Philosophers without Gods

Meditations

on Atheism

and the

Secular Life

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INTRODUCTION

Louise M. Antony

Atheism is a minority position in today's world. At least in the parts of the globe accessible to pollsters, most people believe in God. The rate of theism has little to do with the level of scientific or technological development of the society in question. Consider, for example, the United States, where, despite the country's constitutional commitment to the "separation of church and state," most institutions of daily life are infused with theism.[1] U.S. coins carry the proclamation "In God We Trust," sessions of the U.S. Congress open with a prayer offered by the official congressional chaplain, and national and civic leaders routinely invoke the name of God in campaign and policy speeches.

Within this climate, skeptics and atheists are viewed with suspicion. We are presumed to be arrogant, devoid of moral sentiments, and insensitive to a wide variety of human goods. Indeed, according to the authors of a recent survey from the University of Minnesota, "Atheists are at the top of the list of groups that Americans find problematic in both public and private life."[2] Forty-seven percent of those surveyed said that they would "disapprove" if their child "wanted to marry a member of this group."[3] The survey's authors hasten to point out that these opinions seemed not to reflect their respondents' actual encounters with real, live atheists—most people in the survey claimed not to know any—but rather reflected a stereotypical construction, one that linked disbelief with egotism, consumerism, and ethical relativism.

This volume is meant to contribute to a more just understanding of those who have rejected religious belief. It collects original essays by twenty leading philosophers from Great Britain and the United States, all of whom abjure traditional religious faith. Contributors to the first section, "Journeys," write in a personal vein, describing and reflecting upon the development of their own positions on issues like the existence of God and the basis of moral value. Authors in the second section, "Reflections," discuss in a more general way philosophical questions that arise in connection with religion and theology: Is religious faith really a form of belief? Can an atheist affirm the meaningfulness of human existence? Without God, is anything sacred?

None of us are casual atheists. Some of us were once religious; others never believed. But all of us have had long and serious engagements with religious questions and religious people, both through our professional work and in the course of our daily lives. As professional philosophers, all of us have studied and taught the main philosophical arguments for and against the existence of God, and several of us have published scholarly work on the philosophy of religion. We have discussed religion with colleagues at professional conferences, and with friends over dinner.[4] We have made common cause with religious people in social and political movements. We have seen friends find courage, inspiration, hope, and solace in their religious beliefs, and support and fellowship from their religious communities. We know what we are rejecting. But more importantly, we know *why* we are rejecting it.

I hope the reader will be struck, as I was, by the marvelous diversity of perspectives expressed in these pages, some of which the reader may find quite surprising. Many of the authors, for example, express great affection for particular religious traditions, even as they explain why they cannot, in good conscience, embrace them. Stewart Shapiro ("Faith and Reason, the Perpetual War: Ruminations of a Fool") and Joseph Levine ("From Yeshiva Bochur to Secular Humanist)," both raised in Orthodox Jewish homes, make vivid both the lofty intellectual pleasures of Torah study and the mundane gratifications of a Torah-governed life. Daniel Garber is Jewish by descent but was raised in a secular home. In his essay ("Religio Philosophi"), he expresses a poignant longing for the Christian religiosity that inspired the philosophers he studies, particularly Pascal. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong ("Overcoming Christianity") explains how his loneliness as a displaced Southerner was eased by the fellowship he found in the Amherst College Christian community. Marvin Belzer ("Mere Stranger") recounts with unalloyed pleasure the joyous experiences of his childhood in an evangelical Protestant home.

Still, every one of these writers found reason to give up religious belief. Although Shapiro maintains a kosher home and participates with his wife and children in the life of their local synagogue, his faith has dissolved. He explains his paradoxical relationship to Judaism in his essay. Levine explains, in his, how he came to reject both the doctrines and the practice of orthodoxy, despite the heavy

personal costs his rejection entailed. Belzer recounts the gradual process whereby the defining doctrines of his family's Christianity came to seem, one by one, irrelevant to the core of his religiosity. Sinnott-Armstrong explains how, forced to choose between an ethos of faith and one of rational inquiry, he abandoned religion and took up his life work as a philosopher. I describe a similar dynamic in my own essay ("For the Love of Reason").

Only a few of us in these pages engage in what might be called "evangelical atheism." Like Sinnott-Armstrong, Edwin Curley ("On Becoming a Heretic") urges atheists to abandon their quietism when religion is invoked in defense of immoral and regressive social policies. Simon Blackburn ("Religion and Respect") descries the way the mere designation of a belief as "religious" is held by many to immunize it from all criticism. In my essay ("For the Love of Reason"), I indict dogmatic religion, like the Catholicism in which I was raised, for lionizing the irrational acceptance of preposterous claims.

Several authors acknowledge the losses that can be suffered when faith dissolves. Daniel Farrell ("Life without God: Some Personal Costs") was a Jesuit seminarian when his crisis developed. He explains that in losing his vocation he lost forever the kind of clarity of purpose that had hitherto defined his life. David Owens ("Disenchantment") considers, by means of a brilliantly creepy thought-experiment, the way a thoroughgoing naturalism about human behavior threatens to undermine our most fundamental self-conceptions. Levine laments the loss of what he used to experience as personal connection with a transcendent being.

