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Friendly Freethinker: Is Our Faith or Freethought Mature or Immature?

By Chris Highland
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I'm not a fan of the Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the Christian scriptures. With his very black and white, dark and light, worldview and his dogmatic theologizing and spiritualizing of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, Paul created a Church and a Christ in his image. For example, in his letter to the Galatians he makes this incredible claim: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." Imagine someone saying that today. "See me and you see God; hear me and you hear God." This has emboldened some preachers to claim they speak the inspired Word straight from the mouth of God because they are "filled with the Spirit"? This is the kind of faith encouraged by Paul. How can we square this high-minded, self-righteous brand of faith with the down-to-earth ethical humanism of Jesus of Nazareth (whom Paul never even met)?

Could it be that Paul's dominating and defensive form of "mature faith" was actually quite immature? Could it be what many call "mature faith" today is not mature at all? Consider Paul's own paternal approach to his "children in faith."

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, their self-appointed father in faith, wrote: "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual, but as worldly—as infants in Christ." Other than the obvious condescension in this statement, it implies that Paul treated new believers as children who were not ready for his grown up kind of instruction. He says: 'I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for solid food.' These young converts were not just children, they were babies, theological toddlers. So their doctrinal daddy was spoon-feeding them lessons, what he decided they could swallow and stomach at their totally dependent age. We might imagine hearing a few dissatisfied grumbles in the congregation—even feelings of being offended by the preaching apostle's words—especially as he continues: "In fact, you are still not ready, for you are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and dissension among you, are you not worldly? Are you not walking in the way of man?" The community has problems with sensitive feelings, acting as if they are normal, natural human beings! This offends their strict father, who scolds and spiritually spansks them.

How often do we hear representatives of various religious traditions complain that someone or something was "offensive"? This highly sensitive spirituality reacts with hurt and anger, even violence, to what they believe hurts their faith. They feel wounded by certain words or actions that are labeled "blasphemy!" This is especially true when their argument suggests the Great God of the Universe is somehow hurt by a book, a film, a cartoon (any critical artistic expression). A more mature believer might respond with humility or humor, without being defensive.

Frequently we see this offense leading to legislation, attempting to impose restrictions on everyone (without thought, of course, to how offensive that is to those who don't share the same sensitive beliefs). From my perspective, a person has every right to speak up and express their view that something bothers them or hurts their feelings, that they feel offended by something they see or hear. I think it's reasonable to listen to these complaints and acknowledge how and why someone feels hurt. Then, it is also reasonable to remind the offended person that free expression is a universal right, that what they believe hurts their faith or their deity is not sufficient to deny the beliefs, feelings or expressions of others.



As I see it, a mature religious outlook rationally responds to a playful parody poking fun at something they reverence. They may not like something said or done, yet they know in a free society even offensive things have to be given room. A mature faith isn't defensive or offensive (pushy). Something may be felt as an "attack" on faith, but unless there is violence, that challenge may simply be an honest critique framed in artistic form. I don't appreciate everything I see or hear (nonbelievers are regularly disrespected). Sometimes it's clear someone is purposely trying to offend some group—sacred or secular—which seems rather immature. I wonder why they feel the need to go beyond poking to "cutting"—why they want to hurt the feelings of others. At times I will raise questions—as I do here with Paul—that I know will bother some folks. We can try to be aware of the "spiritually sensitive" and perhaps immature beliefs of others. But I don't think this precludes saying what we feel should be said. Once again, I think a mature faith, or grown-up freethought, can handle it.

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