



The Fatal Flaw in Religious Liberalism and How to Avoid it

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Abstract: it will be claimed in this paper that the question ‘what happens after religion?’ is fundamentally flawed, not least because it presupposes a problematic view of what religion is. With that in mind, the first job is to outline what I take contemporary research to say about religion, and draw some conclusions from that.

Working from that foundation, it then becomes apparent that the need is to speak in terms of what happens *instead* of religion rather than *after* it. We then examine some implications of this shift in perception on some views favoured by religious liberals, among whom can be counted Sea of Faith people. It will be argued that the contemporary views on religion raise some troubling challenges for religious liberalism. One commentator has spoken of the fatal flaw at the heart of religious liberalism. This idea will be examined by looking at the ideas of God and faith prominent in Sea of Faith literature. The implications of the fatal flaw in these areas for liberal religion are outlined, and some solutions are offered.

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When preparing this paper I found the conference theme to be problematic on several fronts. To begin with, a great deal hangs on what one means by ‘religion’ and ‘sacred’. Then there is the subtitle, which seems to presuppose a link between religion and the condition of sacredness. Let me state clearly at the outset that, to my mind, the question doesn’t work because there will never be a time after religion. It is sometimes claimed that secular humanists seek an end to religion. (1) This is simply not true, for a variety of reasons. To ask what happens after religion is like returning to those sterile ‘end of history’ debates of the early 1990s. And the subtitle of the conference—‘Is nothing sacred any more?’—is, in my view, quite unrelated to the main title. It is theoretically possible, for instance, to conceive of a time after religion where many things may be held as sacred.

What is religion?

So, what do I mean by ‘religion’? It’s easiest to begin by making clear what I do *not* mean. When I speak of religion, I do not mean a collective term for all the major systems of belief in the world: the Asian traditions, the Western religions and the varieties of humanism. A whole series of errors and presumptions are made when we insist on lumping these three great – and very different – systems together and insisting on applying the language of the Western monotheist religions to them all. Not only is it unscholarly, it is also imperialist.

Conceptions among the Asian traditions and the varieties of humanism of time, of nature, of virtue, and of society are older and quite distinct from the later, more heated and absolutist nostrums of the monotheists. A lot of scholars, from all points on the spectrum, have commented that it is best to reserve the word 'religion' and all the baggage associated with it, to the three monotheist systems of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, or to abandon the word for precisely the same reason. (2) To speak of Hinduism, for example, as a religion, borders on the absurd. Remember the origin of the word 'Hinduism' goes only back to the eighteenth century when the English lumped everything they saw in India under the catch-all phrase, being careful to retain a derogatory element attached to it. It is like lumping every aspect of New Zealand culture together: rugby and pavlova, Barry Crump and Ernest Rutherford, Graham Capill and the ANZAC spirit, beach holidays, wearable art, barbeques and jandals, and calling it Kiwi-ism, and proceeding to study it as a coherent religion in the same way a monotheist faith is. The result would be absurd.

It is also true that Hindus and Buddhists are just as likely to describe their tradition as a way of life or as a philosophy than as a religion. (3) When we look at Confucianism or Taoism, it is more problematic still to see these philosophical and cultural traditions as religions. And when we turn to Western humanism, it is yet more problematic again. Confucianists, Taoists and Humanists are unlikely to think of their world view as a religion, certainly not in the Western sense, and surely we owe them the courtesy of taking some heed of their own preferences. The religious studies scholar Douglas Pratt has written that the first principle of the discipline should be: 'descriptive terms should be acceptable to those to whom they apply.' (4) Well, if we are going to take this counsel seriously, then the first step would be to desist from coercing the Asian traditions and the humanist systems into the ill-fitting costume of 'religion' with all its underpinnings in Western monotheism.

To me, then, a religion is a tradition of thought and practice which involves cultivating a relationship with some perceived supernatural presence, usually understood as a personal God, which requires submission, obedience and constant praise. (5) And, proceeding from that understanding, surely it is self-evidently wrong to claim that we are all naturally religious. However, neither am I saying that human beings are, ipso facto, all downtrodden rationalists, waiting to have the fog of opium lifted from their oppressed souls. This is no more true than the claim we are all religious.

So if religion is best reserved for Western monotheism, how best to describe what really is universal among *Homo sapiens*? What I am about to say owes a great deal to recent interdisciplinary work running across the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, religious studies and philosophy. Leading exemplars of this approach include Stewart Guthrie, Pascal Boyer and Daniel Dennett.

Through the course of evolution, human beings have found an adaptive advantage in nurturing some belief about themselves and their relationship to the wider scheme of things. Pascal Boyer writes that religion is cultural. 'People get it from other people, as they get food preferences, musical tastes, politeness and a dress sense.' (6) This is not to postulate the so-called religion gene. There is no such thing. But there *is* an inbuilt capacity to acquire metaphysical ideas, in the same way we have the capacity to acquire colds or melodies. This capacity to acquire metaphysical ideas has spawned a bewildering array of schemes, outlines and plans, but time and competition has winnowed things down to a relatively small range of culturally successful ideas. This Boyer calls our Catalogue of Supernatural Templates.

