BELIEF AND EVIDENCE, AND HOW IT MAY AID REFLECTION CONCERNING CHARLIE HEBDO

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Starting from support for James's critique of Clifford's dictum, the article argues for holding beliefs, whether secular or religious, firmly but provisionally, remaining open to fresh experience. This consideration prompts reflection on the debate following the attack on Charlie Hebdo. Alternative beliefs were opposing each other with seemingly equal certainty. The justification for insistence on the right to free speech itself requires scrutiny. The article finishes by noting the baleful effects of the intellectual apartheid which has tended to be practised in the West which presumes that religion and reason have nothing to do with each other.

'It is wrong always, everywhere and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.' Stephen Law's Introduction to the Spring number of *Think* drew attention to three factors which William James considered make an exception to Clifford's celebrated dictum. James argued that there are some choices which cannot be avoided, between options which are 'living, forced and momentous'.

A belief that there are fairies at the bottom of the garden does not meet these criteria. It is not a *live* option – only children fed such ideas in fairy-stories are likely to believe it. It is not a *forced* option because there is no necessity whatever for holding an opinion about the existence or non-existence of such fairies. Nor is the choice *momentous*. It is likely to make not one iota of difference to one's general attitude to life and behaviour except in the unlikely event of its being persisted in into adulthood.

doi:10.1017/S1477175615000457
Think 42, Vol. 15 (Spring 2016)

The belief which Stephen Law cites, that the universe is but 6,000 years old, is also one that does not qualify for James's exception to Clifford's dictum. This is because such a belief is a scientific question for which there is ample evidence that this is not the case. The age of the universe is nearer to 13.8 billion years!

An example that does meet James's criteria is belief in God and its polar opposite, atheism. Both religious and explicitly non-religious convictions regarding this question are *live options.* And the choice is certainly *momentous* – it governs the whole of our attitude to life, what is valued, how we react and act

Perhaps more needs to be said about the second criterion. The choice to accept atheism or belief in some kind of Transcendent Reality with a capital R, which religions mostly term *God*, is in fact a *forced* one. If we don't believe in the latter then, whether we like it or not, we are committed to believing in some form of materialism as explanation for the world, together with other related beliefs such as the absence of any purpose or meaning other than what humans themselves devise, and in the notion that when we die, we die and that's the end of it. For necessarily, if we deny the existence of any Transcendent Reality (God) we are assuming that the world and all that happens in it, including human consciousness, can be ultimately understood in terms of molecules. All the great achievements of human thought, culture, morality and spirituality are the product of human inventiveness and do not relate to any Reality beyond the physical world.

It is interesting that some atheists at the moment are exploring whether this dichotomy between belief in a transcendent reality and atheism is absolute, e.g. Sam Harris's recent book *Waking Up: A Guide To Spirituality Without Religion.* Reviewing the book, Oliver Kamm remains unconvinced. 'We should be content with what we can achieve through human ingenuity, powered by nothing more than the actions of neurons firing within the brain'. *(Times* 17. Jan 2015) This neatly sums up a typical materialist

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175615000457 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conviction about the world, as does the Report written by Jonathan Rowson, Director of the RSA's Social Brain Centre, on *Spirituality: Revitalizing Spirituality To Address 21st Century Challenges*. The focus in the Report is entirely on human exploration of what it means to be human; belief in God or any form of transcendent reality is kept firmly out of the picture.

It is important to note that such materialism involves belief without adequate evidence just as does religious belief. Materialist conviction is often taken to be a neutral one, a kind of default position removed from all the emotional embarrassing baggage which belief in God brings with it. Frequently atheism poses as not a belief at all because all it is doing is denying the validity of another belief. But behind atheism necessarily lies an understanding of the world as ultimately achievable solely through scientific investigation and exercise of human creativity. As such materialism claims to be rational in a way that religion cannot be.

By contrast reason and religion are commonly assumed to be poles apart. Thus Salmon Rushdie can use the phrase 'religion as medieval unreasoning' when commenting on the recent Paris atrocity, and be quoted many times by other commentators. Yet such a statement can be intellectually contested. Scholars of and within all the great world religions know this is not true. Reasons can be given for religious faith as much as for materialist forms of faith. That some may disagree with the soundness of the reasons is precisely the substance of scholarly debate in every sphere. Controversy does not dismiss the possibility of such reasoning being sound.

