

16+ Philosophy

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Introduction

Welcome to our Post 16 Philosophy section. The articles here have been written by Bob Bowie, Senior Lecturer in Religious Education Post Graduate Initial Teacher Education at Canterbury Christ Church University.

Philosophical Arguments: Cottingham

How should we examine religion in philosophy? Many critics of religion use philosophical tools to attack religion. These attacks tend to look at the doctrinal and theoretical propositions within religion and place them under critical examination. But is religion really a set of propositions? Is worship more to do with feeling, a moral commitment, understanding and knowledge altogether, rather than something that can be explained entirely or adequately with rational propositions alone. Prayer is often personal and emotional as much as rational. So the question is, when criticizing religion, is it adequate to focus on truth propositions alone?

Cottingham argues that a lot of academic philosophical argument distorts religion, and the process of this kind of debate is unhelpful. The idea of analytic discourse is that through discussion ideas may be tested, modified or abandoned. However, Cottingham argues that in his experience the arguers rarely ever change their minds when dealing with religion. Advocates and opponents change positions, but are not moved by each others point of view. I remember once hearing an academic giving a talk at a seminar and then, many months later, I heard the same speaker giving the same talk at a different conference. I asked him whether any of the questions he had been asked, or responses he had from the different people who heard him, had led him to change or adjust his argument in any way. He smiled and said no, once he formulated his argument he tended to stick to it closely. It is as though this kind of examination does not do what it is supposed to do when it comes to religion.

It sounds as though Cottingham is opposed to any philosophical analysis of religion, but he suggests that the problem rests in focussing on propositions. It is the idea of religion which is wrong. If religion simply means a set of philosophical propositions, then it can be tested in rather similar ways to most philosophical ideologies. But if we think about the whole spiritual dimension of religion and appreciate that this dimension is a central one to religion, then to reduce religion to propositions is to distort and misunderstand it. I sometimes work with adults who have a new experience of feeling called to become a member of the Catholic Church. In the discussions that take place there are many questions about many aspects of the teaching of the Church. But even when there are difficult sticking points, the people still have a sense of being called. Spirituality invokes a wider range of activities and attitudes than principles alone. Spirituality includes other sorts of wisdom and knowledge, which appeal to emotions, feelings and the imagination. Many mystics wrote in a way that was quite different from the theological explanations often listed in books about religion. They used affective terms sometimes drawing powerfully emotive images. Spirituality seems to reach non-rational parts of human consciousness. This dimension is not a minor element of religion but a central aspect that seems to provide meaning and importance to religious believers. Spiritual living is as much to do with practices of living as statements of belief. What analytic philosophy analyses is a philosophical account of religion not the breadth of religious and spiritual life.

Cottingham uses examples of spiritual masters to show that many placed 'praxis' before doctrinal propositions. Praxis means doing or realising the idea, not simply having it. The Ignatian spiritual exercises are a good example of this. They are practical steps that are done as a kind of spiritual training programme. This leads to an internal transformation, in contrast to the intellectual business of evaluating propositions. Cottingham argues that an examination of religion must acknowledge the primacy of praxis in religious life. These exercises provide a guide to what can be called the art of living. To examine this art of living is difficult if one adopts a detached and unemotional exact intellectual scrutiny of one's condition. Thinking of religious life in terms that are propositional rather than affective, is incomplete. Cottingham is quick to argue that he is not advocating the permanent abandonment of critical rationality but that one needs to operate through an activation and deepening of moral intuitions. Moral discernment is not purely rational but based on deep intuitions.

Cottingham provides a critical observation that we can draw on in our own study of religion. Here are four questions to consider:

– Is the 'study toolkit' we are using suitable to enquire into the whole of religious experience?

– Does your study of the philosophy of religion take a detached critical rational approach, that focuses on intellectual propositions, or does it encourage an examination of spiritual praxis?

– How might you acknowledge these dimensions in your studies in other ways than those provided by the philosophers you are studying?

The Problem of Free Will

Free will is something we feel we have. It is a conscious sense that we have that we control ourselves, choose to act in certain ways, have preferences which we can act on, and so on. It also seems helpful when thinking about morality. The idea of morality is helped by the sense that we choose what we do. That way we can be held responsible for our actions and punished accordingly. If we are not under control of our thoughts and actions then in what sense can be blamed for what we do? In fact we have an idea of diminished responsibility which we apply when people do bad things to reduce the punishment for an action. So, for example, if a person does bad things but it later becomes clear that the person had some sort of mental illness, then our attitude to them changes.

Determinism is the idea that we are not free, that our actions are the affect of previous actions. So we believe we are choosing white chocolate freely, over dark, but in fact this is not the case. Because of prior causes we were always going to choose white. Determinism is sometimes linked to fate. Fate is a supernatural sense that a certain thing was bound to happen. The happenstance I meet someone at a railway station, fall in love, marry and spend the rest of my life with this person. I look back and think, 'it was meant to be'. Perhaps it gives some sense of meaning and significance to the meeting, some security to the anxiety that we might have missed each other and never met.

Religion is often linked to these discussions because religions have a sense of reward or punishment according to human behaviour. 'Follow God's law and be rewarded in heaven – break God's law and be punished in hell'. If we are not in control of our actions, if they are decided by God, fate, or other uncontrollable forces, then how can a reward / punishment doctrine seem fair?

To hear a full discussion about this, search for the In Our Time Radio 4 programme entitled Free Will:
www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/in-our-time/

Incorporeality / Immateriality of God

The idea of the incorporeality of God is present in the Abrahamic religions. It means that God has no physical body or is without physical substance. Christianity has an exception to this rule with the incarnation, Jesus who became flesh and therefore had a physical body. However, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit were conceived as all being incorporeal, with the incarnation as an exception. This exception is one reason for the tension with the other two Abrahamic religions. In the ancient world, divine beings were sometimes physical and could be found in the rivers, groves and seas of the world. Incorporeality distinguished the notion of God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. God had an immaterial reality. A corporealist is someone who believes God has a material reality while an incorporealist maintains that God is immaterial.

God's immateriality or incorporeality is maintained by philosophers for a number of reasons:

First a number of attributes are given to GOD which imply immateriality or incorporeality. These include his necessity, eternity, immutability and omnipotence. For example, no part of the physical world is eternal so God cannot be part of it if he is also eternal. The same can be said of mutability and omnipotence.

