

Can Dialogue Exist between Secularism and Religion?

Faith in Dialogue

Sharing Differences, Seeking Common Ground

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I am not blind to what the Greeks valued – their values may not be mine, but I can grasp what it would be like to live by their light, I can admire and respect them, and even imagine myself as pursuing them, although I do not – and do not wish to.... We can discuss each other's point of view, we can try to reach common ground, but in the end what you pursue may not be reconcilable with the ends to which I find that I have dedicated my life.

-Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal"

The world needs *real dialogue*, that falsehood is just as much the opposite of dialogue as is silence and that the only possible dialogue is the kind between people who remain what they are and speak their minds.

-Albert Camus, "The Unbeliever and Christians"

But this task is very difficult, and what is more important, it is never complete ... It is only a continuing open exchange with those of different standpoints which will help us to correct some of the distortions they engender.

-Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*

Introduction
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By J. M. Beach

For most of human history the cosmos of the known universe was populated by deities and devils in a simplistically ordered whole guided by metaphysical principles and orally transmitted through myths. Humans acted in broad ignorance of the actual mechanics of the objective world, mixing local intelligence and tradition with fanciful belief in the power of magic, prayer, and fate. As Peter Gay once explained the "essence of the mythopoeic mind:" "Where the category of verification is absent, there are no lies."¹ Early philosophers in ancient Greece and India began to use *logos* to challenge the antiquated logic of *mythos*, but skeptics had little evidence to actually convince people to reject old worldviews. Often critique was met with ridicule from the establishment, or sometimes, as was the case with Socrates, a death sentence to preserve public morality.² The traditional epistemology of *mythos* was not fully challenged until Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) ushered in what has been called the "Copernican" revolution with the "new art of experimental science." This new science allowed a new type of truth to be fashioned based on empirical observation, innovative technology, experimentation, and mathematical theory.³

At the same time philosophers of science developed new scientific methods to logically explore and confirm truth. Francis Bacon's (1561-1626) popularized inductive logic and Rene

¹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York, 1995), 92.

² Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History* (New York, 2003); Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* (New York, 2005), 21-30.

³ I. Bernard Cohen, *Revolution in Science*, 135, 142. See also Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

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Descartes' (1596-1650) developed physical reductionism and analytical geometry.⁴ Isaac Newton (1643-1727) unified these developments, creating modern science by synthesizing experimental empiricism with more effective logical methods. He not only developed the calculus, in conjunction with the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), but Newton also further developed the application of mathematical logic to the study of the physical world. Newton unequivocally replaced the divinely governed geocentric chain of being with a new empirical conception of heliocentric universe governed by natural laws: "To consider simultaneously the causes of so many motions and to define the motions themselves by exact laws allowing of convenient calculation."⁵

Newton's epistemological paradigm would stand unchallenged until two later scientific revolutions in the late 19th and early 20th century revised the Newtonian universe. Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of natural selection, which has been called "evolution," is considered to be the start of a new scientific revolution, and it reordered how scientists conceived of life on Earth. Darwin's theory delivered a crippling blow to anthropocentric beliefs about the uniqueness of human beings as a species. It also helped historicize and naturalize knowledge, as most humans had believed in timeless supernatural forces to be the source of all change on Earth. Basically Darwin's theory described all life metaphorically as a dense interconnected tree, the trunk representing a primordial common ancestor of all life on Earth, which over billions of years branched out into millions of new forms through a process has natural selection. New organisms arise due to random genetic modification of organisms at the genetic level over long

⁴ Cohen, *Revolution in Science*, 148, 153, 156.

⁵ Cohen, *Revolution in Science*, 161-62, 168. Quote from Newton's *De Motu* in Cohen, 168.

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periods of time. Certain modifications are “naturally selected” by the external environment because these random changes allow the organism to better survive, mate, and reproduce.⁶

Darwin’s theory enabled not only a “new science,” like ecology and evolutionary biology, but it also created a “new way of thinking,” which focused on the dense interconnection, interdependence, and historically conditioned form of all life on Earth.⁷ Ernst Mayer claimed that Darwin “caused a greater upheaval in man’s thinking than any other scientific advance since the rebirth of science in the Renaissance.”⁸ I. Bernard Cohen, a pioneering historian of science, argued, “The Darwinian revolution was probably the most significant revolution that has ever occurred in the sciences.”

Its effects and influences were significant in many different areas of thought and belief. The consequence of this revolution was a systematic rethinking of the nature of the world, of man, and of human institutions. The Darwinian revolution entailed new views of the world as a dynamic and evolving, rather than static, system, and of human society as developing in an evolutionary pattern...The new Darwinian outlook denied any cosmic teleology and held that evolution is not a process leading to a “better” or “more perfect” type but rather a series of stages in which reproductive success occurs in individuals with characters best suited to the particular conditions of their environment – and so also for societies.⁹

Darwin’s “dangerous idea” completely naturalized (and secularized) both human beings and social processes, thereby, the long scientific assault on metaphysical belief finally rendered obsolete all notions of “the enchanted cosmos.”¹⁰

However, modern advances in science have not completely unraveled the mystery of the physical universe. In fact, the most recent scientific revolution has unveiled a strange,

⁶ Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life*.

⁷ Cohen, *Revolution in Science*, ch 19, quote on 289; Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life*.

⁸ Ernst Mayr, “The Nature of the Darwinian Revolution,” *Science*, 176 (1972), 987.

⁹ Cohen, *Revolution in Science*, 299.

¹⁰ Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 77.

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unpredictable cosmos filled with wondrous and frightening possibilities. Quantum theory and quantum mechanics have introduced the unsettling notion of “relativity.” The Newtonian framework of physical science was based on the idea of a limited number of absolute “laws” of the universe that determined all matter and motion. But Albert Einstein’s (1879-1955) theory of relativity (and later quantum mechanics and more recent developments in string theory) would revise the Newtonian assumption of simple laws and predictable patterns of motion, although many of these patterns seem to hold for the largest of observable phenomena, like planetary orbits and solar systems.

