

What We Talk About When We Talk About God

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THE GOD DELUSION. By Richard Dawkins.¹ Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Pp. 405. \$27.00. LETTER TO A CHRISTIAN NATION. By Sam Harris.² New York: Knopf, 2006. Pp. 96. \$16.95. THE CREATION: AN APPEAL TO SAVE LIFE ON EARTH. By E. O. Wilson.³ New York: Norton. Pp. 175. \$21.95.

The moment may be fleeting, but at this writing the power of the religious Right is on the wane. Its moral pretensions have been shaken by high-profile scandals involving sex, drugs, and influence-peddling,⁴ and its political allies suffered embarrassing defeats in the recent midterm elections.⁵ At the same time, atheism seems to be enjoying a minor renaissance just now (or at least an unusual amount of media attention).⁶ Maybe this is because the secularists sense the Right's momentary vulnerability; maybe it is because they can no longer tolerate its power and prestige. Most likely it is a combination of both.

Regardless of the motivation, one is tempted to ask: what's the point of all this God talk? Everyone seems to agree that the God Hypothesis—the idea that “[t]here exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us”⁷—is neither logically disprovable nor scientifically verifiable. Moreover, religious people are unlikely to abandon their views on the

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⁴ See, e.g., Neela Banerjee, *Some Foresee Compassion After Confessions*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 13, 2006, at A30 (discussing disclosures of homosexual activity and drug use by Colorado Springs mega-church pastor Ted Haggard); David D. Kirkpatrick, *Rejected by Evangelical Base, Politician Ponders Next Role*, N.Y. TIMES, July 22, 2006, at A11 (discussing how ties to disgraced former lobbyist Jack Abramoff led to conservative activist Ralph Reed's sudden fall from grace).

⁵ The Left may still have a God problem, but the Right seems to have a fairly severe one of its own. See, e.g., PEW FORUM ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE, RELIGION AND THE 2006 ELECTIONS (2006), <http://pewforum.org/docs/index.php?DocID=174> (“The exit polls clearly show that the Democrats’ gains in 2006 came largely among non-Christians and secular voters.”).

⁶ See, e.g., Jane Lampman, *Atheists Challenge the Religious Right*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Jan. 4, 2007, at 13; Richard Shweder, *Atheists Agonistes*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 27, 2006, at A23; Gary Wolf, *The Church of the Unbelievers*, WIRED, Nov. 2006, at 182, available at <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism.html>.

⁷ RICHARD DAWKINS, THE GOD DELUSION 31 (2006) (emphasis omitted).

strength of argument alone. (And the American public is overwhelmingly religious.⁸) Even assuming that the atheist case could be made and made persuasively, it is not clear that people would act very differently in a world without religion. It seems likely, in fact, that we would find other reasons to do good things and other ways to justify doing bad things. So is there really anything at stake here? For Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and E. O. Wilson, at least, the answer is an emphatic yes.

I. DAWKINS AND HARRIS

In *The God Delusion* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*,⁹ respectively, Dawkins and Harris argue that the world's fascination with God constitutes a "moral and intellectual emergency" that must be addressed.¹⁰ Their argument proceeds along two main lines. First is the argument from improbability. Dawkins and Harris concede that logic cannot disprove God's existence. Still, they say, it can expose the fatuity of arguments for God's existence (Aquinas's proofs, arguments from design, and so on) and establish the extreme improbability of His existence. Thus, it is demonstrably irrational to believe in God. Second is the argument from infamy. Religion is extraordinarily pernicious in effect, they claim; therefore, to continue believing in God despite His extreme improbability is not only irrational but also manifestly immoral. It would be difficult to overstate our authors' enthusiasm on this last point. Religion is "the great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture,"¹¹ enabling and perpetuating conflict,¹² inflicting untold psychological trauma,¹³ and "actively debauch[ing] the scientific enterprise" by ennobling ignorance.¹⁴ Religion, moreover, is *uniquely* deranging; only religion can account for the irrationality of, say, suicide bombers or abortion clinic assassins.¹⁵

Nor are liberal and moderate believers spared the whip. They lend belief an undeserved aura of respectability, insist on unjustified privileges for faith, and contaminate political discourse by characterizing as territorial or racial or economic disputes that are actually religious.¹⁶ In effect,

⁸ About eighty-five percent of Americans say they believe in God. GREGORY SMITH & PEYTON CRAIGHILL, PEW FORUM ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE, DO THE DEMOCRATS HAVE A 'GOD PROBLEM'? (2005), <http://pewforum.org/docs/index.php?DocID=148>.