Second a number of arguments for the existence of God assume immateriality or incorporeality (the ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments all do this). In the case of the last of these, were God to be the grand designer and yet at the same time a corporeal or material being it would imply he had designed himself. In the case of teleology, he could seem to be an effect caused by something else, were he to be immaterial or incorporeal.

Both these arguments for the existence of God, and beliefs about the nature of God are connected to a belief that he is immaterial or incorporeal. There is incompatibility between features of the nature of God, arguments for his existence and the belief that he is anything other than immaterial or incorporeal. In effect, God would be limited in some way without this belief. God would no longer eclipse creation but be a part of it.

There is a connection between this belief and dualism, which locates the divine with the incorporeal, and the profane with the corporeal. Some ancient religions say that escape from the physical is the journey towards the spiritual. Vestiges of these ideas may be found in the ascetic traditions which deny the self. Here the doctrine of the incarnation presents an interesting challenge, for in becoming human God may seem to have compromised immateriality or incorporeality. Yet Jesus is not believed to be a compromised aspect of GOD and indeed plays a pivotal part in salvation. Equally, other teachings of the Bible question the association of physical reality with non-spiritual or non-good. In creation, God declares his work to be good and makes human beings in his image and likeness.

However, it could be argued that no person could be without physical reality yet the Christian God is a God of three persons. Personal agency seems to imply physical being. Furthermore, the sacred texts of the Abrahamic religions describe God in terms that are full of vivid corporeal imagery. These have to be explained away as metaphorical. Some have argued that, in fact, God is physical but invisible in some way, perhaps he is found in all physical matter (as the ancient Gaia belief associated GOD with the world) and many forms of new age religion see God in the physical.

An additional argument suggests that if it is to be possible for GOD to be meaningfully understood then he must exist in the corporeal world in some form. This leads back to questions about the incarnation for Christianity and the possibility that God may be or become one with a physical being. In addition it connects to ideas about God's immanence. If God is thought to be concerned for the world, to take pleasure in some parts and displeasure in others, to suffer with those who suffer for example, then how does this sit with arguments about immateriality or incorporeality? Would such a God be too remote to be a truly immanent God as well?

Some of these arguments might be influenced by developments in science, especially quantum physics, where knowledge and understanding of energy and matter are raising new questions about the nature of the physical universe. If corporeal reality is not as straightforward as we think, we may find further questions about what incorporeality means.

Suffering and Belief in God

The dreadful loss of life from the Earthquake in south-Asia, coming so soon after the huge numbers killed in the Tsunami is a challenge to religious believers and anyone with a world view of a universe which has some meaning at its heart.

Some might tend towards an acceptance of the inexplicable actions of God. For them there is no rational answer to give to those who have suffered terribly to meet the needs of their emotional devastation. In the Hebrew Scriptures, when confronted with the loss of family, friends, wealth and health, Job illustrates a bitter reality. Faith is not rationally justified, suffering is not explained, and God gives no reasons for his actions.

For others suffering is simply an inevitable fact of the cycle of existence, not an intended feature of the divinely formed universe. Human attachment to life and its materiality exaggerates human suffering by leaving humanity stuck in an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

More difficult to stomach are the attempts to find a theological explanation – that the suffering is in some way punishment for sinful life, or will lead to the improvement of the soul as Hick tries to suggest. Even if an individual case of suffering did lead to a more deeply developed soul, the suggestion that some divine power intended to exchange the life of an innocent child, for the development of the soul of a parent survivor, contradicts common notions of justice, compassion and the idea of a personal God.

Cardinal Archbishop Cormac Murphy O'Conner commented after the Tsunami that people seemed to continue to have faith despite these things. Faith endures without a rational justification, and does not necessarily make things better. This presents an interesting challenge for those taking a philosophical approach to the problem of suffering in the world. Religious people seem not to develop a rational explanation of suffering, or one that satisfies them. It remains inexplicable. Some choose no

longer to believe, others keep their faith. Philosophical arguments either way do not make much difference to how a person responds to suffering in the world.

Faced with this the arbitrariness of faith is difficult to come to terms with. That some seem to be left with faith to believe and others left with no faith, deepens the mystery of faith and belief in God. Many Christians suggest that faith is a gift from God, yet God seems not to give the same amount of faith to all, in the same way that terrible suffering is not universally felt by all. Of course Christians teach that human beings have the option to respond to God. They are not coerced. Yet the capacity to that response must surely be affected by the suffering they endure. All the more reason to be confounded by the mysteriousness of an individual's choice to believe despite the contradictions they must then accept. Which is easier, to choose not to believe in the face of suffering or to choose to continue?

Some say that the response to God should be to reject him, rather than refuse to believe in him. In other words we condemn God for what he is, instead of denying he exists. Hard though it is to comprehend in these terms, this to is a response of faith, so the mystery deepens again.

Warranted Belief: Alvin Plantinga

The idea that religious belief is some sort of illness or irrational stance, is not uncommon in Western Europe. The philosopher of religion, Alvin Plantinga, in his book *Warranted Christian Belief* advances a detailed account of the rationality of religious, and especially Christian, theistic belief. In the book he explains:

“a belief has warrant if and only if it is produced by cognitive faculties functionally properly in a congenial epistemic environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true belief.”

He explores the question, is Christian belief intellectually acceptable? He is not addressing the question of whether it is true or false, but whether it is reasonable, or rational to hold.

First, he asks whether in principle it is possible to have knowledge of God. If knowledge of God is not possible then beliefs in God would be unreasonable. If God is part of the noumenal realm, rather than the phenomenal realm, and if we can only access the phenomenal realm, then how can it be possible to perceive God? If God is not a finite reality then nothing in our experience can be identified as God. If nothing in our experience can be identified as God then God refers to nothing.

However Christians give accounts of perceiving God, in ways such as those recorded in the Bible – through the burning bush to Moses. In addition, if God is infinitely powerful, omnipotent, then why would he not be able to manifest himself in our experience? It seems unreasonable to place on such a God the inability to make himself felt in some way.

Of course there are those who argue that God is in fact an imaginative human construct, and that our use of the word 'God' is in fact associated with a human idea or symbol but that such an idea could not create the world or be omniscient. However, this rejects that which Christians claim, and so effectively redefines God in to something Christians do not hold to believe (in the most part). This is a rehashing of secularity. In other words this is not an argument against a Christian theistic belief but an argument for an alternative belief about religion.