Instead, physical matter at its most basic level is dynamic, chaotic, random, and wholly uncertain. Physicists are still debating the very nature of these building blocks of life and how to reconcile this strange level of reality to the more predictable behavior of larger forms of life, from cells to organisms to universes. Because the micro-physical universe is in constant chaotic motion and the exact position or course of any sub-atomic particle uncertain, the vantage-point of any subjective observer plays a role in trying to objectively observe, record, and understand data. The implications of this revolution upset basic scientific assumptions, such as objectivity, laws of motion, predictability, and positive forms of knowledge. Even Einstein was concerned about his own discoveries, later in his life turning toward a unifying theory of everything because he believed that “God does not play dice with the universe.”¹¹

But Einstein’s later reaction to his own discoveries represented the last throws of an old Western belief. There is a new, profound truth that physical and social scientists are finally coming to terms with. The objective world that we inhabit is not singular, nor is it governed by simplistic and unchanging laws that determine everything according to a singular metaphysical

¹¹ Cohen, *Revolution in Science*, ch 27; Isaacson, *Einstein*; Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*; Lindley, *Uncertainty: Einstein, Heisenberg, Bohr, and the Struggle for the Soul of Science*; Greene, *The Elegant Universe*.

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clockwork, although there are many who still hold this view. The multiple levels and interconnected fields of physical reality are perhaps the most profound and disquieting discoveries in human history. While this does not undercut the foundational notion of empirical naturalism and the inductive methods of physical science, it does make physical reality much more conceptually complex and interdependent, thereby, much harder to observe, quantify, and comprehend.

The traditional assumption of a singular, simplistic, and immutable order of the universe was not only the overarching “great myth” of the ancient world, but it was also the “central dogma” at the foundation of the Western “enlightenment” and the birth of modern science. According to Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997), “One of the deepest assumptions of Western political thought is the doctrine, scarcely questioned during its long ascendancy, that there exists some single principle which not only regulates the course of the sun and the stars, but prescribes their proper behavior to all animate creatures...This doctrine, in one version or another, has dominated European thought since Plato...This unifying monistic pattern is at the very heart of the traditional rationalism, religious and atheistic, metaphysical and scientific, transcendental and naturalistic, that has been characteristic of Western civilization.”¹²

This great assumption was largely unchallenged until the end of the 19th century. Take for example William Graham Sumner who began his professional life as an Episcopal pastor, but left the ministry to become a social scientist at Yale in 1872. In his last sermon Sumner noted the “philosophical skepticism” of modernity and the brewing “conflict” between “traditional dogmas” and science. Sumner explained his turn toward science in terms of looking for “an

¹² Isaiah Berlin discusses this point at length in several essays in *The Proper Study of Mankind*. See “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will,” 555-559; “Herder and the Enlightenment,” 426; “The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities,” 326-28; “The Originality of Machiavelli,” 312-313; “The Counter-Enlightenment,” 245-46; “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 5. The long quote comes from “The Originality of Machiavelli,” 312-313.

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historical revelation of spiritual and universal truths which has authority for man.”¹³ Drawing from the cosmology of ancient *mythos*, scientists have assumed that there was a singular, “rational” and “intelligible” order to the universe that could be discovered by the human mind.

Up until the early 20th century, many scientists conceptualized this singular order in association with traditional Judeo-Christian beliefs about “God.” Thomas Hill, President of Harvard College in 1865, claimed, “The ultimate ends of comment sense, of philosophy, and of science are the same. They may be summed up in one, - it is the reading of God’s thought. The order of the universe is rational, intelligible...No mind capable of scientific labor ever doubts that all phenomena are subject to law, that is, that all phenomena succeed each other in an order which can be understood and expressed in the formulae of human speech.”¹⁴

But the unification of *mythos* (traditional, sacred reasoning) and *logos* (logical, critical reasoning) in a singular conception of the cosmos has not always been widely accepted because of the inherent ontological and epistemological conflict between these two worldviews. These two divergent ideologies have often been in conflict over the past 500 years, especially in the Western world. During this time the ancient logic of *mythos* was rebranded as “religion,” and the analytical empiricism of *logos* was labeled “secularism.” But both concepts of “secularism” and “religion” sprang from the Judeo-Christian tradition as it developed in Europe.¹⁵ Secular came from the Latin word *saeculum*, which literally referred to a century or age. But this concept was used by Western theologians to designate ordinary, natural time (as apposed to the

¹³ Quoted by Harris E. Starr, *William Graham Sumner* (New York, 1925), 167-168. See also Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (New York, 1955), 55.

¹⁴ American Social Scientific Association, *Constitution* (27 December 1865), cited by Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science* (Urbana, IL, 1977), 111-112.

¹⁵ Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford, 2000); Jacob Pandian, “The Dangerous Quest for Cooperation between Science and Religion,” *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (Amherst, 2003); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

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sacred time of God's metaphysical order).¹⁶ Religion came from the Latin word *religio*, which referred to the rituals or behaviors linked to supernatural powers or metaphysical reality. But as the Christian church began to consolidate an orthodoxy this concept was used by Western theologians, like Saint Augustine, to designate the body of "true" knowledge or doctrine contained in the *Bible* or propagated by church fathers.¹⁷ Beginning in the 18th century, European scientists and humanists used these Judeo-Christian distinctions to gradually wall-off a new ontological space, conceptualizing the "secular" world of strictly human affairs and natural processes. As William T. Cavanaugh has argued, "'Religion' as a discrete category of human activity separable from 'culture,' 'politics,' and other areas of life is an invention of the modern West."¹⁸

Secularism became a powerful intellectual force as part of the ideological worldview of Deism, which was created by scientists and humanists during the 18th century. Charles Taylor has called Deism "a half-way house on the road to contemporary atheism."¹⁹ As a quasi-religion, Deism did not completely reject the existence of "God" or metaphysics. Deists assumed that there was some larger metaphysical reality outside the boundaries of the physical universe. However, using the basic theory of logical parsimony, often called "Occam's razor," Deists eliminated the notion of an all-powerful transcendent being ("God") operating and intervening in human history or the natural world because it was redundant in the face of new scientific facts.

¹⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 54-55.

¹⁷ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*; Pandian, "The Dangerous Quest for Cooperation between Science and Religion," 165.

¹⁸ William T. Cavanaugh, "Sins of Omission: What 'Religion and Violence' Arguments Ignore," *Religion and Violence, The Hedgehog Review* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 37. See also, Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 3-32. Jack Goody argues that "religion" is not so much a "western" invention as it is a more general product of literate societies. See *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 4-5.

