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Militant Modern Atheism

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ABSTRACT *Militant modern atheism, whose most eloquent champion is Richard Dawkins, provides an effective and necessary critique of fundamentalist forms of religion and their role in political life, both within states and across national boundaries. Because it is also presented as a more general attack on religion (*tout court*), it has provoked a severe reaction from scholars who regard its conception of religion as shallow and narrow. My aim is to examine this debate, identifying insights and oversights on both sides.*

Two distinct conceptions of religion are in play. For Dawkins and his allies (most notably Dan Dennett) religions are grounded in doctrines, *propositions about supernatural entities, events and processes which the devout believe. Their beliefs prompt them to actions, which they support or rationalize by reference to the doctrines. Dawkins and Dennett view the acceptance of the doctrines as resting on cognitive misfiring — these are delusions to be outgrown or spells to be broken.*

By contrast, the religious scholars who criticize the militant atheists often view religion as centered in social practices that inform and enrich human lives. To the extent that there are doctrines that atheists might subject to epistemic evaluation, these are to be viewed as pieces of scaffolding, that are, in principle, dispensable.

I argue that militant modern atheism is incomplete (and likely counter-productive) so long as it fails to attend systematically to the roles religion fulfills in human lives. Yet it is important to achieve public clarity about the literal falsehood of the doctrines on which fundamentalists rely. The challenge is to develop a well-articulated and convincing version of secular humanism. *Meeting that challenge is, I claim, one of the central problems of philosophy today.*

1.

In times when violence carried out in the name of religion abounds, when many groups of people seek to interfere with the private lives of others because those targeted are allegedly violating divine commands, and when important discoveries about the world in which we live are questioned, or even denied, because they are supposed to be incompatible with authentic messages from the deity, it is easy to think that things have gone too far. Polite respect for odd superstitions about mysterious beings and their incomprehensible workings might be appropriate so long as the misguided folk who subscribe to them do not seek to convert, coerce or eliminate outsiders, but, when the benighted believers invade the public sphere, it is important that they not be earnest. Further, respect should not extend to the deformations the faithful exert upon the minds of the

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young: just as children deserve to be protected against parents who refuse to allow them to receive medical attention, so too they are entitled to defence against forms of religious education that will infect and corrupt their abilities to think clearly and coherently. We no longer inhabit the arcadias of Waugh and Wodehouse, in which fanatic believers and their aggressive challengers who ask where Cain found a wife are equally figures of fun. Because of religious belief, our world is an oppressive and dangerous place, and it is time for those who value reason, justice, tolerance, and compassion to do something about it.

Militant modern atheism, whose manifesto I have just summarized, is an eminently comprehensible reaction to features of public life, perhaps most evident in the United States and in parts of the Muslim world. Nobody ought to deny that the writings of some of those who articulate the principal themes in this manifesto, particularly Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, contain cogent arguments and genuine insights.[1] Although many of the arguments and conclusions are anticipated in the works of earlier writers — in d'Holbach, Hume, and Russell, for example — it is important to have them restated, eloquently restated, in the context of contemporary human conditions and in the light of current knowledge.[2]

Yet the militant response to the dangers and oppressions that are so easily traceable to religious zeal has elicited a further reaction. The books of the 'four horsemen', of whom Dawkins and Dennett are two, who see themselves as riding to the defence of a world besieged by threatening nonsense, have received severe, sometimes savage, critiques from reviewers who regard them as adopting a pinched and distorted conception of religion and of its role in human life.[3] The critics do not want to align themselves with those religious movements that provoke militant modern atheism. They too regret that crude and intolerant forms of religion exist. Their charge is that the self-styled horsemen are meeting primitive fanaticism with equally primitive fanaticism, so that distortions of a valuable human institution — religion — are mistaken for the healthy original. Militant modern atheism, so viewed, is itself akin to the fundamentalism it opposes: intellectually simplistic, aggressively intolerant, and dangerously polarizing. By reducing the options and posing a stark choice, it is likely to lead people with reasonable religious views to perceive their own practices as threatened, and thus to make common cause with the zealots.

