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# Should critical thinking courses include the critique of religious beliefs?

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**ABSTRACT:** Over the last few years, there have been five best sellers critical of religion and religious belief. It seems that there is great interest in questions about religious belief. Ironically, critical thinking texts seldom examine the topic. This paper will evaluate eight arguments to exempt religious belief from rational critique. I conclude that the topic of religious belief should not be exempt from critical thinking classes.

**KEYWORDS:** critical thinking, critical thinking texts, ethics of belief, rationality of religious belief, scope of critical thinking.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: DOES AN ETHICS OF BELIEF APPLY TO RELIGION?

Between 1991 and 1999, I addressed the relation between critical thinking and an ethics of belief in three papers (Hatcher 1992, 1995, 1999). The final paper argued that educators have a moral obligation to teach students to be critical thinkers, that is, to come to a position or judgment only after “honestly evaluating alternatives with respect to evidence and arguments” (Hatcher and Spencer 2004: 1).

The arguments for the moral obligation to think critically were a combination of utilitarian, Cliffordian, Sartrean, and Kantian approaches to ethics. In *On Liberty*, Mill argues persuasively that societies are much healthier if the open discussion and evaluation of all ideas and beliefs is encouraged. Even if there is relative agreement about an idea’s veracity, these ideas too need to be challenged (Mill 1978). Active critique of ideas and beliefs should not only be allowed but encouraged. Clifford (2005), as well as Sartre (1956), has argued that how we behave tells everyone else that it is permissible to behave in a like manner in similar circumstances. To believe or accept ideas on insufficient evidence, regardless of any actual negative consequences that might follow, is telling everyone that such belief-forming behavior is acceptable. When such shoddy thinking becomes common practice, the citizens of a society are made up of gullible, credulous fools. Nothing good follows. The result, according to Clifford, is “one long sin against mankind.” From a Kantian perspective, with its emphasis on the value of human freedom and rational choice, one need only to universalize the belief-forming behavior of the dogmatic, close-minded thinker to see how such a life is, not only counter to social progress (*à la* Mill), but the antithesis of people behaving as rational agents capable of moral agency, and, for Kant, our capacity for moral agency is what makes human life worthy of respect. More importantly, when the Kantian principle of impartiality, which is that all moral principles must be applied impartially to all rational agents, is applied to belief formation an interesting analogy can be constructed. For Kant, doing one’s moral duty means one

applies moral principles impartially to all people in all situations. Such impartial application is the essence of any law, whether physical or moral. The question then becomes, assuming that the arguments that we have a moral obligation to critically evaluate important ideas are good arguments, is it ethical for people to apply strict standards of rational evaluation to some beliefs but not to others? Shouldn't the same standards of rationality be applied by every rational person who forms an important belief? If it is a moral obligation, it would seem then that an ethics of belief should apply equally to all important claims, including those having to do with religion.

Unfortunately, while it may be the case that people have a moral obligation to critically evaluate important beliefs, their psychological tendency is not to do so. From Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" to Bacon's "Four Idols," to Rosen's *War and Human Nature* (2005) writers have consistently pointed out that people are inclined to form beliefs for reasons that are a far cry from being the fruit of honest inquiry. So, as Plato pointed out, it is up to educators to teach students the value of healthy skepticism with respect to conventional "cave wisdom," as well as the importance of honest critical inquiry.

So, again, if students, as rational human beings, have a moral obligation to evaluate their important beliefs critically, but do not have the inclination or tools necessary to do so, then it is teachers obligation (assuming we are able) to provide them with the tools necessary to fulfill their moral obligations. Harvey Siegel makes much the same argument in *Educating Reason* (1988: 88).

Fortunately, that is what critical thinking courses try to do, even though their actual success is marginal. That is, according to research by Pascarella and Terenzini, when pre and post-tests are given, the average gain for a one-semester CT course is 0.5 of a standard deviation. It is little more for a four-year education (2005: 157).

So, given this summary of my position on critical thinking and the ethics of belief, are there good reasons why religion and religious beliefs should be exempt from critical evaluation? Given the importance of religion in the lives of so many people, it seems odd that critical thinking texts have for the most part not focused their critical tools on that area. Is this exclusion justified? Should critical thinking courses include the critique of religious beliefs?

In what follows, I will examine a number of arguments for excluding religious beliefs from the sort of critique taught in the standard critical thinking class. I conclude that each of these arguments is seriously flawed, and, assuming there are no other better ones and that my arguments for the moral obligation to think critically have merit, then the critical examination of religious belief should be included in our critical thinking courses.

Obviously, the question of whether the logical tools taught in critical thinking classes should be applied to religion is huge. In this short paper, I cannot say all that needs to be said about any of the arguments that I examine. One phenomenon that makes this issue quite timely and well worth considering is between 2004 and the present, there were five popular books on the *New York Times Best Seller List*, all critical of the rationality of religious beliefs (Dawkins, 2006; Dennett, 2006; Harris, 2004, 2006; Hitchens, 2006) . So, assuming the books were both purchased and read, there are many readers who have been taking the question of the rationality of religious belief quite seriously.

