

CHAPTER 11

What to Do While Religions Evolve before Our Very Eyes

DANIEL DENNETT

The term *New Atheists* has recently emerged as a way to refer to the explosion into public visibility of a group of atheist critics of religion, distinguished not just by their outspokenness but by their success in commanding attention in the media. The books by Richard Dawkins (2006), Sam Harris (2004, 2006), Christopher Hitchens (2007), and me (2006) were among the first of a still-growing list, and someone christened us the Four Horsemen, a sobriquet that seems to have gone to fixation. (We are not, as Kitcher [2011c] puts it in “Militant Modern Atheism,” “self-styled horsemen,” but we have acquiesced in the term.) In spite of our differences in topics, tactics, and manners, we have often been lumped together as a convenient target for condemnation by the legions of defenders of religion. In addition to the religious spokespeople and churchgoers who have risen up to deplore our rude assault on religions are the critics we Horsemen refer to as the “I’m an atheist but” crowd. Religion is not for them, but in deference to those who love it and need it, they abstain from criticizing it and accuse us militants of the secular sin of intolerance. While Kitcher expresses sympathy for many of the claims of the New Atheists, he (Kitcher 2011c, 2) also “agrees with the critics that valuable options are being foreclosed.” “Militant Modern Atheism” stands out from the rest of the “I’m an atheist but” literature by attempting to articulate some of the positive details of ways religions might evolve harmlessly under the protective mantle of tolerance.

This is important, because it helps to expose a systemic weakness in the sacrosanct ideal of Freedom of Religion, which we might call, with a bow to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “benign neglect.” A policy of maximizing tolerance for religious diversity can work smoothly only if we are careful not to scrutinize the boundaries too closely, and Kitcher’s tightrope act wobbles tellingly between the philosophical ideal of explicitness and the theological necessity of smoke and mirrors. Consider the pressing questions we are wise to postpone, if possible: Exactly which religious practices are beyond the pale? Human sacrifice for sure, animal sacrifice less certainly. Is clitoridectomy genital *mutilation* and hence intolerable, and if so, is the circumcision of males, at least in infancy or childhood, to be banned as well? Is it tolerable for a religious sect to deny reading and writing to its (female) children, or to replace the treatments of modern medicine with prayer?

These are profound questions about how to live a human life, and the principle of religious freedom declares that answering such questions is so important that it should be left to individuals to the greatest extent possible, not dictated by the state, not even by majority rule of the citizens. Following that policy to the maximum, however, could in principle undo the state’s primary function of protecting its citizenry from harm, licensing all the crimes it otherwise forbids, under the exemption of religious freedom. Where does tolerance slide over the cliff edge into anarchic hypertolerance? Any attempt to *legislate* an answer would itself be a violation of religious freedom, it seems. Can’t we just depend on the goodwill of all parties, counting on religious groups to moderate their ways in deference to the sensibilities of others? No, obviously, we cannot. There are today, and have been for millennia, religious sects and even major religions that endorse or even enjoin practices that are widely held by others to be criminal offenses. We may all individually think we know which are the punishable crimes and which are the permissible practices, but we have to recognize that there are many thoughtful, serious people who disagree with us. We would *like* to use gentle, reasonable persuasion to create a consensus on these fraught issues, but we must also recognize that there is such a thing as being too diplomatic.

The ethical questions merge with strategic questions: How much pressure is apt to be *effective* in bringing about the sought-for changes? If reform at gunpoint worked, there might be occasions to revert to it, and in fact it has worked in the past. It is worth reminding ourselves that racial integration was enforced in the United States with the help of thousands of armed troops, and few today would argue that it would have been wiser to forgo the troops and rely on diplomacy alone.

This uneasy balance between principle and strategy is the background that frames the disagreement between Kitcher and me. We are both atheists who disagree about which *truths* it is wise to broadcast, a difference of opinion about strategy but not so stark as whether or not to use force. Neither I nor any other of the New Atheists has called for armed suppression of any religious doctrines, so far as I know. We are content to try to achieve our ends using political means: swaying public opinion with forthright verbal criticism, and even condemnation on occasion. That is the extent of our “aggression.” But Kitcher still thinks it is counterproductive, and instead of just blasting us for our rudeness the way most of the “I’m an atheist but” crowd do, he attempts to demonstrate an alternative path that he expects will have more humane results.

