

Chapter Six: Is Moderate Religion Harmful?

by Don Evans

In the last few years a variety of authors including Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens¹ have produced best selling books critical of religion. While these books were largely prompted by the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., the authors do not confine themselves to criticism of extremist forms of religion which promote terrorist attacks, but try to show that religion in any form is harmful and should be attacked. The arguments these critics use against religion date in some respects to the ancient Greek Sceptics, but others are more recent. Of particular interest is the argument that “moderate” or “liberal” forms of religion, which appear relatively or completely harmless compared to extremist forms, are not to be considered separately from extremism since they too are based on nonsense and irrationality, even if of a less pronounced kind.

Since admittedly most religious believers do not call for or support the commission of terrorist acts, most critics appalled by religious based terrorism exempt moderate believers from criticism, and thus, in the opinion of critics like Harris, Dawkins and Hitchens, in effect “make the world safe for extremism” by failing to attack religious violence at its source, namely, its irrational acceptance of ancient dogmas inappropriate for a more enlightened world. A

¹Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York, Norton, 2005), *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York, Knopf, 2006); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great* (New York, Twelve, 2007).

number of reviewers of these books maintain that while there is no dispute about the harmfulness of extreme forms of religion, the authors fail to make a convincing case against the dangers of more moderate or liberal religion.²

Addressing the question of the harmfulness of moderate religion requires a working understanding of what I mean by the terms “religion” and “moderate.” There is a vast and ever expanding literature on the question of identifying just what is religion and what is not. For my purposes, I will use a definition of religion which applies two criteria to what is properly regarded as “religious.” First, there must be a sense of the *sacred* and second there must be a sense of *supernatural agency*. Both of these elements must be present in order for a belief or practice to qualify unambiguously as “religious.”

By *a sense of the sacred* I mean particular beliefs and practices *set apart* from others as partaking in a special character which we can identify as *sacred*. This property can be attached to stories (oral or written), moral rules peculiar to a particular sect, people (living or dead), activities such as rituals, places, buildings, or natural objects. While a sense of the sacred is necessary to religion, a given religion may or may not have something sacred in all of these categories. It must, however, have at least something in its beliefs that is regarded as sacred. What is it that makes something “sacred”?

While the concept of the sacred is itself complex, for my purposes it only needs to be understood as a property which people attach to ideas, places, or objects which sets them apart from the non-sacred (or profane), and insulates them

²Responses of this sort include Alister McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion* (London, SPCK, 2007); Thomas Nagel, “The Fear of Religion,” *The New Republic*, Oct. 23, 2006 pp. 25-29; and H. Allen Orr, “Richard Dawkins’s ‘Delusion’” *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 54 No. 1, Jan. 11, 2007, pp. 21-24.

from the type of criticism we apply to things not sacred. Sacred things are to be *accepted* as such, not debated as we debate non-sacred things. They are, at bottom, to be approached and treated with *reverence*.

By the second condition, a sense of *supernatural agency*, I mean the understanding of forces and events as the actions of ancestors, spirits, demons, gods or God, rather than arising from purely natural causes. Beliefs in supernatural agency vary considerably in content and application. Some, like the Deists, understand supernatural agency to apply only to the creation of the universe and the natural laws within it, and not to ordinary day-to-day happenings in the world. Others, both crude and sophisticated, understand virtually *all* things to be caused by supernatural agencies. These distinctions are not important for our discussion except as indications of the complexity of religious beliefs and to caution us not to think there is some meaningful entity out there that might answer to the description “religion in general.”

Religious beliefs and practices vary greatly in how they emphasize the elements of the sacred and supernatural agency, both in the relative importance of each, and how each is understood and implemented. While gray areas certainly exist, there do not seem to be any clear instances of belief systems or practices that we unhesitatingly regard as “religious” that do not have at least some degree of both elements.

Belief and Practice

In order to understand the second term in our topic, “moderate,” it is important to make a distinction between religious *belief* and religious *practice*. A common element of confusion in thinking about religion involves failure to distinguish these elements. Critics of religion, influenced by Enlightenment rationality, tend to understand religion only as a kind of belief system, taking little or no interest in how religion is actually practiced. Critics tend to pay far greater

attention to intellectuals and apologists in a religious tradition than they do to the mind sets and practices of rank and file believers. This is understandable since the latter in fact seldom articulate their beliefs in any coherent way, and, if pressed, tend to refer such questions to their religious “professionals” for an answer.

