

Jonah Goldberg, Ayn Rand and Conservative Religiosity

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“I was seconds from turning my car keys into some sort of fist weapon and gouging out his Adam’s apple for the accusation,” said Jonah Goldberg on his [podcast](#). What low, unsavory, insulting accusation could have driven Goldberg, a leading conservative intellectual, to such violent indignation: Dishonesty? Theft? Murder?

No, it was the merest suggestion that Goldberg is a fan of Ayn Rand. Here’s how it happened: The FX drama *Impeachment: American Crime Story* is about the Bill Clinton–Monica Lewinsky scandal, and Goldberg, as a journalist in Washington at the time, was peripherally connected to it. One of the scenes in the FX series is set in his fictionalized apartment. What scandalized Goldberg, his colleagues, and many of his followers is that his apartment was depicted as displaying (in the aggrieved Goldberg’s words) a “big-ass poster” of the cover of *Atlas Shrugged* on the wall.

The show’s producers, he complains bitterly, “clearly have not done their homework about me.” He objects that, because he was a young conservative in the 1990s, they assumed he was a “Rand worshiper.” No, he insists, that’s “just outrageous.” Goldberg is genuinely exasperated (“*This Ayn Rand thing!*”) and really wants you, and his colleagues, and his legion of followers to know for the record: “I am *not* a Randian. I am *not* an Objectivist.”

What’s most revealing in this spectacle is not Goldberg’s disavowal of Rand, but what lies behind his vehemence. To understand that, let’s unspool his explanation.

Why is Goldberg absolutely, definitely, unequivocally *not* an admirer of Rand’s ideas? It is not any specific argument or principle that Rand has put forward. Goldberg doesn’t mention any. It is what Goldberg says she refuses to do: give religion (and tradition) the respectful deference that he believes they are due. The problem, it seems, is “the way the Randians kind of have contempt for religion, contempt for tradition, contempt for all sorts of bourgeois norms and expectations of how to behave in a civil society.”

Notice Goldberg’s stress on “contempt.” The term is not out of place, but it’s misleading. It suggests that Rand’s perspective on religion was simply an emotional reaction, when in fact it was a consequence of her substantive, philosophic embrace of reason. Rand originated a this-worldly philosophy that takes reason as an absolute. Reason, she held, is one’s only means of knowledge (thus, rejecting faith) and one’s only guide to values and action.

Taking a world-historical perspective, Rand described religion as “a primitive form of philosophy,” an attempt “to offer a comprehensive view of reality.”¹ But because it is grounded on faith, it cannot serve the function of philosophy — indeed, religion is harmful to the lives of individuals and has sown destruction throughout history. “Faith, as such, is extremely detrimental to human life,” Rand once said. “It is the negation of reason.”² What human beings need now is to climb up — to upgrade — from faith, superstition, and blind tradition-following to embrace a rational, scientific philosophy as a guide to thought and action. Reason is fundamental to Rand’s philosophy, and she was uncompromising on the point.

It is Rand’s refusal to grant even a nod of deference to faith, superstition and tradition that Goldberg finds so objectionable. She’s on the wrong side of a red line that in Goldberg’s mind must never be crossed. And here we find a clue to why his disavowal was so vehement.

For Goldberg, religion really matters. This is why the “Randians,” guilty of exhibiting “contempt” for religion, “don’t belong in mainstream conservatism.” Generalizing the point, he explains:

You don’t have to be religious, never mind Orthodox, never mind a Catholic, never mind a Christian to be a conservative. But you have to have respect for religion, and respect for the religious. And you have to have a certain amount of reverence for notions of the transcendent, even if they don’t do much for you personally.

While shying away from defining conservatism, and while granting that the movement has many strands and factions, Goldberg insists on this point. To be sure, he is a far cry from the televangelist and fundamentalist threads within conservatism. Yet it is telling that he treats as obvious and uncontroversial that conservatism must show deference to and respect for “notions of the transcendent.” For him, religion is central to the conservative movement. By affirming this litmus test, Goldberg is following in the footsteps of William

¹ Ayn Rand, “[Philosophy and Sense of Life](#),” in Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto* (New York: Signet, 1971 Centennial edition).

² *Playboy* Interview: Ayn Rand. *Playboy*, March 1964.

F. Buckley, who as editor of *National Review* campaigned to dissociate conservatism from Rand. (Notoriously, Buckley published an article on *Atlas Shrugged* that smeared her and the novel. For more on the latter, take a look at [this podcast](#) that Onkar Ghate and I recorded.)

But Goldberg's over-the-top disavowal of Rand is not only, or primarily, about his role as a sentinel barring Rand from the conservative movement (Rand was outspoken across decades in her [rejection](#) of conservatism). Just consider what it implies about the conservative circles Goldberg inhabits, that a link to the atheist Ayn Rand compelled him to defend his integrity so fervently.

By all appearances, Goldberg's disavowal addresses mainly an insider audience of friends, colleagues, and followers. Goldberg recounts with great irritation how various people immediately sent him screenshots of the *Atlas Shrugged* poster from the FX series. No wonder he described a colleague's question — "Is it true?" — as an "accusation." Even if the claim about being "seconds away from . . . gouging out his Adam's apple for the accusation" is histrionic, it surely captures some of his frustration and sense of grievance. Behold his intense effort to absolve himself amid suspicions of even the slightest association with Rand.

There's more than a hint of anti-intellectuality in Goldberg's attitude. Especially today, in the twenty-first century, amid the burgeoning of human knowledge, awe-inspiring scientific advances, and relentless technological innovation, it's embarrassing to hear a leading intellectual intone the importance of "respect for religion." Translated into plain English, it means reverence for superstition over science, for feelings over facts, for blind faith over reason. To insist on this as a defining feature of an intellectual-political movement is primitive.

In this whole pathetic spectacle, Goldberg unwittingly provides further evidence for Rand's negative assessment of the conservative movement. From the 1960s onward, Rand argued, the movement's leading thinkers and spokesmen increasingly turned their backs on reason, science, and individualism. Conservatism as she witnessed it was philosophically bankrupt. A symptom of that decline was the growing influence of religion. The movement was becoming anti-intellectual. Jonah Goldberg's comments exemplify the mentality that she warned against.