

EVANGELISM & SOCIO-RATIONAL FACTORS

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Preview: *Since Christianity can be shown to be rational, logical and historically reliable, why do people still reject our message? Dr. Cox describes an additional factor that must be considered as we make and defend our presentation of the Christian message.*

Evangelism & Socio-Rational Factors

In a previous article, our primary focus was on the importance of rationality — informal logic, to be exact — in doing the work of evangelism. In this article, I am going to extend the concept of rationality to include that which is considered a sociologically acceptable belief. Normally, when someone finds a particular belief to be “rational,” they mean that the belief in question at least meets the following criteria: the belief is not self-contradictory; the belief is supported by relevant evidence; and anyone who adheres to this particular belief is willing to abandon it if there are good reasons to do so. However, in a sense, there is another factor of rationality that we must consider when we propagate beliefs that we want others to accept. I will call this factor the “socio-rational” component of rationality. Let me explain what is meant by this concept and how it affects evangelism.

Every society has within its corporate culture of rationality certain things that it holds to be true and acceptable. These are the things that regulate conversation and behavior. In general, most people in our society will give general assent to these things. In other words, most people, apart from any detailed argumentation, accept these principles without hesitation. By extension, everything else must conform to these assumptions or it cannot be accepted as rational. For example, if you had a casual encounter with someone, it would make no sense to tell them that you just saw a green Martian. Any sort of meaningful conversation could not transpire on the subject of green Martians in our society, for most people do not accept the existence of green Martians — it is not an acceptable belief for people in our society to hold. Similarly, if we move from beliefs to behavior, you would find that to speak of marrying one’s own biological daughter or son would be both an unacceptable topic of discussion as well as unacceptable behavior. Both of these examples just do not fit into what has become the socio-rational

components of our society. Aldous Huxley illustrates in a graphic and honest way what is meant by socio-rational factors when he states:

I had motives for not wanting the world to have meaning; consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption... For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation.

The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic system and liberation from a certain system Of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom.¹

Thus, as Huxley has so aptly stated, apart from detailed argumentation that reflects a strict adherence to the laws of logic, there are regulative principles at work in our society that control the acceptance and rejection of beliefs and behaviors.

As we do evangelism, it would be nice if all we had to contend with was formal rationalism: whether a belief is self-consistent, whether a position takes into account relevant evidence for its defense, and whether the belief could be changed if we happen to come upon good reasons for doing so. However, as it turns out, this is only one part of what we mean when we say we need to be rational. This kind of rationality is rationality in the formal sense. It is true that we need to be rational in this way, but we also need to consider the socio-rational element in doing evangelism. Consider the following example from the realm of theology concerning the death of Christ.

One of the early theories of the Atonement said that the death of Christ was a device whereby God delivered men from the power of the Devil.² This particular theory held that God tricked the Devil into accepting Christ, whom the Devil would not be able to destroy, in exchange for men and women, whom he could destroy.

My only hope of changing your mind would involve my recognition of the non-formal rational factors affecting your opinion.

This theory explains and defends a particular belief about the nature of Christ's death for the sin of humankind, but it only works as an explanation for those with a socio-rational framework that believes (1) that the Devil exists and (2) that when someone is doing evil, it is acceptable or appropriate to defeat them by deception. In other words, this theory presupposes a certain set of beliefs on the part of both its proponents and of the people these proponents are trying to address and convince of their theory. However, if the socio-rational framework does not accept either the existence of the Devil or the deception of people who perform evil, then this theory will basically fall upon deaf ears.

Therefore, as we do evangelism, we are going to have to be rational while being simultaneously aware of the socio-rational framework about us. Every propositional statement that we make about our position assumes a certain framework for its being understood and accepted. Thus, as we consider what we are saying to people in

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our presentation of the gospel and how we are saying it, we also have to consider the socio-rational framework of the culture surrounding both us and them. For instance, central to any presentation of the gospel is the concept of "sin." Thus, we must ask ourselves whether or not our culture has the ability to understand that human beings are essentially defective. If we conclude that the socio-rational framework of our culture will no longer accept the concept of a defective human nature, as we normally present it, we will, then, need to consider how we will express this idea within their existing thought patterns. To say that the socio-rational framework no longer makes it possible to communicate about a subject so basic as the Christian doctrine of sin does not mean that this concept cannot be communicated in our culture. It just means that any communication will need to take into account the existing thought patterns of the culture while, at the same time,

remaining true to the concept that one is trying to communicate. Therefore, we will have to consider what they do accept and why they accept it. The Christian faith must not only be rational, but it also must meet the test of socio-rationality: If we are going to be heard, we must be able to place our truth within society's framework.

A fast and simple way to discover the socio-rational elements of the community in which you are propagating the Christian message is to ask yourself what it is that this community takes for granted. In other words, what does it accept as true apart from any argumentation? Whatever a community takes for granted is what it uses to regulate beliefs and behavior. For instance, many denominations are divided over doctrinal issues apart from any real discussion of those issues. All one has to do is mention such topics as baptism, predestination, and prophecy topics such as tribulational perspectives to see evidence of culturally (and denominationally) determined socio-rationality. Indeed, if I attempted to extend a discussion on any one of these topics, your own socio-rational factors about them may hinder my attempt to discuss them with you. My only hope of changing your mind would involve my recognition of the non-formal rational factors affecting your opinion. Likewise, if we are to penetrate the minds and lives of people with our message, we are going to have to place the essential elements of our message within what they take for granted to be true about the world. Of course, as we do this, we will not only begin to evangelize them, but we will also begin to change the accepted truths of the cultural mindset.

¹Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means: An Inquiry into the Nature of Ideas and into the Methods Employed for Their Realization* (New York: Harper and Row, 1937), pp. 312, 316.

²Origen on Matthew 16:8. cf. Cave, S. *The Doctrine of the Work of Christ* London, 1937, p. 97.