

PROFANE HOLINESS

Why the New Atheism Is (Partially) Good for True Spirituality and Religion

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I believe; help my unbelief!

—Mark 9:24

The New Atheists (TNAs) have seized the public's imagination, opening a new front in the American Cultural Wars against the Religious Right. But if we look closer we can see the wisdom of Simone Weil's powerful observation that atheism is a "purification of the notion of God." Let's call it Profane Holiness.

Conventional True Believers who chop the broad landscape of spirituality into fixed, little denominational plots, ringed with sectarian No Trespass signs, lead us to wrong turns and up cul-de-sacs. This is why the New Atheism should be celebrated, not scorned. It is a kind of Neo-Socratic midwifery, which, contrary to its own explicit intentions, frees true religious-spiritual energy from the old divisions, prejudices, and clichés of the past. Religion is then open to be returned to its original subversive and dynamic, not static, role. The New Atheism ironically offers a kind of cleansing—a tacit (though unintentional) defense, as well as enabler, of the religious life and mind. Of course, its avowed goal is the exposé of Spirituality and Religion as the Great Delusions of History, but paradoxically the result is the opposite.

This essay could also be subtitled an "*unbeliever's* defense" because sectarian colorations of faith often conceal more than they reveal. Those attached to sects and particular doctrines, ironically are unreliable as

defenders and explorers of the spiritual. This does not mean that every sectarian speaks only spiritual falsehoods; it only means that the spiritual truth is far broader than this or that particular religious doctrine or sect. As war is too important to be left to generals so spiritual journeys are too important to be left to the piously faithful. Non-sectarian unbelievers have their powerful uses: those who have a spiritual hunger unsatisfied by sectarian offerings may yet find—contrary to the conventional wisdom—that the unfaithful are their most reliable guide. The Hindu maxim that truth/God is one, though the sages call it by many names, has to include non-believers too.

I

Aldous Huxley spoke of the human “fear of labyrinthine flux and perplexity of phenomena...” And complexity is not a message, Huxley noted, for the smug, well-heeled, wealthy, or complacent who variably want to “settle down in their snug metaphysical villa[s] and go to sleep.” They want a comfortable, facile, one-dimensional world, which is precisely what the original founders of religion did *not* offer. Instead, Buddha, Muhammad, and Christ, after their own fashion, were restless, subversive, quasi-Socratic figures pushing humanity toward an uncomfortable confrontation with a turbulent, perplexing reality. And just as Socrates challenged the Athenian pantheon of morally unseemly Olympian gods, so the founders of the three major religions challenged their respective era’s corrupt religious, social, and communal conventions and traditions.

Religion, in its robust, original sense, was no opiate for the people (though that might apply to the deracinated version peddled the last twenty years by the American Right, whose “God” resembles more the bogus gods of ancient Rome designed to bless the status quo’s power center). Rather in its “pure” dynamic sense it shocked, and thereby centered the soul and mind on upsetting, wrenching concerns and questions regarding guilt, responsibility, God, death, the world, and the existence of evil. TNAs (who undeniably have their own sectarian unquestioned faith in the non-existence of God) reprise this quasi-Socratic role, forcing the conventionally religious to feel uncomfortable inside their cozy, metaphysical villas by facing the perplexity of existence.

John Shelby Spong has celebrated a new emerging Christianity in opposition to tired institutional creeds and symbols “that must be

broken open so that the concept of God can be embraced by new possibilities.” TNAs carry forth Spong’s project by helping to shatter these old religious paradigms, challenging various aspects of its outmoded and barbaric past. The narrowness and blinkered spiritual perceptions resulting from specific historical and cultural circumstances, in which traditional religions were mired, are confronted. After their own fashion, TNAs ironically aid the emergence of a more pluralistic, capacious *God centeredness* out of the dogma of *religious centeredness*.

Sam Harris, Michael Onfray, and Christopher Hitchens build the prosecution case against mainstream religions in unrelenting detail. Religious history has been one long, unending narrative of bloodshed, criminality, ignorance, and tyranny. To fully embrace religion, Harris asserts, means that fanaticism is inevitable. Any hope for moderation in religion is a “myth.” A full survey of the Biblical texts, he asserts, reveals a bloodthirsty God, a God, for example, that wants anyone (including your parents) who tries to divert you away from the “one God” stoned to death (Deuteronomy 13:7-11). There is a direct link between faith, extremism, and terrorism. “Intolerance is...intrinsic to every [religious] creed”; they are simply beyond reason. Harris cites inflammatory passages from the Koran mandating war on infidels (Koran 9:73) as a motivating force on Al Qaeda. Islam adopted, Michael Onfray said, “the worst legacies of the Jews and Christians...” which included total war and a theocracy dedicated to sectarian extermination.

