

The Other End of Faith

Stephen H. Phelps

*Born on this Isthmus of a middle state / A being darkly wise and widely great
He hangs between; in doubt to act or rest / In doubt to deem the self a God or Beast
In doubt the mind or body to prefer / Born but to die and reasoning but to err
Sole judge of truth in endless error hurled / The glory, jest and riddle of the world.*
—Alexander Pope

The angry torrent of the “new atheism,” as it has come to be called,¹ has clearly touched a sympathetic nerve in American society. Sam Harris, author of the best-sellers *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* attained national cover article status in *Newsweek* (April 9, 2007), making lopsidedly successful debating points over the intellectually plodding Rick Warren. The dust jacket of *Letter to a Christian Nation* sports the enthusiastic shout of Marc Hauser, professor of psychology at Harvard: “Reading *Letter* . . . was like sitting ringside, cheering the champion at every jab.” Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* blazes the new atheist trail still wider and angrier. The omniscritical Christopher Hitchens joined the band with *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* and evolutionist Daniel Dennett contributed *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. To judge from the reading public’s avid response to these books and from thousands of posts to Harris’ “Forum”², a large segment of American society has not only withdrawn from religious life but feels hostile toward religion as a mode of thought.

The attempt to divide humanity into two camps, rational and religious, damages the professed interests of both. The water in the well of the public square is poisoned and the ground for joined actions to palliate grievous social problems is undermined.³ If from the side of science there can come terms of peace and understanding toward the religious, those terms must be such as reason itself can *and must* accept. Such claims will not attempt to cover religion’s wrongs or to convert reason into religiousness, but they will refute false assumptions in the atheist account of what religious faith is, when superstition, projection, and wishful thinking are not present. In the end, without surrendering their commitment to reason, the reasonable can consider with dispassion why a religious trust that God is up to the good of the world can be welcomed according to its fruits.

I

The new atheists gleefully report the crimes of religion against reason. Much of their argument is not philosophical but anecdotal, dealing not with the traditions’ theologians, but with selected scriptures and selected behaviors of selected believers. The fact that many believers accept religious dogma uncritically is not an essential characteristic of the religious tradition itself, however; it is a personal habit. In the case of Christianity, if a serious expression of the faith can both accept and celebrate the use of reason to the full extent of its powers, then that expression is the one with which a thoughtful atheist will want to have to do, in the critical sense, rather than shooting fish in a barrel, as the new atheists do. In fact, celebrating and embracing the desire for, and the process of, and the results of all new understanding derived from scientific methods of study, many Christians can conclude, with atheists, all of the following:

- **The Bible is not useful as a natural science text.** Writers of these texts had little objective understanding of proximate causes in the natural world and could not possess the desire to pursue questions of cause and effect in the way that animates western sensibilities.
- **Bible stories often have little or no correspondence with events as a camera might have**

shown them, had one been “in place” at the “right time.” Acknowledging the folkloric character of Bible narratives can strengthen faith by directing its focus away from false or unnecessary assertions, contrary to nature, and toward faith as a species of gratitude and trust, not in supposed facts or a wished-for reality, but in being-as-it-is, which the Christian tradition calls “creation.”

- **The Bible offers a record of how God was perceived when its texts were composed.** Although this statement falls far short of what many believe about the sources and purposes of biblical texts, both adherents and atheists can agree with it, so far as it goes, which may prove helpful for those who desire to understand another point of view. Adherents can also affirm, with atheists, that the fact that ancient people believed this or that about their God does not make the beliefs objective facts about God, in the sense to which western civilization is accustomed.
- **The meat of the Bible is marbled with aggressive self-interest** for the writers’ tribes and communities, and with the kinds of errors to which bias gives rise. Although many Christians resist this proposition, the biblical understanding of human imperfection all but requires the presumption that its texts were subject to error. Atheists typically suppose that conceding this point shows that the Bible is “just an ordinary book,” or worse, a tool fashioned by cynics to control the masses. However, the conflicts, contradictions, wishful thinking, and errors found in the traditions’ leaders and teachers need not vitiate the concept of the Bible as “the word of God.” When held in tension with mature acceptance of human limitation, the concept “word of God” is ejected from the box of literalism into space that demands conscious co-operation and development on the part of communities as they take responsibility for *how* truth is revealed.
- **Much religious belief consists of ideas that are not “falsifiable,”** in Karl Popper’s phrase; that is, no experience could test whether or not “it is so.” Claims about what God thinks, feels, and does, or did, are of this class. Reasonable religious people know that doctrines do not belong to the same order of knowledge as do scientific descriptions of nature. Harris writes: “There is clearly a sacred dimension to our existence, and coming to terms with it could well be the highest purpose of human life. But we will find that it requires no faith in untestable propositions for us to do this.”⁴ Atheists may be surprised that many Christians agree with this too, and oppose importing untestable ideas into public education or legislation as accepted truths. It can further be acknowledged that even for the religious, **many doctrinal formulations are finally unnecessary to, and some deleterious to, the purposes of faith.**
- Among untestable ideas is the belief that belief in Jesus Christ is necessary to receive the greatest good available to a human, and, conversely, that failure so to believe will bring the worst conceivable suffering forever. Most American Christians do not believe this.⁵ Although their reasoning may be influenced more by a general movement toward social tolerance⁶ than by their traditions’ formative theological positions, the gradual growth of a kind of universalism among Christians does not inherently conflict with their faith. **Christians can acknowledge that nothing can be known about the ultimate destiny of any person.** Notwithstanding several passages in the Christian Bible that condemn unbelievers, nothing essential in Christian faith prevents an adherent from trusting that other paths can also orient people toward their ultimate good. Moreover, the biblical portrait of

