

PRELUDE TO A CONVERSATION WITH AN ATHEIST

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It's 10:30am & looking like a bottoming out of yesterday's Wall St. worst crash (Black Monday II); but the rollercoaster, manic-depressive stock market is of little significance in comparison with the God question, which for many Americans is of no significance (consequence) at all but for me is the metaphor for the issue of America's cultural integrity vis-a-vis our history, here and now, and hope, as well as being my personal center of meaning.... This Think-sheet is an open letter to a certain atheist who in the public press has been attacking my theism and whom I've invited (and he's accepted, for Nov.11) to eat an unpoisoned lunch I'll prepare for him to make the conversation more palatable. Via this letter, I'm offering him some invisible but chewable hors d'oeuvres, the numbered items he can bite into and thus prepare himself to advance & enrich our one-to-one conversation--which will not be one-ON-one, because neither of us will be atop the other: it will be a conversation of equals, peers, fellow-humans & fellow-citizens bent on (we will agree) the enhancement of human life in a better-treated biosphere and (only I'll say) *ad maiorem dei gloriam* (to the greater glory of God). The morsels below are buffet-style, in no particular order. While I hope he'll want to converse by these numbers, I assure him that he is under no obligation to do so: I'll have an extra side-board inside me in case he prefers to set up his own buffet. As for my buffet, it's the exact size of this (two-page) sheet, which thus determines the extent of my dishes.

1. We learn by revelation, observation, and experimentation. Respectively, these modes of knowing I call providential (God speaks to, directs, and corrects us), moralist (discerning good/evil, right/wrong patterns in "the nature of things"), and empiricist (systematic data-gathering + paradigmatic interpretation of data from passive & active processing). I spell this out in #1910, which I conclude thus: "All three are in me," in that order of importance to me. You hump along without the one that's most important to me, but perhaps you can make a good case for this self-deprivation.

2. Evolutionism violates the law of parsimony by defect: it's a sub-minimum hypothesis, unable to explain the force antipodal to the second law of thermodynamics, unable to stretch its survival thesis of "natural selection" to cover the survival data, unable to sustain its claim that its crucial explicative phrases--"natural selection" & "spontaneous generation"--are scientific. The unscientific or, as it's now being called, "+ factor," is what Darwin, in the 2nd ed. of THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES, called God. As an evolutionary theist, I am in an intellectually superior position: I don't have all that lame explaining to do! I laugh at the holophrastic "natural" & "spontaneous," which are not scientific but metaphysical terms, meaning (as a child would say) "all by itself, without God's help." And "selection" is a mere metaphor if nobody's doing the selecting. Do you honestly believe (1) this evolutionism is science and (2) not religion, and therefore (3) it's OK to use tax money to teach it to our children as science? And (4) not to teach creation as the myth (world-story) to which the myth of evolutionism is a modern, godless alternative? Tonight on "Nova" we got the usual pseudoscientific, pseudoreligious guff; the last words were "Mother Nature synthesized us." One possible response: Sure she did, and who synthesized her?

3. With so much good in the world, how can you not believe in God?

4. Culture historians teach that our Western idea of the person is a development from the Western Christian God-idea (specifically, Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity), & our idea of the individual is a Renaissance development from the teaching that Jesus, who teaches us to be "born again" (Ital. & Fr., "renaissance"), is (to use the Ren. slogan of the human ideal) the original for "the universal man" (eg, culture-historian Jaroslan Pelikan, "The Universal Man," chap.12 of JESUS THROUGH THE CENTURIES, H&R/85). How sits your atheism with these two data?

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5. "Prayer without ceasing" is the praxis of a continuous vital connection with God; and it relativizes, as (to use the inevitable metaphor) vertical, all human-human connections--as Loree & I, who've been married a bit less than $\frac{1}{2}$ century, agree. This praying provides an intimacy need no human-human relation can. When (as in atheism, secularism) the vertical collapses onto the horizontal, and two such flatlanders live in a hyper-demanding relationship with each other, human-human intimacy is overheated, overtaxed--as Shere Hite shows in the 3rd vol. of her trilogy (WOMEN & LOVE, in which an interviewee says, "I would love to be able to talk about everything, (but)...I have to be very careful about what I say and how I say it."). What, in your life, (1) provides a surrogate for the vertical intimacy and (2) reduces the overdemand on human relations?
6. As a highly moral-political man, please explain the metaphysical grounding of your convictions about good/evil, right/wrong, just/unjust. If in these couplings the first is what enhances, & the second is what impedes, human individual-&-social development (which is a good definition of Renaissance-Enlightenment philosophy), do you confess yourself to be of the R.-E. sect? Or do you have some transcultural self-affirmation & "apology" (in the sense of "apologia pro vita sua," thetic defense of the way you have lived, are living, your life)?
7. Nature's complexities have been yielding far faster than humanity's perplexities, so much faster as to threaten human existence on this small planet. Do you believe that the mysteries are only problems as yet unconquered by the scientific method--or are there mysteries whose meanings are unavailable to science--and if so, how are we to relate to these uncrackable nuts? (You know my answer: revelation has cracked the nuts.)
8. Since equally powerful logicians are on both sides of the a/theism divide, what illogical, irrational factors sustain your decision for atheism? (I'll gladly tell you what mine are, for theism.)
9. Centering in God, biblical religion avoids both utopian extraversion (eg, Marxism & secular liberalism) & masturbatory, narcissistic introversion (eg, Freudianism & Jungianism--such as now being pushed by Yale's Harold Bloom in Harvard's Norton Lectures--eg, in today's BOSTON GLOBE: "Why do we read? We read to learn to talk to ourselves"; and the "only good" of literary criticism "is to direct a reader toward the long, dark journey into the self"). From your writings, I take it that you are given to the former imbalance.
10. Since people fight long & hard over what they consider really important, indeed crucial, it's an honor to religion that there has been & is so much fighting over God. How come you think unimportant, indeed irrelevant, what human beings in general, in history & the here & now, have thought relevant, so relevant as to be worth living & dying for?
11. As Kornhaber & Woodward say in their great book GRANDPARENTS, GRAND-CHILDREN (Doubleday/81, p.142), "Emotional attachments require social supports" as well as continuous personal attention. For you, did God ever get either? Ever any significant relationship with a church?
12. Like everything else that's essentially human, religion occurs at all cultural levels. At what cultural levels have you experienced it?
13. Discussion (persuasion) & violence (coercion) being the alternatives on great public issues, are you consistently for the former--or do you favor keeping God out of the public-school curriculum coercively?
14. No one way of seeing & living in the world (my definition of a "religion") makes sense in all circumstances; but Christian faith makes sense more often, and more profoundly, than its rival options. I trust God speaking in, through, & beyond the Bible & the church. What do you trust? And do you ever doubt your doubts?