Let’s consider his proposal: replacing the “belief model” of religion with the “orientation model.” The belief model is the more or less standard supposition “that individual religions are distinguished by their different doctrines, and that to be committed to a particular religion is to believe the doctrines constitutive of that religion” (Kitcher 2011c, 3). According to this view, coreligionists share values, aspirations, attitudes, and loyalties because they share belief in a set of propositions, the defining creed of their religion. The proposed orientation model inverts this dependence: the shared values and loyalties are an “orientation” definitive of a religion, with the characteristic beliefs tagging along as a typical effect, not the core or essence of the religion.

The idea is that religious *creeds* are no longer the protective shields they once were, uniting the brethren in a shared litany of proprietary and unquestioned truth; they have become part of the problem, and not a small part. If religions could just find a way of quietly jettisoning their creeds while preserving their traditions, rituals, art, and music and honoring the symbolic and historic value of their holy texts, they would actually shed the source of their greatest vulnerability: the all-but-demonstrable falsehood of most of the cosmology and history they have heretofore felt obliged to profess in defiance of evidence and rationality. Some religions—some denominations or at least some congregations—already occupy this enlightened niche, so we know it is a possible stable outcome, but are there steps we can take to get others to transform themselves? If the relentless harsh light shone by the New Atheists on traditional believers just hardens their resistance and enmity, is there a kinder, gentler way of fostering the change of perspective?

There is a tactic that all of us recognize, some of us deplore, and some of us employ. You would think it would be a matter of considerable controversy, but it is seldom discussed, since even raising the issue tends to

preempt the controversy by taking one side. This is the tactic that dare not speak its name; it belongs to a family of tactics that spread in a continuum from indefensible (*lying for Christ* is an example) to indispensable (respecting the privacy and feelings of others to the greatest extent possible). Some relatively benign points on this continuum can be justly called *diplomacy* or *tact*, and other points, over near the other extreme, should be called what they are: intellectual dishonesty at its most culpable. One of the clearest results of my ongoing research with Linda LaScola on the plight of nonbelieving clergy (Dennett and LaScola 2010, 2013, 2015) is the recognition that the slippery slope between these extremes has no boundaries to which one may cling in a principled way. What begins as tact can sour into dissembling that shatters the integrity and blights the lives of many clergy. I have coined a deliberately mild—comically mild—term for the middle ground, *faith fibbing*, which is not so harsh that people find it impossible to confess to, but not so benign that we can all publicly advocate it as a policy without undermining it in the process. No one would occupy a pulpit adorned with the declaration Faith Fibbing Practiced Here.

I went to some lengths in *Breaking the Spell* (Dennett 2006) to distinguish *two* spells one might consider breaking: the taboo against looking “too closely” at religion, holding it up to the same harsh light of rational probing to which we subject all other important phenomena, and the spell of religion itself. In my book I declared my intention to break the first spell and my agnosticism about the wisdom of breaking the second—citing the very considerations that Kitcher advances more positively. Kitcher ignores my distinction but in fact is in nearly perfect harmony with my positions on them. His essay is an *example* of breaking the first spell: he writes with unflinching candor about the shaky status of any religion adopted on what he calls the *belief model* and uses that spell-broken perspective to look hard at the prospects for keeping the second spell unbroken by relying on what he calls the *orientation model*, supposing that this is perhaps the only surviving mode of religion that can provide the benefits he wants to preserve, which may just be a necessity of meaningful life for many people. As I noted in my book, there is a reasonable fear that breaking the first spell will inevitably break the second as well, which fear is the *obligatorily tacit* standard justification for not breaking the first. Kitcher vividly illustrates that problem in his essay, trying to split the difference between being patronizing on the one hand and uneasy complicity with unacceptable nonsense on the other.

