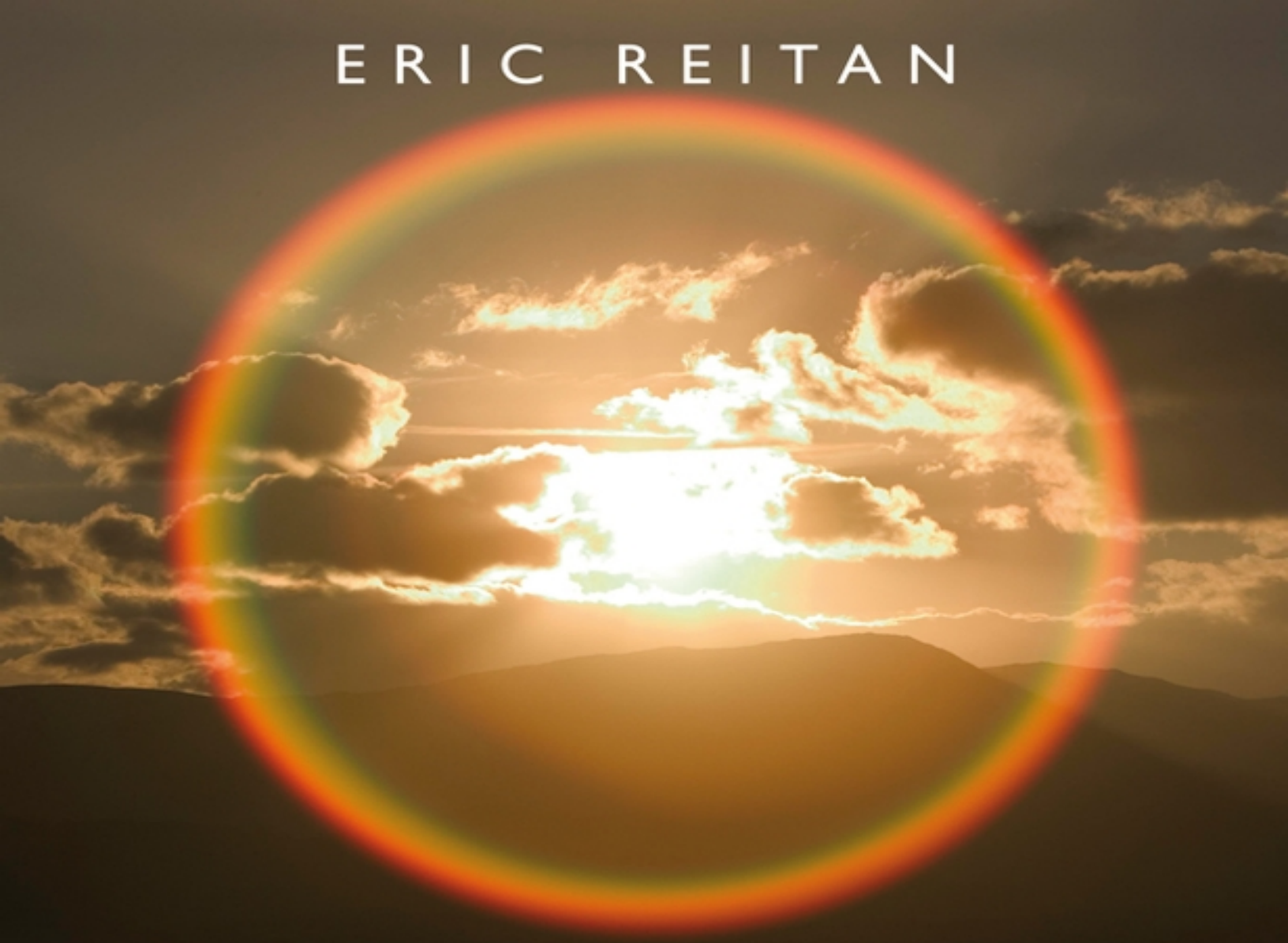
ERIC REITAN



IS GOD A DELUSION?

A Reply to Religion's Cultured Despisers

WILEY-BLACKWELL

Contents

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To Russell Bennett and Baron Garcia, who demonstrated in their lives, each in his own way, what it means to live in a spirit of hope.

