

Consequences

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I believe that Andrea Yates, the Houston mother who is accused of drowning her five children, is a woman of high moral conviction. Andrea Yates believed, as many people do, that there is a God who will judge us and, based on our actions here on Earth, will either reward us with eternal bliss with him in Heaven or condemn us to eternal torment in Hell. She was also convinced, as many are, that God would not condemn to Hell a young child who had no moral ability to choose between good and evil.

The Yates' oldest child, Noah, was only seven at the time of his death. I doubt there are very many who believe that God would actually condemn a seven year old child to eternal damnation for "being bad." Yet Andrea Yates was convinced that if she allowed her children to grow older they would eventually reach the age at which they could be considered responsible for their actions in the eyes of God. At this point their eternal souls would be in jeopardy. What would any loving parent do? In Christ-like fashion she sacrificed her own soul to eternal damnation by killing her children but thereby guaranteed her children eternal life in Heaven with God. How commendable.

I know that virtually every person reading this is now yelling and screaming that Andrea Yates actions were anything but religiously motivated and clearly illogical. Some will claim that she was mentally ill and not responsible for her actions. Others will claim that she is nothing but a cold blooded murderer and knew exactly what she was doing. In either case, they will say, whether due to mental illness or pure evil, what she did was illogical. But I beg to differ. While she may be ill and she may be a murderer, her actions are fully consistent with her belief in God and an afterlife. As reprehensible and disgusting as I personally find her actions, they remain fully consistent with her religious beliefs and flow logically from her religious premises.

What the public's inability to reconcile these facts implies to me is that the public at large is not fully comfortable with the logical ramifications and consequences of their own religious faith. It is said that actions speak louder than words. Many people of faith use this statement to implore the faithful not to simply parrot the words of the scripture but to put their concepts into action. Even the secular among us would agree that simply reciting the Pledge of Allegiance every day or reading the Declaration of Independence or Constitution does not make us good citizens; we must put the ideas embodied in these documents into action. Yet this is what Andrea Yates did: she put her faith into action.

Others, individually and in groups, have put their faith into action with similarly bad reactions from the public. The Heaven's Gate "cult" believed a space ship was coming to Earth to take them to the next level. They prepared themselves and then committed mass suicide in order to leave their bodies behind. The Solar Order also committed mass suicide. The followers of the Rev. Jim Jones and his People's Temple are probably the modern record holders with almost one thousand people committing suicide for their beliefs. Even the suicide terrorists of September eleventh and the seemingly perpetual suicide bombers in Israel and Palestine are putting their faith into action. How many of us can say that we would willingly give up this life for our beliefs? What does this say about the strength of our belief in an afterlife with God?

I'm sure even more yelling and screaming is going on now.

Most of us are ambivalent with regard to our respective faiths. Many of us truly want to believe. We probably try very hard to believe. But many of us likely fall far short of what it supposedly means to really be a good Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, etc. Many of us are also confused about what our faith really compels us to do to be "good" Christians, Jews, etc. So who is to say what is or isn't God's will? Not that long ago some members of the clergy instructed their flock that owning dark skinned people was God's will. Today some religious leaders inform their flocks that it is not merely acceptable but actually a duty to kill Jews or homosexuals or Americans in the name of God. In our own country there are people of faith who act on that faith by killing doctors who perform abortions.

In each of these cases all of the actions that are taken are the logical consequences of each person's belief system. In this country, when that belief system is called Islam we call the people who kill in the name of God terrorists. When that belief system is called Christianity we have a more difficult time deciding what to call those who kill in the name of God.

In the US most folks would agree that every person has both the legal right and the moral justification to kill in self defense. Further, few would argue that we are not morally justified in killing someone who is threatening the lives of our family. Finally, most would probably agree that if we see someone being attacked or murdered, or have information that an attack or a murder is being planned, that we have a moral obligation to intervene at some level. Given the premiss that an anti-abortionist believes that abortion is murder, plain and simple, then they have a moral duty to stop it. QED.

How would any of us react if we discovered that a person we knew had just bombed a building? Later we learned that this building was full of sleeping people and that dozens were killed. How would we react? Shock? Horror? Revulsion? What if we later learned that the building was a barracks full of Nazi soldiers in a concentration camp and that your friend then helped the inmates to escape? Now how would you feel? Would you condemn this person as a cold blooded murderer? Would you call them a terrorist? Or would you honor them as a brave soul of high moral conviction? The concept in the previous two examples is the same: You see murder being committed and you know that it will continue to occur and therefore you must act. The problem we seem to have currently is deciding collectively if abortion is murder or not. Yet agree with them or not, those who believe that abortion is murder are just as morally obligated to act violently to stop it as anyone else would be if they knew that the Jews in their neighborhood were about to be exterminated and preemptive violence against the perpetrators was the only means to stop it. Again, actions speak louder than words.

When a child is born we typically celebrate. Our faith, our culture and our actions are in congruence. When a friend or loved one graduates, be it from kindergarten or grad school, we typically celebrate. Again, our faith, our culture and our actions are in congruence. When a friend or loved one gets married we celebrate. Once again, our faith, our culture and our actions are in congruence. Yet when a friend or loved one dies we grieve: now our culture and our actions are in opposition to the tenets of our faith. While our faith informs us that our loved one is in a better place, that the worries of this life are small potatoes compared to the next, and that we should rejoice - we grieve. Why aren't we all just as happy as we were during the other life transitions? Aren't our actions speaking louder than our words?

The problem with Andrea Yates is that most people are not willing to contemplate the full ramifications of their beliefs. In math and physics you cannot simply ignore the results or the implications of an equation that you do not like. Newton described the universe we live in to a remarkable degree of precision yet his equations were not perfect. These equations generated spurious data when used to describe events at very high velocities or near massive objects. The observed data simply did not match what the theory predicted. While scientists did not like this they had to deal with it. Einstein eventually developed relativity to more accurately describe events across the full spectrum of speeds and masses. Theory was refined to more accurately describe the reality we experience. Similarly, we must do the same with our faith. We must either accept the ramifications of our beliefs (as Andrea Yates, et al, have done) or find a belief system that does not give so much offense.

Of course there is still more yelling and screaming going on at this point. Someone will now inform me that people just can't go around making up religions to suit them - only God can do that. Oh? If that is true I really don't understand where all of the current religions of the world came from. Perhaps God has some sort of multiple-personality disorder or maybe we really are just making it up as we go along. But if we're not allowed to make up a religion which does not allow for or encourage the Andrea Yates or Usama bin Laden's of the world then I suppose we'll all just have to live with the consequences. And that continues to terrify me.