

Freedom From Religion

July 1, 2011 Category: Religion
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RELIGION:

ON YOUR OWN TIME, ON YOUR OWN DIME:

What's the use of good stories? Why do we need them? How is it that they enhance our lives the way they do? Why do we tend to think of most important things in terms of a narrative? ...Not necessarily a "true" narrative, mind you (whatever *that* means), but simply a narrative that WORKS.

Narratives play a vital role in our lives. The key is to allow each individual to choose and apply the narrative that works for him without allowing him to encroach on anyone else's prerogative to do the same thing. MY freedom to subscribe to X narrative ends at YOUR freedom not to. When we institutionalize a narrative (subscribe to it in a collective / systematic way), we establish religion. Religion, that is, is a way of sanctifying a narrative, then partaking in it communally. Even as groups engage in this activity, they must remain cognizant of what it is they are doing and what the boundary conditions are for the activity.

If you want to worship the fabled *magical zucchini* deity, then go nuts. It's not a very popular religion, you say? That's fine; such a factor neither adds nor detracts from its credence. After all, (objective) Reality is not determined by referendum...any more than the credence of one's own (subjective) reality isn't determined by plebiscite. This Faith in a deified zucchini hasn't been around very long, you say? That's fine too: another irrelevant factor. So, please, indulge in your magical zucchini worship if that's what gets you up in the morning (and to sleep at night). That's your personal reality, and need not concern me. Most importantly, it has no bearing on (objective) Reality.

As for me, *other* narratives get me through the day. But that's okay, because everyone gets to choose his own folklore in a democratic, pluralistic society—each with its own heritage and legacy, its own prospects and purposes.

So choose your own narrative! Select the idiom that most resonates with you...and proceed to "live and let live". I may or may not choose to involve myself in your narrative. Whichever decision I make, it's not any of your concern. If we opt to partake in the same narrative, then we may enter into that shared experience with mutual consent. Otherwise, we oblige each other to not step on each other's toes: the discrepancy in narratives need not pose as a problem between neighbors.

If you believe that the *platypus god* of Saskatchewan (named Roger) makes the wind blow, the crops grow, and the sun rise, then worship him 'til your heart's content. Presumably, you believe *all that* because you find the ancient Canadian legend of "Roger the platypus" extremely captivating, and eminently plausible. I don't; but that discrepancy doesn't need to be problematic for either you or me. Your belief in Roger need not burden me any more than my lack of belief in Roger need burden you.

After careful reflection, if you're completely convinced that stripping down naked and smearing chocolate chip cookie dough all over yourself during every full moon will alleviate all your sorrows, then so be it. If you've been persuaded that praying to the all-powerful chrysanthemum deity will bring you success, health, happiness, and good fortune, then more power to you. After all, we're all suckers for a good story—and

that's YOUR story.

Where did you acquire that story? Some guy wrote it down in a book somewhere and claimed it was THE DEFINITIVE account of the world? Great. The narrative gives you hope, a way to orient yourself towards the divine, and a sense of security: so why bother tampering with it? That I'm not on board with you need not fetter your ability to thoroughly engross yourself in that narrative—and enjoy every satisfaction and gratification it affords you.

But, while you're at it, don't begrudge me if I happen to believe, *instead*, that reciting ancient Toltec chants while standing on my head, surrounded by scented candles (with Yanni songs playing in the background) will bring ME good fortune—no zucchinis, platypuses or chrysanthemums required. To each his own. Mutual deference is required—lest one person tread on another person's personal affairs.

What makes sense to you makes sense to you...and what makes sense to me makes sense to me. Perhaps those two things will coincide, perhaps they will not. As it so happens, the story of the mysterious platypus named Roger just doesn't resonate with me the way it does with you. But that's fine—so long as your worship of Roger in no way burdens me. I have my scented candles to attend to and my own script of incantations to memorize. The boundary conditions of my prerogative are perfectly symmetrical with the boundary conditions of your prerogative. They co-exist harmoniously so long as this symmetry is maintained.

None of this is any more (or any less) absurd than ultra-orthodox Jews praying in front of the Wailing Wall, Christians prostrating in front of a crucifix, or Muslims bowing toward Mecca—from a meta-religious point of view. They all have analogous credence—namely: perfect credence to those who practice them...while appearing rather asinine to those of us who don't. So long as we all recognize that fact (and come to terms with it), we can all be on our own way.