And then there are the bloody acts condoned by the Catholic Church: the Crusades, the Inquisition, the burning of innocent women as “witches,” its history of Anti-Semitism, including complicity with the Nazis. These, assert Harris, are not unfortunate by-products of faith, but the inevitable consequence. Besides reiterating the same historical transgressions, Hitchens cites religion as responsible for much of our contemporary violence: sectarian strife in Iraq, India versus Pakistan, the growing nuclear threat from Iran, Messianic Jewish settlers’ land grabs (done supposedly according to Biblical directives), and so forth. Religion and God are simply man-made constructs, with a history of terrible violent outcomes both past and present, rooted in resentments, and tribal wrath.

Of a piece with this benighted history, religion also is an enabler of tyranny and ignorance. Hitchens cites the Catholic opposition, despite

AIDS, to condoms and the evangelical New Right with its anti-gay, anti-stem cell retrograde as examples. In his collection of readings justifying unbelief, *The Portable Atheist*, Hitchens offers an essay by Emma Goldman (approvingly quoting Michael Bakunin) who said:

[T]he idea of God necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind, both in theory and practice.

The modern totalitarian state (Michael Onfray) is modeled on the earlier Christian totalitarian state while the Muslim Imam serves a purpose analogous to a Hitler, Mao, or Mussolini (Hitchens weirdly speculates that the afterlife may be a kind of “celestial North Korea”). Of course, TNAs give an endless litany of the superstitious nonsense peddled by received religion over the centuries about sex, dietary restrictions, circumcisions, women, etc.

The value of TNAs, even after allowing for their polemical excesses, is to dramatically and stylishly remind us that religion, like other human pursuits, can degenerate into something utterly foul. And this is because humans, as religion has maintained for centuries, are flawed vessels, “fallen” creatures. Why should we then not expect that these *human* doctrines, texts, and practices, pertaining to spiritual matters, should not lapse into ignorance, cruelty, and moral blindness? Medical science was used by the Nazis to inflict the grossest barbarisms, but that does not mean we should reject medicine per se; certainly religion *can* become evil—and has. If the care for the body can be used for evil, how much more so the treatment of the spirit?

II

How then are the spiritually inclined—those who believe that religion, at its core, still offers something real and profound—to meet the challenge presented by TNAs powerful narratives? How *precisely* can their endless bashing of Western religious history and scriptures “purify” our notion of God?

John Haught in his excellent *God and the New Atheism* complains that TNAs “unveil religion at its absolute ugliest,” foregoing any engagement with serious theology. This is true, but beside the point: original Biblical texts are not compilations of selections from Paul Tillich, St. Augustine,

John Hick, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, C.S. Lewis, Abraham Heschel—or for that matter John Haught. It is true that Harris et al. avoid serious theological dialogue; but by criticizing both religion’s history of violent strife as well as the received religious texts—mainly Koranic, Biblical, and Talmudist—TNAs challenge religions to come to grips with exactly how various religions must confront the unseemly side of their basic texts. Why, to put the matter bluntly, should believers accept certain parts of religious texts over others given their mixed quality: poetry, profound insights, loving commandments, and horror coexisting almost in the spirit of postmodernism’s eclecticism? The answer is that a cleansing of the received tradition of its flaws and failings through evolution and change is itself a vital tool in advancing the inherent profundity of that tradition. It is not a recent invention of Leftist or “humanist” theologians.

