

4

Evaluating Religion

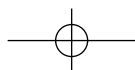
Tomis Kapitan

I. THE PROJECT OF DEMARCATING “RELIGION”

Controversies about religion, the value of religious practices, the grounds for religious beliefs, or the benefits and dangers of religious institutions, are probably as old as religion itself. The disagreements are usually vivid and longstanding; apart from politics, few sectors of human civilization can rival religion in division, acrimony, and bloodshed. Criteria for rationally assessing these debates are desirable, therefore, and to provide them is the object of this chapter. But little headway can be made on this matter without first circumscribing the topic. Just what is “religion”? What makes something “religious”? How extensively can these concepts be applied? Without answers to such questions, we cannot be sure how broad a sweep is made by a given critique or defense of religious phenomena.

There is skepticism about attempts to define “religion”. Some think that we cannot achieve a definition that would satisfy even a majority of those who have thought generally about the vast array of practices, beliefs, and institutions to which the labels “religion” and “religious” are applied. In their favor is the fact that the definitions most commonly cited are either too exclusive, too inclusive, or too vague. Others doubt that there is any single phenomenon of *religion* that stands to be characterized, and, thus, that the entire quest for a definition threatens to be a wasted effort. William Cantwell Smith argued that the classifications in terms of *religion, a religion, religions*—Western concepts dating from seventeenth- to eighteenth-century polemics and apologetics—are unhelpful because the term “religion” is thoroughly ambiguous and most of the traditional meanings are illegitimate.¹ Even names for historical religious traditions,

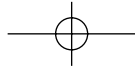
¹ See Smith (1964: 175). Paul Tillich noted that there are partisan objections to the very concept of “religion” as a classificatory device, for it threatens to diminish the status



e.g., “Hinduism”, “Christianity”, “Buddhism”, etc., express oversimplified abstractions that mislead the hearer into thinking that each represents a coherent unified scheme rather than a multifarious set of loosely associated practices and principles. Perhaps the best approach is to rest content with the observation that “religion” covers a family of resembling activities, experiences, traditions, institutions, and beliefs, and that there is no “common essence” exemplified by every item in the family (Hick 2004: 4).

Yet, this skepticism can impede attempts at clarification. There is no doubt that the terms “religion” and “religious” are vague and ambiguous. To most people in the West, religion is a matter of theistic belief and worship, but if we expand our gaze eastward to the Buddhists, Jains, Taoists, Confucians, and others, we discern analogous beliefs and practices motivated by similar concerns but lacking theistic overtones. The term “religion” is applied here too. The question is not whether this is a misuse of a term, but rather, whether there is a broader domain of human activities, conceptions, beliefs, rules, institutions, etc. that can be fruitfully grouped under a single classification, whether we call it “religion” or something else. Noting analogies, bringing hitherto disparate domains under one heading, is how our understanding of the world has traditionally progressed, and there is no reason why the same strategy cannot be pursued in attempting to distinguish a significant sector of human life. It might be difficult to circumscribe this domain in any precise way, but the same is true of other types of human endeavor, e.g., art, philosophy, science, morality, sports, or politics. While noting family resemblances is how we *begin* to demarcate one domain from another, confining ourselves to this approach seems needlessly tightfisted. For one thing, it relies on our ability to recognize instances—to “pick out some clear and uncontroversial cases of religion” (Quinn 2005: 394), something that could not be done without our already having concepts of *religion* or *being religious*, and associated criterion of application, to serve as guides. For another, since resemblance is ubiquitous, any further classification would have to be done in terms of *relevant* similarities, thereby introducing further concepts with respect to which things can be similar, concepts that we associate with those of *religion* and *being religious*. Understanding begins only when we bring these associations

of a preferred faith by treating it as just another species of a more general phenomenon (Tillich 1973: 127). For example, Peter van Inwagen writes that the concept of “religion” is “a piece of misdirection intended to advance what I call the ‘Enlightenment Agenda.’ . . . first to show that there is no God, . . . and secondly, that the Church not only is wrong about history and metaphysics and eschatology, but is a socially retrograde force” (van Inwagen 1995: 206).

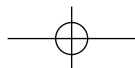
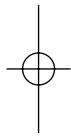


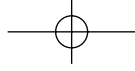
into the open, typically by formulating hypotheses that propose necessary conditions, sufficient conditions, or—dare I say?—necessary *and* sufficient conditions. We then test these hypotheses against the empirical data, and should they fail, we go back and revise. Even if we fall short of unearthing a “common essence” of all religious phenomena, the effort to do so is how progress in clarification, demarcation and, hence, evaluation, takes place.

It is curious that some of those who are skeptical about defining “religion” nevertheless end up doing something very similar to what they initially disparage. William James wrote that “we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important to religion” (1902: 27), yet, nineteen chapters later, he gave a detailed characterization of our “religious life” and of a “common nucleus” of religion creeds (1902: 475–500). Again, W. C. Smith held that the concept of *religion* is inadequate and not a valid object of inquiry (1964: 16, 119), yet his book is replete with talk about “religious phenomena” and “religious persons”, and it culminates in an intriguing analysis of “man’s religious life” (1964: 141–173). And John Hick, despite his avowed family resemblance approach, finds a common character within the restricted class of religious traditions with which he is concerned; namely, a “salvific transformation” from “self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness” (1985: 29 and 2004: xxvi).

Defining, characterizing, or demarcating “religion” is difficult, to be sure, but it is neither trivial nor confined to the sphere of academic curiosity. On a practical level, a concept of *religion* enters into legal statutes—e.g., within the American legal system—and has been at the center of contentious lawsuits. Arguments about the value of religion, whether it is essential to living well, or is a cause of intolerance and terrorism, or is inimical to progress, justice, and the pursuit of happiness, raise questions about whether a particular system of belief and conduct *is* a religion and, thus, whether it deserves respect or opprobrium as such. These controversies, and others ranging from theoretical debates over the compatibility of religion and science to practical concerns about political platforms, taxation, school curricula, and dress codes, are too monumental to ignore. They cannot be settled without some conception of what religion *is*. In plain fact, there *are* concepts of *religion*, however obscure, that are exploited within the public sphere, often with significant results, and there is no reason why we cannot articulate, scrutinize, appraise, and, if possible, improve upon them.

In attempting to state what religion is, I will not spend time exposing the limitations of the leading definitions that have been offered. Nor will I argue on etymological grounds by examining the derivation of the English





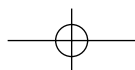
words “religious” and “religion”.² Nor will I characterize religion by recourse to sacred texts or a metaphysical posit of a transcendent reality, say, of gods, God, the One, or Absolute Reality—though no negative existential claim is implicated. Without assuming the truth of philosophical naturalism, I will go as far as I can in describing religion as a *natural* response to the world we encounter, rooted in our condition as acting, experiencing, emoting, and reflecting beings. In so doing, I take the basic concept to be that of *being religious*, considered as a type of activity that individuals engage in, whether by themselves or jointly, and treat “religion” as a nominalization of this activity. In the final analysis, once again, nothing turns on whether the terms “religious” or “religion” continue to be used to label the subject matter; what counts is that there is this important domain within human life, that it can be conceptualized, instances of it recognized, and that principles for understanding and evaluating it and its manifestations can be formulated and put to use.

