FROM CALVINISM TO FREETHOUGHT: The Road Less Traveled

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Précis: Born into a Calvinist family, shaped by a Calvinist catechism training, educated in the Calvinist private school system, and nurtured by a community that prized its Calvinist systematic theology, I was a Calvinist through and through. For 31 years my teaching career was deeply rooted in the Calvinism I had inherited from my community. During most of that time it was a fruitful and satisfying experience. Nonetheless, stimulated in part by the manner in which some members of that community responded to my efforts to practice what I had learned from my best teachers, I eventually felt the need to extend my intellectual exploration into philosophical territories far outside the one provided by Calvinism. Did I complete the lengthy journey from Calvinism to Freethought? The listener will be the judge.

CRAFTING BELIEF SYSTEMS: Two contrasting approaches

It is a mark of the human mind to hold a set of beliefs about "Reality" — what the real world is like, and how we, both as individuals and as a species, fit into the larger picture.

Our belief systems provide us with answers to a list of highly varied questions. Many are the traditional "big questions" of the sort: Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is the universe the way it is, and not something different? How did it get here? Is the universe all there is? Does the universe need an Ultimate Source of being? Is that source "God"? If so, what is God like? And how would we know? Why is there suffering, death, and grief? Is there life after death?

Other portions of our belief system are concerned with matters of more local and personal concern: Does my life have meaning, or purpose? Who is my friend? Who is my enemy? To what "tribe" (community) do I belong? How is my tribe defined? Ethnically? Racially? Politically? Geographically? Professionally? Religiously? What do I owe to the tribal powers? To what persons or tribe must I remain most loyal? What would happen to me if I began to question what my tribe believes or does? What if I developed different loyalties? What will happen to me when I die?

There are many ways to go about the process of crafting these "portraits of reality." We will contrast two quite different strategies — one is rooted in the acceptance of a tribal authority (in this case a religious institution); the other is rooted in creative exploration by individual human minds free from externally-imposed constraints.

I. The requirements of institutional Calvinism (as specified by the *Form of Subscription* that I was required to sign upon accepting an appointment to the Faculty of Calvin College in 1967). Calvinism is certainly not the only organized religion with a strong creedal approach, but it is the one with which I am best acquainted by experience. From here on, then, let *Calvinism* stand for *any organized religion and its creedal requirements.*

The *Form of Subscription*

To be signed by professors, ministers, evangelists, elders, and deacons when ordained and/or installed in office. The original Form of Subscription was adopted by the Synod of Dort in 1618-19.

We, the undersigned, … declare truthfully …
that we sincerely believe
that all the articles
and points of doctrine
set forth in the Belgic Confession (1561),
the Heidelberg Catechism (1563),
and the Canons of Dort (1619)
fully agree with the Word of God.

We promise therefore
to teach these doctrines diligently,
to defend them faithfully,
and not to contradict them,
publicly or privately,
directly or indirectly,
in our preaching, teaching,
or writing.

…. and much more, but this is enough to get the idea ….

II. The marks of Freethought (adapted from the website of the *Freethought Association of West Michigan*).

1. Freethought is way of formulating and evaluating beliefs as an ongoing process; it encourages the creative application of rational inquiry and rejects the authority of any historical creed or dogma imposed by institutional religion.

2. Freethought seeks to provide an environment in which diverse points of view can be expressed within civil discourse and without fear of reprisal, so that differing philosophical perspectives can be given respectful consideration and analysis.

3. In its effort to discern the nature of the universe and to explore solutions to human problems, Freethought encourages the application of reason and science and discourages any recourse to supernatural explanations of the sort traditionally associated with organized religion.

…. and more, but this is enough to get the idea ….

A BRIEF HISTORY OF A LIFE-SHAPING EXPERIENCE

I was recently asked by the periodical *Science & Theology News* to comment on my experience of teaching science at a Christian college. Was it possible, for instance, to teach about evolution in an intellectually responsible manner at an academic institution defined by its loyalty to a particular religious heritage?