Introduction

At one point in his recent book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins expresses astonishment that "any circles worthy of the name sophisticated remain within the Church." He calls it "a mystery at least as deep as those that theologians enjoy" (2006, p. 60). His astonishment is occasioned by the Roman Catholic procedure for investigating candidates for sainthood, a procedure that he thinks can only be an embarrassment to more sophisticated Catholics. But his views here express a broader perplexity – a perplexity shared by other atheists – over why any morally sensitive and intellectually responsible adults would believe in God.

Dawkins' perplexity seems to be widely shared these days. The last few years have seen a flurry of books, both popular and academic, attacking religion in general and theistic religion in particular. In fact, a recent *Time Magazine* article declared that "Dawkins is riding the crest of an atheist literary wave" (Van Biema 2006, p. 50).

Examples aren't hard to find. Sam Harris, in his 2004 book *The End of Faith*, lists religious faith alongside ignorance, hatred, and greed as the demons "that lurk inside every human mind." Of these demons, he thinks faith "is surely the devil's masterpiece" (p. 226). In his *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006), Harris continues the assault, arguing that religious faith "is on the wrong side of an escalating war of ideas" (p. 80) and that the very survival of the world depends on the victory of those on the *right* side of this war: the side opposing religious faith.

Others who belong to the side Harris favors include the philosopher Daniel Dennett, who seeks to demystify religion in his 2006 book, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. While Dennett displays a philosopher's caution about expressing his conclusions too boldly, it is clear where his sympathies lie: religion, for him, is a potent

and potentially dangerous force that needs to be studied scientifically so that it can be controlled. The possibility that religion might be directed towards a reality inaccessible to science, that belief in a transcendent God of love might be *true*, is not a matter Dennett finds worthy of serious attention. He thinks that the arguments for God's existence are weak, dispensing with them in "a scant six pages" (as he declares with apparent pride in a defense of Dawkins published in the March 2007 issue of *The New York Review of Books*).[1] And since he thinks the existence of religious belief can be readily explained without invoking the idea that there is some kind of *supernatural force* making itself felt on the human psyche, Dennett is happy to view religion as delusional. He finds little reason to think the delusion useful, and so the only interesting question is just how pernicious it is.

More recently, the physicist and amateur philosopher Victor Stenger has cranked out a little book entitled *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (2007), in which he purports to show that recent advances in science pretty decisively establish that God does not exist. He then mirrors (more concisely, but with less rhetorical flair than Dawkins, and less eloquence than Harris) the charge that not only don't we need religion to have moral and meaningful lives but religion is an important source of evil in the world.

And for the most angry and rhetorically charged attack, we have Christopher Hitchens' recent screed, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). This pugilistic manifesto digs through the annals of religious history and doctrine to uncover the very worst that religion has to offer – and then holds up these disturbing phenomena as representative of the very essence of religion (while doing some furious rhetorical hand-waving to conclude that heroic figures such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr., were not really religious at all). As Hitchens puts the

point, “religion has caused innumerable people not just to conduct themselves no better than others, but to award themselves permission to behave in ways that would make a brothel-keeper or an ethnic cleanser raise an eyebrow” (p. 6). While he admits that “nonreligious organizations have committed similar crimes,” Hitchens maintains that religion lacks any redeeming features that might counterbalance its evils. It is steeped in misrepresentation, and it “is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking” (p. 5).

Of course, the range of works attacking religion is hardly exhausted by this list. Other recent books that should probably be included are biologist Lewis Wolpert’s *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast* (2007), Carl Sagan’s posthumous essays, *The Varieties of Scientific Experience* (2006), and David Mills’s recently revised and updated *Atheist Universe* (2006). Attacks on particular religious doctrines (such as the doctrine of biblical inerrancy or the doctrine of hell), or particular versions of religious life (especially fundamentalism), are legion (and I am to blame for at least a few of those attacks[2]). And every few years, a scholar in my discipline of philosophy comes out with a new philosophical attack on the rationality of theistic belief in general or Christianity in particular. Some of the best include J. L. Mackie’s classic *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* (1982), Michael Martin’s *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (1990) and his follow-up, *The Case Against Christianity* (1991). In its modern incarnation, this sort of philosophical attack on religion (especially Christianity) has been going on at least since Bertrand Russell’s 1927 essay, “Why I am Not a Christian” (Russell 1961b).