Among the more successful systems by which human beings have projected their anthropomorphism on the world are the monotheist religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The general reason why supernatural notions have been so successful is that they provide us with an adaptive advantage. Stewart Guthrie illustrated this adaptive advantage point well when he had us suppose we are walking along and see a large bear looming up at us. After we dropped our things and took refuge up the nearest tree we notice that what we saw as a bear was in fact only a large boulder. What have we lost by making this mistake? A bit of wounded pride perhaps, a scraped knee as we climb the tree. But we are still alive. Now consider the reverse side of the coin. Suppose we mistake the bear for a large boulder? With that mistake we stand to lose a lot more, as we risk becoming lunch for a bear, with all the tiresome implications that has for our longterm survival options and opportunities to reproduce our kind.

Guthrie's point is that we are rewarded for thinking anthropomorphically. In his mind, religion persists, and will continue to persist, because it is driven by evolutionarily successful models, most particularly our hard-wired tendency to anthropomorphise our world. (7) In this way, it is pointless to speak of a time after religion, because, for the foreseeable future at least, human beings are going to think and act anthropomorphically. And if religion is one of the most successful social manifestations of our tendency to think anthropomorphically, then it's not going to wither away any time soon. The important point here is that it is the anthropomorphism which is universal, and religion is simply one way to give expression to that anthropomorphism.

But, of course, the sting in the tail is that anthropomorphism is by definition mistaken. I think it's reasonable to interpret the condition Lloyd Geering identified forty years ago when he spoke of the spiritual schizophrenia in these terms. By spiritual schizophrenia, Geering spoke of the attempt to inhabit the geocentric pre-Copernican world of the Bible and the heliocentric, post-Copernican world as unveiled by science at the same time. (8) Over the past five centuries, science has rendered untenable the human-centred universe the Bible was framed in. And only now are we beginning to appreciate that the error of anthropomorphic thinking is reinforced each time we as a species behaves with speciesist arrogance toward other living creatures on this world and toward our environment. Anthropomorphism allied with supernaturalism produces a heady, and potentially disastrous mix of delusional anthropocentrism.

Indeed, I don't think it is too much of an overstatement to say that the agony of contemporary monotheism boils down to its various stances with respect to anthropomorphism. Fundamentalism is prepared to retain an anthropomorphic idea of God, while frequently ignoring the consequences of that belief on intellectual coherence or human empathy and anathematising those who find their conceptions limited or erroneous. Non-fundamentalist theologians have worked heroically to reinvent God, or to reimagine God, or to redefine God. But so often their attempts have produced bloodless abstractions that the general punter in the pew cannot feel any attraction to. This is an important reason why fundamentalist churches are growing and liberal churches are atrophying. One of the most determined attempts to cull anthropomorphism came from Paul Tillich but, as Guthrie notes, in trying to 'eliminate the disease, he kills the patient.' (9) We shall return to Tillich in more detail later on.

More recently the American religious studies scholar, Robert Tapp, coined the word Demotheology, by which he meant the theology of the average believer, the punters in the pew. Religion is a human creation, so it comes as no surprise that humans keep on adapting it to meet their current needs. Demotheology is the working theology of non-specialist believers. To a specialist it seems incoherent that upwards of a third of American evangelical Christians are sympathetic with ideas of reincarnation. On the face of it this is blatantly inconsistent, but when looked at through the lens of demotheology, it makes some sense. People want it, so they graft it on, without regard to the coherence of the final result. Similarly, I have come across a number of evangelical Christians who manage also to be passionate devotees of such unsuitable people as the American arch-capitalist (and atheist) Ayn Rand or the Goth-rocker Marilyn Manson. Neither liberal religion nor secular humanism has succeeded in understanding the dynamics of demotheology, which has allowed the fundamentalists open slather. Don Cupitt has acknowledged that his conception of Christian non-realism of the early 1980s foundered largely on the shoals of demotheology. (10)

Avoiding the transcendental temptation

But it now has to be asked: if there will never be a time *after* religion, surely there is nothing more futile than to be an atheist? What possible advantage can this desperately unpopular concept have? In my opinion, atheism states most clearly, not so much what happens *after* religion, but what happens *instead* of it. Or in Lloyd Geering's terms, it seems surprisingly well equipped to help overcome the problems of spiritual schizophrenia. The principal contribution made by atheism in the last century has been to state clearly and unambiguously the dangers of anthropocentrism. Many philosophers and scientists, especially recently, have returned to this theme. However, I go back to Bertrand Russell who, in my view, was the most eloquent critic of our tendency toward anthropocentric conceit. The overwhelming conclusion of science since Copernicus, Russell said on many occasions, was the unimaginable littleness of humanity in the scheme of things. Through all the changes in his technical philosophy, this position remained much the same through his long life. From "The Free Man's Worship", published in 1903, to the last volume of his autobiography, published in 1969, his message was essentially the same.

Russell set out in clear and ringing tones the transience of human life and achievement. Nothing we do will last, nor is it meant to. We ourselves are but the 'accidental collocations of atoms' and no achievement, no matter how magnificent, will survive beyond our brief years. And neither is humanity itself or even the Earth which sustains it any more exempt from the iron law that hangs over individual existence. But this is not something we must flee from or pretend is not there. 'Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.' (11)

With this core insight firmly in place, we can proceed. Once radically shorn of our tendency to anthropocentric conceit, we can, with due recognition of our limitations, seek to transcend them. 'In spite of death, the mark and seal of the parental control, Man is yet free, during his brief years, to examine, to criticise, to know, and in imagination to create.' (12) I am not aware of a finer or more heart-rending passage – and one imbued with the tragic sense of life – that goes to the heart of humanism better than this. A close parallel would be George Santayana's essay 'Platonism and the Spiritual Life'.

