

# DARWIN AND DEMOCRACY

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**W**hen Charles Darwin died in 1882, he was buried in Westminster Abbey, against the wishes of his family. His memorial, placed under Newton's, testifies both to the acceptance of the theory of evolution and to the confidence of the Anglican Church that that theory, rightly understood, posed no problems for religious belief. A century and a quarter later, both judgments are in dispute: the architects of "Intelligent Design Theory" proclaim that they have a superior alternative to Darwinism, and the millions of worried people whom they recruit to their cause campaign for revision of the science curriculum so that their children will not be indoctrinated in godlessness.

I believe that the continued opposition to Darwin, so different from the soothing rhetoric that accompanied his burial, is a symptom of much deeper diseases. It signals, on the one hand, our failure to resolve the complex issues surrounding the relationship of scientific knowledge and religious faith, and, on the other, the difficulties of democracy when different groups of citizens subscribe to different standards of evidence. I will attempt to explain both these connections.

**II**

Let's begin with a brief review of the current debate between Intelligent Design Theory and Darwinism. It's customary to berate the champions of Intelligent Design—the "Design-ers" as I'll henceforth call them—as practitioners of pseu-

do-science. That custom rests on the idea that there's some criterion for demarcating packages of propositions, marking some out as science and others as pseudo-science. But, as philosophers know all too well, there is no such criterion that can readily be identified. Although I sympathize with the frustrated commentators who want to apply the label, I'd approach the issue differently. There are, to be sure, people who ape the ways of science, who seem to talk the talk but who are only pretending to do science—there are pseudo-scientists and pseudo-science is what they produce—but you have to identify the perpetrators first and the propositions only derivatively. The trouble with trying to castigate Intelligent Design as pseudo-science is that you have to start by showing that the Design-ers are only pretending, and that can easily seem an unfair exercise in name-calling.

I proceed differently. Once upon a time, something like Intelligent Design was a reputable approach to the study of life on earth. It died, and gave way to Darwinism. Nothing that has happened since makes it ripe for resurrection. Once you see this, you can pinpoint the pretenses of the Design-ers: they pretend that a mass of explanatory and predictive success simply doesn't exist.

For the purposes of this debate, Darwinism comes in three phases. The first phase is the rejection of a relatively young earth in favor of a history in which different kinds of living things have inhabited our planet at different times. This is actually pre-Darwinian, accomplished in the early nineteenth century through the identification of a world-wide ordering of fossils; by 1830, the idea of a young earth had been repudiated, and the main developments since have involved the use of radiometric dating techniques to show that the earth is far older than Victorian geologists anticipated. The second phase centers on one of Darwin's major achievements, the recognition of all living things as related in a single tree of life. Darwin's patient collection of findings about the geographical distribution of organisms, about anatomical, physiological, and embryological relationships, enabled him to show, again and again, how the similarities and differences could be explained by hypothesizing processes of descent with modification. His arguments have only been deepened by subsequent analyses of chromosome numbers and banding patterns, of shared amino-acid sequences in proteins, and, most recently, of common DNA sequences. As biologists compare the genomes of different species, and find them laden with debased versions of functional sequences that occur in other organisms, Darwin's conclusion becomes irresistible.

Indeed, leading Design-ers often say, in their more guarded moments, that

they don't resist—they claim to accept the idea of an old earth on which all life is linked by descent with modification. The trouble, they say, lies in Darwin's second major idea, the thought that natural selection has been the chief agent of evolutionary change. Here, they recall an important historical difference. For, whereas Darwin's thesis of a single tree of life was adopted relatively quickly—Huxley announced victory in 1872—the power of natural selection remained controversial until well after Darwin's death. Only in the 1920s and 1930s, with the union of evolutionary theory and the new genetics stemming from Morgan and Mendel, was natural selection fully accepted. Since then, *on a relatively small scale*, both within the lab and in the wild, careful work by evolutionary biologists has shown evolution in action. Cunning opponents of Darwin can accept these detailed studies; they can admit that natural selection can produce antibiotic-resistant bacteria or finches with differently-shaped beaks, while denying that it can yield major evolutionary changes. They don't deny (at least, not officially) that evolution has occurred. Their thesis is that it could only have been produced by some special force, one that deserves to be called "Intelligent."

The orthodox Darwinian line is that the power of natural selection can be demonstrated on a small scale during the time-frame of a scientist's investigation, and that we should envisage more dramatic changes as produced over longer stretches of time. Design-ers respond in two different ways: they suggest that certain evolutionary changes require the very precise attunement of molecules to one another, so that, if genetic mutations occurred sequentially, the intermediate forms would be deleterious; and they compute probabilities for certain kinds of transitions, arriving at figures they claim to be too absurdly small to make evolution under natural selection credible.

