

Does organized religion stifle free thought?

Religion is in one sense a very personal concept, being a believer's way of life in relation to divine or supernatural powers. Over time, however, the most practiced faiths have developed into highly organized and uniform belief systems. Religious leaders, such as priests and mullahs, teach their followers how to interpret the holy books and scriptures, and thus how to live their lives in a pious way. Because these writings are hundreds or thousands of years old, some readers find their statements outdated: "thou shall not covet thy neighbor's ox" may not seem relevant today, for example. Yet their messages do evolve and progressive changes reflect modern life, such as female and gay vicars. But are new ideas typical in organized religions, or do such belief systems confine believers to a limited way of thinking?

Central to any religion is the principle of faith, where a believer accepts the existence of divinity without proof or question. This faith also applies to the word of God recorded in the Holy Scriptures. Moslems, for example, regard the Koran as God's actual words revealed to Mohammed in the 7th century A.D. while Christians believe that God inspired the Bible through revelations to prophets. These Holy Scriptures describe how to undertake religious worship and give a basic, uniform system of beliefs and opinions. However, their interpretations do vary. Progressive orders such as the Anglican clergy often portray biblical stories as being allegorical, such as "coveting oxen" for desiring possessions, with these metaphors being framed in present day terms. At the other extreme, fundamentalist Christians, such as some protestant Evangelists, regard the Bible's word as true and infallible.

Many liberals argue that a literal interpretation of holy writings can lead to thinking that is negative or backwards, which can stifle free thought. They say that some scripture passages are sexist, racist, or homophobic, notably: "Woman is more guilty than man because she was seduced by Satan" (Genesis 3:16). Other Islamic and Christian texts contradict established scientific theories—the most well known being that the genesis story of God creating Adam and Eve is at odds with Darwin's theory of humans evolving from apes. Similar contradictions between science and religion led in the 17th and 18th centuries to the philosophical movement of enlightenment that tried to understand the world by reason without recourse to religious belief.

Yet there is a growing opinion among many younger religious people that it is possible to be religious and freethinking. Christian pop groups such as Boyz II Men release hugely popular singles like *End of the World*. A belief in God has also inspired painters, poets, and musicians to create great works of art, from Salvador Dali's *The Sacrament of the Last Supper* to Handel's *Messiah*. In the past religious civilizations have produced great scientific and mathematical works. One thousand years ago, for example, Islamic scholars founded algebra and modern surgery, and even introduced the number zero to the Western world.

But critics of organized religion say that it hampers progress and impedes its believer's imaginations. A rise in Christian fundamentalism across 1920s rural America led to several southern and border states passing laws to forbid the teaching of evolution in public schools. Moreover, the leaders of organized religion sometimes use their beliefs as an excuse to condemn anything that challenges the status quo. In the 16th century, for example, the Italian scientist Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) was placed under house arrest by the Roman Catholic Church for

theorizing that the Earth orbits the Sun. More recently, the Ayatollah Khomeini considered the book *The Satanic Verses* an attack on Islam and placed a fatwa, or death sentence, on author Salman Rushdie (1947-).

On the other hand, there is a long list of religious leaders who have inspired people to create social change. Many historians regard Jesus as a revolutionary who criticized the oppressive state and legal system of the time. In the 20th century the Clergyman Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) led the movement for the civil rights of black Americans and Bishop Desmond Tutu (1931-) campaigned against racial segregation in South Africa. Most religious organizations also strive to help those in need and change society for the better, from the Church's historical fight against leprosy to the obligation of every Moslem to give some of their income to charity.

The following two articles give opposing views on whether religion stifles free thought. The first article is an essay by J. Eric Harrington for exchristian.net, an online forum for encouraging ex-Christians. His opinion is that religion stops a thinking mind, which is caused by the concept of irrational faith. The second article is an interview with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a leading critic of racial segregation, or apartheid, in South Africa. He talks about his life and religion, discussing his fight against the rigid thinking of apartheid and how each of us has the ability to change the world.

Summary

The writers of the two articles have completely different views on free thought in religion, relating to their experiences of the good or harm that religious belief can do.

J. Eric Harrington, the author of the "yes" article, believes that "religion stops a thinking mind", an atheist quote from his bumper sticker. He says that religious people often appear rational when discussing everyday matters, science, or religions other than their own. Yet when questioned about their religious beliefs their thinking simply shuts down. Harrington blames this shutdown on "faith", a mindset that enables religious conviction with no evidence or contradictory facts. In his opinion this mindset is harmful to believers and is useful only to religious leaders in "controlling their sheep."

An interview with Archbishop Desmond Tutu about his opinions and beliefs comprises the "no" article. He talks about his fight against authoritarianism and intolerance, and how people should be taught to think and ask awkward questions. Tutu says that God has given us the wonderful gift of making choices and with that freedom comes the consequences of our actions. Thus although there is suffering, humans also do many beautiful things to justify this freedom. He concludes by saying that anyone can make a difference by doing good and standing up for what they think is right.

Key Points

Stasis: Is the stasis of organized religion the main reason why so many people are attracted to cults and other minority religions?

Yes: Cults members see the main organized religions as being outdated and not filling their spiritual needs.

No: Today's cults are popular because society is more tolerant and their messages are more widely spread across the Internet and in the media.

Allegory: Is it closed-minded to view religious scriptures as factual rather than allegorical?

Yes: Many of the tales contravene accepted scientific evidence.

No: They are the words of God and so must be true.

World-view: Do the views encouraged by organized religion lag behind changes in society?

Yes: Many religious texts, which form the basis of religious teaching, are sexist, racist, or homophobic.

No: Christian leaders have been female, of all races, and openly gay.

Imagination: Does organized religion impede imagination and creativity?

Yes: Many scientists view religious faith as incompatible with a logical, rigorous, and scientific mindset based on the principle of evidence.

No: God has inspired artists and musicians from Salvador Dali to George Frideric Handel.

Conservatism: Do the leaders of organized religions try to maintain the status quo?

Yes: Religious leaders often try to resist new ideas, from the imprisonment of Galileo to the fatwa against Salman Rushdie.

No: Some religious leaders have been instrumental in changing society for the better, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Bishop Desmond Tutu.