

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 been 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 worldview” 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 readers to figure out what they are so fervently attacking when they attack “religion.”

To see more fully the conceptual challenges faced by anyone who wants to attack religion, consider some contrasting definitions. Paul Griffiths (1999), in his book *Religious Reading*, takes religion to be an account of things distinguished from other kinds of accounts by virtue of being *comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central*. For an account to be comprehensive, “it must seem to those who offer it that it takes into account everything, that nothing is left unaccounted for by it” (p. 7). An account is unsurpassable if it cannot be “replaced by or subsumed in a better account of what it accounts for” (p. 9). And to be central, an account “must seem to be directly relevant to what you take to be the central questions of your life, the questions around which your life is oriented” (p. 10).

Contrast this definition with the one offered by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1914). James defines religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (p. 31). And he takes “the divine” to mean “only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest” (p. 38).

Again by way of contrast, consider the view of sociologist Emile Durkheim, who takes religion to be essentially a social phenomenon. For Durkheim, religion is a product of the “inter-social sentiments,” which are those that bond the individual to society by representing the individual as

a member of a greater whole to whom he or she has binding obligations.³ Durkheim sees religion as “a form of custom, like law and morality,” that distinguishes itself from other customs in that “it asserts itself not only over conduct but also over *conscience*.”⁴ For Durkheim, the metaphysical speculations so typical of religious doctrine are merely instrumental and incidental: they function solely to achieve the effect of socializing the individual members of society, creating a conscientious allegiance to societal rules.

Or consider the theologian John Hick (1989a), who sees religious traditions, with their dogmas and practices, as attempts to orient religious practitioners towards an ultimate reality, a “noumenal Real” that transcends the grasp of human language and cognitive faculties. He takes it that human beings are alienated from “the Real” and from one another, at least in part because the Real is just too vast for us to grasp. All we can do is tell mythological stories, formulate metaphors, and devise ritual practices that connect us to it experientially. These stories, metaphors, and practices are supposed to move us away from our self-centered starting points, towards other-centeredness, and finally towards Reality-centeredness. The measure of a religion’s “truth,” for Hick, is not the literal truth of its teachings, since these are “about that which transcends the literal scope of human language” (p. 352). The measure of religious truth is, instead, its capacity to jar us out of our self-absorption and into a way of life shaped by a living connection with a Reality we cannot put into words.

So, which is it? Is religion a comprehensive and unsurpassable account of everything that matters to a person? If so, the naturalism of secular humanists would qualify as their religion. Or is religion a private matter of how the individual relates subjectively to what is taken to be the fundamental reality? If so, the physicist’s awe and wonder at the vast beauty of the cosmos would be a religion. Or is religion a social construct, its metaphysical pronouncements (if any) an incidental by-product of its goal of creating loyalty, obedience, and cohesion among society’s members? If so, Marxist ideology would have been the religion of the former Soviet Union.⁵ Or is religion an attempt, through metaphors and ritual practices, to bring our lives into alignment with an inexpressible transcendent reality? If so, then most world religions would paradoxically *be* religions even as they reject the accuracy of Hick’s account (since they don’t typically take themselves to be engaged in merely metaphorical discourse).

The point, of course, is that “religion” is used in all these ways and more. Each account has justification in ordinary usage. And there is probably even

greater diversity with respect to the cognate term, “religious.” Consider all the things we call “religious”: beliefs, stories, practices, ways of life, experiences, communities, persons, etc. When we call these things “religious,” do we always mean the same thing?

Of course not.

Einsteinian Religion and the Feeling of Piety

What this means is that if the new atheists want to say religion is evil, they need to tell us what sense of “religion” they have in mind. Likewise for “God.”

Do they?

Christopher Hitchens (2007) never even tries. But when we look at the details of his attack, we see an interesting trend. He claims, for example, that the faith of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who was executed for resisting the Nazis, was no real “religion” at all but “an admirable but nebulous humanism” (p. 7). When he refers to Bonhoeffer again, it is to point out that he risked and sacrificed “in accordance only with the dictates of conscience” rather than “on orders from any priesthood” (p. 241), implying that one is being *religiously* motivated only if one acts out of obedience to authorities of an organized religious hierarchy. That Bonhoeffer was part of a priesthood seems to miss his attention. The possibility that Bonhoeffer’s conscience might have been informed by his faith never enters Hitchens’ radar screen.

Concerning Martin Luther King, Jr., Hitchens claims that King was not a Christian in any “real” sense because he preached forgiveness of enemies and universal compassion rather than a rabid retributivism culminating in a doctrine of hell. The lynchpin of his case against the view that King was a real Christian is summarized in the following observation: “At no point did Dr King . . . ever hint that those who injured and reviled him were to be threatened with any revenge or punishment, in this world or the next, save the consequences of their own brute selfishness and stupidity” (p. 176).

