

IS GOD-BELIEF EFFECTUAL? THE LEGAL INSTANCE ----- ELLIOTT #1872

The notion that believing in God does you some good continues to be pushed by preachers despite the ambiguity of the supporting evidence. I'm especially embarrassed by healer-preachers' promises of divine BLESSINGS, but this thinksheet is about divine CURSES vis-a-vis legal oaths: does God really send some special misery upon a court witness who's legally required to pre-curse him-/her-self before giving testimony--or is the act only for psychological effect, viz., to pour over the proceeding a gravy of moral solemnity?

1. I posit first this: my religion fundamentally teaches that religious commitment may actually be bad for you--may, indeed, lead to your demise, in the case of our Lord Jesus. From this coign of vantage, the very notion that believing in God may do you some good is pernicious. (Of course by way of compensation for the misery religion may bring upon you there's pie in the sky or--more orthodoxly--"resurrection" on the "newed earth." But this compensation cannot disguise that, within the venue of history, Christian commitment may turn out to be bad news for your hoped-for good fortune. The more honest Christian preachers admit this, instead of exuding a pseudoDeuteronomism, promising here-and-now material shalom, Robert-Schuller-wise.)

2. I like the defiant saints who "explained" the travails faith brings as a swirling of demons around saints to prevent the effectual radiation of their holiness. But, coolly, one must observe that this line of argument begins with the burdensome fact that the evidence being so handled is, instead of being neutral, actually tilted against the idea that universe/history is under the rule of Benevolence (i.e., the Good God). Here my comfort-and-strength derives primarily from Jesus: Resurrection does overwhelm a faith-occasioned defeat, viz., Crucifixion.

3. The criterion of what's good for you is not absolute if you are a human being instead of a monster. This should be noticed: if left unexamined, what's-good-for-me becomes the touchstone not only of religions but all relationships and values in life; the ego is center and monarch, a situation disgusting, depressing, and self-destructive. "Self-fulfilment" and "self-esteem" as *summa bona* are current instances of this evil preachment.

4. I'm happy about the oath-taking hypocrisy committed every day in our courts of law, and even happier about the oath-taking honesty, and most happy about those few queers (?) who, calling on the name of Jesus (who curses self-pre-cursing), let their yeas be yeas and their nays nays. Why happy about the hypocrisy of witnesses (unbelieving the effectuality of the curse) who take the oath, and of court officers (unbelieving the effectuality of the curse) who require the witnesses to take the oath? Because the oath signals something primitive-real behind and within the artifices of the man-made-and-man-moved world, and because by it unbelievers are forced to name the Name, a society-shaping act that many now falsely, antihistorically, imagine violates "the separation of church and state." (Important distinction: By "unbelievers" here I don't mean those who don't "believe" in the biblical God; rather, I mean those who don't believe that the biblical God misery-indexes a person who pre-curses him-/her-self in case of lying (i.e., perjury): in this sense, most American Christians and Jews are unbelievers.)

5. The oath-taking Bible was always "there" in my father's court, as "there" as is the open Bible in most Protestant churches. It was more than symbol; it was sacrament, with power (though more Greek-religious power, "diké," than Jewish-religious power, "mishpat"). As court secretary, I studied the faces of all in the court during oath-takings: in Pappy's court, it was never empty ritual. In a universe and society ever chaos-threatened, he was an ordained officer of Cosmos.

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6. The legal oath stands at the intersection of the cosmic battle between Cosmos and Chaos and the societal balancing of the two essential social values, viz., personal freedom and the public tranquility. As a society's central test is how it handles threats to either/both of these values, the test occurs after a challenge to either/both has been registered. A liar in the dock has committed double lese majesty: against Reality (so the vow centers in God) and against Society (so the vow calls down woe, personal chaos, on the liar in his/her social world). Biblically, all choices have this double valence--which, then, the vow helps remind us, and society in general, of. (I support the so-called Jesus-exception--e.g., not forcing Quakers to take the oath; but only in the sense that the exception illumines the rule. On this same basis I support conscientious objection to draft registration and to war.)

7. "...so help me God" is the neo-form, the positive form, of the (earlier) self-curse, which is represented in the child's "Cross my heart and hope to die." The positive form is a prayer that God will strengthen me for truth-telling (if not for mindless, idiot-level, uncalculating truth-blabbing, "the whole...and nothing but..."). From the court's standpoint, any self-censoring of your memory-contents vis-a-vis the case is evil. Techno-image: the ideal is a computer hooked directly into your synapses, bypassing "conscience" and "judgment")*--from the court's standpoint. I put it this baldly as a reminder that court witness is a minor social role among scores of major and minor social roles, and it is one most citizens never have to play at all. (*"Cyborg" was Neumann's term for it.) But it is the only one in which the government forces the citizen to perform literally (naming God) "under God" (the "Pledge of Allegiance" being optional). Because of this coercion, the God-naming oath is under severe attack. I favor the coercion on a number of grounds (including those above), and defend it against the argument that it forces hypocrisy, thus: the phrasing can be treated by the oath-taker as quaint, archaic, "not to be taken literally," though solemnly (cf. "in the name of all that's holy").

8. Robt. Ingersoll (who didn't quite make it to our century), during the last 1/3rd of the last century, stumped America (in the lyceums, as they were called) preaching his dramaturgic atheism, always ending his speech by cursing God and calling on the Deity to strike him dead for it before the folks went home--a flourish breath-catching for my father, who heard him on numerous occasions. The old windbag did more good than harm, mainly by puncturing even windier bags--but, for the use of this thinksheet, also for raising the question of the divine retribution (rewards/punishments) in the context of raising numinous fear not in the interest of theism (as evangelists do it) but in the interest of atheism....Now, oath-taking was for raising numinous fear in speaker and hearer (=, after belief died, "superstition"). The failure to teach the fear of God makes psychosociopaths of citizens in the sense that it removes one of the supports for personal morality and social ethics (so also for social change in the justice direction). If God is going to get you/us if you/we don't shape up, we have one more reason for shaping up than we'd have if we didn't believe the implicit/explicit threat of divine punishment. (Illogically, liberal religion teaches that the god blesses but does not curse--a half-moral deity like B.F. Skinner's positive-reinforcer. Now, most folks feel that perjury penalties are only court-imposed, not also God-imposed.)

9. One's moral sense of the value of truth is cultivable without theism, but theism is the fons-et-origo (the primal source) in our heritage, both biblical and American ("Anglo-Saxon Law" + Calvinism + Enlightenment deism-humanism). Oaths in court & swearing-ins remind us.