Can’t We Just Be Secular?

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Religion without God
Ronald Dworkin
Harvard University Press, 2013
$17.95, 192 pp.

Culture and the Death of God
Terry Eagleton
Yale University Press, 2014
$26.00, 248 pp.

On his deathbed in 1964, Aldous Huxley turned his final thoughts to religion: “A Quaker silence is religion, so is Verdi’s Requiem. A sense of the blessed All-Rightness of the Universe is a religious experience and so is the sick soul’s sense of self-loathing, of despair, of sin, in a world that is the scene of perpetual perishing and inevitable death.” Religion is more than the fossilized institutions we often conflate it with. The Quaker, the aficionado, the saint, and the skeptic may concern themselves with questions of belief. But what makes them all fundamentally religious is that they are concerned with questions of value.

Ronald Dworkin’s final and posthumously published book, Religion without God, argues that a religious sense of value is nothing less than the true basis of social and political life. The late Harvard legal theorist hoped his book would “contribute to rational conversation and the softening of religious hatred and fear,” the jacket says. The book is an earnest attempt to reconcile both interreligious and religious-secular divides.
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that polarize political life. Based on the 2011 Einstein Lectures Dworkin delivered at the University of Bern in Switzerland, the book begins by unpacking Einstein’s famous remark that though he was an atheist, he considered himself a deeply religious man in a particular sense:

To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong in the ranks of devoutly religious men.

Dworkin develops Einstein’s deep appreciation for the intangible into a new spiritual type, “the religious atheist,” which he hopes can overcome the false binary driving theists and atheists apart.

Sound like a cheap, semantic fix? Dworkin is well aware of the worry. He writes that religion is an “interpretive concept,” meaning that “people who use the concept do not agree about precisely what it means: when they use it, they are taking a stand about what it should mean.” Religion is thus worth reframing on less politicized grounds. Dworkin wants to do for theist and atheist something like what social psychologist Jonathan Haidt did for the political Left and Right: chart their behavioral differences, but also bring out their commonalities. (Conservatives may be disgusted by gay marriage, but liberals reveal their own holier-than-thou attitudes when it comes to non-organic foods.)

“The new religious wars are really culture wars,” Dworkin writes. By showing that the new religious wars are not really about metaphysical beliefs, he aims to reduce their size and importance. “This ambition is utopian,” he admits. “But a little philosophy can help.” Dworkin reorients discussion of religion from belief in God toward “the independent reality” of value, which he argues is logically presupposed by the value claims of both theists and atheists—thus “separat[ing] God from religion” and “questions of science from questions of value.” To use Dworkin’s recurrent example, the theist and atheist alike know that a beautiful sunset is beautiful;
whatever grounds that beauty, the experience of it is the same. Einstein could thus rightfully call himself a “devoutly religious man” because the awe and wonder he felt toward science “are something beyond nature that cannot be grasped even by finally understanding the most fundamental physical laws.” There is a sense of meaning behind even rigorous scientific work that cannot be reduced to matter alone. This sensibility, Dworkin argues, is religious.

Dworkin writes not of a “turn to religion,” but rather a shift in religious-secular dialogue that has been underway for decades in religious studies departments. The fact that this conciliatory approach has reached a figure like Dworkin and been published in a popular book marks a public debut of revisionist understandings of religion and secularism, though not yet their universal reception. He charges both religious and secular camps guilty of dismissing the other on metaphysical grounds, and forgetting their shared commitments. “What divides godly and godless religion,” he writes, “is not as important as the faith in value that unites them.”

Dworkin’s book is intended to equip us with a less superficial vocabulary with which to talk about religion and its absence. He doesn’t trust the term “secularism”, which hardly appears in his book. As a legal scholar, of course, he supports the formal separation of church and state institutions. But secularism implies a strict separation between atheism and theism that Dworkin thinks is not really there. Once we follow him in moving away from the question of belief in God, we see that forms of secularism—or, rather, secularity, to drop the implication of a unified plot to destroy religion—are as
diverse as forms of religiosity. Secularity is a positive cultural force that cannot be reduced to atheism or antireligiousness.