The point of Kitcher’s introduction of the orientation model is to give him a way of reversing—most of the time—the otherwise standard dependence of serious commitments and aspirations on grounded beliefs. The

orientation-type religionists put commitments first, as the fundamental landmarks of their lives, and let the expression of (what take the place of) grounds for these commitments wander somewhat opportunistically between “mythically self-conscious” metaphor at one pole and “doctrinal entanglement” (flirting with the belief model) at the other, with convenient vagueness in the middle. (The “doctrinally indefinite” folks “take refuge in language that is resonant and opaque, metaphorical and poetic, and deny that they can do any better at explaining the beliefs they profess” [Kitcher 2011c, 6].) Whatever floats your boat, as one says. And indeed, if maintaining a religious orientation is the only way for you to have a meaningful life, you *should* rely on whatever floats your boat. But then it will just make matters harder for you if you have to confront Kitcher’s trio. Tell me, sir or madam, have you decided to go with mythic self-consciousness, doctrinal entanglement, or doctrinal indefiniteness? Don’t ask! Don’t tell! That’s why many think the first spell should not be broken, but Kitcher and I have both ignored that admonition.

Kitcher (2011c, 6) is at pains to express his defense of these delicate options sympathetically: “I’ll suggest that doctrinal indefiniteness can be a reasonable expression of epistemic modesty, and that even doctrinal entanglement can be justified when it is the only way of preserving, in the socio-cultural environment available, a reflectively stable orientation.” But a somewhat less diplomatic version hovers in the background: Kid yourself if you have to.

“Epistemic modesty” sounds like an exemplary character trait, but we should note that it has its dark side. In many religious settings it serves handily to unnerve and disarm those who otherwise might be brave enough to observe that the emperor has no clothes: think twice before you challenge what the elders say; what do you know? A nice feature of this ambient attitude is that it can be iterated in a pinch. Pastors can hold off skeptical challenges by subtly impugning the comprehension, the experience, the sophistication of a lay challenger, and then, if that doesn’t do the trick, confess their own abject incomprehension in the face of mystery. Not “Who are *you* to question these sacred and difficult truths?” but “Who are *we* to question these sacred and difficult truths?”

One of the troublesome aspects of the books by the Four Horsemen is that we don’t bother wrestling with the intricate arguments and analyses of theologians, and we don’t back off; we don’t accept the modest role that self-styled religious sophisticates try to impose on us. This “arrogance” of the New Atheists is often criticized, but, as I never tire of responding: we, like scientists and philosophers generally, are forever asking ourselves “But what if I’m wrong?”—a reflection that is not just rare but positively

discouraged among religious spokespeople. There are some famously arrogant Nobel Laureates in the scientific community, but I have never encountered one who can hold a candle to the overweening overconfidence, the smug certainty of the typical self-righteous defender of religion. Their disdain for evidence-seeking and careful argumentation is often breathtaking, amounting to self-disqualification for the role of rational discussant. Those who view it as positively immoral to entertain alternatives to, or even objections to, their faith place themselves outside the marketplace of ideas, incompetent to participate in the serious political conversations that we ought to be engaging in today. And one of the effects of fostering epistemic modesty in all matters religious, as Kitcher recommends, is protecting the social niche in which these influential subverters of reason can operate largely unchallenged.

I have been asking defenders of sophisticated theology for a recommended reading list, for works they are prepared to defend as intellectually bracing and honest, and have yet to have my challenge met. I am tempted to draw the conclusion that, on closer examination, they recognize that they have indeed been adopting a double standard and letting pass as deep thought work that is actually just obscure, and apparently often deliberately obscure. These works do serve a useful purpose for the adopters of epistemological modesty who can reason as follows: *These professors are professional thinkers about religion; they are still in the church, so they must have gone way beyond me in thinking these issues through. I don't get it, but they do, so I should accept their authority.* In other words, these works provide examples of high-flown rumination that one can confess to finding somewhat incomprehensible but nevertheless deem inspiring and authoritative. *Go read the meticulous arguments of this thinker; they should sweep away your doubts.* (And if they don't, it must be your fault.)