In assessing the potential harmfulness of moderate religion, it is important to distinguish between religious beliefs and practices since the connection between them may in fact be very tenuous. In fact, only a minority of religious people take a serious interest in the structure and implications of their belief systems. Rather, what their religion is mainly about is fitting in with what is acceptable in their particular religious community, something that usually requires little more than lip service to intellectual doctrines as long as one participates in the outward expectations of that community. As someone once observed about Catholicism, it’s not so much something you *believe* as something you *do*.

Critics of religion tend to focus unduly on the minority that takes theology seriously, for they themselves are serious people who take seriously the exchange of ideas. Most people, religious or not, are not particularly interested in “ideas,” particularly when discussion of them makes them uncomfortable. It is easier to just avoid such discussions.

Since religion is often not really about *beliefs* in any straightforward sense, giving undue attention to the articulated *beliefs* of a religion leads to the common but mistaken view that if a *belief* can be shown to be false, incoherent or objectionable then people holding such beliefs should be expected not only to abandon them, but also to abandon the religious practices which such beliefs ostensibly support. The fact that this rarely happens is the source of the frequently expressed incredulity of critics of religion, “how could anyone persist in such nonsense?” when it is clear that a great many people do just that and this by no means entails that they are somehow mentally deficient or unable to deal

with matters outside their religion as rationally as any critic. The key to understanding what is involved here is the realization that what people say they believe in a religious context may have little bearing on how they actually practice their religion.

People believe all kinds of things, both religious and secular, that should logically lead to certain actions, yet it is commonplace that for most people, only a few key beliefs are translated into action with any regularity, especially beliefs that seem to require extraordinary effort. I recall as a high school student sitting in church listening to the preacher decry the fact that only a tiny minority of people would be saved, since believers did not take seriously enough the command to evangelize and as a result, most people never even have the chance to accept Christ and avoid an eternity of torment in hell. I remember looking out the window watching passing cars and thinking of the drivers performing their usual errands in total ignorance of their peril, while I and my fellow Christians ignored them, wasting precious time sitting in church, planning youth outings, thinking of girls, and considering irrelevant questions like where to go to college. If our actions were consistent with our beliefs, we would have been out stopping traffic, pressing Bibles in their hands, and probably getting ourselves arrested in the hopes of saving just a few!

The key point in understanding belief and practice as they relate to the question of the potential harmfulness of moderate religion is to understand that belief and practice are not linked in any simple, direct manner. Often they are hardly linked at all.

Anti-Religious Bigotry

Too often critics of religion assume it is a kind of unitary rather than highly complex phenomenon, so that if they can show the harmfulness of some element of some religion, religion as a whole is discredited. A similar form of

argument is familiar from other contexts. If someone who happens to be a Republican, Jew, Muslim or Scientologist commits a harmful act, it is too easy to blame the ideology or religion they are associated with as the source of that act, even where evidence of a direct connection is far from clear. Readiness to blame the harmful acts of others on ideology and religion taps into one of the worst aspects of human beings, a tendency, sometimes mild, sometimes violent, to group humanity into insiders who think like us and outsiders who don't, and to identify outsiders by simple and visible labels like "Catholic," "Jew," or skin color. In its worst forms, this is simply bigotry.

Arguments which approach bigotry are doubly objectionable since if a critic has allowed himself to fall into bigoted stereotyping of his opponents, legitimate criticisms tend to be ignored since they appear to rest only on inaccurate caricatures of such opponents, or "straw men." In the case of criticism of religion the goal of examining critically the basis of religious beliefs, whether they be my own or those of others, extreme or moderate, is thwarted if in criticizing the views of others I set forth a stereotyped and inaccurate profile of them that can (and in fact often does) lead them to claim that the critic is criticizing someone else's religion, not theirs. Bigotry rarely if ever advances any worthy cause and survives because of the deep, if illusory satisfaction it gives to bigots that they "are telling it like it is" and that they, unlike those they criticize, have the "truth."

Understanding "Moderate" Religion

Bearing in mind the distinction between religious beliefs and practices, it is important to understand what is "extreme" and "moderate" as these terms apply respectively to beliefs and practices. "Moderate" religious beliefs I understand as beliefs that accept, or are consistent with, what Philip Kitcher calls "the Enlightenment case against

supernaturalism.”³ In regard to belief, the Enlightenment case maintains that science is the proper method of understanding the physical world and that sacred texts, no matter how ancient and venerated, cannot be taken as in any sense contributing to that understanding regardless of their usefulness in understanding human history, values and behavior. This conviction is at the heart of what has come to be called “liberal religion” in Christianity and Judaism since the Enlightenment. This kind of religion made its peace early with Darwin, and has since consistently resisted the teaching of creationism and “intelligent design” in science classrooms.