Militant modern atheists have replies to these charges. They can point out, reasonably, that the most prominent, and probably the most prevalent, forms of contemporary religion are not the subtle ideas cherished by their critics, but the cruder doctrines they directly attack. They can challenge those who believe in 'reasonable religion' to specify more clearly just what commitments such types of religion entail — to declare in public what has been abandoned, and to stick to the declaration. They can demand that those who profess a more enlightened religion no longer provide cover for fanatics who take a simplistic view of the scriptures they share with the sophisticated.

So far, I have aimed to outline an important contemporary debate. As a secular humanist, who shares many of the conclusions of the Militant Modern Atheists, but also agrees with the critics that valuable options are being foreclosed, I shall try, in what follows, to work through the issues involved. It is useful to start slowly.

2.

Many contemporary discussions of religion, especially those that concentrate on the three Abrahamic monotheisms, distinguish fundamentalist forms of religion from others

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that are more sophisticated. Fundamentalists are typically conceived as people who insist on reading the sacred texts as literal truth. Their more subtle co-religionists are distinguished by a willingness to declare that significant parts of the scriptures must be read as metaphors or allegories, in the extreme case to suppose that the whole canon be interpreted non-literally. Debates then centre on whether one can defend the literal truth of *any important sentence* in the pertinent texts, on whether commitment to what can be maintained as literal truth can count any longer as religion, and on whether, if it can, that type of religion is at all representative of contemporary religious movements. Militant modern atheists will probably concede that some minor bits of the Bible can be counted as literally true — 'Jesus wept', for example — but they repeatedly point out that allegorical and metaphorical readings are alien to the practices of the world's faithful. Like it or not, various grades of fundamentalism are omnipresent, and these are the proper targets of critique.

I want to reject this way of framing the debate for two main reasons. First, the notion of fundamentalism it introduces is not obviously coherent. Perhaps there are some sentences in the famous scriptural texts whose meaning is sufficiently clear and definite to allow one to speak of literal reading: to suppose, say, that 'Jesus wept' is true in virtue of the fact that a particular historical figure shed tears. Plenty of the Bible and of the Qur'an is very different. What would it mean to interpret Paul's description of our condition literally, when he says that 'we see through a glass darkly'? (The popularity of sunglasses in the ancient near east?) What is the literal meaning of the references in *Genesis* to 'days' at a time when the stars and planets are still being formed? Exactly what forms of struggle and resistance does the Qur'an commend to the faithful? Historians of religion have pointed out the range of strategies of interpretation that have been popular at different periods, and have argued cogently that the idea of scripture as a scientific text, intended to meet the standards of clarity and precision towards which scientists strive, is — unsurprisingly — something that begins to emerge only with the unfolding of modern science, from the 17th century on. Like other readers, fundamentalists are up to their necks in the interpretation business, dedicated *in principle* to an enterprise of responding to the scriptures as if these works were aimed at an ideal of definiteness that typically seems alien to them, pursuing *in practice* lines of interpretation that have been laid down by leading figures in their particular religious tradition and that usually involve tendentious social and political commitments.

The second, and deeper, reason for not framing the discussion in the usual way lies in the fact that it centres the debate on the truth of claims found in particular documents. At first sight, that might appear to be a completely benign assumption. After all, aren't religions distinguished from one another by their various creeds? Defining 'religion' is notoriously difficult, but one attractive strategy is to say that a religion consists of a set of doctrines about special kinds of entities ('transcendent' entities, different in kind from the everyday constituents of nature), that individual religions are distinguished by their different doctrines, and that to be committed to a particular religion is to believe the doctrines constitutive of that religion. Call this the *belief model* of religion.

As it stands, the belief model might seem inadequate, in that more than belief is required of the religious believer. Besides beliefs there are emotions, aspirations, desires, and actions: devout Christians love God and their neighbours, aspire to accord with the divine commandments, wish that the Holy Spirit would descend on them and on others, work for the relief of suffering and the spread of the Gospel. Those who *merely* believe,

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if there are any such people, are not full participants in the religious life. There is a simple way to amend the belief model to encompass this judgment, namely to declare that belief is fundamental. The other psychological states of the religious believer flow from her beliefs. Believing the doctrines she does, including the claim that particular texts are true and represent the divine will, she is moved in particular ways, recognizes particular rules for conduct, forms her plans and goals, and, to the extent that her will is strong, expresses what she values in her actions. A friendly amendment to the belief model recognizes that religious believers have distinctive psychological states of several different types (emotions, intentions etc.), but takes belief in doctrine to be the fundamental basis from which the other religious states emerge.