Russell's essays in the 1920s repeated the core insight of "The Free Man's Worship," but said it in a different way. Gone was the romanticism, the poetry, and the lingering Platonism. In their place was the same sense of cosmic modesty, but told in new language. Modern science will not have done its job until our view of the world fully recognises the inescapable fact of our cosmic irrelevance. Then, and only then, can humanity move on. In 1935 Russell wrote:

Man, as a curious accident in a backwater, is intelligible: his mixture of virtues and vices is such as must be expected to result from a fortuitous origin. But only abysmal self-complacency can see in Man a reason which Omniscience could consider adequate as a motive for the Creator. The Copernican revolution will not have done its work until it has taught men more modesty than is to be found among those who think Man sufficient evidence of Cosmic Purpose. (13)

In Russell's mind, the wholesale rejection of anthropocentric conceit was the imperative moral requirement of our age. Much more recently, Paul Kurtz, America's leading humanist philosopher, has spoken in similar terms of the need to resist what he calls the transcendental temptation. This is the temptation we all have as human beings to accord to ourselves some grand cosmic significance that, as a species, let alone as an individual, we don't deserve, and which smacks of hubris. (14)

The philosophy best suited to making a wholesale rejection of the transcendental temptation is atheism. There is an austere beauty and simplicity to atheism which has been ignored, denied, and sneered at, but not answered. To many scholars the arguments against the existence of God are so definitive now as to be all over bar the shouting. (15) But the real argument for atheism, the argument that moves me and inspires me, is the moral argument. Or, more precisely, the ethical implication of atheism that I as an individual am, and we as a species are, of no interest to the cosmos whatsoever and that we'd better start behaving accordingly. This task of articulating a genuinely naturalistic ethics is the task of the twenty-first century. (16)

This daunting cosmic perspective also belies the extraordinary claim one often hears about atheism being somehow presumptuous. Nothing could be further from the truth. No serious reading of what atheists have actually said could justify such a caricature. The English secularist George Jacob Holyoake expressed this well when he said: 'Were I to pray, I should pray God to spare me from the presumption of expecting to meet him, and from the vanity and conceit of thinking that the God of the universe will take the opportunity of meeting me.' (17) Atheism is the least presumptuous metaphysical position ever devised. Even Alister McGrath, in his seriously under-researched recent philippic, acknowledged atheism as a morally serious position (18) My claim is that atheism combines the virtues of being the clearest possible rejection of anthropocentric conceit and overcoming of spiritual schizophrenia, while also being capable of being expressed in a moving, poetic way.

The fatal flaw at the heart of religious liberalism

But we all know that atheism on its own is not enough. Atheists themselves know this. One atheist thinker, George H Smith wrote: to 'view atheism as a way of life, whether beneficial or harmful, is false and misleading.' (19) And in my *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism and Humanism*, I have outlined the limitations of atheism. (20) So, while the moral worth of

resisting the transcendental temptation is invaluable, it is incomplete without the next move of building a world view as free from the presumptions of supernaturalism as possible. And it is here the great coalition of non-fundamentalist forces can come together. And it is with this goal in mind that this paper is presented. Secular humanism has so much in common with religious humanism, and yet, in New Zealand at least, the two parties have not spoken to each other seriously until recently. And when they have spoken, they have usually resorted to caricatures.

In what might seem like a lengthy disquisition on atheism, my main point is that it really is very important to base one's world view on a profound sense of cosmic modesty. Only then, I claim, can our natural tendency to presumptuous anthropocentrism be countered. And in my view the spiritual schizophrenia Lloyd Geering spoke of in 1968 is best understood in terms of anthropocentric conceit. By its inability to articulate a clear and unambiguous rejection of anthropocentrism, liberal Christianity and religious humanism suffer from what Duncan Howlett called the fatal flaw in liberal religion. Howlett (1906-2003) had a long career as a Unitarian minister and was a leading spokesperson for religious humanism in the United States before abandoning that in favour of environmental work.

So what did Howlett mean by the fatal flaw in religious liberalism? Firstly, he spoke of religious liberalism, but his critique can apply just as closely to religious humanism, and for the purposes of this paper I shall use the two terms interchangeably. The fatal flaw consists in the undetermined cut-off point for open-ended study when a religious liberal has to draw a line in the sand and say "I can go no further." Where is the cut-off point where rational inquiry ends and either submission to dogma or lapsing into mysticism begins? In the nineteenth century many people felt able to abandon belief in the literal reality of hell, while others could to jettison the dogmas of purgatory or transubstantiation. In the twentieth century, this process of shedding belief gathered pace as people professing to be Christians abandoned belief in the literal truth of the scriptures, the salvific efficacy of the church, the divinity of Christ, the historical picture of Jesus as left to us in the Gospels, the crucifixion, the resurrection, even God himself. But the question has to be asked: at which point does the religious liberal say, "I have abandoned all those items of dogma, but in order to retain some semblance of meaning to the word 'Christian', I will retain a belief in this, that, or the other." The fatal flaw in religious liberalism is the absence of any consistent answer to that question. Some will decide the correct cut-off point is here and that the core residue of Christianity is this, but others will say it is there, that or the other. The point at which the questioning ends will depend on each individual. But this gives an arbitrary feel to religious liberalism. This demilitarized zone inside each religious liberal between what is open to question and what is not results in a vulnerable world view and constitutes the fatal flaw in the heart of religious liberalism. (21)

