

Who's Afraid of Religion?

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Inaugural Lecture, March 30, 2006

Introduction

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen.

Those are the words of the Apostle's Creed. I read them not because I endorse them, though as a matter of fact I do. Rather I read them to make a point. And the point is that religion makes us uncomfortable.

Why is that?

Why is it that especially those of us in the academic community find religion *uncomfortable*?[SLIDE]

To have a discussion about the uncomfortableness of religion we first need to be clear about *what sort of religion* makes us uncomfortable, and *what sort of discomfort* that sort of religion induces. Let me say something about each of these. It doesn't take much reflection to see that not every aspect of religion makes us uncomfortable. For example, we would be perfectly happy to have a discussion of claims like: "The oppressive political agenda of the right wing is fueled by religious mania" or "Mahayana Buddhism emerged in the first century BCE with the appearance of the Mahayana sutras." Not only are we happy to have discussions of that sort--they go on in courses and

across lunch tables with some frequency. What makes us uncomfortable is rather *first person expressions of religious commitment*. It is OK to speak of religion and religious adherents from a safe distance, treating them or it as a historical phenomenon or a socio-cultural influence. It is something altogether different to discuss religious commitments that one *owns*. That is the sort of religion that troubles us.

And what sort of discomfort is it that religion of this sort induces? It is not the sort of discomfort we experience when we read accounts of the downward spiral of the political situation in Haiti or when we look at the statistics revealing the devastation wrought by the HIV virus in Africa. *That* is the discomfort of felt injustice, of resignation to the plight of the disadvantaged, or of helpless frustration in the face of natural evil. No, the discomfort we feel in the face of expressed religious commitment is something different. It vacillates between pity--when we feel that the commitment arises from harmless ignorance—to those feelings we experience when a student in one of our classes defends the notion that African-Americans underperform whites on most academic metrics for genetic reasons, or that female college students who are raped are partially, or fully, to blame. Those latter feelings inspire at least intolerance and at most rage. Polite and well-informed folks just don't say those things—in fact, polite and well-informed folks don't even *think them*.

For those of you who are doubtful that you, or we, in fact have such reactions, I invite you to think about the last time you heard a devoutly religious person argue, on explicitly religious grounds, that gay marriage should be banned, or that intelligent design should be taught in the public school biology curriculum, or that abortion is murder and thus should be outlawed. If you did not experience the sort of discomfort I am describing on those occasions, you certainly know that many of your colleagues in the room around you did.

In this talk I want to bring this discomfort, what I am going to call *theo-phobia*, to the surface. I want to reflect on the causes of theo-phobia, and see if those causes in fact justify the hostile reaction. There are, in my view, a number of reasons for academic theophobia. In this talk I propose to discuss five of those reasons, the first four of which are as follows: [SLIDE]

- a) Religion supports oppression, violence, and tyranny and is thus best ignored, excluded or perhaps even actively opposed.
- b) Religion is a personal or subjective matter and as a result can't be subjected to canonical standards of rational scrutiny. It thus has no place in the academy.
- c) Religion can't have a role in scholarly inquiry since it at best plays a balkanizing role in the scholarly world.
- d) If religion is allowed to have a role in the academy it will quickly intrude into domains where it does not belong.

II. Reason Number One

Perhaps the most commonly admitted reason for theo-phobia is the fear that religious belief gives rise to serious moral, social, and political evil. Just hearing those words undoubtedly calls to mind the widespread incidents of terror that have been justified under the banner of Islam. If I had given this talk prior to 9/11 such words would most likely have brought to mind worries about social and legislative initiatives by religious conservatives aimed at curbing stem cell research or limiting access to abortion. Darwin may have peddled, in the words of Daniel Dennett, a dangerous ideas. But the ideas of priests and imams are downright incendiary. [SLIDE]

In this connection, Slavoj Zizek, Director of the Birbeck Institute for the Humanities, wrote the following in a recent Op/Ed piece in the *New York Times*: “More than a century ago, in *The Brothers Karamazov* and other works, Dostoyevsky warned against the dangers of godless moral nihilism, arguing in essence that if God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted. . . This argument couldn't have been more wrong: the lesson of today's terrorism is that if God exists, then everything, including blowing up thousands of innocent bystanders is permitted—at least to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, since, clearly, a direct link to God justifies the violation of any merely human constraints and considerations.”¹ [SLIDE]

The argument is not new of course; critics of religion and other mere theophobes have argued that religion has the power to inspire not only superhuman expressions of

¹ “Defenders of the Faith.” *New York Times*. March 12, 2006, A12.

