

“WAS IT ALREADY THE DAWN OF THE NEW JERUSALEM?”: LEACOCK ON RELIGION

Leacock’s satire of the Church of England can partially be understood through his views on religion. Leacock was not devoutly religious. In an essay he wrote on religion and modern morality, he said that religious traditions provided an “authoritative moral code as a guide”⁸ for the development of society. However, he also believed that “we have kicked out the devil as a ridiculous and absurd superstition, unworthy of a scientific age”⁹.

His private views on religion were a bit more pessimistic. In 1934, he wrote a letter to his son who was about to go through Confirmation. In part, the letter says:

I do not believe that God made the world in six days, do you?

I do not believe that God created Adam and Eve and made Eve from one of his ribs, and put them in a garden and created animals. Do you?

I do not believe that Joshua made the sun stand still, do you? That Elijah went up to heaven and Jonah lived in a whale? Do you?

Nor can I feel anything but horror for the jealous, vindictive slaughtering god of the old testament. To visit the sins of the fathers on the children is, to simple people, the last word of injustice.¹⁰

This was not the only known instance of Leacock casting doubt on religion to his son. Reportedly, Leacock left his son devastated when he told him that nothing happens when people die. They just cease to exist¹¹.

1. Most of the satire in “The Ministrations of the Rev. Mr. Drone” challenges the ways that people act in relation to the church. The chapter does not specifically cast doubt on religious beliefs. Why do you think this is?
2. When Leacock wrote the above letter to his son, he gave it to his niece and secretary Barbara Nimmo to type. He asked her to destroy the original. However, Nimmo thought that the letter was too important to destroy. Instead, she filed it away in Leacock’s archives. This ensured that the letter would eventually become part of the public domain. It was published in full in *The Letters of Stephen Leacock* in 2006.
 - a) Discuss the ethics of Nimmo contradicting her uncle’s wishes and placing her uncle’s letter in his archives, knowing it would become part of the public domain.
 - b) Discuss the ethics of publishing this letter in *The Letters of Stephen Leacock*.
 - c) Discuss the ethics of republishing (part of) this letter in this learning resource.

8 Leacock, Stephen. “The Devil and the Deep Sea: A Discussion of Modern Morality.” In *The Social Criticism of Stephen Leacock*, edited by Alan Bowker, U of Toronto P, 1973, p. 45.

9 Leacock, p. 44.

10 Staines, David, Editor. *The Letters of Stephen Leacock*. Oxford UP, 2006, p. 235.

11 Bowker, David. “Preface.” In *On the Front Line of Life, Stephen Leacock: Memories and Reflections 1935-1944*, edited by Alan Bowker, Dundurn, 2004, p. 9.