

## Silly Holy Man

Some people have wondered why we did not mention religion when we **wrote**:

And yet, a substantial proportion of our fellow citizens still waste their sense of wonder on rubbish like telepathy, astrology and UFO sightings.

Isn't all that true of religions too?

Well, it is and it isn't. Religions share with those beliefs the property of being factually false, and of defining a sub-culture of uncritical believers. On the other hand, some religious traditions also contain evolved, mostly inexplicit, knowledge which is highly valuable. While atheists nowadays can obtain all those deep truths elsewhere, and in **most** cases better, that does not make religion rubbish in the sense that telepathy, astrology and sightings of extraterrestrial spaceships are. And religions have all sorts of cultural resonances and historical significance, to say nothing of their more contingent connections with things like the arts. **Even if** it is true that UFO-loonies once contributed to the discovery of some meteorological phenomenon or other, that is not quite in the same league as having delivered the concept of objective right and wrong, or of the unity of mankind, to Western civilization. To dismiss all that just because the religion isn't actually *true* is like saying that Shakespeare is worthless because his descriptions of Macbeth or Richard III are historically inaccurate. So in short, when religious people marvel at their religion, they are not necessarily "wasting their sense of wonder" at all.

But now – wouldn't you know it? – just as we atheists are drawing these fine distinctions to distinguish religion from pure rubbish, some Holy Man (or more precisely, Silly Man) in Scotland is busily trying to **erase them again**:

An exorcist yesterday called for a 'crusade from the pulpits' against the growing power of the occult.

Father Jim McManus said paganism and witchcraft were intertwined with evil and needed to be stamped out.

[...]

The 62-year-old priest - the only Catholic clergyman to

perform the service of "deliverance" regularly - said devil worship could only lead to tragedy.

Fr McManus said: "Witchcraft has as its basis an evil source - devil worship..."

Presumably, unlike the cynical TV executives we spoke of, he *doesn't* know better. Perhaps he hasn't thought about it - not thinking about such things being an occupational hazard of the Faithful. But nevertheless, by speaking in this manner of the non-existent "source" of non-existent "witchcraft", what he is doing is endorsing the claims of the lunatics. (So are **these people who object to Harry Potter**, by the way.) Lunatics who, incidentally, adhere to a rival religion.

Oh well. It's not really our job to set religion to rights, is it? So - as you were, everyone: here endeth the sermon.

Tue, 07/01/2003 - 16:50 | [digg](#) | [del.icio.us](#) | [permalink](#)

## We Bow To Your Superior (?) Intellect, O Wise One!

"Religions share with those beliefs the property of being factually false, and of defining a sub-culture of uncritical believers."

Oh? That's news to me -- a practicing Roman Catholic (who used to be an agnostic) who holds a doctorate in astrophysics.

The arrogance with which atheists approach religious conviction amazes me. You can no more prove your convictions than I can prove mine. Neither of us can **disprove** the other's creed, either. That's in the nature of religious belief, which occupies the realm of things which can neither be proved nor disproved on this side of the grave. Yet you find it perfectly acceptable to deride my convictions, and me for holding them, even so.

There's a quality called "humility," and another called "tact." Over the centuries they've proved both useful and attractive. **Verbum sat sapienti.**

Curmudgeon Emeritus, Palace Of Reason

by [fporretto](#) on Tue, 07/01/2003 - 20:56 | [reply](#)

## Stories contain meaning

I think all those things like telepathy, astrology, etc are fun games. I think they make sense in the sphere of imaginative story-telling. I don't think they should compete with the world of facts and science. Nor should religion, which is also a kind of fun story.

Stories can contain significant moral meaning (witness Harry Potter) without having to pass themselves off as history. They mean something to people, and influence them for the better.

So there's no excuse for religion to continue getting metaphor and

fact mixed up, but recreational superstitious nonsense may have imaginative/other value, if understood for what it actually is; art.

Alice

by a reader on Tue, 07/01/2003 - 22:45 | [reply](#)

## proof

we're fallibilists here. we know that you can't have \*certain\* knowledge. IOW, you can't prove \*anything\*. but this doesn't mean we don't know anything. we certainly do have (tentative) best theories that we hold true. the basic argument against God is: postulating God solves no problem, and doesn't explain anything. that's pretty damning.

