

When Saints Become Sinners

Any ideology, not simply religion, can cause good people to do bad things



Bruce Wildish is a Canadian writer. He has published articles on the relationship between science, skepticism, humanism and religion in Skeptic and Free Inquiry.

Abstract:

Secularists often accuse religion of corrupting the morality of good people. While there is certainly historical evidence for this position, a famous experiment suggests that science is also culpable in this respect.

Physicist Steven Weinberg has said: "With or without religion good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil - that takes religion."¹

A casual survey of their literature will show that many humanists, skeptics and freethinkers are of the same view. And it's not hard to see why. Under religion's tutelage society has been subjected to slavery, witch hunts, inquisitions, wars, crusades, jihads, ethnic cleansings, terrorism, hate crimes, bigotry, discrimination and all shades and forms of political extremism. Countless millions have been persecuted or killed as a consequence. And in the wake of the terrorist attacks of Sep-

tember 11, 2001 the relationship between religion and the doing of evil has become of particular significance to Americans, forcing even believers to confront and struggle with its implications. Unless one is prepared to adopt the absurd view that the countless individuals responsible for all such religiously-motivated atrocities were and are evil by nature and have simply exploited religion as a means to realize their perverse desires, one is forced to confront the fact that there is something about religion that can drive normal people to do evil.

But Weinberg claims more than this. His statement indicts religion as being uniquely capable of perverting the moral character of otherwise decent people and thereby makes it responsible for many of history's most notorious evils. His statement, as phrased, implies that no other social institution or agency has within itself the mechanisms or facilities for encouraging or manipulating the average person with good

character and intentions into committing an act of wilful evil. While not losing sight of religion's obvious and rather notorious culpability in this regard, the basic falsity of Weinberg's claim is not hard to demonstrate. More significantly, the evidence against his claim carries very special implications for humanists, skeptics and others who value the importance of science for the betterment of human society.

The Milgram experiment

In the early 1960s psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted a series of experiments to study the relationship between obedience to authority and personal conscience, the goal being to provide some sort of explanation for the frequency with which many people throughout history have acted contrary to their consciences and popular morality when pressured to do so by others. The experiment, which has since become a classic in its field, was conducted as follows:

A number of volunteers, a mix of male and female, were brought into a laboratory to participate in what they were told was a scientific study of memory and the effect of negative reinforcement: did the fear of pain improve one's capacity for accurate recall? Their responsibility, as teachers, was to read a series of word pairs to another volunteer, called the learner, and then test the latter's memory by repeating one of the words in each pair and asking for the matching word. In the event of a mistake, they were to administer an electric shock to the learner, increasing the level of the shock with each mistake made. These shocks were transmitted through a control panel containing a series of levers and switches labelled 15 to 450 volts and having warning labels ranging from "slight shock" at one extreme to "Danger: Severe shock" and simply "XXX" at the other. The teacher and the learner were separated from one another by a partition or wall and communicated through an intercom.

Those familiar with this experiment will recall at once that the

so-called learner in each case was not a volunteer at all but merely an actor whose job it was to deliberately make errors when providing responses to the teacher's questions and to feign pain and alarm as the teachers administered the required shocks. The true purpose here was to observe the behaviour of the teachers under these conditions: how many of them would keep administering shocks against the protests and pleas of the learners, solely at the insistence of the scientists in charge of the experiment? How far up the shock scale were they prepared to go?

The results were alarming². Sixty-five percent of all of the teacher volunteers obeyed orders to punish the learner to the end of the 450 volt scale, even when the learner pleaded for the experiment to end and feigned great physical suffering and even unconsciousness, and none of the volunteers stopped before reaching the 300 volt level. To be sure, many of the teachers protested their situation and showed visible signs of stress at being ordered to keep administering the shocks, yet they did so all the same, solely because the scientists involved impressed upon them the necessity of honouring the demands of the experiment.

Humanists and skeptics should keep the results of this fascinating and important experiment in mind when rushing to condemn religion alone for its power to manipulate and coerce normal people into acting contrary to their conscience and doing acts of evil. The volunteers in this experiment, average people all, willingly inflicted what they believed to be harm and pain on other human beings solely because they were told to do so by someone who they perceived as having the authority to demand this of them – someone whose authority derived not from religion, church or scripture, but from the power and prestige of science. And they did this not in the service of something as profound as the cause of righteousness or the fulfilment of the will of God, but

merely to further the expansion of our knowledge about human behaviour. That so many average people were willing, even reluctantly, to inflict harm and suffering on others for the cause of science is evidence that science too has within it the very same means as religion for motivating good people to do evil.