But these arguments, if not disingenuous, are flawed. For, in the first place, claims about the efficacy of natural selection are not committed to simple-minded scenarios of sequential addition of molecules. Secondly, computations of probabilities based on guesses about conditions of which we know ourselves to be ignorant are of little value in assessing whether or not a transition could have been brought about by natural selection. The fundamental point, however, the one that raises concerns about the sincerity of the Design-ers, lies in the fact that their own alleged alternative can't help with the problems they raise. If they are indeed committed, as they claim, to the Darwinian theme of descent with modification, then their criticisms concede certain evolutionary transitions, deny that those transitions could have been effected by natural selection, and assert that the transitions are the product of

“Intelligence”. Without this last claim, the Design-ers are no different from a few well-respected, though unorthodox, contemporary biologists who look for supplements to natural selection, physico-chemical sources of particular kinds of order.

So how does “Intelligence” do it? If a transition really requires the sequential addition of molecules in the ways that the simple-minded scenarios suggest, how does “Intelligence” work the trick that poor natural selection cannot? By coordinating the mutations? By adjusting the environment? No answers are given. Design-ers are too canny to tell the world about the principles that govern the operations of “Intelligence”, when it comes into play, how it is directed, and what it can achieve. The suspicion that their talk is merely pretense arises just at this point. For without some explicit principles, there’s no genuine alternative. Intelligent Design Theory is bankrupt—dead.

### III

In many areas of science, there periodically arise problems that appear difficult to resolve using the standard techniques of the field. Frequently when this occurs, the scientific community divides into two groups, typically a larger group pursuing ways of adapting the prevalent techniques to the hard cases, and a smaller group trying out some heterodox ideas. Nobody talks as though the fundamental principles of the field need radical change, or proposes that well-confirmed claims, accepted for generations, need wholesale rejection. Even though the protein-folding problem has resisted dedicated efforts to solve it, nobody is clamoring for an alternative high-school chemistry curriculum that would introduce the theory of Intelligent Folding.

The difference with Darwin, of course, is that he’s seen as a threat; religious people, particularly American Christians, fear that Darwinism is incompatible with their faith. A long-standing response is that the fear is unfounded. From the eulogies at Darwin’s funeral to eloquent contemporary presentations, many have argued that the opposition between Darwinism and faith is only apparent. If you can have God and Darwin too, then the concerns of supporters of Intelligent Design can be met without clutching at the illusions the Design-ers concoct. From this perspective, the controversy persists because of two mistakes, one that fails to see how the evolution of life on earth, caused by natural selection, might elaborate the plan of a Creator who set things up to proceed in this way and who leaves natural processes to run their course, and another that disguises currently unsolved difficulties with Darwinism as unsolvable, thereby

creating space for a much-touted, but ultimately empty, alternative. A non-problem is created, and a spurious solution is then offered.

According to this diagnosis, the honest supporters are doubly deceived. They hear in a variety of places, and in a variety of media, that they must choose between God and Darwin. Then they are told that, despite the widespread scientific support for Darwin, there's another point of view, one defensible on scientific grounds, and that this is unfairly derided by the academic establishment. Those who say these things appear more trustworthy than the remote Brahmins who pooh-pooh opposition to evolution. The audience has little reason to think critically about the story they are told. Many of them find the scientific details difficult, and, when they contrast the reassurances of their trusted counselors with the haughty dismissals of a secular orthodoxy, their sense of alienation from science deepens.

Darwinism is plainly at odds with some religious doctrines. If you think that the Book of Genesis is literally true, then you cannot accept the first theme in Darwinism, the pre-Darwinian idea that successive floras and faunas have inhabited our planet. Yet, from antiquity, Christians have allowed for readings of their scriptures that are not so sweepingly literal. So, you might think, once extreme literalism is abandoned the anxiety dissolves.

But matters aren't that simple. There's a strand in many religions, especially prominent in Christianity, that attributes a purpose to the Creation. Our world, and life within it, has been designed by a God who cares for his creatures, and who has a plan in which human beings are particularly important. Yet the story of a wise and loving Creator who has planned life on earth, letting it unfold over four billion years by the processes envisaged in evolutionary theory, is hard to sustain when you think about the details.

Many people have been troubled by human suffering, and that of other sentient creatures, and have wondered how the pains are compatible with the designs of an all-powerful and loving God. Darwin's account of the history of life greatly enlarges the scale on which suffering takes place: through millions of years, billions of animals experience vast amounts of pain, supposedly so that, after an enormous number of extinctions of entire species, on the tip of one twig of the evolutionary tree, there may emerge a species with the special properties that make us able to worship the Creator. Even though there may be some qualitative difference between human pain and the pain of other animals, deriving perhaps from our ability to understand what is happening to us and to represent the terrible consequences, it is plain to anyone who has ever seen an ani-

mal ensnared or a fish writhe on a hook, that we are not the only organisms who suffer. Moreover, the animal suffering isn't incidental to the unfolding of life, but integral to it. Natural selection is founded on strenuous competition, and although the race isn't always to the ruthless, there are plenty of occasions on which it does produce "nature red in tooth and claw" (in Tennyson's pre-Darwinian phrase). Our conception of the providential creator must suppose that he has constructed a shaggy-dog story, a history of life that consists of a three-billion year curtain-raiser to the main event, in which millions of sentient beings suffer, often acutely, and that the suffering is not a by-product but constitutive of the script the creator has chosen to write.

