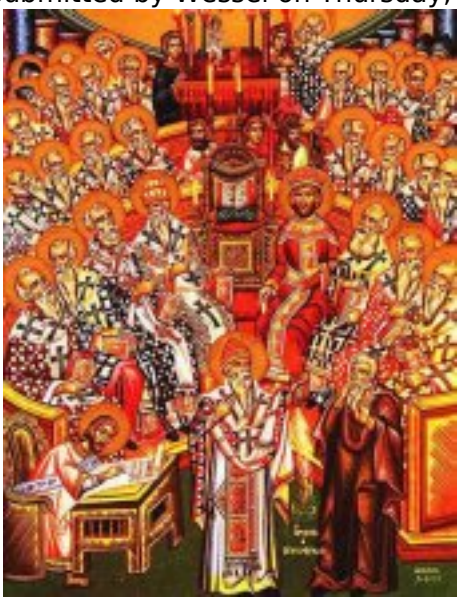
How Religion Does Not Work **[1]**

Submitted by Wessel on Thursday, 17 May 2012 - 09:06



Read time: 10 minutes
I was recently irked by a specific "open-letter" which appeared on one of the popular Afrikaans news websites. It was written by a former student journalist of the unofficial paper of my *alma mater* to a certain church. I am not going to say who or which church, or why they were singled out specifically, as it is quite a long story. All that I am going to say, is that the church was (and still is) very prominent and vocal, and being primarily based in a university town, controversial. In the article, the writer confessed to having "grown up" since his varsity days, having learned new things and admitted to personal faults and past failures. He then went on the lament how this church, about which he had written in a negative light before, had not undergone the same process of growth. He then went on to discuss specific activities and controversies which the church had been involved in, ending off with the expression of the hope that that church can too one day grow and become progressive, tolerant and accepting. Again, I am not going to discuss the specifics, or even my perception of the merits of his complaints. What bothered me about the article (without being affiliated with the church in question or necessarily supporting it in all that it does), was the tone and presuppositions thereof. While the article started out with an air of humility, it read quite arrogantly at the end.

My aim with this article is to address what I see as a false perception which non-religious people have of religion regarding the views and stances which a religion holds on "social" issues. I am going to speak of religion in general, but will mostly use examples from Christianity.

The "rules" of a religion1 are not decided arbitrarily. It may seems arbitrary that, for example, Jews are not allowed to eat pork. But if one digs deeper, one will likely find a reason for that rule which comes out once one understands the *world view* which a religion entails. By "world view" I mean a manner by which someone understands how life, the world and the universe works. For example, the Judeo-Christian belief that "murder is a sin" (that is, it is wrong), may seem obvious and a common-sense thing to believe in, but, at the end of the day, is quite arbitrary. However, if one understands that in Judeo-Christian belief people are made in the image of God, and that God is holy, then one understands that in the Judeo-Christian world view human life sacred, and should be respected and protected. Similarly, the prohibition to eat pork was one that was given to set Jews apart as God's chosen people. All the gentile (non-Jewish) people ate pork, but Jews were to distinguish themselves from those people groups by not eating pork (amongst other things)2. Note also the implication which this has: the sanctity of human life is universal, but the food laws given my Moses to the Israelite people were meant for them specifically. This explains why Christians share the value of human life with Jews, but do not obey the food laws of the Old Testament. A little bit of background

and understanding goes a long way. The first example (the value of human life) comes from the beginning of the book of Genesis where God creates the world. The second example (distinguishing how Jews live amongst the gentiles) comes from the middle of the book of Genesis where God promises to make Abraham a great and chosen nation. But both of these laws were explicitly given in later books Exodus/Deuteronomy and Leviticus, respectively). So to understand what is happening in one book of the Bible, one needs to know the other. The Bible does, contrary to first appearance, tell a coherent story[3] [4].

Of course, to know how specific passages and parts of the Bible fit in with the whole or how it should form part of the Christian world view, it is necessary to do rather in-depth studies of the Bible. Most Christians themselves do not delve into such detail, but their pastors and church leaders should. They then preach what they learn from their studies of the Bible. Accountability comes from their peers, as well as the "lay Christians" who have read their Bibles. But do not expect every Christian whom you meet to be able to give a reason why they hold to certain specific values.