## 2. ARGUMENT #1: THE RIGHT TO BELIEVE ARGUMENT

Some people may claim that to subject religious beliefs to critique undermines students' right to believe whatever they please. After all, "It's a free country and people have a right to believe whatever they want." J. S. Mill argues forcefully for the freedom of thought in *On Liberty* (1978, Ch. 2). According to Mill, one's beliefs are self-regarding and harm no one. So, to attempt to hold persons accountable for their beliefs by trying to impose specific standards of rationality upon them is to infringe upon their fundamental right to believe.

First, the very notion of "having a right" is an ambiguous concept. Some rights are what I call "unconditional rights." That is, they are rights people have by virtue of being born. They are not earned by virtue of meeting a set of specific qualifications. As unconditional, we can legitimately object to anyone trying to infringe upon those rights. Examples of such rights include the traditional right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," as stated in the "Declaration of Independence."

There are other rights, however, that are conditional. To have them, specific conditions or qualifications must be met. For example, I have a right to drive a car, but only after I have met a specific set of requirements. If I have not met the necessary conditions for driving a car, (e.g., driver's license, registration, no DUI convictions, and auto insurance), then I do not have the right to drive. If I have met these requirements, all things being equal, then it would be wrong to deny me the right to drive.

Assuming that there is some sort of right to believe, then which sort of right is it? Is it an unconditional right or is it conditional? If it is the latter, then it must be earned by meeting some set of specific requirements.

If the right to believe is best understood as an unconditional right, then it would be wrong to critique the rationality of someone's beliefs. "If I want to believe that Mary became pregnant while still a virgin, that's my business." "If I want to believe that Jesus changed H<sub>2</sub>O into C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>5</sub>OH, that's my business." In fact, if the right to believe is an unconditional right, then teaching CT skills with the intent of ultimately challenging students' non-evidential beliefs may be an ethically questionable practice. On the other hand, if there is such a thing as an ethics of belief and specific conditions need to be met to earn the right to believe, then asking students to critique their religious beliefs would be a good thing. In fact, it may be a moral obligation.

First, both Harris (2004) and Hitchens (2006) have pointed out that for numerous people religious beliefs are not without consequences. They are not what Mill would call "self-regarding." They are important beliefs that have important consequences for others. For example, the numerous acts of terrorism across the globe are almost always tied to some religious belief. In the case of Muslim terrorists, they believe they will be rewarded in heaven with many virgins should they die a martyr fighting the infidels. According to Hitchens, the Palestinian/Israeli "conflict" is based on the religious belief that each has a "god-given authority" over the land (2006: 24). The war in Iraq has been between the Shiite majority and Sunni minorities. The conflict in the Balkans was between Bosnian Muslims, Croatian Roman Catholics, and Serbian Christian Orthodox (Hitchens, 2006: 20). It is all about religion. Given such consequences, it seems reasonable to conclude that religious beliefs, especially religious beliefs, should be subject to the same sort of critical evaluation as any other important belief. If the right to religious beliefs is not an unconditional right, then one has a right to believe only after specific epistemic obligations are met.

To talk of epistemic obligations implies there is such a thing as an ethics of belief. We do not have the right to believe just any old thing. To be ethical, we need to meet certain epistemic obligations. What could these be? Here things get a bit mushy.

As we have already seen, W.K. Clifford argued that to believe on insufficient evidence was “the long sin against mankind” (2005: 372). Without saying exactly what counted for sufficient evidence, Clifford argued that to form beliefs without sufficient critical investigation was to set a bad example. In effect, besides forming weak belief forming habits for one’s self, such behavior told everyone else that it was OK to believe anything that one was so inclined to believe without any supporting evidence. Such a practice, if common, would create a society of dupes rather than rational agents.

Just as Sartre says in his famous essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” “When we choose, we choose for all” (1956: 291), to believe on insufficient evidence tells everyone else it is OK for them to do just the same. We soon have a society of credulous citizens willing to believe the wildest claims, some of which are harmful to others and society.

So, because religious beliefs are often linked to such harmful behaviors as violence and war, it is especially important for people to think critically about these beliefs. Whether or not one believes that Lee Harvey Oswald killed President Kennedy without any help probably does not matter much. But whether one believes those who insult or make fun of the Pope or Muhammad or burns one’s favorite sacred text should be killed is important.

Because of the importance of religious beliefs and their consequences for others, the right to believe should not be seen as an unconditional right. It must be earned by fulfilling specific epistemic obligations. Such conditions are typically emphasized in critical thinking courses and there is no reason that religious beliefs should be excluded. As Sam Harris points out, “Religion is the one area of our discourse where it is considered noble to pretend to be certain about things no human being could possibly be certain about” (2006: 67). The right to believe does not extend unconditionally to religion.

