

Pascal's Wager and the Religions of the World

It is no doubt to a certain extent true that the subject of religion cannot be viewed in the absence of some sort of bias. Indeed religion and culture, which tend to be axiomatic, influence the thoughts and beliefs of all of us, whether or not we wish to admit it. A person from a Hindu culture, for example, is not likely to view Islam as favorably as a person who himself is a Muslim, an Atheist is not likely to view Buddhism as favorably as one who himself is a Buddhist, etc.

In order to consider the (if one may say) validity of the religions in our world, what we need is an objective approach. The social sciences, because they are based on arguments which fall short of universality and thus reliability, exclude themselves from the realm of pure objectivity. Mathematics, however, is not only universal and objective, it is also the only "perfect" science of mankind. But what can math tell us about religion...?

In the medieval West the Catholic Church made the grave mistake of exerting its control over not only faith, but the sciences as well. In the 14th-16th centuries this system came apart at the seams as the works of Wyclif, Hus and Luther countered the religious doctrines of the Catholic Church, and the works of Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler served to disarm the "scientific" beliefs of Catholicism.

Whereas many protestant leaders of the 17th century concentrated their efforts on maintaining and preserving their newly acquired religious freedoms, two famous French mathematicians, René Descartes (1596-1650) and Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), began to examine the relationship between faith, philosophy and mathematics.

René Descartes, himself a devout Catholic, made several attempts to prove the existence of God. Not in keeping with his stature as a mathematician though, these "proofs" seem to have relied heavily on the ideas of medieval theologians which for the most part began with postulates which presupposed the result. The importance of Descartes' attempts at proving God's existence were that as a leading mathematician of his day, he had tried to find a link between faith and reasoning.

Blaise Pascal, as a child prodigy, astounded even Descartes with his works in geometry and also went on to be famous in many other fields of science. Together with Pierre Fermat, who was a brilliant amateur mathematician,

Pascal founded the field of mathematic probability by computing the odds in a hypothetical card game.

Pascal became a Christian in 1654 and soon afterward joined the Jansenists, a neo-Augustinian movement within the Catholic Church at the time. (The Jansenists were condemned in 1653 and again in 1713 by the pope.) Pascal himself recognized that his conversion was the result of an act of faith and not of reasoning. It was no doubt his own experience then which led him away from the notion of a conclusive proof of God's existence. Drawing on his work in probability, Pascal saw a strong rational argument for Christianity in evaluating the risks incurred by unbelief. The result of his work in this area, commonly known as "Pascal's Wager," is given in its most abbreviated form in chapter 23 of his work *Pensées*:

I should have much more fear of being mistaken, and of finding that the Christian religion is true, than of not being mistaken in believing it true.

Though this "wager" is quite logical and lends itself to many applications, it appears that Pascal never used it for more than a comparison of Atheism to Christianity.

But what can this wager tell us about the world's major religions? Just how can it be applied? The fundamental method in Pascal's Wager is to find the greater risks and then to avoid them by seeking to minimize all the risks present.

So the first thing we need to do is to take a look at just what risks are incurred by unbelief according to the world's various religions:

ATHEISM:

With respect to having a penalty for unbelief, Atheism dictates none. By way of example, this means that an unbeliever in Atheism, e.g., a believer in God or a supernatural power, is subject to no punishment for his or her unbelief in Atheism.

BUDDHISM:

Though this religion has many forms, its doctrine of reincarnation is universal. Unbelief as such does not exist in Buddhism, but rather each human action results in either merit or demerit. The most severe punishment prescribed by Buddhism is essentially for people who led bad lives with "wrong knowledge," and consists of being sent to temporary "hells" followed by successive reincarnations.

HINDUISM

One of the best known features of this religion, along with Buddhism, is again, reincarnation. In mainstream Hinduism, unbelievers, or more appropriately sinners against its laws, are sent to one of seven temporary "hells." Some Hindu groups, such as the followers of Madhva, maintain that the extremely sinful will be consigned to an eternal punishment in hell.

