

GIVE ME THAT OLD TIME RELIGION!

This tale, with, as yet, no ending, takes place in a town appropriately named Hamlet. You might wonder why. Well those who supposedly ran the town were all males with an average Practical Intelligence Quotient approximating their average age. It should be understood that the P.I.Q. test used, measured their ability to do things and not their capability and capacity to think, argue or discuss, activities which occupied all of their time. However, one must concede that their thinking ability was suspect since, frequently what they spent time thinking about or discussing resembled those medieval monks' arguments about how many angels could dance on the point of a needle or others of more recent vintage discussing the possibility that the earth is flat.

However, let us give the inhabitants of Hamlet the benefit of the doubt. It is said that God looks after children and fools. One can surmise that if it weren't for the towns' womenfolk, they would have all starved to death and this narrative would never have occurred. Since they did not, there is a tale to tell. This story is not concerned with how they sustained themselves economically. It is one about how they discovered "God" and religion.

It is easy to imagine that in such a social setting, one overtly dedicated to lofty intellectual pursuits, most of the discussions would take on the hue and color of argumentation. Usually, much time is passed debating upon some course of action with decisions hardly ever forthcoming. This was never more true than amongst the male inhabitants of Hamlet or Hamletans as they preferred to be called. In this respect they bore a strong resemblance to most government bureaucracies as indeed these gentlemen would have made ideal bureaucrats. It is now easy to see why they bore a most appropriate appellation. (The good citizens of Denmark need not take offense. The municipality Hamlet is not located in that nation. It would not be prudent to identify the country in which it is situated. Let us just assume that it could be anywhere. No ethnic, national or racial group is immune from such follies.)

Further, and again as with government administrations, there were resident experts on just about any topic one could conjure. No two experts on the same subject ever agreed because to do so would, in their minds, dilute their expertise as perceived by the uninformed public. To further enhance their standing, the language they deliberately and frequently used was obscure enough to ensure that no one would understand what they were mouthing and thus could not question them intelligently. Of course, it is doubtful as to whether they themselves comprehended that jargon. It has been said that no one should ever put much trust in the words of those with a dictionary in their hands.

There is an axiom or perhaps a natural law that has important relevance to our tale. It deals with experts and or expertise.

"The more specialized knowledge required for any particular area, the fewer the number of experts." Thus there are very few expert plumbers, electricians, opticians and optometrists, dentists, janitors, computer programmers, etc. As the perceived specialized knowledge diminishes, such as with economics, political science, psychology, the fine arts, the law and medicine, the number of experts increase exponentially. And when the perceived specialized knowledge required is zilch, such as with philosophy, theology and politics, everyone becomes an expert.

So it was with the male Hamletans. They were all self proclaimed experts on matters pertaining to philosophy and theology and as could be expected the town was divided into three more or less equal factions, namely those totally deistic, those totally atheistic and those who waffled between the two, pompously calling themselves agnostic. The leader of the first camp was Theo, a powerful orator. The head of the second was Athos, an equally skilled public speaker. Agnos, the principal spokesperson for the agnostics was nothing more than an artful dodger who was never able to answer a direct question and, to say the least, was a horrible discussant.

During most of their public debates, Agnos was astute enough to keep his own council and permit Theo and Athos to go at it. They had been at it for so long they could by now anticipate what the other was going to say, while knowing that their opponent also knew what they were going to argue. Yet, they could not help themselves. They were as deeply mired in their rhetoric as an insect is in a spider's web. They were just not able to extricate themselves from their preposterous verbiage. Their debates were becoming so boring, their audiences had just about dwindled from nearly all the Hamletans to a handful. It seemed to take them an eternity to realize that they were arguing in an empty room.

Something had to be done. During one of the few civil conversations between the two their dilemma was discussed and solutions sought. One after another, proposals were rejected. It seemed like a hopeless cause until Athos came up with the germ of an idea.

"We should propose to our fellow Hamletans some course of action which would allow us to debate our respective ideas under a very different rubric. What do you think?"

Theo was startled by its originality. "Let me think on it," he rejoined. For the next hour he concentrated and then with a fatuous smile he proclaimed.

"First, I must commend you on your very innovative idea. I propose that we ask for a referendum to decide whether we should build a temple of worship or a laboratory designed to prove or disprove evolutionary theory. This would afford us a very pointed theme for our debates, one in which the public would have a very vested interest."

Athos being less contemplative than Theo immediately responded.

"Your notion is inspired. Let us make it even more explicit. Let the referendum decide only whether a temple of worship should be fabricated with taxpayer's money."

Perhaps discerning an advantageous position during the future debates with Athos, Theo quickly acquiesced. They enthusiastically, and perhaps for the first and probably the last time agreed immediately on a joint course of action. Together they put their proposal to the Hamletans at a public meeting where it was straightway accepted, more than likely with an anticipation of a series of rousing and entertaining disputations.

Alas nothing changed. While the debates were well attended, they were as tedious as ever. What follows is what transpired during their last debate and to a large degree exemplified all their previous ones. Theo started and summarily asserted the following.

"First it is obvious that there has to be a cause, that is a primal cause for existence. While we might never be able to comprehend it, it must exist outside the boundaries of

what we understand to be the space-time continuum and thus is not limited by its parameters.