**TESTING THE SECULARIZATION HYPOTHESIS**

The difficulty in identifying what is secular is not at all new; it traces its way back to a turn-of-the-century social theory that still packs undue and unproductive force, especially in the New Atheist circles of Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins.

One of Freud’s most enduring theories was that modernization entails the end of religion—the so-called secularization hypothesis. Religious beliefs, Freud wrote in *The Future of an Illusion*, “are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind,” but at the expense of reality. They are thus “comparable to a childhood neurosis” that modern man would have to grow out of. Since science, reason, and technology grant us real power and psychic control, functions religion can satisfy only by illusion, Freud thinks we ought to prefer the former.³

Freud rejects the cynical position “that men are completely unable to do without the consolation of the religious illusion, that without it they could not bear the troubles of life and the cruelties of reality.” This may be true, Freud admits, of those raised with a psychic dependency on “the sweet—or bitter-sweet—poison from childhood onwards,” but what about those “sensibly brought up?” Perhaps they will not suffer the neurosis in the first place. Perhaps after this religious generation, people could be “cured” from religion once and for all. But what then?

*They will, it is true, find themselves in a difficult situation. They will have to admit to themselves the full extent of their helplessness and their insignificance in the machinery of the universe....They will be in the same position as a child who has left the parental house where he was so warm and comfortable. But surely infantilism is destined to be surmounted. Men cannot remain children for ever; they must in the end go out into ‘hostile life’. We may call this ‘education to reality’....The sole purpose of my book is to point out the necessity for this forward step.*

Almost a century later, a majority of Americans have still not left the house. We do not live in the world Freud predicted, a world he also desperately hoped for. The scientific path destined to rid us of our “infantilism” has not done so. Yet Freud could hardly say that we have not made a forward step: most religious people in the West have assimilated to their increasingly secular world, and the most vigorous religious movements today are ones of willing conversion, not stale habit. Religion continues to permeate most aspects of public life, if perhaps in less official guises.

Perhaps no one understood Freud’s error better than his one-time disciple Jacques Lacan. In a 1974 interview recently translated as “The Triumph of Religion,” Lacan remarked:

*If science works at it, the real will expand and religion will thereby have still more reason to soothe people’s hearts. Science is new and it will introduce all kinds of distressing things into each person’s life... It took some time, but [the Christians] suddenly realized the windfall science was bringing them. Somebody is going to have to give meaning to all the distressing things science is going to introduce.... Religion is going to give meaning to the oddest experiments, the very ones that scientists themselves are just beginning to become anxious about. Religion will find colorful meaning for those.*


The “real” here stands in for everything distressing about human existence that we will never be able face directly: finitude, loneliness, alienation, anxiety, death. For Lacan, Freud’s charge to weather the cold world of adulthood is neither possible nor desirable. Instead, Lacan says, “We must be able to get used to the real”—that is, to acknowledge the real, but not succumb to the nihilism or despair entailed in Freud’s vision. Lacan develops a relation to the real that retains awareness of it, but at a safe distance. He thus makes room for religion in psychic life, going so far as to suggest that psychoanalysis itself could become a form of religion. Lacan’s prediction is exactly opposite Freud’s: Religion is so resourceful that it will “triumph” over reason, he says, and we will “truly drown in it,” and henceforth be cured of our need for psychoanalysis as well.
This debate continues today. In a recent webchat, the Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek came to yet another conclusion, proclaiming that the “21st century will be the century of philosophy.” “The incredible social dynamics of today’s capitalism, as well as scientific and technological breakthroughs, changed our situation so much that old ethical and religious systems no longer function,” he said. For example, biogenetic technologies may soon alter our psyches and pose new questions of identity and free will—questions for which theology has no answers. “This was not even a possibility considered in traditional ethical systems, which means that we all in a way have to think. We have to make decisions. We cannot rely on old religious and ethical formulas.”