To contend that species have been individually created with the vestiges of their predecessors, with the junk that accumulates in the history of life, is to suppose that the Creator operates by whimsy. The charge doesn't go away when the action of the Creator is made more remote. For a history of life dominated by natural selection is extremely hard to understand in providentialist terms. Mutations arise without any direction towards the needs of organisms—and the vast majority of them turn out to be highly damaging. The environments that set new challenges for organic adaptation succeed one another by processes largely independent of the activities and requirements of the living things that inhabit them. Even if the succession of environments on earth has some hidden plan, Darwinism denies that the variations that enable organisms to adapt and to cope are directed by those environments. Evolutionary arms races abound: if prey animals are lucky enough to acquire a favorable variation, then some predators will starve; if the predators are the fortunate ones, then more of the prey will die messy and agonizing deaths. There is nothing kindly or providential about any of this, and it seems breathtakingly wasteful and inefficient. Indeed, if we imagine a human observer presiding over a miniaturized version of the whole show, peering down on his "creation", it is extremely hard to equip the face with a kindly expression.

If you believe in a providentialist religion, you have two possible strategies at this point: if you want to be ambitious, you can try to unfold the purpose behind the apparent messiness of the history of life—that is likely to lead you down a long road involving controversial claims about freedom, apparently monstrous interpretations of the holocaust and other "horrendous evils", and an extremely peculiar conception of divine justice; the genuine religious response forswears the sophistries of scholastic philosophers, acquiescing in the incomprehensibility of the divine purposes. Yet this strategy of retreat has costs.

If you are prepared to treat the divine plan as ultimately mysterious and incomprehensible, then why introduce that thought *just here*? Why not go further? You might declare that the appearances of common descent are deceptive, that species have been newly created with the vestiges of formerly useful organs and structures, with the masses of genomic junk, and that the Creator has His own unfathomable reasons for doing this—you might even insist that the earth has been made with the *appearance* of great age, that the order of the fossils in the rocks and the radioactive residues are products of a recent creation, that in all these instances the intentions of the Creator in mimicking a Darwinian world are beyond human understanding. The appeal to “mystery” is always available—and always an abdication of the spirit of inquiry. For those who would reconcile God and Darwin, it’s hardly an acceptable resting-place.

Hume challenged his providentialist contemporaries by asking them to consider what character they would ascribe to the deity if they set aside their preconceptions and simply used the observed phenomena of life on our planet as the basis for their inference. It might appear that the challenge is unfair, that there are occasions on which we suppose that appearances are deceptive, believe that what seems a natural conclusion from the observed phenomena should not be drawn, think that there is an—unknown—explanation for the discrepancy between the “obvious implication” and what we ought to accept. Not all unanswered questions are unanswerable. In some instances, we would properly assume that there is a solution to a problem, even though we recognize quite clearly that we shall never be able to provide it—there are vast numbers of questions of human history about which we’ll always remain ignorant.

At this point, however, a deeper problem emerges. For on the occasions on which we are justified in thinking that there is an explanation, currently or even permanently unbeknownst to us, we have background knowledge to which we can appeal; although we cannot say what route Caesar followed on the Ides of March, the information we have provides grounds for thinking that he followed some definite course to the Capitol. If the providentialist is to turn back Hume’s challenge—or the Darwinian extension of it—then it must be because there are antecedent grounds for supposing that the Providential Creator exists. Were that not so, then there would be no basis for supposing that the waste, the suffering, and the inefficiency should not be taken at face value.

Troubling questions now arise. Why should anyone think that there must be a Providential Creator behind the apparent evils of the world, a God whose purposes human beings cannot fathom? On what grounds do providentialists

rely when they maintain that there *must* be some unknown order behind the messiness of life?

So the conflict between Darwin and providential religion leads inexorably into a broader battle. It pitches us into what is often (but wrongly) viewed as a war between reason and religion generally, one that erupted in the eighteenth century and that has intensified ever since. Darwinism is entangled with what I'll call the *Enlightenment Case against Supernaturalism*: evolutionary ideas form a separable part of the case, as well as amplifying other themes within it.

#### IV

During the past two centuries, historical, archeological, and literary studies have exposed the processes through which religious doctrines evolve. Whether they focus on oral traditions or scriptures, they offer the same message. The marvelous stories that lie at the heart of religions, stories about covenants and bodily resurrection, for example, are constructed long after the alleged facts, modified in accordance with prevailing conditions, interpreted and reinterpreted. Religions prosper for reasons radically unconnected with the truth of their central tenets. Allegedly religious experience is inevitably shaped by the categories culturally available.