¹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 270.

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Instead, modern European Deists focused on empirical observation, experimental science, and the monistic belief in natural “laws” of the universe, which they used to re-order the ontological and epistemological space of physical reality. Deists did not try to logically disprove the existence of “God”, yet any religious notion would have accord with these new natural laws and prove itself valid within this new empirical worldview.²⁰ As the French *philosophe* Voltaire once explained, "Almost everything that goes beyond the worship of a supreme Being and the submission of one's heart to its eternal commands, is superstition...We are all steeped in weaknesses and errors; let's forgive each other our follies; that is the first law of nature."²¹

While Deists were largely agnostic on religious issues, effectively their belief in science made metaphysical notions redundant. This led to a general orientation of naturalism, which can be (and was) seen as a form of atheism.²² However, even Voltaire held on to a deep religious conviction. After the Lisbon earthquake in 1755 Voltaire wrote, "All the subtleties of metaphysics will not make me doubt for a moment the immortality of the soul or a beneficent Providence. I feel it, I believe it, I want it, I hope for it, and I shall defend it to my last breath."²³ As Peter Gay argued, "Deism was in fact a last compromise with religion. But it was not a compromise with mythopoeic thinking...The disenchanted universe of the Enlightenment is a natural universe."²⁴

18th and 19th century scientists and philosophers used an emerging naturalist mentality to create a “new framework” based on a “new rationalism,” which slowly secularized the modern

²⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 275. See also Berlin, “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will,” 555-559; “Herder and the Enlightenment,” 426; “The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities,” 326-28; “The Originality of Machiavelli,” 312-313; “The Counter-Enlightenment,” 245-46; “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” 5.

²¹ Qtd. in Peter Gay, *The Party of Humanities: Essays in the French Enlightenment* (New York, 1971), 26.

²² Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York, 1995), 374-377.

²³ Voltaire, Letter, August 18, 1756, qtd. in Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment*, 68.

²⁴ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment*, 148-49.

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Western world up to the 21th century.²⁵ Bit by bit, the physical universe, the natural world, and human society were separated from metaphysical doctrines and spiritual deities, although the underlying belief in a singular, intelligible cosmos was retained. As historian Peter Gay explained, "The old questions that Christianity had answered so fully for so many men and so many centuries, had to be asked anew: What - as Kant put it - what can I know? What ought I to do?"²⁶ Newly formulated concepts, such as "religion" and "secularism" were used to signify the modern ontological divide that many Westerners now take for granted. Thomas Jefferson famously went so far as to proclaim a "wall" between the two spheres, although his rhetorical wall has always been more symbolism than reality.²⁷ The existence of a secular sphere slowly became accepted due to political and scientific developments. Western societies became more and more diverse, ethnically and religiously, and a secular public sphere was a tool to enable official tolerance of all faiths. Also, advances in science and technology validated the naturalist conception of the physical world and made many older notions seem quaint fictions, like the traditional notion of a disembodied "soul."

But there is big problem with the whole notion of a secular/religious divide that has been legally enshrined over the last century – it is largely a fiction. While many people consider the 21st century to be part of a "secular age,"²⁸ the vast majority of human beings still live in a pre-modern, mythological frame of mind. The rise of secularism over the last five centuries has not only coincided with the stability of pre-modern religious beliefs and practices, but it has also seen the development of huge global religions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, as

²⁵ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment*, 338; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 294; Berlin, "The Sciences and the Humanities," 330.

²⁶ Gay, *The Party of Humanities: Essays in the French Enlightenment*, 124.

²⁷ Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Danbury Baptist Association," Jan 1 1802. The Supreme Court did not legitimate this notion until 1878. For a history of this letter see James Hutson, "A Wall of Separation: FBI Helps Restore Jefferson's Obliterated Draft," *Information Bulletin, Library of Congress*, 57, no. 2 (June 1998) <www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danbury.html>

²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

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well as the continual emergence of new religions.²⁹ Around 90 percent of the citizens of the United States of America still consider themselves “religious.”³⁰ Perhaps most surprising, around 39 percent of all scientists in the U.S. still consider themselves to be religious, only slightly less than the 42 percent of believing U.S. scientists polled in 1914.³¹ As Charles Taylor ironically explained, “The secular age is schizophrenic.”³² Secularism and religion co-exist awkwardly, and often in conflict.

With the growing acceptability of secularism over the last century, especially in Western Europe and the United States, there has also been a growing tension between the rival ontological and epistemological systems of “religion” and “science,” periodically irrupting into conflict. While science has been legitimated in the public eye, largely do to the staggering advances in technology and the quality of human life, the scientific worldview is still an embattled ideology in a religiously dominated world, even in Western democracies. Some scholars have questioned whether or not we need a “new model” for describing the world, which is “neither exclusively secular nor exclusively religious.” Martin E. Marty explained it succinctly: The world “is religious. And secular. *At the same time.*”³³ Modernity, as Charles Taylor reminded us, is a “struggle between belief and unbelief.”³⁴ But this duality predates the

²⁹ Jose Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective,” *After Secularization, The Hedgehog Review* 8, no 1-2 (Spring & Summer 2006); Paul Heelas, “Challenging Secularization Theory: The Growth of ‘New Age’ Spiritualities,” *After Secularization, The Hedgehog Review* 8, no 1-2 (Spring & Summer 2006); Daniele Hervieu-Leger, “In Search of Certainties: The Paradoxes of Religiosity in Societies of High Modernity,” *After Secularization, The Hedgehog Review* 8, no 1-2 (Spring & Summer 2006).

³⁰ Kendrick Frazier, “Are Science and Religion Conflicting or Complementary?” *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (Amherst, 2003), 26-27.

³¹ Neil Degrasse Tyson, “Holy Wars: An Astrophysicist Ponders the God Question,” *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (Amherst, 2003), 77; Eugenie C. Scott, “The ‘Science and Religion Movement’: An Opportunity for Improved Public Understanding of Science?” *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (Amherst, 2003), 112.

³² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 727.

³³ Martin E. Marty, “Our Religio-Secular World,” *Daedalus* 132, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 42, 47.

³⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 636.

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modern period because belief and unbelief have always existed in longstanding conflict.³⁵ Will it always be this way?