Jesus militates against speculating over the evil that awaits “other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” (John 10:16).

- **The idea that divine power *can or should* intervene in natural processes to cause good or bad things to happen is absurd and offensive to many Christians.** The natural world, with its laws unmolested, can be the world as it is, both now and throughout all time. Notwithstanding that many illustrious teachers of religion have promulgated this doctrine, called “special providence,” or that, shorn of its arcane nomenclature, the doctrine is perhaps the most basic idea motivating the prayers of the humble, trust in God who “rains on the just and the unjust” (Matt. 5:45) resists the notion of divine intervention as contrary to the nature of God. For many, the idea reminds them of the time “when I was a child . . . and reasoned like a child.” (1 Cor. 13:11)
- **Christians can affirm with atheists that being Christian, or being religious, is not a necessary condition for virtue, and further, that some expressions of Christianity are inimical to the “fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”** (Gal 5:22) Some expressions of Christianity appear to intensify the repression of internal conflicts whose resolution would bring profound, positive change.
- **The religious often use their beliefs to rationalize injustice done and justice left undone.** Faith presents no obstacle to seeing how religion is often used to fortify the power arrangements of the status quo. But religion is hardly alone in being abused for the sake of power. So also have the sciences been abused, and the arts and politics and education and sexual relations and sports. *Et cetera*. Susceptibility to this temptation resembles nothing so much as a genetic flaw in human character. The religious do however present a peculiar risk to society when they deny or ignore the possibility of the corruption in their thought systems, for in presuming to invoke the perfect guide, some assume they possess the perfect guidance for their actions. Religion driven by such circular reasoning is like a missile with no ground control.
- **Religious leaders are often insufficiently critical of religious manipulation in public discourse and political action.** Sam Harris argues that even though moderate religious people know the wall between church and state is severely breached, they nevertheless protect the right of radical religionists to use religious grounds to formulate policies that affect the whole public.⁷ True—but Harris strains the point beyond its compass when he claims that speaking “plainly and truthfully about the state of our world is antithetical to tolerance as moderates currently conceive it.”⁸ He seems so absorbed by his allergy to what religious people think that he never pulls his pinned nose from the moldy texts of arrogant religion to go hear the voices, beginning with Micah and Amos and never silenced, which religion continually raises up to proclaim its own decadence and to require its own reform. With reference only to the present age, one thinks of Coffin, Heschel, Tutu, Chittister, Lerner, Sider, Wallis, Waskow, Welty . . . The long list embarrasses any cursory, ill-considered dismissal of western religion’s critical powers.

Reasonable minds will always find much to deplore in religious culture, but the new atheists draw an illogical conclusion from the morass. They assume that holding certain beliefs *causes* certain bad behavior. Harris, for example, expostulates that “religion allows people to consider that

their concerns are moral when they are not . . .”⁹—as if religion were the motive for the deplorable behaviors. While a strong correlation between excessive religious certainty and unjust, cruel, and narrow-minded behavior in the religiously over-certain is not in dispute, correlation does not establish causation. After pages and pages cataloguing the heartless political positions of various religious people, Harris finally concedes that “of course, correlational data of this sort do not resolve questions of causality.”¹⁰ He briefly acknowledges that “societal dysfunction . . . may spring from some deeper source of mischief” than belief in God. On this subject, he proves utterly incurious.

With Ockham’s razor, the curious peel back behavioral traits to get at that “deeper mischief,” much prior to the religious impulse. Begin with the axiom that humans, like other creatures, are often afraid, experiencing cascades of aggressive feelings and defensive thoughts. Being to some degree aware that their thoughts are not objective but contingent points of view; and being constrained by social rules from using physical force to deal with their fears, humans crave broad powers to justify domination of those they fear. When more-base instruments of domination prove inadequate, the fearful are bound to lay hold of symbols, belonging to a whole culture, to secure their position. Given these axioms, it is tediously obvious that symbols of religion serve exceedingly well as tools of high-level domination—in spite of the clear aims of the world religions to free humans from the terrors of their creaturely nature and to replace fear with courage for acts of love. Religion and God are no more the essential problem in the world’s hatred and violence than sexual intercourse is the essential problem in rape.