-- Elliot Temple

<http://curi.blogspot.com/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Wed, 07/02/2003 - 01:34 | [reply](#)

## Commercials

You complain at "cynical" TV executives and accuse them of "pandering". I don't like pandas but I still think this is an unfair thing to say about people who are just making entertaining and misleading TV programs. *You might as well say it about adverts.*

Astrophysics is all about spheres, and Catholicism is a load of balls, so I can see how an interest in one might lead to the other. O physics, preserve us from metaphysics.

by [\\_Felix](#) on Wed, 07/02/2003 - 07:40 | [reply](#)

## Fleshing Out

Elliot wrote:

"we're fallibilists here. we know that you can't have \*certain\* knowledge. IOW, you can't prove \*anything\*. but this doesn't mean we don't know anything. we certainly do have (tentative) best theories that we hold true. the basic argument against God is: postulating God solves no problem, and doesn't explain anything. that's pretty damning."

Just going to be slightly more specific about why the whole God idea is a non-starter. God is all-powerful, therefore God could make the world act in any way he liked and so the idea of God can't explain why the world behaves one way rather than another. So as an explanation God doesn't work. Note that bringing up the idea that God couldn't disobey the laws of logic does nothing to alleviate this problem, because the explanation for why God couldn't break such laws has nothing to do with God himself, nor does it come anywhere near to restraining God's abilities strictly enough to explain anything about the world in which we live.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Wed, 07/02/2003 - 12:44 | [reply](#)

## Documentaries = Commercials?

"You complain at "cynical" TV executives and accuse them of "pandering". I don't like pandas but I still think this is an unfair thing to say about people who are just making entertaining and misleading TV programs. *You might as well say it about adverts.*"

I don't think anyone really expects adverts to make true factual claims, they do expect it from documentaries.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Wed, 07/02/2003 - 12:47 | [reply](#)

## Hubris

Why does god have to be all powerful? The Greek gods weren't. The Greeks also had a word for the position you hold: hubris.

I believe in mathematics and it shows us that no matter what axioms we choose, there will always be something unprovable with our axioms. That is the fault I find with most agnostic people. They think their axioms can explain everything.

by a reader on Wed, 07/02/2003 - 14:46 | [reply](#)

## You've Missed The Point

I know of very few Christians who claim that God's purpose is to "make the world act in any way he liked." The mere fact that He could but does not use His omnipotence to influence the world into behaving one way or the other is not relevant to His existence.

You conclude, "the idea of God cannot explain why the world behaves in a certain way rather than others." I'm sitting here reading this and trying to figure out why that statement bothers me. Slowly, I realize that I don't use God as an explanation for the day-to-day action of the world. In fact, it seems that one would have to be irrational to think that God controls everything. When a tree limb blows down in a storm and falls on my car, I think "Gee, gravity works..." I don't think "God, why did you do that???" Christians (most of them, anyways) believe that events are part of a plan in which we are actors capable of choice in a defined system. This is a step removed from what you're saying. You seem to be saying that Christians irrationally believe that God controls the behaviors of the world, for instance, gravity. Most Christians wouldn't say that God's making gravity. They believe that He set the laws of the universe, for instance, gravitational attraction, and then set events in motion -- to be undisturbed by His hand (for the most part).

Basically, who gives a hoot that the idea of God can't explain why the world behaves a certain way? People tend to think that Newtonian physics (and maybe more exotic formulations, too) explain why the world behaves as it does. Does that mean that God couldn't have set up Newtonian physics? At this point, it turns on

what a previous poster was talking about -- observable fact. As he said, there is no way to tell one way or the other, which puts us on pretty equal footing. Christianity isn't like the Greek and Roman religions with gods of nature, used as explanation for observable events. My question: what gives you the idea that the idea of God should explain events?

Forgive me if I have misunderstood your post. I welcome further conversation on this topic.

by **Rob Michael** on Wed, 07/02/2003 - 15:23 | [reply](#)

## Objective right and wrong

"that is not quite in the same league as having delivered the concept of objective right and wrong, or of the unity of mankind, to Western civilization."

ob◆jec◆tive

adj.

1. Of or having to do with a material object.
2. Having actual existence or reality.
3.
  - a. Uninfluenced by emotions or personal prejudices: an objective critic.
  - b. Based on observable phenomena; presented factually: an objective appraisal.