charity, but otherwise unimaginable acts of horrific cruelty. The Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Ku Klux Klan are among the most commonly cited examples. There is no doubt to any of us sitting here that religious sentiment can motivate behavioral extremes--both the saintly and the satanic. The front page of the daily newspaper makes that plain. [SLIDE] But the reasons for this probably have little to do with the fact that the ideas are distinctively *religious*. Anyone passionately in the grip of an idea that casts them as central to the unfolding of a cosmic drama of substantial proportions can become equally, sadistically driven. One need only consider those Stalinists who took themselves to be direct instruments of the Historical Necessity of Progress toward Communism, or members of the Khmer Rouge who took the lives of nearly two million Cambodians in the service of a deviant form of Maoist dogma. [SLIDE]

Nonetheless, my purpose here is not to start trading accusations about whether religious or secular passion is more potentially destructive. It is rather to point out that we—that is we academics--have conspicuously crippled ourselves when it comes to combating the dangerous excesses of religious passion that we fear. This is evident once we remind ourselves of the tools that we have at our disposal to combat the excesses of the ideologies of Stalin and Pol Pot. And I have in mind here not the tools used by the Defense Department or the Congress—I mean the tools that *we* in the academy have at our disposal. When we aim to show the inadequacy or bankruptcy of such Stalinism or Maoism we take the underlying philosophical and political positions advocated in these views and subject them to *hard-nosed rational scrutiny*. We unpack the notion of Communism being advocated and ask whether or not achieving it would indeed constitute Progress. We ask whether or not there is such a thing as Historical Necessity and how we would know if there were in the first place. And so on. In short, we take advocates of these views to be making truth claims, and we subject those claims to careful, critical analysis.

Can we subject religious beliefs—especially those which spawn passionate excess---to the same sort of hard-nosed scrutiny? On the surface, it seems that we can since religions indeed make truth claims. [SLIDE] But the terms of the settlement concerning the role of religion in the academy have essentially undermined this possibility. Under these terms, religion in the academy must be, in the words of historian

George Marsden “like grandparents in an upwardly mobile family, tolerated and sometimes respected because of their service in the past, even given some nice quarters of their own and celebrated on holidays, but otherwise expected either to be supportive or to stay out of the way and not say anything embarrassing.”² (312)

These were arranged somewhat unreflectively during the first half of the twentieth century as higher education in the United States underwent a radical and dramatic transformation. For a variety of reasons, colleges and universities in the U.S. began to downplay or renounce their formal sectarian ties. And as these institutions became progressively less committed to serving the interests of their founding denomination, the role of religious instruction became more obscure. There was no longer any clear place for *formal, sectarian* religious instruction. And yet, without that, religion seemed to have no obvious role in the regular curriculum. Some schools sought refuge in the establishment of divinity schools and seminaries. Many more established departments of Religious Studies, a newly emerging “discipline,” with the aim of exposing students to the phenomenon of religion without being involved in advocacy for religion. This allowed these institutions to provide a place for liberal Protestant thought in the curriculum while at the same time allowing these institutions to be both diverse and tolerant.

Religious Studies thus emerged to fill the uncomfortable role of providing *access* to religion without *advocacy*. A discipline established with these goals could have followed a variety of trajectories. [SLIDE]But the trajectory in fact followed was characterized by two central themes. First, the academic study of religion would be “scientific” in character—adopting a supposedly “presuppositionless” stance towards religions, their history, and their cultural role. Second, the academic study of religion must celebrate religious diversity by adopting a general posture of *tolerance* towards all religious traditions. Anything less, it seemed, would by definition be sectarian.

[SLIDE]There are, however, two ways to adopt the posture of tolerance. One way is to allow every claimant an opportunity to make their case and to evaluate the truth or falsity of each case on its merits. The second is to disown questions of truth altogether and to instead approach religion with an eye merely to explaining its central claims, its

² *The Soul of the American University*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1994, p.312.

history, and its cultural import. Unfortunately for us, it is the latter, flaccid variety of tolerance that was chosen.

Why unfortunately? Because once religious tolerance means that questions of truth or falsity are out of bounds, we can no longer subject Jim Jones or jihad to hard-nosed rational scrutiny. Once religion is viewed as a set of beliefs and practices adopted for merely cultural or aesthetic reasons, we have rendered ourselves impotent to subject the claims of religion to the bar of reason. One might have hoped that once the consequences of this stance became evident, scholars of religion and academics more generally would have moved quickly to reverse course. On the contrary, the move to regard religion and religious beliefs as purely subjective or “highly personal” became a stampede. The happily embraced consequence is that religion has become a matter of *taste* rather than a matter of *fact*. Once religion is reduced to mere preference, I can no more critically engage your religious beliefs than I can critically engage your belief that Rocky Road is better than Mint Chocolate Chip.