There is, of course, no single answer to this question. Religious colleges vary greatly in the value they place on intellectual candor.

Some schools give academic freedom a high priority and say, in effect, “Teach your academic discipline in a manner that is both intellectually responsible and respectful of this school’s religious heritage.” Ideally, it seems to me, being respectful of one’s religious heritage would necessarily include having a desire to give that heritage the candid and critical examination that it deserves. Let’s call this approach the “intellectual candor first” strategy.

At the other end of the spectrum are those institutions whose chief concern is to propagate a particular viewpoint, usually the one inherited from the school’s founders. In that case, the preservation of some traditional belief system (perhaps embodied in a set of historic creeds) can take priority over the free exercise of intellectual responsibility.

Nearly 40 years ago, in 1967, I began teaching physics at Calvin College. With unexamined confidence, I presumed that the *intellectual candor first* approach was firmly in place. Yes, I did sign the *Form of Subscription*, but at that time in my life I was naively unaware that I would ever encounter a need to challenge any tenet of the belief system that it represented.

In the early 1970’s I began teaching an astronomy course for students majoring in anything but the natural sciences. Stellar evolution — the developmental history of stars from their formation to their exhaustion of energetic resources — was one of my favorite topics. I defined the word “evolution” carefully, but never avoided it. Open class discussion on evolutionary processes was always fruitful. I saw no problem with this candor, and my students offered no objections. Neither did the college administration.

Encouraged by these positive experiences, and eager to model a way in which the sciences could be constructively incorporated into a Christian worldview, I published a book (*The Fourth Day*, Eerdmans, 1986) that embodied what I had been teaching.

I knew, of course, that some members of the Calvin College constituency might object to my friendly attitude toward the word ‘evolution’ and to my judgment that Calvinist theology left more than enough room for it. Very naively, however, I thought that these objections would be expressed politely as carefully-crafted intellectual arguments that I could fruitfully engage in the familiar style of the academy.

I was dead wrong.

Most objections came not from the head, but from the gut. Objectors were angry and frightened.

Calvin’s Board of Trustees, mostly clergy at that time, received many requests that my beliefs be examined to see whether or not I was being faithful to the centuries-old creeds that defined Calvinism.

The Trustees promptly appointed an *ad hoc* investigative committee. In spite of that committee’s better intentions, the investigation eventually deteriorated into a repetitious probing of my commitment to the creeds specified in the Form of Subscription. While I was on a four-month retreat in Oxford, England, the committee sent me a number of their questions in writing. I responded with a carefully-crafted letter that included a candid explanation of why I questioned the requirement that members of the Calvin College Faculty sign the Form of Subscription.

That letter did not improve the tone of our interaction.

After more than three years of scrutiny I announced that I could no longer participate in the monthly interrogations that seemed unbounded in both duration and scope. I had had my fill of feeling like "one mouse in a roomful of cats."

With a new chairperson at the helm, the BOT committee worked hard over the next several months to craft a document that I was able to sign with integrity. It acknowledged that what I had written and taught fell within the bounds of the traditional creeds as they had come to be interpreted by the Christian Reformed Church and applied to academic concerns. Ultimately, this document came to be accepted by both the BOT and the denominational Synod.

Through all of this, the faculty and administration of Calvin College were supportive and encouraging. The Calvin Alumni Association was especially daring in its support (in 1999 it honored me with the Faith and Learning Award). Most of the difficulties that I experienced were generated by a small but vocal minority of members of the Christian Reformed Church, individuals whose worldview had little room for scientific discoveries made after the 17th century, persons who were allowed to have ecclesiastical influence radically out of proportion to their feeble grasp of responsible scholarship.

When the four-year ordeal was finally over I found myself exhausted in every conceivable way. I continued to teach and to enjoy my students, but the combination of several factors eventually took their toll — the lengthy interrogation episode, the numerous instances of public derogation by ill-informed detractors (some of whom published full-page diatribes in the Grand Rapids Press), and my personal disillusionment at the ill-mannered behavior of some of my critics.

