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What difficulties do you experience when engaging in defending secular humanism? In the light of your studies, what strategies can you adopt to overcome them?

Problem: The problem with challenging people is that it can lead to an argument.

Solution: We dig our heels in when we think our position is wrong or at fault. We don't want to acknowledge that it is wrong or may be wrong for we think our personal standing will be damaged if we give in. We think if we concede we paint ourselves as having harmed the truth and therefore people. We end up no longer defending our position, what we stand for, but our personal integrity. We don't want the others to think we are fools.

The answer is to help people see that they are not their ideas. If they were the ideas would be in their heads all the time. And ideas change but you are no less or more of a person. There is no necessary connection between a person and the ideas they have.

Show yourself as an example of a person who changed their mind and did not lose face or look like a fool.

Saying things like, "I can't understand how you could believe something so ridiculous" is attacking the personal integrity of the other person. It is using the belief to attack the person.

Say instead something like, "I have some problems with the idea of God (or whatever). Maybe you could help me. If suffering is the experience of meaningless existence then does it prove by experience that there is no God?"

Help the person realise that they are confusing, "I want God," with, "I want love and happiness." The two are not the same. When you marry, you marry your wife not the happiness you think she will bring. You could try, "The Bible commands us to long for God. Do you think such longing is good? Is it right to do that to a person as we have enough in life to long for?"

Another thought that helps is to concentrate mostly on why people are not Secular Humanists. Work that out and plan your approach accordingly. Ask why do people fail to make the principle that people matter more than religious rules and Gods their core principle?

Always affirm the personal worth of the other person and never devalue it. Try to show that atheism and humanism are attractive. Better to do that than to worry too much about showing them to be correct. Tell the other person you understand how they feel about the issue and that you would like to think about it with them a different way.

Problem: Defending and explaining humanism is difficult. I live in a society that follows Catholicism as a political and Irish cultural badge with little concern for religion, faith, logic or scripture. I feel that being an apologist for humanism can lead to me being seen as strange.

Having being raised in a Roman Catholic background, the Catholicism I was taught was about magical salvation through rites and ceremonies and it glorified superstition and Roman Catholic culture.

Cultural Catholicism intends to want people to affiliate with the Church but with little concern for having faith and is centred on baptisms and marriage and funerals understood as mere rites with a social purpose. Their scripture says such religion has "a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people".

Cultural Catholics use the religion so that they can label themselves and others Catholic as opposed to Protestants and so on. There is often a disdain for Christian believers among cultural Catholics. Cultural Catholics tend to regard sincere believing Catholics and Born-Again Christians as suffering from a religious mania. Even offering to pray with somebody will meet some resistance and one would get a sarcastic look. In Ireland, the mantra of cultural Catholicism is the strange and paradoxical, "Once Catholic, Always Catholic." It is hard for them to think that Christians are called to follow Christ not religion and that Christianity is a relationship.

Folk Catholicism tends to be very unreasonable and its followers would ignore and resent even papal attempts to raise it up to a better and more dignified level. I have experienced people when asked if they read the Bible who reply, "That's old hat. I prefer to read Our Lady's messages that she is giving in Medjugorje" or "I would rather have the information I get through angel card readings".

I was a Folk Catholic. Instead of faith in God, I had faith in myself that I could manipulate and control God through using certain prayers and praying to saints and using holy things such as holy water. It is quite common for popular Catholicism to be riddled with superstition. Now is not the time to comment on genuine Catholic doctrine which differs from that of folk Catholicism.

Solution: Answers can drive people away from humanism, I have to avoid giving suggestions to people. Questions are better than answers. I frame open questions wherein people can share detailed information. This nudges people to think for themselves and maybe find the answer without feeling threatened. It is honouring others' own power to reason and to let the desire for knowledge develop. Ultimately you never ever give anybody an answer but help them to find it themselves. Thinking you can give somebody an answer instead of them making the answer their own is domineering.

Cultural Catholics when asked why they think Catholicism and Irish Culture go together reply, "That's just the way things are!" I can't get confrontational or impatient with such a reply. I'm confident that they will feel silly saying it.

I then ask, "How important is religious truth and finding it?" This is better than lecturing them that things being just the way they are does not make them right or that it's a pathetic reason to be involved with a religion.

Problem: I fear that during religious discussions people will say "I have a right to my opinion". I perceive that as a stubborn discussion stopper.

Solution: I have successfully forestalled it by using an anecdote that gently helps people see its about stopping further discussion and that saying, "I will think about that" is far better. If that fails I can ask, "I feel that view is important to you. Why is that?" The anecdote can remind them how dangerous it can be if people claim that their views are sacred and so nobody should encourage/invite them to rethink them.

To develop my own confidence and to avoid the risk of being made to feel guilty about being a challenge to their view, it helps if I remind myself that I cannot ever engage with others without challenging some view they have. It is not mocking or disrespecting it but trying to help the person rethink it so that they might correct it. It is respecting them above their opinion.

The final step is helping them realise that if you are entitled to your opinion, the opinion must be based on evidence, open to revision, open to changing your mind should evidence come up that refutes the opinion. Calling something your opinion is to say it is debatable.

It makes me sure that I have, wittingly or unwittingly, made them aware of a weakness in their position. They seem to have been influenced by the modern view "All religions are equally true and it doesn't matter what religion you belong to". Though it pretends to oppose religious truth-claims it is actually a religious truth-claim itself. It is also giving special treatment to religion. If it were not it would simply say. "Whether harmful or not, it does not matter what religion you have if any." I fear knowing the prevalence of the attitude. Opinions and beliefs are truth-claims.

I have tried to apply commonsense to certain issues and "I have a right to my opinion" was the response I got. It usually is intended to stop the conversation. Some people have responded that way when I simply asked them a question in relation to faith. It showed that they were starting to rethink some of their religious positions. That is why I had to be silenced. They act as if they use opinions and beliefs to make themselves feel good in some way. They do not want to hear that their opinions and beliefs are not actually about them but should be open-minded attempts to find the truth. It is good to remind them that a opinion by definition is asking for a challenge early on.

Rapport is matching your feelings and behaviour to others so that they feel they are with an understanding person genuinely interested in them. Finding common ground with lukewarm Catholics is hard. I struggle to remember that humanism is an encounter with reality rather than just a set of beliefs so its wrong to think I can argue somebody into humanism. My role is to be the sign of what is beautiful in human nature and inspire people through that.

Rapport is absolutely necessary in order to make humanism look attractive to those who you are in communication with.

It is important to be careful that if a person suffers some sadness that you don't try to create rapport by telling some story about how you went through something similar. That is really dismissing what they have said. It is better to ask questions that are not invasive which are worded to help them maybe think things through clearer and give them the chance of finding some hope.

An atheist can find common ground with the Christian with the following suggestions,

"Do you want to tell me how you know that?"

"I used to believe (or want to believe) something along that line. Why do you believe that?"

"That makes sense to me. Let us see if it takes everything into account."

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