

The Poverty of Accommodationism

David Rand

WHAT IS ACCOMMODATIONISM? Narrowly defined, accommodationism is the idea that religion is not inherently incompatible with science, that religion and science may be reconciled. Although the debate rages on about the validity of this idea, and even sceptical magazines occasionally devote entire issues to it, as if this were still an open question, it most certainly is not. The verdict came in long ago. If by religion we mean supernatural, faith-based belief systems, then the incompatibility with reality-based science is obvious and anyone who still disputes this has not done their homework. Many books have been written on the topic: I recommend for example *Science vs. Religion* by Tad S. Clements (Prometheus, 1990). This brief article will not attempt to recapitulate the arguments so cogently made by Clements and many others.

Among both religious believers and nonbelievers, a common attitude is to declare one's "respect" for religious beliefs, even though one may not share them. In other words, respect for the individual is said to require that one respect that individual's beliefs. I consider this too to be a form of accommodationism, but in a much wider sense. This attitude represents a failure to distinguish between freedom of belief and the belief itself. Taken to an extreme, it results in aberrations such as the current policy of the UN Human Rights Council condemning "defamation" of religion, as if it were possible to defame an idea.

Metabeliefs

Related to these two expressions of accommodationism we find a plethora of attitudes which have in common a deferential approach to religion and a hostility towards overt criticism thereof. Here is an incomplete list:

- An essentialist attitude towards religious traditions, as if an individual's identity could not

be complete without a religious affiliation, as if culture were inconceivable without religion. This is a major aspect of the *Ethics and Religious Culture* programme introduced into Quebec schools in 2008.

- A deterministic attitude towards the anthropology of religion, arguing that the near universality of religion in diverse human societies means that it must be inevitable and we must resign ourselves to it, as if propensity necessarily implied destiny.

- Accommodation of religious practices in public institutions, for example allowing employees of public services to wear symbolic accessories (crucifix, veil, turban, etc.) while on duty. This is often referred to as "reasonable accommodation" although there is nothing reasonable about it.

- A hard distinction between "fundamentalist" religion and "moderate" Proponents of the former are considered to be unscientific and doctrinaire, whereas the "moderately" religious deserve our respect, deference and silent acquiescence. The argument that we nonbelievers "need" the moderates to combat the excesses of fundamentalism is often advanced as an excuse to stifle criticism of religion.

- An exaggeration of the efforts which religious institutions have made to align their dogmas with scientific knowledge, for example the dubious assertion that the Vatican has rejected creationism.

- The rejection of forthright atheism, with many nonbelievers calling themselves "agnostic" rather than "atheist" so as not to offend believers.

- A strong association between morality and religion, as if the former were the exclusive property of the latter, as if religious authorities were somehow endowed with particular expertise in the domain of morals and ethics.

Of course, not every person who adopts one or more of the attitudes listed above necessarily subscribes to all of them. There is plenty of diversity of opinion. But the above attitudes form a mutually reinforcing nexus of what I would call religious *metabeliefs*, i.e. beliefs about religious beliefs—and are often found together. They are frequently implicit and simply assumed, without justification.

Getting Real

In opposition to the above metabeliefs, I propose a reality-based approach motivated by the following three observations.

Firstly, supernatural religion is false, and that falsehood is certain beyond all reasonable doubt. The major monotheisms are mythologies left over from antiquity with dogmas that are not only utterly baseless, but clearly incompatible with reality. I propose the following thought experiment. Imagine a vertical line representing degrees of scientific compatibility, with the bottom end labeled zero, meaning completely incompatible with scientific knowledge and the top end labeled 100% meaning completely compatible. Now consider a number of hypotheses—such as astrology, Christianity, the historicity of Jesus, homeopathy, Islam, Judaism, racism, Santa Claus, etc.—and attempt to place them on this vertical scale by evaluating their relative merits.

