

REPLY TO ALAIN VOIZARD

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I turn now to Alain Voizard. I will be brief in responding to him, for we very largely agree and I think, not unsurprisingly given that agreement, that what he said very much needs saying.

First, we largely agree on naturalism and its importance. We agree that naturalism is incompatible with theistic beliefs. I would go so far as to say it entails atheism. I say “largely agree” because in my naturalism human beings are taken to be *social* animals, though, like a lot of other people, I am attracted to nonreductive forms of physicalism, particularly anomalous monism, but I am not sure it is compatible with a belief that we are social animals—something of which I am even more confident—so I remain agnostic about even nonreductive physicalism. Naturalizing is a good thing, but I am not confident we can make it work in some important areas. I am not sure, for example, that we can naturalize intentions. I think perhaps we can, but I am not confident of that, and these are areas where I claim no expertise. That notwithstanding, not knowing what nonnatural or supranatural phenomena come to, I think all phenomena are natural phenomena or at least dependent on natural phenomena.

However, naturalist that I am, I do not know if I have a scientific view of the world. I think, like Peter Railton and both John Dewey and Charles Stevenson before him, that moral beliefs are natural phenomena that can be naturalistically characterized. Remember that in *that sense* even a noncognitivist or nondescriptivist can be a naturalist, as Allan Gibbard is. And while all these things are natural, I do not think I am setting forth a bit of science or taking a scientific view of the world here. I am certainly not taking an antiscientific view of the world, but it is unclear what it comes to in calling it a scientific view. It may just be in part a

nonscientific—but not antiscientific—view of the world. I have in the first chapter of my *Naturalism and Religion* tried to give naturalistic explanations of religion that are scientific, at least in some broad sense. But my naturalism is not only social, it is nonscientific. I do not think that what science cannot tell us, humankind cannot know. I can know that to treat human beings as a means only is wrong or that in our society to pick my nose in public is impolite, even if science forever must remain silent on such matters. But in endorsing them—not only reporting that they are our mores, but taking them to be my convictions—I have not appealed to anything that is not natural. But endorsing is different from reporting. The latter is in some broad sense scientific. The former is not.

Voizard's criticisms of what he calls the argument of the metaphor, the Magisteria argument, and Pascal's wager are precise, elegant, and sound. So I, of course, have little trouble in agreeing with them. I think he is right in stressing that the argument of the metaphor is a very crucial one and plays a role in almost all incommensurability arguments and is always (or at least almost always) lurking somewhere in the background. What he says here is very well taken. Suppose we ask people who assent to the statement "A supernatural being has created the universe out of nothing," or to "God is an infinite person who transcends the universe, sustains it, and yet enters into it to care for his creation." Many believers—perhaps even most—will say, "Well, not literally." They will in reality treat such remarks somehow metaphorically. Voizard goes on to say that not much of what is truly central to religious belief is taken literally. In trying to find out what "God is not a being but Being itself" means or "God is the unconditioned good" means, we find ourselves going around in a hermeneutical circle of metaphorical utterances. But to treat something metaphorically requires that we can at least in principle say what it is a metaphor of. But over standard theism we just get another metaphor. We never get literal speech. "We," as Voizard puts it, "never understand the metaphor; communication and understanding are but a feeling shared by the happy few."

Voizard also makes some good claims against incommensurability and particularly against the incommensurability of religious beliefs. Some philosophers (D. Z. Phillips, for example) try to cushion their religious beliefs by saying they are incommensurable with nonreligious beliefs in order to insulate them from criticism. But there are connections between religious beliefs and nonreligious beliefs. Indeed, theistic beliefs have a tremendous political effect on what is thought concerning some important social and political issues: "[R]eligious beliefs have political consequences, so they are, after all, connected to the rest of our web of belief, and they are thus not incommensurable."

II

Voizard, as I do, sees it as "our task to wean people from such beliefs." The reason, he avers, is not only intellectual but political and social as well. Our

religious beliefs affect our political and moral beliefs "about same-sex marriages, stem cell research, euthanasia, the teaching of Darwin, and so on." It is well to see this as a social danger. I shall return to this briefly after I say something about the rationality/irrationality of religious belief. Voizard well asks how one can "claim to be rational and at the same time fully believe that an infinitely good and benevolent, all-powerful being created the universe out of nothingness." I too have claimed that religious beliefs are irrational and that it is irrational for a modern, educated, reasonably scientifically and philosophically sophisticated person to be a Jew, Christian, or Muslim.