This is *a* plausible way to think about religion and religious life, at least in the modern world, and perhaps especially in those parts of the world where movements that call themselves 'fundamentalist' hold sway. It is, however, by no means the *only* conception of religion we might form. An alternative approach to religion can begin with other elements of the complex of states and processes, psychological and sociological, found in religious life, selecting some of those states and processes as basic, and viewing the distinctive doctrines as outgrowths, introduced as means of reaching goals marked out by the fundamental attitudes.

That formulation is both vague and general. My aim is to introduce a particular version that will exemplify the possibilities towards which I have just gestured, and I begin with the schematic suggestion to emphasize the fact that my specific conception is by no means the unique alternative to the belief model.

I begin with the concept of an *orientation*. A person's orientation identifies particular goals as valuable, not only with respect to his own life but beyond the compass of that life. It contains a strong desire to work towards those goals, and typically, to do so in coordination with others who share them. These desires support commitments to forming plans to promote the goals and to implement the plans in action, even if that should require considerable sacrifices and personal losses. An orientation, then, is a complex of psychological states — states of valuing, desires, intentions, emotions and commitments — a complex that does not include factual beliefs, and that embodies a person's sense of what is most significant and worthwhile in his own life and in the lives of others.

Religious people whose psychological lives fit the belief model have something similar to an orientation, but in their case the complex of states that direct their conduct arises from specific beliefs about a transcendent entity. They typically suppose that traditional texts contain doctrines that express the will of this being, and, consequently, that particular goals are set for them. I am interested in considering forms of religious life for which the orientation is primary. People who participate in such forms of life have independent views about what is valuable, views they use to appraise the commands of any putative deity; they concur with Kant's claim that some independent source of value is required if 'the Holy One of Israel' is to be assessed as good.[4] Some people for whom an orientation is basic will profess beliefs using sentences that others employ to make claims about the existence and character of transcendent beings (call these *doctrinal sentences*), and may even share some beliefs with fundamentalists. For the religious people in whom I am interested, however, such beliefs are adopted because of the basic orientation — they are consequences of the commitment to particular goals and values.

Thoroughly secular people can have an orientation in the sense I have introduced. In their case, having their particular orientation gives rise neither to beliefs in transcendent

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beings, nor in any professions that use doctrinal sentences. Further, just as religious people can reflect on and thoroughly endorse the orientations they have, so too for their secular cousins. Let's say that an orientation is *reflectively stable* when it survives detailed scrutiny of one's life and the lives of others; when it can be upheld as a worthy choice for the direction of one's transient existence. The *orientation model* fits a human life when the person in question has an orientation and when that orientation is reflectively stable. This model can be applied to secular people and to people who consider themselves as religious. The latter are distinguished by the fact that their orientations lead them to particular forms of behaviour — to participate in particular ceremonies, to utter doctrinal sentences, and sometimes (perhaps often) to form beliefs whose content they express with such statements. Yet when these people talk of their faith, they do not intend to classify their beliefs and professions of belief as psychological states that fall short of knowledge because of lack of evidence, but rather to single out the primary commitments made in their orientations. Faith is primarily a matter of thorough devotion to particular goals and values.

Within the sphere to which the orientation model is applicable, I want to distinguish four types, three of which are easy to appreciate. The *secular* are those for whom their orientation does not give rise to any beliefs about transcendent entities or any participation in professions and ceremonies associated with such beliefs. The *mythically self-conscious* are people whose orientation does lead them to utter doctrinal sentences and to participate in the professions and ceremonies in which those statements find their homes, but who clearly disavow any interpretation of the statements that implies substantive doctrine about transcendent entities. Thus a mythically self-conscious Christian might describe herself as oriented by the values of human equality and solidarity expressed in particular Gospel passages (for example, the Sermon on the Mount), so that she engages with other members of a Christian community to advance these values, while explicitly rejecting *any* interpretation of the New Testament that supposes a personal being from whose will those values derive, who in *any* sense created, governs or surveys the universe. Her creedal professions are expressions of a commitment to the fundamental values and a supposition that, whatever the details of the history of the cosmos, these are the significant things for human beings to try to advance.