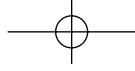
Religion evolves, along with everything else. Very likely, if the human species survives another 20,000 years, its religious life will differ from what it is now, just as will other aspects of human existence. Perhaps our current categories of *religious* and *religion* and *a religion* will become inadequate to characterize any single domain of human activity, or maybe religious developments will require additional conceptual innovations in order to be understood. Perhaps. But the prospect of future changes within any field of study should never be thought as an insurmountable obstacle to present theorizing.

II. THE RELIGIOUS PROBLEM

If the term “religious” expresses a type of human activity, what sort of activity are we talking about? What is it to *be* religious? Let me start off boldly by saying that a person is religious in virtue of (1) possessing certain attitudes that determine a fundamental problem, and (2) engaging in efforts to resolve that problem. The problem itself will be spoken of as *the general religious problem* and the activities as *the general religious response*. The qualifier

² The word “religion” is thought to derive from the Latin term *religio* which has come to be synonymous with “piety”. The *OED* reports that there are different accounts of the derivation of *religio* itself. In one meaning it derives from *ligare* meaning “to bind” or “to connect,” so that *re-ligare*, means “to reconnect,” though this can also be interpreted in the sense of being bound by obligation. Another possibility is that *religio* derives from *legere* meaning “to gather, to study, to read,” in which case *re-legere* is “to read again” or “to consider carefully” (See Smith 1964: 23–6, 183–5 n. 5, 199 n. 58, and also Nigosian 2000: 5.).





“general” signals that the problem is the common core of all religious concern; it can be replaced by “formal”, “abstract”, or “characteristic” without loss of meaning, and I will occasionally drop the qualifiers altogether. To describe this problem, and the characteristic response to it, is to complete the lion’s share of work in characterizing religion.³

Among the most prominent attitudes constitutive of religious mentality are our obvious preferences for things being certain ways rather than others, or, more strongly, our sense of how things ought to be. In our encounter with the world, however, we quickly learn that not everything is as we prefer or as it ought to be; in short, that some things are bad or *evil*. Here, the term “evil” is not restricted to moral depravity, even though many people use “evil” this way. It can be employed synonymously with “ought not be” or “bad”, or less controversially, with “contrary to preference,” but beyond that, no assumption is made about the ontological status of its reference.

The sense of evil—our awareness of conflict between the world and some of our preferences—should not be confused with knowledge or even with belief. It might develop into a doxastic state, but, in itself, it is more akin to a sensory state whose content might or might not become the explicit content of a belief. What is noticeable is that it is typically accompanied by aversion, and it is in response to this aversion, perhaps in conjunction with subsequent experiences of attempts to avoid evil, that a more reflective attitude emerges. This is a *sentiment* that evil, or certain significant evils, are inescapable aspects of one’s life, or, more generally, of human life, at least as normally lived. This sentiment comes in different degrees or forms. At its most abstract level it is focused on the inescapability of evil as such, but its content is usually more specific, for example, that of the first of the Buddha’s “four noble truths”; namely, that all life involves *dukkha*, viz.,

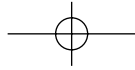
³ Some might already have misgivings if they think of religion as a matter of believing, experiencing, or feeling, rather than an “activity”. But the sort of belief required in the major religious traditions is driven by goals, e.g., attaining salvation or liberation, and while “experiencing” and “feeling” suggest more passive states, it is doubtful that they represent the full scope of religiosity. One of the champions of the feeling-based conception of religion, Friedrich Schleiermacher, described religion in terms of three types of *feeling*; (i) of the Infinite or Eternal as manifested in the finite (1893: 36, 237), (ii) of “total surrender” and “absolute dependence” upon the totality of things (the Infinite, the Whole, or the Universe (18, 37, 106); and (iii) of “sacred reverence” under which things are apprehended as holy or divine (56, 65). He minimized the role of *faith*, referring to it as a mere “echo” of other peoples’ religious experiences, yet recognized that religion is a kind of activity whose goals are (i) salvation or “oneness with the Infinite” (100–1), and (ii) communication of religious experience, thereby accounting for the social aspect of religion (149). Similarly, when William James wrote that “feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that all philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products” (1902: 422), the mention of “products” illustrates that an active response is also part of religious life.

suffering, sorrow, pain, anxiety, etc. In the words of William James, all religions recognize that “there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand” (James 1902: 498), and, in a similar vein, John Hick writes that all the great post-axial religions hold “ordinary human existence” to be “defective, unsatisfactory, lacking” in one way or another (Hick 2004: 32). On a more concrete level, the sentiment might be a preoccupation with particular evils, death or injustice, say, recognizing that *these* are stubborn or implacable features of one’s life, or of life in general. Presumably, not just any recognized evil is enough to generate a religious response; everyone faces daily annoyances, but not all of these stimulate a religious response. The evils in question must be recognized as suitably significant, difficult to evade, or ubiquitous, and there is no need that they are the same for everyone.

Regardless what particular form an individual’s sentiment of evil assumes, it is essential that he or she conceptualizes the instances, sources, types, or effects of evil under common headings of being *evil* (or *bad*, or *what ought not be*, or *what is contrary to preference*). The sentiment requires possession of one or more predicable concepts of evil, even though one might lack the abstract concept of evil *qua* subject, that is, as something to which properties are attributed. Moreover, the sentiment is defeasible. It might fade or be dropped for any number of reasons, for example, by ignoring it, or by coming to the view that evil does not really exist or is nothing more than the absence of being, or by accepting that an individual can be changed so as to escape the normal human condition.⁴

Insofar as the sentiment is retained, it occasions *discomfort* over the apparent fact that not everything is as it ought to be, at least in one’s natural state. This discomfort can be differently labeled—James used “uneasiness” (1902: 498) and Josiah Royce used “sorrow” (1912: 239–40)—but, however designated, it results from the action of the world upon our cognitive, motivational, and emotional capacities. If we lacked motivational preferences, we would not encounter obstacles as we act. If we did not have emotional reactions to what we encounter, we would not feel any discomfort. If we did not have the type of reflective awareness we have, we would not develop the sentiments that we do. Let us refer to the discomfort brought about by the sentiment of evil as *religious discomfort*. Speaking figuratively, it is as much a *metaphysical* ailment as it is psychological,

⁴ The emphasis upon *normality* or our *natural* condition is prominent in James’s description of religion (1902: 498) and in Royce’s (1912: 12). Arnold Toynbee wrote that religion is an individual’s attempt to transcend *innate* self-centeredness by seeking “communion” and “harmony” with an absolute spiritual reality (1956: 273). Similarly, Hick treats the “self-centeredness” from which an individual is to be saved or liberated as the *ordinary* condition from which he or she begins (e.g. Hick 2004: 32).