Žižek lacks Lacan’s enthusiasm for religion, but having witnessed the horrors of the twentieth century conducted under the banner of rational progress, he also lacks Freud’s scientific optimism. Žižek is one of Dworkin’s religious atheists, retaining the need for ethics and value without God or theology. Though he has written a book on salvaging religious insights for the secular world, here he mischaracterizes religion as a source of static doctrines. To proclaim the triumph of philosophy at the expense of religion is to sideline the strong role religious concepts—like innate human dignity—and even organized religions, could play in the social dilemmas he mentions, as perhaps signaled in the Catholic Church today by Pope Francis’s attempts at continued relevance. Sharing Freud’s narrow view of religion as rigid tradition without
invention, Žižek perpetuates the myth of its incompatibility with modern life. Let us hope he is right about the role of philosophy in the twenty-first century. That would not cancel out the role of religion.

**DWORIN’S INTERVENTION**

One might wonder why one of the most accomplished legal scholars of the last century turned his thoughts to religion in his last years. It is clear from the outset of *Religion without God* that Dworkin sees religion as the most fruitful and engaging avenue to pursue a discussion of what he has long sought in his legal work: a basis for social value. Dworkin worries that liberal political theory, despite its eloquent articulation at the hands of figures like Rawls, Nozick, and Nussbaum, always seems—at some level—unsupported. What is the fundamental ground that allows us to speak of what the founding fathers called “inalienable rights” if not the religious correlate, “human dignity?” If we do not recognize some shared ground of value, Dworkin argues, politics becomes arbitrary, leading down a slippery slope from utilitarianism to nihilism. Atheists may prefer secular conceptions of justice to religious doctrines, but liberal political theory alone does not explain the inherent value of individual life, which it aims to protect.

Dworkin calls our best shot at a shared ground “religious” because although he does not believe in the existence of God, he “accepts the full, independent reality of value” and hence rejects the “naturalistic” view that nothing is real except what is revealed by the natural sciences. Even there, “We might say: we accept our most basic scientific and mathematical capacities finally as a matter of faith.” He apologizes for his rather unromantic conclusion:

> I will not have convinced some of you. You will think that if all we can do to defend value judgments is appeal to other value judgments, and then finally to declare faith in the whole set of judgments, then our claims to objective truth are just whistles in the dark. But this challenge, however familiar, is not an argument against the religious worldview. It is only a rejection of that worldview. It denies the basic tenets of the
relational attitude: it produces, at best, a standoff. You just do not have the religious point of view.

The pure naturalist is in the end a problem—left irreconcilable with the rest of the valuing body politic. But the rest of Religion without God has been spent chipping away at the naturalist position, so that the majority of the body politic falls under “religious theist” or “religious atheist,” which share a fundamental belief that there are things worth living together for.

This brings us close to what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called the need for a “civic religion,” fitting the post-revolutionary French model of secularism, which supplanted official state religion with a shared code of secular civic values. Martha Nussbaum pluralizes this position in her most recent book, Political Emotions, by arguing that the state should not impose a comprehensive theory of the good, but instead encourage its citizens to pursue their own in collaborative social arrangements. Recognizing a sense of shared striving is the precondition for love for something beyond oneself. Nussbaum’s resulting legal outlook, like Dworkin’s, amounts to tempering a strictly individualistic conception of constitutional liberties with a view to social consequences.

For Dworkin, the law seems arbitrary unless it is grounded in a sense of shared moral values that lend it legitimacy. The laws of democratic societies are thus held together by a religious orientation, if not religious content. Yet no one voice can ever speak for this grounding because it may be articulated through competing claims and priorities. As the philosopher Charles Taylor describes this issue, “The problem is that a really diverse democracy can’t revert to a civil religion,” as in the case of the young American republic, or “antireligion,” in the case of postrevolutionary France, “however comforting this may be, without betraying its own principles.” Modern states have what Taylor calls a political identity, defined as the generally accepted answer to the question, “what/whom is the state for?” But while Taylor advocates determining policy on religious liberty directly around these goals, forgoing the “fetishized” division between church and state, Dworkin prefers the more strictly legalistic view of promoting “ethical independence” for both theists and atheists.