Perversion of authority

Milgram demonstrated that most human beings have a very strong tendency for allowing others in authority to control and influence their own behaviour, especially when such authorities are able to create the impression that they are acting in the service of larger goals and interests. It is a tendency so deeply embedded in the human psyche that it often overrides the force of our own beliefs and consciences, making it possible for us to act in manner that is in complete contradiction to our normal perceptions of right and wrong. In the end it matters little what form that authority takes: any social institution or agency that commands the respect of the public by creating the impression that its aims are ultimately noble and in the best interests of the public – religious, philosophical, political or scientific – carries within it the power and potential to motivate and manipulate people to act in any manner it deems necessary. And when such institutions come under the control or influence of a relatively small numbers of individuals with a common vision or objective, the circumstances have arisen by which a minority can control the behaviour of the majority.

That religion has demonstrated this point in so appalling a fashion can be explained by the fact that for so much of its history it has not been an exercise of personal piety but has instead been rigidly institutionalised and mired in rigid tradition. The Christian religion provides a perfect example. Though it seems, like many religious movements, to have begun as an effort on the part of a small circle of people to promote personal piety and righteous behaviour on the part of individuals for a particular

When Saints become Sinners

end³, it quickly adopted the trappings of a formal organisation and later degenerated into a rigidly bureaucratic, tightly hierarchical oligarchy centred on an authoritative body of sacred texts and traditions. Independent thinking was discouraged and the right of dissent all but eliminated. It is in religions free of such controlling dogmas and personalities, where the emphasis is on the betterment of the individual and society rather than on the slavish following of rules and the submission of the will of the individual, that one can see proof that the religious impulse need not be expressed in a manner that is socially detrimental⁴.

More relevant insofar as falsifying Weinberg's claims is concerned is the fact that the worst atrocities and moral offences of modern times, catastrophes which very obviously involved the conscription of the consciences and wills of a great many otherwise decent "average" people, were not religiously motivated, but were instead the product of secular political and philosophical ideologies. The innumerable horrors inflicted upon the people of Russia and its environs by the Bolsheviks and their Communist offspring, and the unspeakable atrocities committed by the Nazis are two of the most striking examples. In each case the ability of small cabals of individuals to create powerful authoritative institutions and political structures for the manipulation and control of others by promoting the idea that they were acting in the service of a noble, higher end and were furthering the interests of those who they wished to control, provided the means by which their perverse goals could be realised.

Ideology and belief

In his book on this complex and difficult subject⁵, philosopher Jonathan Glover identifies what he calls the two critical "moral resources" necessary to prevent the conscription of the masses into acts of barbarism. The first is a strong moral identity: one must have a clear definition of oneself as a moral being committed

to not mistreating or harming others in the furtherance of any ideology. The second is an awareness of the importance of certain "humanistic" responses that should guide one's approach to the treatment of others in all contexts, ie responses whose merit and benefits address common human needs and reflect pan-human experiences: sympathy, empathy and respect. Evil flourishes and succeeds when these human responses fail and when the moral identity of individuals is subverted. In the case of religion, as with politics and philosophy – and even science for that matter – the road to barbarism begins when people are manipulated into deriving their moral identity from a specific ideology and when they allow themselves to be governed by belief rather than by knowledge derived through reasoning and facts. Ideology and belief together forge a terrible power that effectively subverts careful moral thinking and allows individuals to disregard or even disengage their normal human responses.

Skeptics and humanists must not lose sight of the fact that science has within itself the very same capacity and power as religion to accomplish this result. While most of its advocates and practitioners regard science more as a process or system for the study of the world and not an end in its own right, it is also a human institution and is thus possessed of the same hierarchies, authoritative structures, power politics and ideologies as any other human institution. And like religion it has its share of disreputable adherents and practitioners, some of whom – a minority, fortunately – are quite capable and willing to encourage or do harm in the service of what they regard as the larger cause of science.

These facts are complicated by another: technology. Science has at its disposal a number of very powerful tools and resources for the furtherance of its ends. It is not hard to conceive of ways in which some of these could be used by scientists themselves to do great harm – developments in genetics being one obvi-

ous example. It is therefore critical that the champions and promoters of science not ignore the lesson of the Milgram experiment, lest they risk falling into the same trap that religion so often has, that of wilfully abrogating the minds and wills of people in the service of their own goals and beliefs. Science's single best protection against this pitfall is to recognise its capacity in this respect and with that in mind to be vigilant in ensuring that the work of science is always coupled with the core principles of humanism.

Notes

1. Weinberg, Steven. 2001. A Designer's Universe? *Skeptical Inquirer* Vol.25, No. 5: 64-68.
2. Milgram, Stanley. 1983. *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: Harper/Collins.
3. In the case of Christianity, Jesus sought to promote a particular vision of Judaism in order to create the conditions by which the Kingdom of God might be realised, the Kingdom being a new world order in which he and his followers would rule in justice over the rest of mankind from a restored Jerusalem.
4. If anything positive can be said about New Age and nature-based spiritualities, it is that they succeed where traditional religion fails in fostering among their followers a religiosity that is personal and experiential as opposed to one that is grounded in the authority and dogmas of institutions and their scriptures. Among the larger religions Confucianism deserves mention as one that is more concerned with individual piety and ethics than dogmas.
5. Glover, Jonathan. 2000. *Humanity, A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

