

# Common-Sense Religion

By Daniel C. Dennett

ACCORDING TO SURVEYS, most of the people in the world say that religion is very important in their lives. Many would say that without it, their lives would be meaningless. It's tempting just to take them at their word, to declare that nothing more is to be said—and to tiptoe away. Who would want to interfere with whatever it is that gives their lives meaning? But if we do that, we willfully ignore some serious questions. Can just any religion give lives meaning, in a way that we should honor and respect? What about people who fall into the clutches of cult leaders, or who are duped into giving their life savings to religious con artists? Do their lives still have meaning, even though their particular "religion" is a fraud?

In *Marjoe*, the 1972 documentary about the bogus evangelist Marjoe Gortner, we see poor people emptying their wallets and purses into the collection plate, their eyes glistening with tears of joy, thrilled to be getting "salvation" from the charismatic phony. The question that has been troubling me ever since I first saw the film is: Who is committing the more reprehensible act—Gortner, who lies to people to get their money, or the filmmakers who expose the lies (with Gortner's enthusiastic complicity), thereby robbing the good folk of the meaning they thought they had found for their lives? Consider what their lives may be like (I am imagining the details, which are not in the documentary): Sam is a high-school dropout, pumping gas at the station at the crossroads and hoping someday to buy a motorcycle; he is a Dallas Cowboys fan, and likes to have a few beers while watching the games on television. Lucille, who never married, is in charge of the night-shift shelf-stockers at the local supermarket and lives in the modest house she has always lived in, caring for her aged mother. No adventurous opportunities beckon in the futures of Sam or Lucille, or for most of the others in the blissful congregation we see, but they have now been put in direct contact with Jesus and are saved for eternity, beloved members in good standing of the community of the born again. They have turned over a new leaf, in a most dramatic ceremony, and they face their otherwise uninspiring lives refreshed and uplifted. Their lives now tell a story, and it's a chapter of the Greatest Story Ever Told. Can you imagine anything else they could buy with those \$20 bills they deposit in the collection plate that would be remotely as valuable to them?

Certainly, comes the reply. They could donate their money to a religion that was honest, and that actually used their sacrifices to help others who were still needier. Or they could join any secular organization that put their free time, energy, and money to effective use ameliorating some of the world's ills. Perhaps the main reason that religions do most of the heavy lifting in large parts of America is that people really do want to help others—and secular organizations have failed to compete with religions for the allegiance of ordinary people. That's important, but it's the easy part of the answer, leaving untouched the hard part: What should we do about those whom we honestly think are being conned? Should we leave them to their comforting illusions or blow the whistle?

Dilemmas like that are all too familiar in somewhat different contexts, of course. Should the sweet old lady in the nursing home be told that her son has just been

sent to prison? Should the awkward 12-year-old boy who wasn't cut from the baseball team be told about the arm-twisting that persuaded the coach to keep him on the squad? In spite of ferocious differences of opinion about other moral issues, there seems to be something approaching consensus that it is cruel and malicious to interfere with the life-enhancing illusions of others—unless those illusions are themselves the cause of even greater ills. The disagreements come over what those greater ills might be—and that leads to the breakdown of the whole rationale. Keeping secrets from people for their own good can often be wise, but it takes only one person to give away a secret, and since there are disagreements about which cases warrant discretion, the result is an unsavory miasma of hypocrisy, lies, and frantic, but fruitless, attempts at distraction.

What if Gortner were to con a cadre of sincere evangelical preachers into doing his dirty work? Would their innocence change the equation and give genuine meaning to the lives of those whose sacrifices they encouraged and collected? Or are all evangelical preachers just as false as Gortner? Certainly Muslims think so, even though they are generally too discreet to say it. And Roman Catholics think that Jews are just as deluded, and Protestants think that Catholics are wasting their time and energy on a largely false religion, and so forth. All Muslims? All Catholics? All Protestants? All Jews? Of course not. There are vocal minorities in every faith who blurt it out, like the Catholic movie star Mel Gibson, who was interviewed by Peter J. Boyer in a 2003 profile in *The New Yorker*. Boyer asked him if Protestants are denied eternal salvation.