Skirmishes between secularism and religion began at the very origins of Western science.³⁶ In fact, if one takes a longer, global view, “religious” beliefs have always been subject to the assaults of doubt, and doubters have often been disdained by the moral majority.³⁷ But the battle began in full force with the European philosophers and scientists of the 18th century, who promoted a spirit of “enlightenment” from the shackles of antiquated myths, oppressive institutions (like the Roman Catholic Church), and authoritarian monarchs. These philosophers and scientists promoted rational thought, free exchange, objectivity, universal natural laws, political democracy, and the ability “to provide permanent solutions to all genuine problems of life or thought.”³⁸ But from the start, a rival tradition of “counter-enlightenment” philosophers, poets, and theologians saw the new secular world-view of science as a reductionist “murder” and “distortion” of the multifarious and “ineffable” nature of reality. These thinkers bristled against the “total claim of the new scientific method to dominate the entire field of human knowledge.”³⁹ These thinkers also questioned the metaphysical assumption of “the general progressive improvement of the world,” which of course was based on making the world conform to the cultural institutions of Western Europe.⁴⁰

³⁵ Actually, the conflict between secularism and religion extends even beyond the existence of these concepts. For at least the past three thousand years, along side religious belief in various cultures, doubts about these religious beliefs have co-existed. See Hecht, *Doubt: A History*.

³⁶ Mario Biagioli, *Galileo, Courtier: The Practice of Science in the Culture of Absolutism* (Chicago, 1993).

³⁷ Hecht, *Doubt: A History*.

³⁸ Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” 263. On the enlightenment see Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York, 1966); *The Enlightenment: The Science of Freedom* (New York, 1969). See also Berlin “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will;” “Herder and the Enlightenment;” “The Divorce Between the Sciences and the Humanities;” “The Originality of Machiavelli.”

³⁹ Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” 250-51; “The Sciences and the Humanities,” 328.

⁴⁰ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (Another Philosophy of History on the Development of Mankind), in Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” 408. Herder also questioned the Euro-centric bias of enlightenment philosophers (416).

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This battle expanded and became more acute in the 19th century. There were several major scientific, philosophical, and political developments that shook the very foundations of religious belief. This in turn caused an aggressive reaction from traditionalists, which led to various "culture wars" up into the 21st century.⁴¹ The four secular developments included the new *Biblical* criticism of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and David Strauss (1808-1874), the publication of Darwin's *On the Origins of Species* (1859), the proto-sociologist Karl Marx's (1818-1883) new political philosophy that saw religion as the "opiate of the masses," and the iconoclastic atheism of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who declared that God was dead. By the end of the 19th century, the conceptual war between science and religion became a popular cottage industry, the most notable publications being John W. Draper's *History of Conflict Between Religion and Science* (1875) and Andrew Dickinson White's *A History of Warfare of Science with Theology* (1896).⁴² And from then on cultural wars have ripped through Western societies every couple of decades.⁴³

Of course not all scientists in the 19th and 20th century were opposed to religion, nor did all scientists think that "science" and "religion" were ontologically opposed. Remember, at the turn of the 20th century around 40 percent of American scientists still considered themselves religious. Three of the most notable scientists of the 20th century who defended the notion of religion were Alfred North Whitehead in *Science and the Modern World* (1925), Albert Einstein in *Ideas and Opinions* (1954), and more recently, Stephen Jay Gould in *Leonardo's Mountain of*

⁴¹ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York, 1991); Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Limits of Social Cohesion: Conflict and Mediation in Pluralist Societies* (Boulder, CO, 1998).

⁴² On this debate in England see Frank M. Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven, 1974); Peter J. Bowler, *Reconciling Science and Religion: The Debate in Early Twentieth Century Britain* (Chicago, 2001); Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society, 1850-1960* (London, 1977).

⁴³ Although these "cultural wars" have not always been focused on religious tenants. In the U.S. for example, during the 1910s-20s there was a cultural war based on competing versions of "Americanism" in response to rising tides of immigration, colonial wars, and World War I. In the 1940s-1950s there was another cultural war based on political ideologies (communism vs. Americanism) and economic orders (state socialism vs. free-market capitalism).

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Clams and the Diet of Worms (1998) and *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (1999). Both Whitehead and Einstein believed in a metaphysical reality that was one with the physical workings of the universe. Einstein argued for a pantheist “God” (“Spinoza’s God”) who designed and worked through the laws of nature.⁴⁴ Gould, who referred to himself as a “Jewish agnostic,” argued that religion and science were “nonoverlapping magisteria.” In an effort to defuse the war between these worldviews, Gould claimed that these two ontological categories had their own “respective domains of professional expertise: science in the empirical constitution of the universe, and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives.”⁴⁵

The rise of scientific rationality and the growing legitimacy of secularism also gave rise in the 19th century to the birth of Comparative Religion, and later, Religious Studies. These academic disciplines sought to study the phenomenon of “religion.” While the early proponents of these disciplines were religious men who sought to bolster the importance of religion in the modern world, the effects of these new disciplines would only serve to widen the conflict between science and religion. The main actor in this early intellectual enterprise was the European philologist Max Mueller. He was greatly influenced by the universal philosophy and theology of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), whom postulated a universal metaphysical *geist* (spirit) behind the working of human history and at the center of all human religions. Mueller’s most important work was *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873). In it he claimed that humans have a “faculty of faith” which they used to apprehend the divine and

⁴⁴ Ronald W. Clark, *Einstein: The Life and Times* (New York, 1971), 413. But Einstein did not believe in the “conventional” definition of religion in terms of a personal God with supernatural powers who acts in history. Einstein said, “The idea of a personal God is quite alien to me and seems even naïve.” See Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 15.

⁴⁵ Steven Jay Gould, “Nonoverlapping Magisteria,” *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (Amherst, 2003), 193.