Although the Santa hypothesis is highly incompatible with science—the jolly delivery man would have to visit all earthly households in one night—that is nothing compared to the extreme scientific incompatibility of Christianity. Indeed, the god of every theism has to manage not just the earth but the entire universe with its billions of stars and galaxies, and he has to do it constantly, 24/7, not just one night a year—and simultaneously he has to read the mind of each and every human being! And he even sees the little sparrow fall, as the old hymn says. On the other hand, the

historicity of Jesus poses little problem, as such a person may in fact have existed (even though we know next to nothing about him, the gospels being collections of pious myths). Even astrology, although false, is more plausible—given its superficial resemblance to field theories such as electricity and gravity—than Santa or god. Theories of racial superiority may also have some plausibility; for example, if the Neanderthals or another humanoid species had survived, they could very well have turned out to be superior or inferior to us by some objective criterion. On the other hand, Nazi racial theories had a strong metaphysical element—involving degrees of innate “moral” calibre, inspired by the long Christian tradition of antisemitism—and would be considerably lower on the scale.

The point of this exercise is to illustrate that theisms are so beyond the pale scientifically that they are far less compatible with scientific knowledge than many beliefs which we would not hesitate to reject and on which we would certainly not lavish our respect. It also illustrates the futility of agnosticism. One may be legitimately agnostic with respect to a

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hypothesis which is reasonable but not well established because data is lacking—such as the historicity of Jesus—but there is no justification for agnosticism with respect to theism.

We can and should be patient with individuals who have begun to distance themselves from a deeply-rooted religious tradition and who move gradually through various stages such as partial belief, deism or agnosticism as they come to terms with their background. However, a well educated and intellectually mature individual has no such excuse. What are we to make of a scientist who continues to call himself or herself an agnostic (in regard to theism) out of “respect” for the beliefs of Christians, Muslims or other theists? If a scientist refused to declare his or her definite acceptance of modern chemistry for fear of offending the homeopathic community,

or if an astrophysicist eschewed name “astronomer” in order not to offend astrology believers, we would be so overcome with hilarity that we would neglect to accuse that person of abject intellectual cowardice. Why should our attitude be any different if theism is the object of their equivocation? I suggest a treatment with megadoses of merciless ridicule as therapy for this affliction.

Secondly, supernatural religion in general and theisms in particular can legitimately be viewed as scams because they are falsehoods promoted by powerful institutions for their own self-interest. Just as homeopathy and magnetotherapy are false medical disciplines and astrology is a pseudoscience operating in the field of psychology, religion is a scam operating in the domain of morals and ethics. In all cases, self appointed authorities claim special expertise in an area in which they have none. The observation that many adherents may be sincere does not mitigate the essentially fraudulent nature of these ideologies.

When concrete action having substantive consequences is motivated by a baseless ideology, the result is often gross incompetence. It would be the height of incompetence to employ homeopathy as a treatment for serious medical conditions or astrology as a tool to diagnose psychological problems. By the same token, making ethical decisions based on supernatural beliefs is a recipe for moral bankruptcy. The Catholic doctrine of divine injection of the soul into the human embryo motivates the Vatican’s intransigent and extremely harmful opposition to women’s reproductive rights. The idea that Mohamed was the last and greatest prophet of the one true god led to riots over a few innocuous drawings in a Danish newspaper. There is no end of similar examples that could be listed.

Thirdly—and here is where religion distinguishes itself from other scams—the major mode of preservation and propagation of religion is the indoctrination of children. The religious dogmas

of the majority religion(s) are often taught in public schools, and this is considered normal and even desirable, mainly as a result of the confusion between ethics and religion which accommodationists make little effort to resolve and sometimes even foster.

