

What Do Believers Believe?

Now, I find it very rare to meet anyone, of whatever background, who admits to believing in personal immortality. Still, I think it quite likely that if you asked everyone the question and put pencil and paper in hands, a fairly large number (I am not so free with my percentages as Mr. Dark) would admit the possibility that after death there might be 'something'. The point Mr. Dark has missed is that the belief, such as it is, hasn't the actuality it had for our forefathers. Never, literally never in recent years, have I met anyone who gave me the impression of believing in the next world as firmly as he believed in the existence of, for instance, Australia. Belief in the next world does not influence conduct as it would if it were genuine. With that endless existence beyond death to look forward to, how trivial our lives here would seem! Most Christians profess to believe in Hell. Yet have you ever met a Christian who seemed as afraid of Hell as he was of cancer? (George Orwell, "As I Please," *Tribune*, 14 April 1944)

I was reminded of that comment when reading a book on Ottoman law.¹ There were situations in which a defendant could clear himself by swearing an oath. According to the author's account, there were records in the surviving legal documents of capital cases where the defendant refused to swear and was executed as a result, as well as cases where the defendant was convicted of a capital offense on his own voluntary confession. The obvious conclusion is that the defendant must have believed in Heaven and Hell very much as Orwell's contemporaries believed in Australia and preferred death with a hope of Heaven to a life leading to Hell.

It is the obvious interpretation and the one the author of the book I was reading offered; it may well be the correct interpretation. But I would want to know more about the situation to be sure.

Imagine someone a few centuries hence looking at records from the current American legal system without much knowledge of how it actually worked. Observing that a large majority of felony convictions were by confession, he might well conclude that 21st century American criminals were so honest, perhaps so afraid of divine punishment for denying their crimes, that they preferred a certainty of prison to a chance of freedom bought at the cost of a lie. What he would be missing would be the institution of plea bargaining, under which a defendant confesses to a lesser charge in exchange for not being tried on a greater, choosing a certainty of (say) one year in prison over a gamble between going free and serving a much longer sentence. The fact that someone pleads guilty not only does not show that he is honest, it does not even show that he is guilty.

We might be missing similar features of the Ottoman case. Islamic religious law, *fiqh*, does not permit torture. Ottoman law, a fusion of *fiqh* and Sultan's pronouncements (*kanun*), did. We do not know, at least I do not know, how voluntary the voluntary confessions were.

For those of us who do not believe in religion, it is tempting to see other people's belief as only semi-real, as more like my belief in the world of *The Lord of the Rings* (the book, which I read early enough so I had to wait for the second volume to be published and have reread many times since, not the movie) than my belief in Australia. It is tempting to interpret our picture of how religious people were in the past as an artifact of filtered data, our sources for the relevant history largely consisting of accounts written by clerics, a point made by Georges Duby, a prominent

¹*State, Society, and Law in Islam: Ottoman Law in Comparative Perspective* by Haim Gerber.

medieval historian, in a book that used a rare secular source to provide a balancing picture.² But it is hard to see how one can give a complete account of history or of the present world without concluding that, for a substantial number of people, Heaven really was, or is, as real as Australia.

How does this apply to contemporary Christian denominations? To what degree do the members believe them, as demonstrated by the degree to which their membership affects their beliefs?

Consider mainline Protestantism. As best I can tell, in the U.S. in my lifetime, mainline Protestants believed the same things those people would have believed if they had not been mainline Protestants, the same things college professors taught and elite media such as the *New York Times* told them. They were for decolonization, for the War on Poverty, for the Civil Rights movement, against apartheid, Off hand, I cannot think of a single issue on which the dominant position of mainline Protestants was sharply divergent from the position of people of otherwise similar backgrounds who happened to be non-religious Jews, or atheists, or

Contrast to that Catholics. Early in the 20th century, the Catholic church was the one major holdout against the eugenics movement, the project of keeping the unfit from reproducing, a movement whose support ranged from George Bernard Shaw to Winston Churchill. In my lifetime, it has continued to oppose contraception and abortion. It has not yet, so far as I can tell, come to terms with the now widespread acceptance of casual sex.

For a third case, a little harder to classify, consider Protestant fundamentalists in the U.S. in my lifetime. At first glance they seem to fit the Catholic pattern, rejecting a good deal that the American elite accepts.

But my criterion was not whether people believed what the elite believed but whether they believed what they would have believed absent their religion. For the mainline Protestants, given their cultural and professional backgrounds, those are pretty much the same question. But the base of fundamentalist Protestantism is much more heavily weighted towards small town, rural populations, people that would be skeptical of the beliefs of the *New York Times* and Harvard professors whatever their religion was. I am not sure to what degree the beliefs of people with that background who happen to be fundamentalists are different from the beliefs of their neighbors who are not.

But Perhaps Not All Catholics

The central facts of at least one part of the current Catholic crisis appear clear. By the time Francis became Pope, it was well known in Vatican circles that Cardinal McCarrick had engaged in extensive homosexual activity with young adult seminarians. The previous Pope had, on that account, restricted McCarrick's activities in a variety of ways, details of which are still controversial. When Francis became Pope whatever restrictions had been imposed were lifted and McCarrick became one of the Pope's chief advisers. Then ...