Other contributors, however, argue that secular life can provide rewards as great and as rich as those claimed by the religious. Anthony Simon Laden ("Atheism and Invisibility") contends that transcendent experiences are possible without transcendent beings, through a loving and open refocusing of attention toward other people. Daniel Dennett, writing in the aftermath of a life-threatening heart attack, shares his appreciation of the thoroughly human skills and kindnesses that contributed to his survival and that now sustain his recovery. It's not necessary to thank God, he insists, when we can, instead, literally "Thank Goodness." Kenneth Taylor ("Without the Net of Providence: Atheism and the Human Adventure") explains why he thinks human beings have the capacity to generate moral value from within, and how our mutual recognition of these capacities in each other can form the basis of moral communities. He also points out that the notion of "divine providence" can offer no psychological bulwark against the horrors that threaten us in everyday human life. At least according to traditional texts, God's plan may well include untold suffering for any particular human being. In my essay, I add that religion can actually increase one's psychic distress by populating the world with supernatural beings and powers. Simon Blackburn articulates a secular conception of the "sacred" as that which is held separate and apart, beyond comparison with things of merely mundane value. Marcia Homiak ("An Aristotelian Life") finds in Aristotle's theory of *eudaimonia* ("human flourishing") a compelling model of attainable virtue and fulfillment. Laden, Taylor, Homiak, and I all argue

that a naturalistic understanding of the human condition reveals a set of heroic challenges—to pursue our goals without illusions, to act morally without hope of reward—challenges that, if taken up, can impart a durable value to finite and fragile human lives.

Atheists are frequently accused by religious people of caricaturing religious doctrine, of attacking straw positions to which few enlightened believers subscribe. Religious people, we are told, need not be fundamentalists; they need not acquiesce to the Bible's apparent endorsement of slavery, genocide, and collective punishment. With more nuanced readings of Scripture, they say, and more sophisticated theology, belief in God can be reconciled with moral rationalism. Several authors consider and reject this reformist expedient. Levine and Sinnott-Armstrong point out that such recommendations invalidate the religious faith of a great many people. Levine insists that anyone who dismisses fundamentalism as unsophisticated effectively disparages the entire tradition of Torah Judaism. Shapiro and Tappenden ("An Atheist's Fundamentalism") argue that attempts to read religious texts and doctrines in a "non-realist" way, to treat them as not in the realm of literal truth or falsehood, must, in the case of Judaism and Christianity, founder on the fact that certain claims of fact are essential to these religions as we know them. Tappenden argues that a properly respectful atheism must take religious narratives at face value, so as to acknowledge the power these stories have held for human beings through the centuries.

But what does "respect" come to in this context? Two authors explicitly consider the question what it means to "respect" views that one believes to be deeply mistaken. Simon Blackburn ("Religion and Respect") argues that it's one thing to demand that we atheists show respect for the projects and needs that people so often address by means of religion: the search for meaning, the struggle to overcome weakness, the need to mark life's passages. This demand is wholly legitimate. But it's quite another thing, and not at all legitimate, to demand that we applaud or endorse people's embrace of doctrines that seem to us unjustified and unjustifiable. Richard Feldman ("Reasonable Religious Disagreement") writes more generally about the puzzle of religious "tolerance:" if I genuinely believe that my religion is true, and if my religion makes claims that yours rejects, how can I think it "reasonable" for you to hold to yours? How can we solve this puzzle without either stiffening into a repressive intolerance, or lapsing into a lazy relativism?

Another charge routinely leveled at atheists is that we have no moral values. The essays in this volume should serve to roundly refute this. Every writer in this volume adamantly affirms the objectivity of right and wrong. I rehearse the main argument—an ancient one, from Plato—for thinking that the existence of God is neither necessary nor sufficient for morality. Taylor develops a positive secular account of the basis of moral value, inspired by the work of Immanuel Kant. Homiak and Laden both explain what they find compelling in Aristotle's secular conception of the connection between virtue and human flourishing.

Several authors take the moral argument further. They argue that traditional religion not only fails to ground morality, but is, in fact, incompatible with it. These authors point to what they see as irreconcilable tensions between the moral messages in Scripture, and the dictates of common-sense morality. Elizabeth Anderson ("If God Is Dead, Is Everything Permitted?") contends that, if one relied on scriptural evidence, one would have to conclude that God is monstrously evil. David Lewis ("Divine Evil") concurs. In his view, the strongest challenge to rational theism is not the traditional argument from evil, which concerns "evils God fails to prevent" but rather the argument from "divine evil," concerning "the evils God himself perpetrates." Curley and Shapiro express their horror at the moral standardly drawn from the story of Abraham and Isaac—that it is right to obey God even when He commands murder. Sinnott-Armstrong, Levine, and I explain how moral scruples about doctrines in our respective traditions contributed to our loss of faith.

While Anderson and Lewis look at the dark side of religious *doctrine,* Georges Rey and Jonathan Adler examine what they contend are pathological features of religious *belief.* Rey ("Meta-Atheism: Religious Avowal as Self-Deception") observes that there are many psychological peculiarities about religious "belief." For example, many doctrinal beliefs professed by the faithful are not emotionally or behaviorally manifest in their daily lives in the way typical of beliefs about more mundane matters. Religious doctrines, Rey concludes, are not so much believed as merely avowed. Jonathan Adler takes up the question of why fanaticism is so frequently grounded in religious belief. His answer is that the notion of religious faith is at odds with ordinary norms of knowledge, norms that serve to block extremist inferences in ordinary circumstances.