"There is no salvation for those outside the Church," Gibson replied. "I believe it." He explained: "Put it this way. My wife is a saint. She's a much better person than I am. Honestly. She's like, Episcopal, Church of England. She prays, she believes in God, she knows Jesus, she believes in that stuff. And it's not fair if she doesn't make it, she's better than I am. But that is a pronouncement from the chair. I go with it."

Such remarks deeply embarrass two groups of Catholics: those who believe it but think it is best left unsaid, and those who don't believe it at all—no matter what "the chair" may pronounce. And which group of Catholics is larger, or more influential? That is utterly unknown and currently unknowable, a part of the unsavory miasma.

It is equally unknown how many Muslims truly believe that all infidels deserve death, which is what the Koran undeniably says. Most Muslims, I would guess, are sincere in their insistence that the injunction that apostates be killed is to be disregarded, but it's disconcerting, to say the least, that fear of being regarded as an apostate is apparently a major motivation in the Islamic world. So it is not just we outsiders who are left guessing.

One reason, free-floating or not, for such systematically masked creeds is to avoid—or at least postpone—the collision between contradictory creeds that would otherwise oblige the devout to behave far more intolerantly than most people today want to behave. (It is always worth reminding ourselves that not so very long ago people were banished, tortured, and even executed for heresy and apostasy in the most "civilized" corners of Christian Europe.)

So what is the prevailing attitude today among those who call themselves religious but vigorously advocate tolerance? There are three main options:

- The disingenuous Machiavellian: As a matter of political strategy, the time is not ripe for candid declarations of religious superiority, so we should temporize and let sleeping dogs lie in hopes that those of other faiths can gently be brought around over the centuries.
- The truly tolerant: It really doesn't matter which religion you swear allegiance to, as long as you have some religion.

- The benign neglecters: Religion is just too dear to too many to think of discarding it, even though it really doesn't do any good and is simply an empty historical legacy we can afford to maintain until it quietly extinguishes itself sometime in the unforeseeable future.

It is no use asking people which they choose, since the extremes are so undiplomatic we can predict in advance that most people will go for some version of ecumenical tolerance, whether they believe it or not.

So we've got ourselves caught in a hypocrisy trap, and

there is no clear path out. Are we like the families in which the adults go through all the motions of believing in Santa Claus for the sake of the kids, and the kids all pretend still to believe in Santa Claus so as not to spoil the adults' fun? If only our current predicament were as innocuous and even comical as that! In the adult world of religion, people are dying and killing, with the moderates cowed into silence by the intransigence of the radicals in their own faiths, and many adherents afraid to acknowledge what they actually believe for fear of breaking Granny's heart, or offending their neighbors to the point of getting run out of town, or worse.

If that is the precious meaning our lives are vouchsafed thanks to our allegiance to one religion or another,

That is a kind of love, but not the rabid love that leads people to lie, and torture, and kill.

**I**N ORDER to adopt such a moderate position, however, you have to loosen your grip on the absolutes that are apparently one of the main attractions of many religious creeds. It isn't easy being moral, and it seems to be getting harder and harder these days. It used to be that most of the world's ills—disease, famine, war—were quite beyond the capacities of everyday people to ameliorate. There was nothing they could do about it, so people could ignore the catastrophes on the other side of the globe—if they even knew about them—with a clear conscience. Living by a few simple, locally applicable maxims could more or less guarantee that one lived about as good a life as was possible at the time. No longer.

