

Religion is like the music of Céline Dion

The Cranky Professor

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Céline Dion's music is hard to listen to. It's unimaginative and trite. It trades exclusively in melody and large emotions, but the melodies are banal and the emotions maudlin or hysterical.

Lots of people enjoy Céline Dion's music. They enjoy crying to it or exalting along with it. They buy Mme Dion's records and attend her concerts. Céline Dion's music brings much happiness to their lives.

Religious beliefs cannot be sustained by argument. "God understands me and loves me"; "Whatever happens, I am safe in God's hands"; "The universe is unfolding as it should, according to God's plan." No argument in favour of any of these statements goes even a millimetre toward showing that statement to be true. It's not simply that arguments in favour of God's existence are inconclusive—it's that they don't even get off the ground. (Any introduction to philosophy text will explain why.) To be religious is to hold beliefs in violation of one's best standards of credibility.

Actually, it is worse than that. God, to be a fit object of worship, must be the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of all that exists. To fulfil these functions, God must be omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly loving and perfectly just. But no being could be either omniscient or omnipotent, as the concepts of omniscience and omnipotence are internally inconsistent. Moreover, no being perfectly loving or perfectly just capable of creating a universe would create a universe like this one, a universe marked by unmerited and unredeemed suffering.

Lots of people are happy to have religious beliefs. They take inspiration from or solace in their belief that God understands them and loves them, that whatever happens they are safe in God's hands, that they are playing their role, however humble, within God's magnificent plan. Their religion brings much happiness to their lives.

I love to talk music. I love to trade judgements of taste and give and receive arguments for and against the merits of musicians and pieces of music. But though I'm happy to criticise Céline Dion's music and to disparage the taste some people have for it, I would never for the life of me attempt to prevent Mme Dion from singing or a fan from listening. Heaven forbid! I'm sad for those people whose hopes were dashed when Mme Dion announced she wouldn't accept an invitation to perform in Halifax. (The fault here, of course, is Mme Dion's; it does not belong to those who publicly expressed their opinion of Mme Dion's music.) I hope that when I talk music my criticisms and commendations, if sound, will affect people and alter their tastes, though I realize this hope is vain. But I wouldn't dream of imposing my taste by force.

I would like for people to give up their religions and for religion to disappear. To be

religious is to believe against your best standards for belief. It is to hold one's identity hostage to fantasies. It is to try to satisfy one's needs for belonging or purpose by denying the sufficiency of one's life here and now. It is to hold oneself answerable to traditions or authorities beyond oneself. To be without religion, on the other hand, is to attempt to see things just the way they are. It's to find one's identity in realities, not in mythologies. It is to pursue contentment entirely in the connections and purposes one forges with friends, neighbours, and colleagues. It is to hold oneself answerable only to oneself and to one's ideals. Atheism is much superior to religion.

I would never for the life of me attempt to prevent a person from practicing religion. I wouldn't — up to a limit, at least — attempt to prevent a person from raising their children within a religion, sad as I'm made by the thought of a child's head being stuffed with mush and nonsense, with fears, and with emotional needs for transcendence. I hope that sound arguments against religion find their mark and alter people's lives. But I expect that religion will continue to darken lives for many decades to come, if not forever.

Though I stand against religion, I insist that the fight be fair on both sides, conducted without force but only through argument and example.

Some people think argument and example are modes of force. They would have those who criticise Céline Dion or religion speak their piece far from the fans of Mme Dion or far from the faithful. Either that or be silent. Hearing criticism can hurt a person's feelings and disrupt her projects; people need protection from such assault. Here I do not hesitate to use the force of politics, economics, and law to preserve and extend freedom of expression, including the freedom to criticise when criticism hurts and disrupts. Creating and maintaining an open society is worth using force.

Why be an atheist? Well, atheism is to religion as the Velvet Underground is to Céline Dion.