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BREAKING THE SPELL

Religion as a Natural Phenomenon

DANIEL C. DENNETT

author of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*



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DANIEL C. DENNETT

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Morality and Religion

1 Does religion make us moral?

Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. —Mark 10:21

The Lord trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth. Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest, this shall be the portion of their cup.

—Psalms 11:5-6

Believing as I do that man in the distant future will be a far more perfect creature than he now is, it is an intolerable thought that he and all other sentient beings are doomed to complete annihilation after such long-continued slow progress. To those who fully admit the immortality of the human soul, the destruction of our world will not appear so dreadful.

—Charles Darwin, *Life and Letters*

Non-Muslims love their life too much, they can't fight, and they are cowards. They don't understand that there will be life after death. You cannot

live forever, you will die. Life after death is forever. If life after death were an ocean, the life you live is only a drop in the ocean. So it's very important that you live your life for Allah, so you are rewarded after death.

—A young mujahed from Pakistan, quoted by Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*

Good people will do good things, and bad people will do bad things. But for good people to do bad things—that takes religion.

—Steven Weinberg, 1999

Religion plays its most important role in supporting morality, many think, by giving people an unbeatable reason to do good: the promise of an infinite reward in heaven, and (depending on tastes) the threat of an infinite punishment in hell if they don't. Without the divine carrot and stick, goes this reasoning, people would loll about aimlessly or indulge their basest desires, break their promises, cheat on their spouses, neglect their duties, and so on. There are two well-known problems with this reasoning: (1) it doesn't seem to be true, which is good news, since (2) it is such a demeaning view of human nature.

I have uncovered no evidence to support the claim that people, religious or not, who *don't* believe in reward in heaven and/or punishment in hell are more likely to kill, rape, rob, or break their promises than people who do.¹ The prison population in the United States shows Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and others—including those with no religious affiliation—represented about as they are in the general population. Brights and others with no religious affiliation exhibit the same range of moral excellence and turpitude as born-again Christians, but, more to the point, so do members of religions that de-emphasize or actively deny any relationship between moral behavior "on earth" and eventual postmortem reward and punishment. And when it comes to "family values," the available evidence to date supports the hypothesis that brights have the lowest divorce rate in the United States, and born-again Christians the

highest (Barna, 1999). Needless to say, these results strike so hard at the standard claims of greater moral virtue among the religious that there has been a considerable surge of further research initiated by religious organizations attempting to refute them. At this time, nothing very surprising has emerged, and nothing approaching a settled consensus among researchers has been achieved, but one thing we can be sure of is that *if* there is a significant positive relationship between moral behavior and religious affiliation, practice, or belief, it will soon be discovered, since so many religious organizations are eager to confirm their traditional beliefs about this scientifically. (They are quite impressed with the truth-finding power of science when it supports what they already believe.) Every month that passes without such a demonstration underlines the suspicion that it just isn't so.

It is clear enough why believers might want to come up with evidence that belief in heaven and hell has benign effects. Everybody already knows the evidence for the countervailing hypothesis that the belief in a reward in heaven can sometimes motivate acts of monstrous evil. Nevertheless, there are many in the religious community who would not welcome the demonstration that a belief in God's reward in heaven or punishment in hell makes a significant difference, since they view this as an infantile concept of God in the first place, pandering to immaturity instead of encouraging genuine moral commitment. As Mitchell Silver notes, the God who rewards goodness in heaven bears a striking resemblance to the hero of the popular song "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town."

Like Santa, God "knows if you are sleeping, he knows if you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good" ... The lyrics continue "so be good for goodness' sake." Catchy but a logical solecism. In logic the song should have continued "so be good for the sake of the electronic equipment, dolls, sports gear and other gifts you hope to get but will get only if the omniscient and just

Santa judges you worthy of receiving." If you were good for goodness' sake, the all-seeing Santa would be irrelevant as a motivator of your virtue. [In press]

Moral philosophers who have agreed about little else, from the days of Hume and Kant through Nietzsche to the present, have regarded this pie-in-the-sky vision of morality as something of a trap, a *reductio ad absurdum* into which only the most unwary moralist would fall. Many religious thinkers agree: a doctrine that trades in a person's good intentions for the prudent desires of a rational maximizer shopping around for eternal bliss may win a few cheap victories, luring a few selfish and unimaginative souls into behaving themselves for a while, but at the cost of debasing their larger campaign for goodness. We see an echo of this familiar recognition in the derision heaped by many commentators on the Al Qaeda hijackers of 9/11 for their purported goal of luxuriating in heaven with seventy-two virgins (each) as the reward for their martyrdom.²

We may shun this theme as a foundation of our morality *today* yet still honor it for having played a founding role in the past, as a ladder that, once climbed, may be discarded. How could this work? The economist Thomas Schelling has pointed out that "belief in a deity who will reward goodness and punish evil transforms many situations from subjective to secured, at least in the believer's mind" (quoted in Nesse, ed., 2001, p. 16). Consider a situation in which two parties confront each other with a prospect for cooperating on something both parties would want, but each is afraid the other will renege on any bargain struck, and there are no authorities or stronger parties around to enforce it. Promises can be made and then broken, but sometimes they can be *secured*. A commitment may be secured by being self-enforcing; for instance, you can burn your bridges behind you so you can't escape even if you change your mind. Or it may be secured by your greater desire to preserve your reputation. You may have good reason to fulfill your

side of a contract even if your reason for signing it in the first place has lapsed, simply because your reputation is also at stake, a valuable social commodity indeed. Or—and this is Schelling's point—a promise made "in the eyes of God" may well convince those who believe in that God that a sort of virtual escrow account has been created, protecting both parties and giving each the confidence to move ahead without fear of renegeing by the other party.

Consider the current situation in Iraq, where a security force is supposed to provide a temporary scaffolding on which to construct a working society in post-Saddam Iraq. It might actually have worked from the outset if the force had been large enough and well enough trained and deployed to reassure people without having to fire a shot. With insufficient forces, the credibility of the peacekeepers was diminished, however, and a positive feedback cycle of violence was put in motion, destroying confidence in security. How can you break out of such a downward spiral? It is hard to say. The flawed and fragile democracy that has been installed may still overcome its corrupt and violence-ridden beginnings, if the world is lucky, however forlorn it looks today. Failed states have a way of perpetuating themselves, and perpetuating both the misery of their inhabitants and the insecurity of their neighbors. In the distant past, the *very idea* of an overseeing God might often have permitted an otherwise chaotic and ungovernable population to bootstrap itself into a working state, with enough law and order so that credible *promising* could take hold. Only in such a climate of trust can investment and commerce and free passage, and all the other things we take for granted in a working society, flourish. Such a meme would be vulnerable to collapse if its credibility was threatened, just as surely as the occupying forces in Iraq depend on their (problematic) credibility for their own effectiveness. The rationale for incorporating whatever doubt-suppression devices could be found would have been obvious (to the blind forces of cultural selection, and probably to the authorities themselves).

Today, when patterns of mutual trust are quite securely estab-

lished in modern democratic states independently of any shared religious belief, the bristling defenses of religions against corrosive doubt begin to look vestigial, like fossil traces of an earlier epoch. We no longer need God the Policeman to create a climate in which we can make promises and conduct human affairs on their basis, but He lives on in legal oaths—and in the imaginations of many who are terrified of the prospect of abandoning religion.

But reward in heaven is not the only—and certainly not the best—inspirational theme in religious doctrine. The God who is watching you need not be seen to be either list-making Santa or Orwell's Big Brother, but instead a hero or "role model," as we say today, someone to emulate rather than fear. If God is just, and merciful, and forgiving, and loving, and the most wonderful Being imaginable, then anyone who loves God should want to be just, and merciful, and forgiving, and loving, *for goodness' sake*. Blurring these two very different views of God's motivating role into one is yet another casualty of the gauze curtains of soft-focus veneration through which we traditionally inspect religion.

Still, there may be the best of (free-floating) reasons for not peering too closely at these fine differences between doctrines. Why create dissension where none need exist? Don't rock the boat. It is widely agreed that all religions provide social infrastructures for creating and maintaining moral teamwork. Perhaps their value as organizers and amplifiers of good intentions far outweighs any deficits created by the putative incoherence created by contradictions between (some of) their doctrines. Perhaps it would be foolish perfectionism, and an act of moral ineptitude, to distract ourselves with minor conflicts of dogma when there is so much work to be done making the world a better place.

This is a persuasive claim, but it has the disadvantage of undercutting itself somewhat in public, since it amounts to making the acknowledgment that "good as we are, we aren't perfect, but we have more important things to do than fix our foundations"—a modest admission that jars with the traditional claims of purity that

religions find irresistible. Moreover, any such lapses from absolutism threaten to undermine the chief psychological source of the very organizational power that is being recognized. Today's religious warriors may be too sophisticated to expect their God to stop the bullets in midair at their behest, but their belief in the *absolute* Tightness of their cause may well be a crucial ingredient in creating the calm with which truly effective soldiers go into battle. As William James puts it:

Whoever not only says, but *feels*, "God's will be done," is mailed [armored] against every weakness; and the whole historic array of martyrs, missionaries, and religious reformers is there to prove the tranquil-mindedness, under naturally agitating or distressing circumstances, which self-surrender brings. [1902, p. 285]

This heroic state of mind does not harmonize well with secular modesty, and though many think it is true that religious fanatics make the most reliable soldiers, we may well wonder whether, all things considered, James is right when he goes on to note (quoting "a clear-headed Austrian officer"), "Far better is it for an army to be too savage, too cruel, too barbarous, than to possess too much sentimentality and human reasonableness" (p. 366). Here is a morally relevant question well worth careful empirical investigation: can a secular armed force, motivated in the main by a love of liberty or democracy, not of God (or Allah), maintain its credibility, and hence its effectiveness, with a minimum of bloodshed, against an army of fanatics? Until we know the answer, we risk being blackmailed by sheer fear into indoctrinating the troops with barbarism. It will take a combination of courage and wise planning—and maybe a large helping of luck—even to do the research needed to find out. But the alternative is even more grim: perpetuating the fatal downward spiral of "righteous" wars, fought by misguided young people sent into dubious battle by leaders who don't really believe the myths that sustain those who are risking their lives. As the Grand Inquisitor says in Dostoevski's *The Brothers Karamazov*, "Beyond the grave

they will find nothing but death. But we shall keep the secret, and for their happiness we shall allure them with the reward of heaven and eternity."

There is a further allure for the zealot, and it is probably—who knows?—a more robust motivator than the prospect of heavenly reward: the *license to kill* (to adapt Ian Fleming's all-too-appealing fantasy about the official status of James Bond). Some people, it seems—who knows?—are just bloodthirsty, or thrill-seeking, and as our customs become ever more civilized and opposed to violence, such people are highly motivated to find a cause that can provide them with a "moral" justification for their swashbuckling, whether it is "liberating" laboratory animals (whose subsequent welfare seems not to motivate the activists sufficiently), avenging Ruby Ridge with the Oklahoma City bombing, murdering doctors who perform abortions, sending anthrax to "evil" federal employees, murdering an innocent person under cover of fatwa, achieving martyrdom in jihad, or becoming a "settler" (armed to the teeth) in the West Bank territory. Religion may well not be the root cause of this dangerous yearning; the Hollywood-inspired desire to lead an adventurous and hence "meaningful" life may play a larger role in multiplying the number of young people who decide to frame their lives in such terms. But religions are certainly the most prolific source of the "moral certainties" and "absolutes" that such zealotry depends on. And although people who can see the shades of gray are less apt to be able to find excuses for committing criminal acts themselves, they are also, today, all too likely to see devout religious conviction as a significantly mitigating factor when meting out punishment. (We can hope that this will change swiftly if given sufficient public attention. We used to regard drunks as somewhat diminished in their responsibility for their actions—they were too drunk to know what they were doing, after all—but we now see them, and the bartenders who served them, as fully responsible. We need to spread the word that religious intoxication is no excuse either.)

2 Is religion what gives meaning to your life?

A puppet of the gods is a tragic figure, a puppet suspended on his chromosomes is merely grotesque. —Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*

Ohhh, McTavish is dead and his brother don't know it;

His brother is dead and McTavish don't know it.

They're both of them dead and they're in the same bed,

And neither one knows that the other is dead!

—Lyrics to the "Irish Washerwoman" jig

According to surveys, *most of the people in the world* say that religion is very important in their lives. (See, e.g., the Web site of the Pew Research Center, <http://people-press.org/>.) Many of these people would say that without their religion their lives would be meaningless. It's tempting just to take them at their word, to declare that in that case there is really nothing more to be said—and tiptoe away. Who would want to interfere with whatever it is that gives their lives meaning? But if we do that, we willfully ignore some serious questions. Can just *any* religion give lives their meaning, in a way that we should honor and respect? What about people who fall into the clutches of cult leaders, or who are duped into giving their life savings to religious con artists? Do their lives still have meaning even though their particular "religion" is a fraud?

In *Marjoe*, the 1972 documentary about the bogus evangelist Marjoe Gortner mentioned in chapter 6, we see poor people emptying their wallets and purses into the collection plate, their eyes glistening with tears of joy, thrilled to be getting "salvation" from this charismatic phony. The question that has been troubling me ever since I saw the film when it first came out is: who is committing the more reprehensible act—Marjoe Gortner, who lies to these people in order to get their money, or the filmmakers who expose these lies (with Gortner's enthusiastic complicity), thereby robbing these

good folk of the meaning they *thought* they had found for their lives? Were they not getting their money's worth and then some before the filmmakers came along? Consider their lives (I am imagining these details, which are not in the documentary): Sam is a high-school dropout, pumping gas at the station at the crossroads and hoping someday to buy a motorcycle; he is a Dallas Cowboys fan, and likes to have a few beers while watching the games on TV. Lucille, who never married, is in charge of the night-shift shelf-stockers at the local supermarket and lives in the modest house she has always lived in, caring for her aged mother; they follow the soap operas together. No adventurous opportunities beckon in the futures of Sam or Lucille, or most of the others in the blissful congregation, *but they have now been put in direct contact with Jesus* and are now saved for eternity, beloved members in good standing of the community of the born-again. They have turned over a new leaf, in a most dramatic ceremony, and they face their otherwise uninspiring lives refreshed and uplifted. Their lives now tell a story, and it's a chapter of the Greatest Story Ever Told. Can you imagine anything *else* they could buy with those twenty-dollar bills they deposit in the collection plate that would be remotely as valuable to them?

Certainly, comes the reply. They could donate their money to a religion that was honest, and that actually used their sacrifices to help others who were still needier. Or they could join any secular organization that put their free time, energy, and money to effective use in ameliorating some of the world's ills. Perhaps the main reason that religions do most of the heavy lifting in large parts of America is that people really do want to help others—and secular organizations have failed to compete with religions for the allegiance of ordinary people. That's important, but it's the easy part of the answer, leaving untouched the hard part: what should we do about those we honestly think are being conned? Should we leave them to their comforting illusions or blow the whistle? I have eventually come to the tentative conclusion that Marjoe Gortner and his

filmmaking collaborators performed a great public service in spite of the pain and humiliation the film no doubt caused to many basically innocent people, but further details, or just further reflection on the details that are known, might lead me to change my mind.

Dilemmas like this are all too familiar in somewhat different contexts, of course. Should the sweet old lady in the nursing home be told that her son has just been sent to prison? Should the awkward twelve-year-old boy who wasn't cut from the baseball team be told about the arm-twisting by all the parents that persuaded the coach to keep him on the squad? In spite of ferocious differences of opinion about other moral issues, there seems to be something approaching consensus that it is cruel and malicious to interfere with the life-enhancing illusions of others—unless those illusions are themselves the cause of even greater ills. The disagreements come over what these greater ills might be—and this has led to the breakdown of the whole rationale. Keeping secrets from people for their own good can often be wise, but it takes only one person to give away a secret, and since there are disagreements about which cases warrant discretion, the result is an unsavory miasma of hypocrisy, lies, and frantic but fruitless attempts at distraction.

What if Marjoe Gortner were to con a cadre of *sincere* evangelical preachers into doing his dirty work for him? Would their personal innocence change the equation and give genuine meaning to the lives of those whose sacrifices they encouraged and collected? For that matter, aren't *all* evangelical preachers just as false as Marjoe Gortner? Certainly Muslims think so, even though they are generally too discreet to say it. And Catholics think that Jews are just as deluded, and Protestants think that Catholics are wasting their time and energy on a largely false religion, and so forth. *All* Muslims? *All* Catholics? *All* Protestants? *All* Jews? Of course not. There are vocal minorities in every faith who blurt it out, like the Catholic movie star Mel Gibson, who was interviewed by Peter Boyer (2003) in a profile in *The New Yorker*. Boyer asked him if Protestants are denied eternal salvation.

"There is no salvation for those outside the Church," Gibson replied. "I believe it." He explained: "Put it this way. My wife is a saint. She's a much better person than I am. Honestly. She's, like, Episcopalian, Church of England. She prays, she believes in God, she knows Jesus, she believes in that stuff. And it's just not fair if she doesn't make it, she's better than I am. But that is a pronouncement from the chair. I go with it."

Such remarks deeply embarrass two groups of Catholics: those who believe it but think it is best left unsaid, and those who don't believe it at all—no matter what "the chair" may pronounce. And which group of Catholics is larger, or more influential? That is utterly unknown and currently unknowable, a part of the unsavory miasma.

It is equally unknown how many Muslims truly believe that all infidels and especially kafirs (apostates from Islam) deserve death, which is what the Koran (4:89) undeniably says. Johannes Jansen (1997, p. 23) points out that in earlier times Judaism (see Deuteronomy 18:20) and Christianity (see Acts 3:23) also regarded apostasy as a capital offense, but of the Abrahamic faiths, Islam stands alone in its inability to renounce this barbaric doctrine convincingly. The Koran does not explicitly commend killing apostates, but the hadith literature (the narrations of the life of the Prophet) certainly does. Most Muslims, I would *guess*, are sincere in their insistence that the hadith injunction that apostates are to be killed is to be disregarded, but it's disconcerting, to say the least, that fear of being regarded as an apostate is apparently a major motivation in the Islamic world. As Jansen puts it, "There can be no Hare Krishna or Baghwan, no Scientology, Mormonism or Transcendental Meditation in Mecca or Cairo. Within the world of Islam religious renewal has to steer clear of anything that implies or suggests apostasy" (pp. 88-89). So it is not just we outsiders who are left guessing. Even Muslims "on the inside" really don't know what Muslims think about apostasy—they mostly aren't prepared to bet their lives on it, which is the surest sign of belief, as we saw in chapter 8.

Here, then, we see a different face of the epistemological problem we encountered in chapter 8, on belief in belief. There we discovered that it is all but impossible to distinguish those who genuinely believe and those who (merely) believe in belief, since the beliefs in question are conveniently removed from the world of action. Now we see that one reason, free-floating or not, for such systematically masked creeds is to avoid—or at least postpone—the collision between contradictory creeds that would otherwise oblige the devout to behave far more intolerantly than most people *today* want to behave. (It is always worth reminding ourselves that not so very long ago people were banished, tortured, and even executed for heresy and apostasy in the most "civilized" corners of Christian Europe.)

So what *is* the prevailing attitude today among those who call themselves religious but vigorously advocate tolerance? There are three main options, ranging from the disingenuous Machiavellian—

1. As a matter of political strategy, the time is not ripe for candid declarations of religious superiority, so we should temporize and let sleeping dogs lie in hopes that those of other faiths can gently be brought around over the centuries.

—through truly tolerant Eisenhowerian "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply held religious belief—and I don't care what it is"—

2. It really doesn't matter which religion you swear allegiance to, as long as you have *some* religion.

—to the even milder Moynihanian benign neglect—

3. Religion is just too dear to too many to think of discarding, even though it really doesn't do any good and is simply an empty historical legacy we can afford to maintain until it quietly extinguishes itself sometime in the distant and unforeseeable future.

It is no use asking people which they choose, since both extremes are so undiplomatic we can predict in advance that most people will

go for some version of ecumenical tolerance whether they believe it or not. (It's just like Sir Maurice Oldfield's predictable denunciation of my subversive hypothesis about Kim Philby.)

We've got ourselves caught in a hypocrisy trap, and there is no clear path out. Are we like the families in which the adults go through all the motions of believing in Santa Claus for the sake of the kids, and the kids all pretend still to believe in Santa Claus so as not to spoil the adults' fun? If only our current predicament were as innocuous and even comical as that! In the adult world of religion, people are dying and killing, with the moderates cowed into silence by the intransigence of the radicals in their own faiths, and many afraid to acknowledge what they actually believe for fear of breaking Granny's heart, or offending their neighbors to the point of getting run out of town, or worse.

If *this* is the precious meaning our lives are vouchsafed thanks to our allegiance to one religion or another, it is not such a bargain, in my opinion. Is this the best we can do? Is it not tragic that so many people around the world find themselves enlisted against their will in a conspiracy of silence, either because they secretly believe that most of the world's population is wasting their lives in delusion (but they are too tenderhearted—or devious—to say so), or because they secretly believe that their own tradition is just such a delusion (but they fear for their own safety if they admit it)?

What alternatives are there? There are the moderates who revere the tradition they were raised in, simply because it is *their* tradition, and who are prepared to campaign, tentatively, for the details of their tradition simply because, in the marketplace of ideas, somebody should stick up for each tradition until we can sort out the good from the better and settle for the best we can find, *all things considered*. This is like allegiance to a sports team, and it, too, can give meaning to a life—if not taken too seriously. I am a Red Sox fan simply because I grew up in the Boston area and have happy memories of Ted Williams and Jimmy Piersall and Jackie Jensen and Carl Yastrzemski and Wade Boggs and Luis Tiant and Pudge

Fisk, among others. My allegiance to the Red Sox is enthusiastic, but cheerfully arbitrary and undeluded. The Red Sox aren't my team because they are, in fact, the Best; they are "the Best" (in my eyes) because they are my team. I bask in the glory of their victory in 2004 (which was, of course, the Most Amazing and Inspiring Come-from-Behind Saga Ever), and if the team were ever to disgrace itself, I would be not just deeply chagrined but *personally* ashamed—as if I had something to do with it. And of course I *do* have something to do with it; my tiny personal contribution to the ocean of local enthusiasm and pride actually does buoy the players' spirits (as they always insist).

This is a kind of love, but not the rabid love that leads people to lie, and torture, and kill. Those who feel guilty contemplating "betraying" the tradition they love by acknowledging their disapproval of elements within it should reflect on the fact that the very tradition to which they are so loyal—the "eternal" tradition introduced to them in their youth—is in fact the evolved product of many adjustments firmly but delicately made by earlier lovers of the same tradition.

3 What can we say about sacred values?

We are here on Earth to do good to others. What the others are here for, I don't know. —W. H. Auden

For many years now, you and I have been shushed like children and told there are no simple answers to the complex problems that are beyond our comprehension. Well, the truth is there are simple answers. They are just not easy ones.

—Ronald Reagan, inaugural address as governor of California, January 1977

If our tribalism is ever to give way to an extended moral identity, our religious beliefs can no longer be sheltered from the tides of genuine inquiry

and genuine criticism. It is time we realized that to presume knowledge where one has only pious hope is a species of evil. Wherever conviction grows in inverse proportion to its justification, we have lost the very basis of human cooperation. —Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*

In order to adopt such a moderate position, however, you have to loosen your grip on the absolutes that are apparently one of the main attractions of many religious creeds. It isn't easy being moral, and it seems to be getting harder and harder these days. It used to be that most of the world's ills—disease, famine, war—were quite beyond the capacities of everyday people to ameliorate. There was nothing they could do about it, and since "'ought' implies 'can,'" people could ignore the catastrophes on the other side of the globe—if they even knew about them—with a clear conscience, since they were powerless to avert them in any way. Living by a few simple, locally applicable maxims could more or less guarantee that one lived about as good a life as was possible at the time. No longer.

Thanks to technology, what almost anybody *can* do has been multiplied a thousandfold, and our moral understanding about what we *ought* to do hasn't kept pace (Dennett, 1986, 1988). You *can* have a test-tube baby or take a morning-after pill to keep from having a baby; you *can* satisfy your sexual urges in the privacy of your room by downloading Internet pornography, and you *can* copy your favorite music for free instead of buying it; you *can* keep your money in secret offshore bank accounts and purchase stock in cigarette companies that are exploiting impoverished Third World countries; and you *can* lay minefields, smuggle nuclear weapons in suitcases, make nerve gas, and drop "smart bombs" with pinpoint accuracy. Also, you *can* arrange to have a hundred dollars a month automatically sent from your bank account to provide education for ten girls in an Islamic country who otherwise would not learn to read and write, or to benefit a hundred malnourished people, or provide medical care for AIDS sufferers in Africa. You *can* use the

Internet to organize citizen monitoring of environmental hazards, or to check the honesty and performance of government officials—or to spy on your neighbors. Now, what ought we to do?

In the face of these truly imponderable questions, it is entirely reasonable to look for a short set of simple answers. H. L. Mencken cynically said, "For every complex problem, there is a simple answer ... and it is wrong." But maybe he was wrong! Maybe one Golden Rule or Ten Commandments or some other short list of absolutely nonnegotiable Dos and Don'ts resolves all the predicaments just fine, once you figure out how to apply them. Nobody would deny, however, that it is far from obvious how any of the favored rules or principles can be interpreted to fit all our quandaries. As Scott Atran points out, the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" is cited by religious opponents of the death penalty, and by religious proponents as well (2002, p. 253). The principle of the Sanctity of Human Life sounds bracingly clear and absolute: every human life is equally sacred, equally inviolable; as with the king in chess, no price can be placed on it—aside from "infinity," since to lose it is to lose everything. But in fact we all know that life isn't, and can't be, like chess. There are multitudes of interfering "games" going on at once. What are we to do when more than one human life is at stake? If each life is *infinitely* valuable and none more valuable than another, how are we to dole out the few transplantable kidneys that are available, for instance? Modern technology only exacerbates the issues, which are ancient. Solomon faced tough choices with notable wisdom, and every mother who has ever had less than enough food for her own children (let alone her neighbor's children) has had to confront the impracticality of applying the principle of the Sanctity of Human Life.

Surely just about everybody has faced a moral dilemma and secretly wished, "If only somebody—somebody I trusted—could just *tell* me what to do!" Wouldn't this be morally inauthentic? Aren't we responsible for making our *own* moral decisions? Yes, but the virtues of "do it yourself" moral reasoning have their limits, and if

you decide, after conscientious consideration, that your moral decision is to delegate further moral decisions in your life to a trusted expert, then you *have* made your own moral decision. You have decided to take advantage of the division of labor that civilization makes possible and get the help of expert specialists.

We applaud the wisdom of this course in all other important areas of decision-making (don't try to be your own doctor; the lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client, and so forth). Even in the case of political decisions, like which way to vote, the policy of delegation can be defended. When my wife and I go to Town Meeting, I know that she has studied the issues that confront our town so much more assiduously than I have that I routinely follow her lead, voting the way she tells me to vote, even if I'm not sure just why, because I have plenty of evidence for my conviction that if we did take the time and energy to thrash it all out she'd persuade me that, all things considered, her opinion was correct. Is this a dereliction of my duties as a citizen? I don't think so, but it does depend on my having good grounds for trusting her judgment. Love is not enough. That's why those who have an *unquestioning* faith in the correctness of the moral teachings of their religion are a problem: if they themselves haven't conscientiously considered, on their own, whether their pastors or priests or rabbis or imams are worthy of this delegated authority over their own lives, then they are in fact taking a personally *immoral* stand.

This is perhaps the most shocking implication of my inquiry, and I do not shrink from it, even though it may offend many who think of themselves as deeply moral. It is commonly supposed that it is entirely exemplary to adopt the moral teachings of one's own religion *without question*, because—to put it simply—it is the word of God (as interpreted, always, by the specialists to whom one has delegated authority). I am urging, on the contrary, that anybody who professes that a particular point of moral conviction is not discussable, not debatable, not negotiable, simply because it is the word of God, or because the Bible says so, or because "that is what

all Muslims [Hindus, Sikhs ...] believe, and I am a Muslim [Hindu, Sikh ...]," should be seen to be making it impossible for the rest of us to take their views seriously, excusing themselves from the moral conversation, inadvertently acknowledging that their own views are *not* conscientiously maintained and deserve no further hearing.

