is hardly a solution, for it begs the unbeliever’s question: Why posit an invisible good in the face of visible evil?

Another possible solution strikes the unbeliever as implausible. Perhaps the one God posited by monotheism contains imperfections; perhaps God is not omnipotent, or not omniscient, or not all-good. But positing God's lack of omnipotence, suggests the question of who or what constrains him (her, it) and leads again to some form of pluralism—pluralism of power or energy, if not of deities. Positing a lack of omniscience won't do either, for even if God exists in time as we do, a deity ought to know at least enough to prevent the innocent suffering of mortal beings. (Even human beings, far short of omniscience, strive with some success to anticipate and relieve suffering.)

Finally, the notion that God is not all-good and is engaged in a moral struggle to manage his omnipotence and omniscience (as Jung suggested) has been singularly unattractive to most monotheists—especially to Christians. Still, if we could explore the possibility more openly, we might find God more humanly attractive and lovable. Ah, yes. But once we have made God more humanly lovable, why deprive him/her/it of a community of peers? Why not consider a whole community of deities living and struggling in some great metasystem? People well-educated in mathematics and computer science cannot easily brush this possibility aside, and so believers and unbelievers come closer together in a sense of doubt, mystery, and hope. The most important lesson here for believers is that unbelievers can be morally good and that many deeply regret the perceived nonexistence of God.

### THE BEAUTY OF RELIGION

In the above discussion, I weighted my argument heavily toward what I believe are the justifiable and understandable objections of unbelievers. Now I want to explore what people miss when they adopt a position of unbelief without immersing themselves (or at least wading about) in our religious traditions. We have removed prayer, sacred music, and religious celebrations from our schools. I do not advocate restoring prayer, for there can be no secular purpose for it, and no one who wants to do so is prevented from praying.

But why eliminate sacred music? Why deprive our children of opportunities to share in one another's traditions? What are we afraid of? Surely children need to know that people are moved deeply by their religious beliefs and that they express their feeling

in creating and performing works of great beauty. For my own part, I would restore Christmas carols and the sacred music of other faiths; I would include both Schubert's and Bach/Gounod's Ave Maria, the "Largo" from Xerxes, Thanksgiving hymns, Negro spirituals, and all the music from my own childhood that I remember with such affection.

Forty years ago C.S. Lewis warned us against stripping passion and emotion from our schools. Critical thinking devoid of emotion, he said, would make our children "easier prey for the propagandist when he comes. . . . For famished nature will be avenged and a hard heart is not infallible protection against a soft head" (1947, 24).

True dialogue, with all its doubts and passions, might lead believers and unbelievers to a tragic sense of life, and that is not an outcome to be deplored. Rather, such a sense can promote deep feelings of affection and appreciation. I love to hear, and even occasionally to sing (whistle, hum), the hymns I learned as a child. I no longer believe the words, but I wish some of them were true, and I know and love many people who still believe them.

For example, I have always treasured A.J. Cronin's *The Keys of the Kingdom*. In it, the priest and physician represent believer and unbeliever. They cherish each other; they share both doubts and commitments; they learn from each other; and they work hard toward a common goal of relieving suffering. Their philosophical differences are never resolved, but their friendship is unshaken. Young people need to hear many such stories.

Religion belongs in our public schools because it is part of our heritage and, more importantly, because it expresses a universal longing. Humanism belongs in our religious schools because it too is part of our heritage and, more importantly, because it expresses the honest doubts with which intelligence challenges that universal longing.

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