We might even say that atheism is less rational than religion. The existence of God, if God exists, cannot be arrived at via scientific evidence, because God, if existent, is the creator of the molecular world not an aspect of it to be discovered by scientific means or rational thinking. So lack of such proof for the existence of God is a poor reason for not believing in God, and may reveal only the

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misunderstanding of the searcher for such proof. Evidence can be given, but all depends upon what we consider to constitute evidence. Many have appealed to Clifford's dictum whilst counting as evidence only scientific evidence which is of course arguing in a circle: assuming in the way the argument is set up what it is purporting to conclude.

Both materialist and religious forms of belief are open to rational enquiry and challengeability. This means that the claim to have reached absolute certainty properly-speaking eludes both. Indeed as Bryan Magee argues in 'How can we ever know that we know?' (*THINK,* Spring 2015) not even our scientific knowledge is more than 'fallible and therefore provisional' (45) so that 'a conjectural view of knowledge' (57) must win the day. 'When certainty is exposed for the delusion it is, a permanently agnostic openness to alternative possibilities is the only legitimate approach. It is not an approach that treats all possibilities alike, or as having the same importance, but one that sees all as fallible.' (54)

Because of this Magee wants to see the word *belief* replaced by *conjecture* understood as 'conjectures that are as imaginative and inspired, as well-informed and hard-worked on as we can achieve, getting as close to the truth as we are at the moment able to come.' He associates *belief* with a closed view – conviction which is firm, unwavering and impervious to criticism. 'To be committed to a belief that a conjecture is true is misplaced and likely to misdirect our efforts because it will weaken the critical attitude we need to bring to the conjecture and narrow our openness to alternative possibilities.' (53)

This advice would appear to be fine for armchair philosophizing, but in the real world will it do? When important decisions have to be made, and reactions to events and possibilities required, often immediately, something stronger and more sustaining is needed for the kind of commitment which enables people to live resolutely. Basil Mitchell put it like this: 'The conditions of human life are such that in all matters of importance to us we have to choose between

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alternative schemes of thought which have varying degrees of rational support but which cannot be shown to be true beyond all dispute. In so far as we have to act in the world, choices have to be made, and in so far as our actions have to be consistent, our choices need to be consistent too, that is to say they have to be based on some more or less coherent view of the world. Our choice of such a view of the world determines not only what we do, but also to a large extent who we are.' (*Faith & Criticism*, 37) No neutral position is possible in actual life. In matters of morality, politics, aesthetics, religion, we must either make conscious choices or live as if we had made them.

There is no reason however why such commitment cannot be strong as well as partial and provisional. Perhaps *conviction* is a better term than either *belief* or *conjecture*. Whatever the term used, settled convictions are inescapably part of either accepting or rejecting the notion of the existence of God, and should be held firmly but in a manner open to fresh evidence and experience.

Often the choice between believing in God or believing in a materialistic account of the world is not made consciously but just simply taken over secondhand and never thought about. In a predominantly religious society such beliefs are likely to be religious, but is a secularist society immune to such a phenomenon? Is it not the case that the vast majority of people take their views from those of significant persons in their environment, home, school, peer pressure, the media, etc.? How much actual thinking goes on? Does the education system encourage it?

Often it seems that not only religious but also materialist beliefs are held dogmatically without an on-going spirit of enquiry. The underlying certainty surrounding some materialist beliefs is aided by the fact that people so rarely talk about these beliefs, but only voice what they don't believe. Most religions advertise what they believe all too clearly so that they make obvious targets for criticism and scorn. But the various forms of materialism tend to be amorphous, ill-defined publicly and largely unconsciously held for, if God

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is never mentioned or thought about, the situation is one of practical atheism anyway.

So these forms of materialism can easily hide from public gaze and scrutiny, and can even pretend not to exist as beliefs at all. Reliance on them as absolutely certain and beyond challengeability can become taken for granted. The absolute certainty so often associated with religion – and a major reason for opposing religion – can become attached to these much vaguer but nevertheless real materialist commitments.

Do we not all need to accept the partial and provisional nature of all our beliefs and commitments? In this way, the dogmatism which Clifford's dictum was designed to undermine can be removed without succumbing to a different form of dogmatic claim to absolute certainty.