When the dust of turmoil settled, I discovered that I had been irreversibly changed by what I had experienced. I also came to realize that it was essential for me to reexamine my personal worldview — my *portrait of reality* — and that I required a much larger intellectual space in which to perform this exploration honestly. At the end of 1997 I requested early retirement from my teaching career. It was, for me, the right thing to do.

Now, many years after that life-changing episode, as I reflect on what happened to me I have begun to wonder why it took me so long to feel the need to question the received view. How was it possible that a reasonably bright and well-educated person like myself could continue to function as a member of a community officially committed to creedal authority? Why was I willing at that time to stay in such a system and to work within the bounds of dogmas and creeds crafted four centuries ago? Was I dull of mind? Was my brain turned off?

The short answer to these rather bluntly phrased questions is, No, I think was functioning as a normal human being. The question then becomes, but *what is normal human behavior in the arena of forming our worldviews, or crafting our portraits of reality?*

My current way of dealing with this question derives in part from a couple of experiences — one quite recent, the other from two decades ago.

A *Bleep* on the movie screen.

Several months ago our church held a series of discussions on the video, *What the Bleep Do We Know?* I was asked to comment on the film from the perspective of a physicist.

My overall evaluation was less than glowing. I began on a positive note by saying that I found *Bleep* to be an effective film for raising several interesting questions in many arenas, including metaphysics, psychology, science and religion. I immediately neutralized that positive comment, however, by

announcing that I would never advise a person to go to this film for definitive answers to any one of those questions.

When dealing with matters in the broad area of science, *Bleep* gave evidence of a high degree of what I called, "physics envy." The video's numerous references to quantum physics, quantum theory and quantum mechanics revealed a strong desire, bordering on obsession, to lead viewers to believe that all of the proposals offered in this video (including some that I found extremely bizarre) are affirmed or substantiated by modern physics. They are not.

Do we "create our own realities"?

One of the mantras in *Bleep* that caught my attention was "We create 'reality' by our human thoughts and choices." But is that true, I asked? Can we, by thought alone, for example, bring into being some real object like a galaxy, or a star, or a stone, or even a hydrogen atom?

The skeptic in me quickly responded, "Well, of course not. Galaxies, stars, stones and hydrogen atoms are not created by thought alone. They are there in the real world whether we're thinking about them or not."

But, of course, I was being far too literalistic. I took 'reality' to mean 'actuality' — what actually exists. Upon listening to *Bleep* more carefully, it dawned on me that most of the time, 'reality' did not mean 'what's actually there.' Instead, the word 'reality' was being used as the name for a ***mentally-constructed portrait*** *of what's real — in the physical universe, in our human experience of the world, in our personal relationships, and in whatever else is a part of the 'real world.'*

Does each one of us construct in our minds a *portrait of reality*, our own operative depiction of what the 'real world' is all about?

I think we do. I think that each of us has crafted what I will henceforth be calling (with a bit of playfulness) an ***Operative Depiction of Reality***, an ODoR.

Note a number of ways that referring to one's "ODoR" seems fitting:

- Whether we are aware of it, or not, each of us has an ODoR.
- Part of a person's ODoR is intentional (like perfume); most of it is not.
- A person's ODoR can be socially functional, whether intended or not.
- We are aware of the ODoR of others, perhaps more than of our own.
- There are good ODoRs and bad ODoRs.
- We are most comfortable with people whose ODoR is like our own.
- One's ODoR is open to evaluation and, within limits, modification.

More seriously, I have found this concept of a personal ODoR — one's Operative Depiction of Reality — to be helpful in my attempts to answer the question posed earlier: "How could I hold to dogmatic Calvinism as long as I did? Similarly, the ODoR concept helps me to understand how Calvinists and other persons are able to hold — with a comparable feeling of personal integrity — worldviews spanning a remarkably broad spectrum.

Before offering additional reflections on how the concept of an ODoR might be fleshed out, let me take note of one more experience that paved the way for my current attraction to it.

A contribution from Jerome Ravetz.