None of this stems directly from Darwin, of course. It is, rather, the work of an army of scholars, among them devout theologians who have sometimes lamented that their work undermines faith. Yet, there's a sense in which Darwin helps to supply a framework for the enlightenment case, for, although the kind of evolution in question is not his, that case thinks in terms of the evolution of religions. Fundamentally, it asks religious people to look at the history that stands behind their religious claims, and to consider how likely it is that claims generated from that sort of history would be true.

The enlightenment case is directed not against all forms of religion, but against what I'll call *supernaturalist* religion. Providentialists believe in a Creator-with-a-plan, but non-Providentialist religions often assume the existence of divinities. An inclusive pantheon would contain many gods—and spirits, and ancestors—who have little interest in human or animal welfare, some of whom can be placated in various ways, most of whom have to be acknowledged as sources of power. An even more capacious collection of religious entities would include *impersonal* powers, forces like the *Mana* of some Polynesian or Melanesian religions, with which it is important to align oneself. It is not easy to identify what distinguishes these objects of religious concern, these gods and

ancestors, spirits and forces, except to say, vaguely, that they are very different from the normal things with which human beings deal, that they are not perceptible except under very special circumstances, that they are somehow “supernatural” or “transcendent”.

Contemporary believers in any of the world’s religions acquire their beliefs in very similar ways. For all of them, there’s a long process of tradition, oral or written, that leads from some present religious community to people in the distant past who were privileged to have unusual experiences, to come face-to-face with supernatural entities, to be given some special revelation. The beliefs held today have emerged from these traditions, and, when we consider the entire ensemble of world religious doctrines, they are massively incompatible with one another. Each devout believer must therefore hold that his tradition is somehow privileged. But how exactly? When we scrutinize the historical processes through which religions spread and evolve, it becomes clear how doctrines are shaped and reshaped by socio-political processes that have little, if anything, to do with truth. Two centuries of literary, historical, and sociological studies of the growth of the major western forms of monotheism reveal how unlikely it is that the kinds of cultural processes through which those religions descend to the contemporary faithful would transmit truth.

Beliefs in all kinds of supernatural entities, in the dreamtime of Australian aborigines as well as the ancestors of African religions, in the gods of Hinduism as well as the *Mana* of Melanesian doctrine, in Allah as well as Yahweh or Christ, are equally ill-supported. Not only is it impossible for the adherent of any one of these traditions to explain why his cultural legacy is superior to its incompatible rivals, but the full weight of the enlightenment and post-enlightenment studies of religions as historical phenomena makes it plain that he should worry about the path that has led his favorite contemporary community to its beliefs. Under these circumstances, to ignore the claims of rival religions, to dismiss them as “primitive superstition”, quite distinct from one’s own revealed truth, or to suppose that one’s religious tenets are “properly basic” is vain dogmatism.

In sketching the enlightenment case so briefly, I’ve ignored three obvious objections. First, don’t contemporary believers have direct experiences of the supernatural? Convinced Christians forthrightly declare that they have daily encounters with Jesus. But, even if we ignore suggestions that religious experiences are closely connected with the sorts of psychological states that are hardly conducive to the acquisition of true belief, these reports of special revelations don’t break the symmetry among traditions. Around the world, people will

attest to their contact with ancestors, with spirits, with gods that are radically different from those favored in the West. As before, the adherent of any one of these traditions would be hard-pressed to declare that his own particular reports of religious experiences are correct and that the deliverances of others are hideously misguided, to judge that Jesus has spoken to him and to laugh at counterpart African claims of conversations with ancestors. Cautious humanists who wish to steer a way between dogmatic religion and dogmatic scientism should acknowledge that there are some aspects of human experience that we *all* fail to understand, for which *all* our current categories are inadequate. The proper conclusion of the enlightenment case is that the reports of religious experience from around the globe are groping efforts to come to terms with events for which everyday descriptions seem, initially at least, to be inept, and that each culture interprets these in language that draws on the stories of its tradition: it is overwhelmingly probable that all such interpretations are completely false.

My response to this first objection leads naturally to a second. Surely the omnipresence of religion and of claims to religious experience points to *something*. Isn't there, perhaps, some common core of religious doctrine that *all* these traditions and their derivative experiences are capturing? Perhaps. Yet the sheer diversity of the world's religions—that is, of the world's religions that have survived into the present, for there have surely been more about which we know nothing—entails that the core will be minimal. All it can contain is a version of Hamlet's thought: there may be more things in our universe than are dreamt of in anyone's natural philosophy. Who could disagree? The most ardent secularist should recognize that our current scientific descriptions are surely incomplete. Whether they will ever be extended to embrace entities of a sort that deserves the title "transcendent" is, at best, a speculative conjecture. In the mean time, however, we shouldn't pretend to know what we don't know, deploying the concepts and doctrines of some arbitrarily chosen body of religious lore to gesture at an extension of our contemporary framework. Supposing that aspects of experience we know we don't understand can somehow be assimilated to the categories and doctrines that have descended to us from ancient times is a blind leap.

