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ATHEISTS DEFEND CATHOLIC FREE SPEECH

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SUBJECT: UTILITARIANISM AND SEXUALITY

DEAR STUDENTS:

SINCE THERE IS A QUESTION ON THE FINAL EXAM ABOUT UTILITARIANISM (SEE THE REVIEW SHEET), I THOUGHT I WOULD HELP WITH AN EXAMPLE. I REALIZED AFTER MY LECTURES ON MORAL THEORY THAT EVEN THOUGH I TALKED ABOUT THE SUBSTANCE OF UTILITARIANISM, I DID NOT IDENTIFY IT AS SUCH AND SO YOU MAY NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SEE IT.

IT TURNS OUT THAT OUR DISCUSSION OF HOMOSEXUALITY BRINGS UP THE ISSUE OF UTILITARIANISM. IN CLASS, OUR DISCUSSION OF THE MORALITY OF HOMOSEXUAL ACTS WAS VERY INCOMPLETE BECAUSE ANY MORAL ISSUE ABOUT WHICH PEOPLE DISAGREE ALWAYS RAISES A MORE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE ABOUT CRITERIA. IN OTHER WORDS, BY WHAT CRITERIA SHOULD WE JUDGE WHETHER A GIVEN ACT IS RIGHT OR WRONG?

BEFORE LOOKING AT THE ISSUE OF CRITERIA, HOWEVER, WE HAVE TO REMIND OURSELVES OF THE EVER-PRESENT TENDENCY IN ALL OF US TO JUDGE MORALITY BY EMOTION. THE MOST FREQUENT REASON I HEAR PEOPLE SUPPORTING SAME-SEX MARRIAGE IS THAT THEY KNOW SOME GAY COUPLES OR INDIVIDUALS. EMPATHY IS A NOBLE HUMAN QUALITY BUT RIGHT OR WRONG DOES NOT DEPEND ON WHO IS DOING THE ACTION OR ON HOW I FEEL ABOUT THOSE PEOPLE, JUST AS JUDGING AN ACTION WRONG SHOULD NOT DEPEND ON DISLIKING SOMEONE. THIS MIGHT SEEM OBVIOUS TO A RIGHT THINKING PERSON BUT I HAVE ENCOUNTERED MANY WELL-EDUCATED PEOPLE WHO DO NOT (OR CANNOT?) MAKE THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PERSONS AND ACTS WHEN ENGAGING MORAL REASONING. I ENCOURAGE YOU TO READ THE FINAL ESSAY EDITORIAL I SENT EARLIER TO REFLECT ON THIS. IN SHORT, TO JUDGE AN ACTION WRONG IS NOT TO CONDEMN A PERSON. A PERSON AND HIS/HER ACTS CAN BE DISTINGUISHED FOR THE PURPOSES OF MORALITY.

SO, THEN, BY WHAT CRITERION SHOULD WE JUDGE WHETHER SEXUAL ACTS ARE RIGHT OR WRONG? THIS IS WHERE UTILITARIANISM COMES IN. UTILITARIANISM IN THE POPULAR SENSE IS FUNDAMENTALLY A MORAL THEORY THAT JUDGES RIGHT OR WRONG BY ITS PRACTICAL OUTCOMES. IT IS SOMEWHAT AKIN TO A COST/BENEFIT ANALYSIS. SO, WHEN A WOMAN IS DECIDING WHETHER IT'S RIGHT TO HAVE AN ABORTION, THE UTILITARIAN SAYS IT'S RIGHT OR WRONG BASED ON WHAT THE BEST OUTCOME IS. SIMILARLY, A MAN WHO IS TRYING TO DECIDE WHETHER HE SHOULD CHEAT ON HIS WIFE, IF HE IS A UTILITARIAN, WILL WEIGH THE VARIOUS CONSEQUENCES. IF THE CHEATING SIDE OF THE LEDGER IS BETTER, HE WILL CONCLUDE THAT IT'S OKAY TO CHEAT. IF THE FAITHFUL SIDE IS BETTER, HE WILL REFRAIN FROM CHEATING.

