



ESL Podcast 681 – Disagreeing about Religion

GLOSSARY

religion – a system of belief about the origins and purpose of life, including the ceremonies and rituals that are connected with it

* Becca was raised as a Christian, but lately she has been studying other religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism.

taboo – something that is unacceptable in a particular culture or society and should not be spoken about

* Whenever Melina's family gets together, they never talk about her drinking problem, because it's a taboo subject in their family.

to bait (someone) – to say certain things to try to get a strong reaction from someone, especially by making him or her become angry

* Just ignore him! He's only baiting you because he wants to see you get angry in front of the manager.

spirituality – interest in and beliefs about the origin and meaning of life and religion

* Dag has started reading a lot about spirituality, because he wants to understand what happens after we die.

disparaging remark – something one says to show that one does not think someone or something is good or important

* Why does your mother always make so many disparaging remarks about how your sister dresses?

faith – a belief in something that cannot be seen or felt

* Tiffany's faith was tested when a lot of bad things started happening to her family.

sacred – holy; related to a god or religion

* Which books are sacred in your religion?

provocative – done to make other people become angry or upset, or to have a strong reaction

* I just finished reading a provocative book about racism.

superstition – a belief that something is lucky or unlucky

* Do you believe in the superstition that walking under a ladder is bad luck?



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there you go again – a phrase used to emphasize that one has just done exactly what one was denying or promising not to do again

* Yolanda, you promised to manage your money better this year, but now there you go again, needing to ask your parents to help you pay your bills.

to call (something) like (one) sees it – to provide one's true opinion without softening it at all, even though one knows other people might become upset by what one says

* For years we've avoided talking about politics whenever Grandpa visited, but from now on, I'm just going to call it like I see it, even if it upsets him.

fundamentalist – someone who follows religious laws very strictly and believes everything in the holy books is true

* Christian fundamentalists believe the world was created in just seven 24-hour days.

atheist – a person who does not believe in God; a person who denies the existence of God

* Marcus is an atheist who believes that after we die, our spirit just stops existing and there is no life after death.

agnostic – a person who does not know whether or not God exists; a person who believes it is not possible to know whether God exists

* Sue doesn't follow any major religions, but she thinks it's possible that God exists, so she calls herself an agnostic.

to defend – to protect someone or something from attack; to say or do things to show that something is true or good when someone else is confronting it

* How can you defend the actions of a murderer?

behold – a word used to draw attention to something, often in a funny way

* Behold! I have created a five-course gourmet meal for us to eat tonight.

tolerance – a willingness to let other people do, say, and believe what they want without feeling the need to criticize or change them

* Not everyone shares our beliefs, so we need to learn tolerance if we're going to succeed in life.



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COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Jim mean when he says, “religion is a taboo subject”?
 - a) Religion is a very serious subject.
 - b) Religion is something that shouldn’t be talked about.
 - c) Religion is very complex.

 2. Which of these is a superstition?
 - a) A belief that animals have spirits.
 - b) A belief that people should not drink alcohol.
 - c) A belief that it is bad luck to open an umbrella indoors.
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WHAT ELSE DOES IT MEAN?

to bait (someone)

The phrase “to bait (someone)” in this podcast, means to say certain things to try to get a strong reaction from someone, especially by making him or her become angry: “Do you think she really believes those things, or was she just saying those things to bait you?” The phrase “to rise to the bait” means to react strongly to what someone is saying when he or she is trying to make one angry: “He’s trying to make you mad. Don’t rise to the bait.” “Bait” is the small piece of food or other object used to attract a fish or animal so that one can catch it: “Would worms or bugs be better bait for catching salmon?” The phrase “to bait” means to put a piece of bait on a hook or in a trap: “Careful you don’t hurt your finger when you bait the hook.”

faith

In this podcast, the word “faith” means a belief in something that cannot be seen or felt: “Sandra’s deep faith in God guides all her actions and decisions.” The phrase “faith healing” refers to the ability to make a person healthy without using medicine, asking God to take away the illness or injury: “Pentecostals believe in faith healing.” The word “faith” can also refer to the feeling of confidence and trust that one has in another person: “You can have faith in me. I won’t let you down.” The phrase “in good faith” means with true and honest intentions: “I signed that agreement in good faith, without realizing how risky it would be.”



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CULTURE NOTE

The United States was the first country to not have an official “state-sponsored” (supported by the state) religion. The First “Amendment” (official change) to the U.S. “Constitution” (the most powerful law in the country) is part of the “Bill of Rights” and guarantees “freedom of religion,” letting people decide which religion(s) they will follow.

People have immigrated to the United States from all over the world, bringing their religions with them. Today, Americans follow “diverse” (many different kinds of) religions.