Thanks to technology, what almost anybody can do has been multiplied a thousandfold, but our moral understanding about what we ought to do hasn't kept pace. You can have a test-tube baby or take a morning-after pill to keep from having a baby; you can satisfy your sexual urges in the privacy of your room by downloading Internet pornography, or you can copy your favorite music free instead of buying it; you can keep your money in secret offshore bank accounts or purchase stock in cigarette companies that are exploiting impoverished third-world countries; and you can lay minefields, smuggle nuclear weapons in suitcases, make nerve gas, and drop "smart bombs" with pinpoint accuracy. Also, you can arrange to have \$100 a month automatically sent from your bank account to provide education for 10 girls in an Islamic country who otherwise would not learn to read and write, or to benefit 100 malnourished people, or provide medical care for AIDS sufferers in Africa. You can use the Internet to organize citizen monitoring of environmental hazards or to check the honesty and performance of government officials—or to spy on your neighbors. Now, what ought we to do?

In the face of such truly imponderable questions, it is entirely reasonable to look for a short set of simple answers. H.L. Mencken cynically said, "For every complex problem, there is a simple answer . . . and it is wrong." But maybe he was wrong! Maybe one Golden Rule or the Ten Commandments or some other short list of absolutely nonnegotiable Dos and Don'ts resolves all the predicaments just fine, once you figure out how to apply them. Nobody would deny, however, that it is far from obvious how any of the favored rules or principles can be interpreted to fit all our quandaries. "Thou shalt not kill" is cited by religious opponents of the death penalty, and by proponents as well. The principle of the Sanctity of Human Life sounds bracingly clear and absolute: Every human life is equally sacred, equally inviolable; as with the king in chess, no price can be placed on it, since to lose it is to lose everything. But in fact we all know that life isn't, and can't be, like chess. There are multitudes of interfering "games" going on at once. What are we to do when more than one human life is at stake? If each life is infinitely valuable and none more valuable than another, how are we to dole out the few transplantable kidneys that are available, for instance? Modern technology only exacerbates the issues, which are ancient. Solomon faced tough choices with notable wisdom, and every mother who has ever had less than enough food for her own children (let alone her neighbor's children) has had to confront the impracticality of applying the principle of the Sanctity of Human Life.

**S**URELY just about everybody has faced a moral dilemma and secretly wished, "If only somebody—somebody I trusted—could tell me what to do!" Wouldn't that be morally inauthentic? Aren't we responsible for making our own moral decisions? Yes, but the virtues of "do it yourself" moral reasoning have their limits, and if you decide, after conscientious consideration, that your moral decision is to delegate further moral decisions in your life to a trusted expert, then you have made your own moral decision. You have decided to take advantage of

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er, it is not such a bargain. Is that the best we can do? Is it not tragic that so many people around the world find themselves enlisted against their will in a conspiracy of silence?

What alternatives are there? There are moderates who revere the tradition they were raised in, simply because it is their tradition, and who are prepared to campaign, tentatively, for the details of their tradition, simply because, in the marketplace of ideas, somebody should stick up for each tradition until we can sort out the good from the better and settle for the best we can find, all things considered. That is like allegiance to a sports team, and it, too, can give meaning to a life—if not taken too seriously. I am a Red Sox fan, simply because I grew up in the Boston area and have happy memories of Ted Williams, Jimmy Piersall, Carl Yastrzemski, Pudge Fisk, and Wade Boggs, among others. My allegiance to the Red Sox is enthusiastic, but cheerfully arbitrary and undeluded. The Red Sox aren't my team because they are, in fact, the Best; they are the Best (in my eyes) because they are my team.

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the division of labor that civilization makes possible and get the help of expert specialists.

We applaud the wisdom of that course in all other important areas of decision making (don't try to be your own doctor, the lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client, and so forth). Even in the case of political decisions, like which way to vote, the policy of delegation can be defended. When my wife and I go to a town meeting, I know that she has studied the issues so much more assiduously than I that I routinely follow her lead, voting the way she tells me. Even if I'm not sure why, I have plenty of evidence for my conviction that, if we did take the time and energy to thrash it all out, she'd persuade me that, all things considered, her opinion was correct. Is that a dereliction of my duties as a citizen? I don't think so, but it does depend on my having good grounds for trusting her judgment. Love is not enough.