The *doctrinally-entangled* go one step further. They hold some beliefs they recognize as implying the existence of transcendent beings, and they take these beliefs to be inspirationally important precisely because the pertinent beings exemplify the fundamental values. To the extent that the beings are viewed as especially powerful, they may even be seen as guaranteeing the possibility of realizing those values. A Christian who believes that Jesus was the incarnation of a being who created the cosmos can see himself as participating in a campaign to achieve important goals — the spread of loving relations among human beings — whose ultimate success is assured. The belief thus functions as a description of aspects of the universe and as an inspiring promise. If asked to defend his belief in particular claims about the transcendent, the doctrinally-entangled person will not appeal primarily to evidence, but rather suggest that it is legitimate to form such beliefs because of the positive role they play in the promotion of the most important values.

Both the mythically self-conscious and the doctrinally-entangled are clear about what they are doing when they utter religious statements. Between them lie characters whose ideas about how to interpret doctrinal sentences are far less definite. They are

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not prepared to say, with the mythically self-conscious, that there is *no* defensible interpretation of those sentences on which they are committed to the existence of transcendent entities. On the other hand, they are not willing to offer any definite interpretation that would provide a content to which they would subscribe. Many of them are inclined to take refuge in language that is resonant and opaque, metaphorical and poetic, and to deny that they can do any better at explaining the beliefs they profess. Something important happened, they think, at Mount Sinai, or in the desert outside Mecca, but they reject the idea that what occurred was any encounter between a historical figure — Moses, in the one instance, Muhammad, in the other — and a very large and impressive person with a long white beard or a somewhat smaller individual with wings and a gleaming presence. If pressed, they will admit that they can only gesture vaguely in the direction of something that might commit them to the existence of transcendent entities — or might not. Their lack of definiteness frustrates militant modern atheists, who find no value in the resonant phrases that pervade theological discussions, but believers will contend that literal language gives out here, that as with great poetry, religious language somehow functions in ways that cannot be captured in the preferred modes of speech of their opponents. We can think of characters of this sort as the *doctrinally-indefinite*.

At this point, I can state some theses I'll attempt to defend in the rest of this essay. First, militant modern atheism is entirely correct in its assault on those types of religious life that fit the belief model. On the other hand, all three of the non-secular approaches that accord with the orientation model are defensible. In the case of the mythically self-conscious that is hardly surprising, and the militant modern atheists applaud when those who continue to think of themselves as religious firmly reject 'supernatural' entities — the militants think, however, that what remains hardly deserves the name of religion. More problematic, at first sight, are the cases of the doctrinally-entangled and the doctrinally-indefinite. I'll suggest that doctrinal indefiniteness can be a reasonable expression of epistemic modesty, and that even doctrinal entanglement can be justified when it is the only way of preserving, in the socio-cultural environment available, a reflectively stable orientation. Militant modern atheism tends to overlook this point because it is in the firm grip of the belief model, and thus assumes — wrongly — that correction of belief about the occupants of the cosmos can automatically be articulated into a satisfying vision of what is valuable in one's life. Perhaps that is true for the privileged few, but it is not so for the less fortunate many.

Nevertheless, two important points emerge from the militant atheistic campaign. The first is that defensible religious attitudes cannot be tainted with elements of the belief model: that would occur, for example, if the beliefs justified by appeal to the promotion of values were then to serve as the bases for adding extra goals, viewed as expressions of the divine will. For the orientation model to apply, considerations of value must be primary, and the believer cannot contend, first, that commitment to the deity is legitimate because it expresses orientation towards things that are of fundamental worth, and, second, that the commitment brings in its train a host of new duties and prohibitions grounded in divine commands. The second point is that any liberal approach to the formation of orientations must recognize the importance of providing people with genuine choice — allowing them to find and pursue 'their own good in their own way' (in Mill's famous phrase) — and that underscores the thesis, expressed forcefully by

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Dawkins, that children should not automatically be assimilated to the religious practices of their parents.[5]

3.

To see why religious people who conform to the belief model are vulnerable to cogent critique, it is only necessary to note that they have two options for defending the legitimacy of their beliefs. The first is to claim that they have grounds for thinking that the doctrines they espouse are true, and in this case the dispute between them and their critics turns on matters of evidence. The second is to suppose that there are no such compelling grounds, that the ideas about transcendent entities are adopted on grounds that fall short — even very far short — of the evidence normally taken as required; in this case there are *ethical* concerns about how beliefs acquired by what some will call 'leaps of faith' — and others describe as 'jumping to conclusions' — can serve as sources of values, goals, and actions in the ways the belief model supposes.

