

# On Preaching and Practicing: Religious Beliefs and Behavior

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## Do we preach what we practice, or practice what we preach?

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A GREAT DEAL of thinking and research in the study of religion, as well as most church programs, operate on the assumption that religious beliefs produce, influence, and significantly direct the behavior of those people who hold the beliefs. This line of reasoning sits very comfortably with a rational model of man. Man is seen as choosing those behaviors which are implied by, or consistent with, his beliefs, attitudes, and values. A derivative of this basic assumption is the idea that a change in a person's attitudes or beliefs will produce a change in his behaviors. However, has it been empirically demonstrated that religious beliefs actually do guide and direct human behavior? This assumption has dominated the study of religion and has influenced the approach pastors have taken to problems of social and individual change. Is it valid?

Since the early 1960's, a substantial volume of research examining the impact of religious beliefs on human behavior has been published. Reviews of this research reveal very little support for the proposition that religious beliefs influence human behavior to any signifi-

cant extent.<sup>1</sup> The model of man described above finds little support in the results of research done to determine the impact of religious beliefs on human behavior.

The failure to find beliefs and attitudes to be the source of behaviors has been reported in other areas of research as well. Ehrlich reviewed the literature on the relation between prejudicial attitudes and behavior, and reports that "prejudice is a poor predictor of discrimination."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Festinger could find only three articles in the literature of social psychology which reported attempts to test the impact of attitude change on behavior. None of the research supported the hypothesis that attitude change produces behavior change.<sup>3</sup> Abelson, upon reviewing the evidence for the influence of attitudes on behavior, concludes: "I have severely questioned whether information has any effect upon attitudes and whether attitudes have any effect upon behavior."<sup>4</sup> Thus, there appears to be a general erosion of the empirical base of the proposition that beliefs influence behavior. The relation between beliefs and behavior should be treated as problematic, given the paucity of supporting evidence.

In addition to the lack of empirical support, there are a number of analytical considerations which reduce the likelihood that religious beliefs exert much influence over behavior. There are two basic issues: Are people trained and helped to do the very difficult job of acting on the basis of their religious beliefs? Are beliefs more likely to be justifications for action, rather than causes of action?

### The Difficulty of Relating Beliefs and Behaviors

Rather than being a natural instinct, etched into our genes, acting on the basis of our religious beliefs and attitudes is a behavioral trait which must be acquired. Indeed, far from being natural, it is very difficult to deduce an appropriate behavior from a given belief. The labyrinthine arguments of theological ethicists testify eloquently to this difficulty. For example, there is ample disagreement concerning the interpretation of the fairly straightforward commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." This confusion only increases when the behavioral implications of less-clear religious norms or beliefs are sought. Moreover, there is the problem of establishing which beliefs are

relevant to the choice of behaviors. Balancing the implications of beliefs with contradictory behavioral implications is also very difficult.

On the other hand, religious beliefs and norms tend to be so highly abstracted that their behavioral implications are far from clear and specific. These difficulties lead to inconsistencies and contradictions, both within individual ethical positions and those taken by experts trained in deriving ethical positions from religious belief. For example, Jesus is reported to have said at one time, "All those not for us are against us" (Matthew, 12:30), and at another time, "All those not against us are for us" (Luke, 9:50). Similarly, in 1958, after the first satellites were orbited, the editor of the *Banner* (the denominational weekly paper of the Christian Reformed Church) thundered that man was not meant to venture into space. He argued that man had been given dominion over Earth, but not over the Universe (*cf.*, Genesis, 1:28-29). Strangely, in 1969, when the moon landing was accomplished, the *Banner* editorial praised the heroic endeavors of those fine Americans who, by going to another part of God's creation, have increased our knowledge of God by increasing our knowledge of the things He made. Thus, the ethical pronouncements of experts are not always consistent, even within the same theological tradition.