Plantinga then turns to the question and examines the idea of justification.

“Critics claim that Christian belief is not rationally justified or justifiable: what, precisely, is the infirmity or defect they are ascribing to the Christian believer? What, exactly, is the question?”

What are Christians accused of lacking? He suggests this criticism arises out of an idea called foundationalism. He explores the idea that theism is rationally acceptable only if there are good arguments for it. He suggests that this treats religion like a scientific hypothesis, but questions whether that is reasonable. He suggests that this lays down a standard that the very argument itself cannot meet. Foundationalism itself fails to meet its own standard used here to reject religion. In fact it leads to the rejection of most of our beliefs, not just theistic ones.

“How much meets the classical conditions for being properly basic? Not much, if any. I believe that I had cornflakes for breakfast, that my wife was amused at some little stupidity of mine, that there really are such 'external objects' as trees

and squirrels, and that the world was not created ten minutes ago with all its dusty books, apparent memories, crumbling mountains, and deeply carved canyons. These things, according to classical foundationalism, are not properly basic; they must be believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are self-evident or evident to the senses.”

There are many beliefs which we rely on that in fact cannot be provided with good arguments that make them scientifically proven. The existence of external objects are difficult to separate from our perception. Memories are hardly scientifically proven and yet we believe them and rely on them. In short, the standard that people make when critics suggest Christian theism unreasonable, is so high than many everyday beliefs would also fail the test.

Finally, Plantinga explores the idea of warrant. He considers those who argue that religious belief is wish fulfillment (Freud), or some sort of dysfunction (Marx). He notes that both begin their arguments from a position that claim theism is false. This is not argued, merely stated or asserted as a given. He continues to explore classic arguments against Christian belief (which he calls defeaters) and makes counter-cases. He believes none of these make serious challenges to the warrant Christian belief can enjoy, if it is true. The crucial difference here is not that he is arguing Christian beliefs are true, but that they are warranted if true.

For more read a detailed review of the book: www.proginosko.com/docs/wcbreview.html.

A C Grayling: Iconoclast of Religion

A C Grayling is Professor of philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London, a humanist, atheist and an ardent critic of religion. His personal website www.acgrayling.com has a selection of short papers which outline something of his personal worldview. This short profile draws from two of those papers and illustrates why this is an important contemporary source for arguments against the morality of religion in debates about ethics and the philosophy of religion.

Religion opposed to morality

In his online paper *Morality and the Churches*, Grayling explores his reasoning that religion should be a trusted source for moral guidance. He is critical about the role that religion has in education and that “churchmen” as he describes them are given privileged even exclusive positions in debates about morality. Religions seem to be the least competent organisations to give such advice. They are obsessed with a small range of human activities, mainly associated with sexuality and have always sought to restrict sexual behaviour. These are either largely irrelevant to genuine questions of morality or are positively anti-moral!

Religion seems to take opposing views to modern thinking. In modern societies personal freedom, achievement in earning a living, providing for a family, saving against a rainy day, and being rewarded for success in one’s career, is approved but Christian morality says the exact opposite. The Bible

“tells people to consider the lilies of the field, which neither reap nor spin, and take no thought for the morrow. It tells believers to give all their possessions to the poor, warns that it is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a well-off person to enter heaven, and preaches complete obedience to a deity.”

For Grayling the fact that these messages so conflict with modern thinking is evidence that they are wrong. Of course religions tend to argue that the very contradiction is proof that they are right.

However, it is not merely that religious views are irrelevant for people living in the modern age, they are positively anti moral. He goes on

“The great moral questions of the present age are those about human rights, war, poverty, the vast disparities between rich and poor, the fact that somewhere in the third world a child dies every two and a half seconds because of starvation or remediable disease.”

By being obsessed with premarital sex, the churches are ignoring the far greater concerns of the world.

Finally he argues that religion is frequently immoral. He points to religious fundamentalists and fanatics who incarcerate women, mutilate genitals, amputate hands, murder, bomb and terrorise in the name of their faith. Given this case against religion, it is extraordinary that churchmen are given any precedence over those that could be drawn from the richness of thoughtful, educated, open-minded opinion otherwise available in society.

Religion as a threat to society

Grayling is concerned about the power and influence of religion, or the sacred, in public life. In his online paper *The secular and the Sacred* he acknowledges the right for people to have religious beliefs, but is concerned both about the growth of faith-based schools be they Christian, Islamic, Jewish or Sikh, and the idea of protecting people from suffering offence on the grounds of their faith. For Grayling both developments seem innocuous, even (in the latter case) desirable; but in fact they dramatically increase the potential for social divisions, tension and conflict, which when understood shows that society urgently needs to be secularised. Grayling argues that the world's major religions "especially Christianity, Islam, and Judaism" are incompatible and mutually antithetical – they are in theoretical conflict because their truth claims clash and there are plenty of examples of how dangerous this clash of truth claims can become when it moves to their logical conclusions and into public space. They take fundamentalist forms, and here Grayling sites Jehovah's Witnesses and the Taliban. These are not aberrations, but the natural full expression of their respective faiths. All the major religions in fact blaspheme one another, and ultimately, if their principles and beliefs were taken to the fullest interpretation, would engage in crusade or Jihad each against the others. Non Christians who don't accept Jesus is the way the truth and the life, blaspheme Christianity. Non Muslims who do not think the Prophet was the messenger from God blaspheme against Islam and so on.

Religion is morally risky, much more so if it is allowed into public space. When religion is given political power it becomes very dangerous. It is only liberal and peaceable when it is on the back foot. For its own protection society must secularize,

"for as science and technology take us even further away from the ancient superstitions on which religions are based (a separation tellingly emphasized by the current cloning controversy), the tensions can only become greater. The science-religion debate of the nineteenth century is a skirmish in comparison to what we are inviting by allowing not just religion but mutually competing religions so much presence in public space."

For Grayling it is time to place religion wholly in the private sphere

"along with other superstitions and foibles, leaving the public domain as neutral territory where all can meet without prejudice as humans and equals."