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develop morality. Mueller was also influenced by the liberal Protestant (and also Western imperialist) agenda of the early ecumenical movement, which meant to spread a largely Western European Protestant version of Christianity across the world. Mueller saw the study of comparative religion as an important resource for Christian missionaries spreading the gospel and converting the non-western savage.⁴⁶

Most of the scholars in the emergent discipline of Religious Studies were theologians and philosophers whose explicit purpose was to reconceptualize and validate traditional theological principles within the newly christened “secular” world. Such scholars included Dutch theologian P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, who coined the term “phenomenology of religion.” He wanted to study the essence of religion through its “empirical manifestations.” It also included the Jewish Christian theologian Joachim Wach (1898-1955), a professor in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, who wanted to create a “science” of religion.⁴⁷ Wach later brought the European philosopher Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) to the University of Chicago in the 1950s. Eliade would become “one of the most influential theorists in religious studies in modern times.”⁴⁸ Eliade most famous book *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1957) legitimated and consecrated the secular/religious divide, but he did so in order to point out how humans move from secular, profane existence into the “sacred space” of the divine. He sought to explain the “religious experience” of “religious man,” a being he termed “*homo religiosus*.” His central concept was the “the sacred,” which he defined as “pre-eminently the *real*, at once power, efficacy, the source of life and fecundity...objective reality...a cosmos.” Eliade claimed that

⁴⁶ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 34-36.

⁴⁷ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 36-37.

⁴⁸ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 41.

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religious man would always be dissatisfied with “profane experience,” and so he “opens” himself to the “divine” and “*makes himself, by approaching the divine models.*”⁴⁹

But these early intellectual movements were only quasi-scientific at best. Much of the work in the study of religion during the first half of the 20th century was either theology or philosophy, and this work almost always was biased in favor of religious assumptions.⁵⁰ The actual *scientific* study of religion did not begin until the 20th century. The fruits of this research would prove to be highly corrosive to traditional religious claims and theological belief. The three most important scientists to study religion *scientifically* were the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920), the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), and the social anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973).

Weber was working on his magnum opus *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Economy and Society)* when he died in 1920. In the *Religionssoziologie (Sociology of Religion)* part of this manuscript he explained that the “essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behavior.” Weber argued that anything claiming to be religious phenomenon should “not be set apart from the range of everyday purposive conduct” because they are primarily “oriented to *this world*,” by which he meant the secular world.⁵¹ In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) Durkheim theorized that religion was primarily a social phenomenon that was geared to the survival of human groups, and that it was also a strategy used by political elites to maintain social order.⁵² When Durkheim used the concept of “sacred,” Loyal Rue argues that what he really meant was any “vital interest of the group.” Thus, “The gods are to be understood as mere symbols

⁴⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York 1987), 16, 28, 100, 166, 203.

⁵⁰ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*.

⁵¹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston, 1963), 1.

⁵² Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York, 1965).

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personifying the transcendent reality of the group. The central activity of religion is found in its ritual life, which creates social solidarity and preserves the social order by reinforcing group consciousness.”⁵³ Evans-Pritchard’s *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (1937) was a groundbreaking book in the scientific study of religion. As Pascal Boyer explains, “His book became a model for all anthropologists because it did not stop at cataloguing strange beliefs. It showed you, with the help of innumerable details, how *sensible* those beliefs were, once you understood the particular standpoint of the people who expressed them and the particular questions those beliefs were supposed to answer.”⁵⁴

Although the field of Religious Studies remains plagued by the bias and vacuity of the central concept of “religion”,⁵⁵ the study of ritual, belief, institutions, ethics, and human consciousness in sociology, anthropology, cognitive psychology, and biology have led to new developments in our understanding of religion as a social and psychological phenomenon. Some of the more notable include: philosopher Daniel C. Dennett’s *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (1995) and *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006); philosopher Loyl Rue’s *Religion Is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture Our Biological Nature* (2005), and anthropologist Pascal Boyer’s *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (2001). There have also been new discoveries of evidence in history and archaeology, which have led to more accurate understanding of existing religious traditions and the meanings of sacred documents. In the study of Christianity, some of the more notable include: John Dominic Crossan’s *The Historical Jesus* (1993) and *The Birth of Christianity* (1999); Donald Harmon Akenson’s *Saint Saul: A*

⁵³ Loyl Rue, *Religion Is Not About God: How Spiritual Traditions Nurture our Biological Nature* (New Brunswick, 2005), 147-148.

⁵⁴ Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York, 2001), 12.

⁵⁵ Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*.

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Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus (2002); and Bart D. Ehrman's *Lost Christianities* (2005), *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (2007), and *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (2007).

For those who follow these recent developments, there is little space left for any theist claims as traditionally defined by the major world religions. Religious prophets have been demystified and humanized. Religious traditions have been historicized within specific cultural, temporal, and geographical domains. Religious texts have been deconstructed both in terms of historicizing the writing and critically analyzing the meaning of sacred texts, and also in terms of reconstructing the heterodox collection of texts that were actively suppressed by more powerful orthodox traditions. As philosopher Loyal Rue explains, "The question of God's existence simply doesn't come into the business of understanding religious phenomena...*belief* is the thing, not the reality of any objects of belief."⁵⁶

And there have been recent scientific findings that have falsified theist-favoring claims of "nonoverlapping magisteria" and the special religious province of morality. Anthropologists, cognitive scientists, and evolutionary psychologists have shown that morality has a biological and social basis that predates the development of religion. Pascal Boyer summarizes what we now know of the origins of morality, "Having concepts of gods and spirits does not really make moral rules more *compelling* but it sometimes makes them more *intelligible*. So we do not have gods because that makes society function. We have gods in part because we have the mental equipment that makes society possible but we cannot always understand how society functions... We can explain religion by describing how these various [human] capacities get recruited, how they contribute to the features of religion that we find in so many different cultures. We do not need to assume that there is a *special* way of functioning that occurs only

⁵⁶ Rue, *Religion Is Not About God*, 3.

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when processing religious thoughts...this notion of religion as a special domain is not just unfounded but in fact rather ethnocentric.”⁵⁷

These recent scientific developments have led many people to proclaim that belief in God is “obsolete.” Journalist Christopher Hitchens explains, “The original problem with religion is that it is our first, and worst, attempt at explanation. It is how we came up with answers before we had any evidence. It belongs to the terrified childhood of our species...reason and logic reject god.”⁵⁸ Evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker argues, “The deeper we probe these questions, and the more we learn about the world in which we live, the less reason there is to believe in God.”⁵⁹ Based on the available scientific evidence, physicist Victor J. Stenger argues that “the only creator that seems possible is the one Einstein abhorred – the God who plays dice with the universe...Yet there is no evidence that God pokes his finger in anyplace.”⁶⁰ Thus, this has led many scientists to proclaim that “God” is a *failed* and obsolete “hypothesis.” The evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins goes so far as to claim that those who continue to believe in God despite the evidence are deceived by a “pernicious delusion.”⁶¹

The large tide of scientific evidence over the past half-century has also emboldened a group of “new” atheists, who have tried to rehabilitate this old negative epithet and make it a respectable intellectual and moral position.⁶² In the United States the number of people claiming

⁵⁷ Boyer, *Religion Explained*, 28, 311. See also Daniel C. Dennett’s *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life* (New York, 1995) and *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York, 2006).