On July 19, 2018, *The New York Times* published an article based on the story of a man named James, whose last name was withheld. A New Jersey man whose uncle had known McCarrick since high school, James alleged that McCarrick had sexually abused him beginning at age 11. ... On July 27, 2018, Pope Francis ordered McCarrick to observe 'a

² *William Marshal: The Flower of Chivalry* by Georges Duby.

life of prayer and penance in seclusion' and accepted his resignation from the College of Cardinals.³ (Wikipedia)

To explain this pattern of events, I offer the following conjectures:

1. Pope Francis, like many moderns, does not regard homosexual activity as morally different from heterosexual activity. His view is in that respect inconsistent with Catholic doctrine and he has prudently concealed it.
2. Pope Francis believes that requiring clerical celibacy is a mistake. This view is inconsistent with current policy but not, as I understand the matter, with theological doctrine.
3. Pope Francis strongly disapproves of adult men having sex with children.

All three of these positions fit modern progressive attitudes, which which Francis seems largely in sympathy. They also explain his behavior. So long as McCarrick's offenses were limited to consensual sex with adults they appeared to Francis insufficiently serious to justify restricting the activities of a talented priest with views on the church close to those of the Pope. Only when evidence of sex with a minor appeared did that change.

So perhaps only some Catholics hold different views than they would hold if they were not Catholics.

Muslims

What about Muslims? Over a period of a century or so the Arabs, who up to then had been bit players in the wars between the Sassanid and Byzantine empires, proceeded to conquer all of the former and more than half of the latter. It was rather as if Spain had set off on a career of conquest in the mid Twentieth Century and ended up with all of the USSR and half the U.S.

The obvious explanation is the one offered by Ibn Khaldun in explaining why those events did not fit his historical theories. It was a miracle, due to Allah putting courage into the hearts of the Muslims and fear into their enemies, and it is a well established principle that scientific theories do not have to account for miracles — a nice solution to the problem of explaining away data inconsistent with your theory. Put in a less religious form, if the Arabs were willing to die for their side and the Persians not willing to die for theirs, that could have given the Arabs a considerable military advantage.⁴

For another approach to the question, one can ask to what degree current Muslims act as if they believe their religion. One of their obligations is a religious tax, *zakat*. As with most tax systems, a clever taxpayer can adjust his behavior to minimize the amount he owes. Someone paying because the state forces him to would presumably try to arrange his affairs to minimize taxes. Someone who is paying because God will reward or punish on the basis of perfect information about what he does and why, or someone paying because he believes that he ought to do what God wants, should be less willing to try to game the system.

How could one do so? *Zakat* consists of two categories. One is a fixed percentage of output for certain agricultural crops — ten percent for crops that are not irrigated, five percent for crops that

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_McCarrick#Vatican_trial_and_sentence

⁴ An alternative explanation of the events is that the two empires had exhausted themselves fighting each other and so were easy prey.

are. The other is a capital levy of 2.5% on certain forms of wealth — gold and silver (except for jewelry) and a merchant's trade goods. For both, there is a minimal level below which no tax is owed. For agricultural crops it is something on the order of half a ton a year of dry produce, low enough so that a small farmer might choose to try to hold his output just below the cutoff so as not to have to pay any tax on it. If one had good data on agricultural output by individual Muslim farmers in a place where *zakat* was paid, it would be interesting to see whether farms producing crops that *zakat* was due on tended to produce quantities just below the cutoff.

The other category provides at least two different and more effective tactics for minimizing taxes. To begin with, gold and silver are taxable if held as wealth but not if used as jewelry. Convert your working cash into jewelry, convert it back when needed for your business, and you avoid most of the tax. It would be interesting to see whether Muslim populations are more inclined to hold wealth as gold and silver jewelry than other populations in other ways similar.

The second tactic is based on the fact that the tax on a merchant's trade goods is based on the weight of the gold or silver for which they were purchased. Here again, there is a minimum value below which no tax is due. The weight of silver below which no tax is due is about eight times the weight of gold below which no tax is due. If the price ratio between gold and silver was eight to one, which is not too far off what it was when the Islamic legal system was created, the quantity of trade goods on which tax was owed would be the same whether they had been bought for gold or silver.

Currently, an ounce of gold is worth about a hundred times as much as an ounce of silver. That means that the minimum value of trade goods on which tax is due is about twelve times as high if the goods were bought for gold than for silver. It would be interesting to see whether, in countries where *zakat* is collected according to the traditional rules, merchants, especially small merchants, deliberately arrange to do business in gold instead of silver in order to stay below the level at which it would be due.

As originally published in my blog, this was only a research proposal. But one of the commenters provided at least a little relevant information.

I remember reading that in Pakistan, the *zakat* is enforced by the government on a particular day once a year. In the days leading up to that date, lines at banks are out the door as customers withdraw every penny from their accounts, only to redeposit after the day of reckoning.

Contemporary Muslims who are willing to blow themselves up, or fly airplanes into buildings, look like evidence in the other direction. But it is hard to be sure to what degree that reflects religious belief, to what degree nationalism. Soldiers in non-religious wars, a kamikaze pilot or a soldier charging into machine gun fire in a World War One battle, exhibited very similar behavior.