But it is one thing when academic philosophers address the question of God’s existence, with a primary target audience of fellow scholars or undergraduate students taking a philosophy of religion class. In terms of

philosophical acumen, Dawkins' *The God Delusion* is dwarfed by the works of Mackie and Martin (and is, in my judgment, rendered puerile in comparison with the writings of the most thoughtful and meticulous of the atheist philosophers, William Rowe). But Dawkins has what Mackie and Martin and Rowe can only dream of: a major bestseller and a growing crowd of followers who seem to hang on his every word. The recent books by Harris, Dennett, Stenger, and Hitchens have also become bestsellers.

What we have today is a surge of scientists and other intellectuals who have been coming out of the closet to voice, not just skepticism, but overt *hostility* towards theistic religion, even in its most seemingly benign forms. These "new atheists," as I will call them, are distinguished by their outrage. Belief in God, they tell us, is not just irrational but dangerous – even evil. And the public, apparently hungry for such frank expressions of animosity, have been gobbling it up, turning one book after another into a bestseller.

The reasons are probably varied. The September 11 attacks, orchestrated and perpetrated by religious fanatics, have doubtless had their effect. Sam Harris makes fruitful use of our dread of religious extremism to play up what he takes to be the inherent dangers of religion itself. I do not doubt that many have looked in horror at what, apparently, religion can do – and then seen the seeds of similar horrors in their own backyards, their own churches and religious upbringings. There is also the evident power, in America, of the religious right's unified voting bloc – a power that has unsettled not only political liberals but also many moderates (and even a fair number of secular conservatives). And then there are the recent assaults on public science education, perpetrated by religious conservatives in the guise of "Intelligent Design Theory."

But I will leave the historical and sociological explanations to others more schooled in these disciplines. The fact is that

religion is being challenged in a way that, while not entirely unprecedented in history, is surely notable. This is not to say that religion has become unpopular, or that belief in God is waning. Rather, it is to say that those who oppose religion – especially theistic religion – are becoming noisier and more vocally angry, and they are pulling out the stops. And leading the cavalry charge (I almost wrote Calvary charge!) is Richard Dawkins, who seems to style himself a kind of C. S. Lewis of atheism.

Dawkins' *The God Delusion* offers up, in one place, the most important attacks that are currently being pressed against religion and theistic belief. These attacks can be summarized as follows:

- *all* the traditional arguments for God's existence are very bad ones;
- despite claims to the contrary, science *can* investigate the existence of God; and when such a scientific investigation is pursued, we see that God's existence is highly improbable at best;
- the existence of religious belief can be satisfactorily explained without making any reference to a supernatural reality;
- we do not need religion to provide us with a basis for morality, or to give meaning to our lives;
- religion is dangerous, even in its moderate forms, because it encourages blind faith that is immune both to rational criticism and to the urgings of conscience;
- religion is a source of division and enmity among people, needlessly magnifying the violence in the world.

These charges are not trivial, and Dawkins clearly believes each one. And so he thinks religion is not only irrational, but one of the roots of evil in the world.[3] Given these convictions, it's no wonder that Dawkins cannot understand why any intelligent, morally sensitive people would believe in God.

This book is a sustained effort to clear up Dawkins' perplexity. It is, in other words, a systematic rebuttal of the main arguments found in *The God Delusion* and, more broadly, in the "atheist literary wave" that Dawkins surfs.

This book is not, however, an attempt to convince atheists and agnostics that they ought to become theists. My aim is very different from the project that Sandra Menssen and Thomas Sullivan, for example, set for themselves in their remarkable recent book, *The Agnostic Inquirer* (2007). In that book, the authors ask whether an agnostic might have good reasons to become convinced that there is a God who has revealed Himself in the world – that is, whether a case can be made that the probability of such a God's existence exceeds 0.5, so that belief in God becomes the most reasonable judgment. This question dominates much of religious apologetics, both historical and contemporary, and Menssen and Sullivan offer an important new contribution to that tradition – by arguing that the content of putative revelatory claims might count as evidence for the existence of a good God who has revealed Himself.

