

# Cologne Letters

November 2013

1

## An old man's musings on Christian perspectives



For a decade or so, I have been writing in Slovak about various topics, more or less related to my Christian worldview (Roman Catholic orientation) with emphasis, again more or less, on the Slovak situation, although seen from an émigré perspective. These were the irregularly issued *Kolínske listy*, and their predecessor *Slovenský kresťanský samizdat*. For various reasons — explained in the last, 38th, issue of *Kolínske listy* — I decided to switch to English, and to address the more general problem of Christians in the post-Christian West. My preferences — and perhaps also some experience — are on the level of theist-atheist, religion-science worldview discussions, where I feel more at home than on the level of psychology, biblical

So the reason I will concentrate on the worldview rather than counselling level is purely personal, and gladly admit that the other level is more important, and potentially more fruitful if viewed from an evangelisation perspective. Nevertheless, I hope that besides arguing for the way — as I see it — one should conduct debates with adversaries in matters of worldview/religion, these writings could help theists — especially Christians — with their doubts (holders of every worldview have them even when they do not want to admit it) in face of the recent atheist advances. I have in mind not only the “Four Horsemen” (*Darwins, Hitchens, Harris, Dennet*) riding on the science-religion seem-

**It is understandable that a man may seek but not find.  
It is understandable that a man may deny.  
But it is not understandable that a man may find himself  
under the imposition: you are forbidden to believe.**

Karol Wojtyla (John Paul II) in 1978, referring to the then situation in Poland, but apparently becoming relevant again, although the “imposition” now goes: you should not believe what the chattering classes cannot/will not understand.

exegesis, Canon law etc.

I think evangelisation by Christians should always be only the ultimate purpose, maybe just an undisclosed wishful thinking, that should not be forcefully implanted into their encounters with non-Christians, especially with lapsed Christians turned anti-Church, anti-organised religion or plain atheists. Nevertheless, if evangelisation is the aim, then certainly the *psychological*, much more than the *metaphysical/philosophical* approach, is the level at which encounters are to be held.

In particular, this could imply that if a young Catholic person feels he/she wants to dedicate his/her life to spreading Christ's message (especially if he has problems with e.g. celibacy), psychology, psychotherapy, eventually even psychiatry should be his/her field to become a professional in, rather than theology defending a system of beliefs on an abstract metaphysical/philosophical level sprinkled with authoritarian do's and don'ts.

ing contradictions or controversies, but also the flood of “counter-evangelisations” (e.g. *Lawrence Krauss*) set in motion by them.

Many of the points I shall try to make in these *Letters* come from my discussions (mostly, but not solely, with avowed atheists) on the Australian online forum <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/>. Some make sense only as answers to a particular question, so I shall quote the question in special quotation marks >>like this<<, of course, without giving the name or nickname of the questioner.

*Faith*, especially in the English use of the word, is much more than *beliefs*, and it has not only a rational (that I want to consider here) but also ethical/moral and aesthetic/emotional dimensions. However, I shall first ignore — more precisely bracket — these other dimensions, and concentrate on the metaphysical level, where it potentially encounters science, more precisely philosophy of religion encounters philosophy of science.

---

Underlying all my arguments is this: When considering matters of Christian, especially Catholic, *beliefs* (metaphysics) one should recognise — and not mix — the four *levels* of “specialisation”:

The FIRST level is simply a *rejection of materialism*, naturalism or scientism<sup>1</sup> or what one calls it, namely that everything that exists can be principally accessed, investigated, explained etc by science and scientific methods. In other words, *a belief in the existence of a Reality that is not reducible to the material* that our senses and science have access to. That dimension, aspect of Reality that makes it irreducible to the physical/material is given different names, the Supernatural, the Transcendent, the Spiritual, *the Divine*. I shall stick with the latter.

At the SECOND level this belief is concretised into *a belief in a personal God*, i.e. that the Divine is *at least as sophisticated as the human mind*, and at its centre is God, seen by theist religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — as the Father who can and will communicate with mankind (Revelation and prayers). The details of how He is seen are different for the three theist religions. That fact that theists *see God as if in their own image* (i.e. a person with or without the Trinitarian “structure”) can be seen as the reverse side of the biblical “God created mankind in His own image”.

[Even religions that have many gods (e.g. Hinduism) will have one who is the Head hence could be included here, perhaps as semi-theist.]

At the THIRD level are the standard *Christian beliefs*, mostly based on the New Testament.