Humility is a premier religious virtue. I think that all the contributors to this volume are humble, perhaps more humble than most religious people. Like theists, we affirm the limitations and fallibility of the human mind; like them, we acknowledge, with awe, the vastness and complexity of the natural world. Unlike theists, however, we have no master story to tell about the origins or the ultimate future of the world. Human science has learned a great deal, we think, but it's not a patch on what there is left to know. We have no sacred texts, no authorities with definitive answers to our questions about the nature of morality or the purpose of life, no list of commandments that cover every contingency and dilemma. We can have no confidence, the evidence of history being as it is, that the truth will win out, or that goodness will triumph in the end. We have no fear of eternal punishment, but no hope, either, of eternal reward. We have only our ideals and our goals to motivate us, only our sympathy and our intelligence to make us good, and only our fellow human beings to help us in time of need. When we speak, we speak only for ourselves—we cannot claim inspiration or sanction from the Creator and Lord of the universe.

What we offer here, then, are not manifestos or creeds. We want simply to explain what we believe, and why we believe. That, in the end, is the best we can do.

ONE

Faith and Reason, the Perpetual War: Ruminations of a Fool

Stewart Shapiro

> The fool hath said in his heart, "There is no God."
>
> —Ps. 14:1

> And the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: "By Myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast hearkened to My voice."
>
> —Gen. 22:15–18

In the spirit of this volume, let me begin with a short, autobiographical note. We'll get to some philosophy or, better, meta-philosophy, after that.

I still remember the moment when the last remnants of my religious faith died. One day in February of 1984, I was driving and listening to a radio news story about David Vetter, otherwise known as the "bubble-boy." The announcer said that he had been born, twelve years before, with a condition, known as severe combined immune deficiency (SCID), that robbed him of the usual defenses against infectious diseases. Since any infection would prove fatal, David lived in a sterile environment, a plastic bubble. He had no physical contact with any living organism. Eventually, the defense was breached, and his doctors had to enter the bubble. David then hugged his mother for the first time, and died a short time later, thus prompting the news story that day.

When I heard that story, something in me snapped, and I have not had a sustained religious thought since. Once or twice, particularly when in the stunningly beautiful highlands of Scotland, or the northern regions of Israel, old

feelings stirred, but it never lasted very long. All I had to do was to start to think about it.

Of course, the story of the bubble-boy was only the straw that broke the back of my religious faith. It was a major tragedy, to be sure, but certainly not the worst one I had heard of. My more or less typical Jewish education included a grounding in the Holocaust, covering that period in history from innumerable angles and perspectives. And of course stories of war, pestilence, famine, earthquakes, and so on, abound in both history and the daily news. In retrospect, it is easy to see that my faith had been waning, and the news story that day was the one that put it away for good, or at least for these last twenty years.

I am fortunate that I have not experienced a personal tragedy at anywhere near the level of David Vetter or his family. In my religious days, I would have added "Baruch Hashem" to that statement. But it now seems outright silly to praise or bless God for sparing *me* from such tragedies. I don't deserve it. And there is no way that the bubble-boy deserved what happened to him. He was *born* with the condition that robbed him of the simple pleasures of human contact. President Carter once reminded us that life is not fair. We all know that. So why should we believe that this universe was created by a being driven by principles of fairness? And if the universe was created by a sentient being of some sort or other, why does this being deserve our worship, let alone our praise? Free thinkers have been asking these questions for centuries, and I have yet to hear a hint of an acceptable answer.

My immediate family remains religious, as modern Orthodox Jews, and I go along with much of the ritual for the sake of family unity. Since I lean toward being a vegetarian, keeping at least some level of a kosher diet is not a major issue, either in or outside the home. There is a lot of wisdom in the Torah, and high among it is the Sabbath. Every Friday night, all work and school shuts down in our home, and we spend the evening and next day together, having nice, relaxed meals, catching up with each other, reading for pleasure, or studying religious texts. This is not negotiable, nor is it susceptible to deadlines on any project from any arena (other than life or death matters, of course). I admit to enjoying this, both for the sheer pleasure and for the psychological harmony it brings to our family. I also admit that if left on my own, I would not maintain the rigor of the Sabbath very long. It is too easy to let outside influences—editors' deadlines for example—push aside what is really important. At least for me, the Sabbath has to be observed religiously to maintain the benefits of it. I seem to have stumbled on a way to keep it religiously without being religious. In this respect, among many others, I am fortunate to be in a religious family.

A few years ago, our community lost a vibrant woman to breast cancer. She was in her early forties and left behind four children, the youngest not yet bat mitzvah (aged eleven). For a few weeks, I went into a rebellious state, refusing to go to synagogue or participate in any rituals (i.e., any positive commandments between man and God). Friends pointed out to me that I had no business to stay

away, since those directly affected by the tragedy were maintaining their faith, dutifully and meticulously fulfilling the commandments for mourners. The boys showed clear intent and depth of faith as they recited the Kaddish. For those who do not know, the Kaddish is a prayer recited by Jewish people who have lost a close relative (parent, child, etc.). It must be said several times each day, in the presence of ten adult Jewish males. Although it is usually recited in a solemn tone, the mourners' Kaddish contains no references to the departed and no words of comfort. It consists entirely of praises of God. This is how Judaism requires one to behave after getting kicked in the teeth by Mother Nature. The bereaved one must publicly declare praise for God.

I am in awe and admiration of the faith of those who pursue this mitzvah, especially after a tragedy like this one. I have nothing but respect for them. But I cannot follow them. Some say that this is pompous and ungrateful, but if so, so be it.