As a result we find ourselves in a place where divergent religious beliefs are used for extreme ends . . . while we have taken away the only tools at our disposal to arrest it. We have stuck ourselves in a position where this sort of discomfort with religion is after all justified. Now that we have immunized the truth claims of religion from rational scrutiny, religious advocates are free to act on the religious sentiment of their choice, even if those actions involve tyranny, oppression, and violence. And the only resources left for reining them involve sheer force.

III. Reason Two

[SLIDE]This brings us face to face with that second reason for our discomfort with first person affirmations of religious commitment. The second reason focuses not on the fact that ideas immune to rational scrutiny run the risk of *spawning extreme behavior*. Rather this second reason concentrates on the fact that since these subjective notions cannot be subjected to rational scrutiny they just have no place in an academic setting.

A number of people are attracted to this particular claim. And their attraction explains the allergic reaction to expressions of religious commitment. For if this view is

right, I should get no more traction out of my religious beliefs in the context of my academic research than I get out of any other mere matter of taste. Who thinks it would be appropriate for me to invoke my preference for Prokofiev over Tchaikovsky or Hemingway over Kerouac in trying to defend a philosophical, historical or scientific point?

When viewed as a matter of *preference or taste*, religious beliefs don't ultimately make any truth claims above and beyond what they tell us about the believer's preferences. But surely religious affirmations are something more than that. While it might be true that some religious believers are merely expressing subjective preferences through their beliefs, this is undoubtedly the exception. When the Jew claims to be a descendent of Abraham, or that Moses led the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt, when the Muslim claims that Muhammad ascended bodily into heaven, they are not *expressing preferences*; they are making what they take to be assertions of objective fact. To deny this is simply to deny religious believers any authority concerning the content of their own beliefs. Such denials are not uncommon of course. Many academics feel quite comfortable telling religious believers that the content of their belief is not or cannot be what the religious believers themselves take it to be. [SLIDE]As a result, folks like biologist Stephen Jay Gould can quite breezily propose to quell the controversy over the relationship between science and religion by declaring that the two represent "Non-Overlapping Magisteria"—that is two domains which cannot in principle overlap. In Gould's widely hailed taxonomy, science covers the domain of "matters of fact with potential yes or no answers"³ while religion deals with the "non-factual": questions concerning morality and value which ultimately amount to little more than assessments of "social" or "moral and aesthetic preferences."⁴ Science deals with facts, religion deals with preferences.

Demarcated in this way, religion is not entitled to make any claims about matters of fact; religious believers are not entitled--as religious believers--to make any claims about what the world contains or how it operates. So, for example, the religious believer is not entitled to affirm that God created the world, that miracles can or have occurred,

³ *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*. New York: Ballantine Books. 199, p.53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 167, 195.

that Muhammed ascended into heaven, that Jesus walked on water, and so on.

[SLIDE]For Gould, “The first commandment for all versions of NOMA might be summarized by stating ‘Thou shalt not mix the magisterial by claiming that God directly ordains important events in the history of nature by special interference knowable only through revelation and not accessible to science.’” (84-5) Gould provides us with a recipe for something, but it is *not* recipe for securing harmony between science and religion; there is no religion left to harmonize *with* on this view. He aims to make peace not by helping hostile neighbors to get along, but by simply obliterating one of the neighbors. If this is what it means to regard religion as merely subjective, then we should stop so regarding it. Instead, we ought to let religious beliefs stand or fall on the merits of the truth claims they make. [SLIDE]In this regard we would do well to follow the advice of Slovoj Zizek who suggests that genuinely respectful tolerance operates differently: “Respect for other’s beliefs as the highest value can mean one of two things: either we treat the other in a patronizing way and avoid hurting him in order not to ruin his illusions, or we adopt the relativist stance of multiple “regimes of truth” disqualifying as violent imposition any clear insistence on truth. What, however, about submitting Islam—together with all other religions—to a respectful, but for that reason no less ruthless critical analysis? This, and only this, is the way to show a true respect for Muslims: to treat them as serious adults responsible for their beliefs.”⁵

IV. Reason Three

[SLIDE]The third cause of theophobia among academics is that we live with an underlying suspicion that if religion is allowed to play any role in the way that we think about issues in our own disciplines, it can only serve to divide scholars into communities that are incapable of communicating with one another. If we encourage Christian philosophy, or Chinese economics, or Indian political theory, or Mormon anthropology, won’t we find ourselves stuck, not with a panoply of balkanized sectarian *institutions*, but with an archipelago of isolated islands of scholarship *within each institution*?