Kitcher (2011c, 9) is well aware of the risks entailed by adoption of the orientation model, and I'm happy to say that his defense of the three conveniently smudged alternatives firmly draws the line at letting *any* of these options abrogate a commitment to reason when deciding ethical matters: "Someone who makes decisions affecting the lives of others is ethically required to rely on those propositions best supported by the evidence."

This requirement runs into awkward interference from the orientation model, however, as Kitcher reveals in discussing one of the central problems with the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam): Abraham! Abraham is called upon by God to perform an unthinkable act (to commit an unspeakable crime, bluntly put). Is this any kind of inspiring example? In a felicitous phrase Kitcher (2011c, 8) notes that "there ought to be no 'teleological suspension of the ethical,'" but then just what is the *positive* role of

Abraham as a “knight of faith” supposed to be, when he so clearly violates this principle? Kitcher (2011c, 8) says that Abraham’s “sort of trust is not legitimate”—you can’t put it much plainer than that—but how, then, does he find a way of endorsing Abraham’s (mythical) story as any sort of talisman for a meaningful life? He doesn’t say, and I suspect that his reticence covers a conviction that any answer would be intellectual sleight of hand at best.

Kitcher (2011c, 9) sketches a speculative account of the evolution of religious phenomena that is, as he says, an alternative to my own speculative conjecture—it sees the predominance of religion as explained by its being (socially) adaptive, not a byproduct of other evolutionary selection pressures—but he then draws a misleading contrast:

If you start with the thought that the predominance of religion in human societies is to be explained by a cognitive deficiency, you will *tend* [my italics] to see your campaign for the eradication of myths in terms of a return to intellectual health. . . . By contrast, if you suppose that the social factors towards which I have gestured have played a non-trivial role in the spread of the world’s religions, you will *wonder* [my italics] if there are psychological and social needs that the simple abandonment of religion will leave unfulfilled.

There may be such a tendency, pulling in opposite directions, but Darwin (1862, 461) long ago showed us that it should be resisted: “It is in perfect accordance with the scheme of nature, as worked out by natural selection, that matter excreted to free the system from superfluous or injurious substances should be utilized for [other] highly useful purposes.”

So Kitcher’s wonder is just as available to me, and, similarly, however socially adaptive religious phenomena may have been in the past, their utility may have expired. It is simply a mistake—but a very common one—to seek a theory of the evolution of religious phenomena that would provide some imagined warrant for your view of the value of religion today. I worked hard to keep these issues distinct in my book, and Kitcher should acknowledge that his preferred speculation is logically independent of the main point for which he is arguing: that religion is valuable *today*, all things considered.

It may well be. I find his most compelling point to be his observation that Dawkins and I should not extrapolate glibly from our own immense good fortune: we find ourselves in a position not only to understand and appreciate the glories of the scientific worldview but to have the thrill—no other word will suffice—of playing significant roles in the spreading of this vision: “The vast majority will never be able to recognize themselves as important participants in any impressive joint enterprise that contributes to knowledge and enlightenment” (Kitcher 2011c, 11).

I discuss this in *Breaking the Spell* (Dennett 2006, 286–92), where I note that religion has the unparalleled capacity to give people a chance to be, in Kitcher’s good phrase, *important participants* in the world they were born into. But as I go on to discuss there, nobody has yet estimated what price we should be prepared to pay—in xenophobia, violence, the glorification of unreason, the spreading of patent falsehood—for that wonderful sense of importance religion gives to many people who would otherwise lead lives without drama, without a point. Kitcher wants to preserve religions (at least for the foreseeable future, I gather), but I think it would be better to work constructively on secular institutions that can provide alternative structures of meaning for everyone, hastening the day of religion’s demise. Still we might accomplish this most practically by encouraging existing religious institutions to evolve into . . . *former* religions. Some have already done so, but they are not yet competing very well in the marketplace of allegiances. That may soon change.