Taylor’s behemoth *A Secular Age* opens with a frank remark: we would all seem to agree that we live in a secular age, even if we can’t pin down exactly what that means. Taylor then refines that sense into criteria for discussing and reasoning about religion and its absence in public life. He quickly discards two simple notions of secularity: first, the simple separation of church and state, second, the falling off of religious practice. Instead he focuses on the conditions necessary for religious belief. How did we get, he asks, “from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others?” As he puts it otherwise, “Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives.” Taylor is not interested in who actually believes what, but why one is able to believe in the first place. The answer, for him, lies in the social framework that upholds belief.

Taylor argues that the West has opened up belief as a question that could not have been asked seriously before the Enlightenment. On the level of possible alternatives, the premodern framework is naive while ours is implicitly reflective. “Naïveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike,” Taylor writes. The believer today is affected by the conditions of secularity just as the unbeliever is. “We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty.” Our “modern condition” is one in which we cannot help but recognize that there are different kinds of fullness out there and that intelligent people cannot agree on which of them is best. In this climate, a cohesive civil religion would be an utter anachronism. Yet Dworkin would argue that this pluralism is not simply relativism. It is in part as a reaction to this uncertainty that we tend to mistakenly think of religion and atheism as mutually exclusive.

Like Dworkin, Taylor figures that the unbeliever and the believer share the goal of achieving fullness in *this* life. “A secular age,” Taylor writes, “is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people.” The conditions of secularity Taylor outlines are in fact the precondition of Dworkin’s entire field of political philosophy, whose question is how to best achieve just human
flourishing in the here and now. This would seem to de facto grant the upper hand to the secularists, but that would be to forget the centrality of value in this question, which even in its cultural form has religious roots.

WHY RELIGION WON’T DIE

The religious studies scholar Hent de Vries has helpfully noted that what we most often refer to when we refer to religion is not someone’s belief status or standing with respect to a particular organized religion. We refer instead to a shared past, a culture. Heresy, iconoclasm, and excommunication still fall under the banner of “religious” activities because they stand in relation to an indisputable religious inheritance, which De Vries calls an archive, “an ensemble of words and things, images and sounds, gestures and powers,” that owes something to “a past whose metaphysical status...is best described as absolute, pure, and virtual.” Even as religion’s particular instantiations remain contestable, he writes, religion itself “has lost nothing of its historical, and perhaps, ontological weight.” We may enter in and out of particular religious faiths, but our relation to religious tradition itself cannot be refuted.

All but the most radical atheists are stuck with the archive of Western civilization, which is inseparable from the religions that determined its course. In a 1947 essay, grappling with her relation to Western culture after the Holocaust, the German–Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote that culture as we understand it today was born at the end of the Middle Ages out of the “secularization of religion,” not its erasure. The Enlightenment triggered a more direct crisis, “the danger of losing historical continuity as such, along with the treasures of the past...the fear of being robbed of the specifically human background of a past, of becoming an abstract ghost.” Yet that ghostly nihilism was never realized because the dissolution of traditional religious values opened up a space for new, cultural kinds of meaning to take hold—as we see, for example, in Nietzsche. Subsequent cultural debates stemmed not from a vacuum of meaning, but from a contest of which forms of meaning to commit oneself to. Arendt ultimately equated culture with non-religious pluralism. “Culture is by definition secular,” she wrote. “It requires a kind of broadmindedness


of which no religion will ever be capable.” Yet here she differs with Freud in calling religion intrinsically narrow.