Philosophers will recognise a parallel to Howlett's fatal flaw argument in Antony Flew's Falsification Challenge in which Flew posits a scenario where two people come across a garden which has some attractive flowers in it. One of them postulates that a gardener must tend the plot, but when no gardener turns up, he changes his story by saying the gardener must be invisible. When an electric fence still reveals no sign of a gardener, invisible or otherwise, the man says he is invisible and immune to electric shocks. 'At last the sceptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"' (22)

I would like to take Howlett's fatal flaw argument one step further by directing it not against a perceived unwillingness to ask questions, for Sea of Faith people are as forthright in their questioning as anyone else. To me the fatal flaw lies more in taking refuge in concepts too comprehensively tarnished or discredited to be fit for the uses asked of them. Or, to return to Lloyd Geering's phrase, the fatal flaw in religious liberalism lies in its unwillingness to recognise that the wish to preserve all the old God and faith talk will also help preserve the spiritual schizophrenia that is at the heart of our problems. By wanting to retain the hollowed out shell of god or faith, religious liberalism is, in my view, fatally flawed.

The consequences of the fatal flaw are dramatic. It leaves religious liberals struggling to contrive some defensible justification for their beliefs. How does the religious liberal deal with a passage of scripture like Deuteronomy 12:32?: 'Whatever I am now commanding you, you must keep and observe, adding nothing to it, taking nothing away.' If we take this passage literally, we should put witches, disobedient sons, homosexuals and those who worship other gods to death. It would mean we could keep virgin girls as slaves for our own use, and butcher those whose beliefs differ from our own. The Deuteronomy passage would seem to disallow any attempt to render the barbarous passages of the Bible as, in Keith Ward's words, 'highly imaginative stories that carry spiritual truths within them.' (23) And neither can one say that Jesus Christ got beyond those barbarities, because Matthew 5: 17-19 has Jesus insisting he has come to uphold every jot and tittle of the Law. David Boulton is not alone among religious humanists in claiming that most people are comfortable now with treating scripture as literature and metaphor. Ten minutes in any fundamentalist church should be enough to disabuse him of such sanguine confidence. Boulton also claims that postmodernism has allowed him to reclaim scripture as 'Grand Fiction, in all its preposterous, glorious profusion and confusion.' (24) He calls this approach instrumentalism, whereby scripture can be used as a means for our spiritual enrichment, without troubling oneself about the truth claims being made. There are few clearer examples of the fatal flaw in religious liberalism than this. To treat scriptures in so casual, self-referential and unscholarly a way runs contrary to the spirit in which they were written, stumbles at the hurdle of demotheology, and shows insufficient respect to the truth claims being made and which require a more committed response than postmodern irony. The British philosopher Simon Blackburn commented recently 'that if religious practitioners are not even in the business of representing the world truly, it is a pity that they chose a story told so like a recital of plain truth, in an apparently descriptive, factual language, in order to do whatever it is that they are doing instead.' (25) The sad paradox is that the fundamentalist is on surer ground than the religious liberal, because, while the fundamentalist world view is narrow, irrationalist, and exclusionary, it is, by this standard at least, not inconsistent.

The fatal flaw and God

One way to illustrate the fatal flaw argument is to look at the liberal Christian/religious humanist views of God. A prominent example is Paul Tillich, who spoke of God as both 'the ground of all being' and the 'source of your being.' I am not claiming to be saying anything new when I ask what is meant by all this. (26) A number of philosophers have queried whether 'being' means anything at all and whether instead it makes the logical fallacy of assuming the word 'being' corresponds to something that exists. (27) Tillich has presumed to cut away all the dogmatic and supernatural excrescences of the Christian idea of God, and stops only with 'ground of all being'. But the fatal flaw argument would ask, why stop there?

Is it not entirely arbitrary to determine that God can still legitimately be spoken of in this way? And does it not have the troubling moral implication of still grounding us, not so much in 'being', but in anthropocentric conceit?

Having drastically pared God down to little more than a sentimental urge, Tillich turns directly to the unbeliever and invites him in.

And believe me, you who are estranged from religion and far away from Christianity, it is not our purpose to make you religious and Christian when we interpret the call of Jesus for our time. We call Jesus the Christ not because He brought a new religion, but because He is the end of religion, above religion and irreligion, above Christianity and non-Christianity. (28)

Is it any wonder that those who are estranged from religion have not heeded this call? If we can abandon or ignore every item of Christian dogma, as Tillich invites us to do, what is left of Jesus Christ? And is not 'Jesus Christ' an invention of Christian dogma? Was not the simple message of Rabbi Yeshua, a message entirely of its time, entirely directed to his fellow Jews, precisely the message that was reworked and ignored in favour of the universalising Christ that Tillich remained party to? (29) To reject Tillich's bloodless, abstract, de-Judaised Christ, or Bishop Robinson's 'man for others' formula, I do, is to show Rabbi Yeshua more respect than he has traditionally been accorded by those who profess to champion his name. This respect is shown in the sense of a clear understanding of what has been rejected; and clear in the sense that truth-claims have been made and have been accorded the respect of a fair hearing on those terms. (30)

And neither does Tillich's radical misreading of humanism act as incentive to bring those estranged from religion in. He wrote:

Humanism has transformed the inaccessibility of God into the sublimity of His moral commands. Humanism has forgotten that God's majesty, as experienced by the prophet, implies the shaking of the foundations wherever He appears, and the veil of smoke whenever He shows Himself. When God is identified with an element of human nature, as in humanism, the terrifying and annihilating encounter with majesty becomes an impossibility. (31)

Tillich misses the point here in several important ways. Humanism has not *forgotten* God's majesty, but rather doubts such an idea is meaningful. The more secular half of the humanist spectrum, at any rate, does not make the mistake of identifying God with an element of human nature. Humanity is on its own, with no guarantee that its physical, intellectual and moral resources are sufficient to sustain it.

