

Treatise on the Spirit and its Association with Religion

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1. Religious beliefs are important.

It is pointless to argue that religious beliefs are not of great importance to people. They are in fact undeniably important to actual people in the real world. Consider the following:

- a. People are willing to die for their religious beliefs.
- b. People are willing to kill for their religious beliefs.
- c. People try to eliminate those with different religious beliefs through conversion and legislation.
- d. People will use force to make others conform to their religious beliefs.

These beliefs must be very powerful and important to make people act like this. A person does not generally go to such extremes for beliefs that are not dear to them. One does not treat their everyday opinions with such reverence. Religious beliefs must be among the more important beliefs a person can hold.

2. What is the nature of religious beliefs that they command such importance?

A religion is a set of beliefs about the world. This though is true of many other beliefs which are not considered religious in nature. When exactly is a belief a religious beliefs? What sort of thing is religion?

3. The nature of religion is spiritual.

Religion is concerned with the spiritual. It is concerned with the spirit. Religious beliefs are spiritual in nature. What exactly does this tell us? What does it mean to be spiritual? What is the spirit?

4. First answer: spiritual is concerned with matters of a non-material nature.

Spiritual is the concern with the spirit where the spirit is viewed as a person's non-material essence. The spirit is the real you that survives the death and destruction of your material body. Along with this is generally found a spiritual realm which exists beyond the material universe as well as various other beings who occupy the spiritual realm. This may include a god or gods, angels, devils, etc. Spiritual is concerned with your spirit and its connection to the spiritual realm and other spiritual beings. Since a person's spirit is viewed as more enduring than the physical self it is of greater importance. Your physical

existence will end some day but your spirit will continue and must be able to successfully negotiate its further existence in the spiritual realm. Spiritual is concerned with ensuring this success.

This is a common view of the spirit. Religion is concerned with the well being of the spirit and its success after the end of our bodily existence.

5. The first answer begs the question.

The existence of the spirit and its associated matters is itself a religious belief. We do not start with a clear knowledge of the spirit and the spiritual realm and then seek a religion to inform and guide us through this realm. In actuality the existence of the spirit is itself a belief that comes from religion. It is religion that informs of us of the existence of the spirit to begin with.

This is why we find such a great variety of opinions as to the precise nature of the spirit and the spiritual realms. Religions are free to diverge in opinion as to the nature of spirit and its relation to the spiritual realms. All they have in common is the belief that there is a realm beyond our physical existence, and the existence of this other realm is not something we can see, touch, or provide any evidence for. Religion asks us to take on faith that the spirit and spiritual realm exists. Therefore while it is true that religion is concerned with the spirit in this sense we cannot say that the nature of religion is the concern with the spirit because there is no spirit to be concerned with until after the existence of religion. The need to help with the spirit is a need created by religion.

6. There is another concept of spirit.

The word spirit is more commonly – though less obviously – used in a completely different sense which can be characterized through such common phrases as:

“Show some spirit.”
“I’m in low spirits.”
“This will boost your spirit.”
“That was a spirited performance.”
“Their spirits sank with the bad news.”
“We need to keep our spirits up.”
“She’s got a lot of spirit.”

In all of these phrases the word spirit is referring to a person’s attitude or frame of mind. These phrases show that a person’s spirit can be high and positive or low and negative. Spirit in this case refers to something easily observed. The condition of another persons spirit can be ascertained by observing them. We know we can affect the spirit of others, the things we do and say make a difference to the spirits of other people. Likewise we can feel our own spirit and its ups and downs as it is affected by the things we experience in the world. Spirit in this sense is a very real and obvious thing. So real and obvious we don’t ever question its existence.

7. The spirit is the color of the glasses a person sees the world through.

The spirit is the general sort of attitude in a persons mind that colors, filters, and modulates how they relate to the world. It affects how the world looks and feels to us. To see this clearly review the following list of characterizations for both a positive and a negative spirit.

Positive Spirit

Cheerful
Enthusiastic
Optimistic
Glass is half full
Energetic
Gets along with other people
Stops and smells the roses
Tries their best, goes all out
Looks forward to the future
Feels satisfied with life
Brings the spirit of others up
Hopeful
Others enjoy their company

Negative Spirit

Gloomy
Depressed
Pessimistic
Glass is half empty
Lethargic
In conflict with other people
Does not even see the roses
Does not try, puts in little effort
Fears the future
Feels dissatisfied with life
Brings the spirit of others down
Without hope
Others don’t enjoy their company.