I THINK IT'S FAIR TO SAY THAT MANY, MAYBE MOST AMERICANS EMPLOY SOME TYPE OF UTILITARIANISM IN THEIR MORAL DECISION MAKING. BUT THERE ARE AT LEAST TWO PROBLEMS. ONE IS THAT TO JUDGE THE BEST OUTCOME CAN BE VERY SUBJECTIVE. WHAT MAY BE JUDGED GOOD FOR THE PREGNANT WOMAN MAY NOT BE GOOD FOR THE BABY. WHAT MAY BE JUDGED GOOD FOR THE ABOUT-TO-CHEAT-HUSBAND MAY NOT GOOD FOR HIS WIFE OR HIS CHILDREN. THIS PROBLEM OF SUBJECTIVITY IS INHERENT IN UTILITARIANISM FOR A SECOND REASON. UTILITARIANISM COUNSELS THAT MORAL DECISIONS SHOULD NOT BE BASED ON THE INHERENT MEANING OF ACTS. ACTS ARE ONLY GOOD OR BAD RELATIVE TO OUTCOMES. THE NATURAL LAW THEORY THAT I EXPOUNDED IN CLASS ASSUMES THAT HUMAN ACTS HAVE AN INHERENT MEANING (REMEMBER MY FIST VS. EXTENDED HAND OF FRIENDSHIP EXAMPLE).

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON APPLICATIONS OF UTILITARIANISM TO SEXUAL MORALITY IS THE CRITERION OF MUTUAL CONSENT. IT IS SAID THAT ANY SEXUAL ACT IS OKAY IF THE TWO OR MORE PEOPLE INVOLVED AGREE. NOW NO ONE CAN (OR SHOULD) DENY THAT FOR A SEXUAL ACT TO BE MORAL THERE MUST BE CONSENT. CERTAINLY, THIS IS ONE REASON WHY RAPE IS MORALLY WRONG. BUT THE QUESTION IS WHETHER THIS IS ENOUGH.

IF TWO MEN CONSENT TO ENGAGE IN SEXUAL ACTS, ACCORDING TO UTILITARIANISM, SUCH AN ACT WOULD BE MORALLY OKAY. BUT NOTICE TOO THAT IF A TEN YEAR OLD AGREES TO A SEXUAL ACT WITH A 40 YEAR OLD, SUCH AN ACT WOULD ALSO BE MORAL IF EVEN IT IS ILLEGAL UNDER THE CURRENT LAW. NOTICE TOO THAT OUR CONCERN IS WITH MORALITY, NOT LAW. SO BY THE CONSENT CRITERION, WE WOULD HAVE TO ADMIT CERTAIN CASES AS MORAL WHICH WE PRESENTLY WOULD NOT APPROVE OF. THE CASE OF THE 10 AND 40 YEAR OLDS MIGHT BE EXCLUDED BY ADDING A MODIFICATION LIKE "INFORMED CONSENT." THEN AS LONG AS BOTH PARTIES AGREE WITH SUFFICIENT KNOWLEDGE, THE ACT WOULD BE MORALLY OKAY. A LITTLE REFLECTION WOULD SHOW, I THINK, THAT "INFORMED CONSENT" MIGHT BE MORE DIFFICULT TO APPLY IN PRACTICE THAN IN THEORY. BUT ANOTHER PROBLEM WOULD BE WHERE TO DRAW THE LINE BETWEEN MORAL AND IMMORAL ACTS USING ONLY INFORMED CONSENT. FOR EXAMPLE, IF A DOG CONSENTS TO ENGAGE IN A SEXUAL ACT WITH ITS HUMAN MASTER, SUCH AN ACT WOULD ALSO BE MORAL ACCORDING TO THE CONSENT CRITERION. IF THIS IMPRESSES YOU AS FAR-FETCHED, THE POINT IS NOT WHETHER IT MIGHT OCCUR BUT BY WHAT CRITERION WE COULD SAY THAT IT IS WRONG. I DON'T THINK THAT IT WOULD BE WRONG ACCORDING TO THE CONSENT CRITERION.

BUT THE MORE SIGNIFICANT PROBLEM HAS TO DO WITH THE FACT THAT THE CONSENT CRITERION IS NOT RELATED IN ANY WAY TO THE NATURE OF THE ACT ITSELF. THIS IS WHERE NATURAL MORAL LAW (NML) OBJECTS. NML SAYS THAT MORALITY MUST BE A RESPONSE TO REALITY. IN OTHER WORDS, SEXUAL ACTS ARE ONLY APPROPRIATE FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE COMPLEMENTARY, NOT THE SAME. HOW DO WE KNOW THIS? BY LOOKING AT REALITY. MEN AND WOMEN ARE COMPLEMENTARY IN THEIR ANATOMY, PHYSIOLOGY, AND PSYCHOLOGY. MEN AND WOMEN ARE NOT INTERCHANGEABLE. SO, A MORAL SEXUAL ACT HAS TO BE BETWEEN PERSONS THAT ARE FITTED FOR THAT ACT. CONSENT IS IMPORTANT BUT THERE IS MORE THAN CONSENT NEEDED.

