Replies to Shira Weiss, Yuval Avnur and Daniel Rynhold

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Shira Weiss, Yuval Avnur and Daniel Rynhold make for an interestingly complementary set of respondents to my paper, "What's God Got to Do with It? Atheism and Religious Practice". In general and admittedly crude terms, Dr. Weiss wants more emphasis on belief and Professor Avnur wants less religious practice (at least from the atheist). In other words, they tug at my defence of "atheistic orthopraxy" from opposing directions. By contrast, Professor Rynhold is in broad agreement with my conclusions, although he raises two issues for further discussion.

It is not clear to what extent Dr. Weiss sees her comments as criticisms or merely as an elaboration on the role of belief in Judaism. Although she describes her comments as "supplementary", she also says that "dogma has played more of a role in the history of Judaism" than I acknowledge in my paper.

It is difficult to know what to make of this. She certainly provides details about the role of the belief that I had not included in my paper. However, I was quite clear that "belief is viewed widely within Judaism as being important" (p. 393)[1], even though I also said that while there is "disagreement within Judaism about whether Jews are … required to believe certain things … the overwhelmingly dominant view is that they are not" (Ibid). It is not clear that Dr. Weiss disagrees with any of those claims or with any important features of my argument. Her citing those who think that belief *is* required does not undermine my claim that such a view is a disputed one[2]. Nor does her observation that an "atheist cannot meet even the most minimalist conception of that towards which he prays" contradict anything I said. Finally, nothing I said was at odds with the claim that there can be "religious value" in "one's innermost thoughts and beliefs".

Yuval Avnur, by contrast, is clearly criticizing my arguments. First, he challenges my argument that theism (combined with belief in the divine origin of a sacred text) does not entail orthopraxy. One problem, he says, is that the term "orthopraxy" is vague. Although believers who accept a common sacred text can vary in their interpretation of that text, there are limits on the range of reasonable interpretations.

Contrary to what Professor Avnur claims, there does indeed seem to be no limit on the range of interpretations there can be of a single text. This range of interpretations distinguishes religions, denominations – and cults – from one another (as I argued on pp. 386-8). For example, Leviticus 11:4-7 could not be clearer that eating pigs is prohibited and yet there are theists – some Christian, some Jewish – who accept Leviticus as the word of God and yet have interpreted the text such that pork consumption is permissible.

The upshot of this is precisely what Professor Avnur calls the "assumption-shattering" idea that "believers could coherently practice *anything they wanted*". Of course, believers will not put it in those words. They will not say that they are practising whatever they want. What they, as believers, will say is that they are following the (or an) authoritative interpretation of what God requires, but the choice of interpretation

can be (even if it is often not) anything that they want.

Perhaps Professor Avnur will argue that many interpretations – such as the permissibility of eating pork – are not "reasonable". I shall leave him to take that up with the true believers who think otherwise, for my argument does not presuppose that there are *no* limits on reasonable interpretation. Instead my argument seeks to shatter the assumption that within the very wide constraints of reasonable interpretation orthodoxy implies the narrower range that constitutes orthopraxy in a given religious context. Yuval Avnur may not make this assumption but my argument is addressed to those many others who do[3].

The bulk of Yuval Avnur's comment is appropriately aimed at the primary argument in my paper – namely that an atheist can have good non-theistic reasons for orthopraxy. Professor Avnur correctly notes that there could also be good non-theistic reasons *against* orthopraxy. While he recognizes that this is compatible with my conclusion he seems to think that it is against the spirit of my argument, which he takes to be "rationalizing a non-believer's observance".

In fact, however, I fully embrace his observation that there can be good reasons for an atheist not to engage in religious practices. Indeed, I had noted that "abandoning religious practice entirely, or changing it, are reasonable responses to atheism" (p. 385). I had not specifically discussed *moral* reasons against orthopraxy, which Professor Avnur raises. However, I do not see this as a problem unique to the atheist. Features of orthopraxy can be morally abhorrent for believers and non-believers. Perhaps (some) believers will have greater impediments to recognizing the moral abhorrence of particular practices, but they are certainly not entirely immune.