### 3. ARGUMENT #2: THE TOLERANCE ARGUMENT

Preferring quietude to confrontation, many believe that tolerance is preferable to critically evaluating people’s beliefs that are radically different from theirs. To critique a person’s religious belief can be construed as an act of religious intolerance. In civil society, we encourage people to respect others and their beliefs. Again Mill argues forcefully for this in chapter two of *On Liberty*. We live in a world with numerous major religions with significant theological differences among them, as well as differences within denominations. In such a world, toleration of difference is important because history has shown what happens when believers look at those who disagree with them as heretics or pagans. Religious wars, terrorist acts, and executions become the rule rather than the exception.

Here the issue is really not an epistemological one but rather one of practical consequences. Do we want to live in a world of peace and harmony or one of confrontation, with a chance of violence and war? Presented with these two alternatives, the answer seems pretty clear. Tolerance takes precedence over criticism or epistemic duties, so the argument goes.

It is in reply to this position that Sam Harris (2004) has been most original. His position in *The End of Faith* is that the tolerance of the religious moderate has made the life of the religious radical (i.e., terrorist) permissible. As Harris puts it: “Religious moderates are, in large part, responsible for the religious confliction in our world because their beliefs

provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed” (2004: 45). When one appeals to one’s religion, then tolerance in effect insulates all, including radicals. The rationality of religious beliefs should be challenged.

Christopher Hitchens also points out that numerous harmful acts done in the name of religion are condoned only because we endorse religious tolerance. For example, female circumcision is condoned, but according to Hitchens, “No society would tolerate such an insult to its womanhood and therefore to its survival if the foul practice was not considered holy and sanctified” (2006: 30). Hitchens goes on to list additional atrocities allowed simply because they are sanctioned by some religion:

Mormons marry underage daughters to uncles and brothers-in-law. Shiite fundamentalists in Iran lowered the age of consent to nine... In India, Hindu child brides are flogged, and sometimes burned alive, if the pathetic dowry they possess is judged to be too small. The Vatican, and its vast network of dioceses, has in the past decade alone been forced to admit its complicity in child rape and child torture, mainly, but by no means exclusively homosexual in which known pederasts and sadists were shielded from the law and reassigned to parishes where the picking of the innocent and defenseless were often richer. (Hitchens 2006: 51)

So, according to Hitchens and Harris, the price of religious tolerance is too great. They agree with Clifford that we should not endorse behaviors or practices that include the unquestioning acceptance of beliefs without sufficient evidence. To do so opens the door to religious fundamentalism that then justifies morally questionable and even terrorist and other morally questionable practices.

From an ethical point of view, if a practice clearly leads to harmful consequences (i.e., killing innocent people), then that practice should itself be condemned on moral grounds. Again, as W.K. Clifford put it, “To believe on insufficient evidence is one long sin against mankind” (2005: 372). The harm that is done by avoiding one’s epistemic obligation outweighs the benefits of tolerating the practice of blind faith.

#### 4. ARGUMENT #3: THE FIRST RELIGIOUS EXEMPTION ARGUMENT

Some have argued that religious faith should be exempt from the epistemic standards of other beliefs because, properly understood, faith is not a psychological state that occurs at the end of rational inquiry, but rather precedes it. According to Richard Taylor, one is “called” to have faith. One just finds oneself believing in God. Hence, according to him, “It is always a mistake to base faith on rational inquiry. The reason the Christian believes...is, simply, that he cannot help it” (2005: 337). Any rational grounds for faith are after the fact, (i.e., a rationalization so to speak). Taylor claims that faith is “an involuntary conviction, often regarded as a “gift” on the part of one who has voluntarily opened his mind and heart to receive it...” (2005: 337). As a “gift” to an open mind, it is not something one should subject to the canons of CT. To do so shows a misunderstanding of the nature of religious beliefs.

In fact, there is considerable evidence that this conception of belief formation applies to the majority of our beliefs (Haidt 2007; Rosen 2005). As Hume said somewhere, reason is the slave to the passions. The research by modern cognitive psychologists indicates that emotion may be more the foundation of belief than reason (Ariely 2008; Brafman and Brafman 2008; Burton 2008; Gilovich 1991; Marcus 2008; Tavis and Aronson 2007).

This might be a good argument were faith a self-regarding practice. However, as we have seen, religious faith has consequences for others, whether it be the tolerance that allows fundamentalist terrorists to flourish, the actual acts of the terrorists, or setting a bad example by believing on insufficient evidence, which is in fact endorsing irrationality.