That is enough about me, or almost so. I hope the gentle reader does not mind my *qvelling* a bit (to use a Yiddish expression). What follows is an essay that my eldest daughter, Rachel, wrote when she was a senior in high school, as part of her applications to some colleges:

> I am the product of a Jewish day school. For thirteen years, I have attended the same school with the same people. Half of my day consists of English, physics, speech, and the other classes that most high school students drudge through. The other half, however, is comprised of religious learning, where I study Hebrew language, biblical texts, and Jewish History.
>
> But when I say that I am the product of a Jewish day school, I mean more than that I attend one. My family and I live in a small heavily Jewish area, and practically everyone in my school lives near me or attends the same synagogue. Even my extracurricular activities, which include playing sports at my school and leading a junior congregation, all directly relate to my religion. For better or worse, Judaism is my identity. It is my morality, my strength, my meaning. Growing up in an intimate community, where religion is more than a burden to endure, but something transcendent and inspiring, has been more fulfilling than I can articulate. I always assumed that I would raise my family the same way. I never questioned that. Until recently.
>
> My father is a philosophy professor and is consistently pragmatic. What he cannot calculate he does not accept. He sometimes lacks emotion and faith. He understands only cold, hard logic. Yet despite his suspicions about G-D and religion, he has always acted like any other Orthodox Jewish man. For the sake of our family, he regularly attended synagogue with us and participated in all Jewish customs. I sometimes forgot that he even doubted. And then, earlier this year, a young and special woman in

> our community passed away from cancer, leaving four young children, one exactly my age, and forcing all those who knew her to question their faith. My father's, which already hinged on such a precarious thread, was now permanently and finally lost. He stopped attending synagogue and severed most of his religious ties. When I asked him how he could surrender on his religion so quickly, he replied that no G-D would allow such tragedies to exist, and that people can live meaningful, important, rewarding lives without a higher authority. Although my father never challenges my beliefs and even respects my commitment, he is the first important person in my life to ever throw my world into upheaval, to make me re-examine how and why I believe.
>
> At eighteen, it is hard to surmise philosophical and ideological reasons for my beliefs. I was raised to hold my religion and my morality on equal ground, and to barely separate one from the other. My father's sudden vocal skepticism of G-D has forced me to re-evaluate many of my strongly held, innate values. My commitment to Judaism is as strong now as ever. Jewish life is an inherent part of where I decide to attend college. Yet despite my deeply rooted faith, I cannot help but wonder if there is credence to my father's ideas. In college, I look forward to expanding my horizons and learning from new and unique people. I am thankful for my warm and affable upbringing. But it is now time to see how my beliefs will serve me in a bigger, more complicated world. I used to be frightened at the prospect of such a transition. Now, because of my father, I have a newly acquired curiosity and a burning desire to broaden my views. After leading a protected, sheltered life, college will still be scary. But suddenly I can't wait.

I admit that I sometimes fail to show emotion, but I do not see this as connected, in any way, to my lack of faith. I would have preferred that Rachel say "sweet reason" instead of "cold, hard logic," but I could not be more proud of her. Most of all, I am grateful and humbled to be a member of the philosophical tradition that breeds the skepticism that led to this confrontation in her mind.

It is not news that religion (or at least organized religion) has had a troubled relationship with philosophy and science, at least in recent centuries. For the most part, the best that can be said is that the two enterprises occasionally manage an uncomfortable and grudging mutual toleration, and even that relationship is not particularly stable. When I teach Jewish philosophy, we study two sorts of figures: philosophers like Philo Judaeus, who attempt to reconcile rabbinic Judaism with traditional philosophical sources, and great rabbis, like Saadya Gaon or Yehuda Halevi, whose works contain philosophical interpretations and speculations. It is perhaps not a great exaggeration to think of this latter work as dabbling in philosophy. There are precious few figures comfortable in both philosophy and the rabbinic world.

On the other hand, the few exceptions to this generalization are among the most powerful minds ever—enough so to give my growing skepticism some pause. One is Maimonides and another is the late Rabbi Joseph Soloveithchik, affectionately referred to as "the Rav" ("the rabbi"). Christianity and Islam have figures like this in their traditions, and in their midst today. And on a more mundane level, some of the most respected and influential scientists and philosophers today are religious, some deeply so.

Nevertheless, I think it is fair to say that among contemporary philosophers, the seriously religious are a small minority. It would not take much effort from the editor of this volume to include ten or twenty times as many authors. One day last year, I was visiting the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. My sister-in-law picked up a book on religious artifacts and suggested that my Christian colleagues might enjoy it. I replied that I did not know if I have any Christian colleagues. She reacted with surprise: "What? Are they all Jewish?!" Putting aside the possibility that some members of my department might be Muslims, Buddhists, and so on, I told her that, for all I knew, my colleagues are atheists. She laughed, and noted, "Ah, yes, philosophers."

It is worth asking why most philosophers are skeptical of religion and why most rabbis shun philosophy. What is it about philosophy and religion, or at least philosophy and traditional Judaism, that leads to a clash in all but a few minds? Why does it seem to take a mind like that of Maimonides or the Rav to thrive in both worlds? A first hypothesis is that the level of faith demanded by typical Western religions is in conflict with the questioning, probing, and doubting that underlie scientific and philosophical methodology. This is the place where the spade turns.

To speak (very) roughly, there are three stances one can take on the interaction between religion and science or philosophy—between faith and reason. The first is that they are at war. The idea here is that religious faith is inherently irrational. Religion and philosophy each stand in the way of the other, in eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. Neither can accomplish its goal without vanquishing the other.