The transparency of information engendered by electronic media has dramatically changed the epistemological environment—the environment of knowledge, belief, error, illusion, confidence—that we all inhabit. It threatens the security and stability of all institutions that depend on confidence and trust, which includes such disparate entities as newspapers, banks, hospitals, religions, and universities. If a reliable source of news loses its *reputation* for telling the truth, it may be out of business, no matter how scrupulously it checks the facts it publishes. So a new arms race is now ensuing, dealing in the manipulation of reputations for truth-telling, and its campaigns can be detected on all sides. *Al Jazeera* has an excellent and deserved reputation for truthful reporting in most of the world outside the United States. Will its recent acquisition of Al Gore’s news website finally secure its respectability in this country or damage Gore’s reputation? *Time* magazine continues its print edition in the United States, while *Newsweek* abandoned its US edition in 2012, choosing to link its fate to the *Daily Beast* website. In recent decades both magazines have experimented with the ploy of bolstering sales by running favorable cover stories on religious topics: the Shroud of Turin, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Gnostic Gospels, new interpretations of putative relics and archaeological discoveries. They clearly have seen the security of religious institutions as a possible lifeboat to cling to, but it is not obvious that their design choice was wise, in retrospect.

Oxford zoologist Andrew Parker (2003) has proposed in his book, *In the Blink of an Eye* that the famous Cambrian Explosion of novel life forms that occurred about 530 million years ago was triggered by a change in the chemistry of the atmosphere or the seas or both, which increased the

transparency of these media, letting much more sunlight in, making vision possible for the first time. Suddenly it paid to have eyesight with which to see your prey or your predators in the offing, and as eyes evolved, so did all the devices and tactics that eyes enable. The result was an arms race of new ways of hiding and seeking, locomoting and defending oneself that drove evolution into one of its most innovative and revolutionary periods. My suggestion is that we are entering just such an arms race today thanks to the cultural evolution of all the new ways of obtaining and distributing information—and misinformation (Dennett and Roy, 2015). Old tactics and defenses no longer suffice, and whoever doesn't redesign in a hurry is doomed to extinction.

I suspect that the critical element in the information revolution that jeopardizes traditional religions is the explosive increase in *mutual knowledge*. It is not just that hundreds of millions of people know about the sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church; hundreds of millions of people know that hundreds of millions of people know about the sexual abuse. The Church used to be able to hush up scandals locally, moving the offenders to other parishes; there were millions of people who each knew about one local case or another, or maybe a few, but nobody (one may charitably assume) knew that there were these millions of people who knew this; nobody knew that there were thousands of cases around the world. Now, thanks to the media, when “everybody knows” about the thousands of priests around the world who have been uncovered as sexual abusers, the Church is very hard-pressed to recruit new priests. Knowing that all the parents in one's parish will be warning their children about the dangers of being alone with a priest must dampen the enthusiasm of any young Catholic man who is considering entering the priesthood. A generation ago Ireland had three priests for every parish; today it is three parishes for each priest. The number of Roman Catholic priests in North America is down a third from a generation ago, and the seminaries don't have enough applicants to replenish the pipeline.

That is a particularly vivid example of how swiftly a reputation problem can threaten the very survival of an institution that has seemed for centuries to be as impervious as any mountain. More indirect effects are worrying the leaders of other denominations. When children learn of the many alternatives to the creeds they are taught by their elders, otherwise unthinkable options become real possibilities. Baptists in America today are baptizing about as many each year as they did back in the middle of the twentieth century, when the population was less than half what it is today, a huge erosion of market share. The Evangelical movement anticipates shrinking dramatically in the twenty-first century, according to some studies. According to one, “If current trends continue, only four percent

of teenagers will be Bible-believing Christians as adults” (Goodstein 2006; see also Spencer 2009). Not without good reason do defenders of religion inflate the numbers of their adherents and conceal—as best they can—any negative trends in attendance. For the same reasons, of course, colleges and universities neglect to report declining enrollments and applications while trumpeting any gains but among religions there are few gains to herald. Muslims and Mormons have increasing populations, due mainly to differential birth rates, not conversions, but “no religion at all” is the fastest growing category, worldwide.

