

An open Letter to Jerry Coyne:

Dear Jerry,

Your distorted reading of my motivation for not releasing the video of our conversation in Kentucky has given birth to an inordinate number of hostile letters to me. Because of misleading statements on your website (11/1/2011), I have received a considerable amount of hate mail, often laced with obscenities, though often also tempered with inquisitive politeness. The mail mostly complains about my “cowardly” reneging on an alleged agreement that you falsely assume I made to post online the video of our panel at the University of Kentucky. When I was in Kentucky I was never asked to do so. Later, after reflecting on what to me was a most unfortunate event I wrote to Prof Rabel requesting that any video not be released.

Anyway, Jerry, your own words impute cowardice to me for this refusal, but how do you know that's the reason for my reluctance? Here is a typical reaction stirred up by your remarks: “What a pathetic, sociopathic dweeb you are. Hiding behind your sick belief system you call a religion. You are an insult to academia, and a dim bulb for the uninformed masses. You deserve the insults you are getting and should be fired. Coward, liar and fool you are, loser. And no doubt a Republican too!” (I'm tempted to say that I can live with every accusation except the last.)

I want to make it clear that Rob Rabel at the University of Kentucky has confirmed that I never gave permission before or after the panel to post the video. You need to make this clear to your audience. I never broke the agreement that you have unkindly caused your readers to assume I made.

However, the more interesting issue has to do with my reasons for refusing permission to post the video, and whether it was wrong for me to do so. I have no regrets about anything I had to say during the panel, and if you agree to post this letter on your site I will be happy to have the video released unedited, for public scrutiny. Those who are reading this blog are free to look at other videos of my comments on science and religion available online. They will see that I have no need to hide my views from the public, and in fact I am quite eager to have my thoughts made available provided they are presented accurately and fairly.

Why then do I hesitate in this case? It has to do with you alone, Jerry, not anyone else, including myself. I have had wonderful conversations with many scientific skeptics over the years, but my meeting with you was exceptionally dismaying and unproductive. I mentioned to you personally already that in my view, the discussion in Kentucky seldom rose to the level of a truly academic encounter. I agree that it was probably entertaining to the audience who gave us a standing ovation at the end. Nevertheless, instead of being flattered by this I went away terribly discouraged at what had just taken place. I wish to emphasize that I do not exempt myself from criticism.

The event at the University of Kentucky did not take place in the way I had expected. My understanding was that each speaker was to provide a curt 25-minute presentation of how he understood the relationship between science and theology. I did just this, and I have no objection to having that presentation made public. People who attended the event, moreover, can testify that in my presentation I avoided talking about or criticizing you personally. Instead I was content to make some very general remarks about why I consider science completely compatible with theology as I understand it.

When Robert Rabel of the Gaines Center at the University of Kentucky, a true gentleman who remains far above reproach in all of this, contacted me last summer and invited me to participate in the event, he asked me for names of people who would differ from my own position. I recommended you as someone who would definitely have a different perspective, to say the least. Prof. Rabel informed me that you agreed to participate with the qualification that you did not want to debate me, but simply to lay out your own way of looking at science and religion. I took this to mean that you would do something parallel to what I did in my presentation.

Instead, you used the event primarily to launch a sneering and condescending *ad hominem*. Rather than using your 25 minutes as an opportunity to develop *constructively* your own belief that science and religion are always and inevitably in conflict, you were content simply to ridicule rather than refute several of my own ideas, as you interpreted them. On the other hand, my own presentation, as those who watch the video will see, was a dispassionate attempt to have the audience understand some of the reasons why the new scientific picture of the universe is so troubling to many traditionally religious people. I don't believe that at any point in that presentation I resorted to ridicule, or that I focused on, much less misrepresented, anything you have written. Instead, I argued in a purely academic way that scientism is simply unreasonable. This was clearly my main point, and I was expecting you to respond to it in an academic manner as well.

Rather than answering my point that scientism is logically incoherent--which is really the main issue--and instead of addressing my argument that the encounter with religious truth requires personal transformation, or for that matter instead of responding to any of the other points I made, you were content to use most of your time to ridicule several isolated quotes from my books. I was absolutely astounded by your woeful lack of insight into, or willingness to grapple with, the real meaning of these passages. Sophisticated argument requires as an essential condition that you have the good manners to understand before you criticize. Your approach, on the other hand was simply one of "caricature and then crush." Citation of a few isolated sentences or paragraphs, the meaning of which requires reading and understanding many chapters, is hardly useful criticism. You grossly distorted every quotation you used, and then you coated over your [mis]understanding of these statements with your own uncritical creationist and literalist set of assumptions about the Bible and theology. There was no room for real conversation, as impartial viewers will notice.

Instead of trying to convince the audience of the logical coherence and philosophical finality of your belief that science is the only reliable guide to truth, you began by arbitrarily announcing to the audience that John Haught is the chief representative of theology in the conversation of science with religion. You gave no evidence for that, and in fact it is by no means evidently true. I am but one of a great number of theologians involved in the discussion, and many others do not share my views. But your strategy was to show that if the principal figure is stupid, then you need not take his subordinates seriously either. This is a convenient method for shrinking the territory that needs to be covered, but it is hardly a fair way of dealing with all the other theological alternatives to your own belief system.

But let me come to the main reason why I have been reluctant to give permission to release the video. It is not for anything that I said during our encounter, but for a reason that I have never witnessed in public academic discussion before. I'm still in shock at how your presentation ended up. I was so offended both personally and as an academic by the vulgarity of it all that I did not want other people to have to share what I witnessed that night in October. I still don't.

I'm referring to the fact that your whole presentation ended up with a monstrous, not to mention tasteless, *non sequitur*, to give it the kindest possible characterization. You put on the screen a list of all the "evils" you associate with Catholicism: its stance regarding divorce, contraception, priest pedophilia, homosexuality--and I can't remember what all--as though these have anything at all to do with the topic of the panel or with my own personal views on the relationship of science to theology. The whole focus of your presentation was on me, but when you came to your conclusion you never bothered to find out what *my own* position regarding your list of Catholic evils might be. I have never witnessed such a blatant smear or malicious attempt to impute guilt by association in all my years in university life.

Your list of Catholic evils, contrary to what you were suggesting, has absolutely nothing logically to contribute to your argument that science is opposed to religion. But even if it did, you never asked me whether I dissent from some or all items on your list of "evils," as many Catholics do, and whether such dissent might, in your twisted way of arguing, perhaps make my own position more credible. Your insinuation could only have been that somehow the priest sexual abuse crisis, for example, discredits my views on science and theology. You should be grateful that I have tried to protect the public from such a preposterous and logic-offending way of bringing your presentation to a close.

There is much more to be said, but if you are willing to post this letter on your blog, go ahead and ask the Gaines Center to release the video as well. These will be my final remarks on this matter.

Sincerely,

John Haught