That's why those who have an unquestioning faith in the correctness of the moral teachings of their religion are a problem: If they haven't conscientiously considered, on their own, whether their pastors or priests or rabbis or imams are worthy of such delegated authority over their lives, then they are taking a personally immoral stand.

That is perhaps the most shocking implication of my inquiry into the role religion plays in our lives, and I do not shrink from it, even though it may offend many who think of themselves as deeply moral. It is commonly supposed that it is entirely exemplary to adopt the moral teachings of one's own religion without question because—to put it simply—it is the word of God (as interpreted, always, by the specialists to whom one has delegated authority). I am urging, on the contrary, that anybody who professes that a particular point of moral conviction is not discussable, not debatable, not negotiable, simply because it is the word of God, or because the Bible says so, or because “that is what all Muslims (Hindus, Sikhs...) believe, and I am a Muslim (Hindu, Sikh...)” should be seen to be making it impossible for the rest of us to take their views seriously, excusing themselves from the moral conversation, inadvertently acknowledging that their own views are not conscientiously maintained and deserve no further hearing.

The argument is straightforward. Suppose I have a friend, Fred, who is (in my carefully considered opinion) always right. If I tell you I'm against stem-cell research because “my friend Fred says it's wrong, and that's all there is to it,” you will just look at me as if I were missing the point of the discussion. I have not given you a reason that, in good faith, I could expect you to appreciate. Suppose you believe that stem-cell research is wrong because God has told you so. Even if you are right—that is, even if God does exist and has, personally, told you that stem-cell research is wrong—you cannot reasonably expect others who do not share your faith or experience to accept that as a reason. The fact that your faith is so strong that you cannot do otherwise just shows (if you really can't) that you are disabled for moral

persuasion, a sort of robotic slave to a meme that you are unable to evaluate. And if you reply that you can, but you won't consider reasons for and against your conviction (because it is God's word, and it would be sacrilegious even to consider whether it might be in error), you avow your willful refusal to abide by the minimal conditions of rational discussion. Either way, your declarations of your deeply held views are posturings that are out of place, part of the problem, not part of the solution, and we others will just have to work around you as best we can.

Notice that my stand involves no disrespect and no prejudging of the possibility that God has told you. If God has told you, then part of your problem is convincing others, to whom God has not (yet) spoken. If you refuse or are unable to attempt that, you are actually letting your God down, in the guise of demonstrating your helpless love. You can withdraw from the discussion if you must—that is your right—but then don't blame us if we don't “get it.”

Many deeply religious people have all along been eager to defend their convictions in the court of reasonable inquiry and persuasion. They will have no difficulty at all with my observations—aside from confronting the diplomatic decision of whether they will join me in trying to convince their less reasonable co-religionists that they are making matters worse for their religion by their intransigence. That is one of the most intractable moral problems confronting the world today. Every religion—aside from a negligible scattering of truly toxic cults—has a healthy population of ecumenical-minded people who are eager to reach out to people of other faiths, or no faith at all, and consider the moral quandaries of the world on a rational basis.

But such well-intentioned people are singularly ineffective in dealing with the more radical members of their own faiths. In many instances they are, rightly, terrified of them. Moderate Muslims have so far been utterly unable to turn the tide of Islamic opinion against Wahhabists and other extremists, but moderate Christians and Jews and Hindus have been equally feckless in countering the outrageous demands and acts of their own radical elements.

It is time for the reasonable adherents of all faiths to find the courage and stamina to reverse the tradition that honors helpless love of God—in any tradition. Far from being honorable, it is not even excusable. It is shameful. Here is what we should say to people who follow such a tradition: There is only one way to respect the substance of any purported God-given moral edict. Consider it conscientiously in the full light of reason, using all the evidence at our command. No God pleased by displays of unreasonable love is worthy of worship.

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