By contrast, my aim is not to convince atheists and agnostics that they should believe in God but rather to show that those who do believe in God are not thereby irrational or morally defective. Contrary to the angry arguments of the new atheists, I will argue that allegiance to theistic religion is entirely consistent with being a decent, reasonable person. But I think that, in our ambiguous and mysterious world, equally rational people can believe different things. On my view of rationality, the fact that a reasonable person could be a theist does not preclude that a reasonable person might also be an atheist. Agnostics should *not* expect to find arguments here that aim to compel them to accept God's existence. But I do hope they will be convinced that the decision to embrace theistic religion can be both rational and benign.

The Spirit of Schleiermacher

A little over two hundred years ago, a young theologian named Friedrich Schleiermacher published a little book that responded to a similar flurry of disdain for religion. The book was entitled *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. In that book, Schleiermacher faced head-on the contempt for religion that was rampant among the intellectual elite in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century – a contempt born out of the Enlightenment, the budding scientific revolution, and the growing clashes between organized religion and the advocates of rationality and progress.

As the title of this book suggests, the spirit of Schleiermacher is a powerful inspiration for the ideas and arguments that make up my reply to the new atheists. Schleiermacher has justifiably been called the father of modern theology, but at the time that he published his *Speeches* he was a little-known hospital chaplain. What turned this book by an unknown into the talk of the intellectual world was the daring way in which he steered a course between the polarized forces of traditional religion and the intellectual world of the Enlightenment. His aim was not to preserve a calcified past or the dogmas that were the target of so much scorn among religion's "cultured despisers." Rather, his aim was to show these cultured despisers that they had *missed the point* of religion.

In the very same stroke, of course, he showed that many of the most ardent defenders of traditional religion were missing the point as well. Schleiermacher wasn't defending in all its details what organized religion had become at the dawn of the modern age, and he certainly wasn't trying to beat back the forces of modernity. Rather, he was trying to show that the essence of religion was both immune to the accusations leveled by its cultured despisers and fully compatible with the growing insights of the modern age.

According to Schleiermacher's understanding, "religion itself" is something that only a minority in history has really grasped and appreciated, "while millions, in various ways, have been satisfied to juggle with its trappings" (1958, p. 1).

It may well be that the target of religion's cultured despisers, in Schleiermacher's day as well as our own, is not religion itself but, rather, its trappings. And, of course, Schleiermacher's own religion was not only theistic but Christian. The points he was making about religion in general extended to theistic religion and to Christianity itself.

In my view, it is one of the great tragedies of history that the trend in theology launched by Schleiermacher at the turn of the nineteenth century was beaten back by reactionary forces less than a century later, and has been thoroughly eclipsed – especially in the popular picture of religion today – by the rise of fundamentalism.[4] On Schleiermacher's analysis as well as my own, religious fundamentalism, at least insofar as it embraces fundamentalism, does not have the right to call itself *religion* at all. The "God" of fundamentalism has no legitimate claim on the title.

Thus, while this book defends the rationality of theistic religion against the charges leveled by the angry new atheists, readers shouldn't expect me to defend the versions of theism they most directly attack. I teach and work in Oklahoma, which is at least one "buckle" of the American Bible Belt. And I learned soon after coming here that when I describe my faith to my students, calling myself "Christian" strikes many as akin to describing an eighteen-legged purple animal with an elephantine nose, and then calling it a horse.

I will not be defending the doctrine of biblical inerrancy because I think it is both mistaken and dangerous. I will not

be defending the doctrine of hell because I think that it is mistaken and (at least in its most traditional formulations) dangerous. I will not be defending the divine command theory of ethics (that is, the theory that morality is the product of God's decrees) because I think it is both mistaken and dangerous. I will not be defending the legitimacy of "faith" understood as stubborn belief without regard for evidence because faith in *that* sense is a dangerous and inappropriate basis for forming one's convictions. I will not be defending a strong doctrine of religious exclusivism because I think it is both mistaken and – that's right – dangerous. I will not be defending the patriarchal subordination of women or the heterosexist marginalization of gays and lesbians because I think that these things are objective moral evils. I will not be defending "Young Earth Creationism" because I think it is mistaken, dangerous, and, well, silly.