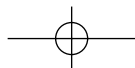
because it concerns a very abstract pattern permeating our encounter with the world which we commonly attempt to grasp through metaphysical conjecture.

Since we naturally try to avoid discomfort, what next emerges is a desire to eliminate or reduce religious discomfort. To satisfy this desire is what I call *the general religious problem* or, alternatively, *the general religious goal*. Again, I speak in abstract terms, fully recognizing that the problem is variously manifested in different religious traditions. Yet, having identified it, we are at the threshold of the entire edifice of religion, and there is nothing supernatural, ghostly, or other-worldly about this entry point as so described. Rooted in our capacities and occasioned by reflection upon our experience, the problem becomes part of our psychological makeup, and everything humans do that qualifies as “religious” is, in part, an attempt to solve it.

It might seem that what I am calling “the religious problem” could equally be called “the problem of evil.” There is some rationale for so doing, but it can also be misleading given that there are different problems of evil generated by different sets of commitments. Some doubt that there is a generalized problem of evil. Peter van Inwagen, for example, describes one attempt to locate an overarching problem of evil, viz., the threat to our endeavor to find “meaning” in the world, as an abstraction that is only remotely similar to the traditional theological problem of evil.

There is no larger, overarching problem of evil that manifests itself as a theological problem in one historical period and as a problem belonging to post-religious thought in another. I don’t know how to argue for this conclusion, because I wouldn’t know how to enter into anything I would call an argument with someone who could even consider denying it (van Inwagen 2006: 16)

Undoubtedly, any “overarching” problem of evil would be different from the traditional problem of evil that faces the sort of supreme being van Inwagen is concerned with. Still, there is common difficulty that faces any reflective person who finds a tension between the belief that some things are evil, or that evil exists in the amount or distribution that it does, and other convictions, say, in the existence of a supreme being or in the goodness, meaningfulness, or worth of life. How to resolve this tension is the general *theoretical* problem of evil, and it takes different forms depending on the convictions in question. It is quite distinct from the general *practical* problem of evil which I have here identified as “the religious problem”; namely, whether there *is* a mechanism, a means, a method, of ridding oneself of the discomfort caused by the sentiment of evil. Both differ from *local* practical problems of evil concerning the efficacy of proposed solutions to the religious problem.



III. THE RELIGIOUS RESPONSE

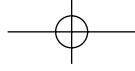
Confronting the general religious problem is not enough for an individual to be engaged in religious activity; *being* religious requires participating in a specific response to the problem. Here too there are characteristic attitudes. To begin with, an individual must envision or be made aware of a possible solution to the religious problem. It is usually learned, but in some cases it is partly a product of the individual's own creative thought, perhaps stimulated by experiences of tragedy, joy, awe, or mystery.⁵ The individual must then adopt a positive evaluation of the vision that, in turn, generates both an endorsement of the vision and an intention to act in accordance with its guidelines.

Typically, a *religious vision* consists of both theoretical claims about the world and the human condition, and various norms (moral, prudential, and possibly, ritualistic). Its theory might involve anything from mundane descriptions to myths to sophisticated metaphysics, but, minimally, it will include the following elements:

1. A conceptualization of evil; that is, an account of its nature, basic forms, sources, effects, or chief exemplars.
2. A view about what is good or of positive value, in particular, about what is supremely good, what is divine or, minimally, what is relevant to reducing religious discomfort.
3. an account of a positive *transformation(s)* consisting in an individual's being reoriented towards what is supremely good so that religious discomfort can be reduced or eliminated.

Theories with these components come in varying degrees of specificity, and some are properly viewed as elaborations or systematizations of others. Each constitutes an articulated conception of the religious problem and its solution, and to the degree that it ventures into the abstract it offers a

⁵ A description of religious experience can be found in writings by Rudolph Otto (1958, 1957) who describes mystical experience and the feeling of a *mysterium tremendum* (1958: chs. iv and v). Howard Wettstein attempts a naturalistic account of religious *awe* as a product of our affective and rational capacities interacting with our experiences, say, natural or human grandeur or of mystery (1997: 260–5). Similarly, Richard Schacht writes that religion happens whenever something is experienced as divine, where such experience involves a “mode of valuation” that can be understood without recourse to transcendent explanations (Schacht 1997: 90–2). By contrast, some hold our natural capacities to be insufficient for solving the religious problem (see e.g. the criticisms of Wettstein by Stump 1997 and Quinn 1997). Instead, humans must be in contact with an external source, say, through communion with supernatural beings or revelation from a divinity, a contact that, in turn, is used to explain the awe-inspiring experiences.



metaphysical vision of reality; at the very least, a partial metaphysics of value and the human condition. The conceptualization of value in some religious visions might deny that there is a contrast between two positive forces or properties—“evil” on the one hand, “good” on the other. Still, some sort of polarity *is* assumed if the call for a transformation is to make any sense. At the practical level, a religious vision will include the following:

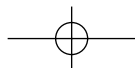
4. A specification of what attitudes an individual should have or cultivate, and which attitudes are to be avoided, in order to facilitate the transformation(s).
5. An agenda of actions (practices) to be performed and of actions to be avoided in order to facilitate the transformation(s).

The attitudes and actions are mandated in order to bring about the envisioned transformation (for example, the Buddhist’s Eightfold Path). Let us say that 1–3 constitute the *theoretical component* of a religious vision and 4–5 constitute its *practical component*.

It is difficult to generalize much further while maintaining neutrality since different religious visions vary widely on what is evil, what is good, and what transformations are required to solve the religious problem. Paul Tillich described the supreme good of religion as whatever is the object of “ultimate concern” (1963: 5), but this promises little more than a change of terminology. The familiar view that the religious response is an effort to gain the favor of divine beings, gods, or a supreme being,⁶ is adequate for a good deal of religious phenomena, but it sacrifices generality and neutrality given that the atheistic traditions within Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, etc. are rightly classed as religions. Even assuming that “divine” represents an attribute of agents, not all theists would take “gaining the favor” of divine beings to be the most accurate depiction of the transformation sought.

Another attempt at generalized description portrays the fundamental source of religious discomfort to be our own self-centeredness, stressing that it is to be overcome through some sort of communion or harmony with Absolute Reality (Toynbee 1956), the transcendent Real (Hick 2004), the Infinite (Schleiermacher 1893), or the One (Copleston 1982), thus, that religion is a matter of “salvation in transcendence” (Otto 1957: 99). Yet it is doubtful that describing the religious response in these terms fares any better, at least not if ‘Absolute Reality’, ‘the One’, and so on, mean

⁶ William James interpreted “divine” very broadly “as denoting any object that is godlike,” though he acknowledged the vagueness of “godlike” (James 1902: 34). I have used “divine” to characterize religion, though in the interests of generality, I took it as a value predicate purged of any connotation of agency (Kapitan 1989: 211–2). Understood in this way, some might classify a state, a force, or an activity as divine, e.g., Nirvana, Necessity, basketball, chess, or romance.