So, in Hitchens’ view, an ethic of love and forgiveness is less central to Christianity than the doctrine of hell. Someone who believes that “God is love” and claims to have experienced that love as a source of spiritual support can turn out, on Hitchens’ account, not to be a Christian in anything but a “nominal” sense. But while King was no true Christian, Hitchens treats Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, the Catholic priest in

Rwanda who was charged with aiding the death squads and raping refugee Tutsi women, as channeling the true spirit of the Christian faith (pp. 191–2).

I would, of course, reverse these assessments. Anyone who, like Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, could call his mother a “cockroach” because she is Tutsi, strikes me as utterly divorced from religion even if he wears its trappings. I would argue, with Schleiermacher, that a deep connection to the essence of religion is rare compared to those who “juggle with its trappings,” and that this rare connection is most clearly represented in the lives of such people as Bonhoeffer and King.

But to say these things requires an account of what I mean by “religion.” Instead of offering his own account, Hitchens’ strategy seems to be this: if it is good, noble, or tends to inspire compassion, then it isn’t “religion.” It is “humanism” or something of the sort. With no clear definition to guide him, Hitchens is free to locate only what is cruel, callous, insipid, or banal in the camp of religion, while excluding anything that could reliably motivate the heroic moral action exemplified by Bonhoeffer and King. When “religion” is never defined, but in practice is treated so that only what is poisonous qualifies, it becomes trivially easy to conclude that “religion poisons everything.”

Do the other cultured despisers of religion do any better?

Consider Dawkins. In the first chapter of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins tries to distinguish “Einsteinian religion from supernatural religion” (p. 13). He stresses that it is only religion in the “supernatural” sense that he intends to attack. But his main purpose seems to be to deflate the pretensions of theists who want to quote Einstein as their ally.⁶ Perhaps because of this polemical aim, his account of the kind of religion he wants to attack is fatally underdeveloped.

Dawkins rightly points out that, when Einstein professed to be religious, he wasn’t referring to belief in a personal God but to the humility and “unbounded admiration” that thoughtful people feel when they contemplate the “magnificent structure” of the universe. At one point, Einstein expresses his understanding of religion this way:

The most beautiful and most profound experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling is at the center of true religiousness. (Frank 1947, p. 284)⁷

This awe in the face of an extraordinary and mysterious reality which puts all our self-conceits into their proper place – this is what Einstein meant by “religion.” For him, religion was essentially a *feeling*, not belief in a personal God.

But in this respect, Einstein was hardly original. When he understands religion as a feeling, he is following in the footsteps of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher’s first published work, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, was written while he hobnobbed with Schlegel and other intellectual romantics in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Berlin. In many ways, his *Speeches* could have been written to today’s “cultured despisers” of religion. What Schleiermacher did in the *Speeches* was argue that these cultured despisers didn’t really understand *religion* at all. For Schleiermacher, religion is not essentially about beliefs or doctrines or knowledge, nor is it about practices or ethical norms. Religion is neither a “knowing” nor a “doing.” It is, instead, a distinctive *feeling*.

By “feeling,” Schleiermacher didn’t mean some rush of emotion, but rather a kind of primal experience – or, perhaps better, a *way* of experiencing. He called it the feeling of *piety*, and in the *Speeches* he tried to describe it as the awareness of “the Infinite in the finite.”⁸ Later, in his magnum opus, the *Glaubenslehre* (usually translated as *The Christian Faith*), he described it as “the feeling of absolute dependence.” Sometimes, instead of “feeling,” he used the term “self-consciousness,” although it is clear that what we are conscious *of* in our experience of piety is not our isolated ego but the self *in relation* to something beyond us.

These brief sketches do not, without elaboration, give us an adequate sense of what piety is like (we will consider it more carefully in later chapters). But it doesn’t take much reflection on Einstein’s humble wonder in the face of a mysterious reality to conclude that what Einstein was feeling was piety in Schleiermacher’s sense.

There is a crucial difference, for Schleiermacher, between the feeling of piety and any attempt to explain it. He identifies religion with the feeling. As soon as you begin to explain it in conceptual terms you are doing *theology*, and you’ve left religion itself behind.⁹

Schleiermacher did acknowledge the reality of religious *communities*, or religions. He thought these came into existence because, as social creatures, we couldn’t keep so profound an experience to ourselves. It’s natural that religion should *express* itself communally. But religion, in its essence, remains a personal feeling.