However, we should be careful here. If having some irrational beliefs and living in accordance with them is irrational, then there are very few rational persons in the world, for most of us have some irrational beliefs. That certainly is not enough to make most of us irrational persons. So why should the religious person who believes in God be deemed irrational? If we are right, *that belief* is irrational and he is being irrational in avowing it. But that is not enough to make him irrational. (Recall here my discussion about this in discussing Wolterstorff.)

I, like Voizard, think theistic beliefs are not only irrational but also that they often lead to very deleterious human consequences. But in spite of these irrational beliefs, there are plenty of religious believers, both ordinary people and intellectuals, who are plainly rational. Hilary Putnam, whom Voizard quotes to good effect, is a practicing Jew; Bas van Fraassen is a Christian, as are my friends Terence Penelhum and Hendrik Hart, and they all are rational and reasonable. I think they are hung up in a certain way, but they no doubt would return the compliment. This is not *just* a matter of accepting liberal tolerance concerning the privacy of belief, religious or secularist (though it is that as well), and it is not just a matter of opposing repression. We shouldn't try to force either faith or its rejection. But it is a matter of recognizing the at least seeming intractability of argument over religion. Though we shouldn't try to impose belief or unbelief (something that would probably fail anyway), we should recognize that religion is a matter—given the consequences of belief—for serious discussion. There Voizard and I are one.

III

Now, back to the harmful beliefs religious belief often generates. Some of them arise from the more Neanderthal forms of religion—what I have called the superstitious ones. But the more educated Jewish, Christian, and Muslim believers scorn these forms, at least some of them, as much as Voizard and I do. Think here of Søren Kierkegaard or Simone Weil or Karl Barth or Reinhold Niebuhr. Still, there are some such problems for even the non-Neanderthals. Most liberal educated Catholics will tie themselves in knots about same-sex marriage, euthanasia, abortion, prevention practices for AIDS, and the like. So

Voizard's and my point remains in a more modulated form. We both think, though in a reasonably noncompulsive way, that it is a good thing to do as much as we can to wean people away from religion.

One further thing I would like to say to Voizard is that not all religious people are fools, sufficiently infantile intellectually and emotionally to be in need of Pabulum. Some know the same arguments about the rational justifiability of atheism that we do, and take them to be sound. And some have the same indignation that we have about the social horrors flowing from religion—or at least from some religions. It is not difficult to imagine Simone Weil reacting in the same way we do. So is there reason for including a cause reflectively considered that should also become a reason, in virtue of which Hilary Putnam and Bas van Fraassen are religious and Alain Voizard and Kai Nielsen not? Or that Anthony Kenny and Peter Winch are agnostics and we are not? Do we have to start talking about the heart having its reasons that reason does not know?

Sometimes people ask me, "Nielsen, if you were to become religious—let's become counterfactual for a moment—what kind of religion would you go for and how would you be religious?" I answer, if I take the question to be disingenuous, that I would probably be some kind of fideist close to the ways of Wittgenstein's views of the way of doing philosophy and as well in *some* of the ways he thought about religion and a religious view that on my taking of it did not turn its back on the Left or eschew progressive social policies. As for religions, I would *probably* choose something like lesser-vehicle Buddhism. But, like Hilary Putnam, I would travel doctrinally light while recognizing that a doctrineless religion is a contradiction in terms.¹

Why fideism? Because I feel it is more honest and best attuned to what religion, humanly speaking, is. (This may help explain why I spent the last quarter of my book *Naturalism and Religion* discussing Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians on religion. But I don't think Wittgenstein was himself what I have called a Wittgensteinian fideist, though Norman Malcolm and D. Z. Phillips are paradigm cases.)

Consider what Peter Winch (who was a Wittgensteinian, a considerable philosopher in his own right, and, I believe, a nonbeliever) said concerning faith: "Faith does not consist in the holding of a theory based on argument, in thinking that a certain view is justified; it involves thinking in a way in which one recognizes questions of justification to be irrelevant."² I do not think this involves a crucifixion of the intellect, a farewell to reason, an irrationalism, or anything of the kind. Winch was not at all bad at reasoning exactly, perspicuously, and to the point. But he kept in mind Wittgenstein's nonobvious (perhaps) tautology that justification must come to an end or it wouldn't be justification. But that it has to end at some determinate time and in some context does not mean that after a time or in a different context questioning can't start up again or that we could not go up a metalevel. Wittgenstein's tautology does not keep us from being good historicist fallibilists. Remember Rudolf Carnap's remark concerning Wittgenstein's enigmatic claims at the end of the *Tractatus*—

particularly the claim that there are things that we can see but not say. Carnap was said to have remarked, "Well, we can always go up a metalevel."