8. The spirit in this sense is real and independent of religion

It is hard to doubt the existence of spirit in this latter sense as its operations are too familiar to us. The fact that we cannot say exactly where in our head the spirit lies or how it operates is not a detriment to our knowledge of its existence. All of the parts of the mind we possess suffer in this same way. For example, we don't know where the intelligence resides in the mind or how it works but that doesn't stop us from believing in its existence. Likewise we experience the operations of the spirit everyday in both ourselves and other. There is no reason to doubt this.

The spirit in this sense stands in stark contrast to the spirit in the first sense of a non-material essence that survives the death of the body. This first spirit is not observed and we cannot be sure that it affects us or is affected by us. People believe in this kind of spirit because it is included in the set of beliefs their religion declares to be true. The second sense of spirit on the other hand is right in plain view as obvious as any other part of our mind, and we do not need religion to tell us that it exists.

9. Spiritual is concerned with the health of the spirit.

The spirit can be positive or negative. It is obvious that a positive spirit is desirable. Reading through the characteristics of spirit in #7 it is hard to imagine anyone wanting to be in the negative column.

Since we know the spirit can be changed and in fact does change going both up and down over the course of time, we can speak of the health of the spirit. A healthy spirit is positive while an unhealthy spirit is negative. As a healthy spirit is desirable we should be concerned with its health. Spiritual then can be defined as the general concern with the health of the spirit. Beliefs, actions, practices, and environments take on a spiritual dimension in how they affect the health of the spirit. In a positive sense our spiritual lives are the parts of our lives that contribute to our spirit's health. A spiritual person is a person who maintains an active interest in their spirit's health. This is in much the same way as a health conscious person is a person who maintains an active interest in their body's health.

10. Religion is tied to the health of the spirit.

If the connection between spiritual and religion is to be maintained then religion in some way involves the health of the spirit. The simplest connection is that a person's choice of religious beliefs has an actual and direct effect on the health of the spirit.

11. There is a set of questions that people are drawn to try and answer despite that they cannot be successfully answered.

Thinkers have long known of the existence of certain questions whose answers cannot be decided. The logic and evidence required to determine the truthful answer to these questions stretches beyond the limits of human comprehension, we become embroiled in the inconceivable and our logic becomes tortured and useless. This however does not stop us from trying to answer them. We come up with many different answers to these questions all of which are equal in the eyes of the truth and there is simply no way to decide which is true or even which ones are closer to the truth. All answers to the questions are equal. Choosing an answer to these questions to believe is just that, a choice a person makes as there is no good solid reason for believing one is true over the others. The choice made is based on some criteria other than proof of truth.

Some examples of these questions that are relevant to this discussion.

A. How did the universe begin? Who or what created it?

You do not need to be a philosopher to see the difficulty in answering this question. Just consider the following.

Everything must have a beginning. The idea of anything having existed forever with no beginning is inconceivable. Everything we know has a start and there was a time before it existed. Always having existed does not make sense, somewhere there must have been a time before. So if the universe has a beginning then there was a time before the universe. But then whatever was there before the universe also could not have existed forever and must have had a start. Well if the time before the universe has a beginning then there must have been a time before this and so on and so on.

Likewise if there is a creator then who created the creator? A creator that always existed makes no sense. We can say the creator existed forever and choose to believe this but it is not really a coherent thought as everything needs a beginning. How could we prove that something existed for ever?

The universe contains everything there is. Therefore it must contain the creator, but the creator existed prior to the universe. How could this be? The creator must be outside the universe. But the universe is everything.

Does the universe have boundaries? If yes what could be beyond it other than more universe? If no then the universe must be infinite in size. What would that look like?

Everything is made out something. At one point the universe did not exist and was created. Created out of what? If there was something before the universe for the universe to be created out of than this stuff was itself the universe.

Are you confused? You should be because none of this makes much sense. Whatever the right answer is to this question it is beyond our comprehension and beyond our ability to know the truth of.

B. What is the meaning of life? What is it humans are here to do? What is our purpose?

You have probably discussed these questions with other people before. You have probably also faced real life situations where the answer to the question really mattered to you and the situation. How did you go about figuring out the answers? How do you defend your answers if challenged? What logic or evidence do you turn to? None really. In the end you rely on the beliefs that you have chosen and hold on faith.