⁵ *Op. cit.*

[SLIDE]In one sense it is highly disingenuous for scholars in the contemporary academy to lob such criticisms. Colleges and universities are rife with folks who claim to represent stances on disciplines that are profoundly contoured by gender, race, ethnicity, and so on. Can one really make the case that scholarship grounded in a particular *faith perspective* is inadmissible when scholarship grounded in these other perspectives is not? It is hard to see what might leverage such a distinction.

[SLIDE]Still, this sort of *tu quoque* reply only serves to avoid a discussion of the real problem at hand. Maybe the secular academy is embarked on a path that will lead *them* to balkanization as well. And maybe that too is bad. The question here is: do we have reason to think that scholarship that invokes or appeals to distinctively religious claims is likely to have the same fate?

[SLIDE]The argument that religiously-grounded inquiry leads to balkanization is grounded in sentiments similar to those expressed by Ohio State philosopher Bernard Rosen who makes the following complaint:

Any personal beliefs—religious or otherwise . . . have to be supported by evidence, and that evidence should meet the standards of the profession. But faith is, by definition, a belief in that for which there is no proof: once a belief can be supported by independent, scientific evidence, it loses its religious naturewhen considering any theory, the evidence has to carry the day, not the fact that it is Christian.⁶

Here we have the seeds of an argument showing that religion in the academy will lead to balkanization. For Rosen and others like him, academic scholarship is rooted in the ideal that our intellectual concerns can be settled rationally. But for such rational adjudication to be possible, we must hold and defend views using shared standards of assessment, and evidence available to all the relevant disputants. Without such standards and evidence, there will be no way to establish the legitimacy of one view over another and thus no way to approach our disciplines objectively. The problem with religiously framed

⁶ Quoted in George Marsden's *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1999, p.25.

scholarship, they think, is that it cannot abide by such rules. Religiously framed scholarship would have to derive some of its evidence or standards of assessment from authority, revelation, or tradition. But, sources and standards of evidence of this sort are accepted by “faith” and so, by definition, cannot be assessed objectively.

There are a number of problems with this line of argument. But my time is limited, so let me focus on just one. [SLIDE]What Rosen and other wants is for scholars to engage in inquiry that is rooted only in claims that can be established on the basis of something like empirical or publicly accessible evidence coupled with agreed-upon standards of assessment. They think that religious claims can’t meet this test for one of two reasons: either because religious beliefs *rest on no such evidence at all*, or because *religious beliefs rest on evidence which is so contentious that people can’t agree on what it shows*. In my view, it is patently false that religious beliefs fail in these ways. But let’s assume that I’m wrong. Always a possibility. What if religious claims *do* fail those tests? Are Rosen and his ilk right that they are to be excluded? No.

[SLIDE]As scholars in every discipline are well aware, there are numerous beliefs that underpin or frame our scholarship that are widely accepted and put to use as constraints on our theorizing even when we have no empirical or otherwise publicly available evidence which demonstrates their truth. For example, we are almost universally committed to claims such as (a) that people of different races and genders merit the same measure of moral respect, (b) that there is a mind-independent material world, (c) that it is good to be especially concerned with the poor and disadvantaged, etc. However, no one has any *empirical or publicly available evidence* in defense of these claims, nor can most of us offer anything but halting attempts at defending these beliefs at all. Nevertheless, our commitment to such claims is not tenuous or wavering—it is indeed quite firm. Such foundational beliefs are an unavoidable pre-condition of scholarly inquiry. The question is not whether or not they are permissible, but which ones we are willing to permit.

Nor is it a problem when we invoke beliefs that are based on evidence that is *highly contentious*. The truth is: we—especially we!-- believe that we are entitled to continue to hold beliefs and theorize on the basis of them even when we fail to convince all of the other reasonable, well-intentioned people who are acquainted with the same

evidence. If this were not the case, then presumably economists would not be entitled to hold beliefs about the effects of lowering the prime rate on the rate of investment, political theorists would be unable to hold beliefs on whether or not democracy is the most effective way to govern poor, less populous states, and physicists would be unable to affirm anything about string theory or dark energy. But they all do. And none of us feels that we have committed any epistemic sin in doing so. Intelligent, well-intentioned people can look at the same body of evidence, argue using shared standards of reason, and still hold contested views all the while being wholly reasonable and rational. That includes religious folks.

