

## A Question of Religion

Written by Simon Jester

Wednesday, 30 September 2009 13:00

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Of all those who have spoken in favour of free speech, perhaps the best sentiments were uttered by John Stuart Mill, who wrote that it was important because, if the words spoken were true, they could correct error, if false, the falsehood of such arguments could be exposed. It is, however, human nature to dislike criticism of one own's self, or a group that one belongs to, even to the extent of getting angry with the critic, however cogent their statements and illogical our response.

Fortunately here in Australia, as in many countries, we have attempted to maintain a level of social progressiveness that values the freedom of expression that permits the questioning of "accepted facts". Yet, by allowing a freedom of belief, we are faced with the paradox that is Belief – people are allowed to hold their beliefs, no matter that any two groups could have completely contradictory doctrines. Furthermore, many groups take advantage of the freedom to believe and practise, and the freedom to state their beliefs, yet attempt to deny anyone not only the freedom to not believe, but also the freedom to state their unbelief.

What allows a religion to demand the double standard of expecting preferential treatment, yet to attempt to halt discussion, debate, or indeed criticism of its practises? What is it about people's beliefs that grants a group, or even a single person, the right to special treatment?

In its submission earlier this year (2009) to the Australian Human Rights Commission, the often-controversial Church of Scientology calls for the enactment of a law to make "antireligious propaganda" a criminal offence, making particular reference to the group Anonymous, alleging a campaign of terror, terrorism, and intimidation on the part of the Anonymous, echoing charges by both Anonymous and ex-members against the church, about the church's own practices. For those not in the know, Anonymous is a loose collection of individuals who have chosen to actively criticise and act against the church, particularly via the internet as well as protests, citing the potential for harassment, or worse, as the reason for wearing masks to protect their identities. The Church of Scientology claims that threats have been made against it; Anonymous have countered that many of the threats have been made by the Church's agents provocateurs or by members of the Church seeking to gain status as the innocent party. To a casual reader, the Church of Scientology's submission, made to the Australian Human Rights Commission, reads like an attempt to target its perceived enemies, crying foul, and attempting to use the banner of Human Rights not just to legitimise itself, but to create a legal atmosphere which would allow it to Seek And Destroy anyone who would dare criticise it, particularly anyone who goes so far as to protest against it. Their opponents, on the other hand, will say this is a typical tactic, that the Church's aim is to ensure that its practises are unable to be questioned, allowing the Church to rise above the law. With the rise of the internet, ex-members and critics have been able to tell their stories of the

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actions of the church, including allegations of assault, physical and psychological, harassment to the point of suicide, and criminal negligence leading to death. The Church, for its part, is alleging that such stories are the fantasies of disgruntled troublemakers, the psychologically unfit, and the easily lead. Never mind, say its critics, that in its own Code of Honor (sic), creator L. Ron Hubbard included the maxim "Never be afraid to hurt someone in a just cause", nor that its terms "Ethics" concerns only what it takes to "Keep Scientology Working", and "unethical" acts are any that impede or attempt to impede the Church of Scientology's operations..

This, however, is not a question of the legitimacy (or not) of the Church of Scientology. What we must consider is what right any private group has to decide public policy, particularly when they will claim to be the only ones to have Truth and The Power Of The Lord (or any supernatural being) on their side.

Does the allowing of a religion mean that we must respect its practises? Because a man is Hindu, must that mean we throw his widow onto his funeral pyre? If a religion advocated cannibalism, would that mean we must make allowances for such? On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church insists that, despite any tissue- or blood-typing evidence to the contrary, that it does feed its congregation the actual flesh and blood of its major prophet...

Which brings us to mid-2008, and the assault of Webster Cook, a University of Central Florida student, for attempting to take a eucharist wafer out of a Catholic Church. This continued with death threats against Cook, indignation through-out the Catholic world, and a statement by the Roman Catholic Church that "desecration of the eucharist" was a crime of greater magnitude than genocide. This continued, with calls for the censure and resignation of noted biologist and blogger PZ Myers, by the American Catholic League, for his comments against the assault over "a goddamned cracker".

