

The Elephant in Your Child's Bed

The God of my childhood suffocated under the carpets of bombs spread across peaceful cities in many countries during World War II. When I saw the charcoal remains of innocent children, women and old men after a massive air raid that was designed to trigger a firestorm in my native Cologne on May 31st, 1942, I knew there was no God of Love presiding over the affairs of this world.

No amount of pious sophistry can reconcile an almighty and all-knowing Being who permits, even causes, such horrendous suffering to be inflicted on people with any comprehensible notion of love. If such a Being existed, it would be a sadistic monster of cosmic proportion because every hour of every day every conceivable form of pain and suffering is visited upon millions of human beings (to say nothing of the other creatures) who bear no responsibility for it – pain and suffering that an all-powerful and all-knowing Being could, by definition, eliminate from the universe in a supernatural whiffy.

By the same token, an all-powerful and all-knowing sadistic monster is difficult to reconcile with the fact that the world also offers millions of human beings (as well as other creatures) multiple occasions of pleasure, happiness and joy. We can account for both our sufferings

and our pleasures by identifying their natural causes (accidents, bacteria, earthquakes and the like on the one hand, tasty food, sex, music and the like on the other), so that not only is a supernatural being irreconcilable with observable facts in our world it is also irrelevant, i.e. not required to account for them.

In all the years of living, reading and thinking since that early insight into religious fantasy came to me the morning after the first 1000-bomber raid of WW II, I have never had to revise it. I tried because I know of the comfort of having certainty about ultimate questions like the meaning of life. I looked into religions other than the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition that has dominated our culture, but all that the years have done is to add more and equally powerful arguments against any notion of a God.

To begin with, reason and sanity demand that an individual who asserts the existence of something must provide tangible proof of it. If my child comes running to tell me there is an elephant sleeping in her bed, we go to her bedroom and she must show me the elephant. If, as is most likely, no elephant is sleeping in her bed, then there is no elephant. Period. I don't have to prove that there is no elephant; she has to

provide the evidence that there is. We might agree, with a wink, that there is an elephant despite the evidence and make an imaginative fun story of it appropriate to her age, but unless we both understand tacitly that there is no real elephant sleeping invisibly in her bed, it's time to consult a psychologist.

The same goes for those maintaining the existence of God. The atheist does not have to prove the absence of a God any more than I have to prove the absence of my daughter's imaginary elephant. It is the believer who has to provide the evidence for his/her/its presence. And I have yet to hear or see a single piece of such evidence that can survive the most basic rational challenge.

Take, for instance, the fallacious logic of the creationist: *The world exists; it cannot have come into existence by itself; therefore there must be a God who created it.* But all you have done is pushed the problem one step backward. Now the proposition is: *God exists; he/she/it cannot have come into existence by itself; therefore there must be a Supergod who created him/her/it.* This is an argument of infinite recession because now you must go looking for the creator of your Supergod, and then for the creator of the

creator ... and so forth *ad absurdum*. This sort of childish exercise solves and answers nothing. The mystery of why there is anything at all and not rather nothing remains, and I believe with the Taoists that anything you can put into words about “the supernatural” is *ipso facto* false.

It is not my purpose here to refute the claims of religion. For anyone without preconceptions, even a brief glance at the account of ‘the creation of the world’ in the Old Testament should suffice to put the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition in perspective.

If the account of creation in the Book of Genesis is indeed in God’s own words, that God is spectacularly ignorant of the facts of life. In reality, the text reflects the simple-minded notions of the early scribes in Mesopotamia who began to concoct these stories perhaps as long as ten

thousand years ago, long before scientific inquiry and research began to reveal a very different story of how this planet arose and how life evolved on it, a story much more complex and much more magnificent than anything the old religion can offer us.

This is not to deny religion its important place in the evolution of the human mind or of human civilization. For early humanity, religious faith provided order in a senseless world, explanations for happenings not otherwise understood, established ritual and ceremony to restrain potentially destructive passions, and urged a more ethical conduct than natural egotism might suggest. All this made the world less threatening and more meaningful for a con-

sciousness waking up to an indifferently natural order. Religion still serves that function for many people, and I’d be the last person to want to deprive a handicapped person of his or her wheelchair. Perhaps this is the only way they know how to meet the challenge of being alive and human.

But – and this is a big BUT – we have moved into a new age, an age that has given us a radically new understanding of the nature of everything and along with it previously unimaginable powers. Along the way we have changed

***For good people
to do evil things,
that takes religion.***

Stephen Weinberg

the very habitat on which we depend for our survival. It will no longer support us at the level of living to which we have accustomed ourselves. If we do not throw overboard the antiquated codes of past ages and replace them with ethical imperatives appropriate to our times, we shall surely perish by our own hand. It may be alright for a child to close its eyes to make something threatening go away because there are always the parents to take care of them, but there are no parents to take care of the human species.

If there are individuals who need religion to negotiate these troubled times, no one should quarrel with them – provided theirs remain private commitments. Religion must not be al-

lowed to dominate public institutions or determine public policy. Both of these must be manifestations of the application of reason to the mounting problems of our time.

The current debate over the atheist bus ad: *God probably doesn’t exist...* shows the dangers, even in our ‘symbolic democracy’, of allowing religion to influence policy. The Ottawa City Council, after its OC Transpo Committee had turned the ad down, allowed the ad on its buses. But seven Councillors

voted against the motion: they did so after the city lawyer had advised them that they would lose an expensive legal case if they denied the application. That is to say, seven City Councillors (including the Mayor!) voted in favour of what their lawyer told them would be an illegal act. The actions of suicide bombers who place their religious convictions above the law are obviously more extreme than the action of the seven Ottawa Councillors, but ethically they are, in principle, no different. Thus does religion make “good people do evil things”.

In our pluralist world, unless we make religion an entirely private matter and permit no public distinctions between people of different persuasions and convictions, hatred and violence will spread. The privileged Catholic School system in Ontario is evidence that in this country we are a long way yet from reaching the level of civilization that alone will see us through the current century.

– *Henry Beissel*