At this point, a critical but obvious observation is in order. It may well be the case that large numbers of our beliefs come to us involuntarily, prior to rational inquiry and choice, or are based on emotion. We just intuit the way things are or in the case of ethics, we just intuit when something is ethically wrong (Haidt, 2007: 997-1002). However, it does not follow that one cannot critically evaluate the reasonableness of one's intuitions or what at first glance appears to be a perfectly reasonable belief. All of science is based on the assumption that belief and theories, even if they appear self-evident, should be tested. So, even if one does not arrive at religious belief through rational deliberation and critical inquiry, it does not follow that the critical evaluation of such beliefs is not possible and in fact needed. For example, given one's childhood social environment, one may intuitively endorse sexism, but it does not follow one cannot subject such beliefs to critical evaluation and change them based on evidence. Likewise, one may be born in a Catholic cave and be naturally drawn to Catholicism, but it does not follow that one cannot critically evaluate those beliefs.

So, even if questioning one's faith is difficult, given the potential consequences of such beliefs, it is something that one is obligated to do. This is because religious faith always entails other beliefs about the way the universe is and how one should act. All of this must be critically evaluated.

There is also personal danger to believing without examining the evidence for one's beliefs. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Greek philosopher Celsus points out, "One ought first to follow reason as a guide before accepting any belief, since anyone who believes without testing a doctrine is certain to be deceived" (1987: 54). He then goes on to list a few of the religious charlatans practicing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century C.E. (I doubt if things have changed much in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.) Pascal's Wager aside, we generally believe that to be duped by charlatans is a bad thing and to endorse believing without good reasons is unnecessarily to set oneself up for deception after deception after deception by a world filled with people who will take advantage of peoples' propensity for believing what is not so, simply because they want to believe it to be so.

Another problem with the uncritical acceptance of religious beliefs is it often entails the acceptance of lots of other claims and practices that are both ethically questionable and socially harmful. For example, there have been and are people of faith who then believe their faith entails their religious sacred text is literally true. In such texts, human sacrifice is often endorsed. Harris lists thirty religions that have or do endorse the sacrifice of innocents (Harris 2007: 4).

#### 5. ARGUMENT #4: ANOTHER EXEMPTION ARGUMENT: THE METHODS OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION ARE CONCEPTUALLY DIFFERENT

The standards of belief assessment in critical thinking are, for the most part, the standards of deductive logic and inductive evidence, sometimes combined with informal logic. These are pretty much the same sorts of standards one finds in a scientific approach to knowledge (Siegel 1988: 113 f.). Ideally, critical thinkers look at evidence in support of a

belief or hypothesis (or *conjecture* if one is a Popperian). Then they test the hypothesis in terms of logical consistency with other well-established beliefs and what consequences should follow if it were true. If, upon experimentation, the consequences do not follow, then the hypothesis is rejected or altered.

The heart of critical thinking is also this careful evaluation of alternatives, using logic and evidence. For the last few years, as the criteria for judgment, some have claimed that science and religion simply function in two different levels and the methods of science (CT) cannot be applied to religious beliefs and vice versa (Murphy 2001: 531). For example, Nancy Murphy claims the realm of religion is conceptually different, albeit methodologically similar to the realm of science. Religion is not subject to the critical standards of justification used in science or CT. Similar arguments or claims are made by Wittgenstein in his lectures on religion (1966). Religious believers are playing by different rules or different language games than scientists and philosophers. Belief is always a matter of commitment rather than reason.

This position is a version of the old conceptual frame arguments that claim that the rationality of a belief is relative to one's conceptual frame. There are numerous conceptual frames. Science has its framework with its distinct rules of evidence, and religion has its. The frameworks are incommensurate, so criticism across frameworks is impossible. Science has its evidentiary rules, and religion has its. Neither is justified in critiquing the other.

The criticisms of this position have been legion. It has been adequately criticized by Roger Trigg (1973), Donald Davidson (1982), and Harvey Siegel (1987), to name a few. One of Siegel's arguments is sufficient to discredit the position. He asks, given that the claim is not self-evident, what sort of evidence is there for the claim that "the rationality of all claims is relative to one's conceptual frame"? Either the evidence is objective or itself relative to some framework. If it is objective, then the position is false. That is because the rationality of at least some claims is not relative to one's conceptual frame, i.e., those that provide evidence for the conceptual frameworks position. If the evidence for the claims is itself relative to some conceptual frame, then it can never convince those who doubt the reasonableness of the position. If there could never be any good evidence for the position, then we have no reason to accept it. Religious beliefs are still candidates for rational evaluation (Siegel 1987: 43-44).

## 6. ARGUMENT #5: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL UTILITY OF RELIGIOUS FAITH ARGUMENT:

Some might argue that one should not subject religious beliefs to critique because that has the possibility of undermining specific, social goods. That is, for many people, religious belief enhances ethical behavior and psychological well-being. If we are not certain of the outcome, why challenge what is at worst a "useful fiction." Many people get both their ethical values and meaning of life from their religious beliefs. In the U.S., as crime rates among the young rose, many wanted to post a copy of the "Ten Commandments" in every school room as a way of instructing any would-be criminal in the ways of virtuous behavior. To challenge the veracity of religion would be at the same time to challenge the ethics grounded in that religion.