Not only does Tillich's view of God demonstrate clearly the fatal flaw, it also runs the risk of violating Douglas Pratt's first principle of religious studies; that of using language the practitioner can recognise. Tillich's idea is one neither the vast majority of conventional believers or unbelievers would recognise and so stumbles at the first hurdle in the arena of demotheology.

More recent thinkers have progressed beyond Tillich. Don Cupitt has said straightforwardly that we should give up the idea that God exists while continuing to see the idea of God as

useful in our lives. He goes on to say ‘I still pray and love God, even though I fully acknowledge that no God actually exists.’ (32) Lloyd Geering has abandoned the God idea just as comprehensively. (33) And Keith Ward likened God to the practice of virtue and the cultivation of excellence. He then adds: ‘If God bothers you, forget God, and think of adopting a way of self-transformation which sees human life in the light of values that are of eternal worth.’ (34) But if all modified, relativised visions of God can be so easily jettisoned, I fail to see how they can meaningfully help in attaching us to ideas of eternal worth. Bishop Robinson justified retaining use of the word ‘God’, despite it not standing for anything substantial, by virtue of the depths it implies, depths that naturalists and secular humanists cannot recognise. (35) What these depths might be was left conveniently vague and to my mind illustrate once again the dangers of the fatal flaw in religious liberalism. And in any case it leaves unresolved the objection that it is an anthropocentric conceit to presume that values we hold dear are of eternal worth. Once again the wisdom of George Santayana is so valuable. Spiritual life is not a worship of ‘values’, he wrote, ‘whether found in things or hypostasised into supernatural powers. It is the exact opposite; it is *disintoxication* from their influence.’ (36) Half a century later Richard Holloway said much the same thing when he made it clear that the use of God in moral debate ‘is so problematic as to be almost worthless.’ (37)

Having made my differences with these thinkers plain, I want to state clearly at this point that I agree strongly with what they are trying to do. I agree that people need a fabric of meaning in their lives. I also agree that much of this fabric of meaning is constructed and expressed with the use of symbols. People need a structure, a purpose and a code of some sort. All people need this, and the extraordinary variety of beliefs we have generated is testimony to human inventiveness. Much of it will be fanciful or delusional and/or anthropocentric, but we seem to need it. I also sympathise with the fear that the dreary shallowness of postmodernism and what has been called Affluenza is posing as grave a threat to any sense of meaning than competing ideologies. (38) But I find myself completely unconvinced that we need to retain the hollowed-out shell of religion as a vehicle for meaning. My question is: why persist with such an attenuated, evacuated God idea—one which fails to clear the hurdles of demotheology, scriptural warrant, logical consistency, linguistic coherence, or moral utility? The goal of an integrated, meaningful, committed life that we all share, I am arguing, is best served in two ways: by resisting as much as we are able the hubristic lure of anthropocentrism, and by grounding as many of our beliefs as possible in knowledge that is, at least in principle, open to question. I argue that the fatal flaw at the heart of religious liberalism works as an obstacle to these things happening rather than the boon it should be.

The fatal flaw and faith

The fatal flaw at the heart of religious liberalism is also at work with one of the central ideas of the Sea of Faith; that we are all animated by faith, which is distinguished from belief and defined broadly as a deeply committed, joyous zest for life, a condition fundamental to our humanity. (39) To begin with, this conception of faith is not shared by most humanists, or by most philosophers or even by a majority of theologians. (40) With respect to secular humanists it is clear that insisting on the universality of faith will drastically violate Douglas Pratt’s first principle that descriptive terms be acceptable to those to whom they apply. Worse, it runs the risk of being extremely insulting, as it implies that people without faith in this sense are somehow not fully human.

Neither is faith understood in this way at the level of demotheology, or by scripture. Among the theologians, the dissident Catholic Hans Küng has spoken of a basic attitude of commitment, which he calls fundamental trust. However, Küng has taken care to distinguish fundamental trust from faith. For Küng, faith is ‘religious faith, faith in God or Divine, and, in a special way, of faith in God and the Bible.’ (41) From a different perspective, the former Catholic—now agnostic—philosopher, Anthony Kenny, has also discussed this question and concludes that faith ‘is a belief in something as revealed by God; belief in a proposition on the word of God. Faith, thus defined, is a correlative of revelation; for faith to be possible it must be possible to identify something as the word of God.’ (42) Neither Kenny nor Küng see any merit in stripping faith of its original core understanding, that of a non-rational commitment to God. Kenny goes on to see faith as a vice unless the existence of God can be rationally justified outside faith, something he is frankly sceptical about. (43)