As these and a host of other such facts become more widely known—and known to be known—it will be hard for religious spokespeople to maintain their traditional tone of authority. Religions that flourished in the murky epistemic waters of earlier millennia are going to find themselves increasingly vulnerable to “impertinent” questions about their practices, their funding, their creeds. Recent history has shown us that cover-ups that used to succeed in the past now have a way of imploding spectacularly. Will the commitment model that Kitcher recommends be able to deflect the scrutiny that would undermine it? Who knows what the near future will bring? Religions have changed more in the past century than in the past millennium, and perhaps they will change more in the next decade than in that past century.

Kitcher and I agree on so much. We agree that “public reason must be thoroughly secular” (Kitcher 2011c, 12). We agree that the belief model of religion is indefensible. We agree that the first spell must be broken—we have both broken it. We differ, apparently, only in our assessment of how to ease the people of the twenty-first century into a more reasonable and socially benign form of organization. It’s like the problem of how to remove an adhesive bandage: slowly, gently lifting, pulling, pausing—or a swift, well-timed yank. I favor the quick shock and it’s over—not so bad, and now let’s get on with our lives. Kitcher favors the glacial approach, and whatever there is to be said for it when calculating the costs and benefits, it is important not to overlook the suffering of those who get caught in the pulpit, slowly accumulating a deplorable history of dissembling and obfuscation in the name of tact. We all indulge in those little white lies, and it would be heartless to forswear them, but how much is too much? I think we should both admit that we haven’t yet figured that out.¹

1. Portions of this essay are revised from “Kitcher versus Dennett: Is New Atheism Counterproductive?,” *Why Evolution Is True*, October 7, 2010, <https://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2010/10/07/kitcher-versus-dennett-is-new-atheism-counterproductive-2/>, and from Dennett and LaScola 2013 and 2015.

Reply to Dennett

PHILIP KITCHER

For four decades now I've been a great admirer of Dan Dennett's philosophical work. His concerns that philosophy should be broadly accessible and that it should focus on questions that interest more than a small coterie of professionals are sources of inspiration. Dan's ability to combine stylistic élan with clarity and precision sets a model for us all. I have often been encouraged by the fact that he and I have stood shoulder to shoulder on many issues. As Dan points out, we agree on so much.

With respect to religion our disagreements resemble those of the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks—all the more intense, perhaps, because the differences might appear, to an external observer, to be so small. In the end, however, I think they are more important than simple divergences on strategy. We are divided not only about the value of religion but also on some basic questions about belief.

Dennett's characteristically lucid and forceful essay engages with the argument of my "Militant Modern Atheism" (Kitcher 2010; also Kitcher 2012c, ch. 12). Dennett responds to my contrast between the belief and orientation models by arguing that, once the orientation model is made explicit, those whose religious commitments conform to it are placed in an uncomfortable position. They have to decide exactly where they stand on matters of doctrine: are they "mythically self-conscious," "doctrinally indefinite," or "doctrinal[ly] entangle[d]"? Unless they fall into the last category, in which case they are lapsing into the belief model, they are forced to realize that they are "kid[ding]" themselves. When religion backs away from full-blooded commitment to doctrines, the devout have to fess up to "faith fibbing."

To my mind this response is revealing, for it shows how Dennett thinks about belief. His writings about religion tacitly adopt a pair of theses, shared by the less sophisticated members of the "Four Horsemen" (I owe the whole quartet an apology for having mistakenly suggested that they proposed this name):

1. When a person properly affirms a statement, there is a precise and definite content, formulable in language as transparent as the languages of the sciences.

2. Believing truly is an ultimate value, one that can override other values. Replacing false belief by true belief brings gains that outweigh whatever losses are involved in the replacement.

In my later work on religion (Kitcher 2014), I've called both theses into question, insisting on the need to recognize that some valuable linguistic practices stand in need of interpretation and that arriving at a state of clear and definite true belief may not be worth the sacrifices required to achieve it. My aim in what follows is to elaborate these points.