In some ways, this point is really very obvious. One commentator on Schleiermacher puts it this way: “Is it not evident to all that when a per-

son is most deeply immersed in religious reality – when he is *being* most religious – he is least conscious of the ideas commonly thought to be its substance, for instance, God, freedom, and immortality?” (Christian 1979, p. 52).

Being religious is about being swept up in a unique feeling. In this respect, at least, *all* religion is Einsteinian.

Of course, Schleiermacher did not share Einstein’s *naturalism* – that is, his tendency to explain this feeling in purely natural terms, without invoking a transcendent cause. In the *Glaubenslehre*, Schleiermacher takes the feeling of piety to be our first inkling of a connection to something beyond the world of the senses, something that is the absolute ground of our being. In Schleiermacher’s mature theology, the religious feeling turns out to be our first direct experiential link to a God of love.

But given Schleiermacher’s view of religion, his differences with Einstein are not on the level of religion in its primary sense. They both experience the feeling that is religion’s essence. Where they differ is in their theology – that is, in how they *explain* the feeling to themselves and others. While Schleiermacher would certainly have disagreed with Einstein’s theology, he would have had no grievance at all with Einstein’s *religion*.

And so, Dawkins’ division between “Einsteinian religion” and “supernatural religion” proves to be a crass oversimplification. In important ways, Schleiermacher’s religion was *both* “Einsteinian” *and* supernatural.

But I can already imagine Dawkins’ reply: *I mean to say, simply, that the term “religion” is either understood in a way that includes belief in a supernatural God, or in a way that does not. That is a mutually exhaustive dualism, and my target is everything in the former category. And I wish physicists would stop using the terms “religion” and “God” in the Einsteinian way, since it misleads the masses.*

I am prepared to grant that when Dawkins heaps accusations on the doorstep of *religion*, he means what I will call “theistic religion” – that is, any use of “religion” that includes belief in a supernatural God. But my point is that even this use of the term is rich in variations. It can refer to someone’s account of the world in terms of God’s activities (*à la* Griffin), or to a solemn personal experience interpreted as an encounter with God (*à la* James), or to a feeling of absolute dependence that gives rise to theistic belief (*à la* Schleiermacher), or to a social institution that invokes the idea of God to bring about adherence to societal norms (*à la* Durkheim), or to communal metaphors and rituals aimed at aligning individuals with a God who defies direct description (*à la* Hick). It might or might not include belief in the power of intercessory prayer, or in miracles that defy natural laws, or in the inerrancy of some holy book.

With so many possible meanings, anyone who launches a critical discussion of theistic religion in general needs to be cautious. For example, if someone wants to distinguish between “Einsteinian religion” and “theistic religion,” it would be risky, in a moment of rhetorical flourish, to say what Dawkins says in the following passage: “The metaphorical or pantheistic God of the physicists is light years away from the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language. Deliberately to confuse the two is, in my opinion, an act of intellectual high treason” (p. 19).

Here, Dawkins poses a sharp dichotomy between the metaphorical God of Einstein and a very *particular* understanding of a supernatural God,¹⁰ which he dubs the one of “ordinary language” (as if, in ordinary usage, “God” means just one thing).

In any event, Dawkins claims that the target of his arguments is *not* some particular brand of theism. “I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods,” he says. “I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented” (p. 36). And yet, swept up in rhetorical excess, he lavishes enormous attention on the “misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filiacidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully” whom he takes to be the God of the Old Testament (p. 31). (I left out “jealous and proud of it” as well as “a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak” and “a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser.”)

Imagine an author who sets out to prove that music glorifies violence but who spends most of the book fixated on gangsta rap and then attributes the vices of the latter to music in general. As already noted, this kind of mistake is called *equivocation*. Dawkins’ rhetorical excesses and inattention to nuanced differences do not just make him susceptible to this fallacy. When he tries to make the case that religion is pernicious, Dawkins moves willy-nilly from an attack on *particular* religious doctrines and communities to conclusions about religion and belief in God *generally*. And this, of course, is entirely typical of religion’s cultured despisers.

The Art of Equivocation

Perhaps Dawkins would have less trouble with theistic religion were it as personal as Einstein’s religion was. Schleiermacher was well aware of this

inclination among religion's cultured despisers. In one tongue-in-cheek passage from his *Speeches*, he expresses the views of his hostile audience as follows:

Those of you who are accustomed to regard religion simply as a malady of the soul, usually cherish the idea that if the evil is not to be quite subdued, it is at least more endurable, so long as it only infects individuals here and there. On the other hand, the common danger is increased and everything put in jeopardy by too close association among the patients. (Schleiermacher 1958, p. 147)

Schleiermacher delights in the metaphor, imagining how his audience sees religion's dangers "heightened by the proximity of the infected," increasing the risk that this "feverish delirium" will spread through the whole society, until "whole generations and people would be irrecoverably ruined" (p. 147).