So to the third objection: Faith should be prized for its readiness to make that kind of leap. Many religious people would surely be impatient with the arguments I have rehearsed here, and would declare that the importance of religious commitment lies in the fact that it does not seek reasons. The proper reli-

gious attitude is one of trust. “So”, a devout Christian, or Muslim, or Jew might declare, “I simply accept these claims about past events, these doctrines about what people should do and what they should aspire to be. To ask me to provide reasons—or to play clever games that try to show I have no reasons—is entirely beside the point.”

Yet here the enlightenment case presses from a new direction. If you are going to use your religious attitudes to run your life, if you are going to let religious doctrine guide you to decisions that will affect the lives of others, then the willingness to leap without evidence, to commit yourself in the absence of reasons, deserves *ethical* scrutiny. As William Clifford, a late Victorian mathematician and apologist for science, saw very clearly, we do not usually endorse the behavior of people who act without reason, ardently convinced that things will turn out well. In Clifford’s famous example, the ship-owner whose wishful thinking leads him to send out an unsound ship is rightly held responsible when the passengers and crew drown. The earnest religious believer who supposes that God has commanded him to kill his son, or that religious doctrine requires him to eliminate the ungodly, or that it is wrong to undertake the operations doctors prescribe to save the lives of children, will subordinate ethical maxims he would otherwise use to guide his conduct to the dictates of faith, faith that is admittedly blind, supported by no defensible reason. We should protest that blind commitment, for, if it is allowed to issue in action, it is profoundly dangerous.

In practice, people don’t protest, because they think of the religious doctrines that move them, and move their friends, as sources of a correct ethical attitude. If the enlightenment case, as developed so far, is cogent, they can have no basis for this judgment. It, too, is an article of blind faith. The true character of acting from unreasoned faith is revealed when you look at the actions of those who are moved by a different faith, at militant fanatics who aim to murder those who do not conform to their religion, for example. Christians will naturally think of themselves as different, but, as we have seen, there is no basis for holding that the *religious* doctrines they avow are any more likely to be correct than those of other faiths, even of radical and intolerant versions of other faiths. The blindness with which they commit themselves to acting in accordance with their preferred interpretation of a particular text is no different from that of people who would express a similar enthusiasm for the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or who would regard *Mein Kampf* as divinely inspired.

## V

Darwin is only a part of the enlightenment case against supernaturalism. Why then does he serve as the object of so much ire, leading concerned people to clamor for the shoddy goods the Design-ers offer? Because, unlike the other contributors to the case, Darwin is visible. He is in the schools, potentially corrupting the youth and leading them to spurn the precious gift of faith. He serves as the obvious symbol of a larger attack on supernaturalist religion, about which thoughtful Christians know, even if they are not aware of all its details. Their concern is justified, although they may think, wrongly, that the onslaught on their faith is contained and condensed in Darwinism. For the enlightenment case will not surface in the education of their children, at least not until they attend universities, and probably not in any systematic way, even then. To defend the faith the important step is to keep Darwin out of the classroom, or, failing that, to “balance” his corrosive influence.

Many of Darwin’s most militant defenders would go further than I have done, insisting that Darwin—and Darwin alone!—takes us all the way to secularism, even to atheism. I dissent for two reasons. First, as I’ve already noted, even though the enlightenment case demonstrates that, taken as literal truth, the stories and historical claims of all the religions about which we know are overwhelmingly likely to be mistaken, it does not follow that the world contains nothing beyond the entities envisaged by our current scientific picture of it. It would be arrogant to declare categorically that there is nothing that might answer to our vague conception of the transcendent—there is too much that we know that we do not yet know.

Second, and more importantly, the critique of providentialism and supernaturalism leaves open the possibility of what I have called “spiritual religion”. Each of the major western monotheisms can generate a version of spiritual religion by giving up the literal truth of the stories contested by the enlightenment case. How is this to be done? I shall illustrate the possibility by using the example of Christianity.

Spiritual Christians abandon almost all the standard stories about the life of Jesus: they give up on the extraordinary birth, the miracles, the literal resurrection. What survive are the teachings, the precepts and parables, and the eventual journey to Jerusalem and the culminating moment of the Crucifixion. That moment of suffering and sacrifice is seen, not as the prelude to some triumphant return and the promise of eternal salvation—all that, to repeat, is literally false—but as a symbolic presentation of the importance of compassion

and of love without limits. We are to recognize our own predicament, the human predicament, through the lens of the man on the cross.