Comment on the Charlie Hebdo controversy following the atrocity in Paris in January 2015

Appreciating the challengeability as belief of atheism/materialism as well as of religion, enables us to see with clarity what most commentators following the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo seemed not to notice, namely, the firm and unwavering commitment to the French principle of *laicete* with its attendant beliefs, which is never questioned at all. Thus, the anti-religious stance displayed in the cartoons reflects freedom of speech for one set of worldviews but not for others.

In a situation where any allegiance to religion is regarded as odd and to be kept under wraps (like the veil which in France mustn't be worn in public) then what comparable freedom of speech can the 6,000 inhabitants of the *banlieues* in Paris have? They conspicuously lack the money, education, networking skills and expertise realistically to have a voice. Claiming the high moral ground when your opponent can't get a word in edgeways is actually a form of tyranny and not the out-workings of liberty, equality and fraternity!

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175615000457 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The obituary of Cabu, one of the victims of the atrocity, quoted him as saying that cartoons are about exposing stupidity. 'Stupidity is our raw material. Our friend is doubt, our enemy is faith.' (*The Times* January 12th 2015) Yet he didn't apply this maxim to his own certainties. Didn't he realize that he took some things for granted himself i.e. regarding free speech as an obligatory principle together with the non-existence of God and therefore the non-validity of any religion? Should not reasoning be applied also to questioning these convictions?

Moreover, freedom of speech in practice is always subject to the vagaries of the relative eloquence, or lack of it, of different human-beings. Those endowed with a charismatic appeal can command attention ensuring that their views are heard. It is also easy for freedom of speech, by all kinds of subtle means, to be denied to those who challenge what is currently favoured by those in power. An example is the Climate Change issue. Whatever the accuracy or not of the alleged scientific consensus about global warming being caused by carbon emissions for which humans are responsible, the very fact that anyone, scientist or otherwise, who disagrees is pronounced a 'denier' or 'sceptic' and not given space in learned journals or on the media to debate the issue openly draws attention to the enormous difficulties surrounding freedom of speech. It is not a simply-applied slogan.

The West has allowed itself to be seduced by slogans which are damagingly under-determined. Reflection on possible or likely consequences is an essential part of all moral decision-making. To trust a slogan to be applied without more ado, whatever the context, is foolish for the notion that there are perfect slogans which can fit all the complexities of actual life is illusory. Reaction to the refusal by Stephen Pollard, editor of the *Jewish Chronicle,* to print the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons is apposite. 'Get real, folks. A Jewish newspaper like mine that published such cartoons would be at the front of the queue for Islamists to murder.' David Aaronovitch (Times January 8th 2015) criticises such a

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reason for not printing the cartoons, considering that opposition should not be on the grounds of the violence that might be provoked. But why not? Isn't peace and non-violence what any civilized society should be about? It's plain common sense not to provoke a madman like a bull in a bullring. Precisely because the pen is mightier than the sword, free speech which hurts others who lack equal means of responding in like manner is dangerous for civilization.

Indeed, the rationality of the free speech mantra, if actually examined, is far from secure. Alice Thompson has noted that some members of a younger generation can see the limitations and dangers of free speech in a way that many older people appear to be unable. 'The young are right to be sensitive. We don't want to go back to an age when we thought it was funny to ridicule women, gays or ethnic or religious minorities – in the play ground or in the press.' ('We may be Charlie but our children are not.' *The Times* January 14th 2015) Doesn't all depends on the context? Thus to poke fun at the high and mighty, politicians, celebrities and the like, is fine and important for the health of society. But to kick those already in the gutter is not.

There is a further reason why the free speech claimed by Charlie Hebdo needs qualifying The cartoons may fail the truth-principle. Satire should seek to expose lies, not promote them. In their depiction of Soeur Emmannuelle they imply that all Catholic nuns are ridiculous in the manner shown. The cartoon has her reflecting on her life 'Down here I masturbated. In heaven, I will suck cocks.' (*Charlie Hebdo*, January 14th 2015) The vast majority of Catholic nuns are not sex-obsessed, and the notion that Christianity has ever depicted heaven in terms of depraved sex-fulfilment is false. And why poke fun at a notable defender of human rights such as Souer Emmanuelle?