Others, such as Count Tolstoy, have claimed that if it were not for religious faith, their lives would be meaningless (2001:72). Tolstoy claimed that only when he was

struggling with his religious faith was he not suicidal. In spite of all of his accomplishments, his life was empty without faith in God. To critique a person's faith would have the potential of removing the person's "reason for being."

If one's ethics and the meaning of one's life are at stake, is it really that important to critique the rationality of such beliefs? What is to be gained? Some, assuming that religious faith cannot successfully meet the standards of CT, may even claim that teachers of critical thinking have made students worse. Students who lose their faith are left without any ethical guidelines and with meaningless lives.

In response, there is indeed some question whether religion actually does make people morally better. Harris (2006) cites a survey that indicates the highest rates of violent crime in the U.S. occur in the most pious states. It would appear that the greater the religious belief, the higher the crime rates (p. 45). (Of course, we know that correlation does not entail cause. It could be that these same states had much poverty and social turmoil, and the social conditions led to both religious belief and violent crime.)

A less empirical approach comes from Kai Nielsen's, often anthologized paper, "Ethics without Religion" (2005: 584). Nielsen argues that both ethics and a meaningful life can exist independent of religious belief. Ethics, as behavior-guiding principles adopted to maximize the odds of individual well-being, can be understood from the perspective of a Rawlsian Contract Theory. Ethical principles are just the sort of behavior-guiding rules rational people would adopt over time to make their choice from behind Rawls "veil of ignorance." Kantian or utilitarian ethics are also developed independently of religion.

As far as a meaningful life without religious belief, it may depend upon what one means by "meaningful life." If one has food, shelter, friends, family, leisure time, opportunities for fulfillment, work and creativity, what more is needed? It almost seems childish for someone with these goods to say, "but life is meaningless."

Perhaps "the life without religion is meaningless" complaint really means "life that ends with death" is meaningless. But here too, much has been written about this from Fitzgerald's *Rubiyat of Omar Khayyam* to Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962). The point is that the recognition of our mortality is what makes each moment of life so important as it is lived. A life that goes on and on loses its unique quality.

So, the "life is meaningless without religion argument" fails just as thinking that ethics cannot exist without assuming a religious basis.

## 7. ARGUMENT #6: THE INCONGRUENT JUXTAPOSITION ARGUMENT

Another reason some may claim that it is inappropriate to apply critical thinking standards to religious beliefs is that the concept of "faith," so central to many religions, simply means to believe on insufficient evidence. Hence, to question the rationality of one's faith is not proper. Faith is not the same as rational belief, nor should it be. To ask people to proportion their beliefs to the evidence is contrary to what people mean by religious faith. Unlike religious faith, instruction in critical thinking claims that any belief, as Clifford says, is supposed to be proportional to the evidence, and the proper attitude is one of fallibility where every belief is held in a tentative fashion, where at least ideally, the beliefs are being constantly questioned. And, most importantly, should there arise new reasons or evidence, one is obligated to change one's belief (Hatcher and Spencer 2004: 24). Hence, to ask people of religious faith to critique their beliefs by the epistemic standards taught in

critical thinking classes is to ask faith to be something it is never intended to be. Faith is not intended to be an epistemically justified belief. It is analogous to asking that empirically based judgments to be as certain as those of math and deductive logic. By their very nature, they cannot live up to such high standards. In short, while it may be correct to say we should proportion belief to the evidence in most areas, religious faith is different.

In reply, while some might claim that faith is not knowledge, prominent 21<sup>th</sup> century theologians, Alvin Plantinga (2005) and Bill Alston (2005) have tried very hard to provide solid rational grounds for religious beliefs. Plantinga argues that religious beliefs are “properly basic,” that is, along with other foundational beliefs, they belong in the foundations of a rational belief system (2005: 387). Alston argues that the justification for religious beliefs based on religious experience is not unlike the justification for beliefs based on sense experience. If it is reasonable to accept beliefs based on sense experience, it is likewise reasonable to accept beliefs based on religious experience. Alston and Plantinga are very able philosophers. Why would they do this if it was acceptable to see faith as something quite different from justified belief? I think they too saw that there was something morally questionable about forming beliefs without sufficient justification beyond it feels good to live in what Clifford called “the cloud castle of sweet illusions” (2005: 369) or I’ll hedge my bets and believe, *à la* Pascal. Again, Clifford argues that to believe without sufficient evidence is to set a very bad example. It is to endorse and so perpetuate credulity among the human community. Religious believers do not want to be seen and criticized as epistemically sub-standard or close-minded, lazy thinkers. Also, it seems obvious that believers see their religious beliefs are quite rational. If the rationality of their beliefs was not important, why would Christians be concerned about the historical accuracy of the Jesus story? So, combining faith and knowledge is not an incongruent juxtaposition. The price of separation is too great.