There is much that comes under the guns of Dawkins and his allies that I *will* defend (for example, the merits of the cosmological argument for God's existence, the evidentiary value of religious experience, and the value of "faith" when that term is properly understood). But a principal task in this book will be to "stake out" the proper territory for theistic religion – to identify the kind of theistic religion that morally sensitive and intellectually responsible people can embrace without it being a "mystery"; a kind of theistic religion that, I will argue, is immune to the challenges raised by Dawkins and the other new atheists. What should become clear is that many actual religions tread shamelessly outside this territory, into the domain of superstition and ideology; and when they do so, they render themselves appropriate fodder for Dawkins' attacks. Dawkins' mistake is not that he attacks these runaway religions. His mistake is to blithely assume that theistic religion itself falls prey to these attacks. It does not.

And so my argument here, while occasioned by the recent "atheist literary wave," should be understood to be as much a critique of some dominant contemporary manifestations of religion as it is a critique of religion's cultured despisers. In fact, I'd started writing a book with a very different title when I read *The God Delusion*. Reading Dawkins' book inspired a shift of focus. The book I'd been writing bore the working title, *How the Religious Right Gets Religion Wrong*. A geology colleague recently suggested I should title this book *A Pox on Both Your Houses*. My hope, however, is to be at least a bit less pugnacious than that.

In that spirit, let me say that much of what Dawkins and the other new atheists have to say is important. Their concerns about the harms done in the name of religion need to be taken seriously, and the underlying reasons for so much religious violence need to be explored. In fact, insofar as *The God Delusion* nicely summarizes the main objections of contemporary atheists to religious faith, it seems to me it should be required reading for all who have yet to seriously confront a forceful statement of these objections. I share Dawkins' disdain for those expressions of faith that seek to "immunize" believers against all critical arguments by, among other things, warning them "to avoid even opening a book like [*The God Delusion*], which is surely a work of Satan" (Dawkins 2006, pp. 5–6).

I think all religious believers should take to heart the words that Simone Weil, the early twentieth-century mystic and philosopher, wrote in her correspondence with a Catholic priest friend: "For it seemed to me certain, and I still think so today, that one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to him because, before being Christ, he is truth" (1951, p. 69). If more Christians (and Jews and Muslims, etc.) lived out their faith journeys with Weil's idea close to their hearts, I cannot but believe that much of the violence

done in religion's name would be avoided. And, at the very least, I believe that Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, if approached seriously, will inspire *some* wrestling with God.

Put another way, I share with the new atheists their disdain for those who stubbornly cling to religious beliefs for no reason at all, without regard for arguments or evidence, with no thought to the implications of their beliefs or the objections that might be leveled against them. This kind of stubborn attachment to religious beliefs is what Dawkins and Harris call "faith." And while Alister McGrath, in *Dawkins' God* (2005), rightly criticizes the adequacy of this understanding of faith, it would be a mistake to think that no religious believers conceive of faith in precisely these terms.[5]

Many, in fact, live out their religious lives in the grip of a "faith" that is just as Dawkins and Harris describe it: they cleave to their beliefs out of mere willful stubbornness, without regard for truth, and they proudly call it a virtue. While there are (as I will argue) understandings of faith according to which it may be the virtue that religious believers claim it to be, this understanding is not one of them.

The reasons for condemning "faith" in this sense are well articulated by the new atheists. But there is a distinctively religious reason that most atheists ignore: faith in this sense is idolatrous. It involves devotion to one's own concept of God rather than to the truth about God. In this respect, Dawkins may be closer to an authentic religious faith than most fundamentalists: he is devoted to atheism because he is devoted to *the truth*, because he sincerely wants to believe the truth about God.

It is my conviction that theism and other forms of supernatural religion are born out of a combination of rational insight, profound experiences of a distinctive kind, and morally laudable hope. But, along with Schleiermacher,

I believe that the germ of religion born from these sources needs to be refined and shaped by careful and humble reflection in open-minded discourse with others. The religious vision that can arise out of such discourse is not the pernicious delusion that Dawkins takes to be the hallmark of all supernatural religion.

But it is an unfortunate fact of history that the germ of this religious vision has consistently been co-opted for political and economic gain, corrupted by our more mean-spirited impulses, obscured by our blinkered and parochial thinking, and – perhaps – distorted by the kinds of impulses that Dawkins and Dennett take to be the evolutionary basis for religion itself.[6] The results have been religious traditions that – while preserving the germ of what I might presumptuously call "true religion," and while offering fleeting glimpses of what that germ might evolve into – are also laden with crud.