Given the difficulties involved in deducing behaviors from religious beliefs, unless people are socialized to act on the basis of their beliefs, it is unreasonable to expect beliefs to influence behavior. Are church members trained and helped to live according to their beliefs? A recent survey found that, "when we analyzed the results (of a survey of ministers), we began to see why Christian congregations have been unshaken by years of sermonizing. It turns out that whether or not people listen, there is not much to hear. Most sermons rarely touch on controversial moral or ethical issues. More than a third of the clergy said that never in their entire ministries had they taken a pulpit stand on a political issue. (We stress issue because we wish to distinguish it from taking stands on political candidates. Political issues are not just partisan matters, but include controversies like school prayers, racism, drug legislation, sexual conduct, divorce, and pornography.) Even the clergy who had commented on social issues were not particularly vocal. Only 25% of those surveyed had in the last year given at least five sermons

which dealt with controversial topics."<sup>5</sup> If the clergy are not willing to help people to think through vital issues of the day in terms of religious beliefs, are we to expect the layman to do this himself? If the professional is not led to behavior by virtue of his beliefs, then it is not surprising that the common man is not either.

The lack of realistic, living role models may also reduce the impact of religious beliefs on behavior. Are there examples for people to follow in the attempt to live according to one's beliefs? Are they believable? Those courageous few who do act on the basis of their convictions are commonly treated as deviant. They are either canonized as saints or condemned as villains. Some, before they are canonized, are killed, as in the cases of Jesus, St. Thomas More, St. Thomas à Becket, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. It is often easier to extol the virtues of a dead saint than to have to deal with a man who lives by his convictions.

Thus, there are several reasons why a close deductive connection from religious beliefs to behavior should not be expected. There is the problem of being trained to deduce behaviors from beliefs; there is a lack of assistance from those whose job it is to do this sort of thing; and deducing which behavior is most properly suited to one's relevant beliefs and convictions is a most difficult intellectual task. It may just be that we have deluded ourselves in emphasizing the causal role of beliefs, attitudes, and values in human behavior.

#### Religious Beliefs as Legitimation

Religious beliefs, attitudes, and values may be more often used to justify behavior to someone who raises the question, "Why did you do that?," than to motivate behavior. When such a question is asked, a selection is made from the person's repertoire of justifications (including religious beliefs, attitudes, and values) in order to account for his behavior. Some of these justifications may accurately reflect the causes of that behavior. Others may simply be post factum rationales for behavior. There is a substantial difference between justifying one's behavior and describing the etiology of that behavior. Insofar as religious beliefs, attitudes, and values are used as post factum rationales for behaviors and decisions, they should not be expected to bear a close causal relation to the behavior they are intended to justify.

Thus, it may well be that religious

beliefs are more often used to legitimate than actually to motivate behavior. This is not surprising to one who has watched theologians in action. A decision is made to act in a particular way, and then beliefs are marshalled to legitimate the action or viewpoint. Given the vagaries, complexities, and inconsistencies of Christian theology and the Bible, it is easy to legitimate nearly anything from anti-Semitism to free-love; from pacifism to holy wars. What is nearly impossible is to derive a consistent prescription for behavior. Christianity is not alone in this. Watch Marxists exegete Marx in order to legitimate their actions. However, it does not appear either analytically or empirically likely that religious beliefs directly produce behavior to any significant extent.

Thus, while the rationale model of man lies behind and informs a great deal of research in the study of religion, there is virtually no reliable evidence to support this view of man. Not only is it nearly impossible to predict behaviors from a knowledge of religious beliefs, it is very difficult to develop clear, non-contradictory behavioral prescriptions from religious beliefs. A more likely interpretation of the relation between religious belief and human behavior is found in the use of religious beliefs to legitimate behaviors motivated by other causes. Given these difficulties, it is very unlikely that more or better research will establish a significant causal role for religious beliefs in human behavior.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Gary D. Bouma, "Assessing the Impact of Religion: A Critical Review," *Sociological Analysis*, 31:172-179, Winter, 1970; and Gary D. Bouma, "Beyond Lenski: A Critical Review of Recent 'Protestant Ethic' Research," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 12:141-155, June, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Howard J. Ehrlich, "Attitudes, Behavior, and the Intervening Variables," *American Sociologist*, 4:29-34, February, 1969. See, also, A. W. Wicker, "Attitudes vs. Actions," *Journal of Social Issues*, 25:41-78, Winter, 1969; and Irwin Deutscher, ed., *What We Say/What We Do: Sentiments and Acts* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Leon Festinger, "Behavioral Support for Opinion Change," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24:404-417, Fall, 1964.

<sup>4</sup> Robert P. Abelson, "Are Attitudes Necessary?" (New Haven, Conn.: Department of Psychology, Yale University, 1970), mimeographed.

<sup>5</sup> Rodney Stark, et al., "Sounds of Silence," *Psychology Today*, 3:38-41, April, 1970.