Religion didn't give Western civilization the concept of objective right and wrong, it gave Western civilization the concept of a collective standard of right and wrong.

by a reader on Wed, 07/02/2003 - 18:45 | [reply](#)

## Re: Objective right and wrong

A reader wrote:

Religion didn't give Western civilization the concept of objective right and wrong, it gave Western civilization the concept of a collective standard of right and wrong.

No. Many people think that's what it did. But that doesn't make them right.

by **David Deutsch** on Wed, 07/02/2003 - 20:07 | [reply](#)

## Re :You've Missed the Point

Rob Michael wrote:

"I know of very few Christians who claim that God's purpose is to "make the world act in any way he liked." The mere fact that He

could but does not use His omnipotence to influence the world into

behaving one way or the other is not relevant to His existence."

It's really very simple. The only reason to adopt a theory is that it solves some problem. God is inherently incapable of doing that, His existence literally cannot explain anything at all. This includes moral explanations, moral explanations of the form "X is right because God said so," are junk, worthless and utterly useless. God could have made X right or wrong or morally neutral or given it any other moral status he wanted, so God can't be the explanation of the moral status of X. There will be an explanation of the moral status of X but it will have nothing at all to do with God. (Unless it's a question like "Should we teach children that God exists?" The answer is no.)

Given that God is totally incapable of explaining anything at all, including morality, there is no reason to think that he exists. Just because the notion of God is frequently associated with some good moral ideas is no reason to accept his existence. Sociobiology (very bad explanation) is often lauded by people who work on evolutionary biology (very good explanation). This association should not restrain us from trashing sociobiology as not being worth the ink that is wasted on it, similarly there is no reason to hold back on criticising the idea of God as being rubbish.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Thu, 07/03/2003 - 15:21 | [reply](#)

## You've Missed The Point, Again

Alan writes: "The only reason to adopt a theory is that it solves some problem."

That may be true for some, but I think you'd be hard pressed to find the Christian who regards God as a 'theory.' Most Christians (I might as well keep speaking for most of them -- they haven't complained so far) wouldn't describe their belief in God as belief in a theory that they believe solves some moral, supermoral, or literal problems.

An important distinction: A theory is some general principle that explains observed phenomena. A belief is an article of faith/conviction that is held to be true. The theory relies on evidence of some sort. The belief can be corroborated by evidence but does not necessarily rely on it.

You note that His existence literally explains nothing. I'm confused as to your use of the word "literally." Is it just emphasis? In any case, for Christians, God provides the answer to the question "Why?" And, though there is not literal proof lying around as to His existence, there is also nothing lying around that says that He does not exist.

Your argument boils down (again) to proof, where, as has been noted before, Christians and athiests are on pretty even footing.

by [Rob Michael](#) on Thu, 07/03/2003 - 18:02 | [reply](#)

## Even Footing?

Rob Michael says (to Alan):

Your argument boils down (again) to proof, where, as has been noted before, Christians and athiests are on pretty even footing.

This is very misleading. While it's true that neither can be proven, their footing as far as what a reasonable person should believe is **far** from even.

We cannot prove or disprove the theory "Undetectable turtles control the weather on Tuesdays". But, is it equally reasonable to believe it or not? Does it really answer the question "Why?" (e.g. Why did it rain last Tuesday?)

I don't think so.

While the original article took some license by saying that religions have the "property of being factually false", I think saying that "Religion is untenable to a person with a good epistemology" is fair. And they amount to the same thing in terms of whether we should adopt it.

by [Gil](#) on Thu, 07/03/2003 - 18:35 | [reply](#)

## I'm not missing the point

Rob Michael wrote:

"Alan writes: "The only reason to adopt a theory is that it solves some problem.""

"That may be true for some, but I think you'd be hard pressed to find the Christian who regards God as a 'theory.' Most Christians (I might as well keep speaking for most of them -- they haven't complained so far) wouldn't describe their belief in God as belief in a theory that they believe solves some moral, supermoral, or literal problems..."

"You note that His existence literally explains nothing. I'm confused as to your use of the word "literally." Is it just emphasis? In any case, for Christians, God provides the answer to the question "Why?" And, though there is not literal proof lying around as to His existence, there is also nothing lying around that says that He does not exist."