Perhaps the irony of some of Grayling's arguments is that religious will tend to agree with some of his criticism of what might be seen as extreme religion. Christians involved in aid and development for the third world, such as CAFOD, Christian Aid and Tearfund might well have sympathy with the amount of attention given to sexual morality when poverty is such a huge issue. The obsession with sexuality is one that seems to afflict many aspects of Western society, not just religion and one could make a case that all the religiously inspired charitable and campaigning work that goes on by religious charities, tends not to make such interesting reading in the newspapers, as comments by "churchmen" on sexual matters. If we accept Grayling's definition and explanation of religion then it seems to be a frightening force. The question is whether his picture of religion, like that offered by Richard Dawkins is complete enough and accurate enough.

Does Sociology Explain Religion?

Does sociology explain religion such that we really don't need to look anywhere else to explain its existence? In other words do we need crafty philosophical or theological explanations or can it all be explained away without it actually needing to be true?

Sociologists had begun to feel rather confident about their understanding of religion, write Martin Riesebrodt and Mary Ellen Konieczny in their chapter "Sociology of Religion" in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of the Religion* (ed. John T Hinnels). Sociologists thought that the present age was a time of secularization, that while people would carry on with private

religious beliefs in their own personal lives, it would not be so obvious in the public world – eventually disappearing from public life altogether. Perhaps religious values might continue in society but for humanistic reasons rather than religious ones – so we would still feel strongly about love and justice and so on but not because of religious beliefs, but because they make sense ethically or politically.

Martin Riesebrodt and Mary Ellen Konieczny write that virtually no-one thought religion would be back and in such a powerful form. They were taken by surprise. The demise of religion has not arrived on schedule – far from it. Throughout the world, in America, Africa, Asia and eastern Europe religion is far more important than the sociologists expected and this has meant sociologists have had to change. They had expected religion to be transformed by the modern world, and some felt this meant diminished.

Classical sociologists of religion such as Marx and Durkheim have provided differing explanations and justifications of this diminishing of religion. According to Marx religion provided a reason for people not to realise that they were enslaved by the social order to drive the process of capitalism and once the people had their revolution and overturned the social order, religion could be dispensed with. For Marx the demise of religion would come when people were emancipated. For Durkheim religion collected together the social order and justified the rules of behaviour by being the thing that everyone shared, meaning values and beliefs were all shared too. The existence of other religions and religious diversity would mean a new social glue would be needed, a civil religion which would still bind people together around the same set of values, even though they had many different religious beliefs. For Durkheim religion was less important than civil religion in integrating everyone into society now we all lived in much more diverse groupings.

Peter Berger is a more recent sociologist who charted the demise of religion in the modern world. He argues that the power of religion to change the world would diminish because societies were becoming much more plural, and religious institutions more diverse and different. Religion is strongest when it is in a position of monopoly – when it is the only show in town. If there is only one way of explaining things then people are more likely to support it. If there are alternatives then choice breeds not only movement from one religion to another, but a realisation that perhaps none of them quite get it right, and perhaps none of them will ever get it right. Religion needs strong social relationships between the believers and the structures of religion. In time the strength and power of religious institutions would diminish, become less pervasive, less important in influencing how people lived and thought. Frankly people would have more choice about which religious institution they connected with, and it seemed to Berger as though people were connecting less with religious institutions at all.

These sociological accounts of religion seem on the face of it to do away with any need for complex philosophical or theological explanations of religion – we don't need them! We can explain religion in human terms as part of human life. No magic tricks required! Except that religion has resurged. Martin Riesebrodt and Mary Ellen Konieczny chart this resurgence in the US with new religious movements in California, a strong return of more conservative religious forces such as Catholic and Protestant Christianity and Islam has returned to be a force in public political life throughout the world. The view that it would come to an end with a whimper has simply not happened and now sociologists are having to think again about how they think about and even analyse religion.

The Psychology of Religion

The psychology of religion tries to study religion so far as it can be explained psychologically. Dan Merkur in his "Psychology of Religion" in *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion* (ed. John T Hinnels) notes that some devotees of religion are not terribly pleased about such attempts as it seems to reduce religion to psychology. Others however see it as a way of purifying religion of the things which are human.

Seth D Kunin's book *Religion: the modern theories*, also explores psychological approaches to the study of religion. He reminds us that as well as Freud and Jung, William James has had a very important role in modern thinking on the psychology of religion.

William James was born in New York, and was the son of theologian Henry James (1811-1882). His most important work, *The varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* meant that as well as being considered a leading psychologist – one of the inventors of American psychology, he was also considered a leading philosopher and religious thinker. James called

his own lectures which formed the basis of the book a “descriptive survey” of the varieties of religious experience but this was only part of the story. In fact they defended James pragmatic view of religion against other psychology accounts of religion which saw it as an abnormal state of mind, or attempts to reduce religion to an intellectual activity. William James defined religion in terms of individual experience. He writes:

“religion ... shall mean for us the feeling, acts and experience of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider to be divine.” (James 1902)

James does not make any comment about whether the divine exists and he does not suggest that religion has a single source in the human psyche. Religion is not uniquely found in one or other way of understanding (theological, sociological or psychological) so James is different from theologians, sociologists and psychologists who claim religion is comprehensively explained from their exclusive vantage point as a discipline (a way of explaining).

James thinks that religion has a function in making aspects of life which are intolerable, tolerable. It is fairly clear that people often rely on religion to help us face the challenges of suffering, illness, loss and death. Religion also helps us to get by as individuals in society.

Dan Merkur writes about James’ particular interest in the study of the process by which a non-religious person became religious – conversion. In other words James is interested in how religion differs from what we could call irreligion? This led him to look at religious experience- seen as a feature of conversion (remember Saul in the New Testament for instance). He observes that religious experiences all include four elements: they are ineffable, authoritative, limited in duration and the mystic is passive. Religious experience is much more important than religious institutions in James’ view and this should really be the main focus of the study of religion. Without those religious experiences leading to the formation of religion, the institutions would never exist. Psychologists then are in a particularly good position to study religion because they are experts in the study of the mind and that is where experience is located.

So while James provides a psychological defense of religion against Freud and others who see it in rather negative terms he also identifies experience as being an important feature of the study of religion rather than simply doctrine or institution. This is rather more challenging for traditional theological ideas of religion and religious traditions.

Science and Religion

Lord May of Oxford’s final anniversary address as President of the Royal Society, perhaps the most distinguished scientific society in the country, raises concerns about the danger of an undermining of the rational basis of science.

