

Chapter 20. Religion and lies: necessarily intertwined.

*Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.*¹ Voltaire

Religion is a lie. One need look no further than the four corners of the scriptures to find contradictions and impossibilities. For example, does the Bible say that god can be seen and heard? Well, yes and no. Here's what the Bible says:

So Jacob called the place Peniel [the face of god], saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."²

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The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.³

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Then the man and his wife [Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" The man said, "The woman you put here with me--she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."⁴

Ignoring the issue of why an omnipotent god could not find the only man and woman on earth, the Bible story has god and man conversing.

Other parts of the Bible say that no man may see god's face:

And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence" . . . "But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live."⁵

Puzzlingly, Jesus, the putative son of god, said that god could be neither heard nor seen. The Bible reports Jesus said, "And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape."⁶

At least one of these statements in the "perfect book" is untrue. An atheist sees these inconsistencies as evidence the book was written by different men at different times, probably never knowing their tales would be assembled into a single book labeled the work of god. A religionist, on the other hand, is left supporting the lie that his holy book is perfect, when the imperfections are obvious.

The Koran has similar contradictions. For example, Muslims are prohibited from drinking alcohol in sura 2:219,⁷ but another part of the “perfect book” says that among the good things Allah provides are, “the palm and the vine, from which you get wine and other healthful nutriment.”⁸ Other translations use the terms “intoxicants,” “strong drink,” and “inebriating liquor,” although some change it to “wholesome drink.”

Returning to the Bible, the story of god stopping the sun in the sky is instructive. The Bible says:

On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: “O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.” So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies . . . The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the LORD listened to a man. Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel!⁹

Making the sun and moon stand still in the sky must have been a great theatrical tool when men thought the sun rotated around the earth. But pictures of the earth from space and flights around the globe have convinced almost all the flat-earth-adherents that the earth is a planet that rotates around the sun. Therefore, to make the sun stand still in the sky, the earth would have needed to stop rotating, causing a loss of gravity and all the soldiers flying off into space! But no, lies are acceptable in the scriptures and the Bible story concludes with Joshua killing every person, young and old, and “all that breathed.”¹⁰

Isaac Asimov said, “Properly read, the Bible is the most potent force for Atheism ever conceived.”¹¹ Although the reasons that people leave religion have not been widely studied, a limited study by Altemeyer and Hunsberger agrees. They said, “If you want a ‘nuclear’ cause of [leaving religion] . . . it originates with this issue: Can you believe in the Bible, and its story of the existence of God?”¹² In a later study of atheists, the same authors reported, “atheists simply could not make themselves believe what most people believe. It was all too flawed, too self-contradictory, too unsupported, too illogical, [the atheists] said. They wanted the Truth.”¹³

A Muslim man related a similar phenomenon about a colleague who insisted that he read the Koran to bring him closer to religion. It had the opposite effect:

He vouched that after I had comprehended the true messages of the Holy Scripture my life would change forever--for the better, he insisted. Reluctantly, I started to read the English translation--verse by verse, passage by passage. The more I read, the more I was shocked, disturbed, astonished, bewildered and resentful. I could not believe that a book which is supposed to be the handiwork of the most compassionate, the most merciful and the most forgiving Allah could contain such a terrible amount of hate, terror, call for murder, war, vengeance and most of all, a blanket plea for the destruction of all those who do not subscribe to the Qur'anic view of the world. . . . The more I learned about the Qur'an the more I became distraught, disturbed and angry--angry, because I felt that I was utterly let down by a killer religion which was imposed on me due to my birth.¹⁴

Religion is a lie. There is no bearded man in the sky. There was no virgin birth. Prayers are not answered. Jesus did not ascend bodily into heaven and Mohammed did not fly away on a winged horse. Thinking back to the Mormons described in Chapter 8, there were no golden plates, Mormons did not descend from an Israeli tribe that migrated to America, dark skin is not a punishment from god, and plural marriage is not a prerequisite to becoming a god yourself.

However, religious leaders repeatedly stand before their congregations and repeat these lies, and congregants repeatedly claim to believe them. Eventually, they build a house of cards composed of lies, so piling on more lies has little consequence.

Mark Twain said, “Faith is believing something you know ain’t true.”¹⁵ A distinction between religionists and atheists is that religionists are more inclined to accept lies and atheists are more inclined to seek the truth. I have been continually amazed that religionists accept as true information that is demonstrably false. An easy example is denying evolution science. Another example is believing untrue justifications for the war in Iraq. American religionists have consistently been the strongest supporters of war in Iraq.

Immediately following 9/11, only 3% of Americans suspected Iraq was behind the attacks. However, after a campaign by the Bush administration, by January 2003, 44% of Americans believed that most or some of the 9/11 attackers were Iraqi and 45% believed that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was personally involved in the attacks.¹⁶ Despite the fact that George W. Bush admitted in 2003, “No, we’ve had no evidence that Saddam Hussein was involved with September the 11th,”¹⁷ religionists made it an issue of faith that Iraq had to be attacked. Support for the war in Iraq has been consistently highest among evangelical and born again Christians.¹⁸ The more religious an American, the more likely that he supports the war. The least supportive group was those with no religion.¹⁹

The same preachers who stand before their congregation and lie from the scriptures adopted a faith-based approach to war. Sarah Palin’s former pastor “has also preached that critics of President Bush will be banished to hell; questioned whether people who voted for Sen. John Kerry in 2004 would be accepted to heaven; charged that the 9/11 terrorist attacks and war in Iraq were part of a war ‘contending for your faith;’ and said that Jesus ‘operated from that position of war mode.’” Palin herself made the war a religious issue, saying, “Pray for our military men and women who are striving to do what is right. Also, for this country, that our leaders, our national leaders, are sending (U.S. soldiers) out on a task that is from God.”²⁰ Palin, a darling of the religious right, has declared that America is a “Christian nation” and that she opposes the separation of church and state.²¹