Bertrand Russell occupies an extreme, and perhaps overly simplistic, version of this perspective. His "Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?" (1930) begins, "My . . . view on religion is that of Lucretius. I regard it as a disease born of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race." And the essay ends thus:

> The knowledge exists by which universal happiness can be secured; the chief obstacle to its utilization for that purpose is the teaching of religion. Religion prevents our children from having a rational education; religion prevents us from removing the fundamental causes of war; religion prevents us from teaching the ethic of scientific co-operation in place of the old fierce doctrines of sin and punishment. It is possible that mankind is

> on the threshold of a golden age; but, if so, it will be necessary first to slay the dragon that guards the door, and this dragon is religion.

The view that religion and rationality are at war finds some articulation within the religious camp as well. These combatants maintain that to engage in philosophy at all, or to think of a religion as a (part of a) *Weltanschauung* subject to the usual criteria on the rational acceptability of such things (whatever those are), is the ultimate in hubris. To reason about religious faith is to adopt what Karl Barth (1956) calls a standpoint of "unbelief." As Alvin Plantinga (1983, 70–71) put it, on Barth's behalf: "[To] be in the standpoint of unbelief is to hold that belief in God is rationally acceptable *only if it is more likely than not with respect to the deliverances of reason.* [For one] who holds this belief, says Barth, his ultimate commitment is to the deliverances of reason rather than God. Such a person 'makes reason a judge over Christ' . . . a posture that is for a Christian totally inappropriate, a manifestation of sinful human pride." From this perspective, the very attempt to reason one's way through to religion runs directly against the command to subject one's personal will to the divine will. The directive is to obey, not to think first and then obey if it seems reasonable to do so. According to Exodus (24:7), when God gave the Torah at Sinai, the children of Israel said, as one, "We will do, and we will understand." The rabbis take the order of these pronouncements to be crucial. The Israelites agreed to obey the commandments before they understood them, expressing faith that they would eventually come to understand them. For this act of faith, they are praised. The merit for this is invoked by contemporary Jews, as they plea for forgiveness each Yom Kippur.

Fundamentalists in our day have to reconcile the accounts in Genesis with the findings of modern science. It certainly *looks like* the universe is much older than scripture says it is. So from the fundamentalist perspective, when God made the world, he planted evidence in it that misleads the rational mind. It is undeniable that if the creation story is literally true, then the world contains evidence that did mislead many rational minds. Why is this? One speculative answer, which I have heard from some Jews and Christians, is that God planted the evidence for evolution, or for the existence of stars more light years from us than the number of years since creation (etc.), in order to test our faith and to increase the merit of those who come to believe anyway. I take it that this attitude is a natural (logical?) extension of the thesis that religious faith is irrational and that one should have faith nevertheless.

If there is war between religion and philosophy/science or, indeed, rationality itself, then we have left the bounds of rational persuasion, so there is not much more to say in an essay of this type. If my opponent concedes that her position is irrational, then what can a philosopher do to convince her to change? How can one appeal to a neutral observer? How can you convince someone that it is better to be rational? Will a rational argument do the trick?

The thesis of war is, of course, not universally held by either believers or skeptics. Thank goodness. I hope that, at least today, the war hypothesis is a marginal, minority view among the world's religions. As noted above, many of the paradigms of rationality in the Western world—doctors, scientists, philosophers—are personally religious. Most of the organized religions of the world support universities, some of them among the best worldwide.

There are two other orientations that one can take on the relationship between religion and philosophy or science. The *rationalist* tradition has attracted some of the best minds in history. The underlying thesis is that religion, properly understood, and rationality, properly applied, pull in the same direction. The rational mind that comes standard with the human body is a gift that God has bestowed on us, and we are supposed to use this gift to negotiate the world and to understand God's ways. As Descartes argued, God would not—could not—give us tools that lead us badly astray when they are used properly. This perspective permeates Maimonides' *Guide for the perplexed.* For Maimonides, it is axiomatic that God would not ask anyone to believe something unreasonable. Passages in scripture that do not make sense, such as the various anthropomorphisms of God, are not to be understood literally. Make no mistake. Maimonides held that the five books of the Torah were written by God himself and that every statement in them is true. But not every statement is to be understood literally. The tradition, and our rational minds, help us tell which are the literal truths and which are metaphorical.

I conceded above that there is a lot of wisdom in the Torah. It has enormous insights on how human beings should treat each other, centuries ahead of its time. The laws concerning gossip and idle speech (*lashon hara*) are jewels, well ahead of the mores of our own time. The Jewish and non-Jewish world would be an immensely better place if these commandments were followed.

My religious friends want to explain to me how the wisdom got into the document. Unlike Maimonides and perhaps Rabbi Soloveithchik, however, I remain perplexed and cannot see the worldview of traditional Judaism as rational. Quite the contrary. The problem, as I see it, is that the Torah is not perfect (despite the fact that the Psalms 17:7 say it is). Human life is valued, to be sure, but individual autonomy is not. Democracy, freedom of speech, and religious tolerance are not among the values of the Torah. Within Torah Judaism, all serious decisions, even personal decisions, are vested in a male-dominated hierarchy. The Torah tolerates and, indeed, encourages and in some cases requires slavery, and the laws concerning divorce, illegitimacy, and other issues related to women are nothing less than pernicious. Modern Orthodox rabbis have developed a way to use the *secular* legal system to attenuate a deep ethical problem concerning divorce in the Torah. One of the most problematic aspects of the Torah's worldview is the thesis of a chosen people. Most of the ethical insights noted above become true, lasting insights only when they are extended from how Jews should treat

each other to how people should treat each other. I cannot accept the chauvinism that underlies the literal reading of many of the laws, even the wise ones.