[SLIDE]OK. So let's admit that there aren't really good reasons for excluding distinctively religious claims from our research programs. It is still fair to wonder just what sort of a difference such claims might actually make. Is there a distinctively religious or Christian way to approach central philosophical questions in ethics or epistemology or metaphysics? It seems to me that answer is yes. [SLIDE]Christians are committed to claims such as: mentality is not essentially physical, there is an objective structure to the physical world, some moral claims are objectively true, the world is not eternal, natural laws are not inviolable, human beings consciously survive physical death, and so on. Such commitments may not rise to the level of *evidence*. But like the belief that members of all races or ethnic groups merit equal moral respect, such presuppositions limit the alternatives the committed religious believer is willing to countenance when developing theories on the nature of minds, or free choice, or ethics, to name three examples.

Of course, even these claims can and should be subjected to rational scrutiny. The religious believer can bring them to her research as starting points, recognizing that the results might show those starting points to be ultimately defective. In this way, the starting points themselves are fair game. And that is why they need not be balkanizing. Research agendas can be guided by these starting points, but the views they spawn or support either turn out to be adequate or inadequate.

IV. Reason Four

[SLIDE]But now things get a bit more tricky. Maybe invoking religion is OK in loosey-goosey disciplines like philosophy. But surely scholars cannot bring religious commitments to bear on their scholarly work in this way across the board. For example, it would surely be impermissible to allow one's religious beliefs to inform or constrain one's scientific research. Wouldn't it?

The question admits of an easy answer: Yes. Unfortunately, it isn't at all clear that this easy answer is *true*. To assess the adequacy of the answer we first have to know what science *is*. [SLIDE]Yet, as most of us already know, there is just no agreement on this matter. Science has something to do with *explaining the world through hypotheses and theories that are empirically testable*. But once we get beyond that, things get murky. [SLIDE]For example, is it also a part of science that the scientific inquirer is aiming to discover hypotheses or theories that are *true*? Apparently some scientists think not. In this regard Alvin Plantinga writes: "I once complained to the then director of the Stanford Linear Accelerator that I wasn't able to make sense of quantum mechanics. He told me that he couldn't make sense of it either, that in fact no one could really make sense of it. That didn't matter, he said; what mattered was that it was useful and extremely well confirmed. This strongly suggests that, as he saw the matter, the criterion of success for science isn't truth or even intelligibility; instead it's something much more like empirical adequacy or at any rate usefulness."⁷

So perhaps the aim in science is not the discovery of testable hypotheses that are *true*, but merely testable hypotheses that show themselves to be *fully, empirically adequate*. Empirically theories need not be true of course, they simply need to make predictions which are unfailingly fulfilled. Are these the sorts of theories at which all good science aims?

It's not very likely. At least not in every area of science. Scientists trying to discover how the population of the Caymans of the Amazon basin have responded to the deforestation caused by the encroachment of civilization are not likely to be interested in theories that are merely empirically adequate. They want to know what is *really going on* and why. They want the truth.

⁷ "Games Scientists Play" unpublished manuscript.

I point this out as a way of providing only one simple example of why defining science gets so very difficult once we get past the affirmation that it involves explanation of the natural world in terms of empirically testable theories. What is more (and maybe what is *worse*), is that it is notoriously difficult to say even exactly what “empirical testability” amounts to. The reason for this, quite simply, is that empirical testing always requires that we hold certain assumptions *fixed*. And anyone who does not like what the empirical evidence seems to show can always skirt it by revising one of the fixed suppositions. In this way, what seemed to be an empirical test might turn out not to be after all. Whether it is, is really more a matter of *discretion*. A simple example can help us see this. Imagine that you go home tonight and find your front picture window smashed, some furniture tipped over, and your television set missing. While trying to determine what has happened your neighbor stops by. “I guess I was burglarized” you say. “Oh, I am not so sure,” says the neighbor. “It was a very warm day today and I suspect some kids were out playing baseball in the street. Perhaps one of them hit the ball through your window, and crawled in the window to retrieve it, knocking over some furniture in the process. Then, Mrs. Jones next door, seeing the broken window and the vulnerable tv set, went in to take the set and hold it until you returned.”

Not wanting to offend your neighbor, you decide to take his suggestion seriously and so you dutifully trudge over to Mrs. Jones’ house and knock on the door. Unfortunately, Mrs. Jones is a bit offended by what looks like a veiled accusation that she stole your television, and she proceeds to slam the door in your face. So much for your neighbor’s theory. Right? “Not so fast” says the neighbor. “I bet Mrs. Jones thought you were an imposter seeking to trick her out of the television set!”