ONE EXAMPLE APPLICABLE TO HOMOSEXUAL ACTS ILLUSTRATES THE PROBLEM. TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE, IN A SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TWO MEN, ONE OF THEM TENDS TO ACT AS THE "WOMAN" WHILE THE OTHER ACTS AS THE "MAN." IN THIS SCENARIO, HOMOSEXUAL MEN HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO ENGAGE IN CERTAIN TYPES OF ACTIONS FOR WHICH THEIR BODIES ARE NOT FITTED. I DON'T WANT TO BE TOO GRAPHIC SO I WON'T GO INTO DETAILS BUT A PHYSICIAN HAS TOLD ME THAT THESE ACTS ARE DELETERIOUS TO THE HEALTH OF ONE OR POSSIBLY BOTH OF THE MEN. YET, IF THE MORALITY OF THE ACT IS JUDGED ONLY BY MUTUAL CONSENT, THEN THERE ARE CLEARLY HOMOSEXUAL ACTS WHICH ARE INJURIOUS TO THEIR HEALTH BUT WHICH ARE CONSENTED TO. WHY ARE THEY INJURIOUS? BECAUSE THEY VIOLATE THE MEANING, STRUCTURE, AND (SOMETIMES) HEALTH OF THE HUMAN BODY.

NOW RECALL THAT I MENTIONED IN CLASS THE IMPORTANCE OF GAINING WISDOM FROM THE PAST. ONE PART OF WISDOM WE GAIN FROM SUCH KNOWLEDGE IS HOW PEOPLE TODAY CAME TO THINK OF THEIR BODIES. I WON'T GO INTO DETAILS HERE BUT A SURVEY OF THE LAST FEW CENTURIES REVEALS THAT WE HAVE GRADUALLY BEEN SEPARATING OUR SEXUAL NATURES (REALITY) FROM OUR MORAL DECISIONS. THUS, PEOPLE TEND TO THINK THAT WE CAN USE OUR BODIES SEXUALLY IN WHATEVER WAYS WE CHOOSE WITHOUT REGARD TO THEIR ACTUAL STRUCTURE AND MEANING. THIS IS ALSO WHAT LIES BEHIND THE IDEA OF SEX CHANGE OPERATIONS. WE CAN MANIPULATE OUR BODIES TO BE WHATEVER WE WANT THEM TO BE.

IF WHAT I JUST SAID IS TRUE, THEN THIS DISASSOCIATION OF MORALITY AND SEXUAL REALITY DID NOT BEGIN WITH HOMOSEXUALITY. IT BEGAN LONG AGO. BUT IT TOOK A HUGE LEAP FORWARD IN THE WIDE SPREAD USE OF ARTIFICIAL CONTRACEPTIVES. WHAT THIS USE ALLOWED WAS FOR PEOPLE TO DISASSOCIATE PROCREATION AND CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL ACTIVITY. SO, FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE GROWN UP ONLY IN A TIME WHEN THERE IS NO INHERENT CONNECTION BETWEEN PROCREATION AND SEX –- NOTICE NOT NATURAL BUT MANIPULATED BY HUMANS –- IT FOLLOWS "LOGICALLY" THAT SEX CAN MEAN ANYTHING WE WANT IT TO MEAN.

NATURAL MORAL THEORY SAYS THAT IF WE ARE TO HAVE HEALTHY SEXUAL LIVES, WE MUST RETURN TO A CONNECTION BETWEEN PROCREATION AND SEX. WHY? BECAUSE THAT IS WHAT IS REAL. IT IS BASED ON HUMAN SEXUAL ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY. HUMAN SEXUALITY IS INHERENTLY UNITIVE AND PROCREATIVE. IF WE ENCOURAGE SEXUAL RELATIONS THAT VIOLATE THIS BASIC MEANING, WE WILL END UP DENYING SOMETHING ESSENTIAL ABOUT OUR HUMANITY, ABOUT OUR FEMININE AND MASCULINE NATURE.