⁵⁸ Christopher Hitchens, “No, But It Should,” *Does Science Make Belief in God Obsolete?* John Templeton Foundation (West Conshohocken, PA, n.d.), 25. See also Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York, 2007).

⁵⁹ Steven Pinker, “Yes, If By,” *Does Science Make Belief in God Obsolete?* John Templeton Foundation (West Conshohocken, PA, n.d.), 4.

⁶⁰ Victor J. Stenger, “Yes,” *Does Science Make Belief in God Obsolete?* John Templeton Foundation (West Conshohocken, PA, n.d.), 32. See also Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis – How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst, NY, 2007).

⁶¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York, 2006), 31.

⁶² Victor J. Stenger, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* (Amherst, NY, 2009). For a video discuss between some of the leading “new atheists” see: Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, *The Four Horsemen: Episode 1* (2008).

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“no religion” has grown from 2.7 percent of the population in 1957 to about 15 percent in recent polls. But only about 10 percent say they are “neither spiritual nor religious,”⁶³ and even less, about 5 percent of the population, claim to “not believe in God.” Of this 5 percent, only a quarter of this small minority (about 1.6 percent of the total population) identify themselves as “atheists.”⁶⁴ In this very religious country, there still remain deep set prejudices against professed atheists. In a recent poll, an average of 41 percent of Americans (and 63 percent of white evangelical Protestants) said that they would not vote for an atheist running for president, even if that person has received their political party’s presidential nomination.⁶⁵ An American serviceman had to be sent home early from Iraq because of the threats he received from other soldiers and even his commanding officer because he tried to hold a meeting for “atheists and freethinkers” while serving in a warzone.⁶⁶ Atheists remain a very small minority; however, a number of new atheists have sketched out a platform to promote non-belief and “atheist pride.”⁶⁷ These atheists have delivered some bold attacks against religion and they have defended the intellectual and moral merits of atheism. Remarkably, many of these new atheists have also acknowledged the possibility for certain conceptions of “God” and spiritual practice.

Christopher Hitchens claims that because of the continuing “fanaticism and tyranny” of religious people, atheism has “moral superiority” because it allows people to use reason independently of “dogma” and form more logical and moral solutions to the world’s problems.⁶⁸ The neuroscientist Sam Harris agrees with Hitchens. He argues that religious people who hold

⁶³ Christopher McKnight Nichols, “The ‘New’ No Religionists: A Historical Approach To Why Their Numbers Are on the Rise,” *Culture*, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture (Fall 2009), 13-14.

⁶⁴ “Not All Unbelievers Call Themselves Atheists,” *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (April 2 2009) <<http://pewforum.org/Not-All-Nonbelievers-Call-Themselves-Atheists.aspx>>

⁶⁵ “Religion and Politics: Contention and Consensus (Part II),” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (July 24 2003) <<http://pewforum.org/PublicationPage.aspx?id=621#1>>

⁶⁶ “Soldier Sues Army, Saying His Atheism Led to Threats,” The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (April 26 2008) <<http://pewforum.org/Religion-News/Soldier-Sues-Army-Saying-His-Atheism-Led-to-Threats.aspx>>

⁶⁷ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 3.

⁶⁸ Christopher Hitchens, “The Future of an Illusion,” *Daedalus* 132, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 83-87.

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beliefs with “no evidence” are “mad,” “psychotic,” “delusional” and signs of “mental illness.”

This makes religious people very “dangerous” because they are “ignorant” of reality and prone to violence.⁶⁹ Harris claims that the major enemy of 21st century is not any specific religious tradition or person, the real enemy is “faith itself” – the “evil of religious faith.”⁷⁰ Thus, without faith, humans can take “a rational approach to ethics” and logically solve the world’s problems.⁷¹ But Harris does not deny that people have “spiritual experience[s],” nor does he find anything wrong with “meditation” or “mysticism,” as long as it is a “rational enterprise” grounded on sound principles and evidence.⁷²

Richard Dawkins explains that an atheist is simply a “philosophical naturalist” who “believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don’t yet understand.”⁷³ But like Harris, Dawkins is open to some forms of spirituality. He does not deny the possibility of Spinoza’s “God,” Einstein’s “God,” or the other naturalistic definitions of “God” made by “enlightened scientists.”⁷⁴ The notion of God just becomes a metaphor for the wonders of the natural universe. Instead of traditional notions of “God,” Dawkins prescribes “a good dose of science” and the “honest and systematic endeavor to find out the truth about the real world.”⁷⁵

But traditional theists refuse to give up much ground to scientific developments or to the claims of new atheists. Recent responses include John F. Haught’s *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (2007) and Karen Armstrong’s *A Case for*

⁶⁹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York, 2004), 72-77, 83.

⁷⁰ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 130-131.

⁷¹ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 170.

⁷² Harris, *The End of Faith*, 217, 221.

⁷³ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 14.

⁷⁴ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 20.

⁷⁵ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 361.

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God (2009). Even some self-professed atheists acknowledge that religion will always have the upper hand. Robert Sapolsky, a neurologist at Stanford University, argues that while “science is the best explanatory system that we have,” that doesn’t mean “that it can explain everything, or that it can vanquish the unknowable.” Furthermore, religious belief “offers something that science does not.” Sapolsky calls it “ecstasy,”⁷⁶ but one could also add emotional comfort, meaningful identity, and motivational purpose.