Ugh.

Well, your neighbor is creative, even if not very convincing. But notice this. His theory in fact *fits the data as well as yours does*. He was able to take the new, seemingly problematic data, and preserve his own theory simply by giving up one assumption that you were both holding fixed (the assumption here of course assumes the general reliability of neighbors under these conditions). Is his theory testable? Well, yes. But only if he plays along by keeping the fixed assumptions fixed. Unfortunately, if the tests don’t come out as he expects, he can still sustain the seemingly refuted theory by backing

down on other shared assumptions. The burglary theory and the baseball-neighbor theory are testable in one sense, and immune to all evidence in another.

All of this is meant to show—again--that coming up with a clear definition of science that tracks what science “really” does or what scientists “really” do is no easy matter. And this might make us pessimistic about the prospects of excluding religious claims from science by appeal to such definitions. A more promising strategy might be to point out certain constraints under which science must operate, and show that importing religious claims into science violates these constraints.

[SLIDE]The most commonly invoked constraint holds that science must be *methodologically naturalistic*. That is, scientific explanations must be given in terms of purely natural entities operating on the basis of specifiable natural laws. Any appeal to non-natural entities, like deities, or non-law-like events (like miracles) is ruled out. Must science be constrained by this commitment to Methodological Naturalism? The question is vexing, and not easily answered. Defenders of Intelligent Design theory think not. They think that in addition to explaining the contents and workings of nature by appeal to material entities and laws it is sometimes permissible to explain those things by appeal to designing agents, to God or to miracles. It would be nice if we could exclude the kids playing with intelligent design from the sandbox simply by appealing to methodological naturalism. But it is not that simple.

To see why, let’s go back to the earlier discussion about whether science is aimed at true theories or merely empirically adequate theories. And let’s assume that science is aimed at giving us *true* theories (a view I think most scientists actually accept in their unguarded moments). Might a commitment to methodological naturalism sometimes guarantee that we get the wrong answer? [SLIDE]Yes, it might. We can see this by considering just one example that arises from the domain of cosmology. For a number of years now cosmologists have noted that the universe is governed by an array of physical constants which must be remarkably, unimaginably precise for life in our universe to be possible. The atheist cosmologist Fred Hoyle said of these constants that, “Such properties seem to run through the fabric of the natural world like a thread of happy coincidences. But there are so many odd coincidences essential to life that some explanation seems required to account for them.” What explanations might there be?

One is that the *apparent* design of the cosmos is indeed *actual* design. On this view, the best explanation for such universal fine-tuning is the existence of a supernatural designing mind. Another explanation is that our universe is simply one among innumerable, perhaps infinite, number of spatio-temporally unconnected universes each of which has a different set of constants governing its activities. If there are an infinite number of actual universes, each of which has a different set of physical constants, then a universe like ours—one that permits life—would not be very surprising and certainly would not require some special explanation.

Which explanation should we favor: the design one, or the multiverse one? If we are bound by methodological naturalism we can't even ask this question. Because of this constraint, the so-called multiverse explanation necessarily wins by default. We can see this sort of reasoning by *apriori* exclusion at work in a revealing article in a recent issue of the journal *Scientific American*. In the article, the author, cosmologist Max Tegmark, provides an impressive array of evidence showing that our universe is indeed fine-tuned for life. He then defends the multiverse explanation for this fine-tuning as follows, "Cosmologists infer the presence of [these] universes by scrutinizing the properties of our universe. These properties, including the strength of the forces of nature and the number of observable space-times dimensions were established by random processes during the birth of our universe. Yet they have exactly the values needed to sustain life. This suggests the existence of other universes with other values."⁸ The reader might wonder why it suggests other universes rather than a designer. The answer is this: the author approaches the question at hand within an implicit commitment to naturalism. The existence of this fine-tuning suggests other universe because . . . well, because the only alternative is that the universe is designed—something that is excluded *apriori*.

Might the design explanation be *true*? Unless you have some very good reason for accepting naturalism you must admit that it *might*. But if it might, and naturalistic science firmly dismisses all such explanations then we are bound to admit that constraining science in this way just might force us to get things wrong.