In spite of the complexity, not to say opacity, of the Bible, the constantly confirmed divine intention set forth in its pages is to direct the energies of adherents away from unreasoning fear of the conditions of their existence and toward a spirit of peace, justice, love, and trust, engaging individuals in continual growth in themselves, with others, and with God. In Christian understanding, this continual growth is effected through the death of the self. The fact that people ignore this divine intention recorded in their scriptures is not the fault of religion as such. Why, given how threatening the intention is, the fact that the Bible is not burned, but continually if fitfully re-read, can give a reasonable atheist a measure of hope for the religious world.

That said, Christianity, considered as a movement, must undergo its own subversion through a reformation which embraces scientific rationalism and pursues unity among all people. Atheists who seek peace will also seek to understand how, for Christian communities committed to such a reformation, it is reasonable to say that God is working through Jesus Christ to develop such a faith for such a world. In this realistic light, the pressing question for the peace of the world is not, contra the new atheists, how to hasten the fading of the religious impulse. Certainly, the excesses of religious fervor present grave dangers to peace. If they can be cooled, however, the successful agents of that change will be the credible and the audible. Atheists really interested in peace will bend their minds and hearts, as do serious religious people, to perfect, through trial and error, what actually works for good in a world where most individuals, alas, can be expected to respond with hostility to whatever is too different from themselves.

II

“Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence.”
—from Emerson’s “The Over-Soul”

Atheism’s attractive doctrine of “salvation by reason alone” has a peculiar flaw. Conceptual reason is sole witness, prosecutor, judge, and jury in the suit to eject the religious from the company of the reasonable. Atheism protests that the trial and conviction of religion must proceed on these terms, for as there is no higher law than reason, no appeal is possible. This is the same circular reasoning that plagues religious fundamentalism. Like a fish determined to swim to the ultimate source of its element, but unwilling to give its life for the cause, such reasoning ceases its pursuit of reality in the last puddle it can navigate, proudly declaring its *eureka*: Reason is all there is!

In *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris identifies the target of his critique this way:

Throughout this book, I am criticizing faith in its ordinary, scriptural sense—as belief in, and life orientation toward, certain historical and metaphysical propositions. The meaning of the term, both in the Bible and upon the lips of the faithful seems to be entirely unambiguous. It is true that certain theologians and contemplatives have attempted to recast faith as a spiritual principle that transcends mere motivated credulity. Paul Tillich, in his *Dynamics of Faith*, rarefied the original import of the term [“faith”] right out of existence, casting away . . . all equations between faith and belief . . . But this is not the “faith” that has animated the faithful for millennia. The faith that I am calling into question is precisely . . . [w]hat Tillich himself decried as “an act of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence.” My argument, after all, is aimed at the majority of the faithful in every religious tradition, not at Tillich’s blameless parish of one.¹¹

This dismissal of the Christian Church as a body in which only one or two people have ever been in touch with spiritual reality *through* Christian faith exposes atheism’s basic, and perhaps willful, misunderstanding of the role of religion in human development. The experience of being self-aware has undergone inexpressibly rapid development in some 30,000 years, during which span of time the genetic makeup of *homo sapiens* has changed but little. Religion has been the primary method for sorting out the intensely complex experience of burgeoning consciousness. If with the new atheists this growth has reached its zenith, then indeed, the religious impulse may be expected to fade. If not, not.

Here the development of consciousness is defined as the increasing capacity to integrate discrete, new ways of perceiving reality into the human response to the world. With respect to this capacity, the human at 30,000 years of age is an animal just waking up. Collectively, we are like an infant roused unwilling from sleep. Of course some of “the faithful in every religious tradition” are given to superstition and wishful thinking! These are adaptive means, suited to early stages of development, for handling needs for security, control, and affection. A religious tradition supplies its adherents with a means to organize and communicate a worldview suited to a range of levels of consciousness. A tradition becomes a world-historical religion only if its essential terms are able to help individuals and cultures develop and adapt to new, more-complex situations. Religions which fail to provide for development through several levels of consciousness wither away.

Why do the new atheists simply ignore the development of consciousness as a feature of religious life? If in young adulthood, they outgrew the confinements of a childish conception of God, this was a positive good. However, since they never experienced a transformative development of their capacity to integrate new perceptions of reality *within* a religious tradition, religious language is for

them necessarily locked away in memory as childlike or poetic at best. At worst, religious language is remembered only as having policed the unhappy confinements of their pre-rational consciousness.

Being ignorant of mature spiritual experience within a tradition, and the consequent reconfiguration of the meanings of symbols and doctrines, those who have arrived at atheism roughly along these lines quite naturally focus on what they *can* observe, namely, religious concepts, expressed in ordinary language, but which now appear to them only as “acts of knowledge that have a low degree of evidence.” By taking aim only at these, an atheist imposes his own literal and reductionist agenda on religion, completely missing the inward development that can unfold for a person and for a whole community as they organize and make normative new experiences of consciousness by means of the symbols and doctrines of the tradition.