It may be objected right away that religions that accept the Enlightenment case fail to meet one of the criteria I laid down earlier for a belief to be properly religious, namely having an element of *supernatural agency*. But this is not the case. A religion that accepts the Enlightenment case has taken the position that supernatural agencies are not to be invoked in understanding the *physical* world, but it need not have any reluctance in doing so when the subject is other than the physical world, namely, the realm of human values, ideas, arts, goals, ethics and morals. It may also be objected that to invoke an agency that is not part of the physical world is to invoke something that does not or perhaps even *cannot* exist. Such objections, while understandable, simply beg the question since they depend on a prior conviction that the supernatural, in the sense of something beyond the physical world investigated by physics and biology, does not exist. At any rate, liberal religious beliefs and practices tend to place more emphasis on the element of the sacred than on supernatural agency, while more traditional religion, especially in America, tends to do the opposite.

Liberal theologies that accept the Enlightenment case are heirs not only to the successes of Enlightenment science, but

³Philip Kitcher, *Living With Darwin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 131-166

also to the philosophical heritage of the Enlightenment embodied principally in the works of Immanuel Kant and his successors. Having abandoned earlier ideas of a God separate from the world who intervenes to perform physical miracles, they conceive supernatural agency as a non-physical force that manifests itself in expressions of human religious and artistic genius, moral systems, and convictions regarding ultimate values. While this can and does strike those outside these traditions as hopelessly vague, such conceptions still engage a large proportion of those who consider themselves religious and who continue to be active in denominations like the main line liberal Protestant churches and Reformed Judaism.

“Moderate” religion as I understand it also has a component of *practice* as well as *belief*. When we talk of religious *practices* which may or may not be harmful, we should distinguish practices which are basically confined to the particular religious group, such as attending church and participating in religious festivals, from practices that involve how a religious group deals with those outside the group.

While we may regard what happens in religious services as pointless or even bizarre, to argue that such activities are harmful seems to depend on arguing that the participants’ time would be better spent in some other or no activity, or that engaging in such practices makes them less fit to deal with life. Such arguments can and have been made, but it is clear that only a bigot would want to prohibit such activities by having the government close them down even though they in no way compel the support of outsiders. To do so would be like someone who takes no interest in professional sports wanting to tear down all stadiums to replace them with homes, offices, art galleries, parks, libraries, or something more to their personal liking.

The situation is different in regard to how a group deals with outsiders. Extremists, whether religious or political, divide the world between “us” (the saved, or enlightened)

and “them” (anyone outside the group). Anyone outside the group is for the extremist only a potential convert or actual or potential enemy. At best, those of different opinions and practices are only to be tolerated until they can be converted or destroyed. Returning to the Enlightenment case (and here I apply the concept further than Kitcher does), the Enlightenment also saw the birth of the idea of universal human rights, rights that are present for all humans regardless of their ethnicity or religious identification.

A moderate religion in regard to practice rejects the extremist dichotomy of “us” and “them.” While all must be free to express their opinions in a free marketplace of ideas, no one individual or group has the right to deprive others of their liberties, property or rights simply because they are outside a particular religious or ideological group. This Enlightenment position is strongly characteristic of liberal religion, which has been at the forefront of the battles for separation of church and state.

A special case of how a religious group deals with outsiders arises regarding the question of the religious indoctrination of children, who, before they are old enough to make informed decisions, are in some sense “outsiders” to those in a group who have already made such decisions, including even their own parents. Parents of strong religious or secular views typically try to inculcate these views in their children, who are not in a position to make an informed judgment about them or act freely on a decision to dissent from their parent’s views. Is this abuse of the innocent? Dawkins, for example, makes just such a case in Chapter Nine of *The God Delusion*. Children are certainly initially “outsiders” to the social structure they are born into, and as such may be considered free agents who should not be subject to indoctrination until they are of sufficient age to make informed judgments about such indoctrination.

We would certainly want to say that abuse is involved if children are raised to hate anyone outside their sect and see their highest calling as killing such outsiders, which seems in

fact to be the case in schools sponsored by the Taliban. But what if someone wants to raise their child as an Old Order Amish, a sect which abhors violence of any kind? Or, religion aside, what about parents that insist their child should be an athlete, artist, scientist, or some other vision of the parents' without regard to the wishes of the child? Should government be invoked to prohibit this as well?