At the FOURTH level are *beliefs that make a Christian into a Roman Catholic*, which in my understanding means acceptance of the Church’s teachings, including interpretations of the Bible and ethical norms (in principle, leaving aside the question of conscience in particular situations) as represented by the Pope. A dissenting Catholic in matters of principle (e.g. concerning Sacraments) can be a good Christian but not a Catholic in this, perhaps too narrow, meaning of the word.

I should emphasise that this is not to be seen as a classification of all worldviews (as far as their

metaphysics are concerned), not even of all religions. They are just the four *levels* or *steps* that I see as leading to the basic presuppositions of a standard Catholic worldview. Of course, there are variations, ambiguities etc on all levels. However, as they stand, they should make it clear that *it is irrational to argue about the beliefs at one level with those who cannot accept the beliefs at the lower levels*.

[For instance, most often atheist “preachers” argue about the lack of “evidence” for God (a problem related to level TWO) after having asserted, explicitly or implicitly, their belief, that all that exists, all reality, including all that can pass as evidence, is accessible through science and its methods. This, however, is exactly the opposite of what level ONE stands for. Similarly there is no point talking about the *raison d’être* of the Catholic Church (something else is its civil function or historical achievements) with those who reject Christianity as such. That is talking at level FOUR on the background of no agreement at level THREE.]

As I said at the beginning, I shall be mainly interested in questions, clarifications, arguments relating to the first two levels.

Standard examples of a believer at level ONE but not at level TWO are *Baruch Spinoza*, a 17th century Jewish philosopher, who argued that God exists but is abstract and impersonal, and *Albert Einstein*, also well known for his “science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind”. He puts it very explicitly:

I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the harmony of all that exists, not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and the doings of mankind." (in a 1929 cable to Rabbi *H. S. Goldstein*).

And elsewhere

My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble mind. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power which is revealed in the incomprehensible Universe forms my idea of God.

---

<sup>1</sup> **scientism** - excessive belief in the power of scientific knowledge and techniques, sometimes pejoratively described as seeing science as playing the traditional role of religion. It is a worldview different from the position, shared by every reasonable person, that accepts the findings of science, is inspired by them, but is aware of its limitations.

---

Einstein was certainly not a theist, he was hostile to traditional Judaism or Christianity and rejected the biblical God. But neither was he an atheist:

The fanatical atheists are like slaves who are still feeling the weight of their chains which they have thrown off after hard struggle. They are creatures who — in their grudge against traditional religion as the opium of the masses — cannot hear the music of the spheres.

There is a contemporary Jewish thinker who agrees explicitly with the Christian position (and especially my view of the matters) up to level TWO:

Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean. ... There is more to wisdom than science. It cannot tell us why we are here or how we should live. Science masquerading as religion is as unseemly as religion masquerading as science. I will continue to believe that God who created one or an infinity of universes in love and forgiveness continues to ask us to create, to love and to forgive. (Sir *Jonathan Henry Sacks*, until recently Chief Rabbi of UK).

Indeed, the recently revitalised interest in the relation between science and religion concerns questions at levels ONE and TWO. I shall deal with this, especially as it is misconstrued by “militant” atheists, in the next issues of these *Cologne Letters*.

## On Compatibility, Tolerance and Respect

I believe that the 21st century Christian perspective, way of looking at reality, is *compatible* in principle with a 21st century scientific perspective. This does not mean that there are no theists and atheists, who are looking for contradictions by misinterpreting either or both, or whose mind is a captive of, say, 19th century. Of course, one has to differentiate between science as such and the possible worldview interpretations of its findings. The same as one has to differentiate between “pure” theology and its application to everyday life, where science gets involved. There are interpretations of both that are incompatible — e.g. a literal understanding of Genesis vs contemporary cosmology — and those that are compatible, although this is not always obvious.

One thing is this compatibility that belongs to the realm of philosophy (of science and of religion) and another thing is the problem of “abortion, euthanasia, ... etc” often raised by atheists in this context, although they have nothing to do with this compatibility of views about reality.

Often also Christian zealots, even Church representatives who participate in public debates on these issues, display too forcefully — intentionally or not — their Christian identity. Of course so do many ardent secularists with their worldview, and the debate becomes emotional on the background of this mixing of differing fundamental worldview orientations, with issues where practicability and morals play a more important role than questions about the nature of reality. Until recently, all such debates could be conducted on the background of

shared Christian values. Unfortunately, some people cannot accept that this is not the case any more. Here the point is not theoretical *compatibility* of some aspects of different worldviews, but practical *tolerance* for the views of others in the public debate. *Jürgen Habermas*, an atheist, put it succinctly in his paper on the “post-secular society” (<http://www.signandsight.com/features/1714.html>.)