Although it is hard to find “exact” (precise; accurate) numbers that everyone agrees on, most Americans are Christian. In a 2008 survey, 76% of the population was Christian. More than half of all Americans are Protestant, 25% are Catholic, and almost 2% are Mormon. Of course, there are many “denominations” (religious branches or types) within the Protestant category.

In recent years, more and more people have begun responding to surveys by saying that they have “no religious preference” or “no religious identification.” Many of these people are atheists and agnostics, but others simply don’t “identify with” (feel connected to) the categories listed on the surveys. In 2008, about 15% of Americans were in this category.

About 2% of Americans identified with Judaism, followed by Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions.

Religious beliefs “vary” (are different) with geography. In the Southern “Bible Belt” (the southeastern part of the United States where there are very strong Christian beliefs), as much as 86% of the population believes in God, but in the Western states, that falls to about 59%.

Comprehension Questions Correct Answers: 1 – b; 2 – c



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COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 681: Disagreeing about Religion.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 681. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from – where else – beautiful Los Angeles, California. That's right!

Visit our website at eslpod.com. You will learn the secret of life, as well as improve your English by downloading our Learning Guides.

This episode is a dialogue between Jim and Tammy called "Disagreeing about Religion." Let's get started.

[start of dialogue]

Jim: You know that religion is a taboo subject, especially with Paul. Why were you baiting him all through dinner?

Tammy: I wasn't baiting him. We have very different views on spirituality and I wanted to discuss the subject with him.

Jim: You were making disparaging remarks about his faith and some of the things he holds most sacred. I think you were trying to be provocative.

Tammy: I may have said a few things that were provocative, but I don't understand how people can believe in superstitions.

Jim: There you go again! People's religious beliefs shouldn't be called superstitions.

Tammy: I'm just calling it like I see it. I didn't know you were such a fundamentalist.

Jim: I'm not a fundamentalist. In fact, I'm an atheist, or at least an agnostic, but I still try to show respect for other people's beliefs.

Tammy: Beliefs are made to be challenged. If you can't defend your beliefs, you shouldn't have them.

Jim: Ladies and gentlemen, behold the voice of tolerance.



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[end of dialogue]

It's commonly accepted by most Americans that if you are among strangers – among people you don't know – you don't typically discuss politics or religion. But that's not what happened in our dialogue. Jim says to Tammy, "You know that religion is a taboo subject, especially with Paul." "Religion," of course, refers to a system of belief, a system of practices about how to run your life. It usually involves certain ceremonies, what we would call "rituals," that are connected with it. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism; all of these could be considered religions. A "taboo" (taboo) here means something that is unacceptable in a particular culture or society; it's something that you don't talk about because it is considered so evil or so bad or so controversial. Jim asks, "Why were you baiting him (baiting Paul) all through dinner?" "To bait (bait) (someone)" is to say certain things in order to get a strong reaction from that person, often to make them angry, to say something you know will make them angry. "Bait," as a noun, is what you use to try to catch fish. You put the bait on the end of a long string that you put down into the water, and the fish comes and gets the bait – the food – and then you pull on the string – on the line, the fishing line – in order to catch the fish. That's where that expression comes from.

Tammy says, "I wasn't baiting him. We have very different views on spirituality and I wanted to discuss the subject with him." "Spirituality" is a more general term used to talk about one's interest in and beliefs about the meaning of life, the meaning of religion. Nowadays, depending on where you see it, it often refers to what we might call "alternative" religious experiences, those that are not part of the more popular religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and so forth. But it can also be used to describe someone in a particular religion, their particular beliefs and ideas about something.

Jim then says, "You were making disparaging remarks about his faith." "To make disparaging remarks" means to say something to show that you don't think something else is good, you don't think it's important, to say bad things about another person or another idea that you don't like. A "remark" is simply a comment, something you say. "Disparaging" means to criticize it, to say it is bad or wrong. Jim says Tammy was making disparaging remarks about Paul's faith. "Faith" here means simply his belief in something. He says that she was making disparaging remarks about some of the things that Paul holds most sacred. "Sacred" (sacred) here means holy, related to God, related to religion. He "holds them sacred," that's just the expression we use. We use the verb "hold" meaning he has these beliefs, he believes these things are holy, that you shouldn't criticize them or make fun of them. Jim then says to Tammy, "I think you were



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trying to be provocative.” “To be provocative” means to do something that makes other people upset, it might even make them angry. It definitely is something that produces a strong reaction. Sometimes it can be used in a sexual sense; if someone says, “That dress is very provocative,” they mean that it is sexy, that it produces a certain reaction in the people who see it, not always positive.

