

The View of the Religious from the Outside

"I am afraid she'll listen to voices in her head, thinking they are divine inspiration, when confronted with national security issues. What if God tells her to launch the missiles?"

(Usenet post about Sarah Palin, then running for vice president)

The argument sounds right, but I do not think it is.

When you get in an airplane, do you worry about whether the pilot is a fundamentalist? What if God tells him to fly into a mountain? The mechanic who checked it? What if God told him not to bother — everything was fine? If you go in for an operation, is whether the surgeon believes in evolution one of your main concerns? What if God tells him to cut out your heart and put it on an altar? When driving down the highway, do you worry that perhaps one car in ten coming the other direction is driven by a religious believer who might decide that this is his moment to go to heaven?

There is evidence all around us that people can hold apparently weird religious beliefs and still do a competent job of dealing with the real world. Perhaps that means that they do not really believe in the weird beliefs, that they are a story they enjoy telling themselves, not part of their picture of the world. Perhaps it merely means that knowing how to fly an airplane or use a scalpel does not depend on your view of religion, so pilots and surgeons who happen to have odd religious beliefs nonetheless learn and practice their professional skills the same way other pilots and surgeons do.

Whatever the explanation, I think it is clear by ordinary observation that holding weird religious, or for that matter political, beliefs rarely makes one unable to live one's life with an ordinary degree of competence.

Getting back to the specific case of Palin ...

Sarah Palin: A Digression

In 2008, when Sarah Palin was running for vice president, a variety of sources, including the AP and *Reason Magazine*, published versions of the following:

"Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin told ministry students at her former church that the United States sent troops to fight in the Iraq war on a "task that is from God.""

It was, to be blunt, a lie. The full sentence, which can be checked from the original video on the *Huffington Post*,¹ was:

"Pray for our military men and women who are striving to do what is right. Also, for this country, that our leaders, our national leaders, are sending them[U.S. soldiers] out on a task that is from God, that is what we have to be praying for"

By snipping the rest of the sentence, the AP and lots of other sources converted "I hope this is true," which is what "pray that it be true" implies, into "this is true." It is a striking example of how a partial quote can be used to attribute to someone something she didn't say — indeed, something inconsistent with what she did say. What she actually said implied that she did not know if it was God's plan or not, which suggests that she does not have voices in her head to answer such questions but must make up her own mind.

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/palins-church-may-have-sh_n_123205

Just like the rest of us.

One commenter on my blog wrote:

I think it's clear by ordinary observation that holding weird religious, or for that matter political, beliefs rarely makes one unable to live one's life with an ordinary degree of competence.

Another responded:

Good thing. Otherwise, it is quite logical that atheists would be likely to not give a rip about the death/and or suffering of their fellow man...why? That person is nothing more than a mere mixture of molecules, with no meaning beyond that of any animal.

Indeed, follow this logic, and it's the *non-believers* who are the real threat if they lived out their belief system.

For my reasons for disagreeing with this counterattack from the religious side of the argument, see Chapter [XXX](#).

Religion, Irreligion and Rationality

Religions serve at least two purposes, both important to humans. One is to help make sense of physical reality, explain (for instance) why living things appear to be brilliantly engineered creations. The other is to make sense of life, to answer questions about what we ought to be doing and why.

The development of science over the past few centuries provided a strong rival to religion for the first purpose, an explanation that not only covered the same territory but came with much stronger evidence for its truth. One might hear stories about occasional miracles at Lourdes or elsewhere, but one directly observed the miracles of science every time an electric light was turned on or an illness cured.

Science did not provide an alternative for the second function. People responded in one of two ways. One was to retain their belief in the religion and reject those parts of modern science that they found inconsistent with it — in its more extreme form, the fundamentalist option. The other was to give up serious belief in the religion and adopt some substitute: Environmentalism, Liberal politics, Marxism, Objectivism, New Age superstitions.

Two recent events started me again thinking about this situation. One was a conversation with a college freshman very upset to discover that the church she was now attending blended environmentalism, which she does not believe in, with Christianity, which she does believe in. The other was a recent [piece](#) in the Wall Street Journal offering evidence from polling data that religious people are, religion aside, less given to a variety of what most of us would regard as irrational beliefs, than non-religious people.

The effect is not small.

The Gallup Organization, under contract to Baylor's Institute for Studies of Religion, asked American adults a series of questions to gauge credulity. Do dreams foretell the future? Did

ancient advanced civilizations such as Atlantis exist? Can places be haunted? Is it possible to communicate with the dead? Will creatures like Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster someday be discovered by science?

The answers were added up to create an index of belief in occult and the paranormal. While 31% of people who never worship expressed strong belief in these things, only 8% of people who attend a house of worship more than once a week did.

Which gets us back to the question of whether the fact that people are religious is a reason to expect them to behave in irrational ways, hence a reason not to want a religious person as President. Judging by at least the evidence in the article, it is the other way round. It is the non-religious President we should be worried about because of what he might believe instead. He might convert a two foot rise in sea level into a hundred foot rise out of pure faith in an avenging Gaea.

Fortunately, Al Gore lost.