In response, Schleiermacher argues that while religion in its basic sense is a private feeling, it cannot *stay* comfortably private. In Schleiermacher's view, "If there is religion at all, it must be social, for that is the nature of man" (p. 148). In fact, the impulse to association is especially strong in the case of religion, in part because of the sheer power of the religious experience. More significantly, the *content* of religious feeling is an impulse to communalism. "How," he asks, "should he wish to reserve what most strongly drives him out of himself and makes him conscious that he cannot know himself from himself alone?" (p. 149)

The content of the religious feeling includes an awareness of "man's utter incapacity ever to exhaust it for himself alone" (p. 149). Hungry for what others can bring to our understanding of the feeling, we are drawn into association with others.

But ordinary human language isn't up to the task of expressing what we so urgently long to express. And the content of religious feeling is not something "to be tossed from one to another in such small morsels as the materials of a light conversation" (p. 150). And so religious communities inevitably adopt a more intimate form, akin to that of close friendship and love, "where glance and action are clearer than words, and where a solemn silence also is understood" (p. 150).

For Schleiermacher, these genuine religious communities, born from the religious feeling and the desire to share it, are antithetical to any "endeavoring to make others like ourselves" (p. 149). In such communities, each member is "full of native force seeking liberty of utterance and full at the

same time of holy desire to apprehend and appropriate what others offer” (p. 151). And so there is no room for hostility towards divergent understandings. Schleiermacher disparages the “wild mania for converting to single definite forms of religion” (p. 155).

If hostility and rivalry are part of a community that calls itself religious, they originate in something other than the primal source of religion. They are, in a real sense, corruptions. The primal religious feeling teaches that “everything is holy . . . whether it is embraced in his system of thought, or lies outside, whether it agrees with his peculiar mode of acting or disagrees” (p. 56). To the extent that organized religion loses sight of this feeling, it is a failure.

Organized religion ceases to be *true* religion if it becomes about dividing human communities into in-groups and out-groups. While Schleiermacher believed that alternative theological speculations inevitably follow from the religious feeling, he also believed that, because the essence of religion is an awareness of something far greater than ourselves, anyone who truly has this awareness “must be conscious that his religion is only part of the whole; that about the same circumstances there may be views and sentiments quite different from his, yet just as pious” (p. 54). Schleiermacher therefore believed that anyone with true religion, no matter how they understood their religious experience (no matter what their theology), would be characterized by a “beautiful modesty” and a “friendly, attractive forbearance” (p. 54).

He thus reprimanded his generation’s cultured despisers of religion with words that still resonate today: “How unjustly,” he said, “do you reproach religion with loving persecution, with being malignant, with overturning society, and making blood flow like water” (pp. 54–5). For Schleiermacher, religious feeling is “the natural and sworn foe of all narrow-mindedness, and all onesidedness” (p. 56). Any organized “religion” that cultivates narrowmindedness or in-group/out-group divisions has lost its connection with the feeling of piety. A community that uses the concept of heresy to attack enemies of the faith has nothing to do with religion in Schleiermacher’s sense – even if, in keeping with Schleiermacher’s own theology, it includes belief in God.

But when Dawkins makes his case in *The God Delusion* that religion is pernicious, he focuses on the role that religion plays in dividing humanity into opposing groups. He maintains that religion is a “divisive force.” He calls it “a *label* of in-group/out-group enmity, not necessarily worse than other labels such as skin color, language, or preferred football team, but

often available when other labels are not” (p. 259). He insists that, with respect to enduring conflicts such as the one in Northern Ireland, “without religion there would be no labels by which to decide whom to oppress and whom to avenge” (p. 259). It is socialization into one religious community or another, starting in childhood, that creates the division. Dawkins claims that if we “look carefully at any region of the world where you find intractable enmity and violence between rival groups,” it is a “very good bet” that religion serves as the basis for the division (p. 260).

But it is religion *as a social phenomenon* that can set human communities against one another or socialize children into rival “religious” identities. And, if Schleiermacher is right, religion as a social phenomenon can serve this divisive role only when it has lost touch with the *substance* of the original religious feeling, thereby ceasing to be authentic religion at all.