Perhaps we cannot justify everything. There may be no principle of sufficient reason in all domains or perhaps even in any domain. More importantly, there may be things that believers care about very much and feel no *need* to justify. *Must* it be the case that they are being irrational or unreasonable here? People sometimes write to me and say, "I've gone to divinity school, I've studied philosophy, I've carefully read your books and agree with them, and still the question of God remains important to me, terribly important to me. It is part of the web of my life. I want very much to believe." Such a person might very well be obsessively irrational over that matter. But then again, he might not.

IV

It is these questions, when we are "beyond the proofs" and various justifications for the existence of God, that interest me and that I think interested Winch. Why is it—and not just psychologically why—that Søren Kierkegaard believed and Friedrich Nietzsche did not; that Josiah Royce believed and John Dewey did not; that Reinhold Niebuhr believed and Sidney Hook did not; that Bas van Fraassen believes and I do not; that Norman Malcolm believed and Anthony Kenny does not? We all are probably confused about something or other. That's hardly news. But is what is involved here all or even at all a matter of confusion? Do we have to have clarity—the right way of thinking—just on one side or the other, so that it is a matter of trying to ascertain who has it? Sometimes, yes—but always? That's hard to believe. But then is it a matter of early toilet training or, more seriously, of our psychologies and socialization? Well, perhaps. But Father Victor White has counseled us that if we try to use such considerations argumentatively, we should recognize that that psychological game can be played by both sides. Perhaps, fundamentally, as William James thought, it is a matter of temperament. But then it is easy to go from there to the typical liberal belief that faith is a purely private matter not to be argumentatively discussed—something that has become almost a dogma in our liberal societies.

However, we should take Voizard's points about the Quinean web of belief and about religious belief having its consequences outside of the religious sphere, but also take the very deep Millian-Rawlsian point about toleration. We don't want to start religious wars against or accept Lenin's view that religion is not something to be discussed but something to be abolished.³ At the same time, we do not have to settle for the belief that there is no better or worse way of thinking, concerning these matters. I would like religion to go away and be replaced by an utterly secular society, but as a result of free discussion by everyone involved, as Rawls would like to see what he calls decent hierarchical societies disappear by their being transformed by our deliberating nonevasively together (aware of the burdens of judgment) and coming to conclude that we would like (and regard as

desirable) these societies to be transformed into liberal societies, perhaps even liberal secularist societies. These changes must come about, not by the sword or through sanctions or by indoctrination, but by talking together and coming to view matters in these ways. Is this too hopelessly Whiggish? Lenin certainly thought so. And is it so difficult, but not impossible, to respect people who deeply disagree with us while still honestly deliberating with them and continuing to have firm beliefs about what should be thought and done?

What I would like to know is whether such different reactions concerning religion, as, say, between Norman Malcolm and Anthony Kenny, who philosophically are not at a great distance from each other, are just a matter, as William James thought, of different *temperaments* rooted in their different psychologies and socialization, or are there somewhere considerations that count more for one stance than the other? Or, if “stance” sounds too intellectualistic, substitute “one orientation toward life or another.” Is there anything, no matter how fallibilistically rendered, like getting it more nearly right or more nearly wrong here in some reasonable sense of “right” and “wrong”? And, if so, what are these “considerations of the intellect *and* of the heart”? And again, if we sort this out, what are the respective weights of the head and of the heart?

I hope you will not conclude that Nielsen in his old age is getting “soft on religion.” In my youth I was a bit more partisan about religion, but, unless I thoroughly deceive myself, I have not the slightest inclination to “believe,” as religious people call it. Religion seems to me too fantastic and too humanly unnecessary for that. My atheism runs deeper and is coherently (I think) linked with my naturalistic view of the world. And that view (pace Wolterstorff)—though not in any of its various particular forms—has massive and growing support (though, of course, not unanimous support) from both scientifically and philosophically educated critical intellectuals. George Santayana’s reactions here and his remarks about animal faith have considerable force and deserve studying. And it isn’t that I do not care about anything—that I am some kind of atheistic nihilist. Like Quine, I rejoice in my naturalism, but unlike Quine I care even more about my socialism and egalitarianism.

NOTES

1. Kai Nielsen, “Remarks on Béla Szabados’s ‘After Religion? Reflections on Nielsen’s Wittgenstein’” *Dialogue* 43, no. 4 (2004): 771–96.

2. Peter Winch, “What Has Philosophy to Say to Religion?” *Faith and Philosophy* 19 (2001): 416–30.

3. See my article on Lenin on religion, “Lenin,” in *Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. Tom Flynn (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).