Although militant modern atheists sometimes delve into the 'proofs' offered in premodern theology, these excursions are entirely irrelevant to the exploration of any possible evidence for doctrinal statements. Whether anyone has ever regarded them as a potential route from atheism or agnosticism to theism is doubtful, and it seems plain that those who constructed the more-or-less intricate arguments did so in attempts to elaborate ideas about a deity to whose existence they were already committed. People who fit the belief model come to the doctrines they espouse because of the social traditions in which they stand and because of the experiences (the 'religious experiences') they undergo. Do these processes, individually or in combination, provide any warrant for doctrinal belief?

A sense of the presence of a deity (or of other sorts of beings) is very common across the spectrum of the world's religions. Too common, in fact, to play any serious evidential role. Once you appreciate the widespread tendency of people to arrive at very different claims on the basis of experiences that seem to them both intense and mysterious, and see that these experiences are categorized in terms that derive from the religions with which the subjects are familiar — and to which they often subscribe — it is clear what is occurring. Religious and secular people alike experience things they cannot explain in everyday secular terms, and sometimes grope for categories that will make some sense of what has occurred. None of these assimilations is to be trusted, for none can maintain that it alone is privileged and that rival interpretations are erroneous. Nor will it do to apply some minimal category, to record one's encounter with some spectral person or some transcendent mind, for that, too, is one thought too many. Given the astonishing variety in the frequency with which religious experiences take place — the statistics suggest that there are 'epidemics' of such experiences — and given also the correlations between religious experience and various other factors not conducive to cognition (ingestion of drugs, psychological distress, moments of adolescent ecstasy), trust in the deliverances of these experiences, conceived as routes to the transcendent that are quite independent of the support given by religious tradition, seems entirely unwarranted. Dewey offered wise counsel on these matters:

> . . . when it [religious experience] occurs, from whatever cause and by whatever means, there is a religious outlook and function. As I have said before, the

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> doctrinal or intellectual apparatus and the institutional accretions that grow up are, in a strict sense, adventitious to the intrinsic quality of such experiences.[6]

In other words, we should cherish the ways in which some experiences we do not fully understand re-orient human lives, suggesting possibilities of promoting important values, without struggling to discern mysterious causes. To do that is to order one's life in the mode of the orientation model.

Religious people who exemplify the belief model are thus evidentially dependent on the traditions in which they stand. That is not yet to deny them the possibility of knowledge, since all of us are dependent on others for virtually all of what we know. The trouble is that the symmetry found in the appeal to religious experience, the use of phenomenologically similar episodes to support radically incompatible conclusions, is preserved when we turn to the grounding of belief in religious tradition. The Native American who is convinced of the existence of ancestral spirits, and the Australian Aboriginal who talks confidently of the Dreamtime, base their religious professions on similar ideas about the past to those that ground the doctrines of Jews, Christians and Muslims. Once, long ago, there was a revelation, and it has been transmitted, with integrity, across the generations to the present. There is no reasonable way to break the symmetry, to declare that one — or some — of these supposed processes of revelation and accurate transmission has matters right, and the others are sad examples of primitive confusion. Moreover, when scholars study the processes through which the doctrines of major world religions evolve, and the ways in which those religions recruit converts, it becomes evident that they are shaped by causes we standardly view as unlikely to lead in the direction of truth. Nobody who recognizes the political considerations that have figured in the construction of the world's most celebrated religious texts can regard these scriptures as reliable indicators of past events. Nobody who reflects on what sociologists have to say about the ways in which people become attracted to particular religions will suppose that the spread of a creed has much to do with its truth.