Thus, in light of the entrenched position of both secularism and religion, and the growing conflict between these two world views, some people have asked where there can be common ground rather than the culture wars. Georgetown University Theologian John F. Haught has proposed a “conversation” between science and religion, as has philosopher Daniel C. Dennett.⁷⁷ There have been some notable debates between science and theology over the subject of the historical Jesus.⁷⁸ But there have been few real conversations or dialogues between people with secular and religious views, and most of these have been academic exchanges that would have limited appeal with the broader public. One of the most notable academic debates was between William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith in *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (1993). The two philosophers debated back and forth the significance of the Big Bang from their opposing religious and secular viewpoints. Another more comprehensive example is the edited collection, *Contemporary Debates in the Philosophy of Religion* (2004). In a not so formally academic exchange, the atheist Christopher Hitchens has publically debated several religious

⁷⁶ Robert Sapolsky, “No,” *Does Science Make Belief in God Obsolete?* John Templeton Foundation (West Conshohocken, PA, n.d.), 20-22.

⁷⁷ John F. Haught, *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation* (Mahwah, NJ, 1995); Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 14.

⁷⁸ Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (New York, 1999); Dale C. Allison, Marcus J. Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Stephen J. Patterson, *The Apocalyptic Jesus: A Debate*, ed. Robert J. Miller (Santa Rose, CA, 2001).

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believers, including William Lane Craig.⁷⁹ Sadly one does not find more of this kind of exchange, especially geared toward engaging the broader public.⁸⁰

But not everyone agrees that such conversations are possible, let alone trying to find common ground. James Davison Hunter argued that culture wars cannot be resolved and conversations cannot take place: "Is it not impossible to speak to someone who does not share the same moral language? Gesture, maybe; pantomime, possible. But the kind of communication that builds on mutual understanding of opposing and contradictory claims on the world? That would seem impossible."⁸¹ Philosopher Richard Rorty argues that dialogue won't work because religion is often a "conversation-stopper" for most people, especially for those believers who hold onto absolutes that cannot be compromised.⁸²

If the past 5,000 years of human history tells us anything, the reality of the human condition points toward the continued need for religious belief, thus, there will probably never be a secular world. The power of cultural tradition is too great, the legitimacy of existing institutions is too strong, the quality of public education is too impoverished, and the impact of forward-looking personalities is too small. The majority of human beings will never lose their religion, nor will they adopt a secular, scientific worldview. Secularism will always be embattled, and religious differences will sometimes still lead to violence. The world of diverse, conflicting cultures and viewpoints that we have inherited from our ancestors will be passed along to our children.

⁷⁹ Christopher Hitchens and William Lane Craig, *Does God Exist?* (La Mirada Films, 2009); Christopher Hitchens and Douglas Wilson, *Collision: Is Christianity Good for the World?* (Level 4, 2009); Christopher Hitchens and Dinesh D'Souza, *God On Trial: A Debate on the Existence of God* (Fixed Point Foundation, 2008).

⁸⁰ William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, *Theism, Atheism, and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford, UK, 1993), Michael L. Peterson and Raymond J. Vanarragon, *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, UK, 2004).

⁸¹ James Davison Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War* (New York, 1994), 8.

⁸² Richard Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," *Common Knowledge* 3 (Spring 1994): 1-6.

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As the philosopher Isaiah Berlin once explained, “Surely it is not necessary to dramatize these simple truths, which are by now, if anything, too familiar, in order to remember that the purposes, the ultimate ends of life, pursued by men are many, even within one culture and generation; that some of these come into conflict, and lead to clashes between societies, parties, individuals, and not least within individuals themselves; and furthermore that the ends of one age and country differ widely from those of other times and other outlooks.” But just because we live in a diverse and conflicting world, it does not “preclude us from sharing common assumptions, sufficient for some communication with [others], for some degree of understanding and being understood. This common ground is what is correctly called objective...Where there is no choice there is no anxiety; and a happy release from responsibility. Some human beings have always preferred the peace of imprisonment, a contented security, a sense of having at last found one’s proper place in the cosmos, to the painful conflicts and perplexities of the disordered freedom of the world beyond the walls.”⁸³

The hope of humanity lies within our ability to communicate our difference, seek understanding and understand in turn, and where at all possible, to find common ground. This is no doubt a difficult and dangerous endeavor, but it is the responsibility of all those who claim the ethical courage to build a better world. “We can do no better,” Daniel C. Dennett argues, “than to sit down and reason together, a political process of mutual persuasion and education that we can try to conduct in good faith.”⁸⁴ But in order to do so, argues Charles Taylor, “Both sides need a good dose of humility, that is, realism. If the encounter between faith and humanism is carried through in this spirit, we find that both sides are fragilized; and the issue is rather reshaped in a new form: not who has the final decisive argument in its armory...Rather, it

⁸³ Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?”, 88; “Historical Inevitability,” 176-77, 185.

⁸⁴ Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 14.

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appears as a matter of who can respond most profoundly and convincingly to what are ultimately commonly felt dilemmas.”⁸⁵ But even when solutions are found to our common problems, “We don’t just decide once and for all...it is only a continuing open exchange.”⁸⁶

There is hope that such public dialogue is possible. There have been several moments in human history where diverse viewpoints were peacefully exchanged in public debate. The ancient Greeks provided an open forum for believers and skeptics to openly discuss their ideas, although the death of Socrates marked the limits of permissible speech.⁸⁷ In the third century BCE, the Indian Emperor Ashoka instituted “Buddhist councils” that created an open arena for diverse parties to argue over religious principles and practices.⁸⁸ In the late 16^h century the Muslim Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great, ruling over Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Jains, Jews, and atheists in the Indian sub-continent, instituted state religious neutrality and public dialogue between representatives of the different faiths.⁸⁹

Mongke Khan, the ruler of the vast Mongolian empire in the 13th century, not only supported Genghis Khan’s initial policy of religious neutrality and tolerance of all faiths, he also instituted public debates over religion. Individuals would try to refute opposing religious doctrines or practices in front of three judges: a Christian, a Muslim, and a Buddhist. Contestants could only use rhetoric and logic to persuade the judges. Common ground was rarely reached and “no side seemed to convince the other of anything,” but each debated ended, as most Mongol celebrations did, with an excess of alcohol, merriment, and “everyone simply too drunk to continue.”⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 675.

⁸⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 428.

⁸⁷ Anthony Gottlieb, *The Dream of Reason: A History of Philosophy from the Greeks to the Renaissance* (New York, 2001).

⁸⁸ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* (New York, 2005), 15.