As well as its greater philosophical coherence, there are two other advantages to this restricted understanding of faith. First, it conforms to popular usage, the demotheology of faith, and to scripture. As you all know, Hebrews 11:1 says ‘Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.’ What is more, ‘faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.’ (Romans 10:17) Not surprisingly, we find a similar message in the Qur’an, where faith and submission to Allah is linked, and where faith is the condition of having no doubts. (49:14-15) One Hadith has a message from Muhammad saying that ‘None of you has faith unless I am dearer to him than his father and his son and all mankind.’ (44)

These passages from the New Testament and the Qur’an highlight the two main objections to faith in the context of this paper. The Hebrews reading serves to encourage our anthropocentric conceit by giving scope for eternal life as a principal function of the unseen. The Qur’anic notion of faith emphasises the suppression of our scepticism. And the Hadith passage gives reference to the fanaticism that is so often a corollary of true faith. These passages, in other words, provide justification for anthropocentric conceit, credulity and bigotry. Is it any wonder that Anthony Kenny saw faith as a vice?

The other, related, problem with persisting in speaking of faith as some broader commitment torn from its original meaning tied up with supernaturalism is that at some point we need to turn our attention to what we have faith in; to the content of the faith. To focus exclusively on the existential act of faith and ignoring the content of the faith commitment is to take some unacceptable risks. Is mere intensity of belief enough? We need to preserve some criterion of judgment for evaluating the worth of someone’s faith commitment. (45) If, to take an extreme case, my ultimate concern is in becoming wealthy through the supply of methamphetamines to children, by what standards could this be found wanting? The Buddha was right when he said that path to enlightenment begins with right belief.

But, the objection could be that this is old news. New, more inclusive conceptions of faith have been articulated. And so they have, although I seriously question their inclusivity. But the problem of Howlett’s fatal flaw remains. What justification do we have to casually cast scripture aside? At which point do we cease trying to regurgitate old shibboleths? If we abandon Hebrews 11:1 as being outdated and problematic, why is it justifiable to linger at the God is love passage of I John 4:16? Is there not something arbitrary and self-serving in picking and choosing in this way? And does not the criticism of the fundamentalist proclivity to pick and

choose scripture lose its force when the liberal critic does the same thing? Is there, in fact, not something more honest and respectful in simply rejecting the whole Christian message and starting afresh? And would such an act not shake the foundations so much more meaningfully than merely knocking on the door with a feather duster?

Overcoming the fatal flaw in liberal religion

But having rejected faith as a universalised motivating principle, I sympathise deeply with what is being attempted. Secular humanists have spoken of this frequently. Bertrand Russell spoke of the need for zest in life, and Paul Kurtz has written extensively on this. An early attempt was his work *Exuberance*. 'Our challenge,' Kurtz wrote, 'if we are to be happy, is twofold: first, in discovering how to make work interesting; second, in learning how to develop interest in some work.'⁽⁴⁶⁾ More to the point, perhaps, is his notion of eupraxsophy. The word is brought together from 'eu', or 'good', 'praxis', or 'practice', and 'sophia', or 'wisdom'. Kurtz is building on the truths we all know: it is not enough to be good without being active in the world. Neither is it enough to be active without being wise or wise without being active. We need to be good, wise *and* active. ⁽⁴⁷⁾ There is an interesting parallel here with the three qualities of *panna* (wisdom) *silā* (morality) and *samadhi* (concentration) that are said to accompany the Buddhist Eightfold Path. ⁽⁴⁸⁾ So where religious humanists among us can speak of faith, I prefer to speak of eupraxsophy. Is it too much to suppose that the differences between our approaches are less important than the similarities?

Our basic similarities can also be illustrated via a profound insight from George Santayana's novel *The Last Puritan* (1936). Santayana spoke of Christianity as partly poetry and partly delusion. While Catholicism kept both in full measure, Protestantism had killed the poetry while keeping the delusion. ⁽⁴⁹⁾ Santayana's observation has important implications for my argument. As Sea of Faith people know, some liberal Christians and religious humanists claim that people are naturally religious. I don't believe this, for reasons I have already outlined, but it does seem to be true that our need for poetry and delusion is well nigh universal. Now humanism can do little, and wants to do little, in restoring delusion. Our biggest delusion, I have argued, is that we matter to the universe and that the universe owes us a living. This I call anthropocentric conceit, and is something any worthwhile humanism is irrevocably set against. But there is no reason why it should be set against poetry, when taken in the broader sense Santayana meant. One of the objections to secular humanism, and one I have some sympathy with, is that it has killed the delusion *and* the poetry. Although it is easy to ignore all the attempts made by secular humanists to address this issue. I have in mind, for example, Paul Kurtz's recent work *Affirmations*.