Tammy says, “I may have said a few things that were provocative, but I don’t understand how people can believe in superstitions.” “Superstition” (superstition) is a belief in things that are lucky or not lucky. So for example, some people have a rabbit’s foot – at least they used to, I don’t know if they sell rabbits’ feet anymore. But when I was a child you could buy a rabbit’s foot, and this was considered a lucky object; it was actually called a lucky “charm” (charm). This is much closer to the idea of magic, where if you do something, something will happen automatically, no question about it.

Tammy is saying that Paul is someone who believes in superstitions. Jim says, “There you go again!” “There you go again” is a phrase used to emphasize that you have just done exactly what you were denying or promising not to do again. The phrase was made famous back in a political debate in 1980 between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter. When Carter made some statement, Reagan turned to him and said, “There you go again Mr. President,” something like that. But in more general terms, it just means that you are saying to the person you are doing whatever they said they weren’t going to do again.

Jim says, “People’s religious beliefs shouldn’t be called superstitions.” Tammy says, “I’m just calling it like I see it.” The phrase “to call (something) like you see it” means that you are giving your true opinion, and you’re not worried about what other people are going to think or say. You’re not worried about making other people angry or not, you’re simply describing the situation as you perceive it – as you see it. Tammy is a little confused since superstition and magic are based on the idea that if you do certain things, as I mentioned earlier, other things will happen. If you say certain words certain results are guaranteed, if you will. So God, or the gods, or some higher power doesn’t really have a choice. In religion it’s somewhat the opposite; most religions believe that there are certain things you should do, but that God or the higher power is the one who’s in control, not you. But Tammy knows that this is considered an insulting term, really, for people who are religious, and so she uses that term “superstitious,” or “superstitions.” Then she says, “I didn’t know you (Jim) were such a fundamentalist.” Once again, the word “fundamentalist” is one that is sometimes used as an insult, not in all cases. A “fundamentalist” would be someone who follows religious laws very strictly, does everything they’re supposed to do, and believes in every aspect of the religion. In the United States it has other



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meanings, more technical if you will, but we won't go into those here. Tammy is really using the word as an insult in a general sense, without perhaps understanding exactly the technical differences in what fundamentalism really means.

Jim says, "I'm not a fundamentalist. In fact," Jim says, "I'm an atheist, or at least an agnostic." An "atheist" is a person who does not believe in God or in gods. It's a person who denies the existence of a higher power of a god. An "agnostic" (agnostic) is a person who says that they don't know whether God exists or not, a person who believes that it isn't possible, perhaps, to know that God exists. So Jim is also confused; he's not sure if he's an atheist or an agnostic. He says, however, "I still try to show respect for other people's beliefs. Tammy says, "Beliefs (things that you believe in) are made to be challenged (are made to be defended)." In fact, she says, "If you can't defend your beliefs, you shouldn't have them." "To defend" means to protect something or someone from someone else who's attacking them; to say or do things, in this case, to show that what you believe is true and you have good reasons for believing that.

Jim then makes a joke; he says, "Ladies and gentlemen, behold the voice of tolerance." "Ladies and gentlemen" is what you say when you are talking to a large group of people and trying to get their attention – trying to get them to listen to you. Here, though, it's just Tammy and Jim, so he's joking. He says, "behold the voice of tolerance." "Behold" (behold) is a very formal word that means to draw attention to something. Nowadays it's used more as a joke; it's not used in the way that it perhaps used to be used. So Jim is saying "everyone look at this person." He calls Tammy "the voice of tolerance." "The voice of..." means that she is speaking as if she were that person. But this isn't a real person, this is an idea that she is apparently speaking for, and that idea is tolerance (tolerance). "Tolerance" is a willingness to let other people do, say, and believe what they want to without feeling like you have to criticize them or change them. It's allowing other people to be what they want to be. Jim is making a joke; he's saying that, in fact, Tammy is not a voice of tolerance, that by criticizing Paul she, in fact, is being intolerant, not allowing people to believe what they want to, in a sense.

Now let's listen to the dialogue, this time at a normal speed.

[start of dialogue]

Jim: You know that religion is a taboo subject, especially with Paul. Why were you baiting him all through dinner?



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Tammy: I wasn't baiting him. We have very different views on spirituality and I wanted to discuss the subject with him.

Jim: You were making disparaging remarks about his faith and some of the things he holds most sacred. I think you were trying to be provocative.

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Tammy: Beliefs are made to be challenged. If you can't defend your beliefs, you shouldn't have them.

Jim: Ladies and gentlemen, behold the voice of tolerance.

[end of dialogue]

Our scriptwriter always calls them like she sees them. That would be the one, the only, Dr. Lucy Tse.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us next time here on ESL Podcast.

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