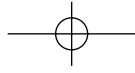
anything other than “the universe” or “the totality of what exists.” There are responses to the religious problem that follow the pattern set forth in points 1–3, e.g., Theravada Buddhism or Epicureanism (see Section IV below), but which do not posit a single transcendent reality.

The occurrence of “being reoriented towards” in point 3 is another effort to secure generality, though it too can be interpreted differently. If the supreme good is identified as an entity distinct from the individual, then reorientation is a matter of coming into a *relationship* with the divine, whereas if the supreme good is the transformation itself, then attainment of a *state* of being becomes the chief focus of religious endeavor. It may also be that a relationship to the supreme good is, *ipso facto*, being in a supremely good state, e.g., the mystic’s state of union with, or absorption into, a more fundamental reality (God, Brahman, the One). In either case, every religious vision presupposes that the elimination or reduction of religious discomfort is closely linked to the projected transformation.

This last point illustrates a complexity in most religious visions that is easily missed if we think of the religious goal as a quest for some sort of transformation, and of the rules and rituals of a particular religious vision as mechanisms for achieving it. Two types of transformation are at stake, though they are not always distinguished. Every religious vision posits the possibility of an individual’s being positively transformed, and links this transformation to the attainment of the religious goal, whether it is best thought of as “salvation,” “being approved by god(s),” “gaining eternal life,” “annihilation,” “union with the One,” “enlightenment,” “living in an ideal community,” “*moksa*,” “*nirvana*,” “*tawhid*,” “*fanā’*,” etc. A religious transformation may be spoken of as *ontological* insofar as it amounts to a change in an individual’s ontological or axiological status, but *psychological* insofar as it consists in a reduction or removal of religious discomfort within the individual psyche. Many religious visions speak of both and suggest one or more overlapping connections between them, notably:

- the transformations are different aspects of one underlying transformation;
- the ontological transformation is a cause of the psychological transformation;
- the psychological transformation is a sign of the ontological transformation;
- belief that one is ontologically transformed, or might become ontologically transformed, is a necessary condition, or a sufficient condition, or both, for the psychological transformation;

Hope for a psychological transformation partly motivates any religious vision, yet it need not be identified as a particular goal *within* that

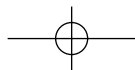
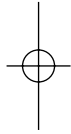


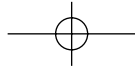
vision. To the extent that a religious vision singles out the psychological transformation for special attention, it offers an explicitly *psychological* solution to the religious problem, at least in part. To the extent that it advances a double aspect account of the transformation, it gives a purely *internal* solution to the religious problem. On the other hand, if the projected ontological transformation is a matter of the individual's relation to something external, then the solution is partly *external*. Again, whether or not the reduction or elimination of religious discomfort is explicitly identified as a goal, it is an underlying cause of the emergence of, and adherence to, every religious vision.⁷

For a person to *be* religious he or she must endorse a particular religious vision. This endorsement includes both belief and an intention to abide by its transformational methods.⁸ Even this twofold commitment is not quite enough. One might encounter the religious problem in some form or another, be both doxastically and practically committed to a particular religious vision, but do nothing to implement that vision. *The religious response* exists only when the intention to implement a particular religious vision

⁷ For the Near Eastern Abrahamic traditions, the solution to the religious problem is a matter of *salvation* involving a relationship between the individual and God. The term "salvation" is also used by philosophers to express a more general state, e.g., James (1902: 498) and Royce (1912: 8–18), while others speak in terms of "transcendence" (Smith 1964: 176 and Hick 1997). For the major Eastern religions, "liberation" is the more apt English expression of the religious goal, and John Hick, in his effort to achieve a general characterization of the structure of the major post-axial traditions, uses the phrase "salvation/liberation" to express what they all aim at (2004: ch. 3). *Perhaps* this phrase is general enough to express the transformation that all religious visions posit, especially if "liberation" is not restricted to the metaphysics of Hindu-Buddhist-Jain traditions, viz., as release from the cycle of rebirth. It is less clear that Hick's sense of "salvation/liberation" is appropriate to capture the Sufi's goal of *fanā'* (annihilation), or for visions which describe the critical transformation in more purely psychological terms, viz., as a matter of becoming enlightened or achieving a state of calm. The "positive transformation" I am speaking of is intended to be even more general, covering even the reform of an individual's behavioral tendencies called for by the *pre-axial* religions in the interests of preserving something else, e.g., social structure, a favorable natural environment, or the favor of the gods.

⁸ Is religion a matter of *faith*? This depends on what "faith" is. Insofar as attempts to implement a religious vision involve a commitment that is both doxastic and practical, then an element of trust or hope is a natural corollary, so if "faith" signifies a dual commitment qualified by these emotions then being religious includes having faith. Faith, in this sense, need not be marked by an absence of evidence. There is no more reason to think that the theoretical components of religious schemes warrant epistemic skepticism than any other segment of human theorization. As for the practical side, evidence that the vision will bring about beneficial psychological or sociological transformations is no doubt empirical, though perhaps it requires examination of many cases of long stretches of time. Maybe the best evidence will always be slender, and, for at least the reflective person, there are undoubtedly moments of uncertainty in the religious endeavor, despite the pious proclamations or boisterous confidence of others.





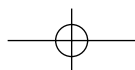
generates actions, regardless whether these actions succeed in generating the hoped-for results. An attempt might consist of a single individual's efforts, or, as some traditions insist, the joint efforts of several individuals. Obviously, there are degrees of religiosity just as there are degrees of effort in executing the intention; for some, the spectacle of abiding evil is so pressing that the religious quest becomes central to their lives, while for others, it makes a more fleeting and less intense claim upon their consciousness, whether periodic or sporadic.⁹

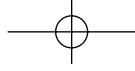
IV. WHAT IS A RELIGION?

Having clarified what it is to *be* religious, it seems a straightforward matter to define "religion". As an abstract feature of human life, religion is the impulse or tendency in human beings to participate in the religious response to the religious problem. Understood in concrete terms, religion is the cumulation of all attempts to solve the religious problem through a religious response. The nearly glib circularity of these descriptions is mitigated by the separate characterizations of "the religious response" and "the religious problem" already provided. More memorable definitions of "religion" might be preferred, say, as "the quest for meaning," "what is of ultimate concern," or "the attempt to overcome evil by reorienting oneself towards what is divine," but these are only surface representations that obscure as much as they reveal.

