

Peter Wesley-Smith, Tues Jan 19 2009:

I can't help musing about Our Dear Lord in relation to Sheila. Mum has been a good church-going Christian for most of her life, though for the last ten years or so she has expressed scepticism about God. By any measure she has been an almost saintly person - well, actually saintly if we could back up a couple of her miracles - yet, like saints and Popes and missionaries, her end days are spent in discomfort and anxiety and frustration. Why? The Christian God - omnipotent, omniscient, merciful - doesn't seem to intervene on her behalf, the only explanation apparently being that God's methods are too mysterious for us to comprehend. The alternative view dismisses the very concept of the Christian God as incoherent. When Sheila dies, however, there will be well-meaning people in the community who will give thanks to The Lord and praise Him or Her. This is all certainly very mysterious to me. Why has The Great Designer condemned human life to deterioration leading to death? Is it that the universe isn't designed at all, or that God doesn't care much? Mystery upon mystery. I know it's not considered polite to challenge conventional religious views - sorry! - but occasionally these Big Questions need to be asked.

Anne Sims, Tues Jan 19 2009:

Hello everyone. I loved today's question time. It was good to hear what you had to say, Peter, and to read Carl's poem. Such deep and enduring questions! Peter, you say sometimes these questions need to be asked. Of course they do. They are the very stuff of life and death. We don't do enough of it, is my thought for today. There are so few opportunities to discuss these issues because people seem to be reluctant to face them. My belief is that there are no answers, just opportunities to thrash out ideas and as in all things, we choose beliefs with which we feel comfortable or which we see as scientifically acceptable. I feel comfortable knowing that mankind has forever sought a spiritual life, whether it be a belief in the old pagan ways, the "universe", dreamtime etc, or more recently, Christianity and the more modern religions. I feel a family connection with the Christianity "theory" if I can call it that, thanks to Grandma, Grandpa, Sheila and Norman in particular. I also have many beliefs that don't sit well with a traditional Christian philosophy. What does it matter though? Is there any right or wrong belief? If we accept that mankind is on his own, so be it. If we choose any of the many options available - and that we could be wrong - it becomes much easier.

OK!! There endeth the lesson for today, read from the book of "Annie". Anyone else feel like contributing?

Anonymous, Wed Jan 20 2009:

This discussion is particularly interesting to me right now for I'm currently reading a book called **50 Voices of Disbelief** (Wiley-Blackwell (www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell), Russell Blackford & Udo Schuklenk (eds), 2009). I like the contribution from **A. C. Grayling** (**Why I am Not a Believer**, pp145-156). Some excerpts:

... the views and practices that emerge from common sense, practicality, and science form a general picture of a law-like natural realm in which we know what it is rational to believe and do, and what is not. We know, for example, that it is rational to expect that we can light and heat a house by installing the right kinds of appliances in it and connecting them to a power source such as an electricity grid, and at the same time we know that it is irrational to believe that we can light and heat it by prayer alone, or by sacrificing a white heifer and dancing around its entrails. This is precisely and exactly why it is rational to believe the deliverances of common sense, practicality, and science, and irrational to believe religious claims: the former are based on evidence massively gathered and confirmed by experience, whereas the various etiolated fancies constituting the latter are untestable, inconsistent with each other, internally contradictory, and in conflict with the deliverances of common sense and science ...

Regarding the Bible, Grayling writes:

In this confused, contradictory, and tendentious document, the component "books" are very obviously of their time, limited and frequently incorrect in the knowledge they display, as well as largely incredible (the miracle stories, for a prime example), and equally frequently morally unappealing, not to say sometimes despicable ...

He thinks that:

... religion ought to be opposed and contested because it consists of falsehood and distortion, and is harmful to humanity. In response to those who point to the charitable work done by religious organizations, and to the comfort some versions of it give the old, the lonely, and the fearful, I respond by saying that the rich, deep, and responsible ethics of humanism is [sic] a far better resource for human fellowship, for it is based on kindness and truth, and does not trade on falsehoods about the world tiptoeing on the hidden cleft hooves of "faith". As to charity: if religions are as capable of murder as they are of charity, it is obvious that it is human nature, not supposed divine supernature, which is the explanation of both - with the big difference that, as has been well said, "It takes religion to make good people do bad things."

In other words, while Anne thinks that "we choose beliefs with which we feel comfortable or which we see as scientifically acceptable", Grayling (and others, including me) are opposed to religious beliefs because they are "harmful to humanity", which is not to say that religious people haven't done, and don't do, an enormous amount of good ...