Many Christians do not develop in the sense defined here, but relate to religious symbols in unchanging and childlike ways throughout a lifetime. This is not inherently a religious phenomenon, but a kind of choice. The new atheists, committed evolutionists all, should have no difficulty seeing the behavior as a successful adaptation to a noetic niche, protecting believers from the stresses of a changing environment—behavior not caused by religion, but manifested within religious cultures as surely as left and right are manifested within political cultures to express competing social needs for change and for preservation. By spending all its substance fulminating against those manifestations of religion which are wary of or opposed to development, the new atheist critique avoids the hard intellectual work that would challenge its own quasi-religious assumptions.

To cover this gaping hole in the argument, the new atheists try to stuff the whole class of more-developed religious faith down the rabbit hole of literalism. Harris writes:

Moderates in every faith are obliged to loosely interpret much of their canons in the interests of living in the modern world . . . [T]he moderates’ retreat from scriptural literalism . . . draws its inspiration not from Scripture, but from cultural developments that have rendered many of God’s utterances difficult to accept as written . . . [Deuteronomy 13: 7-11 is cited here, a call to execute any who do not worship Yahweh] It is only by ignoring such barbarisms that the Good Book can be reconciled with life in the modern world. “[M]oderation” in religion . . . has nothing underwriting it other than the unacknowledged neglect of the letter of the divine law. The only reason anyone is *moderate* in matters of faith these days is that he has assimilated some of the fruits of the last two thousand years of human thought. The doors leading out of scriptural literalism do not open from the *inside*.¹²

Dawkins piles on: “The holy books do not supply any rules for distinguishing the good principles from the bad.”¹³

These assertions do not reflect well on their authors’ research skills. Jesus bluntly selects “two great commandments” as the sole criteria for sorting good principles from bad. (Matt 22:38-40) These rules, so to speak, are continually reaffirmed (e.g., John 13, Matt. 5, Rom. 13:10, 1 Cor. 13). Beyond the promulgation of interpretive rules, however, the biblical tradition offers a record of explicit challenges to the reduction of faith to literal, conceptual truth. Jesus is said to dismiss the effort: “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life . . .” (John 5:39). So also Paul: “For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” (2 Cor 3:5-6) These terse sayings belong to a much broader movement against literal interpretations of the scriptures. Consider four examples which form a moving picture of consciousness in development.

- 1) According to the Bible, the dynasty of King David lasted about four hundred years. It is no surprise that significant reflection on the meaning of this long succession comes only toward the end of that time. The story of David’s learning that his “throne shall be established

forever” (2 Sam 7.16) was written more than three hundred years after his death. By this time, prophets had already been declaiming for several generations that, far from being eternal, the dynasty was doomed as punishment for its social injustice and heartless cultic formalism. The 2 Samuel story is therefore best understood not as a mere report, but as one side of a heated seventh-century argument over the nature of God and Israel’s place in history. In the decades after the dynasty was finally destroyed (ca. 587 BCE), a nonliteral interpretation of “everlasting kingdom” emerged in some of Israel’s spiritual teachers, while others maintained hope for a resumption of the dynastic succession. The record of this evolution from literal to symbolic interpretation of kingdom is “in the book.” It contributed greatly to the Jesus movement, as witness the Palm Sunday stories of all four Christian gospels.

- 2) Those responsible for the literal interpretation of an endless dynasty in Jerusalem (the “Deuteronomists”) were also concerned about an actual king, Josiah, whom they supported through times of concrete political conflicts, foreign and domestic. Monotheism, a theological commitment to see all things under one God who can be trusted, was their great contribution to the historical development of consciousness. The new atheists mercilessly mock Israel’s monotheism, but they miss its core affirmation, on which their own minds depend. Absent the belief that reality is one, the axiom of scientific study, that repeated observations of phenomena mean something, cannot even arise in thought.

Pursuing their insight into unity, the Deuteronomists codified an interpretation of good and evil fortune as expressions of the will of the one God, rather than of unpredictably competing deities or fates. This was framed in what now appears to most westerners as a rigidly literal belief that God causes good to come to good people and evil to the evil *in this life*—or to the children, should people give judgment the slip by dying out of season. (See Deuteronomy 30 for an extended peroration on this subject.) Despite its simplistic limitations, the teaching had obvious normative value for the culture, as the practices of rewards and punishments will always have for, say, parents raising children and employers considering their workers.

Nevertheless, this teaching about God’s role in good and evil was challenged contemporaneously by Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Over the next three centuries, Israel’s Wisdom tradition continually set itself against the prevailing moralism that assumed the will of God could be read from the conditions of a personal life. The books of *Job*, *Ecclesiastes*, *Song of Songs*, *Jonah*, and *Ruth* as well as many psalms are products of this late period. These late scrolls were not swiftly burned by traditionalists, which suggests that the wider religious community needed to throw open the doors on thought about the nature of God, to admit broad beams of light. The new atheists cite none of these books in their critiques of the Bible, and otherwise show no acquaintance with the record of nonliteral interpretation developing within the religious culture.