There is a twofold notion of a particular religion—that is, of *a* religion. As an *ideal*, a religion is no different from a religious vision, or from a particular elaboration upon a religious vision. A single vision can give rise to different elaborations, and because difference and similarity come in degrees, differentiating among distinct religions *qua* religious visions is no different than distinguishing among theories. The same arbitrariness affects the distinct notion of *a* religion as that complex of historical attempts to implement a particular religious vision, some of which are short-lived

⁹ Is religion dispensable, or are we to agree with James who felt that religion will necessarily play an eternal part in human history (1902: 493), or with Tillich—who wrote: "The religious principle cannot come to an end. For the question of the ultimate meaning of life cannot be silenced as long as men are men" (1963: 96). There may be individuals who are not moved by the religious problem in the way that I have described it, though every human who is not mentally impaired has the potential to be religious, and, very likely, *is* religious to the degree that he or she harbors sentiment of evil. Yet human nature is flexible enough to allow for non-spiritual types whose piecemeal approach to life's evils precludes the sentiment of evil from ever taking root or leaving any serious mark. Outward piety might even conceal a mind focused on other goals.





while others are massive *religious traditions*.¹⁰ Here, differentiating becomes risky business, for distinctions are often artificial or misleading and sensitivities are acute. For example, are Jainism and Buddhism distinct from Hinduism, or just movements within Hinduism (Smith 1964: 62–3)? Or, since Christianity is an outgrowth of Judaism, and Islam is an outgrowth of both, why not treat each tradition as a species of one religion? In the other direction, treating each of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and so forth, as constituting just *one* religion is also precarious. Each could equally be viewed as a *framework* for many similar religions that differ in crucial respects. It is almost ludicrous to think of an Albert Schweitzer (1949: ch. 9) and someone who advocates apocalyptic war (e.g. Lindsey 1980) as adherents of the same religious vision, even though both are described as “Christians.” How can Ibn ‘Arabi and Rumi be grouped together with Ibn Taymiyya as “Muslims” when their beliefs differ so widely? It seems more accurate to describe them as religious rivals, competitors for being legitimate interpreters of a vision, rather than co-religionists.

Some might think that this account of a religion is too narrow. By describing a religion as a particular attempt to solve a single problem, the religious problem, we miss the sense in which many religions involve a more encompassing quest for “the meaning of our life” (Tillich 1963: 4, and 1973: 56-72), and call for a massive reorientation of *all* one’s activities. However, nothing in the characterization precludes finding a solution to the religious problem in the larger quest for life’s “meaning,” and it is likely that an effective religious vision will portray the encounter with evil within a larger practical and metaphysical context that responds to this quest. Since evil is pervasive, and since values and choices condition every sphere of human activity, a religious response may well involve a holistic regulation of attitudes and behaviors concerning every aspect of life, including our social and political involvements.

On the other hand, the account might seem too broad. Well, it is broad, to be sure, and a good deal can be classified as “religious” and “religions” by its means, including, happily, the world’s major religious traditions. But it does not entail that every action or goal-oriented process is a religious one.

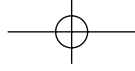
¹⁰ W. C. Smith distinguished a religious system considered as an ideal from the historical and sociological manifestations of that system. “Thus, there are two Christianities: ‘true Christianity’ on the one hand, the ideal . . . and, on the other hand, the Christianity of history, which the sociologist notes is a human, sometimes all too human, complex. Normally people talk about other people’s religions as they are, and about their own as it ought to be” (Smith 1964: 48). He also noted that those who are within a religious tradition, especially its developers, often do not have a name for that tradition, though Islam is a notable exception. The other traditions did not receive names until the late eighteenth century (1964: ch. 3).

Its emphasis upon a peculiar sort of problem and a goal-oriented response permits a distinction between religion and other forms of human endeavor. For example, since the goal of religion, as such, is not the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, then religion is not the same as philosophy or science, even though every religious vision incorporates some degree of theoretical conjecture. Similarly, religion is not art, politics, economics, sports, sex, agriculture, warfare, etc., for each can be characterized in terms of goals that differ from the general religious goal.

At the same time, the account allows virtually any type of action to *acquire* a religious status if it is taken to help resolve the religious problem. Eating, smoking, drinking wine, singing, copulation, and so on can be religious activities insofar as they are deemed conducive to achieving the religious goal. Even killing can be religious; one thinks of the ritualistic sacrifices performed by Aztec priests or of sacred texts that mandate terrorism (Numbers 33: 50–3 and 1 Samuel 15: 1–3). One can even conceive of a religious vision that would deal with evil by helping people forget the sentiment of evil through endless indulgence in idle diversions or “entertainment.” More disturbing responses are advanced by “satanic” cults that willingly embrace forms of evil as means of solving the religious problem. Similarly, political ideologies can become religious visions insofar as they optimistically offer a socio-political program for reducing evil and its psychological effects; namely, through membership in properly constructed societies. Thus, Marxism, with its optimistic vision that historical necessity will deliver a classless society that eliminates injustice, has been described as a religion by various observers, including Toynbee (1976: 573). One might be happier calling these “quasi-religions” because of the absence of a god (Tillich 1963: 4–8), but then we face the problem of narrowness in the theistic approach.

The historic relationships between religion and philosophy raise the question whether they are really distinct domains. Every religious vision embodies some level of philosophical speculation about the world and our place within it. While some do not develop beyond various levels of philosophical mythology, others spawn sophisticated theories in their drive for a defensible systematization. Normative theorizing is also needed, since resolving the religious problem requires regulating norms, and justification for those norms is often supplied through an underlying metaphysics or mythology. Within societies dominated by religious traditions that do not contrast the secular and the religious, e.g., Hinduism and Islam, philosophy rarely has a voice apart from discussions of the theoretical component of a religious vision (Smith 1964: 85).

Even if philosophy is a separate discipline in its own right, it often attracts people with religious concerns—not only those who wish to use

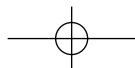


its theories to articulate and defend a existing religious vision, but those who seek alternatives. While it seems obvious that the religious goal does not drive every bit of philosophical theorizing, it is an open question whether the sort of wonder that generates the philosophical endeavor operates apart from the attitudes that are constitutive of religion. Is the pursuit of knowledge or understanding ever an end in itself, or do we engage in it for other reasons? Is the aesthetic-laden construction, contemplation, and application of theories something we pursue for its own sake? Maybe so, at least for some thinkers, but there are many for whom philosophy is therapeutic consolation, and who view the pursuit of knowledge as having a potential for significant psychological transformation. Some passages in Plato's dialogues can be interpreted in these terms, as in the *Republic* where ignorance is identified as a principal source of human folly, and a vision is provided whereby inner discord and discontent can be reduced or eliminated; namely, the disciplined philosophical pursuit of wisdom.

Quite apart from whether philosophy *per se* is not a religion, there is a pronounced religious motivation in some major philosophical traditions. Ancient Stoicism and Epicureanism, while differing considerably in their metaphysics and ethics, viewed the pursuit of understanding as facilitating *eudaimonia*, achievable by developing rational self-control (*apatheia*) or in practicing virtue, or by cultivating a state of inner tranquility (*ataraxia*) through the prudential avoidance of pain. The elimination of fear and anxiety is prominent in Lucretius' philosophical poem which appeals to the Epicurean atomistic metaphysics as a way of undermining superstitious fears, including the fear of death, so as to foster *ataraxia*. Again, the Neoplatonist tradition is centered on a conviction that knowledge enables one to overcome evil, though, unlike the Stoics and Epicureans, it more clearly describes a distinct ontological transformation—the return of the soul to the One—as the highest happiness. Each of these philosophies developed a metaphysics to motivate an ideal transformation, and each, thereby, conformed to the pattern of a religious vision set forth above.

V. CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING RELIGIONS

Questions of evaluation inevitably arise when we consider goal-oriented activities. Regarding religious phenomena, it is one thing to evaluate a particular religious vision, considered as an ideal, but quite another to evaluate attempts to implement that vision. Philosophers tend towards the former, focusing on the veridicality of and evidence for the theoretical



component of a religious scheme. But *being true* or *being based on adequate evidence* are not the only properties one might investigate. A religious system might be *effective* in bringing about beneficial psychological, sociological, moral, or political changes quite apart from the accuracy of its metaphysics. We must distinguish between the efficacy of a religious vision relative to particular ends, and the truth or evidential status of its doctrines. The two need not go together; a false belief, say, that one is favored by the forest gods (if it is false), might reduce fear and instill confidence and optimism. A distinction can also be made between internal and external evaluations. Internal evaluations concern whether a vision (an element thereof, or an attempted implementation thereof) achieves, or can achieve, its intended goals. External evaluations use other criteria, e.g., are adherents of a given vision better people, or does implementing the vision have beneficial effects upon society, humanity, or the community of living things?

Summarizing, there are different basic categories of evaluation that can be applied in evaluating any particular religious vision (scheme, system, tradition) R:

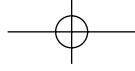
Theoretical Adequacy: Does the theoretical component of R consist of true propositions, or, alternatively, is there adequate evidence for these propositions (its doctrines)?

Internal Effectiveness: Is R an effective solution of the general religious problem? This question can be broken down into two components:

- (a) *Doctrinal:* are the transformations proposed by R actually achievable, that is, can implementation of R yield the intended ontological transformation, and, if any, the intended psychological transformation?
- (b) *Practical:* would an attempt to achieve the transformation(s) proposed by R be likely to solve the religious problem?

External Impact: Would implementation of R have negative effects in other spheres; in particular, will it generate immoral actions? Would implementation of R have other beneficial or negative effects on the individual, or society, or the wider community of life? Does R foster human happiness or progress; e.g., does R foster mistaken beliefs about the structure of reality and impede scientific understanding?

There is some overlap in these categories. The doctrinal question under the Internal Effectiveness category concerns the truth of R's transformational accounts, and so is already covered under the category of Truth. But because the achievability of R's psychological transformation might depend



upon the evidence for R's metaphysical transformation, at least for some people, then doctrinal issues are relevant to the question of R's effectiveness. Further, even though the practical question under the Effectiveness category is connected to the concerns about external impact, there are reasons to keep the criteria distinct. R might provide an individual with an adequate means for solving the religious problem, yet be detrimental overall, for that individual or for others. Again, while the moral code within R's practical component might have much to recommend it, R might fail to provide adequate mechanisms for resolving the religious problem.

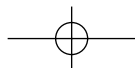
VI. EVALUATION AND HICK'S RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

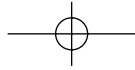
It is beyond the scope of this chapter to apply these criteria to any particular religious vision. I mention them because they are directly relevant to the ongoing debate over *religious pluralism*. John Hick has formulated this position as the view that

the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly, different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate . . . and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness is manifestly taking place—and taking place, so far as human observation can tell, to much the same extent. (Hick 1985: 47)

At least two evaluative claims are constitutive of Hick's pluralism. First, each of the "great world faiths"—those that emerged in the axial age (2004: 28–33)—presents legitimate or "truthful" representations of the Real (2004: ch. 14). Second, each of these great traditions "constitutes a valid context of salvation/liberation" (1985: 104). There is both a *theoretical* and a *practical* pluralism here, respectively, and a generalization upon either could be framed in terms of an even wider group of religious visions, though this would depart from Hick's own position.

On the surface, Hick's theoretical pluralism does not seem plausible, for the different religious traditions support contradictory claims, for instance, concerning the personal character of the divine or the immortality of the individual self. To the extent that a given solution to the religious problem requires a correlated ontological transformation, practical pluralism is on no better footing, since the different traditions also give conflicting accounts of salvation/liberation. But Hick's position is more subtle. He does not claim that the theoretical components of rival religious visions are "wholly true," at least not in any literal sense (2000: 64), and his defense of theoretical





pluralism is based on his defense of practical pluralism. He justifies both by means of a single fundamental criterion of evaluation:

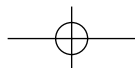
. . . the central criterion will be soteriological, the bringing about of a transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness (Hick 2004: 164; and see also 2000: 170; 1985: 47, 86)

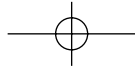
Reality-centeredness is a matter of an individual's proper relationship to the Real, where "the Real" (also, Ultimate Reality, the Ultimate, the Transcendent (2004: xix)) is a transcendent, non-natural, ineffable *an sich* unity that is experienced and conceived in different ways within different religious traditions. Hick thinks that the postulate of the Real is essential, otherwise religious experience "threatens to be an illusory projection of our imaginations" (1985: 106), and the claim for its singularity is justified because it is "the simplest hypothesis to account for the plurality of forms of religious experience and thought" (2004: 248). (This metaphysical posit marks Hick's religious, as opposed to a naturalistic, interpretation of religion.) Reality-centeredness can take different forms, e.g., saintliness (2004: 300–8) or unitive mysticism (2004: 292–5), each being correlated to different experiences and conceptions of the Real.

Hick's basic argument for religious pluralism comes down to this. Each of the great world faiths satisfies the soteriological criterion since each succeeds in facilitating a transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, that is, each "constitutes a valid context of salvation/liberation, but none constitutes the one and only such context" (1985: 104). Because of their success, there is reason to believe that each tradition supplies truthful representations of the Real or "is built upon an authentic human perception of the Real" (1985: 107 and also 2004: 248). However, the truthfulness in question is *mythical*, not literal (2004: chs. 19–20):

I mean by a myth a story that is not literally truth but that has the power to evoke in its hearers a practical response to the myth's referent . . . a true myth being of course one that evokes an appropriate response. The truthfulness of a myth is thus a practical truthfulness, consisting in its capacity to orient us rightly in our lives. (Hick, quoted in Yandell 1999: 371 n. 8)

The truth belonging to the theoretical visions of the great religions, accordingly, is their "practical truthfulness which consists in guiding us aright" (2004: 375), and thus, "the truthfulness of each tradition is shown by its soteriological effectiveness" (2004: 248). With this qualification, Hick thinks he has successfully shown that each of the great religious traditions can be positively assessed in both practical and theoretical terms.





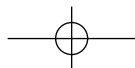
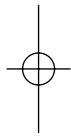
There is reason to be suspicious of this reasoning. Hick actually gives two accounts of the “soteriological” criterion. The term *soter* is Greek for savior, and historically, its use is linked to the Christian notion of salvation. It is not difficult to see, Hick writes,

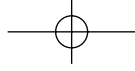
that this is a specific form of a more general idea of being brought from an evil situation into a radically better one. (2004: 10)

In fact, *this* idea of a soteriological transformation is more general than Hick’s *special* sense of a transformation from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, and, unlike the latter, it does not assume the existence of a transcendent reality. Consequently, with Hick, we may distinguish between a general and a special sense of soteriological transformation, and, similarly, between a general and a special soteriological criterion of evaluation. In terms of the foregoing account of religion (Section IV), every type of reduction or removal of religious discomfort would qualify as a general soteriological transformation, but not necessarily as a special transformation.

