

THE GOSPEL OF WEAK BELIEF

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have faith (John 20:29)

The true believing Christian must first of all be a skeptic.
--David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

The connection between strong belief and religiously motivated violence can be well documented, and the early results of my research on the origins of religious violence can be found at this [link](#).

Jerry Falwell is one of my favorite preachers of strong belief. He once declared that God does not answer the prayers of Jews. Not only is Falwell claiming to know God's mind, but he is also undermining divine freedom. Surely God can answer any prayer She chooses to.

Others of Falwell's ilk appear to make God a real weakling. I love the cartoon in which former Sen. Jesse Helms, after trying so hard to get prayer in the schools, asks the Lord how Christian values can possibly survive. God's answer is simple: "Don't worry, Jesse, I can take care of it."

Conservative Christians condemn secular humanism because they believe they substitute their laws with for God's and generally taking over divine prerogatives. I've called this "[Spiritual Titanism](#)" and I believe that preachers who speak for God and tell us what God wants us to do make great little Titans.

With his concept of "weak belief" Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne has offered an attractive way of responding to the "strong belief" of fundamentalism. In *Faith and Reason* Swinburne states: "For the pursuit of the religious way a [person] needs to seek certain goals with certain weak beliefs." For Swinburne all that a good Christian needs is a "weak" belief that Christianity is *probably* true and other religions are *probably* false.

In the context of a comprehensive "world theology," I prefer to revise Swinburne's proposal along more universal lines: some sort of divine being probably exists and that all religions at their best are in tune with the divine. Or, if we are serious about being all inclusive, the following might be the most diplomatic: none of us know whether a divine being exists or not, so all religious belief *and* unbelief must be tolerated.

One might interpret the strong belief of fundamentalism as a new form of gnosticism (from the Greek *gnosis*=knowledge), although contemporary fundamentalists do not share the esoterism of the ancient Gnostics. The Gospel of Weak Belief could be seen as a form of agnosticism, or more accurately, as a reaffirmation of fideism, putting faith before knowledge claims.

Ancient Gnosticism has a continuing presence in India, where the *jnana yoga* of the Upanishads is still very much alive. Although the texts and general teachings are open to all, the tradition of being initiated secretly by a guru is still very strong. In his works Aurobindo uses the term gnosticism, and his belief that we can become supermen with perfect knowledge appears to be a rather [Titanistic](#) epistemology. In the following passage from Aurobindo's spiritual companion "The Mother," strong belief does not get any stronger: "What is remarkable is that once we have had the experience of a single contact with the Divine, a true, spontaneous and sincere experience, at that moment, in that experience, we shall know everything, and even more" (*Collected Works of the Mother*, vol. 10, p. 34). If this is mystical knowledge of undifferentiated unity, then the claim is not as egregious as it looks on its face.

If there is a Gospel of Weak Belief, who are its prophets? I submit that the Buddha, Confucius, Laozi, Mahavira, Gandhi, and Jesus are the Saints of Weak Belief.

The Buddha was frequently asked questions such as the following: (1) Is the world eternal or not eternal? (2) Is the soul the same as the body or different from the body? (3) Is there life after death or no life after death? The secret of the Buddha's famous Middle Way is to ascertain the difference between desires that can be fulfilled (they do not bring new karma) and cravings, those that will lead to karmic debt. One of the most subtle and deep-seated desires is a "craving for views," typically expressed in metaphysical queries such as the ones above.

The Buddha called such problems "questions that do not tend to edification," and he usually answered with what I call "neither/nor" dialectic: (1) The world is *neither* eternal *nor* not eternal; (2) the soul is *neither* the same as the body *nor* different from the body; and (3) there is *neither* life after death *nor* no life after death. This dialectical technique was perfected by the great Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna, but its effect was just as powerful in the Buddha's original words. "Neither/nor dialectic" essentially destroys "craving for views" by negating it into oblivion. For more on dialectic see this [link](#).

Sometimes the Buddha would just sit in silence as a signal that the questions were inappropriate. When pressed for an explanation, the Buddha answered that these questions are "not calculated to profit, [they are] not concerned with the Dharma, [they do] not redound even to the elements of right conduct, nor to detachment, nor to purification from lusts, nor to quietude, nor to tranquilization of heart, nor to real knowledge, nor to the insight of the higher stages of the Path, nor to Nirvana" (*Questions That Tend Not to Edification*).

When Confucius was asked about the existence of spirits and divine retribution, he, too, answered as the Buddha did: we cannot know about such things so develop your virtues and treat others as you would have them treat you. The Daoist Laozi, Confucius' elder contemporary, thought Confucius was arrogant, claiming far too much knowledge. Legend has it that Laozi said this to Confucius: "Rid yourself of your arrogance and your lustfulness, your ingratiating manners and your excessive ambition.

These are all detrimental to your person" (quoted in D. C., *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, p. 8).

Laozi was also a master of dialectical thinking, especially what might be called the dialectic of reversal: for example, power when exercised to an extreme becomes impotence; whereas weakness and softness (such as water slowly eroding the elements) is real strength. As the *Daodejing* states: "Time will show that the humblest will attain supremacy, the dishonored will be justified, . . . those content with little will be rewarded with much, and those grasping much will fall into confusion" (chap. 22).

Mahavira, an elder contemporary of the Buddha, promoted the doctrine of "many-sidedness," and his followers, called the Jains, explained this view with the parable of the Five Blind Men and the Elephant. Each man had a hold of one part of the elephant, so to one reality was tail-like, to another it was trunk-like, and to another reality was like one gigantic ear. Each man had a different, but equally valid perspective on the same reality. The Jains use this story as a lesson for universal tolerance of all beliefs.

Gandhi was profoundly influenced by Jainism as can be seen in this confession: "Formerly I used to resent the ignorance of my opponents. Today I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see me and vice versa" (*Young India* 1/21/26, p. 30). One would think that weak belief leads to impotence, but the power of Gandhi's agnosticism and active nonviolence undermined British rule in India. Therefore, weak belief definitely does not mean weak conviction or passivity.

Jesus' commitment to weak belief is found primarily in his parables. Parabolic language is the perfect medium for the Jain doctrine of many-sidedness. Parables are open-ended and offer many levels of meaning, and they preserve the freedom of the respondent.

Jesus and the Buddhist Zen monks were more radical than the Buddha: the point of a parable or a *koan* is not an ethical one, but a provocation for people to transform their lives spiritually. The early church made the parables into allegories (for example, Jesus *is* the sower) and turned rich, polyvalent discourse into the univocal dogma of strong belief. Even today Christian ministers too often interpret the parables in a conventional ethical way that obscures their transforming power.

In his support for the dispossessed Jesus loved the dialectic of reversal just as much as Laozi did. "So the last will be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16); "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk. 18:15).

There is another less noticed, but equally powerful reversal in Jesus' rebuke of Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have faith" (Jn. 20:29). Jesus' point, I believe, is clear: Thomas was wrong to demand the evidence of strong belief. In this verse Jesus is condemning the first Christian fundamentalist and essentially saying "Blessed are those of weak belief."

Paradoxically, the partner of strong belief is weak faith, and God's rebuke of Jesse Helms is a good example of strong belief but weak faith in what God is able to do. The Scottish philosopher David Hume is usually portrayed as an enemy of Christianity, but I believe he was correct when he said that "the true believing Christian must first of all be a skeptic."