And in some of the more pernicious modes of religious expression, the germ has been thrown away altogether and the crud has been lifted up. Human beings have been encouraged, indoctrinated, even coerced into the worship of rubbish.

Ideology and Hope

Perhaps, given religion's sordid history, it is not surprising that the cultured despisers of religion would find it a mystery why any intelligent and morally sensitive persons would embrace theistic belief. I do not begrudge them their befuddlement. Rather, I question what they do in the face of it.

Dawkins, for example, thinks that this mystery cannot be solved so long as we assume that theists are being reasonable and morally sensitive in their theism. Instead, the mystery can only be solved by invoking selective

stupidity.[7] On Dawkins' view, if people who are otherwise intelligent and morally sensitive also believe in God, it must be because their intelligence and moral sensitivity have, at this point, failed them. Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* makes a similar claim, albeit with greater subtlety and eloquence.

But in his own discipline, Dawkins becomes incensed whenever a mystery of evolution – some complex biological system that hasn't been explained yet in Darwinian terms – is treated as a refutation of Darwin's theory. When intelligent design theorist Michael Behe, author of *Darwin's Black Box* (1996), invokes such mysteries as reasons to conclude that evolutionary theory can't explain the organized complexity we find in living organisms, Dawkins treats this as an intellectual cheat.

To throw up one's arms and declare a Darwinian explanation impossible is simply a way to shut down intellectual inquiry. Can the complexity of our immune system be explained on the assumption that all complex systems evolved gradually from simpler ones through natural selection? To assume that the answer is *no* – and to declare, "It must be divine intervention!" – just because it hasn't been done yet is intellectually irresponsible. "*Hasn't* been done!" should not be equated with "*Can't* be done!"

But here is the parallel question: Can the fact that there are theists who seem to be intelligent and morally sensitive be explained on the assumption that these theists are *exercising their intelligence and moral sensitivity* in the formation of their theistic beliefs? For Dawkins to assume that the answer is no – and for him to declare, "It must be selective stupidity!" – just because *he* hasn't been able to figure out how the exercise of intelligence and moral sensitivity can generate religious belief . . . well, why isn't *that* intellectually irresponsible?

Let's be honest: Dawkins is no more qualified to pursue a good faith effort to find rational foundations for theism than

a creationist is qualified to pursue a good faith effort to find Darwinian explanations for complex biological phenomena. Of course, the typical creationist lacks the biological training necessary to pursue the effort with any competence. But there are exceptions: Michael Behe is an accomplished professor of biochemistry. If Dawkins is right about Behe's failings, this only goes to show a general point of no small importance: even accomplished scholars can go wrong in their thinking when they have an ideological axe to grind. Put simply, creationists would be too delighted by the failure to find Darwinian explanations to keep doggedly going until success is achieved.

In order to keep doggedly looking for a certain kind of explanation, even in the face of initial failures to find one, we need some confidence that such an explanation is out there to be found. It is this confidence that keeps scientists going despite all the false starts and failed experiments. They have faith in the power of science to explain events – not in the naive sense of "faith" that Dawkins and Harris foist upon religious believers, but in a very real sense of the word. For scientists, their faith is a kind of methodological presumption that a naturalistic explanation is available, if only we keep at it long enough. It is, in a sense, a species of hope. In a later chapter, I will argue that there is a kind of religious faith very similar to this faith of the scientists. But for now I want to make a different point.

Some of the people I have most admired have not only been devoutly religious but their religion has been theistic. They have shaped their lives according to a love of God that buoys them through difficult challenges and seems to radiate back through them as a love and compassion for the world and everything and everyone in it. They are thoughtful and open to critical discussion of their convictions. They are slow to anger, slow to condemn, and even quicker to forgive.

These people are, admittedly, no more typical of theistic believers than they are of the general population. And they have no connection at all to the fundamentalism that is the primary target of today's cultured despisers of religion. But they do believe in God. And they do align themselves with religious traditions (the ones I've known best have been Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews, but there are many examples within Islam and other faith communities as well).

The new atheists would have us believe that the religiosity of these rare individuals is an anomaly in their character, something they possess in spite of their intelligence and moral sensitivity. Their belief in God, their religious faith, their allegiance to a historic religious tradition – all these things exemplify where their intelligence and moral sensitivity have failed them.