- 3) In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins observes approvingly that Jesus did not “derive his ethics from the scriptures of his upbringing. He explicitly departed from them, for example when he deflated the dire warnings about breaking the Sabbath.”¹⁴ The author does not hazard a guess as to what motivated Jesus’ nonliteral approach to the scriptures. No doubt he chalks it up to Jesus’ reason, rather than his religion. But Jesus’ religion was more than competent to mount a reforming assault on religious traditionalism. The centuries-old

prophetic tradition held the terms of love and justice in mutual tension; neither demand could be relaxed to satisfy the requirements of the other. Whenever such a perfecting ideal is pursued with singleness of mind, literal thought must give way, for words are only adequate to things that have already been; they can never inscribe the path toward perfection. The publications of the new atheists do not even give honorable mention to Israel's prophetic tradition.

- 4) In Acts 10-15 is told the story how Jewish leaders of the early Christian movement changed their minds about the law that required the faithful to be circumcised. It hardly matters that the elders' concession to Peter and Paul seems grudging. What matters is that these Jewish men decided to take responsibility for having believed in error that a practice of their tradition actually circumscribed the freedom of God to save. Paul would later write to the church at Rome that a "real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal." (Romans 2.29) The doors leading out of scriptural literalism are flung open from the inside.

Regardless the uncertain historicity of these stories, no one disputes that they have been told and retold for generations. This fact disarms the charge that the Bible is a locked box of bad beliefs. The practice of religious communities in cherishing stories about bold, non-literal reinterpretations of received texts and traditions testifies to a persistent, subversive intention to preserve specifically religious directions for picking the locks that enforce religious and cultural conformity. This behavior in an historically continuous community may seem to an outsider puzzling and contradictory. How can scripture be used to build up as well as to tear down the walls of the community?

It takes patience to sort through the immensely complex history of biblical composition to see patterns emerge, but as they do, something quite universal is revealed. Building up and breaking down is the pattern of all developmental progress. Cells do it, animals do it; cultures that fail to do it die. Literalists of the atheist or fundamentalist stripe want to force the Bible into competition for truth with the sciences of our time, but this obsession of theirs has nothing to do with religious faith. The inner aim of the communities who formed the Bible was always to awaken consciousness. In its thousand pages, the Bible inscribes a brief history of consciousness' development, not to record facts, but as a gift from generation to generation, demonstrating what worked for the development of persons and communities. Taken together, the texts have served this purpose so well in countless and diverse contexts that they may be expected to serve into the indefinite future. Part of their message is: *See how we struggled after the good, oscillating between the often harsh cell-forming activities and the subversive, creative re-forming practices. We did not give in to the temptation to despise, reject, or erase the memory of those who went before us in this struggle to see more. Now go and do likewise.* The sufficiency of the Bible as a charter for communities committed to spiritual development depends in part on its *inclusion* of records of ancient perceptions of God, self, and others, some of which yet hold, and some of which have given way to more-just, more-sublime visions through a pattern of growth that has, in principle, no end but God.

Atheists may assert that "reason alone" led biblical personages (or story-telling communities) to overturn narrow, legalistic self-interest in favor of more-inclusive visions of justice and love, but this assertion explains nothing. Whence reason? Having coined the term "meme" on the analogy of "gene" to highlight the similarity of the principles of information transmission found in both cells and cultures, Richard Dawkins should be curious about the source of reason and its contribution to

development. He is, however, positively unwilling to tender any hypothesis to account for the generative force giving rise to greater justice and love—but he knows that God was not involved.

Over the longer timescale, the progressive trend is unmistakable and it will continue . . . Where have these concerted and steady changes in social consciousness come from? The onus is not on me to answer. For my purposes, it is sufficient that they certainly have not come from religion . . . What compels its consistent direction? . . . It is beyond my amateur psychology and sociology to go any further . . . For my purposes it is enough that, as a matter of observed fact, it does move, and it is not driven by religion—and certainly not by Scripture . . . Whatever its cause, the manifest phenomenon of *zeitgeist* progression is more than enough to undermine the claim that we need God in order to be good.¹⁵

The Jewish and Christian traditions never claim that religion or the scriptures “drive these concerted, steady changes” in consciousness. Only God is said to move within such “observed facts.” The arbitrary decision to exclude God from possible sources for the development of reason and love and justice is just bad thinking. (In a recent radio interview, E.O. Wilson acknowledged as much: “I am a deist. I don’t want to be called an atheist. I don’t want to exclude the possibility of a creative force or deity. That would be bad science.”¹⁶) To say, as the new atheists do, that these developments have only to do with reason and nothing to do with the will of God is not only to misunderstand God but reason itself. Whoever sees that her worldview is a child of all the prior developmental processes of her culture for generations upon generations will be slow to say that religion has nothing to do with shaping her own capacity to see the world as she does. What if the development of consciousness is what God is and what God is up to?