C. Is there anything beyond the physical world? Is there a non-material component to the universe and to our existence?

We have covered this question already. By what means could you collect evidence for the non-material world? Physics is very clear on the fact that a physical object –our body for example – can only be affected by other physical objects. No violation of this rule has ever been detected. If it is impossible for the material and non-material to interact how could it ever be detected? Furthermore everything we know is physical in that we describe it in terms that are physical or as relationships or powers of things physical. What does non-material look like, what does it weigh, how does it work? If we can see it, touch it, or measure it in any way then it is physical. It is beyond the comprehension of physical beings to understand what non-physical is.

There are other examples but these are the most relevant to our discussion. Most people do hold answers to these questions that they believe to be true. And if you ask them why they believe what they believe there is not much for them to say beyond, “I just do, it is what I choose to believe.”

12. Religion provides the answers to these questions.

At its very core a religion declares answers to these questions. The most important religious beliefs are answers to these questions. From the answers to these questions everything else within the religion flows – further beliefs, practices, prescriptions. These answers ground the rest of the religion and serve as its foundation. Religion never offers proof for its answers as there is none. Religion requires you to believe on faith. You choose to believe or you do not.

A religion starts with assumptions taken as given indisputable truths as to the beginning the universe, its creator, the meaning and purpose of life, and the existence of the spirit and its realms.

13. The answers to these questions must be important.

Why bother trying to answer questions that cannot be answered? Why defend your choice of answers so vehemently if you cannot be sure that you are correct? Why would anyone care, isn't one answer as good as the next?

It must make some difference to the lives of people. It must make a very big difference. The choice of answers must in some way affect your life or else why would it matter?

14. The answers have an effect on spiritual health.

The answer a person chooses has an effect on their spiritual health. Some answers may improve a person's spiritual health and other answers will degrade their spiritual health. Since the choice of answers for most people amounts to their choice of religion then the choice of religion can have consequences for a person's spiritual health.

This is visible in societies where people have a free choice of religion and forceful conversions and obvious intolerance is frowned upon. People will move from religion to religion in an attempt to find one that works for them, where works for them amounts to finding the religion that has a positive effect on their spiritual health. They are looking for a religion that they find satisfying, one that makes their lives possess the qualities of good spiritual health.

Why do the answers to these questions affect our spiritual health? We don't know but it would be hard to doubt that they do. We do not know by what mechanism a person is made to feel loved or cared for. No one knows why a certain action will cause one person to be happy and have no effect on another person and a negative effect on a third. We still accept these things as real as they obviously are. On the same grounds we know that the answers to these religious questions do affect our spiritual health.

15. Although there is no possibility of deciding the truth between the answers to these questions there is a criteria for deciding which answers to believe.

A belief that improves your spiritual health is better than one that does not. A person should choose the answers that maximize their spiritual health. Given two answers to one of these questions the one that has the most positive effect on your spiritual health is the best answer. The appropriate choice of religion is the religion that brings about desirable spiritual health.

16. A person's spiritual health is their own.

Just as a person's physical health is their own so is their spiritual health. The health of a person is the health of that person whether we are talking physical or spiritual health.

17. A person's physical health needs are unique to themselves.

There is no one way to good physical health that is right for every person. Everyone's body is unique in many different ways and hence calls for a different prescription to achieve good health. If we could examine each person's body and determine a perfect diet for them we would end up with as many different diets as there are people. Some people's bodies process carbohydrates more efficiently than others. Some people's bodies use vitamins and minerals less efficiently. People have many different allergies. The specific wear and tear people experience over their lives as well as the illnesses they have whether contracted or genetic also result in different dietary needs for good health. These things also change over a lifetime so the specific best diet for someone over a lifetime changes.

The same can be said for the best exercise regime. An exercise that is really good for one person may severely injure another person. Likewise two people with the same illness may respond differently to the same treatments. Different people can be more or less susceptible to the same illness, requiring different health plans to prevent it

Although we can take all of the health prescriptions from our hypothetical survey and average them all together to get some general guidelines we must be aware that there is no actual person who is perfectly average. There will be plenty of people for which following the general guidelines will not result in good health and may even severely compromise their health. If everyone needed the same things the field of health science would be among the easiest there is. In the end everyone's physical health needs are their own.