Dennett imagines religious believers who are dumbfounded by the request to situate themselves with respect to the orientation model. Perhaps he and I move in different circles, but I know many thoughtful people who would have no trouble with the question. Some, like the late Robert Bellah, would identify themselves as mythically self-conscious. They recognize that their creedal professions aren't intended to record matters of historical fact, and they are happy to talk of their doctrines as "myths" (Bellah 2011)—and even to claim that clashing myths can count as true. Chapter 3 of Kitcher (2014) offers a philosophical reconstruction of this usage, distinguishing alternative approaches to truth in different domains (see my replies to Gideon Rosen and to Michael Smith). To put the point very simply, religious statements are viewed as metaphorical, as gestures toward a different aspect of reality—the transcendent—and valuable because of their "fruits for life."

Others, probably the majority of those who profess "liberal" (or, as I would characterize it, "refined") religion, would answer Dennett's question differently. They would point out, from the beginning, that the statements in question are complex, in need of interpretation. Some of them might invoke particular interpretations they favor, interpretations that separate the content of belief from any literal commitment to supernatural goings-on. All would deny that the interpretations they can give, or even the interpretations that have been provided in the history of their religion, exhaust the significance of the doctrinal statements. Many would likely concur with the attitude recommended by Bellah, seeing all the world's major religions (and perhaps the less prevalent ones as well) as gesturing toward an aspect of reality that literal language cannot capture, an aspect that deserves the emotional responses William James ([1902] 1982, lecture 2) saw as central to religion (solemnity and awe, combined with a joyous acceptance). Faced with the suggestion that they are "kidding themselves" or "faith fibbing," they would reject the description (possibly indignantly); resorting to metaphor or allegory, they would explain, is not the same as lying, particularly when there is no other way to express important insights.

Dennett, working with Linda LaScola, has been much concerned to help a group of lapsed religious people who cannot take the stance I find so common among the thoughtful devout. The effort to help clergy who have lost faith deserves sustained applause—even though, as I’ll suggest below, there’s a vastly larger group of vulnerable people to whose predicaments Dennett often appears blind. Interactions with those who cannot find any convincing interpretation of the doctrines they are paid to recite and teach has probably encouraged Dennett’s sense that people who grope for words to explain their religious commitments are hopeless muddleheads. He issues a challenge: Give me a list of theologians who are worth reading. I’ll bite. James (although not officially a theologian), Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, George Lindbeck, Nicholas Lash, and Bellah (again, a believer, not a theologian). I anticipate Dennett’s reply: All these writers descend into deep-sounding vagueness at crucial moments; their works lack clarity and precision. Apparently nothing short of an explication meeting Carnap’s high standards will do, either for the believer who is asked to clarify his version of the orientation model or for the theologians to whose works the believer might turn. Thesis 1 tacitly underlies Dennett’s complaint against liberal (refined) religion.

Let me be clear. In the end, as Kitcher (2014) argues, even refined religion should be seen as a way station on the road to secular humanism. My book (2014) is concerned to show how refined religion evades the most powerful arguments against (literalist) religions (those committed to the belief model) and how a philosophical reconstruction of it can be given. Refined religion fails because it introduces an unnecessary and potentially diversionary “transcendent realm” that compromises the human values at the core of the orientation model and because it narrows the class of narratives that are fruitful for human life.

Yet refined religion should not be dismissed out of hand in the way Dennett and his fellow Horsemen favor. Thesis 1 embodies a narrow scientism. To see this, consider literature generally, and poetry in particular. Neither *King Lear* nor *The Brothers Karamazov* nor *Finnegans Wake* would pass the “Carnapian explication” test. The failure is even more evident with respect to the poetry of Rimbaud or Rilke or Blake or T. S. Eliot. The closing section of “Little Gidding” is plainly religiously inflected, but even a resolute atheist like me can find significant content in Eliot’s resonant lines. You don’t have to be a believer to sense profound truths, truths you can partially express but never render fully in the language Dennett demands. Why should a different—higher—standard be set for the doctrinally indefinite believer or for the writers on my list?