Daniel Dennett has spoken of cranes and skyhooks. Cranes are scientific and empirical ideas which are lodged securely in the ground and for which good evidence exists. Skyhooks, by contrast, are metaphysical ideas like God or the soul, for which no evidence exists. Dennett urges us to abandon all resort to skyhooks. ⁽⁵⁰⁾ I agree that we should not base our world view on metaphysical skyhooks, but I don't agree that we can do without skyhooks altogether. It is with this in mind that I liken humanism to the winged anchor. The anchor of science keeps us connected closely to the ground from which we came and to which we will return. No other anchor is sufficient for this purpose. The naturalistic view of the world as articulated by science is the surest preventive against both anthropocentric conceit and, its first cousin, the fatal flaw in liberal religion. But this does not, of course, mean believing *in*

science as one used to believe *in* God. It means recognising science as the vehicle which has given us the surest knowledge of how the world actually works, rather than how we would like it to work. And nobody who has read good science could believe it is without beauty, or without poetry. In the words of Richard Dawkins: ‘I believe that an orderly universe, one indifferent to human preoccupations, in which everything has an explanation even if we still have a long way to go before we find it, is a more beautiful, more wonderful place than a universe tricked out with capricious, *ad hoc* magic.’ (51)

But we also need an anchor with wings, an anchor capable of creating and sustaining the poetry Santayana speaks of. We can’t live entirely without delusion, but we need to be constantly vigilant about the amount of delusion we permit ourselves. The wings of music, poetry and literature are the means by which we retain our love of life in full knowledge of our complete cosmic irrelevance. And it is philosophy which serves as the glue keeping the wings connected to the anchor. (52) The spiritual schizophrenia of our age will not be cured by pretending we can do without skyhooks any more than by giving the skyhooks more responsibility than they can bear.

Conclusion

To finish off, many of you must be wondering: “If he sees so many flaws, fatal or otherwise, in the Sea of Faith view of the world, why did he join in the first place?” That’s a fair question, and I will try to answer it with something better than rhetoric. First, the obvious reason: the Sea of Faith does not exclude me. The back page of each newsletter declares it is open to ‘people who have a common interest in exploring religious thought and expression from a non-dogmatic and human-oriented standpoint.’ (53) I subscribe to that wholeheartedly and am very glad to be a member of the Sea of Faith

Another reason is a personal one. After living in the United States for two years, I decided to spend less time speaking to those who would agree with me. We all speak glowingly of dialogue, but it struck me that precious little is actually done. This, of course, involves me in no abandonment of my secular humanist roots. Once again, my hero Bertrand Russell said it best: ‘Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.’ (54)

I have found fault with religious humanism in this paper, but I have done so as an ally. I hope this paper will help lead to the more important task of exploring some of the principal common themes in secular and religious humanism. With so many stark threats to the open society and to our global sustainability looming in on us – what Don Cupitt has called our trash future – little is to be gained by caricaturing one’s closest allies. (55) Secular humanists may use some different terms, they may be critical of what they see as a tendency to fudge the core issues of our being grounded in nature, but, at their best, both movements share a commitment to asking questions and not being satisfied with rhetoric, commandments, or blandishments. Keith Ward speaks of liberalism in religion as ‘the rejection of arbitrary rules, accepted solely on authority, that restrict freedom and equality. But it also means a total commitment to principles which support and encourage the fulfilment of all finite persons and the fullest extension of their creative freedom so far as that is possible compatibly with a similar fulfilment of others...’ (56) I am in complete agreement with that idea, although I wouldn’t call it liberal religion, for the reasons I have outlined in this paper, reasons which hopefully also show that this is more than a squabble over semantics. My plea

is that we look to overcoming the fatal flaw in liberal religion by abandoning the discredited nostrums of the past: God and faith, and learn to express ourselves in ways better suited to the Copernican and Darwinian reality. And while this involves a comprehensive rejection of the anthropocentrism latent in monotheism, it in no way involves turning away from the richness of the Asian traditions, which I have argued are best not lumped in the one-size-fits-all category of 'religion'. I see no reasons why secular and religious humanists should not work on this task together.

Bill Cooke 2006

Notes

1. See Noel Cheer, 'Could a Humanist ever frolic in the sea of faith?' *The Open Society*, Vol. 79, No. 2, Winter 2006, p 2.
2. See, for example, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York: Mentor, 1964, p110; Paul Kurtz, *Eupraxophy: Living without Religion*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989, p 66; and Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, London: Asia Publishing House, 1960, p 63. Despite their different backgrounds and perspectives, they all say the same thing on this point.
3. I have in mind books like *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* by Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1984 [1939]; *A History of Indian Philosophy* (five volumes) by Surendranath Dasgupta (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997 [1922]; and *Indian Philosophy* (two volumes) by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948 [1927]). Each of these titles is recognised as a classic, and none speak of Indian religion.
4. Douglas Pratt, *Religion: A First Encounter*, Auckland: Longman Paul, 1993, p 20.
5. It is worthwhile to note that this understanding is similar to that of the British theologian Keith Ward, although he would argue for a greater universality to this condition that I would. See Keith Ward, *The Case for Religion*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2004, p 53.
6. Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p 47.
7. Stewart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p 200. And so far, most religious humanist thinkers would agree. See, for instance, David Boulton's account in *The Trouble with God: Religious Humanism and the Republic of Heaven*, Alresford, Hants: John Hunt Publishing, 2002, chapter 7.
8. Lloyd Geering, *God in the New World*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1968, p 39.
9. Guthrie, op.cit., p 183, and see also Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, London: Penguin, 1995, p180 and David Boulton, *The Trouble with God*, op.cit., p 71.
10. Don Cupitt, *After God: The Future of Religion*, London: Phoenix House, 1998, p xii.
11. Bertrand Russell, 'A Free Man's Worship' in *Mysticism and Logic*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959, pp 47-8. The essay was originally called *The Free Man's Worship*.
12. *ibid*, p 48.
13. Russell, Bertrand, *Religion and Science*, London: Oxford University Press, 1960, p 222.
14. Paul Kurtz, *The Transcendental Temptation*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1986, p 461 & *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1988, p 238.
15. For instance, see Kai Nielsen *Philosophy and Atheism*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1985, where he says on page 224 that the philosophy of religion has become boring because the argument for atheism is so strong that it's difficult to work up enthusiasm for the topic. For a full bibliography of contemporary atheist thought, see Bill Cooke, *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism, and Humanism*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2006, pp 50-1.
16. See Raymond D. Bradley, 'A moral argument for atheism' in Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier (eds) *The Impossibility of God*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003, pp 129-146. Derek Parfit noted the need for an articulation of a post-religious ethics in the conclusion to his important work *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, p 454. Thanks to Floris van den Berg for bringing this to my attention.
17. George Jacob Holyoake, *The Origin and Nature of Secularism*, London: Watts & Co, 1896, p 100.
18. Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism*, London: Rider, 2004, p 273.
19. George H Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989, p 21.
20. Bill Cooke, op.cit., pp 51-2
21. Duncan Howlett, *The Fatal Flaw at the Heart of Religious Liberalism*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1995,