This, of course, does not imply that the question of tolerance is more important than that of compatibility — they are just two different things. Much of the controversy is based on the assumption — on both sides of such debates — that religious and scientific outlooks are not compatible (unless the first one is reduced to the subjective realm of psychology). Compatibility, on the other hand, means that one can accept the existence of an aspect of Reality accessible only through religious experience and religious (e.g. mythological) models as a part of a person’s worldview, at the same time as one accepts the validity of scientific models (theories) of physical reality. I shall elaborate on these two ways of modeling Reality, again in the next issues of *Cologne Letters*.

Some atheists complain about “wilfully” ignorant anti-scientific nonsense”, as somebody put it, from intolerant theists. Well, there is also a lot of wilfully ignorant anti-Christian/anti-religion nonsense from intolerant atheists. One just has to live with these manifestations of ignorance (of what is science, or religion, or both), and try to keep the worldview dialogue open and above insults.

---

Others, again usually atheists, claim “the right to offend, to insult” as one of the basic rights in a free democratic society. Mostly adherents of some religion have been — or felt like having been — thus targeted. I do not subscribe to a “right to insult”, but I have to admit that what is insulting to whom is a rather subjective matter:

Somebody can claim to have been insulted by something that others see only as criticism: It makes a difference whether I hit (physically) a wrestler or an old lady, and both of them can claim they were hit when in fact it was just a slight push. The same about “hitting” verbally, where the situation is complicated by the fact that what is and is not an insult depends not only on how it is received, and how it is seen by uninvolved “outsiders”, but it varies also with time and culture: what was insulting to a Christian in the Victorian era could be an innocent remark today, whereas today we have all sorts of groups — not only religions — who feel insulted by this or that abusive representation of what they are or stand for. I better refrain from concrete examples.

Unfortunately, one encounters frequently clichés like “unbelievers are immoral” and “have no basis for their lives” or “believers are irrational” (or even illogical, superstitious), and worse. One simply has to learn to see these things not as statements about the worldview (theist or atheist) but as a statement about the perpetrator of these offensive statements. Perhaps these utterances are just an expression of his/her insecurity in what he/she believes or disbelieves.

A frequently raised complaint by atheists is that they are supposed to show respect for religion or religious people (two different things). Of course, “respect the believer not his/her beliefs” comes up as an analogue of the Catholic “love the sinner not the sin”.

I think that showing respect — in either sense — is still part of our culture. For my generation there were words we would use when talking to our peers but not when talking to our grandma. I could exclaim “are you blind?” when frustrated by somebody’s slowness to comprehend, but that would be disrespectful, if that person was actually blind. A civilized person should not be disrespectful to anybody: knowing the difference between

disrespect and criticism is one of the things that makes one civilized.

This one kind of respect, namely for a person, is the easier to deal with. What is more often questioned is “respect for other peoples religious beliefs”. Here the problem is what belief can be regarded as religious (hence firmly entrenched in the identity of the holder of such belief) in our society, and that is not easy to answer. I would respect beliefs that are part of one of the — six or so — so-called higher religions plus secular humanism to cover serious non-religious. Nevertheless, it is hard to define what is “respectable” in a religion, and in what context. The rule of the thumb would be, show respect for the worldview beliefs of a person you want to engage in a debate with. I will not have respect for a five year old’s views on higher mathematics, but then, I would not discuss it with him.

Also, it often depends on how one understands (interprets) the symbols that a religious belief is usually based on. Most holders (or deniers) of such beliefs have only a naive understanding of the symbols involved. Those who take these symbols too literally like to clash with the holders of opposite beliefs, usually also held naively, and both are easily offended as well as become disrespectful of the alternative beliefs, often including their holder.

For instance, there are many manifestations of Islam that I do not like, to say the least, but I have to accept that there must be something more to Islam than just these negative things, since it attracted a billion adherents. And that “more” might not be that much different from something that is already part of my worldview. There are non-Christians who think similarly about Christianity. Call it whatever you like, respect or not. This has nothing to do with cultural or any other relativism but with being tolerant and respectful of the alternative worldview. It is often the case that one can learn about one’s own worldview more from an outsider than from an insider. As my wife uses to say “I cannot tell you how you *feel* in your clothes, but I can tell you how you *look* in them.