Since being Reality-centered is a matter of being in an appropriate relation to the Real, then evidence that an individual has become Reality-centered requires evidence that there exists a Real. Consequently, evidence that a given religious tradition facilitates special soteriological transformations not only depends upon evidence that instances of the special soteriological transformation actually exist, but also upon evidence that there *is* a Real. To the extent that Hick tries to motivate his posit of the Real by appealing to the purported existence of special transformations (1985: 106–7), his reasoning is circular. And since he offers no independent evidence for the existence of a single transcendent Real, then his central claim that special transformations are facilitated by the great religious traditions has lost its empirical moorings. At best, the empirical evidence shows only that the great traditions facilitate general soteriological transformations; e.g., a reduction of religious discomfort or greater moral virtue. So, neither of Hick’s versions of pluralism, theoretical or practical, is secured.

Finally, since even false beliefs can facilitate *general* soteriological transformations, then the fact that the great religious traditions satisfy the general soteriological criterion does not imply the literal truth of their theoretical components. To say that the traditions are mythically true, where “mythical truth” is interpreted in Hick’s purely pragmatic terms, is to offer nothing by way of a positive appraisal within the category of Theoretical Adequacy beyond what is already achieved in the categories of Effectiveness and External Impact. In either case, the prospects for a more general theoretical pluralism are dim.



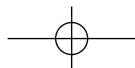
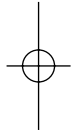


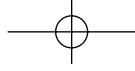
VII. CRITICAL PLURALISM

Despite this negative assessment of Hick's pluralism, a version of practical pluralism seems correct; namely, that different solutions to the religious problem can be, and have been, efficacious in solving the religious problem. Many religions have been successful in producing a psychological transformation in terms of diminishing fear, providing hope, encouraging humility, producing inner calm, and stimulating more intense spiritual experiences. The great traditions have done this, and the future may see new visions that are even more effective. Exclusivism with respect to the practical components of religious visions—that there is only one practical program for solving the religious problem or for bringing about other beneficial psychological and social results—is unwarranted.

This is not to say that *all* religious visions offer valid solutions to the religious problem, much less *equally* valid solutions, or that any one vision will work for every person. Just as some medicines are more effective than others in treating certain diseases or ailments, so too, some religions might be more effective in resolving the religious problem. Some religious visions might actually have horrendous effects, psychologically or socially; for instance, those that mandate human sacrifice, genocide, ethnic cleansing, racism, or the creation of *de jure* prejudicial states. Theoretical claims that underlie such immoral practices and policies, e.g., claims positing the intrinsic spiritual or moral superiority or inferiority on racial grounds, have little to recommend them. So, while we can accept a measure of practical pluralism, no religious vision should automatically be immunized from negative evaluations as regards any of the categories of evaluation. The correct attitude is one of *critical practical pluralism*, as much at odds with indiscriminate tolerance as it is with exclusivism.

Is pluralism the last word? Might there not be a preferred method for solving the religious problem that is suitable for all humans? An evaluative exclusivism—that some one religion is *best* for everyone—cannot be ruled out *a priori*, for it is an empirical question whether there is, or can be, a religious scheme that can be most profitably applied to all. Yet, as far as existing humans goes, evidence points to the contrary, since what works for one does not work for another, and some visions work better for certain people than do other visions. Because of their intellectual and emotional makeup, there are those who cannot believe or do what some religious systems require of its adherents, and a certain measure of religious relativism must therefore be acknowledged (Hick 1985: 73). Evaluative exclusivism might fare better if the day arrives when global cultural unity makes universal acceptance of a single religious vision a real possibility.





Still, apart from the desirability of that day, it is nearly impossible to predict what forms of evil future generations will encounter, and what mechanisms will be most effective in dealing with the problems they face. In response to changing conditions, some religiously oriented people might find that none of the extant visions are adequate and they will *need* to search for novel schemes. This is why those who prohibit innovation in religious response can be profoundly *anti*-religious, despite their own pious convictions, since their intolerance can stifle the religious spirit by preventing others from actively pursuing and realizing the religious goal. Worse, they identify the innovators as enemies of “religion,” and their zeal becomes deadly. At the level of practical evaluation, a critical evolutionary pluralism seems a far better strategy than exclusivism.¹¹

VIII. EVALUATING RELIGION

If the foregoing account is correct, and religious phenomena develop as a response to the sentiment of evil, then it is not clear just what sort of critique of religion *per se* could be launched that would be any more successful than wholesale assaults on art or politics. But periodically, criticisms emerge that are presented as being directed at religion as such (recently, Dawkins 2006, Dennett 2006, Harris 2004, Hitchens 2007). Typically, these discussions focus upon particular religious traditions or particular genera of religions, defined, say, in terms of belief in supernatural beings (Dennett 2006: 9), and some of their criticisms are entirely appropriate.

There is a common tendency in these critiques to blame the religious impulse for circumstances that actually stem from quite distinct motivations. Moreover, they are often guilty of a certain degree of historical naiveté. For example, some of the books mentioned single out Islam for particular opprobrium, contending that it provides a religious justification for

¹¹ James wrote that “no two of us have identical difficulties, nor should we be expected to work out identical solutions” (James 1902: 477), and Hick points out that “so long as there is a rich variety of human cultures—and let us hope there will always be this—we should expect there to be correspondingly different forms of religious cult, ritual, and organization, conceptualized in different theological doctrines” (1973: 146–7). In a more theistic vein, Arnold Toynbee noted that for the historian, “the higher religions’ claim to uniqueness and finality will look like almost impious proclamations of a deliberate reversion to the self-centeredness that is the hallmark of ‘Original Sin’” (1956: 132). “Different people’s convictions will differ, because Absolute Reality is a mystery of which no more than a fraction has every yet been penetrated by—or been revealed to—any human mind . . . However strong and confident may be my conviction that my own approach to the mystery is the right one, I ought to be aware that my field of spiritual vision is so narrow that I cannot know that there is no virtue in other approaches” (1956: 251).

retrograde intolerance and terrorism (e.g., Harris 2004: chs. 3–4; Dennett 2006: ch. 10; Hitchens 2007: chs. 41, 43, 44, 45, 47). Their treatments are unfortunately devoid of historical analyses that allow one to understand the social and political circumstances that underlie contemporary Middle Eastern violence. For example, little is said about twentieth-century Western imperialism in the region, repeated US military interventions and support for local autocracies, or the imposition of a Jewish state upon the Islamic world and subsequent Israeli aggression against the Palestinians. Yet, rightly or wrongly, these are policies and actions that have stoked the furnaces of resentment throughout the Islamic world. It is easy to lay the blame at the feet of Islam when agents of violence identify themselves as “Muslims,” but once we understand the causes of unrest a more nuanced assessment is likely to emerge. To be sure, there are violence-prone individuals who justify their extremism by reference to religious texts and who claim to be Muslims. But there are similar people who claim to be Jews or Christians or Hindus, and there are objectionable interpretations of statements within the holy scriptures of each tradition. To cite instances of violence and intolerance in launching a criticism of Islam or these other religions, much less a global criticism of religion, is like condemning *any* political ideology on the grounds that its adherents have used—or misused—some of its provisions in justifying atrocities.