For the sake of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Simone Weil and Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as too many personal friends and inspirations to name, I hope that Dawkins and the other cultured despisers of religion are wrong. I hope, in other words, that theistic religion can be, and often is, a vital constituent of a life lived with compassion and intellectual integrity.

To say that the religious faith of these rare individuals springs from their intelligence and moral sensitivity is not to say they all have carefully worked out philosophical arguments demonstrating the reasonableness of theistic faith. Their intellects and compassion may operate on a more intuitive level. It's the job of philosophers to trace out carefully the rational pathways that intuitive insight often surges through too quickly for plodding intellects to follow.

My hope is that such pathways can be found. The new atheists, whose life experiences and personal heroes are almost certainly very different from my own, do not have this hope. And therefore, just like the creationists who will give up the search for Darwinian explanations at the first

sign of intellectual difficulty, the new atheists lack the tenacity to keep looking for rational pathways to theistic faith.

Overview

The search for these pathways requires hope, but it also requires philosophical diligence. And such diligence requires a serious effort to think through many of the most important ideas and arguments developed in the philosophy of religion. As such, my reply to the cultured despisers of religion may serve as a kind of introduction to that field.

In Chapters 1 through 3, I focus on the two key concepts that form the basis of the philosophy of religion: the concepts of "religion" and "God." I argue that the new atheists are continually in danger of either misconstruing these concepts or considering only one meaning among many. Most significantly, they fail to see the difference between theistic religion that is principally characterized by *fear* of a supernatural tyrant, and theistic religion that is chiefly characterized by *trust* in a transcendent good. These things are so fundamentally distinct that to conflate them is like confusing medieval alchemy and contemporary chemistry.

In Chapter 4, I take up the question of how science and religion are related. In the course of doing so, I explore the distinction between religion and superstition, and I consider the worry that when religion makes claims that fall outside the scope of scientific inquiry it renders religious assertions meaningless. In Chapters 5 and 6, I explore the traditional arguments for the existence of God. I argue that, while the best of these arguments do not *prove* God's existence, they do something else of no small importance: they show that it is reasonable to believe in the existence of a necessary being that explains the existence of the empirical world. Such a being would constitute a reality fundamentally

distinct from the world we encounter with our senses. It would amount to a supernatural reality that explains the existence of the world.

In Chapters 7 and 8, I appeal to two ideas that the new atheists dismiss rather quickly – religious experience and faith – to build on the foundation for theistic religion that philosophical reasoning lays down. I argue that the phenomenon of religious experience supports the rationality of believing in a transcendent good. Faith, understood as a species of hope and a decision to live as if a hoped-for reality is true, can take us the rest of the way towards belief in something like the Judeo-Christian God: an infinite personal spirit whose essence is love. The hope that underlies such belief I call the "ethico-religious hope," and I argue that living in this hope is fundamentally at odds with engaging in the pernicious practices that the new atheists attribute to faith. There is, in effect, a "logic of faith" that precludes intolerance, fear-driven violence, and persecution.

In Chapter 9, I turn to the problem of evil – that is, the problem of reconciling belief in a transcendent God of love with the existence of the evils in this world. I argue that these evils are insufficient to dash the ethico-religious hope. To the contrary, the scope and magnitude of evil in the world entails that for many of us, our lives will have positive meaning only if we live in that hope – only if we have faith in something like a God of love.

Finally, in Chapter 10, I focus on what I take to be the source of the violence, oppression, and cruelty that have so often gone on in the name of religion. It is not religion *qua* religion that is responsible. Rather, these things are caused by ideologies of exclusion that are only contingently linked to theistic religion. While such ideologies are often overlaid upon religious doctrines and practices, they needn't be. And such ideologies often operate independently of religion. Religion, in short, is only a convenient vessel through which

these ideologies sometimes operate. But at least in the sense of “religion” defended here, the essence of religion stands opposed to these dangerous ideologies. To attack religion is therefore to attack what may be one of our most important resources for fighting the very evils that so inflame the new atheists’ outrage.

Our task must be to nurture authentic religion, to pursue the compassionate and thoughtful discourse that can purge it of the forces that corrupt it. We must find ways, not to stamp out religion, but to let *true* religion loose upon the world.