18. The minds of people differ to an amazing degree.

People believe different things, hold different opinions, have differing likes and dislikes, react differently to the same situations, make different choices, have different interests, as well as differ in many other ways. Between people, minds differ far more than even their bodies do. There is no universal prescription for making someone happy. In addition all of these things within a person changes over time. What works for a person at one point in their lives does not work at another point.

Like the physical body we can make generalizations about the mind but in the end we find they don't hold to everyone.

19. Spiritual health is unique to a person.

The requirements for good spiritual health differs from person to person. Just as peoples bodies and minds are different so are their spirits. Just as the requirements for their minds and bodies differ so does their spiritual requirements. There is no reason to believe that there is any difference. What benefits one persons spirit may damage another's.

20. The set of religious beliefs that is the most beneficial to spiritual health differs from person to person.

Every person requires for their spiritual health the set of religious beliefs that is best for them. The set of religious beliefs that improve one person's spiritual health are not necessarily those that will improve another person's and in fact may have negative consequences for another person.

21. The only way to measure the goodness of a religious belief is relative to an individual's spiritual health.

Saying that a religious belief is good for spiritual health without specifying the persons whose health it is good for is too general to be useful. Surely generalizations can be made but as with physical health these generalizations must be taken with the recognition that they in no way can be applied to everyone. If we did our hypothetical survey again and prescribed the perfect religious beliefs for every person's spiritual health we would also end up with a lot of prescriptions.

22. Ultimately the choice of religious beliefs is solely for the benefit of an individual person and this individual should be free to choose the beliefs which give them the best spiritual health.

Just as it would be silly to demand that all people follow a single precise prescription for physical health regardless of whether or not the prescription benefits them, it would be silly to forcefully demand that everyone hold a certain set of religious beliefs regardless of whether or not these beliefs benefit them.

People must be allowed to freely choose their religious beliefs so that they can maintain good spiritual health. People's needs clearly differ and the freedom to choose is necessary. Forcing beliefs upon another person when the beliefs detract from their spiritual health is no different than forcing bad physical health on a person, which we would find repugnant and not allow.

It should never matter to one person what another person's religious beliefs are. You choose the beliefs that are best for you and other's choose the beliefs that are best for them. Where could the point of conflict be? If everyone has a healthy spirit why would anyone care.

Therefore while religion is concerned with good spiritual health the accompanying intolerance defeats this mission. Religion demands that at least some people hold religious beliefs that are not the best for them or even detrimental to them. Intolerance in religion is a fundamental contradiction. How can religion promote good spiritual health while forcing beliefs on people? One has to wonder if the root cause of this intolerance is that so many members of religions are unwittingly holding religious beliefs that are detrimental to their spiritual health. Intolerance is exactly the sort of behavior one would

expect to be exhibited by someone in poor spiritual health. If this is the case then religion as it actually exists in the world has largely failed at promoting good spiritual health.

Appendix I: An example of how answers to religious questions may affect people differently.

Take the question is there a continuation of life after death and two opposing answers.

- a. There is a spirit that lives on after death.
- b. Death is the end nothing follows.

To one person the first answer is a source of great relief. It is a cushion against death. There is no need to fear the end of this life because there is more to come. To another person the continuation of life after death makes this life seem unimportant and insignificant. Why care so much about this life if there is more to come? Life becomes trivial and tiresome.

Looking at the second answer one person might be filled with dread. They cannot find peace knowing that this life can end at any moment and the end really is the end. To another person the second answer is a great motivator. There is but one life to live and you must live it to the fullest.

Expanding on the first answer what if we add that your happiness in the next life is completely dependent on what you do in this life. Assume too that there are further beliefs that tell you what you must do in order to have a happy life after.

To one person this gives life great meaning. Life has a goal and a purpose: to do what needs to be done to have a good afterlife. Another person might be filled with the dread of failure. The pressure would be unbearable to them and their spiritual health would suffer. A third person might feel at odds with the purpose. They live their life feeling angered or enslaved by the prospect of having to live in a way that does not work for them just so they can avoid an unpleasant afterlife.

From this simple example it can be seen how a belief will have different effects on different people and that a belief which is positive to one person's health is a hazard to another's. It is easy to see that different beliefs will be best for different people.

Appendix II: Oh my god! My objective roof is falling into the pits of my subjective sewers.