Creationism

The thorny problem of creationism deserves special attention. Indeed, the very word “creationism” has been corrupted by accommodationism. Although its generic meaning is belief in the existence of a divine creator of the universe and everything in it, creationism is usually employed in a very narrow sense, as a synonym of species creationism, i.e. the hypothesis that species were created by god rather than evolving from a common ancestor. Further, species creationism must be distinguished from biological creationism: the latter addresses the question of the origin of life whereas the former does not. Recall that the title of Darwin’s great work was *The Origin of Species*. His decision to omit discussion of the origin of life was itself a concession to religion, an attempt to avoid offending Anglican orthodoxy.

Much has been made of the Catholic Church’s ostensible acceptance of evolution. Yet in fact,

the Church accepts only a subset of species evolution, excluding the evolution of the human species, because the Catholic theory of soul-injection constitutes divine creation of humanity and is incompatible with our evolution from earlier primates. (If you are not convinced, consider the following questions: At what point in pre-human evolu-

tion did god decide to start injecting souls into embryos? To what species belonged the pre-human mother who gave birth to the first ensouled human baby?)

Further, those who oppose “creationism” in the narrow sense consistently ignore the theory of the divine origin of morals, i.e. the hypothesis that

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morals and ethics emanate from and were created by god and have no meaning without god. This concept, which I call “moralistic creationism,” is not only essential to *all* forms of theism and even deism, indeed it is a pillar of the propaganda of species creationists who argue that accepting evolution would lead to widespread moral “decay.” If humanity were to abandon the myth of the divine origin of morals and accept that ethics can be the result of biological and cultural evolution, this would strike a fatal blow to the foundations of the species creationism of biblical and koranic literalists.

Conclusion

Accommodationists fear that by criticizing religion in general, not just fundamentalism and extremism, they will alienate the moderates whose support they solicit. They fail to consider the very real possibility that maintaining a coherently critical attitude towards religion in general will convince many moderates to abandon their supernatural beliefs and join us. Perhaps a few social conservatives would move towards fundamentalism, but what about all those closet atheists who would more likely move towards nonbelief? Since no-one possesses a crystal ball which could accurately predict the number who might be alienated as compared to the number who might be sympathetic, why not settle the debate by doing the right thing? Avoid the dishonest and ultimately self-defeating opportunism of accommodationism and state forthrightly that all supernatural religion is incompatible with science.

When creationists, in their attempts to demonize their adversaries, claim that evolution will destroy religious belief, accommodationists invariably reply, “No! You can accept science and still keep your faith!” In other words, believers can have their cake and eat it too. Of course the creationists are right on this point. Anyone who truly understands the concepts of evolutionary theory can no longer take supernatural religion seriously. Daniel Dennett refers to evolution as an “acid” which inevitably eats away at faith. By denying this, the dishonesty of accommodationists reaches an unacceptable extreme. By implicitly endorsing the idea that losing one’s faith would

be a very bad thing indeed, they ally themselves with religious propaganda and weaken the cause of science.

In response to such fears, we should instead reply, “What is so horrible about becoming an atheist? Why be so afraid to question a mythology which was probably forced upon you as a child and is maintained through a combination of blind faith and inertia? Is your atheophobia so extreme, so entrenched that you think atheists are less moral than believers? Nonbelief will not make you less human, less moral. It may do the opposite.” Indeed, the evidence suggests that atheists are at least as ethical as believers. To the faith-based ethics of the religious, atheists prefer reality-based ethics—which is founded in humanism.

Do accommodationists “respect” the religious as they so loudly claim? The unsavoury mixture of dishonesty and low expectations which typify the discourse of accommodationists is not respect, but rather pandering. Accommodationism is a recipe for intellectual stagnation and capitulation to obscurantism. Instead, we must never forget to distinguish the believer from the belief. We must say to the religious: “You are better than your religion! Its dogmas are irrational, unnecessary and dangerous. You do not need them and will be better off without. Follow your own intelligence and humanity. Abandon the bad habit of remaining loyal to a tradition which in no way merits your loyalty.”

And if many do not make the change, then alliances with anyone, even the religious, are still possible, provided that the goal is clearly secular and that the alliance is a principled one, based on an honest presentation of one’s own convictions.

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