It follows that it must also be all-powerful. It therefore behooves us to be humble before such a being, to worship it and ask for its guidance through the medium of prayer. After all, this primal cause must have had a purpose when it created our universe and us. This purpose gives meaning to our existence, a meaning which we must endeavor to discover by dutifully serving it. It is fair to assume that since we have been created with the means to do both good and evil, and the ability to distinguish between the two, whatever purpose our existence has must be related to them. Also, since we have been provided with the where-with-all to survive, prosper and enjoy the fruits of our labor and existence, the deity I have been expounding upon, - yes deity! – must be generous and benevolent and serve as a role model for us. It is therefore only fitting and proper that a temple be erected in his honor.”

Athos's responded in his usual acerbic and long winded manner.

“What I find most astounding about Theo's oratory is his assertion that God is generous and benevolent and as such should serve as a role model for us. I can only wonder in which world, or better still in which illusory world, Theo resides. How benevolent is this God that he/she/it (Theo has never been clear about his God's sexuality or lack thereof.) created a world and a universe in which natural mayhem and destruction reign as exemplified by novas, meteorite collisions, earthquakes accompanied by destructive tidal waves, volcanoes, hurricanes, tornadoes and typhoons, naturally occurring toxins, deadly micro-organisms as well as various other fauna and flora equally perilous. It is as if God created an obstacle course where one slip is fatal.

But perhaps the deadliest thing this kindhearted deity produced were the predatory animals of which humankind is, without a doubt, the greediest, hungriest and by far the most ferocious. No other animal in existence has slain as much of its own kind as humans have. It is a cruel God that hardwired us to kill since all fauna and some flora can only survive by consuming other living things. Was this God's plan? If so what a heartless entity God is and what a barbaric sense of humor resides there.

I would like to believe in a Deity as Theo does and to ascribe to that entity the characteristics that Theo has painted. If I did believe than I would subscribe to Theo's views. Simply put, I cannot believe because I wish to, especially when the evidence about God's benevolence does not exist. We live in a world in which humans despoil the environment, exploit others, and kill en masse, all because of excessive greed, and groundless fear. It is the ultimate irony that our world is one of unbelievable inequity, injustice and cruelty residing along with indescribable beauty, munificence and creativity. That is the ultimate horror because we live under the delusion that we have free will.

Theo would argue that the world is as we make it, not as we find it. That is unadorned nonsense. However I must admit that the argument about God's supposed loving kindness is highly subjective since traits such as beauty, love, generosity, sagacity, to name a few, are in the eye of the beholder.

There is a much more logical reason for discarding Theo's position. He argues for the existence of a creator from a metaphysical theorem namely that of “cause and effect”. I do not quarrel with his use of that proposition but only with his lack of consistency. Why

does he not ask what caused the primal cause? His response has been that since the primal cause exists outside the parameters of space-time, it is not subject to the same limitations as all that occupy space-time. How does he know this? The truth is he does not. Ergo, he is basing his whole philosophy or theology on an unsubstantiated supposition.

However, let us take his logic one step further. If there is a cause for his primal cause, there must also be a cause for that cause as well and so on and so on. Thus, we can perceive an infinite progression of primal causes. If that is so, why not assume that there is also an infinite regression of causes. Thus there would appear to be a hierarchy of primal causes. If evolution is correct, the logical primal cause just below Theo's is the most primitive form of life, namely viruses which then becomes the highest form of life and we humans the lowest. (The way things are going viruses may be the only living things that will survive human folly.) Now this is patently ridiculous. Perhaps we have to discard the notion of 'cause and effect' and replace it with something like functional relationships."

At this point, Agnos, also a gifted amateur mathematician, interjected.

"The notion of an infinite progression and regression of primal causes bears investigation. What if I came up with a mathematical function for that entity and then integrated it from minus infinity to plus infinity as is often done with the calculus. This would provide us with a more definite and unified primal cause."

He was so taken with this task that he sped out of the hall and shortly after disappeared. The last anyone ever heard of him was that he is sitting on some mountain top in the Himalayas, meditating and obsessed with trying to write down a mathematical function describing 'God'. He might still be there.

At this point in the proceedings, someone in the audience screwed up enough courage, stood up and lambasted Theo and Athos.

"I am sure that most of us here are fed up with your childish ranting, and your very obscure, abstract argumentation that no one here understands. If you want to convince us of anything, please change your ways. For example, if either of you can come up with a laudable story or tale to buttress your position, you will be listened to with far greater attention than you are currently receiving. The one with the better story will win the debate as the referendum results will indicate."

"We will try," Theo and Athos replied, whereupon the meeting broke up.

Genis, who had been paying rapt attention from the front row and who also was a budding author, immediately went to his very advanced computer and using a new program asked the computer to create a tale that would describe the origins of our universe and the meaning of life. The computer complied with a very lengthy epic story, one that never seemed to end, one that contained many plots, subplots and parables. It started so.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.
And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,

And God said, Let there be light; and there was light.

Despite the many inconsistencies and gaps in the story line, this epic was the first to tell a story that people could relate to. It assuaged their fears about the meaning of existence and death. It was a resounding success. As one best seller deserves another, four more equally successful sequels were written by four different computers run by chaps named Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And that is the gospel truth!

Postscripts:

1. Although the Deists easily won the referendum, the Temple was never built in Hamlet. At the time they voted for one, they didn't realize they had no funds to build it. When they finally did start receiving royalties for the epic saga, they decided to build a theater instead. There is one drama that is played every year. It has to do with a rather indecisive Prince of Denmark.
2. The atheists and the agnostics were never able to conjure up a story to tell. Too bad!

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April, 1998

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