I KNOW THIS DOESN'T ANSWER ALL THE QUESTIONS IN MANY OF YOUR MINDS. ALL I ASK AS YOUR TEACHER IS THAT YOU APPROACH THESE QUESTIONS AS A THINKING ADULT. THAT IMPLIES QUESTIONING WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD AROUND YOU. UNLESS YOU HAVE DONE EXTENSIVE RESEARCH INTO HOMOSEXUALITY AND ARE COGNIZANT OF THE HISTORY OF MORAL THOUGHT, YOU ARE NOT READY TO MAKE JUDGMENTS ABOUT MORAL TRUTH IN THIS MATTER. ALL I ENCOURAGE IS TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS. AS A FINAL NOTE, A PERCEPTIVE READER WILL HAVE NOTICED THAT NONE OF WHAT I HAVE SAID HERE OR IN CLASS DEPENDS UPON RELIGION. CATHOLICS DON'T ARRIVE AT THEIR MORAL CONCLUSIONS BASED ON THEIR RELIGION. THEY DO SO BASED ON A THOROUGH UNDERSTANDING OF NATURAL REALITY.

(MY COMMENT: HIS EMPLOYER IS CONSIDERING FIRING HOWELL. ATHEISTS HAVE PUT THEIR THEOLOGICAL DISAGREEMENTS WITH HOWELL ASIDE AND RALLIED TO HIS DEFENSE BECAUSE OF A COMMON INTEREST ... FREEDOM OF SPEECH).

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THE SCIENCE SEGMENT

LARGEST STAR EVER DISCOVERED

USING A COMBINATION OF INSTRUMENTS ON ESO'S VERY LARGE TELESCOPE, ASTRONOMERS HAVE DISCOVERED THE MOST MASSIVE STARS TO DATE, ONE WEIGHING AT BIRTH MORE THAN 300 TIMES THE MASS OF THE SUN, OR TWICE AS MUCH AS THE CURRENTLY ACCEPTED LIMIT OF 150 SOLAR MASSES. THE EXISTENCE OF THESE MONSTERS -- MILLIONS OF TIMES MORE LUMINOUS THAN THE SUN, LOSING WEIGHT THROUGH VERY POWERFUL WINDS -- MAY PROVIDE AN ANSWER TO THE QUESTION "HOW MASSIVE CAN STARS BE?"

A TEAM OF ASTRONOMERS LED BY PAUL CROWTHER, PROFESSOR OF ASTROPHYSICS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD, HAS USED ESO'S VERY LARGE TELESCOPE (VLT), AS WELL AS ARCHIVAL DATA FROM THE NASA/ESA HUBBLE SPACE TELESCOPE, TO STUDY TWO YOUNG CLUSTERS OF STARS, NGC 3603 AND RMC 136A IN DETAIL. NGC 3603 IS A COSMIC FACTORY WHERE STARS FORM FRANTICALLY FROM THE NEBULA'S EXTENDED CLOUDS OF GAS AND DUST, LOCATED 22 000 LIGHT-YEARS AWAY FROM THE SUN. RMC 136A (MORE OFTEN KNOWN AS R136) IS ANOTHER CLUSTER OF YOUNG, MASSIVE AND HOT STARS, WHICH IS LOCATED INSIDE THE TARANTULA NEBULA, IN ONE OF OUR NEIGHBOURING GALAXIES, THE LARGE MAGELLANIC CLOUD, 165,000 LIGHT-YEARS AWAY.

THE TEAM FOUND SEVERAL STARS WITH SURFACE TEMPERATURES OVER 40,000 DEGREES, MORE THAN SEVEN TIMES HOTTER THAN OUR SUN, AND A FEW TENS OF TIMES LARGER AND SEVERAL MILLION TIMES BRIGHTER. COMPARISONS WITH MODELS IMPLY THAT SEVERAL OF THESE STARS WERE BORN WITH MASSES IN EXCESS OF 150 SOLAR MASSES. THE STAR R136A1, FOUND IN THE R136 CLUSTER, IS THE MOST MASSIVE STAR EVER FOUND, WITH A CURRENT MASS OF ABOUT 265 SOLAR MASSES AND WITH A BIRTHWEIGHT OF AS MUCH AS 320 TIMES THAT OF THE SUN.

IN NGC 3603, THE ASTRONOMERS COULD ALSO DIRECTLY MEASURE THE MASSES OF TWO STARS THAT BELONG TO A DOUBLE STAR SYSTEM, AS A VALIDATION OF THE MODELS USED. THE STARS A1, B AND C IN THIS CLUSTER HAVE ESTIMATED MASSES AT BIRTH ABOVE OR CLOSE TO 150 SOLAR MASSES.