I may well be utterly enamored with the story of the magical zucchini deity. After all, it's on the same footing as the folk-tales in the Torah, the New Testament and the Koran—which seem to work perfectly well for so many. Certainly, this dogmatic system is no less plausible *from a meta-religious standpoint* than the dogmas of any other religion. Thus, if you expect me to “honor” your devout tribute to Yahweh, or Jesus, or Mohammed, then you're obligated—in the name of consistency of principle—to “honor” my reverence for the almighty zucchini god. Short of such mutual deference, hypocrisy is afoot.

It is all well and good that we all dance to the rhythm of our own narrative—and subscribe to the narrative that suits each of us best. There are so many fascinating narratives from which to choose, it seems there is one for every kind of sensibility. For one to take pride in that selection, then, seems perfectly natural. (What good is a narrative if one is going to be ashamed of it?)

Ultimately, in order to make it work, one must have FAITH in the appointed narrative—because a story without a leap of faith is little more than an idle curiosity. Complete immersion is required; it's just that some people get lost in their own story, and lose touch with Reality (i.e. the world as it is independently of that story). Such people forget that it's THEIR narrative—the posited reality FOR THEM. They thereby misconstrue it as OBJECTIVE truth—thus entirely missing the point of “personal narrative”. They view their coveted narrative as if it is THE narrative: the result of a bona fide scientific inquiry. In other words, they treat it as if it were revealing Reality instead of their own (subjective) reality. (They treat their social / psychological construct as an absolute description of the world.) It is then that the omni-symmetrical prerogative breaks down...and problems arise.

Expecting the world to revolve around one's personal narrative is the quintessence of narcissism. A delimited group—engaged in a shared narrative—demanding that all mankind subscribe to that narrative entails collective narcissism. Every Faith needs to recognize its delimited existence, lest it breach the conditions on which freedom of religion is predicated.

Incidentally, you can tell the people of MY Faith (there are currently eleven of us) by our distinct garb. We dress in irrational attire as an overt tribal signifier—in order to assert our identity and exhibit our devotion. For example, we wear massive, fluorescent purple top hats (in order to appease the holy Blarfo-splorp). We wear neon orange pantaloons just to make clear to everyone else that it is WE who are the *chosen ones*.

Chosen for what, you ask? Well, the great day of final reckoning, of course. That fated day shall be none other than the culmination of human history—the appointed time when the great Snuzzle-flump will descend from the sky on a rainbow of lilac nectar (just as the prophecies foretell). It is the day that will usher in a new era of utopian splendor. Those without the prescribed top-hat and pantaloons will be consigned to the dreaded *celestial sphere of lime jell-o* for all eternity.

Just eleven adherents, you ask? Alas, our redemption is strong, but our evangelism is weak. How long has this faith been around, you ask? Since last Wednesday evening: it's fresh and new—the cutting edge of spiritual awakening. Why lime jell-o? Haven't you heard: That is the substance of doom (as specified in our sacred scripture). Sacred scripture, you ask? Indeed, t'was written by a guy named Dennis: the designated "messenger" who channeled the sacrosanct instructions (via a serendipitous interlude of revelation). Revelation, you ask? Ah! Haven't you heard the amazing news? Dennis received the special message while doing laundry one rainy summer afternoon in Topeka, Kansas. It was delivered to him via the pattern of wrinkles in clothing lying in the hamper.

But why lilac nectar, you insist? That's the sanctified elixir that the divine Blarfo-splorp ordained, according to Dennis. It is the elixir of salvation—not to be confused with chocolate milk, which is the elixir of damnation. (God help those who drink chocolate milk!)

Why a day of reckoning? It only stands to reason: cosmic justice is imperative...lest things don't work themselves out in the end. (We need something wonderful to look forward to. After all, what's a narrative without divine providence?)

You see, Blarfo-splorp gives our lives meaning, imbues our lives with purpose, assigns each of us direction and significance...AND he commands us never to step on kittens or to kick one's mother in the stomach. We're also supposed to eat raspberry marmalade every Wednesday (to commemorate Dennis's blessed revelation). Our creed: Be kind to all other humans—except for Asian, albino midgets...who should be treated with extra special reverence.

And don't steal, cheat, lie, or bring harm to others. What's not to like about all that?

We should note that neither the popularity of a Faith nor the duration of time that it has existed is a factor in assessing the credence of the Faith's claims. Scientology had *the same plausibility* when L. Ron Hubbard boasted a dozen followers a month after Dianetics was written *as it does now*—with tens of thousands of followers and over half a century more to its history. (Shall we say, "Hey, perhaps Mr. Hubbard *was* on to something" the moment Scientology breaches a magical threshold of membership or duration?)