So when a specific issues comes up which a non-religious person thinks the church should change its stance on, they might question why the church is stuck "in the dark ages" with its thinking. They might lament the fact that the church is not progressing like the rest of secular society is. Indeed, when certain churches do make concessions in areas such as, for example, homosexuality, then it is understandable that non-religious people would expect all the other churches to be able to follow suit. But this is not possible, because the issue in questions never stands on its own. Whether it is homosexuality or women pastors or disciplining your children (which are all contentious, contemporary issues), there is *an entire theology* behind it. To change the opinion of the Christian on the issue, you need to either invalidate their core beliefs, or show how their opinion does not follow from their theology. The former is unlikely to happen, which leaves the latter. And to be able to do that, one would need to *understand* the theology. The problem is that many non-religious people think they do, but do not appreciate exactly how much has been said and studied around it over the past two millenia.

The point which I am trying to make is really simple: if you disagree with a religious group on one particular point, then it is *unreasonable* to expect them to change their opinion or belief because you and the rest of the secular world (who have a completely different and incompatible world view from that religion), at least without actually doing the leg work of understanding their position and arguing against it from a theologically informed position. Christian evangelists and apologists know that they cannot prescribe someone from the Bible if that person does not believe in the validity or authority of the Bible. All I am saying is, is that the street goes both ways. Just because you reject the Bible as the Word of God, does not mean that the Christian does.

In conclusion I want to present a video which I think complements what I have been trying to say. The video is not related to the article which I mentioned earlier in any way. It is a response to a video clip which has been causing a stir in America over the past couple of weeks. The original clip can be found here, for context:

Now, I know that there will be responses to the below response video. And responses to those responses, and so forth. I am not interested in getting involved in this particular debate at this particular time, and certainly not in this article (which has already become lengthy). Rather I want to point to this video as an example of a response to a non-Christian who made claims about the Bible and Christianity who, while he had some knowledge of the Bible (and would undoubtedly want to see Christians change their stance on homosexuality), did not understand or appreciate the theological depth of what he was attacking. He was pitting his world view against a completely different world view, but really just begging the question by assuming that his world view is correct and the Christian one is false.

I understand that you may have serious objections to what adherents of a certain religion say and believe. But rather than just assuming that the world view of that religion is incorrect, please rather take the time and engage with them in discussion. I have already said that Christians many times are wrong [2]. But they are not always wrong. Christianity has survived for a very long time and many highly intelligent people believe in the Christian faith (without being bigots, as pointed out in the above video). You should perhaps seriously consider why that is.

- 1. I am here including Christianity which, unlike other religions, is not a religion of "works", but rather of "faith". This means that while, for example, a Muslim needs to do specific things in order to get into heaven, a Christian technically needs only faith. But this faith is evidenced by what they do and what they do not do. I am here broadly and informally referring to these "dos" and "do nots".
- 2. I do not know why specific animals are prohibited and others not—many people believe that the distinctions between specific animals are arbitrary, but that the specifics are irrelevant because the main point (that is, to distinguish the Jews from all other people groups) was being achieved.
- 3. Not wanting to harp on about this now, I just want to mention that much more can be said about the examples given here. For example, with the pork issue (which is part of a larger one about clean and unclean food), one can also look *forward* in the Bible. The thread on this issue continues throughout the Bible. See, for example, Ezekiel 4:9–13, Mark 7:1–23, Acts 10, Acts 15, etc. (*and the respective contexts of these passages*).
- 4. It is also important to mention that God, being sovereign over all things, *can* decree something without giving an explanation for it. This type of decree would then truly seem arbitrary to humans. In Islam, Allah is unknowable, and speculating about *why* he did something is foolish; perhaps even blasphemous. But in Christianity, God is personable and has made Himself known in the person of Jesus Christ. God does not act arbitrarily or incoherently, but as part of His divine *nature* works in a directed and structured way to fulfil His great plan for humanity. As the old saying goes, "everything happens for a reason".

Categories:

- In the Media [3]

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