Spiritual Christians place the value of the stories of the scriptures not in their literal truth but in their deliverances for self-understanding, for improving ourselves and for shaping our attitudes and actions towards others. Yet spiritual Christianity—like spiritual Judaism or spiritual Islam—is vulnerable from two directions. To those who have grown up in a more substantial faith, who have not appreciated the force of the enlightenment case and who see no need to abandon supernatural religion, the spiritual version seems too attenuated to count as genuine religion at all. So, even though many contemporary Americans agree that large parts of scriptural texts should not be read literally, most of them do not completely abandon supernaturalism in favor of spiritual religion—they continue to affirm that a personal God made a covenant with the Jews or that Jesus literally rose from the dead. Where spiritual religion is most clearly visible, in explicit denials that the Jews were chosen in any straightforward sense or in attempts to explain the natural events that lie behind the conflicting resurrection narratives of the Gospels, the content of the religion seems to consist in powerful ethical ideas and exemplars.

From the other side, secular humanists will see spiritual religion as a last desperate attempt to claim a privilege for traditions whose credentials have been exploded. Secularists can find value in the teachings of Jesus, inspiration in the image of the sacrifice on the cross—but also in ideas of the Torah or the Qur'an, in the sayings of the Buddha, in Socrates and Augustine, Kant and Dewey, Gandhi and Du Bois. Moreover, they can acknowledge the power of the stories, their ability to move and to inspire, while insisting that these are not unique to *religious* literature. Why not go all the way, to a cosmopolitan understanding of thought about what is valuable and worth achieving, a secular conception that celebrates the very best in the ideas and stories from many different traditions, some of them unquestionably secular?

Pressed from two sides, spiritual religion can easily appear unstable, liable to lapse from clear-headed acceptance of the enlightenment case and to topple back into supernaturalism, or subject to abandon its vague partiality to one tradition and to metamorphose into a cosmopolitan secular humanism. For a secular humanist, like me, spiritual religion seems to face the serious challenge of providing more content than the exhortations to, and examples of, compassion and social justice that humanists enthusiastically endorse, without simultaneously reverting to supernaturalism. Although I do not see how that challenge is

to be met, it is not clear how to circumscribe all possible responses to it—and thus to close the case against religion, period. The enlightenment case culminates in a (polite) request to the reflective people who go beyond supernaturalism to spiritual religion, to explain, as clearly and precisely as they can, what more they affirm that secular humanists cannot willingly grant.

That, I suggest, is where reason leads us. But it cannot be—nor should it be—the end of my story.

## VI

For, though they speak with the tongues of men and of angels, the voices of reason should not expect to carry the day. The conclusion they draw deprives religious people of what they have taken to be their birthright. In its place, they offer a vision of a world without providence or purpose, and, however much they may celebrate the Grand Human Adventure of understanding nature, that can only appear, by comparison, a mess of pottage. Often, the voices of reason I hear in contemporary discussions of religion are hectoring, almost exultant that comfort is being stripped away and faith undermined; frequently, they are without charity. And they are always without hope.

Religion is, and has been, central to the lives of most people who have ever lived. From what we know of the history of the growth and spread of particular creeds, its pervasiveness is understood in terms of the social purposes it serves, and nobody should expect it to disappear without a struggle, under the impact of what proclaims itself—accurately, I believe—as reason. For the benefits religion promises to the faithful are obvious, and obviously important, perhaps most plainly so when people experience deep distress. Darwin doesn't provide much consolation at a funeral.

Of course, secularism has its own revered figures, people who met personal tragedies without turning to illusory comforts. Hume faced his painful death stoically, persisting in his skepticism to the end; T.H. Huxley, Darwin's tireless champion, wracked with grief at the death of his four-year-old son, refused Charles Kingsley's proffered hope of a reunion in the hereafter. Perhaps these figures should serve as patterns for us all, admirable examples of intellectual integrity and courage that will not take refuge by turning away from the truth, by supposing, with the supernaturalists, that stories about life after death are literally true.

It is crushingly obvious, however, that those most excited by the secular vision—those who celebrate the honesty of spurning false comfort—are people

who can feel themselves part of the process of discovery and disclosure that has shown the reality behind old illusions. Celebrations of the human accomplishment in fathoming nature's secrets are less likely to thrill those who only have a partial understanding of what has been accomplished, and who recognize that they will not contribute, even in the humblest way, to the continued progress of knowledge. Hume's and Huxley's heirs, like Richard Dawkins for example, preach eloquently to the choir, but thoughtful religious people will find their bracing message harsh and insensitive. How can these celebrants of secularism understand what many other people stand to lose if their arguments are correct? How can they expect those people to be grateful for the mess of pottage they offer?

Because such questions naturally arise, many people resist those arguments, hoping that they are incorrect or incomplete. They know that the case launched against their cherished beliefs is clever, but they are also tempted by the thought that the cleverness is flawed. If others, recognizably more sympathetic to their faith, can point, however vaguely, to potential faults, they will be grateful—and they will be disinclined to inspect too closely the gifts they are offered. So, again and again, they view Darwin as the enemy of what they hold most dear, and they resist Darwinism with whatever devices their apparently sympathetic allies can supply.