- p17.
22. Antony Flew, 'Theology and Falsification' in Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (eds) *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, London: SCM, 1955, pp 96-98.
 23. Ward, op.cit., p 177.
 24. Boulton, op.cit., p 187.
 25. Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London: Allen Lane, 2005, p 16.
 26. See, for instance Dennett, op.cit., p 180; Nielsen, op.cit., pp 88-93 and Boulton, op.cit., p 71.
 27. See, for instance Paul Edwards, *Heidegger's Confusions*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004, pp 18-47.
 28. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, London: Penguin, 1969, p 108.
 29. This objection also applies to Bishop Robinson's sentimental notion of Jesus as the 'man for others'. See *Honest to God*, London: SCM, p 76. In contrast I have the works of Geza Vermes in mind, such as *The Changing Faces of Jesus*, London: Penguin, 2001, which presents a less theologically charged and more historically accurate picture of Rabbi Yeshua.
 30. I argue this point at slightly greater length in 'Why Criticise Religion?' *NZ Rationalist & Humanist*, Vol. 74, No. 3, Spring 2001, p 1.
 31. Tillich, op.cit., p 95.
 32. Cupitt, op.cit., p 85.
 33. Lloyd Geering, *Christianity without God*, Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2002, see chapter four.
 34. Keith Ward, *God: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2002, p 211.
 35. Robinson, op.cit., p 54.
 36. George Santayana, 'Platonism and the Spiritual Life', in *Winds of Doctrine*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957, p 248.
 37. Richard Holloway, *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out of Ethics*, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000, p20.
 38. For discussions of this see John de Graaf, David Wann, & Thomas H Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002 and John F. Schumaker, *In Search of Happiness*, Auckland: Penguin, 2005.
 39. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, pp 3-17.
 40. See Bill Cooke, 'Is humanism a religion?' *NZ Rationalist & Humanist*, Winter 1999, pp 2-6, for this argument in greater detail.
 41. Hans Küng, *Does God Exist?* New York: Vintage, 1981, p 473.
 42. Anthony Kenny, *What is Faith?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p 47.
 43. *ibid*, p 54.
 44. Maulana Muhammad Ali, *A Manual of Hadith*, Dublin, Ohio: The Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam Lahore USA, 2001, p 20.
 45. This argument is developed in Paul Kurtz, *Eupraxophy*, op.cit., chapter three.
 46. Paul Kurtz, *Exuberance: An Affirmative Philosophy of Life*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1985, p 58.
 47. Paul Kurtz, *Eupraxophy*, op.cit., especially chapter one. More recently, eupraxophy has included an 's', with a view to aiding pronunciation. I am not convinced this was a helpful thing to do.
 48. See the entry on 'Magga' in Nyanatiloka (ed) *Buddhist Dictionary*, Taipei: Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, n.d [c.1970], p 92.
 49. George Santayana, *The Last Puritan*, New York: Scribners, 1936, p 474.
 50. Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, op.cit., p 264,
 51. Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow*, London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1998, p xi. Neither is this observation confined to more secular-minded humanists. David Boulton has expressed the same idea. See *The Trouble with God*, op.cit., p 71.
 52. Bill Cooke, *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism and Humanism*, op.cit., pp 571-2.
 53. Refer to the declaration on the back page of each Sea of Faith Newsletter.
 54. Bertrand Russell, 'The Liberal Decalogue' in Bill Cooke, *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism, and Humanism*, op.cit., p 319.
 55. Several flagrant examples of this can be found in David Boulton's otherwise reasonable study *The Trouble with God*. On page 188 he is presumably being sarcastic when he says that the 'standard model' of humanism is that there was nothing but darkness until the advent of the Rationalist Press Association! And on page 164, Boulton does little more than resort to abuse when he sneers that attending a 'humanist/rationalist/secularist meeting' (as if these were the same thing), one runs the risk of encountering 'the same solemnity and earnestness, the same reek of moral superiority, the same understated but palpable male dominance, the same sense of certainty and the same condescension toward the unconverted as you remember from your church- or chapel-going days.' It has to be said that lapses into sarcasm and abuse are not helpful to an argument seeking to show how morally enriched one is. Neither is his case helped by a series of very basic errors in the history of humanism he outlines in the

pages leading up to this outburst.
56. Keith Ward, *The Case for Religion*, op.cit., pp 198-9

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