⁹ SAM HARRIS, LETTER TO A CHRISTIAN NATION (2006) [hereinafter HARRIS, LETTER].

¹⁰ *Id.* at xii.

¹¹ DAWKINS, *supra* note 7, at 37 (quoting Gore Vidal).

¹² See, e.g., SAM HARRIS, THE END OF FAITH 12 (2004) [hereinafter HARRIS, FAITH] ("A glance at history, or at the pages of any newspaper, reveals that ideas which divide one group of human beings from another, only to unite them in slaughter, generally have their roots in religion.").

¹³ See, e.g., DAWKINS, *supra* note 7, at 309–44; HARRIS, LETTER, *supra* note 9, at 80.

¹⁴ DAWKINS, *supra* note 7, at 284; see also *id.* at 46–61; HARRIS, LETTER, *supra* note 9, at 62–64.

¹⁵ See DAWKINS, *supra* note 7, at 303.

¹⁶ See *id.* at 2; HARRIS, LETTER, *supra* note 9, at 82–84.

moderates and liberals allow religiosity to live like a parasite in the body politic, gathering strength from its host until it bursts forth, inevitably, into irrationality, extremism, and violence.¹⁷ Lovers of rationality, science, and liberal democracy, therefore, have a stark choice: they can stand by while superstitious hordes trample modernity or they can fight back. Dawkins and Harris choose the latter option, and offer their books as opening salvos. Harris seeks to “arm secularists in our society, who believe that religion should be kept out of public policy, against their opponents on the Christian Right,” and also to convince religious moderates that “the respect they demand for their own religious beliefs gives shelter to extremists of all faiths.”¹⁸ Dawkins intends to “raise consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one”—and to show the irrationality and immorality of alternative positions.¹⁹

Tall orders for such slender volumes! But there is a good deal to appreciate and even admire in these books. First, it would be difficult not to enjoy reading them. Dawkins and Harris are talented stylists and polemicists. Indeed, even if you are incensed by some of their rhetorical flourishes—and many passages seem designed to have just that effect²⁰—you are likely to be impressed by the verbal and intellectual range of these books. Dawkins plucks insights from fields as diverse as evolutionary biology and quantum physics; Harris is an astute religious comparativist who has clearly read his holy books. And progressives will almost certainly enjoy Dawkins’s and Harris’s ruthless skewering of the American religious Right and its stranglehold on certain policy issues.

But these books claim to traffic in Truth, not just satisfaction, so we must ask if they prove their points. Not surprisingly, that largely depends on who is reading them. Take the case for God’s improbability. Dawkins is by far the more innovative thinker here—and it is no mean feat to offer an original thought on this topic. He is at his best in explaining why some

¹⁷ I am sorry to say that both Dawkins and Harris are very fond of this exasperating and transparently silly argument. Where to begin? First, it does a poor job describing the behavior (and effect) of a believer like Garry Wills, who has been an outspoken critic of the religious right in America. See, e.g., Garry Wills, *A Country Ruled by Faith*, N.Y. REV. BOOKS, Nov. 16, 2006, at 8, available at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/19590#fnr15> (criticizing the Bush Administration for, among other things, trying to insinuate religion into science). Since moderate and liberal Muslims are no less targets of this aspersion, I should also mention that it does a poor job describing someone like Abdul-Karim Soroush, a deeply devout philosopher famous for eviscerating the epistemological certainty on which Islamic radicalism and theocracy depend. See, e.g., Abdul-Karim Soroush, *The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge*, in *LIBERAL ISLAM: A SOURCEBOOK* (Martin Kurzman ed., 1998). Second, and perhaps more tellingly, Dawkins and Harris seem oddly uninterested in generalizing this point. On their logic, shouldn’t we hold anti-war scientists responsible for chemical warfare? Well-meaning patriots for imperialist adventures? This is guilt-by-association reasoning at its worst.