I don't think there are easy answers to these questions, given the fact that raising children according to one's convictions as a parent seems to be about as basic a human right as any. It seems to me the burden of proof lies with the critic to establish that indoctrinating children with values not obviously destructive to society at large should be prohibited. This is not to say that critics should not be allowed to argue against such practices, as they should have the same right to criticize outsiders as anyone else in a free society.

The Harmfulness of Moderate Religion

In this section, I will consider arguments to the effect that even moderate religion is harmful. My aim is to establish that the alleged harmfulness of moderate religion is exaggerated, and that lumping moderate together with more extreme forms of religion tends to be counterproductive for those who seek to create a better informed, more humane and more secular society.

To begin, the discussion from this point will be confined to religious *beliefs*. As reviewed above, moderate religious *practices*, practices which by definition do not involve depriving outsiders of their rights, cannot be considered harmful the way extremist religious practices obviously are, in that such practices, as extremist, *do* infringe on the rights of others. As maintained previously, religious practices that do not involve restricting the rights of others should not be considered harmful, as long as no one is compelled to participate in them or support them. To insist that such

practices are harmful to the individuals who engage in them because the critic considers them harmful comes very close to simple bigotry. It is neither moral nor realistic for anyone to expect that others should conform to a particular way of living when their different way of living entails no harm to me and only alleged harm to them.

Having laid this background, I can now address the question “In what sense can religious *beliefs* be said to be harmful?” Criticizing religious beliefs as harmful is usually based on two kinds of judgments about them, (1) that holding certain beliefs leads to harmful actions and (2) that religious beliefs are harmful even if they have no apparent consequences. As an example of the first consider the example of unquestioning acceptance of the commands of a cult leader. Such belief has in the recent past led to mass suicide or other self-destructive acts (Jonestown, Heaven’s Gate, Waco).

As for the second judgment, it might be maintained that for someone to hold a theological belief without obvious or unambiguous consequences, say that Jesus is “divine” is in itself harmful even if it does not seem to imply or cause the commission of harmful acts. It is tempting to say that only beliefs that arguably lead to harmful consequences are harmful, thus exempting instances like our second case, but this fails to address the core question of whether beliefs about the sacred or supernatural agency are in themselves harmful in some meaningful sense. This requires closer examination.

Belief in the wisdom of megalomaniac cult leaders even when they command their followers to perform harmful acts is clearly inconsistent with moderate religion, so is not the issue here. The problem is with the grayer areas where it is harder to identify whether or to what degree a belief “leads” to harmful consequences. Consider these examples:

1. A belief that I must baptize my baby.

2. A belief that I should fast during the month of Ramadan.
3. A belief that before I go to sleep, I should review my day and ask God's forgiveness for anything I have done wrong, and ask for his guidance for the coming day.

No doubt with sufficient ingenuity it could be argued that such beliefs *can* lead to adverse consequences, but these types of belief are clearly different from belief in the infallibility of commands of crazed cult leaders. It would seem the burden of proof should be on those who claim these kinds of belief are harmful, either inherently, or because of what they "lead" to. And such arguments need to be of better quality than that of the "slippery slope" such as "if we legalize recreational drugs a majority of the country will soon become addicted to them, with horrible consequences."

While clearly harmful acts normally do follow a slope from prior acts which are in no obvious way harmful, "slippery slope" arguments assume that *any* act related in some way to an eventual harmful act establishes the danger of that seemingly innocent act. But there are few things humans do that cannot lead to abuse. The point is to understand how this process occurs and act appropriately, not to expect to eliminate all actions connected in some way with subsequent abuses. A century ago many Americans felt the best way to control alcohol abuse was to prohibit all recreational use of alcohol, a policy that was wisely abandoned when the cure became worse than the disease.

One way to assess whether religious beliefs "lead to" harmful acts is to examine specific harmful acts that seem related to religion and try to determine if religion has contributed to them, and if so, in what ways. This should involve an examination of beliefs that may seem necessary to committing harmful acts as well as those which in themselves seem sufficient to cause such acts.