VERY MASSIVE STARS PRODUCE VERY POWERFUL OUTFLOWS. "UNLIKE HUMANS, THESE STARS ARE BORN HEAVY AND LOSE WEIGHT AS THEY AGE," SAYS PAUL CROWTHER. "BEING A LITTLE OVER A MILLION YEARS OLD, THE MOST EXTREME STAR R136A1 IS ALREADY 'MIDDLE-AGED' AND HAS UNDERGONE AN INTENSE WEIGHT LOSS PROGRAMME, SHEDDING A FIFTH OF ITS INITIAL MASS OVER THAT TIME, OR MORE THAN FIFTY SOLAR MASSES."

IF R136A1 REPLACED THE SUN IN OUR SOLAR SYSTEM, IT WOULD OUTSHINE THE SUN BY AS MUCH AS THE SUN CURRENTLY OUTSHINES THE FULL MOON. "ITS HIGH MASS WOULD REDUCE THE LENGTH OF THE EARTH'S YEAR TO THREE WEEKS, AND IT WOULD BATHE THE EARTH IN INCREDIBLY INTENSE ULTRAVIOLET RADIATION, RENDERING LIFE ON OUR PLANET IMPOSSIBLE," SAYS RAPHAEL HIRSCHI FROM KEELE UNIVERSITY, WHO BELONGS TO THE TEAM.

THESE SUPER HEAVYWEIGHT STARS ARE EXTREMELY RARE, FORMING SOLELY WITHIN THE DENSEST STAR CLUSTERS. DISTINGUISHING THE INDIVIDUAL STARS -- WHICH HAS NOW BEEN ACHIEVED FOR THE FIRST TIME -- REQUIRES THE EXQUISITE RESOLVING POWER OF THE VLT'S INFRARED INSTRUMENTS.

THE TEAM ALSO ESTIMATED THE MAXIMUM POSSIBLE MASS FOR THE STARS WITHIN THESE CLUSTERS AND THE RELATIVE NUMBER OF THE MOST MASSIVE ONES. "THE SMALLEST STARS ARE LIMITED TO MORE THAN ABOUT EIGHTY TIMES MORE THAN JUPITER, BELOW WHICH THEY ARE 'FAILED STARS' OR BROWN DWARFS," SAYS TEAM MEMBER OLIVIER SCHNURR FROM THE ASTROPHYSIKALISCHES INSTITUT POTSDAM. "OUR NEW FINDING SUPPORTS THE PREVIOUS VIEW THAT THERE IS ALSO AN UPPER LIMIT TO HOW BIG STARS CAN GET, ALTHOUGH IT RAISES THE LIMIT BY A FACTOR OF TWO, TO ABOUT 300 SOLAR MASSES."

WITHIN R136, ONLY FOUR STARS WEIGHED MORE THAN 150 SOLAR MASSES AT BIRTH, YET THEY ACCOUNT FOR NEARLY HALF OF THE WIND AND RADIATION POWER OF THE ENTIRE CLUSTER, COMPRISING APPROXIMATELY 100,000 STARS IN TOTAL. R136A1 ALONE ENERGISES ITS SURROUNDINGS BY MORE THAN A FACTOR OF FIFTY COMPARED TO THE ORION NEBULA CLUSTER, THE CLOSEST REGION OF MASSIVE STAR FORMATION TO EARTH.

UNDERSTANDING HOW HIGH MASS STARS FORM IS PUZZLING ENOUGH, DUE TO THEIR VERY SHORT LIVES AND POWERFUL WINDS, SO THAT THE IDENTIFICATION OF SUCH EXTREME CASES AS R136A1 RAISES THE CHALLENGE TO THEORISTS STILL FURTHER. "EITHER THEY WERE BORN SO BIG OR SMALLER STARS MERGED TOGETHER TO PRODUCE THEM," EXPLAINS CROWTHER.

STARS BETWEEN ABOUT 8 AND 150 SOLAR MASSES EXPLODE AT THE END OF THEIR SHORT LIVES AS SUPERNOVAE, LEAVING BEHIND EXOTIC REMNANTS, EITHER NEUTRON STARS OR BLACK HOLES. HAVING NOW ESTABLISHED THE EXISTENCE OF STARS WEIGHING BETWEEN 150 AND 300 SOLAR MASSES, THE ASTRONOMERS' FINDINGS RAISE THE PROSPECT OF THE EXISTENCE OF EXCEPTIONALLY BRIGHT, "PAIR INSTABILITY SUPERNOVAE" THAT COMPLETELY BLOW THEMSELVES APART, FAILING TO LEAVE BEHIND ANY REMNANT AND DISPERSING UP TO TEN SOLAR MASSES OF IRON INTO THEIR SURROUNDINGS. A FEW CANDIDATES FOR SUCH EXPLOSIONS HAVE ALREADY BEEN PROPOSED IN RECENT YEARS.

