

PROBLEMS: IRISH CATHOLICISM

I live in a society that follows Catholicism as a political and Irish cultural badge with little concern for religion, faith or scripture. I feel that being a defender and promoter of atheism can lead to me being seen as strange. I don't want to be seen that way and feel it would damage my efforts at challenging Christian teaching.

When I practiced Catholicism, instead of faith in God, I had faith in myself. I thought 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.

Despite being raised in a Roman Catholic background, I did not become atheist until adulthood. The Catholicism I was taught was about magical salvation through rites and ceremonies and it glorified superstition and Roman Catholic culture. As I was raised Catholic, I can make use of my knowledge of the Church as a tool to expose the falsity of the religion.

Now is not the time to comment on genuine Catholic doctrine which differs from that of folk Catholicism. Let us talk about cultural Catholicism.

Cultural Catholicism intends to want people to affiliate with the Church but with little or no concern for having faith and is centred on baptisms and marriage and funerals understood as mere rites with a social purpose. Catholic Scripture says such religion has "a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people".

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.

Cultural Catholics use the religion to so that they can label themselves and others Catholic as opposed to Protestants and so on. There is often a disdain for true 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."

The biggest problem I find when trying to promote atheism is that cultural/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".

Catholics who think the Bible is nonsense are unfamiliar with the Church's own teaching that it is the inspired word of God. I ask, "Why do you think the Bible is irrelevant nonsense?" A relevant quote from a pope helps greatly. This can help consolidate their unbelief.

Religious superstition is a barrier to true human maturity.

Rapport is matching yourself in feelings and behaviour to the others so that they feel they are with a trustworthy person who understands them and has a genuine interest in them.

Rapport is absolutely necessary in order to make Christianity look attractive to those who you are in communication with. One should try and help them see that the rapport is a gift God has developed in you. There can be no conversion to Christ if others do not see him in those who share the gospel.

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.

The most important fact we will ever encounter is that nobody can damage us emotionally or psychologically unless we let them. Its the letting that does the harm not them. That truth is very liberating. But if there is a God, it follows that as he makes us and is closer to us than we are to ourselves, he does have the power to damage us emotionally or psychologically. The Christian believes God will not do that. But if he is forced to hurt us for a greater good or somebody else's benefit then what then? Belief in God leads to the fear that he will damage us. And even if we believed he wouldn't, its only a belief.

There has to be part of us that doubts.

Those who say that religion is not the cause of wars redefine religion as good. But all religion cannot be equally good so their meaning is usually, "My religion is the one that is good". Why don't they use the word goodness instead of religion then? But even if religion is not the cause of war cultural religion certainly is. A Catholic culture and the Catholic Church are related. It is as if they combine into a new religious entity that does not realise that it is acting like Catholicism but is not fully representative of Catholicism. Thus if you could prove the Catholic faith was innocent of violence it would not follow that the symbiosis of Catholic Church and Catholic culture is innocent. Cultural religion is a wider concept than a religious system.

People need saving from religion.

I have to avoid giving suggestions to people in the Church with a view to saving them from their faith. As Newman puts it "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.

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.

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

Often all you have to do is mention something related to faith or atheism and you will get that response. It certainly is an attempt to silence you and accuse you of disrespecting the opinion if you press the matter further. It's better to hear, "I will think about that." They can then change the subject if they want.

I need to forestall it. An anecdote that gently helps people see that it is about stopping further discussion is ideal. The goal is to help them see 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 be one that will also remind them of 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.

When people retort, "I have a right to my opinion" especially a religious one 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." It is fearsome how prevalent the notion that all religions are the same is. It is down to lazy thinking and not caring what damage bad religion does.

Opinions and beliefs are truth-claims though admittedly weak ones. Thus to state an opinion is to ask for it to be challenged if it is wrong. I have tried to apply commonsense to certain issues and "I have a right to my opinion" was the response I got. 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 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.

The Bible says at Proverbs 18:2, "Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions."

Finally the Bible says in Proverbs 15:1 "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." "I have a right to my opinion" when used to stop listening will rouse up anger.

James 2:19 says "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." It's point is that

religious opinion in itself is worthless. It wants faith to touch the heart and change the person. Thus the test of real faith is how it reacts to truth.

In page 128, Bridge-Building, "Do not present Christianity as being right ... present Christianity as being attractive." In my case it should be, ", "Do not present humanism as being right ... present humanism as being attractive."

Books

McGrath, A. Bridge-Building (Inter-Varsity Press, 1954)

Newman, R. Questioning Evangelism (Kregel Publications, 2007)

Reid, A. Apologetics (Moore Theological College, 1996)