More that 20 years ago I was a member of a study team at the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship that spent a year in collaborative research on the topic of "Creation and Cosmogony." One member of our team introduced a number of ideas drawn from the sociology of science. The concept that I found most helpful is credited to Jerome Ravetz, the phenomenon he called "folk-science." It has to do with a particular category of beliefs that we hold, and why we hold them.

Putting Ravetz' concept in my own words, a "folk-science" is *a set of beliefs about the natural world* — beliefs that need not be derived from, or even consistent with, the natural sciences — beliefs whose primary function is to provide *comfort and reassurance* that the rest of one's worldview is OK. [Ravetz: "…comfort and reassurance in the face of the crucial uncertainties of the world of experience." Cf. *Scientific Knowledge and its Social Problems* (Oxford U. P., 1971) p. 386.]

Many folk-sciences function to make certain traditional religious belief systems more tenable. Disbelief in biological evolution, for example, functions to make various forms of Special Creationism tenable for approximately 3/4 of Americans today.

Young-Earth Special Creationism, the most common form, functions as a folk-science for most of Fundamentalist Christianity. As the folk-science of Christian Fundamentalism, the belief that the entire universe was recently created (within the past 10,000 years) is coupled with the belief that a recent global flood shaped the major geological features of the Earth's surface (no matter what those deluded scientists say). This pervasive folk-science enables Creationists to maintain their belief in the inerrancy of the Bible through which (it is held) God has revealed all manner of other doctrines dear to Christian Fundamentalism.

Similarly, the concept of *Intelligent Design* functions today as the folk-science of a large portion of the broader Evangelical Protestant population in North America. A fundamental tenet of ID's folk-science is that the system of natural causes fails to include the formational capabilities needed for assembling certain complex biotic structures, such as the bacterial flagellum. If natural causes are inadequate, then the form-imposing intervention of some non-natural Intelligent Designer must have been essential (wink, wink, we don't say who the Designer is, but you know who we mean). And if supernatural (power over nature) intervention was necessary for the formation of rotary motors on E. coli bacteria, then there is nothing standing in the way of Evangelicals maintaining their conviction that God could have performed all of the other supernatural acts portrayed in the Bible.

As I now see it, what I am calling an ODoR is a comprehensive, all-inclusive version of folk-science. ODoRs function in ways similar to folk-science, providing normal human beings like us with "comfort and reassurance in the face of the crucial uncertainties of the world of experience."

A SERIES OF PROPOSITIONS ABOUT ODoRS

1. **ODoRs include a vast range of concerns.**

    - Basic *metaphysics* — the natures of real things and their relationships.
    - A set of *religious beliefs*, especially a concept of God, or of the Sacred, or of some unnamed Ultimate Mystery that inspires us to awe.
    - A *world picture* — a concept of the natural world's contents, structure and formational history; a *folk-science* consistent with one's metaphysics and religious beliefs.

- A concept of *self*, of other persons, and of interpersonal relationships.
- A set of *attitudes* — reasons for either confidence or fear, optimism or despair.

2. The elements of our ODoRs are drawn from numerous and highly varied inputs or sources.

- Genetically-based proclivities
- Parental & family input
- Tribal (communal) inheritance
- Society and its culture
- Institutional religion
- Education
- Professional sciences and academic disciplines
- Sensory perception & its interpretation
- Personal experience
- Creative personal reflection
- **….**

Note: it is inevitable that these contributions to our ODoRs are incomplete, less than fully accurate, and interpreted with our personal biases.

3. **ODoRs are crafted by the mind/brain**.

- I use the word 'mind' here, not to suggest that ODoR-crafting can be done without the brain, but to focus attention on that portion of it that is done *consciously* and with *intention*. Until recently, I was inclined to think that all, or nearly all, of our ODoR-crafting was done in this mode. Perhaps this inclination was little more than a consequence of my being a thinker by profession. At this stage of my reflection, however, it seems to me that an extremely important portion of the ODoR-crafting process takes place *without our conscious or intentional involvement*. The idea that ODoR crafting-is an entirely conscious and intentional activity must, I believe, be rejected. Hence the next entry….