Lord May has seen an undermining of scientific progress in the public response to the MMR scare. He has noted that the moral obligation to vaccinate children in high numbers has been assuaged by irrational beliefs about risks which have no scientific basis. Now the population are not well protected against mumps. There may well be far more harm done by mumps to children than any very unlikely link to other conditions as the risk of a serious outbreak is so much higher now so many people refused to get the vaccination.

Lord May also noted that in the US, the aim of a growing network of fundamentalist religious foundations and groups reaches well beyond “equal time” for creationism, or “intelligent design”, in the science classroom. He argues that the ultimate aim is the overthrow of “scientific materialism”, in all its manifestations. He quotes George Gilder, a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute, has indicated that this new, faith-based science will rid us of the “chimeras of popular science”, and those chimeras turn out to be ideas such as global warming, pollution problems, and ozone depletion. In other words religious fundamentalism is undermining a rational basis for enquiry which has given us greater health than ever, better resistance to diseases and infections, and more human beings than ever before as child mortality declines.

Richard Dawkins has bitterly opposed what he considers religious dogma. Dawkins sees education and consciousness-raising as primary tools, including the fight against certain stereotypes. He has written that,

“Many of us saw religion as harmless nonsense. Beliefs might lack all supporting evidence but, we thought, if people needed a crutch for consolation, where’s the harm? September 11th changed all that. Revealed faith is not harmless

nonsense, it can be lethally dangerous nonsense. Dangerous because it gives people unshakeable confidence in their own righteousness”.

It is relatively easy to find evidence to back the moral argument against religion. Lord May thinks that the world is in danger and the spread of irrationality threatens the future of the world. There is an irrational failure to grasp the peril the climate is in and a turning of the back on notions of a rationally justified truthful picture of reality. Is religion’s strongest response to the knowledge we have in the modern world a straightforward denial of its merit? If that is the case, then the moral argument against religion will grow.

Making Sense of Science and Religion

It is easy to simplify the relationship between science and religion and characterize the relationship between them simplistically. We can see them as in constant opposition, diametrically opposed. We can see them as complimentary to one another, rather than opposing forces. We can even see them as intimately connected. In his book *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, CUP, 1991) John Hedley Brook examines the history of science and religion and finds each of these representations of the link overly simplistic.

Religion and Science in perpetual conflict

The media tends to represent science and religion as opposites and a number of best selling books, such as Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, underline this view. This is perhaps a commonly held view today and of course it might seem an attractive idea. The language we sometimes use about science and religion reinforces this separation. For example, the words faith and reason seem to sum up the extent of their difference. Faith is one thing and reason quite another – the two are irreconcilably different! Curiously, when these words are used, it is often without careful definition of what exactly each means. There is an assumption that this portrayal captures the historical reality of a war between science and religion which reaches back to the trial of Galileo and the publication of the *Origin of the Species* by Darwin. Brook captures this idea of the history of the two in the account of the reluctance of the clergy to fix lightning rods to their churches. In 1975 the Bell Tower in Venice had once more been shattered by a storm and although Benjamin Franklin had mastered the lightning rod and this could have saved many a church tower, such a device was viewed as meddling with providence. God’s wrath in the storm should not be denied. The clerical authorities allowed it to be destroyed twice more before installing the device, with the effect that the monument was saved. Brook argues this portrays a picture of how the development of science and religion can be seen – stuck in a perennial battle.

This view of the past conjures an idea that with the scientific revolution of Copernicus and Galileo, religion and science parted. However this picture does not reflect the reality. The English Copernican John Wilkins revised his beliefs as a result of accepting Copernicus’ sun centred astronomy, but did not abandon religion. He later became a Bishop in the Church of England. Galileo continued to support a place for theology and philosophy. Other later scientists maintained religious views. For instance, Newton had a particular interest in biblical prophecy and alchemy. This does not prove any links between science and religion but it does challenge the way in which we view and use the history of the two.

Science and Religion are complimentary

Brook identifies a second view of the link seeing the two as complimenting one another by responding to a different set of human needs. Scientific language is for one area of practice – the laboratory, while theological language for another – the place of worship. Debates about evolution verses creationism are based on a mistake. A proper understanding of the doctrine of creation is that God is the creator of everything, everything is ultimately dependent on God, not that every separate species has to be independently created by God.

An intimate relationship between Science and religion

Brook’s third observation is that some people directly deny the first category and instead suggest that there is a very close connection between science and religion and that one encourages the other. For instance Puritan values are seen to have

assisted with the expansion of science in America. Those who believe in this connection see in science reasons to be religious and vice versa – one leads to the other.

A complex history

Brook argues that these three positions are maintained today and in each case they appeal to history to justify them. However this appeal to history is a problem because the lessons from history are not that simple. In other words we need to be careful about how history is used to justify arguments about the place of science and religion today. It is easy to think the picture we have today of what science is, has always been this way and the picture of what we believe religion is, is also unchanged. However, Brook argues that the way religion and science were defined in the past mean that easy correlations with the present debates are not appropriate. For example, in the seventeenth century what was termed Natural Philosophy explored God's relationship to nature. This is an example of how religious beliefs could operate within science influencing the theories chosen. For T H Huxley, for example, the meaning of Darwin's theory was found in its challenge to what he saw as the poison of Roman Catholicism, not Christianity per se.

Mutual indifferent co-existence

Over time it has become easier to insist on the mutual irrelevance of science and religion – perhaps they could co-exist in mutual indifference. This is because of a much clearer idea of what constitutes evidence and how that differs within science and religion.

New areas for connections

However, some developments in particle physics make the position of mutual indifferent co-existence doubtful. Rather they point to new parallels being drawn between science and religion. Developments in quantum mechanics have demanded a review of classical ideas of causality and the idea of physical reality. The possibility of drawing objective descriptions of the world, objective from the method used to draw, has been rendered highly problematic. In quantum physics, the rules seem only to apply whilst the observation is being made! The fact that photons and electrons exhibit both wave and particle characteristics, raise important questions about the building blocks of reality.

Reality has become somewhat more elusive than it once was thought to be. Brook notes this has attracted theological attention. With the new physics there is rather more indeterminacy, which again makes space for dialogue with theologians.

Brook's survey is not about the actual connections between science and religion, but about the way in which there is a rather more complicated picture of how science and religion have been related in the past. Simplistic pictures of this relationship must be questioned, however attractive the picture might be.