In short, I cannot buy *all* of the Torah, and so I cannot believe it has a divine source. Within the tradition, and according to Jewish law, Judaism is a package deal. One is not allowed to pick and choose among the various commandments and doctrines. You either accept the package as a whole, or reject it. Maimonides, the quintessential rationalist, insists on belief in every one of his thirteen principles of faith and obedience to every one of the 613 commandments. Of course, humans are not perfect, and everyone inevitably falls short in practice, but the Torah itself must be accepted in toto. I submit that the level of faith demanded by traditional Judaism is inconsistent with the philosophical doubt or questioning we engage in daily, the same doubt and Socratic questioning that philosophers instill in students and anyone else who will listen, the same doubt that gave birth to and sustains the scientific enterprise.

The clash between faith and reason is exemplified in the biblical story of the sacrifice of Isaac. Even if we put the matter of morality aside, the commandment to sacrifice Isaac makes no sense. God had given Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age: at Isaac's birth, Abraham was a hundred years old and Sarah was ninety. A miracle. And Abraham was explicitly promised that Isaac would have children: "for through Isaac shall seed be raised unto you" (Gen. 21:12). A few verses after this prophecy, Abraham is commanded to give up his son as a sacrificial offering. And Abraham obeys, or tries to. God sends an angel to stop Abraham, just before he kills Isaac.

The praise that God's angel heaps on Abraham serves as an epigraph to this essay. Abraham had passed this final test, with flying colors. Apparently, the test was to see if Abraham would obey this command, despite its irrationality and despite its immorality. Following Søren Kierkegaard, I cannot help seeing this episode as a refutation of rationalism. The Torah is saying that sometimes it is outright irrational to have faith, and yet one should have this faith nevertheless—just as the enemies of rationality have been urging. God's commandment not only trumps morality, it trumps rationality. Maybe it takes an Abraham to get to that level of faith, and the rest of us should stick to what is moral and rational. But the story is in scripture for a reason. It is to teach us something. For me at least, the message of the story is clear, and I reject it with all of my being.

It need hardly be mentioned that this biblical story is not an obscure item added to the corpus. One cannot take it or leave it. The story lies at the heart of the worldview. A religious Jew recites it every morning shortly after rising.

There are a number of other interpretations of this biblical story, some more consistent with the tradition than others. None come close to satisfying me or getting to the heart of the problem. One reading is that Abraham actually *failed* the test. He was supposed to stand up to God, and reject the command to sacrifice his son. Abraham had established a precedent of arguing with God, before the destruction of Sodom. On the reading in question, he should have argued

here and refused to obey. Instead, we are told that Abraham got up early, anxious to obey this most unusual command. A *Midrash* ("legend") has it that Abraham rose early so that Sarah would not find out what was going to happen. The thought behind this *Midrash* is that Sarah would have prevented Abraham from (trying to) sacrifice their son. If so, then I submit that she is the hero of this story, the one to serve as a role model for future generations of parents and believers. In her apparent willingness to stand up to God, did she somehow have less faith than her husband, or did she have the good sense to think before acting, and to wonder how authentic the (supposed) command is? We have learned from David Hume that a seed of doubt and skepticism is healthy. It would not have taken much here. Could Abraham have gone through with the sacrifice if he entertained the thought that he misunderstood the command, or that it was not authentic?

In any case, the proposition that Abraham failed this test is inconsistent with the text itself. Abraham is praised to the nth degree after he is prevented from murdering Isaac. And it is explicit that he is praised for his willingness to sacrifice his son. The angel stops the sacrifice with the words, "Do not lay your hand on the boy, and do nothing to him; for I know now that you revere God, seeing that you have not refused me your son, your only son." It just does not make sense to praise someone for failing a test.

It is sometimes pointed out (or claimed) that in the historical context, the commandment to sacrifice Isaac did not seem as immoral as it would today. Since human sacrifice was (supposedly) common among the world's religions at that time, God was not asking Abraham to do anything very much out of the ordinary. Of course, God had indicated earlier that Abraham would have many descendants through Isaac, but Abraham had already witnessed miracles. He might have found it probable—or certain—that another miracle would occur, and that Isaac would be resurrected after the sacrifice. How else could the earlier prophecy, which Abraham presumably did not doubt, come to pass? On this reading, the sacrifice of Isaac does not fare all that poorly on grounds of the mores of the time or on grounds of consistency with previous pronouncements.

This interpretation, if correct, diminishes the praise due to Abraham. If he was confident that Isaac would somehow be resurrected, or not be killed in the act due to some miracle or other, then Abraham was not really sacrificing anything (in his own mind). On this reading, he did not believe that he was giving anything up in favor of his faith or obedience to God. And if child sacrifice was indeed common, then Abraham was not doing anything very much out of the ordinary. Lots of people did what Abraham was prepared to do—sacrifice a close relative in obedience to a higher power. We are told, more than once, that Abraham loved Isaac. I presume that at least some of the pagans loved their children too. It is only natural to love one's offspring. The only difference between the pagan who sacrificed a child, and Abraham who tried and was stopped, is that the latter was (supposedly) following the true religion. But does one get special credit,

and praise, just for being right? If it is indeed praiseworthy to (be prepared to) kill one's child in obedience to a deity, then Abraham and his pagan counterparts are on a par. If the pagan's child sacrifice was too immoral to deserve praise, then so was Abraham's.