Considerably more could be said about the difficulties of the belief model to sustain the idea of religious knowledge, but I'll turn now to the alternative approach that conceives religious belief as unwarranted by the evidence. It is easy for opponents to formulate this approach as the supposition that faith intervenes to fill the gap between the inadequate evidence and confident belief, but that is to introduce a notion of faith quite different from the concept valued by many religious people. Devotees of one of the Abrahamic monotheisms whose lives are structured by the orientation model take their faith to be a form of commitment: they start from identifying themselves with particular goals and with a community that strives towards those goals, and that initial identification is perceived as the act of faith. Abraham can figure for them as the paradigm of this sort of commitment, as the 'knight of faith', not because he leaps beyond the evidence to conclude that a specific transcendental being exists — that would be absurd, given his supposed personal encounters with this being — but because of his willingness to trust his God, even when perplexing and morally repugnant things are demanded of him. On the versions of the orientation account I shall defend, that sort of trust is not legitimate, for the commitments made are bound by ethical prescriptions (there ought to be no 'teleological suspension of the ethical'), but the example serves as a useful correction to views of faith that remove it from the practical sphere and treat it as belief without sufficient evidence.

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Any religious person who supposes that belief in transcendent entities can be legitimate without sufficient evidence faces the challenge of explaining how religious doctrines figure in the guidance of action. One possible response is to deny that they play any role whatever. They are placed in some sealed compartment in the believer's psychology, permanently unavailable for any practical decision-making. Whether or not this supposed insulation of religion is even coherent, that is whether subjects whose minds were structured in this way could properly be said to believe the doctrines ascribed to them, I strongly doubt that any actual people satisfy these conditions. Yet if the partitions between doctrinal belief and decision-making are permeable, then the presence of those beliefs is ethically suspect. Someone who makes decisions affecting the lives of others is ethically required to rely on those propositions best supported by the evidence. Thus unless the doctrinal belief is better supported by the evidence than pertinent rivals, it will be wrong to use it in planning one's conduct. Since the evidential gap between belief about transcendent entities and facts available to religious believers is typically a gulf, it is extremely hard to envisage how they could escape the charge of ethical irresponsibility.

Again, there are complications to be probed, but my principal interest lies in showing that *when the issue is framed in a particular way*, conceived in terms of the belief model, militant modern atheists can make a powerful case. Frequently, they fail to present that case, thus inviting religious responses that rebut inferior forms of criticism. Yet, if the targets are forms of the religious life that accord with the belief model, sceptics can focus on the grounds of belief and pose a devastating dilemma.

4.

Among the militant modern atheists, Dennett sees most clearly that the issues centre on the processes that underlie religious belief. His efforts to articulate the theme are particularly instructive because they reveal how concentrating on the belief model can blind critics to possibilities that emerge from rival ways of thinking about religious life. Dennett provides a speculative evolutionary psychology, one that hypothesizes selective advantages in cognitive structures that inclined our ancestors to gravitate to certain types of explanations for puzzling phenomena, in particular to posit invisible agents as causes. The world's religions are unfortunate side products of a psychological tendency that served our forebears well. With the advance of modern science, people have better ways of responding to the puzzles, so that we can now liberate ourselves from faulty beliefs that have had all sorts of harmful practical consequences. We can 'break the spell', self-consciously resisting modes of thought that, like our tendencies to folk physics, incline us to false beliefs.

Dawkins does not elaborate this theme with the detail and care that Dennett provides, but he shares a similar picture — hence the 'God delusion'. The common perspective is dominated by concepts drawn from the realm of knowledge and belief, framed by the belief model. Within this frame, the conclusions militant modern atheists draw can appear inevitable. True belief is a good thing for people, delusions and spells are bad; hence you *help* those whose doctrines you assail, by leading them (or forcing them?) to a better cognitive state; they will make better decisions as a result of their enlightenment; they will be liberated by the unpleasant medicine you administer.

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To see how and why one might escape this picture, it is useful to start with the evolutionary psychology Dennett offers.[7] His speculations can be contrasted with different conjectures, with hypotheses that don't see the emergence of religious life in terms of cognitive defects. On Dennett's account, the predominance of religion in human societies stems from a prevalent psychological disposition, once adaptive, to think in ways that generate myths. Another possibility would suppose that religions played a role in the social lives of our Paleolithic ancestors, that they encouraged compliance with the norms of the small groups, that they fostered various types of solidarity, as well as giving point and direction to individual lives. These ideas about social and psychological advantages accord with anthropological evidence about the status of gods as 'guardians of morality', and also with some of the features sociologists discern when they study how people are attracted to particular religions. It would be wrong, however, to claim that my alternative is significantly better grounded than Dennett's: *both* are speculative. The important point, for present purposes, lies in their contrasting explanations of the predominance of religions. Where Dennett discerns an unfortunate cognitive glitch, I point to social and individual needs, some of them still important to people, which religions have met: societies that failed to develop religions were less good at meeting these needs, and, in consequence, they were less likely to transmit their forms of culture to descendant groups.