CONFUCIANISM & SHINTOISM:

Whereas the former is agnostic with regard to punishment after death, the latter is so optimistic as not to specify any for unbelief. In general, where various groups of these two religions have a doctrine of punishment after death, they appear to be Buddhist in nature and stem from the influence of this faith.

JUDAISM:

As with liberals in other religions, liberal Jewish groups deny any form of punishment after death. Some of the conservatives and orthodox, who hold to a more literal interpretation of the Torah and Prophets, believe in eternal punishment for unbelievers.

CHRISTIANITY:

Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christianity believe in an eternal hell for unbelievers. In addition, though, the Orthodox presuppose purgatory in their prayers for the dead, and the Catholics openly teach its existence. Evangelical Christians, in holding to a more literal interpretation of the Bible, deny the existence of purgatory, and believe in an eternal hell. Liberal groups, and the related, but non-Christian group called Jehovah's Witnesses, reject any form of punishment after death.

ISLAM:

In their observance of the Qur'an, conservative Sunni and Shiite groups believe in an eternal hell. Liberal groups, among them the Ahmadis, deny the existence of an eternal hell for unbelievers.

BAHA'I:

Though the writings of their prophet dictate eternal hell as a punishment, liberal followers of this faith have allegorized this.

APPLICATION OF PASCAL'S WAGER:

In order to get a better overview of the punishment doctrines of the world's major religions, we have constructed the following chart:

Religion	Lives	Purgatory	Hell[s]
Atheism	1	n	0
Buddhism	mult.	n	t
Hinduism	mult.	n	t
Hinduism (Madhva)	mult.	n	t/e
Confucianism	?	?	?
Shintoism	?	?	0
Judaism (conservative)	1	n	e
Judaism (liberal)	?	?	0
Christianity (Orth.)	1	y	e
Christianity (Cath.)	1	y	e
Christianity (Evan.)	1	n	e
Christianity (liberal)	?	?	0
Jehovah's Witnesses	1	n	0
Islam (Sunni)	1	n	e
Islam (Shiite)	1	n	e
Islam (Ahmadi)	1	n	t
Islam (liberal)	?	?	0
Baha'i (conservative)	1	n	e
Baha'i (liberal)	1	n	0

Key: mult. = multiple; ? = not defined; y = yes; n = no; 0 = none; t = temporary; e = eternal.

According to the logic of Pascal's Wager, we can first disregard all religions in those forms which have no doctrine of hell. (For instance, a non-Atheist has nothing to fear after death if Atheism would prove to be true in the end; a non-Jehovah's Witness likewise.) Other religions which can be disregarded are those which have doctrines of reincarnation (multiple lives) and temporary hells, since these represent a far lesser risk than religions which espouse an eternal hell. We are thus left with the following religions to consider:

- Hinduism (Madhva)
- Judaism (conservative)
- Christianity (Orthodox)
- Christianity (Catholic)
- Christianity (Evangelical)
- Islam (Sunni)
- Islam (Shiite)
- Baha'i (conservative)

Of this group, Hinduism (Madhva) represents by far the least risk since it teaches reincarnation and that only extremely wicked people will be punished eternally. We disregard it also.

One thing we notice in applying Pascal's Wager to the remaining religions is that all are conservative forms of their respective faiths, and that they purport to adhere to their own scriptures. But what do the various scriptures of the remaining religions have to tell us?

The Qur'an, the holy book of Islam and also a holy book of Baha'i, states quite clearly that Jews and Christians who believe in God, the Judgment Day and do what is right, will have nothing to fear in eternity; see Qur'an 2:59(62); 5:73(69). The followers of both conservative Judaism and Christianity meet these basic requirements as put forward in the Qur'an. The Qur'an itself, however, is rejected by both of these religions. The result of Islam's inclusion of conservative Judaism and Christianity, but their exclusion of Islam, is that conservative Judaism and Christianity represent the greater risk to unbelievers. Thus, according to the logic of Pascal's Wager, we disregard Islam and Baha'i.