Nowadays, we read almost daily of people who kill innocent human beings, claiming that they are doing what God wants. We call them terrorists, or would-be terrorists if (like Abraham) they are stopped at the last minute. Whatever else we may think of such people, I presume that we do not doubt the sincerity of their beliefs. They must be sincere, since many of them deliberately kill themselves in the process. It is the beliefs themselves that are sick, demented, irrational. No God would want this, we tell ourselves. The philosopher in me still asks the question: What's the difference between the near sacrifice of Isaac and contemporary religious terrorism?

I do not claim to have said the last word on the sacrifice of Isaac in this context. I do submit, however, that this biblical story represents a deep challenge to rationalism, perhaps the deepest in the (so-called) Old Testament. Contemporary rationalists have attempted to come to grips with the story. Here is Louis Pojman (1998): "Many Old Testament scholars dismiss the literalness of the story and interpret it within the context of Middle Eastern child sacrifice. The story, according to these scholars, provides pictorial grounds for breaking with this custom." As noted above, this account is not consistent with the praise heaped on Abraham for passing the test, or at least it diminishes the praise. Pojman continues: "But even leaving aside this plausible explanation, we might contend that Abraham's action can be seen as rational given his noetic framework."[1] One can imagine his replying to a friendly skeptic years after the incident in the following manner:

> I heard a voice. It was the same voice (or so I believed) that commanded me years before to leave my country, my kindred, and my father's house to venture forth into the unknown. It was the same voice that promised me that I would prosper. I hearkened, and though the evidence seemed weak, the promise was fulfilled. It was the same voice that promised me a son in my old age and Sarah's old age, when childbearing was thought to be impossible. Yet it happened. My trust was vindicated. My whole existence has been predicated on the reality of that voice. . . . This last call was in a tone similar to the other calls. The voice was unmistakable. To deny its authenticity would be to deny the authenticity of the others. . . . I prefer to take the risk of obeying what I take to be the voice of God and disobey certain norms than to obey the norms and miss the possibility of any absolute relation to the Absolute. And what's more, I'm ready to recommend that all people who feel so called by a higher power do exactly as I have done.

I find this last statement chilling, but our topic here is rationality, not chillingness. I know that other thinkers whose rationality is beyond question come to conclusions similar to Pojman's concerning this story, and perhaps I have not picked the strongest rationalistic interpretation of it. But I cannot follow this line. It seems to me that Abraham's action was outrightly irrational, and that *this* was the message of the story. He was praised for acting in an irrational manner, following his faith. To use Pojman's apt phrase, the social "norms" in question here are not those concerning the polite way to address someone or concerning petty theft. The focus is on the norm against the deliberate murder of an innocent human being—a child. How on Earth can it be rational to violate that, especially after receiving prophecy that said child will himself have children? When we are dealing with matters that are this fundamental, perhaps there is no neutral standpoint from which one can evaluate the dispute. But for me at least, the issue here is whether the level of faith demanded of an Abraham, or anyone else for that matter, is compatible with entertaining doubts about the authenticity of the source of the faith. The Torah's message is that it is not. One of the sins that Jews confess each Yom Kippur is the sin of doubt. I submit that at least some doubt is no sin at all. This, I believe, is the most important lesson of philosophy. Even the slightest inkling of doubt would have been sufficient to stay Abraham's hand. Since there was no doubt, an angel had to come to stay his hand.

Let me insert one more personal anecdote. There was only one occasion during my career when I lost my temper at a professional philosophy event. It was a departmental colloquium, and the speaker was a well-known philosopher defending the rationality of a belief that God has spoken directly to (or otherwise communicated with) an agent. The colloquium speaker argued that a subject can be rationally justified in the belief that the communication is genuine—that it comes from the Divine source. Of course, it is not enough just to think, or even to be subjectively certain, that God is talking to you. According to the speaker, the hypothesis that God is talking to you is defeasible, and as such, it can be "overridden" by other epistemic factors.

During the question period, I got the floor and suggested that at least some of the Inquisitors thought that they were being commanded directly by God to torture the unbelievers into submission. He agreed. I asked him what went wrong (presuming that something had gone wrong). His response was that the Inquisitors' belief that they were in communication with God was overriden by other factors and that they should have seen this. "What were the overriding factors?" I asked. "Basic morality," he said.

At this point, I asked the speaker if he held that basic morality *always* overrides (i.e., defeats) the hypothesis that God has spoken. He said "no," that the situation is more complex than that. This was the point where I lost it. I said that my people, and others, have suffered enough from Christians' thinking that they were talking with God. After the colloquium, two religious philosophy

students told me that they appreciated my reaction, and it gave them pause in their own thinking. So perhaps some good came of the session.

In retrospect, I suspect that the speaker balked at the suggestion that basic morality always trumps a hypothesis of prophecy because he wanted—or needed—to maintain that Abraham's actions concerning the sacrifice of Isaac fit into the religious epistemology developed in the talk. That is, the speaker needed to maintain that, according to the presented epistemology, Abraham was rationally *justified* in murdering Isaac. I am enough of a Quinean to reject foundationalism.[2] Just about every belief is fallible, and subject to revision, if the going gets rough enough. But I would think that it is patently obvious that the immorality of slitting the throat of an innocent child would override any belief that a morally divine deity has commanded someone to do just that. I concede that there is no knock-down argument here. Holism is hard to negotiate, especially when things this fundamental are called into question. So let us leave our discussion of rationalism.