Arendt identifies culture as a new vehicle for religion: “The historian, though hardly ever the theologian, knows that secularization is not the ending of religion.” De Vries has solidified her position more theoretically: “In religion’s perpetual agony lies its philosophical and theoretical relevance. As it dies an ever more secure and serial death, it is increasingly certain to come back to life, in its present guise or in another.”

The death of God is not the death of religion, and even religion’s own death seems somehow to immortalize it. This brings us to one of Mark Taylor’s criteria for all religions. In addition to explaining origins and the like, religion for Taylor contains a “‘principle’ of ‘internal’ criticism that leaves the theory open to endless revision,” which in turn maintains it in a world of ever-changing circumstances, including the leap from theology to culture.

The English philosopher Terry Eagleton begins his latest book, *Culture and the Death of God* with a cautionary note that “atheism is by no means as easy as it looks.” As a Marxist, Eagleton is wary of religious dogmatism, a hesitation manifest in his peculiar Catholicism. While his political vision


is inspired by the Christian idea of care for the poor, he is equally critical of the betrayal of that vision by institutional Christianity. Years ago, Eagleton’s New Atheist credo *The God Delusion*, accusing him of equating religion with fundamentalism.\(^{14}\) In his latest book, Eagleton sets up the narrative of God in modernity as primarily a political one. “Religion has been one of the most powerful ways of justifying sovereignty,” he writes, so its ebb from public life in the West since the Enlightenment has triggered a crisis of political authority. Of the various attempts to “plug the gap where God had once been,” the “most resourceful of these proxies was culture, in the broad rather than narrow sense of the term.” Yet art, culture, and reason have invariably proved unequal to the task: “The Almighty has proved remarkably difficult to dispose of.” Eagleton identifies something special about religion that other kinds of meaning can’t displace—its capacity “to unite theory and practice, elite and populace, spirit and senses, a capacity which culture was never quite able to emulate.” Thus “religion has proved easily the most tenacious and universal form of popular culture.”

“Societies become secular,” Eagleton writes, “not when they dispense with religion altogether, but when they are no longer especially agitated by it.” *Culture and the Death of God* is a chronicle of how many of the West’s most treasured secular values and traditions resulted from religious agitation. If we consider Žižek’s claim of the obsolescence of religion in this context, it seems that the ethical debates of the twenty-first century will continue to take place on that agitating turf of religious discourse. Hence Eagleton’s revisionist history redeems religion from Freud’s narrow view of religion as repressive, “a yoke which must be shaken off.” What Freud failed to note was that reactions against religion would continue to appeal to religious sensibilities in the secular terms of value and culture. Both Eagleton and Dworkin call on us to own up to that continuity.

Eagleton claims that the biggest problems facing religious traditions today are precisely what led to their historic power: authority and boundedness. Christianity in the West was built up on “Christendom,” the unification of faith with political authority, but eventually softened into “Christianity,” the post-medieval understanding of Christianity as a faith. With
this shift, Eagleton argues, Christianity went from dictating the terms of social life to adapting itself to keep up with them. The project of the Enlightenment in Britain, he writes, “was not to replace the supernatural with the natural, but to oust a barbarous, benighted faith in favor of a rational, civilised one.” As Freud wrote in *The Future of an Illusion*, “a civilization”—religious civilization—“which leaves so large a number of its participants unsatisfied and drives them into revolt neither has nor deserves the prospect of a lasting existence.” Accordingly, Eagleton does not deny the unsavory, repressive aspects of fundamentalist religion, but shows that we need no longer oppose religion as such to free exercise of the mind. Even from a secular perspective, he then suggests, it may be more productive to reform the religious civilization we have instead of trying in vain to move past it.