To illustrate, Daniel Dennett, albeit more thoughtful than popular Islamophobes like Harris and Hitchens, writes about Middle Eastern terrorism as follows:

Defenders of religion are quick to point out that terrorists typically have political, not religious agendas, which may well be true in many or most cases, or even in all cases, but that is not the end of it. The political agendas of violent fanatics often lead them to adopt a religious guise, and to exploit the organization infrastructure and tradition of unquestioning loyalty of whichever religion is handy. And it is true that these fanatics are rarely if ever inspired by, or guided by, the deepest and best tenets in those religious traditions. So what? Al Qaeda and Hams terrorism is still Islam’s responsibility, and abortion-clinic bombing is still Christianity’s responsibility, and the murderous activities of Hindu extremists are still Hinduism’s responsibility (Dennett 2006: 299)

What Dennett overlooks is that there a similar pattern of appealing to political ideologies of all sorts as a cover for atrocities. What of Israeli bombings in Lebanon or American bombings in Iraq and Afghanistan, each of which claimed the lives of thousands of civilians? What about the large-scale air assaults by the United States against Vietnam and Cambodia during the 1970s, not to mention the massive destruction of Japanese and German cities in 1945? Are these campaigns of state terror the responsibility of *Democracy*? They were committed in its name; the leaders

of the United States and Great Britain in 2003 did not hesitate to appeal to “democratic values” in justifying an invasion and occupation of Iraq. Why not conclude that Democracy is just another “attractive nuisance,” much like Hitler’s Nazism or Stalin’s Communism were, or much as Dennett thinks Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism are (2006: 301)? Yes, religious doctrines and scriptures are cited to justify atrocities, but so are the narratives and maxims of powerful political visions. The causal story behind ideologically-inspired violence, as well as the cure—if there is a cure—is more complex than a condemnation of religion or the religious impulse—even under the guise of “belief in supernatural beings”—suggests.

Apart from critiques of particular religious visions or of long-lived religious traditions, there are those who think that the religious emphasis on mitigating the psychological discomfort caused by our encounter with evil actually impedes genuine progress in improving the human condition. Karl Marx’s description of religion as an “opium of the people” comes to mind. I think enough has been said to establish that this is a criticism of a particular family of religions or religious frameworks—or their misuse—at best. Not all religious visions urge a passive acceptance of the socio-political status quo, and there is no reason why social progress, and working towards that progress, could not be an integral part of the solutions proposed.

There is a more unusual, and somewhat disturbing, criticism of religion that goes beyond pointing to the negative effects upon individuals and societies attributable to the religious impulse. There might be people who find the experience of evil so intense that no solution for reducing or eliminating religious discomfort could possibly work. Perhaps these are people of great intelligence and high moral sensitivity for whom the fact of radical injustice in the distribution of evil—including past injustices which cannot be rectified because the victims are no longer around—refutes the religious project outright. If so, then their stance is one of *religious pessimism*: the religious problem cannot be solved, at least not without deluding ourselves. Of course, this position confronts religious relativism: while some individuals find no effective solution, others do, in which case religious pessimism describes the situation of an unfortunate few. Only if religious pessimism becomes normative, and a case is made that everyone ought to acquire the sort of knowledge and sensitivity that has, in fact, prevented some from resolving the religious problem, is there a global challenge to religion as such. Making this case would be a daunting, if not impossible, task, but it is likely that religious imagination would rise to the challenge.

REFERENCES

- Copleston, Frederick (1982), *Religion and the One* (New York: Crossword Publishing Company).
- Dawkins, Richard (2006), *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).
- Dennett, Daniel (2006). *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Group).
- French, Peter A., Uehling Jr., Theodore, and Wettstein, Howard K. (1997) (eds.) *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, xxi. *The Philosophy of Religion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press).
- Harris, Sam (2004), *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton).
- Hick, John (1973), *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan).
- (1985), *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St Martin's Press).
- (1997), "Transcendence and Truth," in Phillips (1997), 41–59.
- (2000), "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," in Quinn and Meeker (2000), 54–66.
- (2001), *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Palgrave).
- (2004), *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- Hitchens, Christopher (2007) (ed.), *The Portable Atheist* (Philadelphia: De Capo Press).
- James, William (1902), *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Random House, The Modern Library).
- Kapitan, Tomis (1989), "Devine on Defining Religion," *Faith and Philosophy* 6: 207–14.
- Lindsey, Hal (1980), *The 1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* (Slagle, La.: Westgate Press).
- Nigosian, S. A. (2000), *World Religions* (3rd edn., New York: Bedford/St Martin's).
- Otto, Rudolf (1957), *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Meridian Books).
- (1958), *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. by John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Phillips, D. Z. (1997). *Religion without Transcendence?* (London: Macmillan).
- Plantinga, Alvin (1995), "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in T. Senor (ed.), *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith* (Ithaca, NY Cornell University Press).
- Quinn, Phillip (2005), "Religious Diversity," in W. J. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 392–417.
- (1997), "Religious Awe, Aesthetic Awe," In French, Uehling, and Wettstein (1997), 290–5.
- Quinn, Phillip, and Meeker, Kevin (2000) (eds.) *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Royce, Josiah (1912), *Sources of Religious Insight* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons).

- Schacht, Richard (1997), "After Transcendence: The Death of God and the Future of Religion," in Phillips (1997), 73–92.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich (1893), *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd.), trans. of the 3rd edn. of *Über die Religion: Reden an die gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (Berlin 1821).
- Schweitzer, Albert (1949), *Out of My Life and Thought* (New York: Henry Holt and Company).
- Smith, William Cantwell (1964), *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: New American Library).
- Stump, Eleonore (1997), "Awe and Atheism," in French, Uehling, and Wettstein (1997), 281–9.
- Tillich, Paul (1963), *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- (1973), *What is Religion?*, trans. and introd. James Luther Adams (New York: Harper Torchbooks).
- Toynbee, Arnold (1956), *An Historian's Approach to Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (1971), *Surviving the Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- van Inwagen, Peter (1995), "Non est Hick," in T. Senor (ed.), *God, Knowledge, and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 191–216.
- (2006), *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Ward, Keith (2000), "Truth and the Diversity of Religions," in Quinn and Meeker (2000), 109–25.
- Wettstein, Howard (1997), "Awe and the Religious Life: A Naturalistic Perspective," in French, Uehling, and Wettstein (1997), 257–80.
- Yandell, Keith (1999), *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge).