

Against religion: The case for faith

by [Douglas John Hall](#) in the [January 11, 2011](#) issue



Lucas van Valckenborch, *Tower of Babel*, 1594.

On September 12, 2001, the following paragraph appeared in the British newspaper the *Guardian*:

[Heretofore] many of us saw religion as harmless nonsense. Beliefs might lack supporting evidence but, we thought, if people needed a crutch for consolation, where's the harm? September 11th changed all that. Revealed faith is not harmless nonsense, it can be lethally dangerous nonsense. Dangerous because it gives people unshakable confidence in their own righteousness. Dangerous because it gives them false courage to kill themselves, which automatically removes normal barriers to killing others. Dangerous because it teaches enmity to others [who are] labelled only by a difference of inherited tradition. And dangerous because we have all bought into a weird respect, which uniquely protects religion from normal criticism. Let's now stop being so damned respectful.

The author of these words, Richard Dawkins, is frequently dismissed for his reductively atheistic pronouncements; but I believe that people of faith, *any* faith, need to take this particular pronouncement very seriously. Though it was inspired by a particular event involving a debased form of Islam, it applies just as cogently to religious fanaticism wherever it is found—and it is found (in abundance, let us admit) on the North American continent, where it is usually associated with a type of Christianity that has become so dominant in our context as to be thought by many almost normative.

Such Christianity, though it regularly basks in an aura of true-believing Bible faith, seems oblivious to the critique of religion that runs throughout the pages of both the older and the newer Testaments. In fact, if the testimony of theologians still highly honored among thinking Protestants is to be believed, Richard Dawkins's statement could be seen as having a remarkable continuity with the prophet Amos's denunciation of cultic pomposity (5:21f.) or the more scathing letters to the churches of Asia Minor in the Book of Revelation. For theologians as different in their approach as were Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, religion, far from being "harmless nonsense," should be regarded with at least as much suspicion as Dawkins thinks—and more, since it is for them usually a travesty of genuine faith.

The critique of religion is not limited to the thought of these three, but it is rather interesting that their wariness and mistrust of religion has been, if not altogether forgotten, almost totally absent from Christian consciousness in the decades following their demise. In order to give concreteness to the subject, I shall quote passages from the writings of all three.

"The message of the Bible," the young Karl Barth was wont to remark (perhaps because he was minister in a Swiss village that loved to think itself properly religious), "is that God hates religion." What "we must say [of religion] is that it is the one great concern of *godless* men" (*Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1).

Barth included in his voluminous *Church Dogmatics* a whole section (about 30 long pages of small print) titled "Religion as Unbelief"—a piece of theological reflection often reminiscent of Kierkegaard's *Attack upon Christendom*. And Barth is not speaking of the "other" religions only, but of Christianity as well—and perhaps even especially of Christianity. The Christian religion too, he writes, "stands under the judgment that religion is unbelief, and is not acquitted by any inward worthiness." Religion, Barth declares,

is a *grasping*. . . . Man tries to grasp at truth [by] himself. . . . But in that case he does not do what he has to do when truth comes to him. He does not *believe*. If he did, he would listen; but in religion he talks. If he did, he would accept a gift; but in religion he takes something for himself. If he did, he would let God Himself intercede for God; but in religion he ventures to grasp at God.

Paul Tillich, though he disagreed with Barth on many counts, was at least as sharp in his attack on religion as Barth. In a sermon titled "The Yoke of Religion," based on the statement of Jesus, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden . . . take my yoke upon you" (Matt. 11:28-29), Tillich argues that "the burden [Jesus] wants to take from us is the burden of religion." He continues,

We are permanently in danger of abusing Jesus by stating that He is the founder of a new religion, and the bringer of another, more refined, and more enslaving law. And so we see in all Christian churches the toiling and laboring of people who are called Christians, serious Christians, under innumerable laws which they cannot fulfill, from which they flee, to which they return, or which they replace by other laws. This is the yoke from which Jesus wants to liberate us. He is more than a priest or a prophet or a religious genius. These all subject us to religion. He frees us from religion. They make new religious laws; He overcomes the religious law. . . .