When orthopraxy is deemed to present moral problems one response is to abandon orthopraxy, but that is not the only option. Another is to reinterpret orthopraxy, as seems to have been the case by those rabbinic authorities who interpreted into oblivion such Biblical injunctions as the execution of the "stubborn and rebellious son" and the utter destruction of "the idolatrous city". This option is not restricted to the past. Within contemporary Orthodox[4] Judaism, there are modernizing streams that (and individuals who) attempt to accommodate at least some current moral concerns. There are obvious limits on how much such accommodation is possible. Thus another option is to exhibit some selectivity in observance. Orthopraxy, like religious observance more generally, comes in degrees, as Yuval Avnur himself acknowledged in response to my first argument, when he observed that "orthopraxy" is a vague term that should not be interpreted excessively narrowly. Thus, some selectivity may well be compatible with orthopraxy.

Whether this approach can resolve the moral problem while remaining within the realm of orthopraxy depends in part on what one takes the boundaries of orthopraxy to be. It also depends in part on what the perceived problems are and what the resultant selectivity involves. Consider the case of circumcision, which Yuval Avnur cites. If one thinks that circumcision, though a central tenet of Judaism, is morally problematic and one elects not to circumcise one's sons, there is a strong case that one has abandoned orthopraxy (although what if one is fully observant in all other regards?) However, just because a practice is perceived as being morally problematic does not mean that it actually is morally wrong. I happen to think that the evidence

does not support the view that neonatal male circumcision is wrong, at least if appropriate anaesthetic is used[5]. Other moral concerns – including the gendered division of religious labour – are more compelling. Here people can push the boundaries of orthopraxy. Some may believe that these cannot be pushed far or fast enough and they may formally change denominational allegiances. Others might reason that the more people with those concerns who abandon orthopraxy, the smaller the chance that orthopraxy will change. I do not presume to judge which view is right, but only to note that these are complex matters and that people of good moral conscience can reasonably respond in a range of ways.

Yuval Avnur also considers the "inauthenticity" objection that I had anticipated and discussed. He obviously is not persuaded by my response but it is not clear why. He tries out a series of arguments. At one point he asks whether prayer by atheists might "offend those who do believe". Perhaps; but perhaps the reverse is true. At least in Judaism, observant believers are more likely to be offended by an atheist's refusal to pray. Later he asks whether it is "really rational, if you don't believe that any of it is true, to solemnly stand, every week, perhaps every day, and recite … prayers", but immediately concedes that it may be if there is a good reason to do so. He then asks whether it is "an *honest* thing to do if you do not mean what you say". Honest to whom? One is not deceiving oneself – and certainly not God. Perhaps one's fellow worshippers? However, if they believe that one has an obligation to recite the prayers even in the absence of belief they cannot assume that all those reciting the prayers do believe what they are saying. Moreover, if those fellow worshippers prefer a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, then non-disclosure need not be regarded as deceptive. If they do ask, one can tell. If the fellow worshippers are themselves atheists, they will not care if others too are uttering the prayers "metaphorically".

Yuval Avnur then suggests that "routinely uttering things you think are false, or meaningless, in these ostensibly serious circumstances can still seem bizarre, perhaps bordering neurotic." It certainly can seem that way. However, while it may seem bizarre to some, it may seem entirely normal to those immersed in the practice. Practices often seem more bizarre from the outside. Indeed, there are many human practices that appear bizarre if one looks at them from just a little distance. These include shaking hands as a means of greeting, the pomp of various military, political and civil ceremonies, and spending one's life writing academic papers and books that almost nobody will read. If these and innumerable other bizarre human practices bring some comfort or meaning, their being bizarre may be insufficient to avoid or condemn them.