Examples

Take two eminent scholars; Francis Collins, the director of the National Human Genome Research Institute, headed a multinational 2,400-scientist team that helped map the three billion biochemical letters of human DNA; Richard Dawkins is the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science. Dawkins is a biologist and an atheist. Collins is a geneticist and a Christian. Science and religion are often presented as conflicting areas. Dawkins argues that religious belief is irreconcilable with a rational way of thinking. In a recent debate (www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1555132-3,00.html) Collins argued that God's existence cannot be answered as a scientific question using tools of science. "From my perspective, God cannot be completely contained within nature, and therefore God's existence is outside of science's ability to really weigh in," said Collins. Collins sees evolution and faith in the existence of God as compatible. He argues creation activated evolution. Dawkins finds it odd that God would choose a roundabout way of creating life and humans. Why wait for 10 billion years before life began and then another 4 billion years until humans were capable of worshipping. For Collins the Old Testament was never intended as a science textbook but rather a description of who God is and what our relationship with God should be like. The difference between the two is not about the difference between Faith and science but about compatibility. Dawkins is an incompatibilist, Collins a compatibilist.

Professor R J Berry is Emeritus Professor of genetics at University College, London. He thinks the opposition of creation and evolution is a mistake. In a paper for the Faraday Institute he argues that 'Creation' is a theological term that acknowledges the dependence of all that exists upon the authorship of the Creator. On the other hand 'Evolution' refers to our current understanding as to how God has brought biological diversity into being. As such he sees these two things as compatible with one another.

Dr Denis Alexander is the Director of the Faraday Institute for science and religion and Fellow of St Edmund's College, Cambridge; and a Senior Affiliated Scientist at The Babraham Institute, Cambridge, where he was previously Chairman of the Molecular Immunology Programme and Head of the Laboratory of Lymphocyte Signalling and Development. He has surveyed the different models for the way science and religion interact and conflict is one of those models though it is not one that accurately described the history of the relationship. A second possibility is the NOMA model – No Overlapping Magisteria. This view holds that the two have nothing to say to one another. They operate in different kinds of compartments and address different questions. However, if science and religion claim to be about reality, then it is the same reality they are about. The third model is Fusion. In this view there are overlapping boundaries. The kinds of knowledge that science and religion represent are similar or the same. Quantum mechanics might be seen as similar to eastern philosophy, in this kind of model. However the Royal Society, a leading institution for science in the UK, has as its motto: Take no-one's word for it. Religious traditions constitute someone's word for it. The final model is complementarity. This suggest science and religion address the same reality from different perspectives. They provide different kinds of explanations which compliment one another. They are not the same kinds of explanations. However this might fall into a form of NOMA and it may also give a suggestion that science is about facts and religion about values and opinions. We might feel that some crimes such as rape are moral facts, rather than just opinions.

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Creation and Evolution not Creation or Evolution

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Models for Relating Science and Religion

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Dawkins v God

Richard Dawkins, is the "Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science" at Oxford University and in a recent book, *The God Delusion* (Bantam), he argues that to be an atheist is a "brave and splendid" aspiration. Belief in God is a delusion and a "pernicious" one at that. Dawkins isn't certain that God does not exist but "I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there". Dawkins is hostile to his opponents and he questions the sincerity of serious thinkers who disagree with him, such as the late Stephen Jay Gould or Richard Swinburne, a philosopher of religion and science at Oxford, whom he accuses of attempting to "justify the Holocaust".

Dawkins main argument is an elaboration of the child's question "But Mommy, who made God?". If we say God made everything, we want to ask the question who made God? It is unacceptable to make God the ground of all being because, "any God capable of designing a universe, carefully and foresightfully tuned to lead to our evolution, must be a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide". The God hypothesis is "very close to being ruled out by the laws of probability". However, in this text his moral criticisms will be outlined. Dawkins targets the virtue of religion both in its sources and in its behaviour.

Bible

Dawkins is very critical of Biblical stories which seem doubtful sources of guidance. He finds the story of Noah "charming", but with an appalling moral tone. He writes, "God took a dim view of humans, so he (with the exception of one family) drowned the lot of them including children and also, for good measure, the rest of the (presumably blameless) animals as well".

He is also critical of some of the moral messages he finds in the Bible. Moral duplicity is present in the other example, that of the story of Lot and his daughters. In the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah Lot was chosen to be spared with his family because he was uniquely righteous:

“Two male angels were sent to Sodom to warn Lot to leave the city before the brimstone arrived. Lot hospitably welcomed the angels into his house, whereupon all the men of Sodom gathered around and demanded that Lot should hand the angels over so that they could (what else?) sodomize them: ‘Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them’ (Genesis 19: 5) ...Lot’s gallantry in refusing the demand suggests that God might have been onto something when he singled him out as the only good man in Sodom. But Lot’s halo is tarnished by the terms of his refusal: ‘I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly. Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes: only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof’” (Genesis 19: 7-8).

The attitudes present in these stories are unacceptable and the moral messages they give very problematic. Dawkins recognises that many theologians don’t accept such interpretations but is sceptical about their attitude to their own religious texts:

“...irritated theologians will protest that we don’t take the book of Genesis literally any more. But that is my whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories. Such picking and choosing is a matter of personal decision, just as much, or as little, as the atheist’s decision to follow this moral precept or that was a personal decision, without an absolute foundation”.

Dawkins objects to literal religious systems because they have no absolute foundation, left to the vagaries of personal opinion. But he is equally concerned with religion that is absolutist as his treatment of religious morality suggests.

Ethics

Dawkins argues that religious opinions lead people to commit terrible crimes while atheists are not driven to evil by their atheism. He explores the issue of Britain’s suicide bombers of 7/7.

“Why did these cricket-loving young men do it? Unlike their Palestinian counterparts, or their kamikaze counterparts in Japan, or their Tamil Tiger counterparts in Sri Lanka, these human bombs had no expectation that their bereaved families would be lionized, looked after or supported on martyrs’ pensions. On the contrary, their relatives in some cases had to go into hiding. One of the men wantonly widowed his pregnant wife and orphaned his toddler”.

The bombing has been a dreadful disaster for the individuals and their victims, as well as their families and for the whole Muslim community in Britain. The act is extraordinary and the damage appalling. Ordinary personal or political motivation cannot adequately explain such action. It is only religion which can lead to such horror.