When religious faith ascribes the power to reach for the highest ideals not to reason but to the grace of God, it is not imagining a mechanism for improved personal virtue, as atheists suppose. The ascription of praise and thanks has a quite different purpose. It arises in the experience that “our being is descending into us from we know not whence.” The symbol “God”—the word on a page, the sound in the ear, and all other conscious referents to deity—corresponds to an awareness of the illimitable possibility of being, into which the individual senses herself drawn, and of which it is not at all her experience that she is the source. This humble attitude that combines both profound unknowing about the source and destiny of oneself and of all creation with profound trust to take this life’s wild ride into the face of death, and awaken to its rigors all the while, is the essential religious attitude. It differs from the essential atheist attitude in its belief in the untestable proposition that no accumulation of observations of causes and effects can account for the source of consciousness and its powers of transformation. Ian Mitroff makes the point in “The Atheist Delusion.”

One has to assume philosophically, i.e., metaphysically, that the universe is ordered in order to observe the universe in orderly ways. These assumptions are not only philosophical, but spiritual in the best sense of the term . . . In sum, to believe that science, and science alone, can explain the entire universe is not only a serious delusion, but it is a belief that is as strong as any religious one. In fact, it is a religious belief!¹⁷

III

Traditional knowledge is knowledge that has been remembered or recorded, handed down, pondered, corrected, practiced, and refined over a long time. A related kind of knowledge is made available by the religious traditions and is not otherwise available. If you premise the falsehood of such knowledge, as the materialists do, then of course you don't have it—and your opinion of it is worthless. —Wendell Berry¹⁸

Whoever are curious to develop something more than a worthless opinion about religious traditions realize that they must drop the unscientific premise that all religious knowledge is false. This is a different kind of intellectual step than that proposed by literalism, whether religious or atheist, for it does not force reason, the seat of the centered self, to abdicate its authority. Nor does it permit reason to pretend to a throne it cannot hold. It is simply an open mind. Can faith function unembarrassed by superstition, projection, and wishful thinking? If so, then one outside the circle of faith can give respectful, even graceful, attention to the integrity of religious persons and communities.

In a spirit of genuine inquiry into Christian faith, it will prove unhelpful to begin by testing concepts of Christian doctrine against one's own standard of logic. This approach misapprehends what Christian faith is for. It is not a set of propositions or moral rules which, if accepted, will bring desirable consequences. While many church people actually do think of their religion in these terms, their error arises not from the Christian tradition but from their own need for a religious system subject to their own control. The biblical record is clear that faith is for the overthrow of the ego in order to draw the whole person into wider participation in creation. James Fowler calls this *telos* of faith a "decentration from self . . . a qualitative expansion in perspective taking, a 'knowing' the world through the eyes and experiences of persons, classes, nationalities, and faiths quite different from one's own."¹⁹ Now, if a curious intellect sets out to wrestle Christian doctrines to the ground, it is the wrestler's ego which will have initiated the match. The ego is incapable of initiating its own subversion, however; if it is healthy, its job is self-preservation. Therefore, even though efforts to prove, disprove, or mock religious teachings can provide tasty bones for the ego to gnaw on, such efforts cannot reveal anything about the inner aim of Christian faith. They only confirm the ego as a good (or bad) wrestler. Confirmation of the ego's centered nature and skill is the major task of young adulthood. It must be complete before a mature inquiry into Christian faith can make sense.

A mature, albeit uncommitted, inquiry can begin by considering the whole body of Christian speech, thought, and practice as a kind of language. The inquirer need not learn the language to see that faith is like a language. Like ordinary language, all its terms are signs and symbols. Each term has an etymology, a history, and meanings which are shifting across time and culture. No term simply is what it signifies—"grass" is not grass, "God" is not God, nor heaven, nor Christ; all signifiers point beyond themselves. As with ordinary language, religion has a grammar; some things can be expressed only according to the received pattern. Meanings inferred from common symbols and practices differ from one speaker to the next. Christians who are serious about the possibility of their ego's subversion take part in local communities of faith to work out shared meanings for the terms of their language. If the ultimate function of ordinary language is to facilitate a kind of "horizontal" connection among individuals, the ultimate function of the Christian language is to facilitate what might be thought of as "vertical" connections among levels of consciousness, from infant or ignorant or intrigued to the infinite word of God.

The central symbol of the Christian language is the crucifixion-resurrection of Jesus. All other story elements of the Christian language either affirm this paradoxical symbol, or they are adventi-

tious to it. So Paul: “When I came to you, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God in lofty words or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” (1 Cor 2.1) To the extent that the Christian churches may be regarded as one church, it may be thought of as the culture which organizes experiences of evil and good through the self-transcendent symbol of humiliation and exaltation seen in the crucifixion-resurrection of Jesus. Whereas experiences of much evil or of much good commonly result in personal and social disintegration through fear, depression and self-loathing on the one hand, or pride and recklessness on the other, the pattern of giving utterance to the symbol *crucifixion-resurrection* can shift the energy of attention from destructive self-focus, decentering the ego and potentiating a new consciousness, integrating the personality into fuller participation with the world. Although the patterned utterances of the central symbol are expressed through very many practices which together make up the Christian language, the affirmation present in all of them is total decentration of self (crucifixion) through the living human ideal (resurrection) known as Jesus.