Sarah Palin was also at the heart of Politifact’s 2009 Lie of the Year, “death panels.”²² As part of the dispute about President Obama’s proposed health care changes, Palin coined the term “death panel” when she wrote on her Facebook page:

As more Americans delve into the disturbing details of the nationalized health care plan that the current administration is rushing through Congress, our collective jaw is dropping, and we’re saying not just no, but hell no! . . . The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama’s ‘death panel’ so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a

subjective judgment of their 'level of productivity in society,' whether they are worthy of health care. Such a system is downright evil.

In truth, the bill proposed reimbursing medical doctors for optional counseling to Medicare recipients about things like advance directives and hospice care.²³ The lie took off and circulated widely in right-wing religious circles. One poll found that only 50% of Americans disbelieved the "death panel" lie, 45% believed it, and 5% were not sure.²⁴ A poll with a larger sample confirmed that 50% of Americans who had heard of death panels disbelieved the lie, but found 30% believed it and 20% were not sure.²⁵ The polls did not inquire about religion, but they did ask about party affiliation. Nearly half of Republicans believed the death panel claims, but only 20% of Democrats did.²⁶ In the end, the lie won. The Senate version of the bill which eventually became law removed the counseling provisions.²⁷

Another popular lie is that President Obama is not a U.S. citizen (he is²⁸). About 77% of the general population thinks Obama is American, but only 42% of Republicans and 47% of Southerners are sure Obama is American.²⁹ More research would be required to correlate belief in these lies directly to religion, but indicators are there. Belief is highest among Southerners and Republicans, both groups with disproportionate numbers of religious adherents.

The issue of truth versus lies extends into the personal realm. Chapter 17 discusses preacher Ted Haggard's fall from power due to patronizing a male prostitute and using illegal drugs. Despite all of this, his wife appeared on television and said he is completely heterosexual.³⁰ Similarly Suzanne Craig, wife of conservative Christian Larry Craig, an Idaho Senator who pled guilty to soliciting a male undercover officer for sex in a Minneapolis airport restroom, stood next to her husband while he told reporters he was not gay and mistakenly pleaded guilty to the charges.³¹

The relationship of lies and religion does not end with sexual scandals. Altemeyer and Hunsberger theorize that while atheists are characterized by low right-wing authoritarianism, religionists are typically high right-wing authoritarianists. Noting that authoritarian followers are more likely to copy their beliefs from others, instead of working things out for themselves, they say:

[T]heir ideas could be more inconsistent, more self-contradictory, because they have not critically examined their beliefs very much. Their thinking may similarly show lots of double standards. They could prove more dogmatic than most people, because they reached their conclusions largely before they considered the evidence; their only refuge in the face of disconfirming facts may be dogmatism. They may also be readier than most people to accept invalid "evidence" that supports them. They may rely more upon social support for maintaining their beliefs, such as associating with people of like mind.³²

Religion is a lie. Evidence shows that atheists and religionists differ in their willingness to accept lies and their willingness to question their leaders. This difference helps to explain why you rarely hear of an atheist riot or suicide bombing, while hardly a day goes by without hearing of a religiously motivated crime. A horrible example of this is motivating sexually frustrated young men to conduct suicide bombings with the promise that the religion that prohibits healthy access to women will

reward them with the service of seventy-two virgins after their destructive death. Superlegal acts authorized by religious lies, described in the next chapter, constitute one of the most dangerous aspects of religion.

When I speak with a religionist who will not accept established facts—be it legislative language, tax impacts or evolution science, I often need to say to myself, “this is a person who believes in virgin birth, dead bodies coming back to life and a bearded man who lives in the sky and answers prayers.” With this in mind, the religionist’s acceptance of lies seems consistent with his overall lifestyle.

Religionists regularly attend services and listen to a professional telling lies. Since religionists are trained to accept lies, it is not surprising that they accept new lies on faith—lies like Iraq attacked the U.S., that a health care bill contains provisions to kill grandma, that Ted Haggard is completely heterosexual and that suicide bombers will be rewarded with seventy-two virgins. Religion, with its creation myth, miracles and far-out stories is simply a package of lies--practiced, repeated and refined over the years. Religion and lies are necessarily intertwined.

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 2. The Bible, Genesis 32:30.
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 4. The Bible, Genesis 3:8-13.
 5. The Bible, Exodus 33:19-20.
 6. The Bible, John 5:37 (King James Version).
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23. The bill provided:

[T]he term 'advance care planning consultation' means a consultation between the individual and a practitioner described in paragraph (2) regarding advance care planning, if, subject to paragraph (3), the individual involved has not had such a consultation within the last 5 years. Such consultation shall include the following:

- (A) An explanation by the practitioner of advance care planning, including key questions and considerations, important steps, and suggested people to talk to.
- (B) An explanation by the practitioner of advance directives, including living wills

and durable powers of attorney, and their uses.

(C) An explanation by the practitioner of the role and responsibilities of a health care proxy.

(D) The provision by the practitioner of a list of national and State-specific resources to assist consumers and their families with advance care planning . . .

(E) An explanation by the practitioner of the continuum of end-of-life services and supports available, including palliative care and hospice, and benefits for such services and supports that are available under this title.

(F)(i) Subject to clause (ii), an explanation of orders regarding life sustaining treatment or similar orders...

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