¹⁸ HARRIS, LETTER, *supra* note 9, at viii–ix.

¹⁹ DAWKINS, *supra* note 7, at 1, 2–3.

²⁰ See, e.g., HARRIS, LETTER, *supra* note 9, at 38 (“There is an obvious truth here that cries out for acknowledgment: if God exists, He is the most prolific abortionist of all.”).

arguments for God's existence actually depend on assumptions that imply His non-existence. For example, says Dawkins, theists like to argue that science cannot account for the existence of the universe or the origins of life; therefore, we can infer that God is the cause of both. But, says Dawkins, to invoke God to explain such improbability raises a problem of infinite regress: it raises, in other words, the question of where God came from.²¹ Therefore, the appearance of agency not only does not prove God's existence, it illustrates how improbable His existence must be—at least more improbable than the improbability He is being recruited to account for. This is very improbable indeed, and crucially, much more implausible than the faintly Darwinist explanations Dawkins offers for the origins of life.²² Therefore, a designing God is so implausible, and scientific accounts of the origins of life so much more plausible, that to believe in God is irrational.

Dawkins is very proud of this argument for God's improbability. In fact, he suspects it is irrefutable.²³ And indeed it is, provided you share with Dawkins a few key assumptions. For example, Dawkins argues that postulating God begs the question of God's origin. But why? Because for Dawkins, it is a working assumption that all "creative intelligences, being evolved, necessarily arrive late in the universe."²⁴ Ipso facto, God needs an *evolutionary* history. But granting the explanatory power of Darwinian evolution here on Earth (which I certainly do), it is unclear why we must assume Darwinism's universal applicability—why we must assume, in other words, that the birth of the universe and the origins of life, like the evolution of life, proceeded along Darwinist lines.

Ironically, for Dawkins, it is a matter of faith that they did.²⁵ He suggests that if our consciousness has been sufficiently raised by the power

²¹ See, e.g., DAWKINS, *supra* note 7, at 149 ("His existence is going to need a mammoth explanation in its own right."); *id.* at 156–58.

²² Briefly, Dawkins argues that the law of large numbers easily accounts for the admittedly very improbable appearance of the first hereditary molecule. Planets and solar systems are sufficiently numerous that this supremely unlikely event was likely to occur on at least a few planets; and we can postulate similarly numerous "multiverses" to account for why our universe in particular is chemically and physically hospitable to at least a few such planets. *Id.* at 134–51.

²³ *Id.* at 157.

²⁴ *Id.* at 31.

²⁵ This crucial point is obscured in *The God Delusion*, but elsewhere Dawkins more frankly acknowledges that his view rests on certain large and possibly unverifiable assumptions—that is, on faith. See, e.g., Richard Dawkins, in WHAT WE BELIEVE BUT CANNOT PROVE: TODAY'S LEADING THINKERS ON SCIENCE IN THE AGE OF CERTAINTY 9 (John Brockman ed., 2006) ("It is an established fact that all of life on this planet is shaped by Darwinian natural selection, which also endows it with an overwhelming illusion of 'design.' I believe, but cannot prove, that the same is true all over the universe, wherever life may exist. I believe that all intelligence, all creativity, and all design, anywhere in the universe, is the direct or indirect product of a cumulative process equivalent to what we here call Darwinian natural selection. It follows that design comes late in the universe, after a period of Darwinian evolution. Design cannot precede evolution and therefore cannot underlie the universe.").

and elegance of Darwinist thinking, we will look askance at *deus ex machina* explanations for the universe and prefer Darwinist explanations instead.²⁶ Fair enough. But in the absence of evidence, the mere hope that everything in the universe always has and always will be explicable in Darwinian or pseudo-Darwinian terms cannot by itself defeat theism's competing view, itself an expression of hope: that God's complexity and improbability is immune to Darwinian analysis because He "exists" outside of what we regard as space and time. Indeed, one need not put much stock in theology to wonder whether Dawkins's certainty on this point is warranted; a healthy dose of scientific skepticism will suffice.²⁷