In Australia, the Exclusive Brethren have been the centre of much controversy, with even our own now-Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, who labelled them a "dangerous cult" before he became head of government. Allegations of political interference, as well as the strict treatment of its followers, the use of cover groups in campaigns against equal sexual rights for the LGBTIQ(...etc.) community, and so on, have not prevented them from receiving increased government funding.

Undoubtably, there are religious groups that do do good within the community, assisting those in need, yet many Australians have needed their community fire service, their State Emergency

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Service, help from other services that have no religious affiliation. Charitable Acts, Community Spirit are shown, time and time again, to not be the exclusive purview of Religion. Many religious groups will happily claim that morality, ethics, and community come only from divine inspiration. This is not so say that religious doctrine has no merit; the Catechism of the Catholic Church, for example, lists in its Formulas of Catholic Doctrine such acts as Feed The Hungry, Shelter the Homeless, and Instruct the Ignorant, that a humane, mature society could agree with, without needing to explain them as supernatural demands. On the other hand, groups such as the Fundamental Latter Day Saints, and the Hare Krishnas state their belief that the Apollo moon landings were faked, the latter group because, amongst other things, it contradicts their belief that the moon is "perfect".

Unfortunately common, too, is the use of front groups to advance doctrine without being seen to be directed by a "religious" group, or using a thin veneer of social & community work as a cover for less than community-minded beliefs. With the gaining of status as religious group, social status is not the only thing that is gained – the prized perk for some groups is the tax-exempt status that is gained, as well as government grants that can be received for little more than existing, a case of Profit Over Prophet. Relief from taxes and certain employment standards can see large amounts of money channelled up the hierarchy, rendered not unto Caesar, but unto someone whose motives tend to be less than pure. This is not limited to the Bakkers and Swaggerts of days gone by... Sex, drugs, and the lust for both money and power have behind the rise and fall of far too many, who at worst might be delusional and megalomaniacs, demanding that they have a divine right to rule.

Given the way political machinery operates, a small group acting in concert can advance the whims of their leader (with the threat of Eternal Damnation should they fail hanging over their head), no matter the will of, or detriment to, non-followers.

The growth of Islam in England has seen calls for the adoption of sharia law into parts of the civil legal system, at least for Muslims in that country. Aceh province in Indonesia has adopted sharia law, which can proscribe the death penalty for apostasy, the act of leaving one's religion. This isn't exclusive, of course, and it isn't necessary to look far back in history to see other religions doing the same thing, although tends to be more a case of separation – once you leave the group, you are no longer a person, you have no rights, and members are not allowed to communicate with you, primarily for fear that you might infect them with the revelation that things aren't so bad on the outside.

Adoption of a paternalistic, top-down authoritarian approach means that dogma is generally decided from those at the top, any contrary opinions of others quashed. What might purely be

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the opinion of a single person must be adopted by all, lest they suffer the consequences, real or imagined, or being heretics.

Let us think about the issue of Gay Marriage, more correctly referred to as Same-Sex Civil Union, although this does not have same sound-bite quality. By any rational argument, there seems to be no reason to disallow two consenting adults to claim such status and rights purely based upon their gender, yet discrimination still takes place. Many government agencies will accept two adults to be in a spousal relationship, no matter what their genders, yet for the financial year 2008-9, the Australian Tax Return was still defining spouses & partners only in terms of "of the opposite gender". If you think that this doesn't bother you because you aren't homosexual, ask yourself if you like being taxed for being in a heterosexual relationship. Despite any logical reason why same-sex relationships should be accorded the full status as those of opposite-sex ones, it will likely remain a divisive issue for some time to come, as many who claim special status due to their beliefs continue to oppose it.

Many questions still remain. From what authority, other than their opinion, does the ability to dictate moral values stem? Can we permit the double standard whereby religious groups, or rather their leaders, are allowed to dictate public policy, yet be immune from criticism or examination? The moment a group is recognised as being religious, a number of liberties are granted that are otherwise unavailable to most people. What need, for example does an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipotent, and (supposedly) omnibenevolent being have of tax exempt status? Why, in extreme cases, does an omnibenevolent god require the death penalty for heretics, or for people who commit some other "sin" in a manner that hurts no others?