To resist Darwin, or the enlightenment case that looms behind him, is hardly unreasonable if what you would be left with is a drab, painful, and impoverished life. For people who are buffeted by the vicissitudes of the economy, or who are victimized by injustice, or who are scorned and vilified by the successful members of their societies, or whose work is tedious and unrewarding, people for whom material rewards are scanty or for whom the toys of consumer culture pall, for people who can unburden themselves most readily in religious settings and who find in their church a supportive community, above all for people who hope that their lives mean something, that their lives matter, the secular onslaught threatens to demolish almost everything. That is why the voices of reason are as sounding brass or as tinkling cymbals.

Writing in the 1920s, thoroughly aware that the Enlightenment Case had created a "crisis in religion", America's premier philosopher, John Dewey, argued for a new attitude to religion and the religious. We need, he suggested, outlets for the emotions that underlie religion, and this requires the emancipation of the religious life from the encumbrance of the dogmas of the churches, of their commitment to the literal truth of their favored stories. The task is to

cultivate those attitudes that “lend deep and enduring support to the processes of living”.<sup>1</sup> Dewey was, I believe, pointing to a position on which spiritual religion and secular humanism can converge, the former by erecting barriers against sliding back into supernaturalism, and embracing a cosmopolitan conception of the contribution of many different traditions to our understanding of the deepest questions about ourselves and our ideals, the latter by giving up its bracing recommendations to move beyond superstition, and by appreciating the genuine needs that stand behind religion.

It is the claim of religions that they effect this generic and enduring change in attitude. I should like to turn the statement around and say that whenever this change takes place there is a definitely religious attitude. It is not a religion that brings it about, but when it occurs, from whatever cause and by whatever means, there is a religious attitude and function.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we haven't achieved the broadening of the religious life Dewey envisaged. For most Americans, the only occasions that cultivate the attitudes that support the processes of living are dominated by the doctrines of the traditional religions. If anything, the forms of Christianity that have been most successful in recruiting new members place heavy emphasis on the full acceptance of dogma, on literal interpretations of the canonical texts. Despite the demolition of the doctrines that Darwin and his enlightenment allies ought to have wrought, scriptural myths pervade many American lives because we have found no replacements for the old ways of supporting emotions and reflections essential to meaningful human existence.

None of this is to deny that religion, as it has been elaborated in the substantive stories of the major traditions, is also capable of doing enormous harm. The history of religions reveals not only the consolations of the afflicted and the legitimate protests of the downtrodden but also the fanatical intolerance that expresses itself in warfare and persecution, that divides families, cities, and nations, that forbids people to express their love as, and with whom, they choose. It is possible to appreciate the ways in which the religions human societies have developed have met genuine human needs, without forgetting that the myths they have elevated as inviolable dogma have often been destructive. Dewey saw our situation clearly—the challenge is to find a way to respond to the human purposes religion serves without embracing the falsehoods, the poten-

tially damaging falsehoods, of traditional religions—we need to make secular humanism responsive to our deepest impulses and needs, or to find, if you like, a cosmopolitan version of spiritual religion that will not collapse back into parochial supernaturalism.

## VII

Without addressing these problems, there are, I believe, deep difficulties for the functioning of our democracy. I want to conclude by briefly sketching these difficulties.

I have proceeded by assuming a basic epistemological thesis: scientific inquiry sets the standards for the acceptability of beliefs. The heart of the conflict between science and religion is a debate about this thesis. An unsympathetic observer might suppose that evangelical Christians are committed to an epistemology of wishful thinking—that they hold so tightly to the doctrines of their religion that they will not count as knowledge anything inconsistent with any major tenet. A more charitable formulation would ascribe to many religious Americans a different conception of knowledge: standard scientific investigations can reveal many things about the natural world, but, where they conflict with revealed religion, they cannot be trusted; for the texts of the scriptures, as interpreted by those graced with insight, offer a higher form of evidence that cannot be overridden by our fallible inquiries. This conception of knowledge has a venerable pedigree, for something very like it has been debated for centuries; Galileo's *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina* is one of the more prominent attempts to oppose it, but the stakes over which Galileo and his contemporaries fought were far lower than those in the twenty-first century opposition. Yet the local victories achieved by Galileo and his successors make the hybrid epistemology of evangelical resistance an uncomfortable position. People who want to embrace the sciences when they are irrelevant to religious issues, or even when they are in conflict with religious tenets once regarded as important, will find it hard to defend their insistence on Biblical evidence as overriding when the enlightenment case against supernaturalist religion as a whole is in question.

What concerns me here, however, is the difficulties posed for a democracy when this hybrid epistemology co-exists with a thoroughgoing deference to the standards of scientific inquiry. Liberal democratic theory is largely dedicated to exploring how people with very different conceptions of what is valuable, divergent attitudes towards the ways in which worthwhile human lives should be structured, can find ways to agree on common policies and institutions. If the

analysis I've offered is correct, the current state of American democracy is one in which the differences in values are conjoined with different epistemological perspectives. That yields a serious problem.