Thus, the persuasiveness of this argument ultimately rests on your opinion of Dawkins's Big Idea—the idea that Darwinism's fundamental assumptions hold no matter how far we wander from their terrestrial home. If it seems to you that Dawkins's Big Idea has enabled him to arrive at a profound insight about the nature of the universe, then you will find his account persuasive. If, on the other hand, you think that Dawkins's Big Idea has commandeered his imagination and blinded him to the possibility that the universe may not always behave in a Darwinist fashion, then you will not. My view of the matter is that both Dawkins and his opponents are more like Whitman's noiseless patient spider than they care to admit.²⁸

That brings us to the argument from infamy. Dawkins and Harris believe that religion is at the root of almost all human suffering and conflict—or at least that it is at the root of far more suffering and conflict than we tend to acknowledge. In fact, Dawkins and Harris see God—and, importantly, only God—everywhere.²⁹ And where they see God they see only pestilence. Suicide bombing? God's fault. Abortion provider murders? God's fault. Conflict in Northern Ireland? Homophobia? Indiffer-

²⁶ See, e.g., *id.* at 118 ("But Darwinian evolution, specifically natural selection . . . shatters the illusion of design within the domain of biology, and teaches us to be suspicious of any kind of design hypothesis in physics and cosmology as well.").

²⁷ Dawkins himself admits that we understand precious little of the universe and may be ill-equipped to understand much of it, even with the aid of science. DAWKINS, *supra* note 7, at 362–74.

²⁸ To wit:

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.
And you, O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

WALT WHITMAN, *LEAVES OF GRASS* 374 (Signet 2000) (1892).

²⁹ See Terry Eagleton, *Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching*, LONDON REV. BOOKS, Oct. 19, 2006, at 32, 34.

ence to humanitarian crises? All God's fault. Here again, readers will have to decide whether Dawkins and Harris wield the Big Idea or the Big Idea wields them. I think it is clearly the latter. Our authors' hostility to certain religiously inspired political programs seems to have developed into a full-fledged monomania about religion per se. And that monomania, like all monomanias, leads them to say and think some strange things.³⁰ For example, Dawkins and Harris have to engage in breathtaking amounts of revisionism to suggest that religion has been and continues to be all cost and no benefit.³¹ Even more problematic is Dawkins's and Harris's claim that certain evils would not occur but for religion. For instance, they argue that suicide bombing must be a religious and only a religious phenomenon because "[o]nly religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people."³² Really? Dawkins and Harris offer no evidence for the proposition, and conveniently ignore contrary examples.³³ More generally, hasn't the twentieth century taught us that murderous outrages hardly require religious justifications? Surely that is one of the bitter lessons of the genocides in Germany, Cambodia, Iraq, and Rwanda.³⁴

But all this merely hints at the deepest problem with the argument from infamy: it assumes a radical distinction between religion and poli-

³⁰ I am reminded of Sherwood Anderson's lyrical evocation of the problem with Big Ideas:

[I]n the beginning when the world was young there were a great many thoughts but no such thing as a truth. Man made the truths himself and each truth was a composite of a great many vague thoughts. All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful . . . And then the people came along. Each as he appeared snatched up one of the truths and some who were quite strong snatched up a dozen of them . . . The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.

SHERWOOD ANDERSON, WINESBURG, OHIO: A GROUP OF TALES OF OHIO SMALL-TOWN LIFE 4-5 (1919).

³¹ See Eagleton, *supra* note 29.

³² DAWKINS, *supra* note 7, at 303; cf. HARRIS, FAITH, *supra* note 12, at 29.

³³ The Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, for example, are among the world's most prolific and ruthless suicide bombers. The Tigers are a secular Marxist group. See, e.g., ROBERT A. PAPE, DYING TO WIN: THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF SUICIDE TERRORISM 139 (2005).