To argue that certain religious beliefs are *necessary* to cause someone to commit certain harmful acts is to claim that the acts would not occur in the absence of the beliefs. For example, it is commonly assumed, especially by critics of religion, that suicide bombers are primarily motivated by their religious beliefs. However, careful research has not substantiated this view. Suicide bombers are generally not motivated by specifically religious beliefs but by very specific political goals, such as undermining confidence in governments maintained in power by foreign troops. Many, although not all, such suicide bombers in fact have basically secular life styles and are not especially devout in any sense. Moreover, suicide bombing often does advance the political agendas of its perpetrators, so is hardly as “irrational” a political tool as it is sometimes claimed to be.⁴

This does not of course exempt all belief as unnecessary to harmful action: It is hard to see why someone would commit suicide at the order of a cult leader while not having a religious conviction of his authority and wisdom. The question is whether there is something generic about religious beliefs in general that makes them necessary to harmful acts. I maintain that while certain kinds of harmful acts like Jonestown cannot be understood without reference to indisputably religious beliefs, the beliefs in question are clearly extremist in nature and therefore not really at issue when moderate religion is being examined. Cases of extremist religious beliefs leading to harmful acts cannot be used to argue that religious beliefs in general are necessary conditions for the commitment of harmful acts, but only that

⁴Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2006). One may want to argue that it is irrational to kill oneself to advance a political goal, but such self-destructive actions are clearly only an extension of the common willingness of young men to join military operations where the chances of their survival may be next to nothing. This is not usually understood as “irrational.”

in some, but hardly all, cases harmful acts have an arguably religious basis.

The case for the contribution of religious beliefs to harmful acts would be improved if it could be shown that while such beliefs are not *necessary* to the commission of such acts, they can in some cases be *sufficient* to cause them. For example, if a Muslim becomes convinced that Islam requires him to wage ceaseless war against non-Muslims, to include depriving them of their human rights and freedoms, this would certainly provide sufficient foundation for him to commit harmful acts against non-Muslims.

The difficulty is that while committed Muslims maintain the superiority of their religion above all other belief systems, religious or secular, there is no consensus in Islam as to which specific acts are acceptable or not acceptable for the advancement of Islam. Non-Muslims are fond of pointing to passages in the Koran which they interpret as endorsing or even commanding harmful acts against all non-Muslims, and claim that Muslims who fail to obey these “commands” are not “real” Muslims since they reject the actions that their belief system requires.⁵ They may extend this kind of criticism to Judaism and Christianity as well, whose scriptures in some places endorse genocide and certainly never raise objections to institutions like slavery, now considered unacceptable even by very conservative believers. This kind of argument is subject to the criticism we raised earlier since it depends on assuming that a religion must have a simple one to one correspondence between its official beliefs and its practices, when in fact this is almost never the case, especially if the practice called for requires extreme commitment, not just lip service.

⁵It has always struck me as odd that those outside a religious tradition are often zealous to point out inconsistencies between belief and practice as if they would be happier if religious people *were* all violent fanatics rather than mostly decent people who have a proclivity for belief in what is arguably nonsensical and antisocial.

It remains to consider whether some apparently or relatively “harmless” beliefs like a belief in the divinity of Jesus, whatever that might mean, should be themselves regarded as harmful in some sense other than directly contributing to the performance of harmful acts. For instance, they may be held to “create a climate” for the acceptance of more dangerous beliefs. Although this sounds like a “slippery slope” argument of the type we criticized earlier, it deserves a more careful examination. We could say for example that such beliefs are

(1) Logically incoherent. In the case of the divinity of Jesus, a case can be made that human and divine attributes are sufficiently distinct hypothetical properties to make combining them in one god-man (Jesus) equivalent to arguing for the existence of a square circle. Surely we should oppose illogical beliefs!

(2) It is also clear that “harmless” beliefs of this kind tend to be founded on uncritical acceptance of alleged revelations from supernatural powers through ancient witnesses who were in no better position than we are to judge the truth of such beliefs. Surely we should demand adequate evidence for our fundamental beliefs!

While both of these considerations provide good reasons for rejecting such apparently “innocuous” beliefs, the question remains whether people that entertain such beliefs are in fact led to adopt more extreme views that lead eventually to harmful acts. The evidence does not support this. The vast majority of religious believers, whether their actual beliefs are moderate or not, do not evolve into violent fanatics. A small minority does, but just as many or more become more liberal in their beliefs or leave them altogether. It should be noted that religion does not always lead to fanaticism. The best critical work on Biblical interpretation in the last two centuries has come not from those outside religious traditions, but from those working within them seeking to accommodate their traditions with the Enlightenment case.

