

Throughout human history, religion and law had a sometimes uneasy relationship. Kings expected their laws and rules to be obeyed, even when they sometimes clashed with the religion of their subjects. In the ancient Greek play Antigone, the king ordered a dead rebel prince unburied, left for the jackals. Antigone, the dead man's sister, secretly buried the body in obedience to her religion, not the king's law. She paid with her life, but the king was definitely in the wrong, as the play makes clear.

The problem arises when law and religion are one. Religious commands can only become law when they are negative. Nobody can force people to obey: "Love thy enemy as you love thyself." But the law can compel people to obey the law mandating torture of those who do not "believe" (the Inquisition) or to lynch women whom they "believe" are witches.

Today's Western Civilization is based on support for law (and reason) over religion (belief). We generally do not attack people's beliefs, even when they are as stupid as "the moon is made of green cheese" or "the moon landing was a fraud shot on a movie lot." Even though we profess belief in freedom of religion, and our Constitution forbids the state from promoting one religion over another, some religious practices are banned: polygamy, human sacrifice, animal sacrifice, murder of disobedient daughters and wives. If parents who disbelieve in modern medicine permit their child to die rather than be treated by a doctor, they go to jail.

Where we still have problems in this conflict between law and belief is the issue of women controlling their own bodies, including not bringing a pregnancy to term. Those with the "belief" that all life is sacred are willing to sacrifice the life of a pregnant woman and show little interest in what happens to both a defective baby and its mother afterwards. Beliefs are only sacrosanct as long as they do not impact others. "My fist stops at your nose" is the principle here. Law, and the greatest good, must prevail in a modern society.

In Hawaii, a long simmering issue is what to do about building one of the world's most advanced telescopes on top of the Big Island mountains. The site is perfect for scanning outer space. We have greatly benefitted from astronomy since the onset of the scientific revolution in the 17th century. At that time, science (the telescope) showed us that what we once believed was not true. We learned that the earth rotates around the sun, not the reverse, a long-held "belief." The "believers" fought with all their power against the new science. Despite this, science prevailed.

Nonetheless, there are pockets of "true believers" who insist that the Bible (their religious book) is the only credible source of knowledge. A ridiculous amusement park in one of our southern states shows dinosaurs and human beings living at the same time, or show Noah's Ark, an ancient myth, loaded with all examples of biological life (how big did that boat have to be?). It is not funny, however, when such believers demand that their myths (Creationism) be taught along with Darwinian science, or even instead of it. Ignorance should not trump science.

In Hawaii, those who "believe" that their gods (the ancient ones) live on those mountains and would be offended by the telescopes, have demonstrated in their thousands to prevent builders from carrying equipment up the mountain. The Hawaiian Supreme Court finally weighed in and sided with the scientists. We don't permit throwing virgins into volcanos any more either, no matter what the "belief" is. In Iran, fanatics want women to cover up, be invisible. Unfortunately, religion and law are contaminated in Iran. Women increasingly disobey the law, an admirable revolt. Religious leaders, hypocrites all use modern medicine when they are sick rather than drink the ink melted from a page of the Koran, which they used to do, and they are developing nukes!

When your belief interferes with other people's lives, the law will, and should, come down on you with both feet.

685 words

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