³⁴ See generally SAMANTHA POWER, A PROBLEM FROM HELL (2002) (examining the historical, political, and cultural roots of twentieth century genocides). Incidentally, there is something fundamentally hypocritical—and even ironic—about the way in which Dawkins and Harris castigate religion for its tendency to exacerbate group tensions and thus promote violence. Dawkins and Harris argue that religion is wrong and dangerous, and that religion cannot be reconciled with modernity; thus non-religious people must “confront” (convert?) religious people. But this is precisely the kind of sociopathic in-group/out-group thinking that Dawkins and Harris insist *uniquely* characterizes the religious worldview. Thus the form of the critique undermines the argument in a fundamental way; it enacts the very tendencies it criticizes, and in so doing illustrates how easy it is to dehumanize “others” in religious *or* secular terms. Thanks to Tejinder Singh for this observation.

tics (that is, non-religious cultural ideas and practices).³⁵ Dawkins's and Harris's model of religion is pathological and individualistic: religious derangement enters the brain of a believer and causes him to think irrational things—and, too often, to do terrible things. Public, mobilized religion is a case of mass hysteria brought on by mass infection. But this model is misleading because it ignores the social character of religious practice. Religious belief may live, in some sense, in the individual conscience, but religious practice lives in the public sphere. Thus, an individual's religion is inevitably bound up with the entire matrix of human culture: history, language, tribal codes, familial relationships, political ideology, art, science, commerce.³⁶ That matrix informs the content and character of religion as surely as religion informs the rest of the matrix. (And as a result, religion is shot through with epistemological schema we'd call "rational" or "secular," while science is infused with themes we'd recognize as "religious."³⁷) Nor can we understand individuals' or communities' religious behavior without understanding how, *ex ante*, other cultural practices and institutions limit and define the ways they can enact their religious beliefs. I do not mean to belabor these elementary sociological points. It is sufficient to say that it is not irresponsible or evasive, as Dawkins and Harris think,³⁸ to take a more sophisticated view of how religion, in conjunction

³⁵ See, e.g., HARRIS, FAITH, *supra* note 12, at 27 (describing grisly murder scenes from the 2002 Hindu-Muslim riots in the Indian state of Gujarat, and concluding that "[t]he cause of this behavior was not economic, it was not racial, and it was not political The *only* difference between these groups consists of what they believe about God.") (emphasis added).

³⁶ Indeed, perhaps the very inescapability of the matrix explains why so many people are attracted to extremism's (false) promise of a "pure" religion.

³⁷ To illustrate, compare Harris's superficial view of the Gujarat riots, *supra* note 35, with Professor Nussbaum's sensitive explication of how secular Nazi ideology undergirds much of the ostensibly religious violence in India.

When we examine [the history of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), or Hindu nationalist party], we see that the tensions between Hindus and Muslims expressed here are not "ancient" or even indigenous hatreds. They result from a borrowed fascist ideology of purity, which has gradually been imposed, transforming a Hinduism that in its origins is plural, diverse, and tolerant.

The ideologue whose views were central in the formation of the [modern BJP], M. Golwalkar, derived many of his views from German romantic nationalism, and especially from its National Socialist formation

. . . . Golwalkar portrays the Muslims, particularly, as outsiders and "despoilers" who must now finally be "shake[n] off." . . .

Such attitudes have nothing to do with the history of the Hindu religion or with any religious doctrines dating from before the 1930s.

Martha C. Nussbaum, *Genocide in Gujarat*, DISSENT, Summer 2003, at 15, 16–17, available at <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=480>. Conversely, anyone who doubts that the scientific worldview is suffused with "faith" need only consider Dawkins's unfounded (but not implausible) belief in the universal applicability of Darwinist principles. See *supra* text accompanying notes 25–28.

³⁸ See, e.g., HARRIS, LETTER, *supra* note 9, at 79–87.

with other ideas, practices, and institutions, feeds into rational *and* irrational behavior. Indeed, their one-dimensional analysis is the irresponsible one. It is all too easy (and in their cases, self-serving) to dismiss the evidence and assume that intractable social conflicts can be eliminated by “curing” people of their religious ideas.³⁹

But failure to understand the social character of religion also has more general methodological consequences for opponents of political religion. Dawkins and Harris, for example, seem to think that the persistence of the politicized religion they find so obnoxious is largely a function of its appeal to individual consciences. They think religion is attractive to people mainly because it helps them explain the universe, console and inspire themselves, and act in a moral fashion.⁴⁰ That must be why Dawkins and Harris think political religion—and the conservative agenda to which it is so often yoked—will be fatally wounded if they explain why it fails at these tasks (especially the first one) and offer secular alternatives.⁴¹ But they seem oblivious to the possibility that the persistence of religion depends as much on its social and political value (as a vehicle for organizing and mobilizing individuals and communities) as it does on its ontological and epistemological value (as a set of answers to the mysteries of life, the universe, and everything).⁴² Opponents of political religion will have to offer something considerably more powerful in the former sense if they hope to displace religion. Playing “gotcha” with doctrine’s logical inconsistencies simply will not do; nor will offering alternative ways “to invoke the power of ritual and to mark those transitions in every human life that demand profundity.”⁴³