- I use the word 'brain' here to focus attention on that portion of ODoR-crafting that takes place in the *subconscious* as an expression of our inherited nature — what we are in consequence of the human genome. I suspect that this subconscious ODoR-crafting is at least as important as what we do consciously, probably far more important. Major portions of one's ODoR have been constructed *without either rational examination or even awareness.* (Note: After the presentation someone asked if this might imply a form of behavioral determinism. No, I would not go so far as to suggest that our behavior is fully *determined* by what resides in the subconsciously-crafted ODoR, but what resides in the subconscious is bound to have an *influence* on behavior, at least probabilistically.)

- Because what we do consciously and intentionally can ordinarily be the object of candid and self-critical reflection, *the mind-constructed portion of one's ODoR is relatively open to examination, evaluation and modification.*

- However, the ODoR-crafting that we do subconsciously with our brains is far more elusive and easily overlooked. Performing a critical examination of that portion of the *content* of our personal ODoR may be as difficult as lifting an iceberg out of the water for an inspection of what is ordinarily hidden beneath the ocean surface.

- Perhaps it would be more realistic and fruitful to encourage the scientific study of the subconscious *process* of ODoR crafting. In this endeavor, I suspect that a major contributor will be evolutionary biology's quest for an answer to the question, How did the human genome get to be the way it is? In other words, ODoR-crafting can be fruitfully studied, at least in part, as a natural phenomenon. (Note: This is similar to the point made by Daniel C. Dennett concerning the scientific study of religion as a natural phenomenon. See his book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon.*)

4. Our brains/minds construct ODoRs for numerous and diverse utilitarian functions.

- To survive in a competitive world. Some ODoRs lead to behavior that has survival value.
- To provide, in the words of Jerome Ravetz, "comfort and reassurance in the face of the crucial uncertainties of the world of experience."
- To demonstrate and secure one's tribal identity, often defined by the tenets of a religious belief system. (This provides a means to satisfy the *need to belong*).
- To function successfully as a member of society generally.
- To provide a reliable basis for expectations and predictions.
- To satisfy one's basic intellectual curiosity.
- To demonstrate rationality by intentionally working to minimize inconsistencies.

5. Good ODoRs, bad ODoRs.

- ODoRs are essential to human life and culture, enabling what we consider normal human experience. (Survival value again)
- ODoRs are a stabilizing factor in human life and society.
- The desire for stability can, however, lead to an addiction to ODoRs that make excessively bold claims for *certainty*.
- A lust for certainty encourages ODoRs that promote *exclusivism* (only *our tribe* knows reality) and *triumphalism* (our tribal ODoR *must win* over yours).
- Some ODoRS are *life-enriching*, either for their holders, for those affected by them, or both. (…. Mother Theresa …. Mahatma Gandhi …. Jesus of Nazareth ….)
- Some ODoRs are *toxic*, either for their holders, for those affected by them, or both. (Crusades … Holocaust … 9-11 …)

6. The fact that one's ODoR exhibits many utilitarian values does not ensure that any particular portion of it is *true*.

- The portions of one's ODoR that are especially vulnerable to this problem include those constructed by the subconscious and those inherited from, or imposed by, institutional authority.
- In both *politics* and *religion*, for example, unexamined and misguided loyalties to persons or institutions have led people to grave misperceptions concerning what is true.
- Behavior based on those misperceptions can be harmful, even deadly. Tribalism has its consequences.

7. A person's *publicly-professed* depiction of reality may differ from his/her *operative* depiction of reality.

- By a *publicly-professed* Depiction of Reality I have in mind what a person says in response to the question, What do you believe about X?
- By an *operative* Depiction of Reality I have in mind the actual belief system that leads a person to make decision/action Y instead of Z.
- A disparity between these two Depictions of Reality need not imply duplicity. The subconscious need to maintain one's place in the tribe, for instance, may not only, a) inhibit the candid examination of one's ODoR, but also b) suppress the realization that one's operative belief system might be different from what one habitually or instinctively says in response to the question, What do you believe?
- Recall Thomas Kuhn's calling attention to two differing traditions in the sciences: a) how scientists talk about their professional activity, and b) how scientists actually go about their scientific work.
- Even if it differs from the *publicly professed* Depiction of Reality, the *operative* Depiction of Reality will, I suspect, function at the level of decision making.