Consider the question: if there aren't any gods, does that mean that dogma is decided by the prejudices, desires, and whims of a privileged few? If there is no divine inspiration, are questions of life and death of millions (or, indeed, billions) of people decided by the Voices In The Head of one person? Given the multiplicity of belief systems, all claiming to be the one-and-only source of Truth, is it possible to decide which is the correct or possibly the least incorrect?

Ask any religious person to provide some evidence as to the legitimacy of their claims, no doubt they will provide their scriptures as evidence, claiming it as the only source of truth. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, would no doubt claim that the Bible gives authority to the Pontiff (strangely enough coming from the Latin term for "Bridge Builder"), the Pope therefore is infallible, and so his decisions, including the veracity of the Bible, must ipso facto not only be correct, but the only real truth. Other groups (Christian primarily, perhaps Jewish) might cite the plagues visited upon Egypt in the Book Of Exodus, for the Pharaoh having the temerity to

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question the demands of Moses, and his claims to have the exclusive truth, a not-so-subtle threat repeated by modern day preachers who rail against any they chose to see as sinners, that being anyone who does not obey their will. Never mind that in that book and later ones, similar claims are used to justify genocide; the celebration of Passover commemorates the Angel of Death passing over Jewish houses, killing first born Egyptian males instead, because the Pharaoh would not (as the story goes) release the Jewish people.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell came up with the idea of a Celestial Teapot. Imagine, somewhere orbiting the Sun, is an otherwise ordinary, small teapot. I could have a religious belief in the teapot, and its existence could not be disproved. I could, then, dictate a number of tenets, claiming them to be divinely inspired by the teapot, but more likely my opinion and prejudices. Given the special treatment religions are normally given, I could not only demand them to be taken seriously, but insist that you, a teapot atheist, live by those “holy teachings”. It was with this spirit that the world was introduced to the internet meme, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, complete with Beer Volcanoes, and Stripper Factories as part of the divine world. The beliefs do not have to make sense, and can even contradict actual fact, but the fact that they have been declared to be Religious Doctrine gives them privileged status.

One effect that the Enlightenment has had is that it has, by promoting the freedom of speech and thought, allowed us to ask awkward, or sometimes wrong, questions. We learn to accept that the freedom of ourselves to make a statement must be balanced by the freedom of someone to make a contrary one. If we want to make a statement, we need to accept the possibility that someone might prove us wrong.

Religious doctrine, by its very nature, is non-democratic, and an anathema to free, democratic speech and thought. Claimed to be issued from a divine presence, it is issued by a single source as authoritative. At best, criticism will be confined to checking if it contradicts existing dogma; at worst, heretics find their lives cut short. Losing the ability to question, we lose the ability to counter any excesses committed in the name of religious belief.

It is not the existence of religion, nor the choice of people to believe in what they will, that we must protect against. It is the demand that beliefs become untouchable, beyond criticism, once a claim of religious belief has been invoked, that we must protect against.

When it comes to matters of religion, one person's necessary question is another's heresy; one person's criticism is another's vilification. Significantly, one person's “necessary” cleansing

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(purification, treatment, counselling, etc.) is another's physical and/or psychological assault. How often are those who rail against the sinner found to be committing the sin?

Anonymous's practises such as internet based attacks on the Church of Scientology may verge on the illegal, but their illegality should be viewed under the same light as if the Church was not a religious group. Protests, unauthorised “dissemination of religious doctrine”, criticism, “denigration” of beliefs are at least as important to protect as the right of any group to believe as it wants. Likewise, the status of religion cannot be allowed to protect any group from the laws that all should answer to.

In protecting the Freedom Of Religion for those who need to believe, we must ensure that Freedom From Religion is also available to any who choose, and that exclusive privileges are not extended based on what a person believes – or claims to believe.