³⁹ See, e.g., Eagleton, *supra* note 29, at 34 (“[Dawkins] thinks, for example, that the ethno-political conflict in Northern Ireland would evaporate if religion did, which to someone like me, who lives there part of the time, betrays just how little he knows about it.”).

⁴⁰ See *id.* at 345–62.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Dawkins, *supra* note 7, at 1–6.

⁴² To be clear, this is not to argue that religion is “merely” political, or that religious actors are anything but sincere in their beliefs. It is simply to argue that religion is a reliable vehicle for fusing individuals into groups for the sake of interacting with the world, and that that function—which is inevitably political in the broad sense—has contributed mightily to its attractiveness and persistence.

⁴³ HARRIS, LETTER, *supra* note 9, at 88. Professors Robert Post and Reva Siegel have made an analogous point vis-a-vis legal originalism. See generally Robert Post and Reva Siegel, *Originalism as a Political Practice: The Right’s Living Constitution*, 75 *FORDHAM L. REV.* 545 (2006). They argue that opponents of originalism fail to understand its instrumental, social, and political appeal. According to Post and Siegel, the “ascendancy of originalism does not reflect the analytic force of its jurisprudence, but instead depends upon its capacity to fuse aroused citizens, government officials, and judges into a dynamic and broad-based political movement.” *Id.* at 549. Thus:

To understand originalism’s power at the dawn of the twenty-first century is to appreciate the subtle ways in which originalism connects constitutional law to a living political culture and provides its proponents a compelling language in which to seek constitutional change through adjudication and politics.

Id. Originalism may pose as a description of what the law is, but it is really (inevitably?) a

Of course, that assumes, with Dawkins and Harris, that opponents of a politicized religion must obliterate its religion to change its politics. But there are other ways to deal with disagreement, as demonstrated by E. O. Wilson's new book, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*.⁴⁴

II. WILSON

Wilson is no stranger to the so-called war between rationalism and superstition.⁴⁵ But *The Creation* is not a battle cry. Instead, Wilson asks religious conservatives to put aside their disagreements with liberal secularists in order to pursue a common goal: saving the biosphere from the creeping Armageddon that is mankind. The appeal—in the form of a letter to a Southern Baptist pastor—takes no pains to obscure Wilson's secular worldview, nor the philosophical disagreement that must follow:

I see no way to avoid the fundamental differences in our respective worldviews. You are a literalist interpreter of Christian Holy Scripture. You reject the conclusion of science that mankind evolved from lower forms. You believe that each person's soul is immortal, making this planet a way station to a second, eternal life. . . . I am a secular humanist. I think existence is what we make of it as individuals. There is no guarantee of life after death For you, the glory of an unseen divinity; for me the glory of the universe revealed at last. . . . You have found your final truth; I am still searching.⁴⁶

But, says Wilson, religious conservatives and secular humanists still share similar “imperatives of security, freedom of choice, personal dignity, and a cause to believe in that is larger than ourselves.”⁴⁷ On that basis he invites his fictional interlocutor to “meet on the near side of metaphysics in order to deal with the real world we share.”⁴⁸ Wilson's argument for why theists should value and defend Nature clearly is designed to rhyme with religious worldviews. Thus, for example, he suggests that theists and secu-

normative vision of what the law should be. No wonder, then, that it “has engaged in a perfectly ordinary effort to identify and appropriate a politically useable past by strategically selecting and resurrecting particular historical themes and events,” and “ignored elements of the original understanding that do not resonate with contemporary conservative commitments.” *Id.* at 558. The parallelisms with public, mobilized religion are obvious if imperfect. The political religion that so frustrates Dawkins and Harris, like the political originalism that so frustrates liberal constitutional theorists, persists to the extent that it usefully corresponds to reality—not necessarily to the extent that it “truly” corresponds with reality.