Seen from Schleiermacher’s perspective, Dawkins’ argument amounts to this: “There exists this social phenomenon that was originally born out of religion (understood as a feeling of piety), but which has become alienated from this source. And this social phenomenon, which has nothing to do with true religion, is a cause of violence and misery. Therefore, religion is a cause of violence and misery.”

It doesn’t take a logician to see that this argument is bad, even if we take “religion” in Dawkins’ argument to include only its “supernatural” forms. After all, Schleiermacher believed in God but what Dawkins is attacking is entirely divorced from the theistic religion of Schleiermacher and his many spiritual children.

The fact is that Dawkins attacks “supernatural religion” in *one* sense and applies his conclusions to “supernatural religion” in *any* meaningful sense. If one were looking for examples of equivocation to include in a critical thinking textbook, one couldn’t do much better than Dawkins’ arguments against religion.

Examples abound. Dawkins explains at length why he is hostile to “fundamentalist religion,” by which he means organized religion that affirms the literal inerrancy of a holy book (such as the Bible). He also explains at length why he is hostile to moral absolutism – which he never defines but which seems to mean something like “unquestioned belief in the truth of certain moral principles, taken to hold without exception, and believed without acknowledging the possibility of error.” He concludes – rightly, in my view – that both of these phenomena are dangerous (pp. 282–301).

But how are they related to religion in general? Fundamentalism is only one form of religion. Moral absolutism is at best associated with

the religion of some (but not others). One can be a moral absolutist without being especially religious and one can be religious without being a moral absolutist.

So how does Dawkins move from condemning fundamentalism and absolutism to condemning religion as such? Following in the footsteps of Sam Harris, he appeals to the concept of faith. He maintains that religion – even “moderate” religion – asserts that “unquestioning faith” is a virtue. “Faith,” he says, “is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument” (p. 308). And the more that “faith” is encouraged, the more likely people are to cling to dangerous beliefs “on faith” and thus become dangerous fanatics. The more that someone’s beliefs are shielded from critical scrutiny by virtue of being part of their “religious faith,” the harder it becomes to criticize religious doctrines *before* they lead to violence and tragedy.

Again, I agree with Dawkins – *if* “faith” means “stubborn belief that is indifferent to evidence and immune to rational criticism.” But for Dawkins’ argument to work, this sort of “faith” must be essential to religion in *any* meaningful sense.

Is it? Not for Schleiermacher. Not for Simone Weil, who believed, as we saw, that “one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of a pure regard for truth.” Not for me. Not for Russell Bennett, former pastor of Fellowship Congregational Church in Tulsa, whose funeral was packed with people of every religious faith and none at all, who was described by a Jewish rabbi as one of “the Thirty-Six” (referring to the Jewish fable that, in every generation, there are thirty-six truly good souls who preserve the world through their gentle but persistent commitment to a life of love, and who are so humble they would never admit to being one of this number). Not for Paul Ashby, current pastor of this same church, who has long meditated on the question of why Tibetan Buddhism, despite terrible oppression under the Chinese occupation, has never given rise to a suicide bomber. Not for most of the congregation at this church.

I mention this church, not because it is unique (it’s not) but because it is the church I know best. It is the church where my children are learning not merely about Christianity but how to critically reflect on all religious doctrines in a spirit of curiosity and devotion to a truth that transcends human understanding.

Is there *faith* in such a church? Absolutely, but not in Dawkins’ sense. For the sense of faith that is present at churches like it, we need to look elsewhere (I will offer my own proposal in Chapter 8). Is this community

religious? Absolutely – but not if “faith” in Dawkins’ sense is taken to be the essence of religion.

Religion, even organized religion, needn’t be any of the things Dawkins accuses it of being. Often, of course, religious communities look just as Dawkins describes. But when this happens, it may be because the community has lost touch with the essence of religion in Schleiermacher’s sense – perhaps because the evolutionary forces that Dawkins and Dan Dennett describe as the *source* of religion have swept through and disconnected the community from the primal religious feeling, making the community *about* something else (such as social control in Durkheim’s sense). Contrary to what Dawkins and Dennett think, the evolutionary forces they discuss do not explain religion. Rather, they explain why authentic religion is so rare.

The Eloquent Equivocations of Sam Harris

In *The End of Faith* (2004), Sam Harris raises equivocation on the meaning of “religion” to a high art, wraps the ambiguity in mellifluous prose, plays up our fear of religious extremists, launches stinging attacks on Christian fundamentalism, and then lets the force of rhetoric do the work of implicating all religion in the impending demise of human civilization. His message is simple: humanity is headed towards Armageddon, and the blame lies as much with your Aunt Ruth, who faithfully drives to her United Methodist Church every Sunday to sing hymns and pray and listen raptly to Pastor Jim, as it does with Al Qaeda fanatics.