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. We spread his call because it is the call to every person in every period to receive the New Being, that hidden saving power in our existence, which takes from us labor and burden, and gives rest to our souls.

It is true that Tillich elsewhere is able to use the term *religion* in a more neutral or sometimes even a positive way, namely, as descriptive of a human striving for meaning and deliverance, to which the revelation in Christ comes as response and resolution. The striving, the longing (*Sehnsucht*) for God is for Tillich, as for most of these thinkers, of the essence of human being. It's not the searching but the finding that's the problem! Too much religion is entirely too successful in finding, defining and circumscribing the Infinite and in using its convictions to denounce others. It substitutes for the essential otherness and mystery of the divine the doctrinal and moral certitudes that serve precisely the nefarious ends that the atheist Dawkins names. The great caution uttered in the fourth century of the common era by that

North African spiritual genius Augustine of Hippo needs to be writ large over all such presumption: *Si comprehendis, non est Deus* ("If you think you understand, it's not God you're talking about").

The polar opposite of this kind of religious certitude, for those theologians grouped around the misleading term *neo-orthodoxy* in the 20th century, is faith. Bonhoeffer's comments are particularly instructive. Following an ancient exegetical device (but giving it a new twist), Bonhoeffer contrasted the two biblical stories of Babel and Pentecost to concretize the difference between religion and faith.

The myth of the tower of Babel is perhaps the Bible's most dramatic symbolic depiction of the religious impulse—the temptation, as Barth called it, of "grasping" after the Ultimate, the struggle for possession and *securitas*. In that saga, human beings, terrified by the precariousness of their creaturehood (well, human creaturehood is precarious), reach up after divine transcendence in a pathetic and futile effort to secure the future. Their absurd tower, the first (as one may say) of many such towers, is an attempt, as it were, to get hold of and control the Controller. What they get instead is a still greater consciousness of their finitude and vulnerability: scrambling for divinity, they end in an abysmal failure of common humanity.

By contrast, Bonhoeffer saw, Pentecost, the spiritual beginnings of the Christian movement described in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, does not depict human beings grasping after the Absolute but rather the divine Spirit descending to and transforming human beings from within, as Jeremiah insisted is the only authentic transformation. Babel, the religious quest, ends in even greater human alienation; Pentecost, the birth of faith, initiates reconciliation even among those who cannot fully understand one another.

Why, we may ask, is it important for us today to revisit and reclaim this neo-orthodox critique of religion? We should do so in the first place because this is not just a 20th-century theological invention but a courageous attempt to recover a genuine and unavoidable biblical theme—a theme that transcends religious particularity and finds echoes in all profound experiences of the presence of the holy. Christians lost sight of this critique as soon as the Christian religion took upon itself the role of religious establishment, and wherever that ambition enters a community of faith—*any* community of faith—it annuls or corrupts the very experience that gave birth to that community: namely, the experience of faith—that

is, of trust—not in individual or institutional power but in a transcendent Presence that defies containment, definition or even comprehension. A religion that wants to commend itself to everyone and to dominate (to be Christendom) cannot afford to be self-critical. It must be promotional, upbeat, positive!

That message is surely unavoidable for all who take scripture seriously; yet Christendom was adept at repressing precisely that message. During the Christendom ages, biblical texts critical of religion, such as those famous lines of Amos about God's hatred of false, noisy worship, could be explained as applying not to the church but to Judaism, the failed parental faith that Christianity was destined to displace. Such rationalization is, I suspect, characteristic of every religion that seeks to achieve imperial status. The critique of religion is genuine only when the community of faith knows that this critique applies first to itself—that it is part (as the First Epistle of St. Peter puts it) of "the judgment that begins with the household of faith."

Today there is an even more important reason why this biblical critique of religion needs to be studied and reflected on by all persons of faith as we try to discover ways of living faithfully in a religiously diverse and physically restricted planet. Insofar as religion is inherently a kind of grasping, as Barth insisted, it follows that the religious impulse will also engender an inherently competitive and conflictive spirit. A spiritual struggle that is motivated by the desire for finality, certitude and the possession of ultimate verity is not likely to manifest much openness to, or even interest in, other claims to truth. To the contrary, it will foster the type of exclusivity that guards its spiritual treasures zealously, having as it were wrested them from eternity.