To blame the harmful acts of religious people on their religion without careful examination is to engage in the kind of bigotry that claims that devout Catholics should not be allowed to vote or hold political office since their belief in nonsense means that their acts will also be nonsensical or at any rate contrary to the public good. Probably all of us believe ridiculous things to at least some extent, but that is not in itself a reason to deprive us of our civil rights. We should criticize nonsense where we find it without assuming it is harmful in any overt sense either to the person who believes in nonsense or to society at large.

Conclusions

Secular humanists should support critical assessments of religious beliefs and practices. The question is how to do this most productively. First, critics should abandon stereotyped characterizations of religious believers and try to develop more critical and nuanced approaches to religion. Recent work advocating this approach is found in works such as philosopher Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*⁶ and in the approaches of anthropologists such as Stuart Guthrie, Pascal Boyer and Scott Atran.⁷ Rational assessment of religion recognizes its prominent place in human life for probably the majority of people, certainly in America, and tries to understand how religious beliefs and practices arise, are sustained, and, in general, what makes them tick. While there is real emotional satisfaction in ridiculing and condemning religion in general or particularly offensive aspects of it, we belie our claim to reason when we let such prejudices interfere with examining

⁶Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York, Viking, 2006).

⁷Stewart Guthrie *Faces in the Clouds* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993); Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained* (New York, Basic Books, 2001); Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004).

religion objectively as a natural human phenomenon. Too many critics seem uninterested in why people persist in believing irrational things even when such irrationality is pointed out to them. A more sophisticated understanding of religion can provide the answers.

We must continue to speak out against the harmful acts done by religious people, but be more critical when it comes to blaming their religion for these acts or to blaming religion in general. To do otherwise is to open us to the charge of bigotry. Two hundred years ago a majority of Americans did not see an intrinsic moral problem in owning other human beings as slaves, and neither did their sacred scriptures. Those scriptures and the theologies they support are still with us, but using those scriptures to defend slavery is no longer fashionable. It would have been a mistake then to blame the abuse of slavery primarily on those scriptures, regardless of how they were used to support the institution, for slavery existed long before they did. It is a mistake now to assume without careful argument that harmful acts supported by religious beliefs are in fact primarily caused by those beliefs.

Fundamentalist and other extreme forms of religion inconsistent with the Enlightenment case continue to plague us, but as happened with slavery, extremism in religion may be on the decline. We should not ignore the fact that America is one of the few modern democratic countries where religion has not experienced a gradual decline in influence over the last two centuries. It is arguable that the decline of religion outside America has in large measure been brought about from within by moderate religion, which first enabled believers to accept the Enlightenment case, and then permitted, if not encouraged, a shorter step to a fully secular world view.

While it is also true that some Christian fundamentalists have moved to more conservative beliefs in reaction to their former denomination's drift into liberalism, there is good reason to believe that the overall trend in modern Western democracies is to less rather than more religion, even though

the religion that remains may be predominantly of the more extreme sort. In the United States, the Religious Right routinely suffers defeats, a trend that has persisted despite the electoral successes of the Republican party, successes attributable in large measure to support from the Religious Right. Only time will tell if America will, like other modern democracies, experience a decline in the influence of religion in life and politics.

Books such as those by Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens, despite their shortcomings, may encourage this decline. Such books, easily available in chain bookstores and on line, are now more accessible to more people, especially young people, than they have been in the past. There can be little doubt that a significant number of future secular humanists will date their awakening from religious dogmatism to just such books. Despite legitimate criticisms of the sometimes comically inept and naïve approaches to religion exhibited by these authors, they do serve a valuable purpose.

In the meantime, since we have far more in common with moderate religious believers who have accepted the Enlightenment case than they have with extremists, we should continue to work with them on common causes and not pretend that the eradication of religion is ultimately the only or best way to prevent the societal ills caused by illiberal religion. The long tradition of humanism has both secular and religious roots, and we should resist the temptation to blame all or most societal ills on religion, regardless of how emotionally satisfying that may be. Instead, only a nuanced, critical and open approach to the question of the harmfulness of religion is worthy of the best traditions of humanism. As Thomas Nagel puts it:

Blind faith and the authority of dogma are dangerous; the view that we can make ultimate sense of the world only by understanding it as the expression of mind or purpose is not. It is

unreasonable to think that one must refute the second in order to resist the first.⁸

Don Evans is Secretary of WASH's Board of Directors. He is the editor of this volume and of WASH's previous collection of essays, *Humanism Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (1999), also known as the "Blue Book." He holds a masters degree in philosophy from Yale.

⁸Nagel, *loc. cit.*, p.29.