The argument for this is straightforward. Suppose I have a friend, Fred, who is (in my carefully considered opinion) *always right*. If I tell you I'm against stem-cell research because "my friend Fred says it's wrong and that's all there is to it," you will just look at me as if I was missing the point of the discussion. This is supposed to be a consideration of reasons, and I have not given you a reason that I in good faith could expect you to appreciate. Suppose you believe that stem-cell research is wrong because that is what God has told you. *Even if you are right*—that is, even if God does indeed exist and has, personally, told you that stem-cell research is wrong—you cannot reasonably expect others who do not share your faith or experience to accept this as a reason. You are being unreasonable in taking your stand. The fact that your faith is so strong that you cannot do otherwise just shows (if you *really* can't) that you are *disabled* for moral persuasion, a sort of robotic slave to a meme that you are unable to evaluate. And if you reply that you *can* but you *won't* consider reasons for and against your conviction (because it is God's word, and it would be sacrilegious even to consider whether it might be in error), you avow your willful refusal to abide by the minimal conditions of rational discussion. Either way, your declarations of your deeply held views are posturings that are out of place, part of the problem, not part of the solution, and we others will just have to work around you as best we can.

Notice that this stand involves no disrespect and no prejudging of the possibility that God has told you. If God has told you, then part of *your* problem is convincing others, to whom God has not (yet) spoken, that this is what we ought to believe. If you refuse or are unable to attempt this, you are actually letting your God down,

in the guise of demonstrating your helpless love. You can withdraw from the discussion if you must—that is your right—but then don't expect us to give your view any particular weight that we cannot discover by other means—and don't blame us if we don't "get it."

Many deeply religious people have all along been eager to defend their convictions in the court of reasonable inquiry and persuasion. They will have no difficulty at all with these observations—aside from confronting the diplomatic decision of whether they will join me in trying to convince their less reasonable coreligionists that they are making matters worse for their religion by their intransigence. And here is one of the most intractable moral problems confronting the world today. Every religion—aside from a negligible scattering of truly toxic cults—has a healthy population of ecumenical-minded people who are eager to reach out to people of other faiths, or no faith at all, and consider the moral quandaries of the world on a rational basis. In July 2004, the fourth Parliament of World Religions was held in Barcelona,³ and it brought thousands of people of different religions together for a week of workshops, symposia, plenary sessions, performances, and worship services, all enjoined to observe the same principles:

*listen and he listened to so that all speakers can he heard
speak and he spoken to in a respectful manner
develop or deepen mutual understanding
learn about the perspective of others and reflect on one's own views,
and
discover new insights. [Pathways to Peace, the Parliament program]*

Colorful flocks of differently robed priests and gurus, nuns and monks, choirs and dancers, all holding hands and listening respectfully to one another—it was all very heartwarming, but these well-intentioned and energetic people are singularly ineffective in dealing with the more radical members of their own faiths. In many instances they are, rightly, terrified of them. Moderate Muslims have so far been utterly unable to turn the tide of Islamic opinion

against Wahhabists and other extremists, but moderate Christians and Jews and Hindus have been equally feckless in countering the outrageous demands and acts of their own radical elements.

It is time for the reasonable adherents of all faiths to find the courage and stamina to reverse the tradition that honors helpless love of God—in any tradition. Far from being honorable, it is not even excusable. It is shameful. And most shameful are the priests, rabbis, imams, and other experts whose response to the sincere requests from their flock for moral guidance is to conceal their own inability to give reasons for their views about the tough issues by hiding behind some "inerrant" (read "above criticism") interpretation of the sacred texts. It is one thing for a well-meaning layperson with a deep allegiance to a religious tradition to delegate authority to his or her religious leaders, but it is quite another for those leaders to *pretend* to discover (thanks to their expertise) the right answers in their tradition by a process that has to be taken on faith and is inaccessible to even the most well-meant criticism.

As so often before, we should grant that it is entirely possible that this evasive question-ducking rationale is entirely free-floating. In other words, it is surely possible for people to *believe in all innocence* that their love of God absolves them from the responsibility to figure out reasons for these hard-to-fathom commands from their beloved God. We need make no accusations of insincerity or guile, but respecting someone's innocence does not oblige us to respect his belief. Here is what we should say to such a person: There is only one way to respect the *substance* of any purported God-given moral edict: consider it conscientiously in the full light of reason, using all the evidence at our command. No God that was pleased by displays of unreasoning love would be worthy of worship.