This is a rather scathing portrait of a book that won the 2005 PEN/Martha Albrand Award (which until 2006 was awarded annually to a new American author of nonfiction). In terms of the criteria used to determine the award recipient, namely “literary and stylistic excellence,” Harris’s book is exceptional. But while such excellence deserves recognition, one of the risks of stylistic brilliance is that it can blind readers (and authors!) to weak argumentation. And one of the problems most easily obscured is equivocation.

Is Harris guilty of the charge? Like Dawkins, he accuses religion in general of endorsing “faith” construed as blinkered allegiance to irrational beliefs. But Harris has other arguments as well. I want to consider two of them – both targeting religious moderates. The first implicates these

moderates in the supposed threat to human civilization as we know it; the second accuses them of a deep intellectual dishonesty, according to which they betray both reason *and* faith.

Harris is astute enough to recognize a difference between religious extremists and religious moderates. The former blow themselves up on crowded buses, demand the deaths of infidels or abortion doctors, and celebrate at the funerals of gays with signs announcing “God Hates Fags”; the latter pray over their meals, recite traditional creeds, think everyone should try to live in peace, and look forward to listening to the cantor on Friday evening, or belting out a good hymn on Sunday morning, etc. The extremists are prepared “to burn the earth to cinders if it would put an end to heresy,” while the moderates “draw solace and inspiration from a specific spiritual tradition, and yet remain fully committed to tolerance and diversity” (2004, p. 14).

What could be wrong with the latter? The problem, according to Harris, is that they perpetuate “a terrible dogma” – namely, that “the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others.” He thinks these moderates endorse “the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God.” And, on his view, this notion “is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss” (pp. 14–15).

The *abyss*, no less! Perhaps so, but is it fair to saddle *all* “religious moderates” with this “terrible dogma”? Schleiermacher may well be the spiritual grandparent of so-called “moderate” Christians today. If you don’t read him carefully, you might come away thinking he endorses the naive respect for religious diversity that Sam Harris foists onto all religious moderates. After all, he claims that the religious person will “listen to every note that he can recognize as religious” (Schleiermacher 1958, p. 149), regardless of sect or denomination, recognizing that “there may be views and sentiments quite different from his, yet just as pious” (p. 54). There is, in Schleiermacher, a strong basis for a pluralism that looks for what is valuable in every religion, setting aside charges of heresy in favor of “this beautiful modesty, this friendly, attractive forbearance” (p. 54).

And Schleiermacher says all of this while devoting his life to the Christian faith. Surely then, here is one of Harris’s “religious moderates” who “draw(s) solace and inspiration from a specific spiritual tradition” while remaining “fully committed to tolerance and diversity.”

But it would be an appalling mistake to accuse Schleiermacher of teaching Harris’s “terrible dogma.” Schleiermacher, in these passages praising

tolerance of religious diversity, is describing the *nature* of the religious mind and thereby offering a measuring stick by which to decide whether a so-called faith community is truly *being* religious.

Respect for religion in all its forms does not equal respect for all those who *call* themselves religious, even those who behave in ways utterly at odds with what anyone moved by religious piety would do. Harris's "religious extremists" would be singled out by Schleiermacher as lacking authentic religiosity. From Schleiermacher's perspective, there is no religion there to respect. He would condemn it as a perversion, all the more horrific because of the essential beauty of what has been perverted.

Schleiermacher, in a manner typical of the religious moderates I know, combines a sharp critical stance towards extremist and fundamentalist religion with an interest in culling from every religious tradition some insight into the transcendent. My experience is admittedly anecdotal but my point isn't about statistical frequency. It's about whether Harris's sharp dichotomy – between religious extremists who would raze the earth to expunge heresy and doe-eyed moderates who think everyone should just be allowed to believe whatever they wish – is fair. Schleiermacher, once again, stakes out a perspective from which *both* of Harris's alternatives would have to be condemned.

Like Schleiermacher and Harris, I condemn both alternatives. Unlike Harris, I do not plunge headlong towards the wholly unwarranted conclusion that there are no other alternative accounts of religion but these.

In a follow-up argument, Harris betrays an even more astonishing caricature of religion. He begins this argument as follows:

The only reason why anyone is "moderate" in matters of faith these days is that he has assimilated some of the fruits of the last two thousand years of human thought. . . . The doors leading out of scriptural literalism do not open from the *inside*. The moderation we see among nonfundamentalists is not some sign that faith itself has evolved; it is, rather, the product of the many hammer blows of modernity that have exposed certain tenets of faith to doubt. (Harris 2004, pp. 18–19)

Harris then notes that "from the perspective of those seeking to live by the letter of the texts, the religious moderate is nothing more than a failed fundamentalist." He reiterates his misguided charge that religious moderation "does not permit anything very critical to be said about religious literalism," since fundamentalists are "merely practicing their freedom of belief," and so concludes that, "by failing to live by the letter of the texts, while

tolerating the irrationality of those who do, religious moderates betray faith and reason equally” (pp. 20–1).