Suppose that a democratic society consists of two groups, diverging not only in their values but also in their conceptions of knowledge and evidence. If there are issues that arise for this society in which each group makes its decision according to what it takes as the facts, and if the differing epistemic standards yield incompatible factual determinations, how will the policy dispute be resolved? Whoever loses will be committed to seeing the outcome as based in a faulty conception of the facts, one rooted in a failure by the victors to respond to what the evidence demands. That might be tolerable if the consequences of the rival policies were not at odds on any fundamental moral matter, but it is quite intolerable when human issues of the greatest seriousness are at stake.

Consider two questions that arise in American society today. Many scientists believe that blastomeres derived from human zygotes could be used to generate cell lineages for research that might provide new weapons against debilitating diseases. They see no objection to using the blastomeres in this way: they understand the mechanical processes of fertilization and DNA incorporation, and find it incredible that such processes confer on the zygote some distinctive status; they know that the blastomere is formed a major embryonic stage before the pre-pattern of the central nervous system is laid down, and that, in consequence, there isn't even the ghost of a sentient organism present. American policy on stem-cell research is, however, currently shaped by a respect for the inviolability of these clusters of cells—the sacredness of a new human being, as many people would say. For religious people, including some who have had great impact on the policy debate, there is scriptural support for viewing the envisaged experiments as the destruction of a human being, and this scriptural support overrides the scientific evidence for taking the processes of embryonic formation in purely mechanical terms.

Or consider the proposal that destabilization of the Near Eastern world is a precondition for the return of Jesus. A significant minority of Christians believe that their Bible tells them that this is so, and some are inspired to think that American foreign policy should be shaped by the directive to prepare the world for the Savior's return. In considering the consequences of various possible actions, secular people (as well as many Jews and Christians) would assess the effects, and the value of the effects, rather differently. The devotees of the "last days", however, will take themselves to have overriding evidence for a broader

view.

In both instances, extraordinarily important outcomes depend on what is decided: scientists look to the relief of the suffering of hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of patients, evangelical Christians see the murder of human beings; “last days” enthusiasts conceive themselves as carrying out God’s plan, others fear tumult and destruction born of fanaticism. However the issues are decided, the losing side must regard the result as one in which the most crucial evidential considerations have been ignored. There is no resolution that can compromise between the clashing perspectives, and, for the defeated, the considerations advanced against them must seem a travesty of reason. So they are asked to allow policies to go forth in their name, when they must repudiate both the reasons and the conception of reason on which those policies are grounded.

Rousseau proposed that a precondition for a social contract is that the parties share a conception of the common good. Analogously, I suggest that a democratic society needs a shared notion of public reason, a common agreement on what kinds of evidential considerations count and on their relative weight. Academic writings on democracy often suppose that this notion of public reason must be neutral among all private views, as if the secular standards, the view from science, were naturally paramount. If, however, the epistemology of evangelical Christianity is committed to the overriding authority of the Bible, then evangelical Christians cannot accept science as the single voice of public reason. For religious reasons to be debarred from public discussion is, for them, for policy to be systematically unreasonable. By the same token, if those reasons are permitted to enter—if religious leaders testify, in the name of their scriptures, before policy-making bodies—then secularists (and some religious allies) will see public reason as prey to irrationality and fanaticism. Either way, there are bound to be some decisions that some citizens will feel duty bound to protest.

This situation has serious consequences. Once people have become accustomed to the bifurcation (or dissolution?) of public reason, they can easily warm to the idea that sources whose deliverances support their values are at least as trustworthy as those that claim a unique title to “objectivity”. Moreover, when market forces have fractured the news media, allowing different accounts of the facts to attract different segments of the polity, it isn’t easy to see how to regain a place for genuinely dispassionate reporting that will be authoritative in our public deliberations. Without serious common ground on which to find consensus or compromise, we face what Dewey astutely diagnosed as the fragmen-

tation of the public.

Re-knitting that public is an enormous endeavor, one that requires the renewal of shared standards of knowledge. In my secularist view, those standards can only come from insistence on the priority of science, but that insistence must make room for the religious impulses and concerns that militant secularists currently ignore. As I have emphasized, secularism must be humane, recognizing the needs for community, for social support, for ways of exploring why human lives matter. In this, I believe, secularists should join forces with the advocates of spiritual religion, those who have gone beyond supernaturalism but continue to appreciate the predicaments to which supernaturalist religions respond. That is only, of course, to gesture vaguely in a direction, and I do not know whether that direction contains a path to success or how we might find it. But, as I have argued here, without some such efforts we have much more on our hands than a relatively confined spat about what biology teachers ought to present—for without a shared conception of public reason we are truly lost.<sup>3</sup>

### Notes

1. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 15.
2. *A Common Faith*, p. 17.
3. The themes explored in this essay are discussed in more detail in Philip Kitcher, *Living with Darwin: Evolution, Design, and the Future of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).