Here is a riddle: how is your religion like a swimming pool? And here is the answer: it is what is known in the law as an *attractive nuisance*. The doctrine of attractive nuisance is the principle that

people who maintain on their property a dangerous condition that is likely to attract children are under a duty to post a warning or to take stronger affirmative action to protect children from the dangers of that attraction. It is an exception to the general rule that no particular care is required of property owners to safeguard trespassers from harm. Unenclosed swimming pools are the best-known example, but old refrigerators with their doors not removed, machinery or stacks of building materials, or other eminently climbable objects that could be an irresistible lure to young children have also been deemed attractive nuisances. Property owners are held responsible for harms that result when they maintain something that can lure innocent people into harm.

Those who maintain religions, and take steps to make them more attractive, must be held similarly responsible for the harms produced by some of those whom they attract and provide with a cloak of respectability. Defenders of religion are quick to point out that terrorists typically have political, not religious agendas, which may well be true in many or most cases, or even in all cases, but that is not the end of it. The political agendas of violent fanatics often lead them to adopt a religious guise, and to exploit the organizational infrastructure and tradition of unquestioning loyalty of whichever religion is handy. And it is true that these fanatics are rarely if ever inspired by, or guided by, the deepest and best tenets in those religious traditions. So what? Al Qaeda and Hamas terrorism is still Islam's responsibility, and abortion-clinic bombing is still Christianity's responsibility, and the murderous activities of Hindu extremists are still Hinduism's responsibility.

As Sam Harris argues in his brave book *The End of Faith* (2004), there is a cruel Catch-22 in the worthy efforts of the moderates and ecumenicists in all religions: by their good works they provide protective coloration for their fanatical coreligionists, who quietly condemn their open-mindedness and willingness to change while reaping the benefits of the good public relations they thereby obtain.

In short, the moderates in all religions *are being used* by the fanatics, and should not only resent this; they should take whatever steps they can find to curtail it in their own tradition. Probably nobody else can do it, a sobering thought:

If a stable peace is ever to be achieved between Islam and the West, Islam must undergo a radical transformation. This transformation, to be palatable to Muslims, must also appear to come from Muslims themselves. It does not seem much of an exaggeration to say that the fate of civilization lies largely in the hands of "moderate" Muslims. [Harris, 2004, p. 154]

We must hold these moderate Muslims responsible for reshaping their own religion—but that means we must equally hold moderate Christians and Jews and others responsible for all the excesses in their own traditions. And, as George Lakoff has noted, we need to prove to those Islamic leaders that we hear their moral voices, and not just our own:

We depend on the goodwill and courage of moderate Islamic leaders. To gain it, we must show our goodwill by beginning in a serious way to address the social and political conditions that lead to despair. [2004, p. 61]

How can we *all* keep the cloak of religious respectability from being used to shelter the lunatic excesses? Part of the solution would be to make religion *in general* less of a "sacred cow" and more of a "worthy alternative." This is the course somewhat haplessly followed by some of us brights—atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, secular humanists, and others who have liberated themselves from specifically religious allegiances. We brights are quite aware of all the good that religions accomplish, but we prefer to channel our charity and good deeds through secular organizations, precisely because we don't want to be complicit in giving a good name to

religion! This keeps our hands clean, but that is not enough—any more than it is enough for moderate Christians to avoid giving funds to anti-Semitic organizations within Christianity, or for moderate Jews to restrict their charity to organizations that are working to secure peaceful coexistence for Palestinians and Israelis. That is a start, but there is more work to be done, and it is the unpleasant and even dangerous work of desanctifying the excesses in each tradition *from the inside*. Any religious person who is not actively and publicly involved in that effort is shirking a duty—and the fact that you don't belong to a congregation or denomination that is offending doesn't excuse you: it is Christianity and Islam and Judaism and Hinduism (for example) that are attractive nuisances, not just their offshoot sects.

Any vicious cult that uses Christian imagery or texts as its protective coloration should lie heavily on the conscience of all who call themselves Christians, for instance. Until the priests and rabbis and imams and their flocks explicitly condemn *by name* the dangerous individuals and congregations within their ranks, they are *all* complicit. I know many Christians who are privately sickened by many of the words and deeds done "in the name of Jesus," but expressions of dismay to close friends are not enough. In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, I wrote about the brave Muslims who dared to speak out publicly against the obscene travesty of the fatwa pronounced on Salman Rushdie, author of *The Satanic Verses*, condemned to death for his heresies, and urged, "Let us all distribute the danger by joining hands with them" (p. 517n). But here is the truly distressing Catch-22: if we non-Muslims join hands with them, we thereby mark them as "puppets of the enemies of Islam" in the eyes of many Muslims. Only those within the religious community can effectively start to dismantle this deeply immoral attitude, and multiculturalists who urge us to go easy on them are exacerbating the problem.