Contrary to what the new atheists might say, that can only be a thing of beauty.

1

On Religion and Equivocation

In “Why I Am Not a Christian,” Bertrand Russell prefigures by about 80 years many of Richard Dawkins’ complaints about religion and theistic belief. After dispensing with (or so he thinks) the arguments for God’s existence, Russell launches into an attack on the character of Christ, focusing on Christ’s purported endorsement of the doctrine of hell. As Russell sees it, the doctrine “that hellfire is a punishment for sin . . . is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels, if you can take him as his chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that” (Russell 1961b, p. 594).

After impugning Christ’s character, he turns to the Christian religion which he claims “has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world” (p. 595). Then he brings religion *as such* under fire. “Religion,” he says, “is based primarily and mainly upon fear . . . fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand in hand” (p. 596). Finally, he turns his sights on God, saying that the concept of God “is a conception derived from the ancient Oriental despotisms. It is a conception quite unworthy of free men” (p. 597).

But what does Russell mean by “religion” here? What does he mean by “God”? Is religion in *every* sense “based on fear”? Is *every* conception of God “derived from the ancient Oriental despotisms”? For Russell, the concept of God is that of a terrible tyrant in the sky, dispensing arbitrary rules and

ruthlessly punishing those who question his authority. The cowering masses, terrified of the world and its dangers, project their fears into the heavens, imagining this cosmic tyrant who, while deadly and capricious, can be appeased. Out of their efforts at appeasement, *religion* is born.

And when appeasement does no good (as it surely won't, since its object is a fiction), there is the inevitable effort to place blame: *we* haven't been good enough, or *you* haven't been good enough. Those wicked Sodomites have brought God's wrath upon us. It's the fault of the infidels or the heretics. To appease God, we must defeat His enemies.

Gradually, perhaps, this attitude takes on an otherworldly dimension: The rewards for our efforts at appeasement will come in *another* life. And if we fail to defeat God's enemies in this life, have no fear: they will roast in the next.

It's no wonder, if this is Russell's only image of religion, that he thinks of it as evil.[1] It's no wonder that, eighty years later, Russell's spiritual protégé, Richard Dawkins, is on a righteous crusade to stamp out religion from the world.

But perhaps what Russell is describing is not *the* phenomenon of religion and *the* concept of God. After all, our language is messier than that. One word often refers, not just to one concept, but to a cluster of related ones. The philosopher Wittgenstein (1953) once suggested that many terms – such as the term "game" – extend over a range of phenomena that are related only by what he called "family resemblances" (p. 32, remark no. 67). My cousin looks nothing like my daughter. But my daughter looks like me, I look like my mother, my mother looks like her brother, and he looks like my cousin. We call both professional football and peek-a-boo "games"– even though it is hard to find *anything* they have in common – because they are connected by such "family resemblances."

So it may be with both "religion" and "God."[2]

The Meanings of “Religion”

When we use the term “religion,” we might mean a system of doctrines. Then again, we might mean a body of explanatory myths, or a social institution organized around shared beliefs and ritual practices, or the personal convictions of an individual, or a person’s sense of relatedness to the divine. Sometimes we treat it as synonymous with “comprehensive world-view” and other times as synonymous with “spirituality.”

Pretty much everyone would agree that the beliefs shared by most Southern Baptists, insofar as they are Southern Baptists, comprise a religion; and most would agree that the beliefs shared by biochemists, in their role as biochemists, do not. But while some people would be inclined to call secular humanism a religion, others would staunchly resist doing so.

The fact is, we use the term “religion” in a variety of ways. And this fact makes it difficult to talk precisely about religion, let alone attack it with valid objections. Whenever usage is so varied, there is a real danger that one will fall prey to what philosophers call *equivocation* – that is, the fallacy of using the same term in different senses in the course of a single argument or discussion, without noticing the shift.

This is the treacherous conceptual quagmire into which Bertrand Russell waded eighty years ago, and into which the new atheists slog cavalierly today. To his credit, Dawkins *tries* to define his terms. But he fails to do so with a philosopher’s care, and he is too swept up in his own rhetoric, the joyous excesses that make his attacks on religion so entertaining (at least to those who aren’t deeply offended by them). Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, by contrast, never define their terms, leaving it up to their