While musing on this, I received an email from the Aquinas Academy saying that Michael Whelan, SM, PhD, will shortly be delivering a public lecture called "Does God Love a Hitler Less Than a New Born Baby?" (7.30pm, Thurs Feb 4, Our Lady of the Way Parish Church, North Sydney). He writes:

"We must speak of God. Our language of God can be meaningful and enlightening as a way of opening us to the Mystery that is beyond names and definitions. We get into serious difficulties when we start to think we actually understand God or have named God adequately. God's Love is everlasting, beyond our wildest dreams and certainly beyond anything we can name. Sometimes it might seem scandalous in fact."

I have *no idea* what that means other than the old fall-by of God being too Mysterious to understand. End of discussion.

Peter Wesley-Smith, Thurs Jan 21 2009:

I like the response by Anon and through him or her the passages from Grayling. The trouble is, believers and sceptics tend to inhabit quite separate universes, with assumptions and terminology and motivations which are utterly incompatible, and any hope of effective communication between the two groups is largely futile. Thus the seemingly incomprehensible paragraph quoted from Michael Whelan. Most Christians I've known refuse to talk about religion to me, as though their faith is too strong to be challenged (or perhaps too weak to survive critical discourse). They talk to each other, presumably, and reinforce each other, and encourage each other to reaffirm their faith. It's all a big mystery, really: not only God, but why people so devoutly rely on the theology which surrounds her. And the notion of choosing a belief, as though belief is as prosaic as items in a supermarket, and then organising one's life and thoughts in accordance with it, is to my mind really weird. Most people, of course, believe what they're told in childhood and identify with it right through their lives. This is also weird, especially when such belief apparently justifies monstrosities in the name of the Lord. Mystery on stilts ...

Jean Kenny, Thurs Jan 21 2009:

Annie Sims, I love you!! (Actually I have known that for a long time.) You have a beautiful, generous spirit and great wisdom.

My 2 bob's worth:

We can rationalise about the existence or not of god and the impact of religious beliefs on humanity till the cows come home (which they do every night of their own accord - or does God make this happen???)

It is when we start imposing our own rationales or beliefs on other people that we run into trouble. I think over the centuries we enterprising humans have invented a whole lot of religious dogma about God Almighty in order to control others and gain personal/political power. Also to avoid responsibility for ourselves and others during our lives, by investing in the idea of Life after Death. But can we accept that there is no life hereafter? Some of us can, some can't. As Anne said, "We choose beliefs with which we feel comfortable or which we see as scientifically acceptable."

I go along with the theory of evolution these days, with a good sprinkling of Buddhist philosophy. I have struggled for years to come to terms with my inheritance (from both sides of my family) of rampant Christianity. I have found it difficult to put aside my early conditioning, and to work out my own philosophy/beliefs without feeling somewhat guilty. My dear Papa Enoch Hall used to sing "At the end of our journey we shall wear a crown", and to shout "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord FOREVER!" I deeply respect him and his beliefs, however they are not mine. But I owe my existence to him and his belief in Christ, because those beliefs took him and his wife Carrie to England in 1916, where they adopted my mother, bringing her back to Australia to grow up and to eventually meet my father and produce me. And I remember Enoch's sister-in-law Grace Emily Brown, who spent many years of her life working for humanity in hospitals in India and on whose gravestone is the single word, now somewhat out of favour, "Missionary".

So I dunno, really!! I think what Sheila would say (while acknowledging her bodily discomfort and some mental confusion) is that what matters is unconditional love given and received. I think she would say that nothing else really matters. (Let me know Peter if I'm wrong!!) And who can say how that love is generated? Does it matter how? It exists regardless of theories or beliefs.

Phew!!! Cheers from Jean

On Sat Jan 23 2010, **Ross Edwards** sent in the following contribution:

On her radio show, Dr. Laura Schlesinger (a popular conservative radio talk show host in the USA) said that homosexuality is an abomination according to the Bible (Leviticus 18:22), and cannot be condoned under any circumstance. The following response is an open letter to Dr. Laura, penned by James M. Kauffman, Ed. D. It's funny, as well as informative.

Dear Dr. Laura,

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can.

When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind them that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination ... end of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some other elements of God's Laws and how to follow them.

1. Leviticus 25:44 states that I may possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighbouring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?

2. I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

3. I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual unseemliness - Lev. 15: 19-24. The problem is how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offence.

4. When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord - Lev. 1:9. The problem is my neighbours. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?

5. I have a neighbour who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2. clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself, or should I ask the police to do it?

6. A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination - Lev. 11:10, it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this? Are there 'degrees' of abomination?

7. Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle-room here?

8. Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev.19:27. How should they die?

9. I know from Lev. 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

10. My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? Lev. 24:10-16. Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair, like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14) I know you have studied these things extensively and thus enjoy considerable expertise in such matters, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

Your adoring fan,

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