“Only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people ... However misguided we may think them, they are motivated, like the Christian murderers of abortion doctors, by what they perceive to be righteousness, faithfully pursuing what their religion tells them. They are not psychotic; they are religious idealists who, by their own lights, are rational ... they have been brought up, from the cradle, to have total and unquestioning faith”.

and religious schools don’t help:

“If children were taught to question and think through their beliefs, instead of being taught the superior value of faith without question, it is a good bet that there would be no suicide bombers. Suicide bombers do what they do because they really believe what they were taught in their religious schools”.

Dawkins attacks religion on many fronts: philosophical, ethical and political and he uses examples which support his case. He represents a secular argument against religion and religious institutions but many are critical of his arguments (see [Dawkins vs McGrath](#)).

Some questions to consider

1. Does Dawkins do religion justice or is he building a paper tiger he can easily knock down?
2. Dawkins sometimes comes over as very intolerant of people who disagree with him – is that a reasonable basis for objecting to his arguments?

Dawkins v McGrath

McGrath has written a short rebuttal of Dawkins, *The Dawkins Delusion: atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine* (Alister McGrath with Joanna Collicutt McGrath, SPCK). Here we shall examine his important 4th chapter which deals with the charge that religion is evil.

Does religion lead to violence? There are certainly a lot of people who seem to be motivated to do terrible things by their religion and in history religions do seem to have sometimes encouraged intolerance and war. McGrath thinks this point has some validity. The evidence of religiously motivated violence is undeniable as McGrath knows only too well from his experience of growing up in Northern Ireland. However, he does not believe violence is a necessary aspect of religion (for instance Jesus showed no violence) and it is quite apparent from history that many non-religious political ideologies have caused violence such as Pol Pot in Cambodia. Dawkins' belief that atheists could not do such terrible things as religious people is demonstrably false.

Dawkins argues that acts such as suicide bombings could only be motivated by religious ideas, but there are examples in history against this. Under Stalin most Orthodox priests were killed just for being priests, along with clergy of other religions not to mention hundreds of thousands of Baptists. There seems to be a link between Stalin's atheistic ideology and who he chose to have killed. With regards to suicide bombers it is worth remembering that the Marxist guerrillas in Sri Lanka invented the suicide vest. In other words religion is not the only ideology capable of such violence. Political ideology can do it too.

Moreover, McGrath argues, it is hard to imagine that all divisions among humanity would vanish if religion were to go. Race, culture, language, class, political diversity will still exist. Is all diversity to go? That seems somewhat reminiscent of the totalitarian extremes humanity would rather abandon.

Another interesting point which McGrath notes briefly is that Dawkins seems unable to distinguish between belief in God and religion, and yet there is a great deal of evidence that many believe in God without considering themselves part of an institutional religion. McGrath notes that Dawkins also has an extraordinarily selective reading of the Bible. Many Jewish and Christian scholars and believers find aspects of these texts puzzling. Dawkins seems unwilling to consider the context in which these texts were written or to apply any of the cultural and historical factors which are considered when interpreting the texts in many religious traditions. These factors do not match the proper definition of religion according to Dawkins – a view of religion he then seeks to dispatch. Of course there will be some religious groups and traditions that may agree with Dawkins view on scripture, but they are hardly representative of all religions or religious people.

Saving Darwin from Dawkins: Midgley

The philosopher Mary Midgley has in recent years criticised Richard Dawkins, not because of his attack on religion, though she feels his attack has weaknesses, but because of his use of the word selfishness, and his psychological account of the human condition, and therefore human morality, in terms of being selfish. She believes that under the guise of his biological science, he has smuggled in an explanation of human behaviour that is psychological, rather than biological.

Writing in 2009 she suggested that:

“Selfish is an odd word because its meaning is almost entirely negative. It does not mean “prudent, promoting one’s own interest”. It means “not promoting other people’s” or, as the dictionary puts it, “devoted to or concerned with one’s own advantage to the exclusion of regard for others”. This being usually seen as a fault, the word serves chiefly as a

term of abuse. And it raises a difficulty for theorists who want to say that self-interest is, in some sense, the core of all human motivation”.

By theorists she is talking about Dawkins and those like him, who view human behaviour in highly deterministic terms.

“We wonder how, if this is so, the word could ever come to be invented at all? Just as there would be no word for white if everything was white, there could surely be no word for selfish if everyone was always selfish. As things are, however, we notice that some people do consider others less than most of us, and we use words like selfish or mean to record this fact”. (Midgley, 2009)

She notes that Charles Darwin presses a more complex account of human behaviour in his book *The Descent of Man*.

“Darwin derived morality, not just from our extra intelligence but from the combination of that intelligence with the strong affectionate and co-operative motives which we share with other social animals, and related these to our evolutionary history. As he put it, “Thus the social instincts – the prime principle of man’s moral constitution – with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the golden rule, ‘As ye would that men should do unto you, do ye to them likewise’ and this lies at the foundation of morality”. (Midgley, 2009)

However Dawkins seems to have taken a rather different route. In his book *The Selfish Gene* (1989), Dawkins disregards these Darwinian suggestions. He writes flatly that “we are born selfish” – we are ourselves, not the genes. Here the word selfish has its normal, negative sense here. He writes that if we want,

“to build a society in which individuals co-operate generously and unselfishly... you can expect little help from biological nature. Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then have a chance to upset their design, something which no other species has ever aspired to”. (Dawkins, 1989, p.3)

Dawkins goes on to argue that it is possible for a human being to turn against his instinct.

“We can even discuss ways of cultivating and nurturing pure, disinterested altruism, something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed before in the whole history of the world... We have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators”. (Dawkins, 1989, p.200)

Midgley suggests that far from being science, this is a metaphysical claim, an extreme dogmatic suggestion based on a simplistic and arbitrary understanding of human psychology. Midgley argues that this extremist psychological has actually pushed people towards creationism and intelligent design because of the suggestion that this is linked to Darwin. And yet, Midgley would have us believe that Darwin was far more nuanced than Dawkins. Darwin would never have dogmatised hastily about matters that are mysterious and complex to us.