Some people might point out that religion is not just about our spiritual health. They claim that religion is the source of morality and order for society. It is what holds everything together and justifies the moral backbone people and society need to flourish. If religious beliefs cannot be justified and we are free to choose any belief we want then religion is hopelessly subjective. Then the backbone of morality must be subjective. Does that not leave us in an anything goes world where anyone can claim any action to be moral simply by choosing to believe it is moral?

Part of the suspicion must be confirmed as accurate. The choice of religious beliefs is subjective. It would be dishonest to say they are not and that people are choosing their beliefs based on truth, logic, reason, and evidence – and by extension the differing beliefs of other people are provably wrong. The choice of religious beliefs is subjective and anything derived from them is also subjective. That is just the way things are and there is no point in denying it.

Does this mean that morality is at its heart subjective too?

Hardly so. Just because religion is often used as a justification for morality does not mean that it is the only way to justify morality. In fact given the inherent subjectivity of religious beliefs it is not a good way to justify morality to begin with.

Moral belief exists prior to and independently of religious belief. Morality is in no way dependent on religion for its existence. Furthermore, religion is not required as a motivator for morals to be followed. If we look at moral beliefs across all religions there is an intersection of core moral belief that cuts across religions and is held in common by everyone. This moral belief pre-exists religion and does not ultimately depend on any religious belief for its existence.

Religions do end up adding additional moral requirements based on their own specific religious beliefs and this accounts for the rest of the moral prescriptions and rules found. These vary a great deal between religions and are only justified within the particular religion they exist. For example religions all have prohibitions against the unprovoked killing of innocent people. Everyone holds this rule and it does not need justification from religion. On the other hand, religions have a variety of different prohibitions on what foods may be eaten and not eaten and under what circumstances. These vary greatly between religions and each is only justifiable within the particular religion whose beliefs supports them.

It is beyond the scope of this treatise to present a theory showing that there is a common morality held by humanity that exists outside of religion. However a few points can be made here.

If we could review the sources of all of the wrong doings committed in the world I bet we would find that less than 10% of them were due to evil people, where evil people are defined as people who are either aware of the moral rules and choose to break them anyway or who display a complete obliviousness to the moral rule. All of the remaining wrong doings are committed by what I call good but ignorant people – the stupid good. These people know the correct rules but misapply them due to their getting the facts of a situation wrong. They think they are doing something good but they are really doing something stupid and wrong.

To give a fictional example of an all too common occurrence imagine a country where a group of corrupt political leaders are trying to cement their rule. These leaders claim that all of the problems in their country are due to some minority group of citizens. They report this information to the public, full of lies and false claims and declare the minority to be a threat to all that must be destroyed.

The moral principle here is that it is allowable to do what must be done to save yourself or society from a dire threat. The leaders know this minority is not a threat and in calling for their destruction are violating core moral principles. They are fully aware of what they are doing. The leaders are evil.

The actual destruction of this minority is not personally carried out by the leaders, they are just the instigators and justifiers. The actual destruction is carried out by regular citizens of the country, perhaps even a large majority of them. Are these people evil too? Some may be, but for the most part no they are acting completely in accordance with the established moral principle. The cause of their wrong doing is ignorance, they really believe that the minority is a danger that must be stopped. This is an example of one of the two primary sources of wrong doing in the world. People get the facts massively and horribly wrong and then act on these misfacts. All of a person's knowledge of moral principles is of no use if they apply it to anything other than the true facts. Misapplied morals are quite dangerous.

An example of the other primary source of wrong doing by the good and ignorant is the invention of additional moral principles derived from their own subjective beliefs. They get all of the core morals right but then add others based on beliefs that are not true. This is a form of ignorance in which a factual mistake leads a person to believe in a non-existent moral rule. This is exactly what is happening with all of the additional moral principles religions derive from their declared religious beliefs. Morals are derived from subjective religious beliefs. This is a major source of wrong doing in the world and shows why religion is not well suited to act as a foundation for morality. Religion should be true to its purpose which is promoting good spiritual health.

The point of all this is that everyone knows the core moral values, they know right from wrong. Most people are also motivated to follow the rules, there are few evil people who just ignore the rules. Most wrong in the world is caused by ignorance of facts. The existence of core moral values indicate that there is an objectiveness to morals and that it

stands prior to and independent of religion. Religion does not add anything to morality and in fact cannot.

Where do the core morals come from and why do people follow them? That is a question to be answered at another time. For now what is clear from the evidence is that there is a common morality held by humanity that exists outside of religion.