⁴⁴ E. O. WILSON, *THE CREATION: AN APPEAL TO SAVE LIFE ON EARTH* (2006).

⁴⁵ DAWKINS, *supra* note 7, at 67.

⁴⁶ WILSON, *supra* note 44, at 3–4.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 4.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

larists can meet on the common ground of a “green history” which acknowledges that “[c]ivilization was purchased by the betrayal of Nature,”⁴⁹ or “Eden.”⁵⁰ That betrayal, says Wilson, spiritually impoverished us as surely as it materially enriched us.⁵¹ Moreover, to disturb the biosphere’s delicate balance is to put ourselves and our progeny in mortal peril; thus, failure to assume stewardship of the Creation is a moral failure on any account.⁵² Assuming stewardship, however, could make this planet “paradise.”⁵³

Wilson’s approach recalls Stanley Fish’s distinction between philosophical and pragmatic agreement. Fish observes that societies can reach pragmatic agreement (say, on environmental policies) even in the absence of philosophical agreement (say, on whether God created the world)⁵⁴ because particular policies can satisfy competing philosophies. Indeed, democratic and pluralist societies really have no choice in the matter. It is not as if they can compel agreement on (most) philosophical issues. I think this is right, and I think it constitutes a deep criticism of Dawkins’s and Harris’s approach to the problem. *The God Delusion* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* are extremely un-Fishian. They insist on philosophical consensus, and question the bona fides or intelligence of anyone who disagrees with their view of the right basis for such a consensus.⁵⁵ In contrast, Wilson understands that bracketing irreconcilable differences may be a necessary precondition to solving problems, since it enables the conversation to proceed and implies modesty and respect for one’s opponent. And the manner in which Wilson rhetoricizes his appeal implies, also correctly, that philosophical diversity and moderation can be affirmative goods—perhaps indispensable goods. Every camp will have its priorities, after all, most of them admirable and many of them unique. Ideally, Camp A will convince Camps B and C to care about Camp A’s non-overlapping priorities, and vice versa. But again, this can only occur if all camps maintain respect for each other. Wilson’s book is not perfect, but it does pursue this complicated project in good faith. Dawkins and Harris reject the project out of hand. They call it appeasement.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 10–11.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 9.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 9–14.

⁵² WILSON, *supra* note 44, at 14, 26, 75.

⁵³ *Id.* at 90.

⁵⁴ Stanley Fish, *The Search for Common Ground*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 19, 2006, available at <http://fish.blogs.nytimes.com/?p=23>.

⁵⁵ *Cf. id.*:

When your candidate for common ground is rejected by others, you can respond in many ways, but too often the response is either to read the naysayers out of the human community (they are savages or criminals or hopeless ideologues)—or to propose a course of education designed to bring them to full maturity (please read John Stuart Mill’s “On Liberty” by tomorrow).

⁵⁶ See DAWKINS, *supra* note 7, at 66–69 (referring to scientists who deny any essential

But that view of the matter strikes me as petulant, naive, and impractical.⁵⁷ After all, it is undeniable that even “if religion is a delusion, it is a delusion with a future.”⁵⁸ And surely science’s stature and influence will only increase. So it seems we are stuck with the problem of reconciling our religious and rationalist impulses when they conflict, both in our own hearts and in our political communities. In that sense, anyway, the answer to the question I posed at the end of the first paragraph is clear: there certainly *is* something at stake in these conversations, even if God’s existence cannot be proved or disproved definitively. Indeed, what is at stake is nothing less than the success of progressive politics. After all, the viability of that program will depend in no small part on the political support of the millions who embrace religion. That banal observation suggests another: progressives need a coherent approach to political problems that implicate religion. Unfortunately, a short book review cannot fully articulate or defend such an approach. But it can identify the potential approaches or attitudes expressed in the books reviewed here, and suggest which of those seem more promising from a progressive point of view.