“Nor, certainly, would he have made the mistake of mixing claims to scientific objectivity with melodramatic rhetoric based on personifying the gene – a mixture which gives Dawkins his own grand conclusion that the cosmos is both a random, meaningless jumble and also a callous, brutal fate-figure that manipulates us. Small wonder that his readers say “If that is evolution I don’t want it”. (Midgley 2008)

Dawkins’ doctrine is simply unrealistic. In her most recent book (2010) Midgley argues that the reduction of human motivation to pure self-interest, which she calls a reductive individualism, comes not from Darwin and his evolutionary theory, but other enlightenment thinking which portrays human beings as heroically independent and driven by self-directed individualism. She goes on to argue that human beings are framed to interact with one another in society and the complex ecosystem within which we are a tiny part.

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Against the Toleration of Religion

In his book, *The End of Faith: Religion, terror and the Future of Reason* (Free Press, 2004) Sam Harris argues that in a world with weapons of mass destruction we cannot tolerate views that pit one true God against another. Theology must justify itself ethically and reasonably and that means rationally.

Harris argues that belief fundamentally affects every aspect of your life. If you really believed that you had only two weeks to live or had won the lottery, everything would be affected by that belief. In the world as it is, many people believe that a creator of the universe has written a book, but there are several such books to choose from. People group themselves according to which book they think is the real book and there are many practices and beliefs that follow from the particular book they have chosen. Some of those beliefs and practices are not benign. The attitude of respect for people who follow a different book is not one that God supports. Intolerance is intrinsic to every faith, even if there might be a bit of ecumenicalism, as the main thrust of all religions is that the others are an error or worse, an evil. Religion, it seems undermines human cooperation.

Of course, religions are not all bad and religious people do some good. However, Harris argues we have been slow to realise the fundamental damage that religion does – the inhumanity it inspires. People may have spiritual and emotional needs which are met by religion, but at what price? One can counter that not all religions are extremist and in fact many religious people take a more liberal moderate position. However, Harris goes on to argue that religious moderates are those who have taken on board some of the fruits of human thought (e.g. democracy, human rights, scientific advancement). Religious moderation comes from the advancement of knowledge which leads educated people to ignore certain aspects of religious doctrine which do not stand up to scrutiny. It is not that reason is compatible with faith – they are not. Religious moderation is the result of secular thinking and ignorance of the sacred texts. Over time more and more religious truths are found to be unhelpful. Progress in religion seems to mean abandoning more and more aspects of the religion.

Conflict

Harris goes on to argue that religion is a spring for religious conflict:

"The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews v. Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians v. Catholic Croatians; Orthodox Serbians v. Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants v. Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims v. Hindus), Sudan (Muslims v. Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims v. Christians), Ethiopia and Eritrea (Muslims v. Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists v. Tamil Hindus), Indonesia (Muslims v. Timorese Christians), and the Caucasus (Orthodox Russians v. Chechen Muslims; Muslim Azerbaijanis v. Catholic and Orthodox Armenians) are merely a few cases in point". (p.26)

Millions have died as a direct result of religious difference. However, Harris is not ruling out spirituality. He argues that there are human experiences that can be appropriately described as "spiritual" or "mystical" – experiences, of meaning, selflessness, and heightened emotion that surpass our narrow identities as "selves". These experiences do not justify arrogant claims of exclusivity about the sanctity of certain texts. In fact spirituality can be informed by all human experiences. We can situate our ethical intuitions and our capacity for spiritual experience within the context of a rational worldview. We need an extended moral identity which is not restricted to tribal considerations. Beliefs which mean people live life in the present world with their mind focussed on the next are unacceptable and must not be tolerated.

Privacy

Harris makes the case that religion is not private. The pilot does not land his plane through prayer, though he may believe it possible for prayer to do this. Such an act would show negligence and would lead to criminal charges, should the pilot survive. Harris maintains that some beliefs are intrinsically dangerous and cannot be tolerated. If a belief about the rightness or wrongness of women's dress can lead to violence or harm coming to such women, then the belief, despite its seeming innocuousness, is unacceptable.

Criticism

Harris' argument is powerful. It is a strong moral argument against religion based on a call to rationality and what he considers to be an honest reflection of what religion does in the world. The difficulty may in fact be not in terms of the critique he provides, but the application of his conclusion. The world where people are united around a rational system of ethics and spirituality sounds perfect but what about the transition period and what about the dissenters? To become intolerant of religions, and I think we can honestly say that it is religions that we are being intolerant towards, may produce quite considerable violence and death and not because of the resistance of the faithful. The example of the Nazi extermination of the Jews illustrates this.

The problem of human beings, Harris observes, is that they are irrational and the kind of irrationality leads to suffering. But is he right to think that a world where people are not allowed to have such religious beliefs, where their freedoms are restricted and where groups which have such beliefs are marginalised would be a better one? Human rights, which Harris attributes as a gift of secular thought, include the right to express freedom of religious belief. The intolerance shown to religious groups on the margins has been a significant agent in producing human rights. It is also wise to note that religion is not the only factor which determines the world view people have. Culture and ethnicity, quite apart from religion, inform peoples' conduct. Would these escape the analysis if they were based on tradition rather than rationality? There are a whole range of experiences which people use to justify, in their own terms, the view of life that they have. To what extent can we restrict the kinds of interpretation that people make of their experiences when they veer away from the facts and the means by which facts are measured? Harris' critique of the harm done by religion is very strong, but it remains to be seen how the intolerance he suggests can be morally justified.

A second issue with Harris' argument is his definition of religion. Harris represents religion as an exclusive worldview which does not encourage respect for others and followers who do not take this seriously are not taking their religion seriously. He wants to replace this with a universally adhered to worldview. That is the same aim most fundamentalist religions have which seems a little worrying.

Thirdly, his representation of moderates is a weak part of his argument. Religious moderates do not cause the kind of death that fundamentalists do and so Harris needs another argument to challenge them. His argument is that they do no justice to their own religion but that only stretches as far as his definition of their religion is acceptable. Harris uses the basic analysis that religious people are book followers. But books do not characterise all religions by any means and this undermines his dismissal of the moderates. Debates about the interpretation of scripture and the role of other sources of authority, such as tradition is not accounted for. New age religions and new spiritualities simply would not fit his definition. Why must we accept a definition of religion which does not allow it to draw authority from a wide range of sources? Why are the only authentic religious believers literalists. It is worth remembering that Jesus did not follow the literal interpretation of law though he was in many, if not all respects, a good Jew by the definition accepted in his own time.