Reality is not a popularity contest.

Meanwhile, one's own personal reality "works" for a person whether he has 11 billion fellow subscribers or only 11. Freedom of / from religion protects the 11 billion from that 11, and the 11 from that 11 billion. To

allow a religion to encroach on the prerogatives of any individual is to breach the condition of omni-symmetry on which freedom of / from religion is predicated. Indeed, 11 billion people can be wrong just as readily as can 11 people. (Groupthink, in fact, makes larger followings *even more* suspect, as peer pressure and “street cred” become increasingly potent persuasive / coercive devices.)

Asking YOU to subsidize (or make sacrifices for) MY religion is unfair for precisely the same reason that you asking ME to do so for YOUR religion would be. Consistency of principle is the key to understanding the logistical symmetry between freedom OF and freedom FROM religion. It is incumbent upon those of us who support democracy to avoid hypocrisy when we handle religion—our own or anyone else’s. My obligation to “honor” your decision to subscribe to religion X entails your obligation to “honor” my decision NOT to subscribe.

To each his own. For you, it’s a crucifix; for him, it’s the Kaaba; for me, it’s orange marmalade. I shan’t begrudge you for NOT wearing a massive, purple top hat any more than you should be concerned about my neon orange pantaloons—while utterly ignoring your holy symbols. Going about our respective business should be no problem at all—as long as I don’t take your marmalade and you let me keep mine.

The Boundary Conditions of Religious Prerogative:

Honoring your right to subscribe to a religion (or to believe something) DOES NOT MEAN respecting the religion / belief *itself*. I can respect your freedom of religion without having any respect for your religion. Put bluntly: Just because I will always respect your *right* to believe X doesn’t mean I need to respect the belief in X.

Respecting freedom to X and respecting X are two different things. Most reasonable people can agree that certain things are unworthy of respect. If something doesn’t deserve respect, I will naturally tend to be “dis-respectful” OF it. It doesn’t follow from this that I’m failing to respect the right itself to X.

Sam Harris once noted: “Tolerance of religious stupidity has a way of making liars and cowards of people who should have nothing to fear from the fruits of honest reasoning.” We abandon intellectual integrity when we conflate the mandate to respect the freedom to X with a mandate to respect X itself. Your right to espouse X is based on the exact same principle as my right to tell you how idiotic X is—and how foolish you’re being by espousing it. There is no mandate to “be respectful”. My ability to openly and candidly, loudly and clearly discuss the defects of a particular dogma (or the flaws of a certain dogmatic system) is *grounded in exactly the same principles* as anyone’s right to *subscribe to* that same dogma or dogmatic system.

Being shy about confronting the dysfunction of dogmatism is abdicating one’s duty as an intellectual. Reticence to call a spade a spade (in an effort to be p.c.) does NOBODY any good.

Frankly discussing the flaws of others’ cherished beliefs (and ideologies) *publicly* is crucial to any functioning PDD. Doing so is just as integral to a healthy public discourse as is the right to proclaim those same cherished beliefs / ideologies. If freedom to openly believe X is fundamental to a democratic society, the freedom to openly CRITICIZE X is just as fundamental...and fundamental for the same reasons.

If my criticism of X offends you (the believer in X), that is patently irrelevant...just as is whether or not your belief in X may happen to “offend” me. “That offends people” is no argument for deterring any freedom. Ever. We must be consistent with the application of this principle.

For example, if I publicly say that Catholicism is idiotic...one can no more indict me for saying this (because it may be “offensive” to Catholics) than I can indict Catholics for publicly saying Catholicism is fantastic (because saying so may be “offensive” to me). The standard can’t be unilateral.

Your freedom to openly subscribe to your religion is based on precisely the same principle as my freedom to openly criticize it. That my *criticism* of the religion may be “offensive” to certain people is no more relevant than whether *subscription* to the religion elicits similar emotive reactions within me. Imagine someone saying, “Christianity is tasteless. It offends too many people. Therefore, it is inappropriate and socially unacceptable to publicly say positive things about it.” Should be encounter such a statement, red flags should go up immediately.

Yet, when the shoe’s on the other foot, suddenly people change their tune. The hypocrisy couldn’t be more glaring.

Political correctness is inherently hypocritical—as it bases moral obligations for ALL on the subjective states of SOME. The paradoxes that arise from such an m.o. are obvious to those who are impartial and operate on consistent principles.