

Losing their Religion

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Famously, the lyrics of R.E.M.'s hit song don't actually refer to religion at all, but rather relate to an old expression from the American South that broadly translates as "losing my rag" in English. However, I think these words apply to many of our MPs in a much more literal sense, for whom leaving the EU (or their opposition to it) has become something close to religious dogma. One of the key defining qualities of religion is the fact that it is founded on belief rather than evidence. I make this point not as a criticism of religion: I am myself a practising person of faith.

An important corollary of this fact, however, is that for a religious believer, faith is distinct from science since it cannot be falsified. There are two obvious ways in which a believer can react to evidence (whether scientific, historical or any other form thereof). I stress that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nor are they necessarily the only reactions that people of faith might have and I'm sure a theologian could name many more. For Brexit, however, they will suffice!

1. They can confine their faith to fundamental questions that are generally beyond the scope of human knowledge (the existence of God, for example).
2. They can assume that the core tenets of their faith are correct and therefore it is the evidence that must be misleading or incorrect.

An obvious example that has been widely commented on in the western world is that of evolution and Christianity. I choose this merely because it will be familiar to most readers of this blog. However, these questions are not confined to Christianity – Islam and Judaism (which, with Christianity, make up the triumvirate of Abrahamic faiths) face exactly the same dilemmas.

The preponderance of scientific evidence in favour of the hypothesis of evolution is overwhelming, but Christians have reacted in very different ways. Some have accepted that questions of how long the

earth has been in existence and the nature of evolution and natural selection are rightfully the domain of science. Scripture's comment on the nature of creation is thus allegorical: Eden represents a state of being rather than a place and the modern universe was most definitely not created in seven days flat. For these believers, the Big Bang is really rather god-like!

In contrast, others have taken the Bible to be the literal truth of the matter. Scientific evidence that contradicts the notion that the earth might have been created in the manner attested to in Genesis must therefore itself be incorrect. This is logically sound – if I assume that *A* is true then *B* and *C*, which on the surface suggest that *A* is false must in fact imply something else instead.

What does all this have to do with Brexit though? Well, I submit that for many MPs Brexit is an article of faith and, moreover, their treatment of evidence is more in line with the second reaction listed above than the first. I also believe that this is true of a substantial number of people within the population at large.

The most obvious example of the way in which Brexit has become a religion might be the Conservative Brexiters. For this group, many (but far from all) of whom are also members of the ERG, it is patently self-evident that Brexit is positive. Moreover, most members of this group appear to *believe* that Brexit is economically positive. Much like the case of climate change, the preponderance of evidence is rather overwhelming: anything other than the very softest of Brexits will have a net negative impact on total trade and this in turn will have a net negative impact on GDP.

That does not mean that every industry and every business will suffer from Brexit. Some people and businesses will lose out and others will gain. What the economic evidence *does* say is that if you add up all of the losses then they will be larger than all of the gains. This specifically relates to the medium term. Now, academics are not infallible – we are subject to group-think and we make mistakes. Sometimes these are obvious but very often they are quite subtle. However, it is reasonable to say that there is an enormous body of evidence using several different methods that all suggest the same thing and very little that contradicts it^[1].

In other words, if 'Brexit is good' is taken as gospel truth then it is the academic work that must be wrong. Such imperviousness to contradictory evidence bears all the hallmarks of some of the more extreme examples of faith. Michael Gove's trite dismissal of evidence on the basis that Britain has "had enough of experts" is a classic example of this. Of course, it is all-too-easy to dismiss economists on the back of a failure to predict the financial crisis. Yet academic economists have long believed that making short term forecasts of economic conditions is a mug's game.

I would use the analogy of a Doctor. Your Doctor can tell you that smoking will reduce your expected lifespan. She cannot tell you (at the age of 30, for example) what your precise lifespan will be. Nor can she tell you whether you will get a heart attack in 20 years' time. However, she can tell you that smoking will make it more likely that you will have a heart attack. Similarly, economists can tell you with substantial confidence that a hard Brexit will reduce national output. We cannot say by exactly how much, nor can we say whether there will be a recession in the next 5 years. We can, however, state that a hard Brexit will increase the likelihood of having a recession in the next 5 years.

Lest my readers think that the Brexit religion is only manifest amongst Leavers (beLeavers, perhaps?), I have seen very similar modes of thinking amongst passionate Remainers. The most obvious manifestation of this is a failure to engage with the issues raised by Leave voters. For example, as an EU member state, the UK runs an immigration policy that is institutionally deeply prejudiced. That is a statement of fact.

Migrants from the European Union have rights not accorded to those elsewhere in the world. This is a very difficult policy to morally justify and it should give us immediate pause to notice that the overwhelming majority of EU citizens (and thus potential immigrants) are white. Indeed, one might argue that it is, de facto, institutionally racist. In terms of outcomes, it does not appear dissimilar to the widely criticised Johnson-Reed Act in the USA.

Of course, there is nothing (in theory) to prevent the UK from having a completely open-door immigration policy for the rest of the world. However, I suggest that doing so would pose substantial logistical

difficulties (in terms of building more housing etc.) and due to the numbers and skills of potential migrants, integrating them into the UK labour market without unduly harming existing lower-earners might prove an additional challenge.

I would also tentatively suggest that openly welcoming all-comers, particularly should they subsequently become UK citizens, might not be looked upon fondly by other EU states. One can imagine the reaction were France to receive a million migrants from North Africa via the UK, courtesy of European freedom of movement. Likewise, Poland and Hungary (amongst others) are unlikely to take too kindly to migration of this nature.

There are, of course, many other ways in which the Religion of Brexit manifests itself. These are very often subtle and tend to be due to a failure to adequately challenge evidence in their haste to see confirmation of their own world view. I would suggest that a large part of the reason for all of this is due to the fact that, at heart, Brexit has come to be predominantly about identity (which as a species we seem to feel very viscerally attached to) rather than about facts and evidence. I believe that this is unhealthy. It is time for us to lose our religion.

[\[1\]](#) Where there is much greater diversity of opinion lies in the size of this effect – are the overall losses large or small – and what the distributional consequences of Brexit might be.