Such an analysis might go something like this. The deeper questions that tend to be raised by conflicts between science and religion are almost certainly insoluble as a philosophical matter. But they will continue to occupy our political attention for two reasons: first, because we put a good deal of stock in both religion and science, and second, because science and religion are not static monoliths. Thus, as science advances⁵⁹ and religion’s priorities shift,⁶⁰ the old questions will burst forth in new settings,

conflict between science and religion as “The Neville Chamberlain School of Evolutionists” and “the appeasement lobby”); *see also* HARRIS, *supra* note 9, at 62–68 (attributing such disavowals to a “raw terror of the taxpaying mob”).

⁵⁷ Cf. Fish, *supra* note 54:

You might then hear someone say, when you lie down with dogs, you will get fleas, but that’s the choice—either a hewing to principle that brooks no compromise (you won’t even talk to Iran or North Korea or Cuba) or a willingness to hold your nose for the sake of getting something you think good, though not perfect, done with partners you don’t really trust.

⁵⁸ Shweder, *supra* note 6.

⁵⁹ It is old hat, for example, to observe that advances in medical technology are likely to upset political and legal settlements in the abortion context. But the problem is a general one. *See, e.g., Free to Choose?*, *ECONOMIST*, Dec. 23, 2006, at 16–18 (suggesting that advances in neuroscience may fatally undermine traditional notions of free will, and therefore require a radical re-thinking of responsibility, crime, and punishment); Jeffrey Rosen, *The Brain on the Stand*, *N.Y. TIMES MAG.* at 49 (Mar. 11, 2007) (discussing emerging problems related to neuroscientific evidence in criminal law).

⁶⁰ As they no doubt will. Following are just a few trends that could impact the political priorities of religion in America: the rise of Pentecostalism, *see* PEW FORUM ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE, *SPIRIT AND POWER: A 10 COUNTRY SURVEY OF PENTECOSTALS* (2006), <http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/Pentecostals-06.pdf>; increasing political disagreement between mainstream and conservative Christians, *see* JOHN C. GREEN, ET AL., PEW FORUM ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE, *2004 ELECTION MARKED BY RELIGIOUS POLARIZATION* (2005), <http://pewforum.org/publications/surveys/postelection.pdf>; and the rapid

and prior pragmatic settlements will become unacceptable. No settlement will remain acceptable to all parties for long; no party will remain influential forever. A vicious cycle? A never-ending quagmire? Maybe. But we could take a more sanguine view of the matter. Professor H. Jefferson Powell has argued that our “historically extended tradition of argument” about the Constitution structures and legitimizes American political practice.⁶¹ More specifically, conflict within that tradition appears to encourage—rather than threaten—the emergence of common values. That is a useful metaphor for the debate about the roles of science and religion in our liberal democracy—no doubt a “constitutional” debate in the broadest sense. Here, too, we have an extended tradition of argument; here, too, ongoing conflict within that tradition binds us together by enabling us to reach provisional, pragmatic agreements despite enduring philosophical disagreements.

Perhaps that is as good a way as any to express why progressives ought to prefer Wilson’s dialogic approach—with its Fishian overtones and Powellian implications—to Dawkins’s and Harris’s polarizing approach. Dawkins and Harris dislike pragmatic accommodation and see no reason to respect their opponents’ philosophical views; they think working within the argumentative tradition cedes too much. But democratic and pluralist societies are understandably suspicious of that attitude, and for that reason Dawkins and Harris are unlikely to persuade many reasonable people that the terms of the debate need to be changed. (And, of course, in the meantime they are likely to alienate those for whom the “truth” of religion is not an open question—a problem only academics can afford to ignore.) Wilson, however, is willing to work within the tradition by arguing that deep philosophical disagreement need not preclude mutual respect nor prevent broad pragmatic agreement. It seems to me that any progressive more interested in achieving her practical goals than scoring debate points must prefer the latter approach.

growth of Islam in America, *see generally* IHSAN BAGBY, ET AL., HARTFORD INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS RESEARCH, *THE MOSQUE IN AMERICA: A NATIONAL PORTRAIT* (2001), http://www.cair-net.org/mosquereport/Masjid_Study_Project_2000_Report.pdf.

⁶¹ H. JEFFERSON POWELL, *A COMMUNITY BUILT ON WORDS: THE CONSTITUTION IN HISTORY AND POLITICS* 6 (2002).