Professor Avnur ends with an anecdote about his experience as an immigrant child being required to pledge allegiance to the United States flag. He says that he "barely understood, let alone … believe[d]" the things he was saying. He thinks that many of the other children did understand – something I doubt about his fellow seven-year olds – and he "felt fake" and made him "feel more distant, even alienated, from the community". This experience, he says, makes him "suspicious of the idea that one can engage in religious ritual *for the sake of one's identity*, and with respect for the tradition, while not meaning the things one says".

I certainly understand that reaction. It is precisely the reaction that many atheists have in a synagogue or other house of worship. However, I also understand the other

reactions I described in my article. Some atheists have reported to me the opposite experience to Yuval Avnur's – namely finding community. They feel connected with those around them and with their forebears who for generations uttered the same prayers. Some report enjoying the liturgical tunes. For others the prayers are a kind of mantra, where the meaning of the words is less important than their positive psychological effect. The positive effect may also vary – a comforting familiarity or stirring emotions, for example. Reactions differ, which is exactly why we should not generalize from Yuval Avnur's anecdote of his own experience.

Daniel Rynhold reflects first on what counts as a religious or a Jewish practice. He poses a thought experiment in which a Christian (who does not convert to Judaism but) who values continued Jewish existence commits to "traditional Jewish observance" in the hope that it will encourage more Jews to do so. This is meant to raise the question whether Jewish orthopraxy "for the sake of Jewish continuity is sufficient to identify a practice as 'Jewish'".

There are obvious ambiguities in the adjective "Jewish". There is one sense in which the imagined Christian is indeed engaged in Jewish practice (and would be even if his motivation were different). If this were not so we would not know what Professor Rynhold means when he describes the Christian as committing to "traditional *Jewish* observance". Here "Jewish" refers to the practices characteristic of Judaism. One of the other possible senses of "Jewish" refers to the practitioners of those practices. The Christian's observance is not Jewish practice in this sense because the practitioner is not Jewish[6]. Although Daniel Rynhold does not explicitly make this distinction, he does recognize "the centrality of Jewish ethnicity to Judaism" and that my paper brings this out.

Finally, both Yuval Avnur and Daniel Rynhold, take issue with my claims that theism does not *entail* orthopraxy, and that atheism does not *entail* the abandonment of religious practice. Entailment, in its literal, logical sense, applies to the relationship between propositions. They note that since practices are not propositions, beliefs cannot entail practices. Daniel Rynhold recognizes that this criticism is liable to the objection of "being willfully obtuse" and "nitpicking", and he acknowledges that it is clear that what I am interested in is whether atheistic orthopraxy is "reasonable". He thus uses this opportunity to sketch out some helpful ideas about practical rationality[7].

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[1] All page references are to "What's God Got To Do With It?: Atheism and Religious Practice", in *Ratio*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, December 2006, pp. 383-400.

[2] In a different paper I have argued that requiring (or commanding) belief is problematic, thus lending philosophical support to those who think that belief is not required. See "Against Commanding to Believe", in *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Winter 2001, pp. 87-104.

[3] Yuval Avnur over-interprets my claim (on p. 393) that estrangement and even divorce of theism and religious practice is possible. That claim covered both "orthodox heteropraxy" and "atheistic orthopraxy". Divorce may be possible in the latter case even if no more than estrangement is possible in the former.

[4] By using the capital O, I refer here to the "denomination" and not to traditional doxastic conformity.

[5] See Michael Benatar, David Benatar, "Between Prophylaxis and Child Abuse: The Ethics of Neonatal Circumcision", *American Journal of Bioethics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Spring 2003, pp. 35-48.

[6] As an aside, and tangentially, I am reminded here of the quip that distinguishes being Jewish from being "Jew-ish".

[7] I am grateful to Dani Rabinowitz for inviting me to participate in this symposium, to Samuel Lebens who is facilitating it, and to the commentators for their contributions.