NOT ONLY IS R136A1 THE MOST MASSIVE STAR EVER FOUND, BUT IT ALSO HAS THE HIGHEST LUMINOSITY TOO, CLOSE TO 10 MILLION TIMES GREATER THAN THE SUN. CROWTHER CONCLUDES THAT "OWING TO THE RARITY OF THESE MONSTERS, I THINK IT IS UNLIKELY THAT THIS NEW RECORD WILL BE BROKEN ANY TIME SOON."

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RELIGION

STEPHEN PROTHERO INTERVIEW: THE MANY FORMS OF FAITH

BY NICOLE NEROULIAS

NICOLE: YOU WRITE THAT VIEWING RELIGIONS AS DIFFERENT PATHS TO THE SAME GOD "IS A LOVELY SENTIMENT, BUT IT IS DANGEROUS, DISRESPECTFUL, AND UNTRUE." COULDN'T THE SAME BE SAID OF FOCUSING ON THEIR CONFLICTS?

STEPHEN: IF I HAD THE PERCEPTION THAT EVERYBODY WRITING ABOUT RELIGION WAS JUST WRITING ABOUT DIFFERENCE, DIFFERENCE, DIFFERENCE, THEN I WOULD BE MORE INCLINED TO WRITE ABOUT SIMILARITIES. BUT, I'M REACTING AGAINST A GENERATION OF POPULAR BOOKS THAT HAVE REALLY TRIED TO PUSH THE PENDULUM VERY FAR TOWARD RELIGIOUS SIMILARITIES, AND I'M TRYING TO PUSH IT BACK.

WHAT I'M TRYING TO DO IS GET AWAY FROM TWO KINDS OF EXTREMES: THAT RELIGION IS ALL GOOD AND THAT RELIGION IS ALL BAD. I'M TRYING TO SAY THAT IT'S BOTH.

NICOLE: RELIGIONS ARE CERTAINLY DIFFERENT, BUT AREN'T THEY ALL SERVING THE SAME BASIC PURPOSE: EXPLAINING THE WORLD AND HOW TO ACHIEVE SOME HIGHER STATE OF BEING?

STEPHEN: I DON'T DISAGREE WITH THE DALAI LAMA OR HUSTON SMITH OR KAREN ARMSTRONG ON THE QUESTION OF WHETHER ALL RELIGIONS PREACH COMPASSION. THE REALLY IMPORTANT DISAGREEMENT I HAVE WITH THE NEXT STEP: THAT, THEREFORE, RELIGIONS ARE THE SAME. I DON'T THINK ETHICS IS WHAT RELIGION IS ESSENTIALLY ALL ABOUT. A LOT OF PROTESTANTS THINK THAT RELIGIONS ARE BELIEF SYSTEMS. CONFUCIANISM IS MORE ABOUT ETHICS AND RITUAL, JUDAISM IS MORE ABOUT LAW AND STORY, BUDDHISM IS MORE ABOUT EXPERIENCE.

ALL THESE PEOPLE WANT US TO GET ALONG, THEY'RE SPEAKING ON BEHALF OF PEACE, AND SOME OF THEM ARE WINNING THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE. THEY THINK THE WAY TOWARD PEACE IS TO PRETEND THAT RELIGIONS ARE THE SAME; I DON'T THINK THAT'S THE WAY TOWARDS PEACE. IF YOU LOOK AT OTHER AREAS OF LIFE, LIKE RACE AND ETHNICITY, THAT'S NOT THE WAY TOWARDS PEACE. IT'S ABOUT UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENCES. I'M BAFFLED THAT WE HAVE TO DO THIS PRETEND THING IN RELIGION. YOU CAN HAVE DIFFERENCES WITHOUT CONFLICT.

NICOLE: GIVEN THAT CHRISTIANITY INCLUDES MORMONS, CATHOLICS AND EVANGELICALS, AMONG OTHERS, AREN'T THE DENOMINATIONAL DIFFERENCES ALSO SIGNIFICANT? WHERE DOES IT END?