If you start with the thought that the predominance of religion in human societies is to be explained by a cognitive deficiency, you will tend to see your campaign for the eradication of myths in terms of a return to intellectual health. However difficult it may be for them to abandon their religions, people will be better off by repudiating the false beliefs that have held them captive. By contrast, if you suppose that the social factors towards which I have gestured have played a non-trivial role in the spread of the world's religions, you will wonder if there are psychological and social needs that the simple abandonment of religion will leave unfulfilled. You may even begin to wonder if the bracing tonics militant modern atheists conceive themselves as administering are — considered overall — a good thing.

My introduction of the orientation model is a vehicle for exploring these issues. Orientations are of primary importance in human lives, and people who cannot arrive at a reflectively stable set of values and aspirations rightly feel incomplete. Thoroughly secular people can have an orientation, as I have already conceded, but it is a fallacy to think that, for any religious person who currently fits the orientation model, that person can attain a cognitively superior orientation by rejecting the beliefs militant modern atheists discern as false. The cognitive gains can simply be outweighed by other forms of psychological and social loss.

To recognize this is not to patronize religious people, to view them as insufficiently astute or mature or courageous to come to terms with hard truths. Rather, it is to appreciate the difficulties contemporary social environments pose for the attainment of satisfying orientations outside of religious life. Dawkins' reflections on his own orientation reveal the ways in which humanly important issues can simply disappear from view.

> There is more than just grandeur in this view of life, bleak and cold though it can seem from under the security blanket of ignorance. There is deep refreshment to be had from standing up and facing straight into the strong keen wind of understanding: . . . [8]

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> The truths of evolution, along with many other scientific truths, are so engrossingly fascinating and beautiful; how truly tragic to die having missed out on all that![9]

> But couldn't we also teach science as something to read and rejoice in, like learning how to listen to music rather than slaving over five-finger exercises in order to play?[10]

There is much to agree with in these passages, but they seduce readers — and Dawkins and Dennett too, I suspect — into thinking that *anyone* can orient a worthwhile life, one that will survive reflective probing, on the basis of contemplation of the cosmos as the sciences have revealed it.

Aristotle's great reflection on the good life in the *Nicomachean Ethics* closes with a picture of this kind, one that celebrates the life of informed contemplation. Yet, in the preceding books, Aristotle has pointed to other features that many people regard as central to the worth of the lives they lead: activity, contributions to social life, virtuous conduct, friendship, and so forth. It would be presumptuous for me to fathom the orientations of Dawkins and Dennett in any detail, but I am pretty sure that some of these alternative factors matter to them, too. They belong to a community of distinguished scholars, and to a subcommunity directed towards what they take to be an extremely important goal, that of spreading enlightenment as broadly as they can, and I strongly suspect that their membership in these communities and their sense of the contributions they make is an integral component of their successful and satisfying orientations. They are probably in the best positions to articulate their aspirations and values, but I strongly suspect that any complete account of their sense of the worth of their lives would not consist in the passive pleasures of understanding various natural phenomena.

Even in affluent societies where citizens can be relatively well educated, the vast majority will never be able to recognize themselves as important participants in any impressive joint enterprise that contributes to knowledge and enlightenment. For large numbers of people, daily struggles to cope with threats to their physical wellbeing leave little opportunity for contemplation. Yet some institutions sometimes supply them with satisfying orientations, enabling them to rear their children with devoted love, helping them to create a less harsh and more just world for a few people around them. Some of these institutions are, of course, churches and mosques and synagogues.

Other things equal, it is preferable for these people to be mythically self-conscious, to enjoy the cognitive benefits towards which the militant modern atheists point, while also using the framework supplied by a religious tradition to direct their actions, in conjunction with others, towards valuable ends. But things are not always equal. Under some circumstances, the only psychologically and socially available ways of supporting a life that has any sense of worthy goals at which it aims, or any capacity for working with others to attain those goals, involve participating in traditions that cloud the messages Dawkins and Dennett want to deliver. Secular thinkers can regret that fact, but they should see it as a stimulus, not to break spells and abolish delusions, come what may, but to work towards an intellectually articulated and socially realized version of secular humanism that will permit satisfying orientations for the many people whose opportunities are currently limited.