Should we not insist on a right to free speech only if there is also present a sense of responsibility built upon respect for all other people including and especially those with whom we disagree? The *Three Rs* of our education

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175615000457 Published online by Cambridge University Press

systems need immediately supplementing by three much more important *Three Rs* which can enable learning to be properly applied, including attitude towards religion. The *Three Rs* may be summarized as Responsibility, Respect and Realism. Rights without Responsibility are a nonsense. Respect in a democracy must be extended to all and not just some. Realism acknowledges the inappropriateness of trying to apply slogans and legal decisions to highly complex, volatile and sensitive situations in the real world.

It is time that the West grew up. Instead of unthinking celebration of certain historically-charged maxims it should move forward. The problem is that so many of its leading intellectuals still seem to be stuck in a time-warp back in the 18th century when ecclesiastical institutions dominated society often in highly oppressive ways. The irony is that, by not acknowledging that Christianity no longer poses such a threat, the West unthinkingly makes it much more difficult to guard against a much more real threat, that presented by Islamism, Houellebecq's novel *Submission* even envisages the election in France of a Muslim President in 2022.

The importance of ending an intellectual apartheid between secularism and religion

Many commentators have noted that the responsibility for the prevention of radicalization within Islam depends on moderate Muslims doing a better job of educating the young. But the link between radicalization and Islam requires some strong and determined intellectual debate. The *jihardists* may be common criminals but they are enabled, by citing certain texts from the Quran and not others, to draw upon the power of religious fervour to support their criminality. It is this link which moderate Muslims need to break.

The intellectual environment of the West ought to be helping them, not hindering them, in this urgently-needed

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task. Unfortunately, however, an intellectual apartheid has been operating – unintentionally but nevertheless really – which is unhelpful. Assuming that religion and reason have nothing to do with each other has made religious people feel outsiders in the public square and in intellectual debate. The principle of *laicete* has pushed religion largely into just the private arena which has created something of a ghetto-like environment in which reform of religion becomes more difficult. The criticism which especially the young, who can apparently be so easily radicalized, need to hear tends to be absent.

Free and open discussion by all, religious people as well non-religious, is a far safer bet in a democracy. Basil Mitchell critiqued Clifford by citing John Stuart Mill's plea for freedom of speech. 'Mill noted that', in general, truth is better served by having a variety of systems of belief in vigorous competition with one another than by allowing the expression only of what is currently held to be the truth. This policy favours the optimum development of the rival systems by encouraging creativity and ensuring the exposure of each of them to the most determined criticism.' (*Faith and Criticism*, 29)

Yet the complete separation of religion from reason is frequently taken for granted in the West. In an article in the *Times*, 'Who are the true Muslims – all or none?' (November 1st 2014) Matthew Syed argued that no reasons can be given for preferring one form of Islam over another because it's all a matter of prior emotional commitment as to how the Quran is to be interpreted. Yet his argument does not stand up. As I noted in a letter published in the *Times*, two challengeable assumptions lie behind his comment: firstly, that there is no God whose will anyone can or cannot do; secondly, that no reasoning can be given for preferring one view of scripture over another.

The problem with the first assumption is that it cannot be conclusively and rationally proved. It remains the case that God may exist and that God is or is not approving of the actions of those who presume to do his will. Secondly, the

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correct interpretation of scripture has been the source of intense scholarly enquiry within every world religion. Just one example: those Christians who act from hatred are not following the Jesus whom they say they are, for the gospels record that Jesus allowed himself to be killed rather than use violence against his enemies. I finished the letter by requesting that the intellectual debate be opened up instead of closed down.

The immensely difficult task of debating how the Quran should be interpreted is a task which the Muslim community must perform, and especially its intellectual leadership who should be encouraged to do this by being given respect and support by the wider community. The allowable exceptions to Clifford's dictum should not be interpreted as permitting a dilution of reasoned response to beliefs, convictions or conjectures, but as enabling the response to be more effective by being more genuinely open, generous and enquiring. Therefore it is time for the West to extend a more welcoming hand to religion. Democracy has to contain disagreement not try to wipe it out. The fact that large numbers of people in the West disagree with religion in any shape or form is no excuse for trying to keep it out of the public square. Public debate should be encouraged particularly on what is controversial, not stifled or confined to a private sector.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175615000457 Published online by Cambridge University Press