I turn now to Thesis 2 and its unfortunate consequences. I agree with Dennett and Dawkins that it is often good for people to be enlightened, for their false beliefs to be replaced by true ones. From my *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (Kitcher 2001b) on, however, I've been arguing that not every truth is worth having. The aim of our epistemic ventures is *significant* truth. Moreover the significant truths are those that contribute to human well-being. Practical significance is the most obvious species: we value some truths because they help doctors ameliorate diseases or protect vulnerable people from threats to their security. Yet we shouldn't overlook the value of truths that simply advance our understanding of the world. Dawkins is often eloquent on the joy that comes from viewing nature clearly and accurately. He rightly laments the blindness that prevents many people from experiencing the uplift enlightenment brings.

Nevertheless once you make the shift from the value of truth (period) to the value of significant truth, Thesis 2 becomes problematic. Because significance depends on the conditions of human lives, the predicaments different individuals and communities face, significant truth is thrown into a broader mix of values, so that its benefits may be swamped by the losses entailed in achieving it. No doubt if we lived in some rather different world, it would be good to learn about the degrees to which genetic differences affect the talents on which our current societies place most emphasis. But if our only method for acquiring the knowledge would be to breed identical twins, rearing them apart in controlled environments, we rightly forgo the benefits of understanding the precise genetic contribution. And even if we have alternative routes to knowledge, we might be obligated not to take them if we were convinced that the likely damage from future uses of the information would be too great.

My resistance to sweeping away all religion as noxious rubbish stems from combining the pragmatist sense of truth as one value among others (the point of the previous paragraph) with reflections on the lives I have known. For anyone like me, for whom a youth in the lower reaches of the British class system brought acquaintance with many people whose lives were made bearable by their local church (liberal, by today's standards) and the sense of community it provided, the losses of religious involvement can easily outweigh the gains of enlightenment: I have known too many people who have said, sincerely and accurately, "Without my faith I just couldn't go on." Their declaration stems, of course, from failures of the ambient societies. They are probably at least as common among those who live just north of me in Harlem and who turn to one of the local churches or synagogues or mosques for comfort, for support, for community, and sometimes for a joint campaign for social justice. Ideally we could attend to the causes

of injustice and provide meaningful communities for those who are struggling. In practice we are at a far remove from being able to do so.

Dennett and I focus on different groups. Salient for him (and for LaScola) are the lapsed clergy, whose chosen professions require them publicly to proclaim things they privately reject. Prominent for me are the world's poor and vulnerable, whose religious practices give shape and value to their lives. The task of building a fully secular world in which their needs will be properly accommodated strikes me as vast—that world won't be built in a day or even in a generation. Much as I admire the humanist organizations that have tried to assume the functions of religious communities, their efforts strike me as early experiments to find surrogates for the rituals, devotions, and forms of joint life that the major religions have honed over centuries.

For Dennett the main difference between us is one of strategy. He prefers to pull off the bandage quickly and sees me as favoring “the glacial approach.” His image captures some features of our quarrel, but it's important to pose a question: Who, or what exactly, feels the pain? The most obvious subject is a society, a particular nation, perhaps, or the entire human population. Society, after all undergoes a transformation, from a state in which religion is prevalent, even dominant, to another state from which religion has vanished. The envisaged benefits are clear: no more obfuscation to cloud policy discussions, no more people with false religious conceptions, no more clergy crossing their fingers as they preach. Society, however, doesn't feel the pain. Individual people do—and especially those whose otherwise drab or miserable lives are transformed by their religious practices.

The potential anguish caused by the quick removal of the bandage seems to me vast enough to outweigh the benefits. But even if the utilitarian calculation goes differently, computing a net gain in aggregate levels of well-being, there's no shirking the obvious standard objection. A large number of lives would be blighted in order to secure the well-being of others. Better, I believe, to develop secular humanism as a positive position, showing clearly how a meaningful life after faith is possible, and, probably more important, to combat social injustice and fashion functional substitutes for religious institutions. My recent work on religion is intended to point the way.

The rate of secular transformation does not have to be “glacial.” I hope it goes smoothly and quickly. But I don't think the task of building a secular world will be forwarded by cheery assurances about quick tugs of the bandage or by neglect of the positive comforts the world's religions bring. So for all my admiration for Dan, all my agreement with his endorsement of the secular life, I remain a “soft” atheist, an unrepentant Menshevik.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PHILIP KITCHER

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