Very credible mainstream theologians have reconciled spiritual verities with change and variation. For example, Cardinal Newman—once called a “great teacher” by the former Cardinal Ratzinger—famously conceded that Christianity has undergone many changes over the centuries, and confronts the problem of whether or not there has been any continuity of doctrine since the time of Jesus. He claims that, for various reasons, developments and variations in doctrine and worship have become necessary over the centuries. This arises from the universality of Christianity and the idea that its spread all over the world necessitated adaptations to local circumstances. Moreover, the fact that questions have arisen over the centuries which Scripture does not solve has, consequently, required the completion of Scripture. This is not to be regarded as a deficit in Scripture; rather, Newman maintained that Scripture was written on the principle of development. “Fundamentalism”—a belief in the “inerrancy of the scriptures”—rather than being an uncontroversial, obvious example of “tradition” is itself a kind of freakish, spiritual paralysis: it tries to “freeze” religious texts—or at least parts of it that often serve a certain political agenda, for example as part an anti-gay rights campaign—while ignoring the developmental push that has historically driven the emergence of a more purified spiritual awareness. The “traditional” founders of Christian Theology, Aquinas, St. Augustine, and Martin Luther, used interpretation as a means to illuminate and clarify received texts—even at times introducing doctrinal innovations—by eliciting implicit meanings. In other words they were “completing” the

scriptures by drawing out, which by their lights, were core meanings obscured, ignored, or misunderstood. The story of Christianity itself is its emergence from a set of beliefs defined by a tribal society historically bound by narrow rituals and rules (e.g., dietary restrictions) into a more purified stage, a more universal doctrine (all the while protecting the core Judaic beliefs in justice and speaking truth to power). A similar process is found in the histories of Buddhism and Islam.

To carry forth anew this ceaseless tradition of revitalizing tradition, Thomas Paine's thought offers a way. Although Hitchens, for example, sees in Thomas Paine a kindred "enlightened" spirit, Paine, unlike TNAs, can not only separate the spiritual wheat from the chaff, but also face the perplexities embedded in the human spiritual condition: finite humans, through their creeds, often obscure not clarify the meaning of God. Paine takes the iconoclasm of TNAs to the next level by making crucial distinctions that TNAs do not make.

While also casting a very critical eye on received Christianity ("idolatry of the ancient mythologists, accommodated to the purposes of power and revenue") and the Bible (full of "voluptuous debaucheries" and "cruel and torturous executions," more the "word of a demon" than the "word of God," a detestable "history of wickedness"), Paine does not lose sight of spirituality's fundamental precepts. He declares:

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life...I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy and endeavoring to make our fellow creature happy.

Thomas Paine does not believe that the existence of a Higher Power is annulled by the perfidies and confusions of the flawed religious texts by which humans have sought to explain (and celebrate) this Being. Nor do the cruel acts done in the name of God mean that God is a fraud or hoax. Since the Bible is, Paine says, a "collection of the most paltry and contemptible tales," it is an insult to God to assert that it is His Word ("I cannot dishonor my Creator by calling it [the Bible] by his name") (Hitchens called "paradoxical" Paine's criticism of religion as an insult to God, thereby revealing Hitchens' own confusion on the issue).

Doubt and reason co-exist with belief and faith (albeit theologically minimalist) in Paine's thinking (though he would not be comfortable with being called even a partial "man of faith"). Contra Harris, Paine proves that a kind of religious moderation can exist within the bounds of critical reason. Although all church institutions ("whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish...") by Paine's lights are "human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit," he nevertheless advocates religious tolerance:

I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise. They have the same right to their belief as I have to mine.

Humanism, reason, and spirituality merge because Thomas Paine's anti-religious *Profane Holiness* links a celebration of tolerance, mercy, and justice toward humans with the best that religion has to offer after all the mainstream belief systems have been purged of their companion barbarisms. Although Paine overstates his case—ignoring the traditional texts' message of love that the doctrinal "letter" kills—his own take on Ockham's Razor as applied to spiritual matters is an excellent place to begin: The Book of James' injunction: "Be ye doers of the Word" suggests that spiritual truths must be birthed by simple deeds not merely worshiped through the muddle and complexity of ancient texts and the institutions, rituals, and dogmas founded on them. To blaspheme (some of) these traditional religious narratives, is to open a new vista on the purity and wonder of God's mysterious love toward humans as "revealed" not solely in ancient "holy" documents but in the kind, generous acts of humans toward humans, the "better angels"—and God's presence—reflected in our human nature. Once it is conceded that human spirituality is a generous process of unfolding—God's love working through individual loving hearts and deeds in our otherwise profane world—then we can get beyond an unhelpful attachment to doctrinal and textual differences. The shock generated by TNAs "blasphemous" polemics against those "traditional" doctrines and texts is precisely what is needed to purify our souls of theological dross, to make us whole, to make us Holy.

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