Despite this liability, most scientists remain resolutely, indeed *fanatically*, beholden to this constraint. And fanaticism can get ugly. One can see it at work in one

⁸ "Parallel Universes." *Scientific American*. May 2003.

case that has been widely discussed in the news media. In August of 2004 a lengthy review article appeared in the journal *The Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*—a journal sponsored by the Smithsonian Institute. The article surveyed a wide array of scientific literature on the origin of “genetic information.” The author of the article, a widely known defender of Intelligent Design theory, wrote the article in an attempt to show that naturalistic attempts to explain the origins of biological information cannot succeed. Once it became known by readers that the journal had published an article by someone who defied naturalism, the reaction was swift and furious. The editor of the journal was immediately sanctioned by high level official within the Smithsonian some of whom attempted merely to revoke his privileges to access the museum and to utilize its library, and some of whom sought ways to have him fired. The heavy-handedness of Smithsonian officials ultimately led to an investigation by the Office of Special Counsel which discovered a systematic plot by Museum officials to undermine his credentials and credibility.

What is happening here? What inspires such witch hunts? It is, of course, theophobia motivated by this fourth reason.

[SLIDE]What is the alternative? One would be to allow scientists to take explanations that appeal to design or non-natural entities seriously. If there is evidence for any such view, or some way of putting it to the test why not let the creationist’s knock themselves out. We aren’t going to exclude any possibly true explanations just by fiat.

Some might welcome such a stance because they think that it couldn’t really make any difference. We can still only allows beliefs concerning non-natural entities into the scientific domain when they yield some empirically testable claims. But, one might think, claims appealing to non-natural entities are not and could not be empirically testable.

[SLIDE]This claim is false. And to see why, let’s consider the following, admittedly imaginary, example. Tomorrow morning we open the newspaper and are stunned to find that scientists have made a truly remarkable discovery. While examining a previously unviewed region of the universe, astronomers have discovered a large galaxy containing millions of stars which, from the vantage point of our planet, spell out

the first three chapters of the book of Genesis in Hebrew. I don't mean that they give the vague appearance of Hebrew characters; this is laser printer quality.

What would you conclude? I would conclude that some non-natural intelligent agent was at work causing the stars to be arranged as they are. Is this a scientific inference? Well, it is based on empirical data. And it is testable. How so? Because we can put to the test the claim that arrangements of matter which have complex semantic content for human beings does not in fact arise by processes that do not involve the activity of rational agents.

This, again admittedly fictional, example is meant to show us that some appeals to non-natural designing agents need not be incompatible with a perfectly respectable conception of science as an enterprise beholden to constraints of testability and empirical content. But we can use this example to see something else as well. Imagine that astronomers continue to study this arrangement of stars for many years. And now let's consider two potential outcomes of their continued research, and what those outcomes should lead us to conclude. Potential outcome #1: This particular arrangement of stars defies everything we know about star and galaxy formation. Getting this number of stars into an arrangement of that sort would violate all of the fundamental principles of astronomy on which our best explanations of other galaxies rest. Potential outcome #2: This particular arrangement of stars came into existence by the following series of events, all of which accord perfectly with our best understanding of the formation of stars and galaxies.

Under outcome #1 I think reasonable people could, and perhaps should, conclude that the star formation constitutes a miracle. And this is a perfectly respectable inference based on the empirical data alone, holding certain things fixed. Under outcome #2 I would conclude, first, that no miracle had occurred, and second, that a designing agent set up the material universe in such a way that this star formation would appear as it did when it did. And I suspect most of you would as well. What does this show us? Only that explanations that make appeal to design can be good, but they need not compete with explanations given in terms of law-like processes. There is no reason to think one will always trump the other. Though in some cases they will. Still, there is no reason to foreclose on either possibility *a priori*.

VI. Reason Five

I said at the beginning that I think that there are five reasons that academics find first person expressions of religious belief discomforting. Here is the fifth: The truth of religion implies that there is something in the universe over and above the natural which deserves my attention, allegiance, or honor and I find that distasteful or irritating.

Why do I think some academics are theophobic for this reason? The answer is, well, they have said so. Take for example, eminent New York University philosopher Thomas Nagel. In his, to date, penultimate book, *The Last Word*, Nagel says the following:

[SLIDE] “In speaking of the fear of religion, I don't mean to refer to the entirely reasonable hostility toward certain established religions and religious institutions, in virtue of their objectionable moral doctrines, social policies, and political influence. Nor am I referring to the association of many religious beliefs with superstition and the acceptance of evident empirical falsehoods. I am talking about something much deeper--namely, the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that. My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and it is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time. One of the tendencies it supports is the ludicrous overuse of evolutionary biology to explain everything about life, including everything about the human mind. Darwin enabled modern secular culture to heave a great collective sigh of relief, by apparently providing a way to eliminate purpose, meaning and design as fundamental features of the world.”⁹

⁹ Thomas Nagel. *The Last Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1999, p.130.