Eagleton’s narrative depends upon what the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo has called the “weakness” of contemporary thought, which disables the metaphysical and authoritative claims of organized religion along with those of its staunchest critics. As Vattimo puts it, “The end of metaphysics and the death of the moral God have liquidated the philosophical basis of atheism.” For Vattimo, the atheist’s absolutism for scientific facts has gone the same way as the religious dogmatist’s. Now that there are no absolute truths, only interpretations that stop short of fully explaining reality, religion gains back lost footing. This leads to what Vattimo calls “postsecular faith,” which has passed through the gauntlet of “death of God” critiques. It offers the entrance of critical, open, and creative tools into the foray of religious life. Values formerly confined to a particular religious doctrine now contribute to “a general explosion of *Weltanschauungen*, of world views,” the “Babel-like pluralism” of our day.

**THE RELIGION OF THE FUTURE**

In a 1997 *New York Times* article, Jack Miles, who had just toured the country promoting his book *God: A Biography*, found himself face to face with doubters who nevertheless practiced religion. As he described the sentiment he encountered, “If I may doubt the political system from the voting booth, if I may doubt the institution of marriage from the conjugal bed, why may I not doubt religion from the pew?” In these
doubting observers, Miles finds just the trend Dworkin hopes for: the quiet disappearance of the metaphysical question of God. For Miles, these people worship out of a need for a spiritual community. Yet many religious people Miles talks to worry about declining membership. What does he prescribe? “Religious reflection on secular uncertainty—a reversal of the familiar phenomenon of secular reflection on religious uncertainty.”

In her latest memoir, the Christian author Marilynne Robinson gives us just that. She reflects that the social science she read in college “did not square at all with my sense of things….The tendency of much of it was to posit or assume a human simplicity within a simple reality and to marginalize the sense of the sacred, the beautiful, everything in any way lofty.” Yet her critique does not spare religion, which she calls a frequent accessory: “religion in many instances abetted these tendencies and does still, not least by retreating from the cultivation and celebration of learning and of beauty, by dumbing down, as if people were less than God made them and in need of nothing so much as condescension.” Robinson’s idea of religiosity entails belief, yet like Dworkin’s it is not at odds with science or reason. “O ye of little faith,” she writes, “Let them subscribe to Scientific American for a year and then tell me if their sense of the grandeur of God is not greatly enlarged by what they have learned from it.” For Robinson, religion is not, as many atheists and theists have emphasized, just about “explaining how the leopard got his spots.” Religion boils down to a mentality that recognizes complexity and beauty in the world.

As we see in Robinson’s case, a religious sensibility leads us to do strange things, like write fiction. We collect experiences, facts, and emotions in something so puzzling yet powerful, so uniquely ours, that it adds up to a vessel of self-awareness. Since I don’t know of a better word, let’s follow Robinson in calling it a soul,
the loss of which in our times Robinson calls “disabling, not only to religion but to literature and political thought and to every humane pursuit.” Hearing out Robinson’s use of the term “soul” would seem to go against Dworkin’s aim of a religious mentality without metaphysics. Yet soul might—as a concept—work just as well for the religious atheist. Dworkin comes so close to representing what for Robinson is genuine religious experience without belief in God that we can already see his book initiating an important dialogue.

Behind Dworkin’s project of reshaping religious and secular discourse is, I believe, a political core. Despite his more radical background, Eagleton’s book spells out the implications of the religious atheist for politics in a way Dworkin might have endorsed if he hadn’t felt compelled to bracket the political question for the purposes of his short but powerful book. Eagleton concludes, “If religious faith were to be released from the burden of furnishing social orders with a set of rationales for their existence, it might be free to rediscover its true purpose as a critique of all such politics. In this sense, its superfluity might prove its salvation.” The religious sensibility might, in its mature form, ultimately become so liberated from religious tradition that it could come to serve as the basis for a new and universal vision for human flourishing in common. I have followed Dworkin in arguing that something similar is already implicit in the idea of politics, but what if we were to make that shared affect explicit? Far from disappearing, religious faith might quietly follow Eagleton’s genealogy and Dworkin’s prescription, shifting from private metaphysical belief to political faith built on shared traditions and common values.