But why, exactly, are religious moderates supposed to have betrayed religious faith? On Harris’s view, it is because they do not “live by the letter of the *texts*.” And why is it that religious moderation cannot, on his view, be seen as representing the evolution of religion to a more advanced form? Because he thinks that “the doors leading out of *scriptural literalism* do not open from the *inside*.”¹¹

Religion, for him, is about scriptural literalism. The *fundamentalist* view of religion, as blind allegiance to a *text*, is also Harris’s definition! Since *that* is what he takes the essence of religion to be, and since we cannot escape literalism from “the inside,” he concludes that there is nothing within religion itself that enables this escape. Since Harris relegates religious feeling to the margins, the fact that this feeling is sharply at odds with fundamentalism cannot, for Harris, count as an internal impelling cause of religion’s evolution. Religious moderates are therefore represented as people without the integrity of their convictions, people who are simultaneously unwilling to accept where literalism leads (because of the influence of modern insight and rationality) and unwilling to accept where modernity and rationality lead (because of a nostalgic attachment to the text).

We aren’t led to this conclusion unless we accept the equation that Harris makes between *fundamentalism* and religion. Harris never considers the possibility that fundamentalism may be the perversion, that fundamentalism may be the betrayal of authentic religion. He blithely equates religion with fundamentalism, and the rest is easy: fundamentalism is irrational; it has no resources for transcending itself. If religious moderation is born out of fundamentalism, it can only be because these moderates can’t stomach fundamentalism but are unwilling to follow reason to its conclusion.

Had Harris offered, at the start of the book, a narrow stipulative definition of “religion,” and said that he was only attacking religion in that very narrow sense, I would have praised the book for identifying a dangerous phenomenon and explicating precisely what made it so dangerous. But instead, Harris allows his attacks to sweep indiscriminately across anything that calls itself religious – except when “religion” is used as a label for a specific phenomenon he wants to call “spiritual practice” (his treatment of which we will consider in Chapter 7). Harris is careful to rescue what he loves from his promiscuous assault.¹² What he fails to explore is whether there are other things, to which he is personally indifferent, that are equally undeserving of his attack.

The Truth amidst the Mudslinging

And yet, amidst all their equivocation, Dawkins and Harris get something right: organized “religions” have not typically been what Schleiermacher and other religious progressives have lifted up. Schleiermacher himself admits that every real religion is corrupt in one or many ways. After all, religious communities are human ones, subject to all the failings to which humanity is susceptible. And there may be things about these communities that make them distinctively vulnerable to certain kinds of corruption.

This is something I could hardly deny. My family and I drive an hour to church every week. On the way there, I don’t pay much attention to the sights but on the way home I see all the churches that we are passing: Amazing Grace Holiness Church on the right, followed a few miles further on by First Pentecostal Holiness Church (all this holiness along one small stretch of highway!). Once we get into the countryside with nothing but cows for company, we pass Ventures of Faith Ministries whose sign proclaims it to be the “World Outreach Center.” I can never resist the comment, which inevitably makes my wife groan: “Strategically situated for world outreach!”

Once we take off the freeway and follow the single-lane highway home, we pass a Baptist church whose name I can’t recall but which posts a variety of messages on its sign. For a time last summer, the message read, “Prayer conditioned inside!” (I didn’t get it until my wife pronounced it with an Oklahoma accent). Later, when Oklahoma was in the grip of an extended heat wave, the sign said, “Think it’s hot *here*?”

Once we get closer to home, we pass through a small town whose most prominent landmark is a red-and-blue-painted auto repair shop (with lightning bolts!) calling itself “God’s Garage.” On the property is a sign pointing the way to an affiliated church. I can’t recall its name but I think of it as the church where everyone has a well-tuned car.

Of course, we could shorten our Sunday drive if we were willing to worship at any of these churches. We could avoid it altogether were we to worship at one of several dozen that exist in our town. So why don’t we?

Our reasons have much in common with those that Dawkins and Harris voice for disdaining religion. Of course, there are churches in our town that don’t fall prey to their criticisms. If other considerations were not in play, we could spare ourselves the drive. But the reality is that any real-world religious community – what Schleiermacher called a “positive religion” – will have flaws.

