

Discussion on an Airplane from Atlanta to San Francisco

[A middle-aged woman with very short hair and no makeup, in a t-shirt, sits next to you.]

You from Atlanta?

Yeah.

Me too, are you headed out on business?

Yes, got to be out there till Friday. How about you?

Oh, I'm meeting my partner out there and she and I are going to get married and take a few days to celebrate. I really wish we didn't have to travel though: I'm ashamed that my own state government doesn't make local businesses support our right to the kind of wedding we want to have, since every half-way intelligent person now-a-days accepts our right to marry.

Well... I don't claim to be half-way intelligent, but I wouldn't approve of it.

No kidding! See, that's the problem we're dealing with: It's really not your business to be deciding what's right and wrong for other people and imposing your personal values on them.

Well, they're not really my personal values. I believe a thing is right or wrong for everyone, regardless of who believes it or accepts it.

That's crazy! Everyone has their [sic] own beliefs, based on what they've experienced, how they were raised, and so on. For example, most people haven't had the experience of being naturally attracted to someone of the same sex (although that's changing, I hope) and so there's no way they could understand my feelings and what I've been through. I just want to have the right to make my own choices of what's right for me ... just like you do.

Well... I don't actually think I have the right to make my own choices about right and wrong.

What?

I try to follow what the Bible teaches about...

[Interrupting] ...Oh, religion. I figured that was where you were going. That's so lame to hide behind religion to condemn other people and justify what you personally want to believe.

Actually, my faith in God leads me to believe things that I—personally—wouldn't have chosen to believe and do, or not do, things that I would never have chosen my own.

See! That's a perfect illustration of why religion is so harmful—like the radical Islamists and their Sharia law and the Catholic Inquisitions. Religion could be okay if you keep it to yourself, but most religious people invent a set of laws and force other people follow them and condemn

everybody that doesn't believe and act like they do. I'll bet you're a right-wing conservative trying to vote in people that will outlaw abortion and bring back racism and homophobia.

No. I don't think government can make much difference in any way that really matters.

So you're not politically active?

Not really.

[Pause, thinking] Look, I don't think what you believe would improve things if other people believed it too, but you must think so. How do you think you'll ever improve society or the human race (or protect animals or the planet) if you just sit back and don't get involved—not that I want you to, of course. I mean, think of the progress that our country has made in the last 200 years: slavery abolished, segregation ended, women able to vote, the end of sexual repression, gender equality. You must be aware that most popular religions are making the same progress: like including women and gay people in the clergy.

Yes, and those religious groups are wrong to do that.

You don't have women priests in your church?

No, not in the way you're thinking. We don't have women in any public leadership roles, because we just follow the Bible.

Whoa, you really are lost in the past! You probably don't accept evolution or the round earth 'theory' either, do you? I don't mean to be rude, but people that believe like you do have always been a great barrier to progress. Do you ever consider changing with the times? Do you know how long it's been since what you believe was popular?

Actually, I don't think what I believe was ever popular. And it doesn't change.

So you believe stuff that was never widely accepted, is against science, and it's stuff that you don't even understand or agree with "*personally*" yourself?

...And you think everyone else should believe just like you do?

Questions on the above conversation:

1. How much progress are these two making in understanding the other's position?
2. Which position best characterizes mainstream media and academia in America?
3. If you think of this conversation as a debate, who is winning?
4. What would you say to clarify the discussion?