In looking at the Jewish scriptures, we notice that the ritual of sacrifice, so central to the most literal form of Judaism, must be performed on the site of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 12:11-14 and II Chronicles 7:12). For over 1300 years a Muslim mosque has stood on this location, and no sacrifices can be performed there. Thus in the strictest sense Judaism cannot even be practiced in our day, which means that not only

unbelievers, but even the followers of this religion are at risk of incurring eternal punishment.

Since Orthodox and Catholic Christianity both maintain the doctrine of purgatory, this serves to lessen the risk of an eternal hell. They are thus disregarded according to the logic of Pascal's Wager.

As a result of this general evaluation of the world's major religions, it turns out that Evangelical Christianity represents the *greatest risk to unbelievers*.

But in Evangelical Christianity does the position of belief (and thus unbelief with respect to the other religions) actually *minimize* all of the possible risks under consideration?

Logically speaking, if there turns out to be no afterlife or eternal punishment, Evangelical Christians have no hell to fear. If it turns out that humans will be reincarnated, Evangelical Christians are moral, even according to the standards of such religions, and they would then have several more tries at doing better in later lives. If Islam or Baha'i would turn out to be true, Evangelical Christians, by virtue of their belief in God, the Judgment and their doing that which is morally right, would have nothing to fear in the afterlife. In the most literal sense of the Torah, Judaism cannot be practiced today, and thus condemns even itself. If Orthodox or Catholic Christianity would turn out to be true in the end, Evangelical Christians take the Bible literally and thus have nothing to fear from either one of them, which consider the Bible as just one of their authorities.

As shown above, Evangelical Christianity not only represents the greatest risk to unbelievers, but for its believers it also minimizes all of the risks incurred by unbelief in the rest of the world's major religions. In a generalized form Pascal's Wager would then read: "One should fear more not to have been an Evangelical Christian and to find out that it was true, than to have been one and to find out it was not."

Admittedly this evaluation overlooks just what these religions require to be considered a believer by them, be it their rites or dogmas, and we leave this to the inquirer. What we have done though, is to use mathematical principles in evaluating the most crucial aspect of religion — its ultimate consequences.

We hope that you will also consider the possible risks which religions warn us of, before it is too late. One day we will all see whether an eternal hell exists or not, and the stakes are too high to ignore.

In the Bible, Jesus says:

If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; and whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?

Mark 8:34b-36

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- A Buddhist Bible*. Dwight Goddard, ed. Boston: Beacon Press.
- A Dictionary of Comparative Religion*. S.G.F. Brandon, ed. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1970.
- Der Koran*. Max Henning, trans. Wiesbaden: VMA Verlag.
- Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity*. Tom Dowley, ed. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Fortesque, Adrian. *The Orthodox Eastern Church*. New York: Burt Franklin, repr. 1969.
- Gaver, Jessyca Russell. *The Baha'i Faith: Dawn of a New Day*. New York: Hawthorne Books, 1967.
- Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'U'llah*. Shoghi Effendi, trans. and ed. Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1976.
- Grimm, George. *The Doctrine of the Buddha*. Trans. Bhikkhu Silacara. Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass, repr. 1973.
- Herman, A. L. *An Introduction to Buddhist Thought*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1983.
- Mapero, Henri. *Taoism and Chinese Religion*. Trans. Frank A. Kierman Jr. Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981.
- The Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary*. Albert J. Nevins, ed. New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1965.
- Newman, Robert C. "Pascal's Wager Reexamined," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society* 4 (1981): 61-67.
- Pascal, Blaise. *The Thoughts, Letters and Opuscules of Blaise Pascal*. Trans. O. W. Wight. New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1864.
- Picken, Stuart D. B. *Shinto*. Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1980.
- Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam*. H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers, eds. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974.
- Taylor, Rodney L. *The Confucian Way of Contemplation*. Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1988.
- Walker, Benjamin. *The Hindu World*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1968.

© 1992 by N. A. Newman