Another concern is that if one assumes that an irrational faith is acceptable, then, as Harris and others have pointed out, whatever follows logically from that irrational set of premises must also be acceptable. In some cases, what follows is morally quite questionable: terrorism, female genital mutilation, and even slavery.

#### 8. ARGUMENT#7: WE CAN’T EVALUATE RELIGIOUS CLAIMS BECAUSE THEY ARE MEANINGLESS

Some have argued that religious claims are meaningless. It would follow that if meaningless, then they cannot be critically evaluated. Hence, they have no place in a course on critical thinking. Religious claims are meaningless because, according to Antony Flew, believers cannot or will not say what evidence or experience could falsify their claims (2001: 225-227). If nothing can falsify a claim, then it is compatible with all possible states of affairs in the universe. As such, religious claims are not really statements. They don’t really say anything. So, we should not subject them to the same critical analysis and standards as meaningful claims about the universe.

One problem with this approach is that I have never known a believer who thought that the claims describing his or her religious beliefs were meaningless. Flew’s characterization of the typical believer is wrong. For most, evidence does matter. For example, most think that the problem of evil does count against their beliefs, but there are adequate answers to the problem (Hick, 2001). The fact that Jesus has not returned, in

spite of contrary promises in the bible, counts against their faith, but they think there are adequate responses to this problem. For example, maybe something got lost in translation. Finally, people do lose their faith. People do change their minds about religion, and it is often because of studying the arguments and evidence against religious beliefs. For example, one might study the history of a religion or its texts and conclude that one's favored text or the institution of the church was a political construction created to control the masses rather than something best explained by a supernatural cause, i.e., God. Granted there may be believers for whom nothing could change their minds, but this not the normal religious person. For example, in my own circle of friends, there are self-described "recovering Catholics" who have, after what seemed to them to be good reasons, given up the faith of their childhood when they were, as they say, "cradle Catholics." One does not change one's mind about meaningless claims that are immune from evidence and arguments.

#### 9. ARGUMENT #8: THE MARKET UTILITY ARGUMENT:

In addition to these logical and ethical arguments that religious beliefs, like others, should be subject to critique, perhaps the most common reason textbooks have not included the application of these skills to religious beliefs is that such a practice would not be good business. Criticizing religion is not popular in a country with 91% believers (Zuckerman: 48). There are hundreds of private liberal arts colleges in the U.S., and almost all are church-related. One might assume that an open critical evaluation of religious beliefs would not be consistent with the mission and values of many of these institutions. While some criticism might be expected in a philosophy of religion text, any critical thinking text that presents what is to be taken as a universal approach to argument analysis and evaluation should try to be "politically correct." Textbook writers are no doubt aware that one of the first books in CT, Howard Kahane's *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric* (1971) was criticized by many because of its left-leaning political bias. All of the examples of bad arguments came from conservatives. Teachers who did not share Kahane's political views were reluctant to use the text. Later editions were consciously more balanced. According to information in "Harper's Index," when asked which category parents are most fearful their children might marry, (atheists, homosexuals, or people of different races) atheists ranked number one (Harpers, 2006). Because the textbook business is a business, it is little wonder that a sustained analysis and evaluation of religious beliefs is conspicuously absent from CT textbooks.

As understandable as this might be, I question its wisdom. The central assumption is that it is important to challenge students' beliefs unless those beliefs are religious beliefs. However, as Plato points out in the "Meno," beliefs that are not tied down with good reasons might easily fly away like the statues of Daedalus. In a like manner, beliefs that have not been challenged are weak and may not survive the often tragic events of real life. Why should religious beliefs be exempt? If a belief is important to one's life, it would seem wise to test it to make sure it was worthy of its value. In fact, as I have argued (1995, 1999), it may well be the case that we have a moral obligation to evaluate the rationality of our beliefs. To not do so assumes we are infallible and sets a very bad example for others. The same sort of argument was put forth by the theologian Paul Tillich

(1957). He claimed, with respect to Protestants, if there was one thing they should not do, it was to assume infallibility and not question their beliefs (226).

J.S. Mill also addresses the value of critically evaluating one's beliefs. Mill claims that only through open examination and critique of all beliefs that we sort out the weaker ones and refine strong ones (Mill, 1858). So, for authors and publishers to exempt religious beliefs from the field of critical inquiry is not in the interest of the search for truth.

## 10. CONCLUSION

If the arguments based on utilitarian, Kantian, Cliffordian, and Sartrean ethics for the moral obligation to critically examine important beliefs have merit, and the major arguments for exempting religion and religious beliefs from critical analysis and critique are flawed, then it seems reasonable to conclude that critical thinking classes should include the critique of religious beliefs. In fact, given the importance of religious beliefs to so many people, teachers may well have a moral obligation to do so. It should be noted that nothing I have said, entails anything about the rationality of religious beliefs.