One further orientation on the relationship between religious faith and rational belief is that the two are incommensurable—they do not engage each other at all. Science and perhaps even philosophy are at cross-purposes with religion. A defense of this, perhaps desperate, orientation begins with Hume's is–ought dichotomy. Science, and rational speculation generally, concern facts. The goal is to figure out what is true about the universe: whether or not it had a beginning and, if it did, how it began; how the universe operates; how planet Earth developed into what it is; and so on. In contrast, religion is normative. It concerns how we should live our lives. On this view, the Torah is a handbook for what Plato calls the art of living, and it is not a scientific, historical, or cosmological treatise. A famous, contemporary Orthodox rabbi was once asked if he believed that humans descended from other primates, as evolution contends. His response: "Why are you asking me? This is a scientific question. Ask a scientist." This is of-a-piece with the incommensurability orientation.

The world might be better off if believers and skeptics alike adopted a view like this. We would not have to fight over scientific textbooks, and perhaps the ugly disputes between various religions would be attenuated. For example, if one gives up the factual belief that a chunk of land belongs to his group, by divine decree, then he might find some reason to come to grips with others who make claims to the land.

As pleasant as this orientation may be, I do not know how tenable it is. Incommensurability does not fit with religion as we know it. Can the world's religions withdraw from *all* factual claims (other than the existence of God, perhaps)? Many years ago, in an Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion class, a Christian student rejected the incommensurability thesis, remarking that "if they find the body, the game is up." Can Christians maintain their faith without defending the historical reality of Christ walking on Earth? Closer to home, I gather that most modern Orthodox Jews have come to accept the truth of evo-

lution. After all, the evidence for it is damn good. So they hold that the creation story is not to be taken literally. Its truths are metaphorical. Maybe one can take the same orientation toward the story of the great flood, and perhaps even the actual historical existence of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their wives and children. But the concession to science ends there, or at least close to there. As emphasized in Joseph Levine's contribution to this volume, Orthodox Judaism is predicated on a special relationship between God and the children of Israel, a relationship that was consummated historically at Mount Sinai. If there was no Sinai, then Orthodox Judaism loses its hold on the children of Israel. The Bible says that God's presence descended on the mountain. A friend pointed out that we do not know what that means and that we have some room to interpret this sentence in a non-literal manner. But, he added, if there were no Jews at Sinai, we are in trouble. I do not know what an Orthodox Judaism stripped of all of its factual claims would look like, but it would be nothing like the religion we have now.

In short, I do not know how well religion can stay on the "ought" side of the is–ought dichotomy (assuming that it is a dichotomy). A deeper problem for the incommensurability thesis comes from the other side of the divide. Rationality, and certainly philosophy, are not—and should not be—content to stay on the "is" side. The incommensurability thesis is that religion tells us how to live. It instructs us on how to treat each other, how to treat the planet, and so on. And, as noted above, there are indeed deep insights along those lines in the holy texts. However, it seems to me that moral matters are susceptible to rational appraisal. That is, rationality has something to say about the best way to live and does not abandon that arena to the world's religions.

This is not to insist on moral realism, the thesis that moral discourse is objective. Moral non-cognitivists from Hume to Simon Blackburn insist that moral assertions, such as the wrongness of killing innocent children, do not express matters of fact, or have truth conditions. But it does not follow from such views that moral discourse lies outside the norms of rational appraisal altogether. Hume admits as much, when he discusses the senses in which we hold that a given feeling or action is rational or irrational. Moreover, Blackburn's quasi-realism is a sustained attempt to show that there is a logic of morality. To say that moral pronouncements are not cognitive, and, with Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature,* that morality is not *primarily* a rational matter ("reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions," 2.3.3.4) is not to deny reason an important (albeit secondary) role in moral deliberation. Abraham was not stopped by his faith in his attempt to murder Isaac. Something should have stopped him.

I am not an expert in meta-ethics, and I may have mis-described the territory. But it seems clear to me, at least, that it is simply not true that religion and science/philosophy are incommensurable. I do think that religion has nothing to say to science, on the "is" side of the dichotomy, but philosophy and rational reflection generally do have something to say about the "ought." It is dangerous

and unethical to leave that realm to the world's religions. Frankly, they do not have a good track record.

So I am forced to the conclusion that the two peace proposals, rationalism and incommensurability, are untenable with at least the mainstream Judeo-Christian traditions, or, to be specific, traditional Torah Judaism. If this is correct, then religious faith is at war with rationality, and all there is to do is choose sides. The best the camps can hope for is a grudging, mutual respect—agreeing to disagree, keeping the dispute from getting violent. Rationality dictates this much, perhaps. Hopefully, the believer's faith will go along, although the history of religious tolerance is not promising.

There is indeed mystery in life, a lot of unanswered questions of vital importance. I would not be a philosopher if I did not believe that, with all my being. Religion and philosophy alike grapple with the deepest questions of all: What is it all about? How should we live? Philosophy is sometimes chided for failing to provide compelling answers to its questions. Perhaps one of the most important lessons of philosophy is to teach us how to live with the questions unanswered, rather than settle for unsatisfactory but popular answers. This is our legacy from Socrates onward and is the source of at least some of the conflict with religion. In exchange for the security, comfort, and certainty of the world's religions, we offer only doubt and uncertainty, a cold, hard logical look at the universe. But I'll take it.

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