⁸⁹ Sen, *The Argumentative Indian*, 18.

⁹⁰ Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Kahn and the Making of the Modern World* (New York, 2004), 172-73.

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The philosophes of the European Enlightenment used the ancient philosophical method of dialogue to investigate religious dogma and political traditions. David Hume used this method in his landmark book, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), published after his death and without attribution because of the radical nature of dialogue during a time of religious and political absolutism. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's play *Nathan the Wise* (1779) was focused on the dialogue between a Jew, and Muslim, and a Christian. In it he tried to preach tolerance for different faiths and viewpoints, ending with the maxim "Little children, love one another."⁹¹ Peter Gay explained the power of this method, the philosophes favorite philosophical tool: "The philosophes, for their part, could exploit the potentialities of dialogue fully, to propound the most outrageous hypotheses for the sake, not of refutation, but of serious consideration, to dramatize the constructive role of criticism, to record their own education, their struggles and uncertainties, and by recording them, educate their readers."⁹²

Political discourse in the United States of America is another example of the institutionalization of dialogue, public debate and peaceful exchange of ideas. However, it took several hundred years for this rhetorical arena to open up for all peoples in this country. For most of this country's history not everyone was free to debate, and at several key junctions heated debates have irrupted into violent conflict, and even war. But more and more minorities have stood up to be recognized and have articulated their need for equal rights. The idea of American democracy remains to this day an unsettled and contested ideological terrain – the contours of which remain divisive and ever changing.⁹³ James A. Banks has argued that a major

⁹¹ Lessing, *Nathan the Wise*, qtd. in Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment*, 334.

⁹² Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment*, 172, 176-77.

⁹³ Specifically I am referring the debates over the "culture war" of the last three decades, which reflect a heated disagreement over the very notions of American national and cultural identity. A very short list of this debate might include the following: Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*; James Davison Hunter, *Cultural Wars: The Struggle to Define America*; Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why American is Wracked by Culture Wars*; Michael Lind,

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problem facing modern, multicultural nations is “how to recognize and legitimize difference and yet construct an overarching national identity that incorporates the voices, experiences, and hopes of the diverse groups that compose it.”⁹⁴ One solution to this problem has been offered by Gerald Graff who has argued that educators should show students that “culture itself is a debate” and, thereby, “teach the conflicts” that define our American culture both past and present: “Acknowledging that culture is a debate rather than a monologue does not prevent us from energetically fighting for the truth of our own convictions. On the contrary, when truth is disputed, we can seek it only by entering the debate.”⁹⁵

In many ways the ideal of democracy can be seen as a peaceful yet heated discussion conducted by diverse human beings with different viewpoints trying to convince each other with words on the best way to organize a society. Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama has described American democracy “not as a house to be built, but as a conversation to be had.” Obama argues that Americans need to join the “conversation” of America, which is “a ‘deliberative democracy’ in which all citizens are required to engage in a process of testing their ideas against an external reality, persuading others of their point of view, and building shifting alliances of consent.”⁹⁶ The philosopher Amy Gutmann has praised the “virtue” of deliberation by which important questions facing society are discussed and argued peacefully amongst the equal participants of a democratic nation. Often the most important questions cannot be completely answered, nor can agreement always be found, but Gutmann stressed, “We can do

The Next American Nation: The New Nationalism and the Fourth American Revolution; Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture, and History*; Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, eds., *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal*.

⁹⁴ James A. Banks, “Diversity, Group Identity, and Citizenship Education in a Global Age.”

⁹⁵ Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*, 8, 12, 15.

⁹⁶ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, 92. For two excellent and very short books on democracy, see: Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy*; Robert A. Dahl, *On Political Equality*.

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better to try instead to find the fairest ways for reconciling our disagreements, and for enriching our collective life by democratically debating them.”⁹⁷

This book then represents one attempt to institutionalize a forum, or at least the precedent, for the open discussion of secularism and religion. The goal of this book is articulate and share individual differences while opening personal worldviews to the scrutiny of others with different views. The focus of this book is on dialogue, the sustained attempt to peacefully discuss ideas while establishing mutual bonds of goodwill, friendship, and a common humanity. There is also a focus on reasoned argument and clear thinking. It is important to get beyond what Amartya Sen calls "disengaged toleration."⁹⁸ Thus, beliefs and claims are questioned so as to investigate the truth, yet the old notion of a singular truth must be discarded since one's idea of truth is most likely embedded in a complex nexus of values and priorities.⁹⁹ The purpose of this book is not necessarily to convince anyone with a “final decisive argument.” Rather this book is about sharing subjective experience and reasoned argument in an open, friendly environment, seeking to be heard, respected and understood, while also searching for “commonly felt dilemmas,” mutual interest, and shared values.¹⁰⁰

As the editor of this project, I have sought not only to legitimate my own atheistic point of view as a viable ontological and ethical position, but to subject my views to scrutiny and debate. In turn, I have asked several believers of diverse religious faiths to articulate their own theological positions and subject themselves to scrutiny and debate. The focus of this book is on the dialogue between diverse participants, who have all come together in a mutual project to not only share divergent ideas, but ultimately, to engage each others' differences, tolerate diversity,

⁹⁷ Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, 11-12.

⁹⁸ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), x.

⁹⁹ Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?”, 88; “Historical Inevitability,” 176-77, 185; Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, x, xix.

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 675.

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and peacefully share a world. And even more than that, I am happy to say that despite our deep religious differences, I can call each one of these participants my friend. And in the end, therein lies the sustaining hope of this project.

I would like to end with the words of the 13th century Sufi mystic, Jelaluddin Rumi. This poem embodies not only the spirit of this book, but also the promise of a peaceful future for both believers and non-believers - all of us. We must share the same world despite our differences.

Only Breath

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu
Buddhist, sufi, or zen. Not any religion

or cultural system. I am not from the East
or the West, not out of the ocean or up

from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not
composed of elements at all. I do not exist,

am not an entity in this world or in the next,
did not descend from Adam and Eve or any

origin story. My place is placeless, a trace
of the traceless. Neither body or soul.

I belong to the beloved, have seen the two
worlds as one and that one call to and know,

first, last, outer, inner, only that
breath breathing human being.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Jelaluddin Rumi, *Selected Poems*, trans. Coleman Banks (London, 2004), 32.