8. OK, now what does this concept of ODoRs accomplish for me?

- I find it helpful to realize that I, like every other human being, have an ODoR that is open to critical and candid examination. Using the methodology of the empirical sciences may prove helpful in this process of examination.
- I believe that it would be helpful for me to try to identify both the *content* and the *sources* of various portions of my ODoR.
- I believe that it is helpful to be aware of the two different levels/processes by which ODoRs are constructed — some *consciously* and intentionally, others *subconsciously*.
- Those elements that have been constructed consciously and intentionally are open to *rational examination* and, if called for, *modification*. My goal is to have a well-informed and candidly examined ODoR.
- I believe that I should work to minimize discrepancies between my *publicly-professed* portrait of reality and my *operative* portrait of reality.

A few questions:

1. Would a realization of the shortcomings of my own ODoR help me to be tolerant of the (more easily detected :) shortcomings in the ODoRs of others? Answer: It should, of course, but I've left some room for improvement here.
2. Would the realization that only a small portion of my own ODoR has been *intentionally* crafted help me to be tolerant of persons with ODoRs different from mine? Answer: It should, but once again I've left some room for improvement here.
3. Do you have a desire to modify someone else's ODoR? OK, but you may need to pay attention to the phenomenon of human resistance to change, as captured in the following words attributed to Sydney J, Harris: *"It is impossible to reason a man out of something he has not been reasoned into. When people have acquired their beliefs on an emotional level they cannot be persuaded out of them on a rational level, no matter how strong the proof or logic behind it. People will hold onto their emotional beliefs and twist the facts to meet their version of reality."*

Back to my earlier questions….

How was it possible, I asked earlier, that a reasonably bright and well-educated person like myself could continue to function as a member of a community officially committed to creedal authority? Why was I

willing at that time to remain in a highly tradition-bound system and to work within the strictures of dogmas and creeds crafted four centuries ago?

Was I dull of mind? Was my brain turned off?

No, thank you very much, I think my mind and brain were functioning quite normally. I believe that I was acting in a manner consistent with human nature. That is, I was acting in accord with my ODOR *at that time*.

In retrospect, my signing the Form of Subscription in 1967 may have been done with inadequate regard for what it entailed, but doing so was an expression of my willingness to declare my loyalty to the tribe into which I was born. It was consistent with my ODOR in 1967. For whatever combination of reasons, I was *at that time* not consciously aware that there was any need to challenge the Form of Subscription or the centuries-old creeds to which the Form committed me.

What about twenty years later, when I began to experience the fallout from publishing *The Fourth Day*? Well, that was the dawning of a new day, the beginning of a new journey.

What about today, forty years later? There's no going back now. I have embarked upon a journey that brings me into new conceptual territory. I continue to have high respect for my former colleagues, my friends, and family members who remain loyal to the Calvinism with which I was once comfortable. They are good people, and what they hold dear I will not dismiss lightly or disrespectfully, whether I can agree with it or not. And most of them have been exemplary in their willingness to maintain a friendly relationship with me in spite of the changes in my belief system.

Nonetheless, I must move on in my own personal journey. My goal is to craft my new Portrait of Reality as consciously and intentionally as I am able. In order to do so I must often admit that I don't "know" nearly as much as I once did. The kind of certainty I once professed — authority-derived and institutionally-enforced — is now gone. In its place I find deep satisfaction in "giving it my best shot" each day and taking responsibility for bringing my *professed* Portrait of Reality in line with my *operative* Portrait of Reality. The journey of life is good.

Some of the sentiment I feel in this experience was captured well by Robert Frost:

> I shall be telling this with a sigh
> Somewhere ages and ages hence:
> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
> I took the one less traveled by,
> and that has made all the difference.

(Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*, last verse)