STEPHEN: THE FACT THAT THE RELIGIONS ARE KIND OF DIVIDED AGAINST THEMSELVES ALSO MAKES THIS BROADER POINT ABOUT RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCE. CATHOLICS ARE NOT THE SAME AS PROTESTANTS ARE NOT THE SAME AS MORMONS, AND THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVISION IS VERY IMPORTANT INSIDE ISLAM. THAT'S WHY IT MAKES EVEN LESS SENSE TO MAKE THIS CLAIM THAT ALL RELIGIONS ARE THE SAME, IF ALL FORMS OF CHRISTIANITY AREN'T EVEN THE SAME.

NICOLE: HOW DO YOU ACCOUNT FOR PEOPLE WHO BLEND RELIGIONS, SUCH AS INTERFAITH FAMILIES OR SOMEONE PRACTICING BOTH BUDDHISM AND JUDAISM?

STEPHEN: ONE WAY IS THAT THEY ARE INCONSISTENT. ANOTHER IS THAT THEY'RE ONLY ACCENTING THE PARTS OF THEIR RELIGIONS THAT WORK TOGETHER. ANOTHER IS THAT THEIR RELIGIONS ARE PUZZLE PIECES THAT CAN FIT - JUDAISM HAS TRADITIONALLY NOT HAD THE KIND OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE EMPHASIS THAT BUDDHISM HAS, AND BUDDHISM DOESN'T AFFIRM A GOD, SO IT DOESN'T BUMP UP AGAINST THE "NO GRAVEN IMAGE" PROBLEM. THEY'RE VERY DIFFERENT RELIGIONS, BUT THEY'RE NOT MAKING, FOR THE MOST PART, INCOMPATIBLE CLAIMS. YOU CAN BE DAOIST AND BUDDHIST AT THE SAME TIME; A LOT OF CHRISTIANS IN EAST ASIA ARE ALSO CONFUCIAN. THAT'S BECAUSE THOSE RELIGIONS OPERATE LARGELY IN SEPARATE SPHERES.

NICOLE: WHY ARE YOU SO HARD ON ATHEISTS?

STEPHEN: I THINK THEY'RE INTELLECTUALLY DISHONEST, AND I THINK IT'S THE HARDEST RELIGIOUS POSITION TO TAKE UP.

(STEPHEN, 2 COMMENTS:

1) ATHEISM IS NOT A RELIGIOUS POSITION. GET TO A DICTIONARY AND SPEND SOME TIME LEARNING THE TERMS.

2) WHAT IS INTELLECTUALLY DISHONEST ABOUT REJECTING THE EXISTENCE OF AN INVISIBLE GHOST FOR WHOM NO EVIDENCE EXISTS?).

WITH CHRISTIANITY, YOU JUST HAVE TO AFFIRM THAT JESUS IS GOD AND SENT TO THE WORLD TO SAVE THE WORLD.

(STEPHEN: HOW DO YOU AFFIRM SOMETHING FOR WHICH THERE IS NO PROOF. I THINK THAT IS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF INTELLECTUAL DISHONESTY).

WITH ATHEISM, YOU HAVE TO REJECT EVERY SINGLE GOD.

(STEPHEN: SO DO YOU. ATHEISTS ONLY REJECT ONE MORE GOD THAN YOU DO. WELL, ACTUALLY 3 MORE SINCE YOUR GOD IS REALLY 3 GODS IN ONE).

THERE'S A LOT OF GODS OUT THERE. I THINK MANY ATHEISTS ARE NOT ACTUALLY ATHEISTS; THEY'RE JUST PEOPLE WHO'VE REJECTED THE JEWISH OR CHRISTIAN GOD, MORE SPECIFICALLY THE GOD THAT THEIR PARENTS TAUGHT THEM. THEY DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THE HINDU DIVINITIES. HOW CAN YOU REJECT A GOD THAT YOU'VE NEVER EVEN HEARD OF?

(STEPHEN: OKAY, WHY DON'T YOU TELL US HOW YOU REJECTED ALL THE OTHER GODS, INCLUDING THOSE YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF, AND THEN WE'LL TELL YOU HOW WE REJECTED THE VERY SAME ONES YOU REJECTED, BEFORE THROWING YOURS OUT AS WELL).

PERHAPS THEY JUST FEEL COMMITTED TO SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE RATHER THAN MYSTERY?

(STEPHEN: THE FACT THAT YOU CAN ASK THAT QUESTION AND NOT SEE THE RIDICULOUS NATURE OF YOUR IGNORANCE IS STAGGERING).