As social animals, most of us must therefore choose between a *flawed* religious community and no real *living* religion at all. If we want religion in our lives, we must decide which flaws we can live with, given our idiosyncrasies and life histories. It is like choosing a spouse: no spouse is perfect, so you need to find one whose flaws you can live with and who can live with your flaws.

But sometimes (perhaps often) these flaws are so monumental that Schleiermacher can only agree with the cultured despisers of religion when they accuse positive religions of displaying characteristics entirely at odds with “true religion.” Choosing these positive religions is not choosing religion at all and may even lead to the death of religious feeling. Again, the analogy to an intimate relationship is apt: if we are to find a loving life partner, we must choose among imperfect mates. But some flaws are so great they render a loving relationship impossible.

When corruption of religious communities is pervasive, the situation may be akin to finding a mate amidst a crowd of abusive alcoholics. While some of those close at hand might not be abusive drunks, one may need to travel far to find a *compatible* mate.

The religious world we live in may well be like a world dominated by abusive drunks. The reality is that organized religions have historically served a dangerously divisive role. The concept of heresy has shaped virtually every actual religious tradition in history. And this concept has clearly played a role in fomenting violent conflict. Sam Harris may well be right that we have the moderating power of *secular* culture to thank for the fact that there aren’t more American churches at each other’s throats.

But Dawkins himself observes that religion is not the only thing that has served as a “label of division.” Beneath this use of religion is an *underlying drive to divide* that will seize just about anything to do its work: religion, skin color, national identity, kinship groups, language differences, even (as Dawkins notes) sports team allegiances (2006, p. 259).

No one can deny Harris’s charge that the history of religion is fraught with the willingness to sacrifice critical reflection at the altar of fundamentalism. But under the surface, other drives may be at work. Human beings crave power and privilege. And this drive is so strong that it can even take hold of a philosophy of radical *egalitarianism* such as Marxism and use it as a basis for imposing the very class divisions that Marx abhorred, vesting party members with privilege while the majority languish, too afraid of the KGB (the heresy police!) to voice dissent.

And then, of course, there is the human desire for certainty, for relief from doubt. Sometimes that certainty is sought in a radical relativism:

“Whatever I believe is right for me, just because I believe it.” Sometimes it’s sought in a fanaticism that won’t admit the possibility of error or a naive trust in someone else to do your thinking for you.

These drives have taken hold of religious communities repeatedly through history. In Schleiermacher’s day, the cultured despisers of religion saw all this corruption and (in Schleiermacher’s words) it made positive religion “the object of a quite pre-eminent hate” (1958, p. 214). We see that hate today in the spewing vitriol of Dawkins, the righteous outrage of Harris, the cold intellectual disdain of Dennett (like a researcher studying cancer under a microscope).

In response to this hatred, Schleiermacher does not deny the pervasiveness of corruption but asks the cultured despisers of religion to “forget for once this one-sided view and follow me to another.” He goes on:

Consider how much of this corruption is due to those who have dragged forth religion from the depths of the heart into the civil world. Acknowledge that much of it is unavoidable as soon as the Infinite, by descending into the sphere of time and submitting to the general influence of finite things, takes to itself a narrow shell. (Schleiermacher 1958, p. 216)

In short, consider the possibility that these positive religions were born out of the inner life of religious feeling and the urgent need to share it in community with others. If that is true, we need to ask what forces took hold of these communities, ultimately wringing from them every trace of the religion that gave them birth.

These are questions I will return to in the final chapter, once I have more adequately characterized the kind of “religion” I want to defend. For now, I simply want to note that Dawkins and Harris, in a manner characteristic of the angry new atheists, ignore the possibility that, when religion becomes a tool of division or a venue in which critical reflection is shut down, religion *has lost its way*.

Under some important definitions of “religion,” that’s precisely what’s happened.

Definitions therefore matter a great deal. We need to be careful to use our terms precisely and to acknowledge different meanings of a word. The new atheists display an all-too-common failure in this respect. The evils of “religion” in one sense are treated as the evils of “supernatural religion” in general – even though supernatural religion in Schleiermacher’s sense is essentially *opposed* to the very things Dawkins and Harris and Hitchens blame it for. This is true even though Schleiermacher’s religion was

neither the atheistic religion of some Buddhists nor the impersonal deism of the Enlightenment. It was theistic, with a loving and redeeming God at its heart. It was communal, finding its fullest expression in communities of faith. But it had no room for divisiveness or blind allegiance to pronouncements from on high.

Religion of this sort may be hard to find in the buckle of the Bible belt, but it can be found even there.

And it's worth the drive.