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# Commentary on “SHOULD CRITICAL THINKING COURSES INCLUDE THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS?”

by Donald Hatcher

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is a great pleasure and honour to comment on Don Hatcher’s paper. As one of the leaders in critical thinking movement and particularly in research into effective critical thinking instruction, he has thought deeply about many issues related to the teaching critical thinking. In addition his paper discusses a topic seldom addressed: what should be the objects of rational scrutiny in a critical thinking course? Most discussion about critical thinking focuses on the rational strategies and criteria that should be included in a critical thinking course from such topics such as the role of formal logic, scientific reasoning, fallacies etc, and not about which subjects are appropriate. As a result I found Hatcher’s paper and the questions it proposed both novel and interesting. As a recent co-author (with Sharon Bailin) of a critical thinking textbook, (Battersby & Bailin 2010) I had many occasions to think about what topics would serve the pedagogical purposes of teaching reasonableness, and I must admit it did not occur to me to include religion as one of the topics. Hatcher notes most critical thinking texts avoid this topic and presumably so do most courses. As someone who lives in a country experiencing both a revival of a politically ambitious and fundamentalist Christianity combined with a so-called war with fundamentalist Islam, it is not hard to see how this issue could be both important and controversial. Nonetheless, having read Hatcher’s paper and reflected on his arguments, I remain of the view that our omission in our textbook of the discussion of religious views except in relation to evolution and intelligent design was probably a wise one.

## 2. HATCHER’S ARGUMENT

Hatcher’s strategy is to examine the various arguments against including the rational critique of religion in a critical thinking course and to show that these are all flawed. But there is some unclarity about what would follow from a successful attack on these arguments. In his introduction he claims that the success of his strategies of showing that the objections to addressing religion in critical thinking courses are all flawed, will show that “[the rational critique of religion] *should be* part of a critical thinking course.” But in the conclusion of his argument he makes a rather different claim: “Critique of religious beliefs *should not be excluded* from our critical thinking classes.”

This latter claim is of course a much weaker claim and is more consistent with his strategy of showing that objections to including the rational critique of religion in a

critical thinking course are all flawed. But the ambiguity surrounding the conclusion permeates his argument since most of his arguments are based on the negative consequences of allowing religious belief to go unquestioned. If one is persuaded by his arguments and believes that critiquing religion in a critical thinking course could mitigate the dangerous effects of religious irrationality then one could well argue not only that we *may*, but literally that *we should* subject religious views to rational critique as part of critical thinking instruction.

Rather than review all of Hatcher's argument I wish to address the general and repeated consequentialist argument (ala Hitchens and Harris) that religions are a particularly evil force in the world and that the evil associated with religion is partially or perhaps even primarily a product of religious beliefs being held beyond rational scrutiny (ala Hatcher). The assumption is that subjecting such views to rational scrutiny could reduce the likelihood of their believers indulging in harmful treatment of others. I am not particularly confident of this assumption. While Hatcher makes no reference in his arguments to the literature on the non-rational factors in human and religious belief, his references contain many. I suspect he would agree that the ability of a critical thinking course changing the religious view of believers is limited. If that is true then the argument that we should address religious issues is weakened, if not undermined.

As Hatcher, Clifford and others argue beliefs are not harmless because they have a natural tie to action. Because misguided beliefs can lead to misguided and even morally deplorable actions, such beliefs cannot seek the protection of a "right to believe" and are therefore appropriate objects of criticism. Of course not all or perhaps not even most unwarranted beliefs lead to harmful actions. But Clifford and associates argue that if we tolerate harmless but unwarranted beliefs such tolerance will allow the spread of irrationality and eventually result in people acting in harmful ways on the basis of unwarranted belief.

### 3. IS RELIGION THE RIGHT TARGET?

But is religion the right target? While the Abrahamic religions born of tribal warfare are particularly troubling, I wonder if we would have the same worries about religious belief if we focused on Buddhism or pacific Quakers—even if their beliefs are held in equally non-rational ways. On the other hand, many dangerous religious leaders are thoughtful and willing in principle anyway to have their view questions and subject to rational scrutiny. Pope Benedict, many of whose views are morally problematic, cannot be accused of not rationally reflecting on religious beliefs. He has even argued that we have a duty to do so. (Benedict) Nonetheless irrationality that supports morally repugnant actions deserves to be addressed and if it can be done effectively in a critical thinking course, that is a good reason to do it. But we should acknowledge that such irrationality is not solely or even primarily the domain of religion. In his book *The Moral Landscape* Harris rightly takes on secular relativism as another irrational view that supports morally repugnant tolerance of the sort deplored by Hitchens. I would suggest that history tells us that fanaticism whether religious or not is the primary basis for innumerable horrifying acts. And it is fanaticism that opposes subjecting beliefs to rational scrutiny. To the extent that critical thinking courses should focus on dangerous irrationalities, it is the fanatical beliefs of all kinds, not religious beliefs (unless they are fanatical) that should be subject to critical

scrutiny. As many have noted, the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw fanatical secular beliefs supporting more morally horrific actions than did religious ones.