THEN I HOPE THEY NEVER READ A NOVEL, SINCE MYSTERY LIES AT THE HEART OF SO MANY NOVELS!

(STEPHEN: ATHEISTS READ AND ENJOY NOVELS AS MUCH AS YOU DO. THE DIFFENCE IS - WE CAN SEPARATE REALITY FROM FANTASY - YOU OBVIOUSLY HAVE GREAT DIFFICULTY MAKING THAT DISTINCTION).

BUT, EVEN REJECTING THE SUPERNATURAL, NOT ALL RELIGIONS HAVE GODS, NOT ALL RELIGIONS NECESSARILY HAVE THE SUPERNATURAL. CONFUCIANISM AND BUDDHISM MIGHT BE THE RELIGION FOR THEM.

(STEPHEN: WHY DO YOU THINK WE REQUIRE A RELIGION? JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN'T FACE REALITY AND YOUR OWN MORTALITY DOESN'T MEAN THAT OTHERS HAVE THE SAME DEFICIENCY).

NICOLE: COULDN'T YOU ALSO FRAME THIS AS THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BELIEVERS AND NONBELIEVERS, OR BETWEEN FUNDAMENTALIST AND PROGRESSIVES ACROSS THE BOARD, NOT BETWEEN RELIGIONS?

STEPHEN: THERE'S TRUTH TO THAT, BUT I DON'T THINK THAT'S ON A GLOBAL SCALE. IN AMERICAN POLITICS, THE LIBERAL EPISCOPALIAN AND REFORM JEW HAVE MORE IN COMMON [WITH EACH OTHER THAN WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS/JEWS]... BUT THESE RELIGIONS HAVE THEIR OWN NARRATIVES AND THEIR OWN RITUALS, AND THOSE AREN'T SHARED ACROSS THESE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS.

NICOLE: ONE CAN SEE HOW THIS BOOK APPEALS TO BELIEVERS WHO FEEL STRONGLY THAT THEIR RELIGION IS DISTINCT. HOW DOES YOUR CHRISTIANITY AFFECT YOUR VIEWS ON OTHER FAITHS?

STEPHEN: I'M RELIGIOUSLY CONFUSED NOW.

(STEPHEN: YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO TELL US THAT. WHEN YOU WANDERED OFF INTO LALA LAND ABOUT MYSTERY NOVELS IT BECAME CLEAR THAT YOU ARE CONFUSED ABOUT A LOT MORE THAN JUST RELIGION).

I DON'T HAVE ANY REAL ANSWERS TO ANY OF THESE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS.

(STEPHEN: THAT IS THE SAME POSITION THAT WE INTELLECTUALLY DISHONEST ATHEISTS TAKE. ATHEISTS DO NOT CLAIM TO KNOW THE ANSWERS - ONLY RELIGIOUS BELIEVERS DO).

I THINK THE REASON THAT I KEEP STUDYING THEM IS BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE ANSWERS; I THINK IF I HAD ANSWERS, I'D BECOME AN ECONOMIST!

WHEN I GO TO A RELIGIOUS SERVICE, I USUALLY GO TO A QUAKER MEETING WHERE NO ONE SPEAKS, SO NO ONE EVER SAYS ANYTHING THAT I DISAGREE WITH. IT'S A PRETTY GOOD SITUATION.

(STEPHEN: AFTER READING ABOUT WHAT GOES ON IN YOUR MIND, I THINK THAT "NOT SPEAKING" WOULD BE YOUR BEST COURSE OF ACTION).

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FAMOUS QUOTES

ROBERT PIRSIG (BORN 1928) 81 YEARS.

HE IS AN AMERICAN WRITER AND PHILOSOPHER, AND AUTHOR OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL NOVELS:

ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE: AN INQUIRY INTO VALUES (1974)

AND

LILA: AN INQUIRY INTO MORALS (1991).

"YOU ARE NEVER DEDICATED TO SOMETHING YOU HAVE COMPLETE CONFIDENCE IN.

WHEN PEOPLE ARE FANATICALLY DEDICATED TO POLITICAL OR RELIGIOUS FAITHS, OR ANY OTHER KIND OF DOGMAS OR GOALS,

IT’S ALWAYS BECAUSE THESE DOGMAS OR GOALS ARE IN DOUBT."

"WHEN ONE PERSON SUFFERS FROM A DELUSION, IT IS CALLED INSANITY.

WHEN MANY PEOPLE SUFFER FROM A DELUSION IT IS CALLED RELIGION."