Nagel pines for the world described by Protagoras--the world in which “man is the measure of all things.” He does not wish for there to be any “cosmic authority.” No Heavenly Fathers please!

And in truth, many academics are naturalists or atheists as much or more on the basis of such wish fulfillment as they are on the basis of any reasoning or evidence. There is, of course something ironic about that fact in light of the naturalist’s tendency to beat religious believers with a Freudian stick. On Freud's view, religion (and here we're thinking especially of theistic religions) is an illusion, in his technical sense. This sense is not such as to entail the falsehood of religious belief, although in fact Freud thinks there is no such person as God. Still, illusions have their uses and indeed their functions. The function or purpose of religious belief is really to enable believers to carry on in this cold and hostile or at any rate indifferent world in which we find ourselves. The idea is that theistic belief arises from a psychological mechanism Freud calls 'wish-fulfillment'; the wish in this case is father, not to the deed, but to the belief. Nature rises up against us, cold, pitiless, implacable, blind to our needs and desires. She delivers hurt, fear, pain; and in the end she demands our death. Paralyzed and appalled, we invent (unconsciously, of course) a Father in Heaven who exceeds our earthly fathers as much in power and knowledge as in goodness and benevolence. The alternative would be to sink into depression, stupor, paralysis, and finally death.¹⁰

In Nagel’s case it is the other way ‘round. In this case, atheistic belief arises from a psychological mechanism of wish-fulfillment. And the wish is father to the unbelief. The specter of a divine authority stands in the background as a threat to my autonomy and independence. Like a cosmic dictatorial Provost or legislator who threatens not my academic freedom by my liberty to do what I please without fear or guilt, God stands in the way of my self-actualization. Paralyzed and appalled by the prospect of such a domineering figure, we unconsciously invent a universe that is cold, blind, pitiless, and indifferent; a universe in which meaning is entirely of our own making; a universe in which I am accountable to no one but myself.

¹⁰ This description of the Freudian view is borrowed from Alvin Plantinga’s “Games Scientists Play” unpublished.

Is wish fulfillment of one sort any better than the other? Not really. But as in the examination of the first reason, my aim here is not to get opposing camps to sit around lobbing grenades at one another. The point is simply this. Theophobes need to be aware that there is plenty of belief spawned by wish fulfillment to go around. Theists might find themselves unreasonably troubled by the specter of atheism. Atheists often are equally unreasonably troubled by the specter of a purposeful, morally infused universe that developed with human beings in mind and holds them accountable. Both are live possibilities, and there is plenty of evidence to which both parties can appeal in defending their case.

Conclusion

Academic theophobia has a variety of causes, only some of which we have been able to explore here today. My main aim in this talk has not been to provide those in attendance with therapy for their phobias (though I am happy to accept contributions from those who find themselves cured). Rather the aim is to help us see that our arbitrary exclusivism is after all groundless. The religious adherent can and should allow their commitments to play a guiding role in their understanding of the world and in their scholarly endeavors. But the truth is that we are not quite ready for that yet.

[SLIDE]In his recent book *Moral, Believing Animals*, UNC Chapel Hill sociologist Christian Smith sums up the contemporary stance towards such perspectives in a discussion of various current theories aimed at explaining why human animals are also moral animals. "Why are humans apparently unique among all animals in being profoundly moral animals? It may be impossible to answer this question definitively, but it is worth considering. Some people will say . . . humans are moral because of the relatively large brains our species acquired through evolutionary development, which are neurologically capable of depths and complexities of evaluation and emotion unavailable to smaller brained animals. . . . Here, by contrast, is a theory that would be truly controversial, daring, and radical: human religions have existed and do exist everywhere because a God really does actually exist, and many humans-especially those not blinded by the reigning narratives of modern science and academia-feel a recurrent and deeply

compelling "built-in" desire to know and worship, in their various ways, the God who is there. Try publishing that, and we will find out who is controversial and daring. Of course, that theory, while not empirically verifiable, would certainly explain a lot. It is a most parsimonious theory. But prevailing assumptions of knowledge production rule it inadmissible. So we stick with other theories no more empirically verifiable or intellectually coherent but that at least fit our dominant narrative."¹¹

I invite you all to be controversial, daring, and radical, or at least tolerant of those who are. It's respectable even if not respected; and it's even fun. And in some cases, it may lead you to the truth—and maybe even earn you an endowed chair.

¹¹ Christian Smith. *Moral, Believing Animals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2003, p.117.