Hatcher argues with others that religion supports too much evil to be protected from rational scrutiny on the basis of the virtue of tolerance. Hatcher quotes Hitchens' remarks about the horror of allowing clitorrectomy on the grounds of religious tolerance. But as Harris points out, clitorrectomy can also be tolerated on the basis of relativism. It should also be noted, as Ali Hirsi points out in her marvelous biography, *Infidel*, clitorrectomy was a tribal custom that was attached to Islam only in certain cultures. In fact the major religions and their practices are almost all grafted on to local cultures. Many brutal practices are grounded in other beliefs and traditions besides the appeal to religious doctrines.

While I agree with Hatcher that there is no rational or ethical barrier to subjecting religious beliefs to rational criticism in a critical thinking class, we still have the question of whether this is the best focus for our limited time of rational influence. Personally I am more troubled by those who would export religious positions into science and politics. This is of course the strategy primarily of fundamentalist and fanatics and not tolerant religious moderates. Again the problem is fanaticism in all its guises, not just its religious guise. And it is problematic not so much because of the irrationality of the beliefs, but because fanatics do think their beliefs justify transcending normal moral decency or even the scientific method.

There is another related strategic problem. Students will tend to righteously defend their right to belief in the religious domain, but are much less willing to do so in the domain of science or where beliefs clearly lead to actions. After all, what could be more democratic and consistent with free speech and freedom of religion, than respecting and not questioning the religious beliefs of others and even oneself? For this reason focusing directly on religious belief will likely produce strong resistance. But when the religious view spills over into science it is clearly exhibiting the pernicious effects that Clifford and Hatcher deplore and unquestionably deserves rational scrutiny and rejection. For this reason Bailin and I focus in our text on critiquing the intelligent design denial of evolution.

#### 4. AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY: CRITIQUING ANTI-SCIENCE

Critiquing intelligent design allows one to teach quite a bit about the nature of science: the role of imagination and theoretical fecundity, consensus, anomalies etc.. Not only does focusing on evolution serve to demonstrate the weakness of the "sacred text" approach to understanding the world, it also presents an opportunity to illustrate the explanatory richness of science. Lastly it also provides an opportunity to discredit other attacks on science based on the citation of anomalies etc. (e.g. the claim that global climate change is based on "junk science"). And while I think it would be hard to make a case that one has a duty not to believe in God, I think one can make a case that one has a moral and intellectual duty not to believe in the clearly false creationist account of the world.

I also doubt that anyone would argue that they have a right to believe whatever they want about the effectiveness of vaccines. As most of you know there had been considerable recent controversy over the claim that vaccine, particular the MMR shots, can cause autism. This has led to fanatical movements attacking scientists and widespread refusal to have one's children vaccinated. The story is horrific. (Goldacre, Mnookin) It started with a doctor making a lame case for the connection between autism and vaccinations to a kind of fanaticism where loyalty to the belief trumped respect for the evidence.

More troublingly the media spread the fear with resulting widespread refusal to immunize and subsequent outbreaks of measles and rubella. The evidence suggests that unwillingness to vaccinate was actually positively correlated with years of higher education. Though there was extensive research that showed there was no correlation between vaccination and autism the belief still persisted. The myth was only laid to rest after the lead doctor was disbarred for unethical (not unreasonable) conduct. This indifference to and fear of scientific evidence seems to me as troubling as unscrutinized religious belief and may well be more harmful.

One last comment: If you believe *à la* Hitchens and Harris that religious belief itself, regardless of whether it has or has not been subject to rational scrutiny, is a source of evil, i.e. it is not the process of coming to religious beliefs or reasons for holding them, but rather the actual content of the beliefs that is the problem, then the justification for treating them in a critical thinking class is not just to scrutinize them but to *eradicate* them. I doubt this is Hatcher's view, and I doubt that such a project is appropriate in a critical thinking class. On the other hand, in the case of religious objections to evolutionary theory and other anti-scientific irrationalism, I do think one is justified in attempting not only to scrutinize these beliefs, but to argue strongly against them—just as one would if students defended the geocentric theory of the solar system, or the phlogiston theory of combustion.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

I again want to thank Hatcher for so thoroughly canvassing such a rich and controversial topic. I have no difficulty with his arguments demonstrating the intellectual and academic right to bring religion under rational scrutiny, but I continue to believe that the focus on explaining and defending scientific theorizing and reasonableness is a better use of our efforts to improve our students' rationality.

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