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Within the actual social environments in which contemporary people grow up, doctrinal entanglement can be expected to persist, not because the arguments directed against the doctrines are incomplete or because the people who hang on to belief in transcendent entities are too stubborn or too stupid, but because enlightened secularism has not yet succeeded in finding surrogates for institutions and ideas that religious traditions have honed over centuries or millennia. Until those surrogates are widely available, we need respect and tolerance for the doctrinally-entangled. True enough, it would be better if their religion evolved to a state of mythical self-consciousness, but the costs for them — and sometimes for important social causes — that would attend the simple removal of false belief outweigh the benefits. Only those who approach these issues with the conviction that these matters are, from beginning to end, purely epistemic, who suppose that the belief model fits all religious lives, who think an evolutionary account will show how we've been HADD, will insist on breaking spells and ending delusions come what may.

If the doctrinally-entangled should be considered in this way, the doctrinally indefinite are surely even more worthy of secular tolerance. For their errors are, at worst, those of their doctrinally-entangled cousins. Moreover, once you recognize the importance that interpretation *must* play in reading religious texts, and once you appreciate the richness of many passages in these texts, it's easy to appreciate the predicament of the honest religious person who views parts of scripture as valuable for orienting her life and conduct, but who admits an inability to formulate any definite sentences that could articulate the content of the resonant words. There is something in those words that inspires and moves her, and she believes that they record some important past experiences — but the exact content of the inspiration and the precise character of the experiences is, she concedes, beyond her powers of definite expression.

I close by recapitulating two points I made earlier. First, commitment to any definite doctrine, mythical self-consciousness, or doctrinal indefiniteness must not incline the believer to slide into accepting normative claims that would underwrite conduct affecting the lives of others on the grounds that they express the will of some transcendent being — and I incline to think that a similar point holds even when her actions only affect herself. The orientation model insists that values come first. When further claims about what is to be sought or what is to be done are derived from religious doctrine, seen as expressing the commands of the deity, the believer has drifted from the orientation model into the belief model. Those to whom the belief model applies are, I have maintained, vulnerable to cogent critique. Hence, there must be a rigorous commitment to the priority of those values that can be shared with proponents of other religions and those who have no religion at all. Public reason must be thoroughly secular. The most that can be done is to offer particularly vivid and inspiring formulations of the common values.

My second agreement with militant modern atheism is almost a corollary of this. If one of the values we should share is that of self-determination, Mill's 'pursuing one's own good in one's own way', then the practice of confining the thoughts of the young to the religious doctrines of parents — or to the secular attitudes of parents — is effectively the derivation of a specific value from the parental acceptance of doctrine. Enlightened parents should view the orientation model as suitable for their children, and should thus be concerned to open their children to a range of possibilities, while simultaneously helping them to acquire habits of thought that will equip them to choose wisely for

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themselves. Yet until the environments in which many young people grow up have been radically transformed and enriched, involvement in a religious institution may protect the children, as it protected their parents, from the severe diminution of opportunities that our callous societies so frequently allow.[11]

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NOTES

1 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (New York: Penguin, 2007).
2 Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, and Dawkins' *The God Delusion* often recapitulate points made by Russell *Why I am not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967). Some of the ideas and arguments go back to Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, and Baron d'Holbach's voluminous anti-religious writings (for example, *Christianity Unveiled*).
3 Thus Leon Wieseltier has written and spoken scathingly about the books of both Dennett and Dawkins. In *The Case for God* (London: Bodley Head, 2009), Karen Armstrong also criticizes Dawkins' allegedly shallow understanding of religion.
4 I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981 [1785]), p. 21.
5 J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (Oxford: World's Classics, 2008 [1859]), p. 15; Dawkins *The God Delusion*.
6 John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1933), p. 17.
7 See Dennett op. cit.
8 Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2003); quoted in *The God Delusion* 397.
9 Dawkins *The God Delusion* op. cit., p. 320.
10 Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), p. 36.
11 This paper was originally delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Philosophy, March 19 2010. I am grateful to Taylor Carman and Wayne Proudfoot for valuable comments on an earlier draft, to the audience at the SAP meeting for some excellent questions, and to Richard Harries for a stimulating conversation before the lecture.

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