Translated this way into a formula of unvarnished pragmatism, Christian faith sounds like a tame psychology of optimism and kindness, and an inadequate ground for a world-historical religious tradition. It must be said that for many, Christianity seems to function as a support system for conventional morality around which a homogeneous society of well-mannered peers can gather for light fellowship and emotional comforts at stressful times. But as we have seen, using religious forms to *avoid* religion’s aims only testifies to the adaptive skill of the ego to invent means to maintain its control and avoid its spiritual destiny, which, according to the “good news,” is its overthrow. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Matt. 16.24 and many parallels) When the ego tires of winning its countless small victories of self-assertion, it may be ready to receive what it cannot win—a new way of seeing, a new life, from God who grasps the ego with deadly intent. Here Christian faith speaks of the operation of divine grace, not because it understands, let alone controls, a mechanism for blessing, but rather because the tradition has understood that faithfulness is *not* a pragmatic tool for acquiring desirable ends, but only the right relationship of the finite to the infinite, of the limited to the illimitable, of death to life.

The non-religious inquirer might hypothesize that “deadly pursuit of the ego” can be translated from its symbolic form (crucifixion-resurrection) into a more-universal pragmatic principle, such as that everyone should be kind to others, even at their own expense. On this point, religious philosophy finally turns the table on science, psychology, and humanism, more generally. What evidence is there that the world we know, or wish we might know, can actually cohere and actually develop, if the primary means of exhorting souls to justice and love were billboards and matchboxes emblazoned with reminders? *Be kind—even if it hurts?*

Harris trusts that ethical concern for the other can always be arrived at just this way, by reason’s taking the logical steps from awareness of its own absolute self-regard to the inference that others also have such absolute self-regard. This is all a reasonable person needs to begin honoring all people absolutely. He writes, “How can we encourage other human beings to extend their moral sympathies beyond a narrow locus? How can we learn to be mere human beings, shorn of . . . national, ethnic, or religious identity? We can be reasonable. . . Reason is nothing less than the guardian of love.”²⁰ This Stoic philosophy is almost touching, except for its inexcusable blindness to history, where power was never constrained by so fine a thread as reason. Reinhold Niebuhr drew out the implications of the hidden absolutism in the belief that reason alone can guide moral life.

“The careful limitation and definition of rights which Stoicism gave to the world as a social ideal always develops into injustice in actual life because every person views rights not from an absolute but from a biased perspective. The result is a society in which the perspective of the strong dictates the conceptions of justice by which the total community operates, and necessitates social conflict through the assertion of the rights of the weak before the injustice is corrected. . . . Only imaginative justice, that is, love that begins by espousing the rights of the other *rather than the self*, can achieve a modicum of fairness. [In] . . . the ethical teachings of Jesus . . . we discover an unattainable ideal, but a very useful one.”²¹ [emphasis added]

Since reason is not accountable to any but itself, whatever an individual’s reason does not see does not belong to his moral universe. Harris asks how we can encourage other human beings to extend their moral sympathies, but he does not seem to notice that in a world constructed from reason, there is no “we” able to function intentionally. Before Harris’ formless “we” prosecutes his call to dismantle religion entirely, “they” ought to show how their reasonableness will be taught, shaped, corrected, and made accountable in living communities. Only moral communities can engage members in the ego-subverting task of extending their moral sympathies by, in Niebuhr’s words, “espousing the rights of the other *rather than the self*.” This act of self-subversion is unreasonable on its face. Reason can consent to the process, but it cannot initiate it. By means of symbols that potentiate the development of consciousness through the decentration of the ego, communities of faith function as moral communities in ways that reason cannot effect.

The symbols and signs of religious language facilitate real conversation and action toward spiritual progress. They are like crucibles and test tubes in laboratories committed to the scientific exploration, complete with falsifiable propositions, of what co-operates with grace in support of transformative development in consciousness. To presume that the symbols through which transformations are mediated would still work if translated into pragmatic psychological steps would be like telling a Spaniard that he “really” means “blue” when he says *azul*—i.e., that he does not know what he is talking about. In fact, no one has the standing, logically speaking, to assert that a religious adherent can develop toward faith’s high ends *without* the specifically religious language in which she is trained, or that such powerful speech is possible apart from the specific religious community that encourages her transformation.

The final chapter of Harris’ *End of Faith* is called “Experiments in Consciousness.” It opens with these words: “At the core of every religion lies an undeniable claim about the human condition: it is possible to have one’s experience of the world radically transformed.” Clearly, and no doubt like many atheists, Harris understands and celebrates the aim of religion. However, he is not offering terms of peace. The passage continues:

The problem with religion is that it blends this truth so thoroughly with the venom of unreason. Take Christianity: it is not enough that Jesus was a man who transformed himself to such a degree that the Sermon on the Mount could be his heart’s confession. He also had to be the Son of God, born of a virgin, and destined to return to earth trailing clouds of glory . . . According to the dogma of Christianity, becoming just like Jesus is impossible. One can only enumerate one’s sins, believe the unbelievable, and await the end of the world.²²

To be sure, a good deal of religious culture fits this quick sketch. But a thoughtful inquirer may have grown weary of trashing people who have had little or no experience of transformation, yet who find fellowship and meaning in their religious tradition. The curious will rather wonder about the experiences of those who are *most* engaged with the ego-subverting potential in the practices of their faith and who gladly continue to speak the Christian language—“Son of God, born of a virgin, destined to return . . .”—after literal meanings for the words have fallen to earth like booster rockets.