In every religion, there are vulnerable points—ideas, attitudes or emphases which, under certain historical conditions, are bound to become flash points of conflict. But surely there is no point more redolent of potential violence than this kind of spiritual certitude itself. In a global village where religious disputation no longer limits itself to quarrels within the various historic religions but spills over increasingly into the unprecedented meeting of world religions, every one of them made newly insecure by their felt awareness of one another and of rampant secularity, the greatest flash point of all is inseparable from the religious impulse as such. With its clamoring for ultimacy, its frenetic triumphalism, its incapacity for existential doubt and the entertainment of alternatives, such religion inevitably courts violent opposition. The newly minted atheism of today understands this and capitalizes on it. It argues, with

a kind of dogged logic, that the only way humankind can avoid the great catastrophes to which this situation points is by dispensing altogether with "the God delusion."

Persons of faith must embrace a greater realism than that. No one—and certainly not a bevy of smugly atheistic Oxford dons—is going to rid *homo sapiens* of the religious impulse. Contrary to Bonhoeffer's later musings about the seeming disappearance of *homo religiosus*, it appears likely that human beings will continue to build their spiritual towers of Babel, world without end. But biblical faith, and the intimations of that faith that may be found in extrabiblical sources, will at least be able to maintain a critical perspective on religion—especially one's *own religion*. The thoughtfully faithful will be delivered a little from what Tillich calls the "burden" of religion, which is religion's perpetual temptation to take heaven by storm, to imagine itself above mere creaturehood and to award itself the place of finality.

Probably faith—by which I mean awe and trust in the presence of the holy—will never be found in easy separation from religion—some religion; but the thoughtfully faithful will nevertheless be able to distinguish between what comes of faith and what comes of religion. And the greatest distinction of all in this contrast will always lie in the readiness of faith, unlike religion, to confess its radical incompleteness and insufficiency—indeed, its brokenness. How could it not do so? As the prophet Isaiah cries in the presence of the holy, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (6:5). Likewise, the apostle Peter, experiencing in a new and dramatic way the fathomless depths of Jesus' compassion, commands, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man" (Luke 5:8). In short, there is an intrinsic modesty in faith, and it has nothing to do with bourgeois politeness or political correctness. Authentic faith can never rest content with itself; it can never extinguish its own existential antithesis, doubt; and it can never assume that it has arrived at its destination—that now it "sees" face to face and not as through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12).

I conclude with a quotation that ought to be heard alongside and in contrast to the quotation from Dawkins with which I began. Dawkins faulted religion precisely because it bolstered the tendency of its already humanly egocentric devotees to believe themselves unassailably right and true. I am glad to concede that Dawkins's statement is an accurate characterization of the great temptation of *homo religiosus*. The statement I wish to cite presents a very different image of the human being encountered by "the Eternal Thou" (Martin Buber), for it seeks to depict not

religion but faith. It is the confession of one of the great Christian activists and lay theologians of our epoch, a French Protestant who was part of the resistance to the Nazis and who was so committed to the possibility of the reign of God in the world that he did not stop with resistance but entered the political arena, eventually becoming the mayor of Bordeaux—thus demonstrating the Reformation's insistence that true faith begets, besides modesty, the courage to hope and to work for change. His name was Jacques Ellul, and this is how he described the posture of faith:

Faith is a terribly caustic substance, a burning acid. It puts to the test every element of my life and society; it spares nothing. It leads me ineluctably to question my certitudes, all my moralities, beliefs and policies. It forbids me to attach ultimate significance to any expression of human activity. It detaches and delivers me from money and the family, from my job and my knowledge. It's the surest road to realizing that "the only thing I know is that I don't know anything."
(Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World, translated by Peter Heinegg)

Such faith, and not religious bravado, is the prerequisite for dialogue between the religions today; it is also, I believe, the condition sine qua non of civilization's survival.