

Chapter 4 *Is the Pope Atheist?*

After the pope John Paul II was shot in 1981, he was rushed to the emergency room of the Gemelli clinic, more precisely the Agostino Gemelli University Polyclinic, where he met a collection of some of the most skilled doctors —modern doctors— Italy could produce, in contrast with the neighboring public hospital with lower quality care. The Gemelli clinic became a designated destination for him and his successors upon hyperventilation, accelerating heartbeat, appearance of sweat in his forehead or similar potential harbingers of risk to his health and the Catholic church.

At no point during the emergency period did the drivers of the ambulance consider taking John Paul The Second to a chapel for a prayer, or some equivalent form of intercession with the Lord, to give the sacred first right of refusal for the treatment. And not one of his successors seemed to have considered giving precedence to dealing with the Lord with the hope of some miraculous intervention in place of the trappings of modern medicine.

This is not to say that the bishops, cardinals, priests and mere laypeople didn't pray and ask the Lord for help, nor that they *believed* that prayers weren't subsequently answered, given the remarkable recovery of the saintly man. But it remains that nobody in the Vatican seems to ever take chances by going first to the Lord, subsequently to the doctor, and, what is even more surprising, nobody seemed to see a conflict with such inversion of the logical sequence. In fact the opposite course of action would be considered madness. In fact it would be the opposite to the tenets of the Catholic church, as it would be considered voluntary death, which is banned.

Note that the putative predecessors of the pope, the various Roman emperors, had a similar policy of going to the treatment first, and having recourse to theology after, although some of their treatments were packaged as delivered by the deities, such as the Greek god Asclepius or the weaker Roman equivalent Vediovis.

REVELATION OF PREFERENCES

One of the most potent ideas economists have left us is the notion of *revelation of preferences*. You will not have an idea about what people *really* think, what predicts people's actions, merely by asking them. Words don't count, only deeds do. Words are cheap unless people take actions for them. What matters, in the end, is what they pay for goods, not what they say they "think" about them. People cannot predict their own actions.

The same applies to belief. Or what we call belief. And in this case what is called "religious" belief. It doesn't appear to matter during emergencies.

Try to imagine a powerful head of an "atheist" sect, equivalent to the pope in rank, suffering the same health exigency. He would have arrived at Gemelli (not some second rate hospital in Latium) at the same time as John Paul. He would have had the same cloud of "atheist" well-wishers come to give him something called "hope" (or "wish") in their atheistic language, with some self-consistent narrative about what they would like or "wish" to happen to their prominent man. The atheists would have been less colorfully dressed; the vocabulary would have been a bit less ornamental as well, but actions that require immediacy during crises and emergencies would have been nearly identical.

Clearly, there are a lot of differences between the Most Holy Father and an atheist of equivalent rank, but those are about matters that are nonlife threatening. His Holiness has given up on certain activities in the bedroom, other than reading and praying, though at least a dozen of his predecessors, the most famous one being Alexander IV, fathered a great deal of children, at least one when he was in his sixties, and that by the conventional (not the immaculate) route. (There have been many playboy popes). His Holiness spends considerable time praying, organizing every minute of his life according to certain practices, with exigencies. But his Holiness is most certainly the most Christian: many people have less of their time devoted to "religion", and many atheists who get engaged in Yoga and similar collective activities also spend considerable time doing what to a Martian would be similar ritualistic gestures.

There was a period, the Albigenian crusade, during which Catholics were engaged in the mass killing of heretics. They killed indiscriminately, heretics and nonheretics, as a time saver and complexity reduction approach. The motto was that it did not matter, since "The Lord would be able to tell them apart". These times are long gone. Most Christians, when it comes to central

medical, ethical, and decision-making situations (like myself, an Orthodox Christian) do not act differently from atheists. Those who do (such as the Christian scientists sects) are few. Most Christians have accepted the modern trappings of democracy, oligocracy, dictatorship of sort, all these heathen political regimes, in place of theocracies, confining the “belief” to matters that would make their decisions for central matters indistinguishable from those of an atheist.

So we define atheism in deeds, or secularism, in how much one’s actions differ from those of an atheistic person, not his beliefs and other decorative and symbolic matters, which we insist do not count.

And further, we should not worry about people’s religions but their tolerance: it is not my business (nor that of any government, any ruler, any authority) what people “believe”, what matters is what they do to others.

“TAWK” AND CHEAP “TAWK”

The first principle we make:

There is a difference between beliefs that are decorative and a different sort of beliefs, those that map to action.

There is no difference between them in words, except that the true difference reveals itself in risk taking, having something at stake, something one could lose in case one is wrong.

And the lesson, by rephrasing the principle:

How much you truly “believe” in something can only be manifested through what you are willing to risk for it.

But this merits continuation. The fact that there is this decorative component to belief, life, these strange rules followed outside the Gemelli clinics of the world merits a discussion. What are these for? Can we truly understand their function? Are we confused about their function? Do we mistake their rationality? Can we use them instead to *define* rationality?

The next chapter is about the nondecorative in decorative beliefs.