Two experiences of transcendent unity are at work as one practices the language in community. The first experience is a kind of humbling. One has not invented this manner of speaking. After much study, one still knows really very little of how it came to be that these things can be said with joy, for history is a simpleton compared with life. One watches the lit faces of people who say and sing the words as if each had sprung from their mother's mouth. One sees the slack jaw of some who cannot brook one more utterance of this or that word of doctrine, for its literal sense is stones and dust to the tongue, and no bread. They are between stages, but they have not heard that there is more to come. Perhaps no one has told them. One hears the children sing, and thinks of all they will learn and not learn, and remembers the generations in which his own tiny seed of self is laid. All this and more he will not set himself over against. He is not higher than they. If he embraces things this company avoids; if he is less fearful than another about his unknown destiny; if he loves more readily, what is that? Someone—anyone—in this community is more at home than he with this creation in ways he has not known. Something has happened in the fading of the voice of doctrines: he is overcome. He is dying to himself, again, and is inexpressibly grateful for the strange passageway and the offered words which seem always to go before, a light in the dark. Under his breath, he tries one of them. “And my life is hid with Christ in God”—its poetry, perfect. No one who has been touched with a death like this desires any more to separate from a body of life like this.

The second experience is a kind of exaltation—as if the first was not! It is the recognition that the symbol at the center of the Christian language, “Jesus Christ and him crucified,” stands both for me and infinitely beyond me. Harris frets that Christians think they cannot “become just like Jesus.” Never mind that the Bible clearly teaches the opposite, namely, that all must become like Jesus—with the stress on the verb “become.” But *just* like Jesus? After winning that race, what course would one then run with all her heart and soul and strength? Harris' fretfulness shows only that he has not experienced faith's uncanny exaltation of desire for transformation beyond oneself, which involves the crucifixion we have been talking about. He has failed to grasp and be grasped by the power of the symbol.

Philosopher Ken Wilber brings light on the subject for the curious inquirer:

Anything I can point to on my present level of consciousness is only a sign; anything higher can only be discussed and thought about using symbols, and these symbols can only be finally understood upon transformation to that higher level itself. . . . With all that in mind, we can say that each transformation upward marks the emergence in consciousness of a new and higher level . . . and we can say that development or evolution is a series of such transformations . . . mediated by symbols, or vertical forms in consciousness.²³

The cross of Christian faith is a symbol whose transformative function cannot be exhausted, because it stands for the overturning of all things partial by means of deaths unchosen revealing new life given of grace alone. Whatever translation one makes of the meaning of the cross of Christ is no more than a way of telling how one came to oneself, and came to be oneself. “Anything higher”—that is, whatever yet may come of a self made new—“can only be discussed and thought about using symbols.” Like many an atheist, Mr. Harris is a literalist who has not experienced through the power of symbols the uninterpretable humbling openness for what yet must come. Yet all who stand before the cross, regardless the thoughts that crowd or cloud their brows, stand in expectation of their own upward call, they know not when or how. “In Christ,” they say. How are they wrong?

Endnotes

1. December 15, 2006. National Public Radio story for *All Things Considered* by Brooke Gladstone
2. See www.samharris.org
3. E. O. Wilson, dean of the natural scientists for whom atheism is an article of faith, pours some oil on the waters with *The Creation* (2006), which calls upon the religious right to “consider forming an alliance to do something that science and religion, the most powerful social forces in the world, are uniquely prepared to do: save the creation.”
4. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 16
5. A 2005 Beliefnet/Newsweek poll determined that 79% of Americans believe that “a good person who isn’t of your religious faith [can] go to heaven or attain salvation.” Only 22% of Evangelical Protestants and 3% of Roman Catholics believed the opposite.
6. http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_savn.htm
7. *End of Faith*, pp. 14-23 and Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006), p. 5
8. *ibid.*, p. 22.
9. *Letter to a Christian Nation*, p. 25
10. *ibid.*, p. 45
11. *End of Faith*, p. 65
12. *ibid.*, p. 17-18
13. Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), p. 263
14. *ibid.*, p. 250
15. *ibid.*, pp. 270-272
16. *To the Best of Our Knowledge*: National Public Radio, with Anne Strangechamps; April 29, 2007.
17. <http://www.spiritualprogressives.org/article.php?story=20070118115930313>
18. Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance* (Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005), p. 57
19. James W. Fowler. *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), p. 55
20. *End of Faith*, p. 190
21. Reinhold Niebuhr. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), p. 32
22. *The End of Faith*, p. 205
23. *The Collected Works of Ken Wilber*, Volume 2. (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), p. 116