You have now started talking nonsense. First you say that the idea of God doesn't solve any problem and that no Christian wants the idea of God to do so and then you say it answers the question "Why?" You can't have it both ways, "Why?", which presumably means "What is the meaning of life?" or something like that IS A PROBLEM. A problem is simply some feature of our current worldview that seems unsatisfactory. If your idea that for Christians God is the answer to the question "Why?" is correct, then it follows that Christians think the idea of God solves the "Why?" problem. As I have argued the idea of God is incapable of solving any problem

and so it cannot be a solution, or even the general gist of a solution to the "Why?" problem and Christians are simply mistaken when they think that God can answer this question.

It is not conceivable that some of the stuff in the Bible or in Christian or Jewish tradition (such as the idea of objective morality and maybe other stuff but I don't really know) has a bearing on the "why?" problem but that is entirely separate from the idea that the existence of God solves the "Why?" problem.

I am not asking for proof I am pointing that nobody who has the slightest interest in explanation should invoke the idea of God.

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Fri, 07/04/2003 - 02:20 | [reply](#)

## Gullible viewers

"I don't think anyone really expects adverts to make true factual claims, they do expect it from documentaries."

Surely this is their own problem?

Possibly a hundred years or so ago at the dawn of advertising, many people were taken in by bogus adverts. Should the advertisers have stopped advertising, rather than the people getting wiser?

by [\\_Felix](#) on Fri, 07/04/2003 - 06:13 | [reply](#)

## Factually True Religions?

Curmudgeon and Gil: At most one religion can be factually true. Hence the overwhelming majority of religions are factually false (though, as the article pointed out, some of them *contain* truths).

Curmudgeon: Surely a practicing Catholic in particular is not permitted to deny the above.

by [David Deutsch](#) on Sat, 07/05/2003 - 04:14 | [reply](#)

## Still Missing It

Alan writes: "First you say that the idea of God doesn't solve any problem and that no Christian wants the idea of God to do so and then you say it answers the question 'Why?'"

No, actually, read farther up and notice that you said that the idea of God doesn't solve any problem, not I. I responded to your statement that theories are adopted to solve problems by saying that God is not a theory for Christians -- please note how I didn't even address the God solving a problem issue. Read the next paragraph down from that and you'll see where I talked about theories and beliefs. That is the difference between what you're saying and what Christians are saying regarding God. It would be

helpful if you'd read what I'm writing instead of what you think I'm

writing.

David, the Catholic Church does not practice exclusivism. It maintains like the article that all religions contain some truth:

CCC 843

*The Catholic Church recognizes in other religions that search, among shadows and images, for the God who is unknown yet near since he gives life and breath in all things and wants all men to be saved. Thus, the Church considers all goodness and truth found in these religions as "a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life.*

by **Rob Michael** on Mon, 07/07/2003 - 15:20 | [reply](#)

## Re: Factually True Religions?

Rob Michael:

David, the Catholic Church does not practice exclusivism. It maintains like the article that all religions contain some truth

And does it (or do you) maintain that containing some truth is the same as being true? Does it (or do you) deny that not being true is the same as being false?

If it does, it is not rejecting "exclusivism", it is rejecting logic.

If it doesn't, then I don't see how what you have said contradicts the proposition that the overwhelming majority of religions are false, and that this is trivially provable.

by **David Deutsch** on Mon, 07/07/2003 - 16:01 | [reply](#)

## True Religions

To answer David's questions:

I do not maintain that containing some truth is the same as being true, nor would I expect the Catholic Church to do so, for as you put it, such an act would be a rejection of logic.

I also believe that every proposition is either true or false. However, there is a difference between the actual truth value of something and whether or not we can *know* the truth value. This is why one often sees people talking about relative truths. In many cases it is easier to say that one proposition is clearly more true than others without saying that it is absolutely true.

Nowhere is this more clear than in discussion about ethics. Philosophers have been frustratingly unable to pin down right and wrong; truth and untruth are similarly slippery labels. And yet we speak in terms of more right, more wrong all the time. In ethics we do that to skip over the impossible calculation of whether an act is absolutely right and absolutely wrong. With regard to religion, a similar assumption is made regarding what is true and what is not.

They call that faith and, as you say, it has very little to do with logic.

by **Rob Michael** on Mon, 07/07/2003 - 23:05 | [reply](#)

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