

Atheism vs. Theism:
A Debate With No Winner

Jeff Murico
Ph.D. student, Claremont Lincoln University

Abstract: This paper investigates the metaphysical debates occurring between the “New Atheists” and “Analytic Theists.” Utilizing the work of anthropologist Talal Asad, this paper traces the western construction of the category of “religion” to explain the ways in which the New Atheists and Analytic Theists subscribe to (and continue to promote) a problematic conception of “religion” to ground their respective arguments. The problem is not that the New Atheists and Analytic Theists misunderstand each other; rather, the problem is that they both subscribe to a western-constructed, universal definition of religion, which is centered on cognitive belief and is “supposed to affirm something about the fundamental nature of reality.”

Keywords: new atheism, analytic theism, post-metaphysics, religion, secular

Atheists and theists seem to have a lot to talk about these days. They regularly engage each other in debate, they are producing some of the most popular literature on the market, and they are becoming household names to be discussed at dinner tables throughout the western world. Love them or hate them, their influence is undeniable. Analytic Theists, such as William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland, and John Polkinghorne, have very little trouble selling books or securing tenured professorships at respected universities. The same goes for the so-called “New Atheists,” who include names such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett. These New Atheists and Analytic Theists have found success for the same basic reason: they offer articulate and creative responses to what seems to be the most important question imaginable: “Does God exist?” While there is nothing inherently wrong with asking, or attempting to answer, this

question, both the New Atheists and the Analytic Theists commit a series of crucial errors in attempting to do so. Both groups place this question at the center of “religion,” both rely on an essentialist notion of “religion,” which is centered on belief, and both mistakenly understand the question of God to be a scientific hypothesis which can be answered given a correct set of premises and proofs. Utilizing the work of prominent anthropologist Talal Asad, this paper will trace the western construction of the category of religion to explain the ways in which the New Atheists and Analytic Theists subscribe to (and continue to promote) a problematic conception of religion to ground their respective arguments. The problem is not that the New Atheists and Analytic Theists misunderstand each other. Rather, the problem is that they both subscribe to a western-constructed, universal definition of religion, which is centered on cognitive belief and is “supposed to affirm something about the fundamental nature of reality.”¹ This, I argue, does not pay respect to the variety of possible elements that make up many people’s religious identity.

While a significant portion of this paper will be devoted to the exposition and analysis of two distinct groups, the New Atheists and the Analytic Theists, neither section should be read as a comprehensive overview, or essentialist depiction of each perspective. There are considerable differences, for example, in the way Dawkins and Hitchens leverage their respective criticisms at religion. The Analytic Theists, as well, employ a variety of techniques and tactics to deconstruct the other. While such perspectival differences deserve more pointed justification or criticism

¹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 43

within the conversations they are having, this paper acts as a wider lens, which reveals a methodological error that is shared by all parties in the conversation. Therefore, rather than dredge through extensive examples available on both sides of the argument, this paper utilizes the work of only a few; namely, Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great*, and William Lane Craig's book of collected essays *God is Good, God is Great*.

In what follows I hope to demonstrate the ways in which the New Atheists' criticisms rely upon a western-construction of religion that is belief-centered, concerned with scientific hypotheses on the question of God's existence, and conceptualize religion to be a universal, transhistorical, and transcultural phenomenon. Richard Dawkins, for example, begins his book, *The God Delusion*, with an explanation of the title. He writes that the *Penguin English Dictionary* defines "delusion" as "a false belief or impression."² Elsewhere, he notes that "delusion" is defined as "a persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence."³ Belief in a supernatural God, according to Dawkins, is something that is contradicted by scientific evidence. He agrees with Robert M. Pirsig when he writes in his famous novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, "When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called Religion."⁴ Dawkins's book is intended to provide deluded

² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (New York: First Mariner Books, 2006, 2008), 27

³ *Ibid*, 28

⁴ *Ibid*

religious believers with a more accurate description of the world so that they will have little choice but to renounce religion and become atheists.⁵

He firmly believes that religion is essentially a false belief system about the nature of the world and cosmos, which can be better explained by the theory of evolution. In other words, the question of God's existence, thus the question of religion's value, is contingent upon "the God Hypothesis," explained here:

*"There exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us. This book will advocate an alternative view: any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution. Creative intelligences, being evolved, necessarily arrive late in the universe, and therefore cannot be responsible for designing it. God, in the sense defined, is a delusion; and, as later chapters will show, a pernicious delusion."*¹

God either exists or does not exist. Understanding that many people find a high level of ambiguity in the evidence available to either support or deny God's existence, Dawkins explains two types of agnosticism, or two possible ways one can look at the God hypothesis. TAP (temporary agnosticism in practice) is the perspective that one withholds her position on a question until more evidence is provided.² For example, one could be justifiably agnostic on the question of whether or not there are any black swans in a lake if she has yet to see all of the swans (and has yet to find any black swans, of course). The point being, there is a way to determine the truth to the question: one could find all of the swans and observationally determine whether or

⁵ Ibid. "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down."

¹ Ibid, 52

² Ibid, 69-70

not there were any black ones. Until she observes them all, however, she is entitled to be agnostic on the question. If, however, she knows that there are exactly two hundred swans in the lake and she is certain that she has seen one-hundred and ninety-nine white swans, she can presume with high probability that the last swan will also be white.

Secondly, Dawkins describes PAP (permanent agnosticism is principle), which he says is “appropriate for questions that can never be answered, no matter how much evidence we gather, because the very idea of evidence is not applicable.”³ The question of God’s existence, Dawkins claims, “belongs firmly in the temporary or TAP category. Either he exists or he doesn’t. It is a scientific question; one day we may know the answer, and meanwhile we can say something pretty strong about the probability.”⁴ It is clear that Dawkins finds the question of God’s existence to be ultimately answerable through scientific inquiry. Furthermore, Dawkins also claims that belief in God is answerable to intellectual arguments for and against the existence of God.

“I have a responsibility,” Dawkins writes, “to dispose of the positive arguments for belief that have been offered through history.”⁵ It is at this point that Dawkins engages with the Analytics, such as Aquinas’s “proofs” (“The Unmoved Mover,” “The Uncaused Cause,” and “The Cosmological Argument”), Anselm’s “ontological argument” (via Plantinga), and the “argument from design,” to prove

³ Ibid, 70

⁴ Ibid. Along the same lines, Dawkins also notes: “I suggest that the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other” (72); “God’s existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice.” (73).

⁵ Ibid, 99

that belief in God is unwarranted. Unwarranted, because each of these arguments, according to Dawkins, is better explained by scientific (mostly evolutionary) probability. Furthermore, Dawkins places the “God hypothesis” at the center of religion. In other words, if the God hypothesis is false, which Dawkins claims is indeed the case, then religion has been dealt its final blow. Religion, according to Dawkins, is ultimately and universally concerned with the scientific question, “Does God exist?” He writes, “If the argument of this chapter is accepted, the factual premise of religion – the God Hypothesis – is untenable. God almost certainly does not exist.”⁶

Dawkins is explicit about his views on the question of God’s existence and what belief in God amounts to. He is less direct, however, in his use of the term “religion.” He tells us that he just knows that it exists and that it exists everywhere. Such a conclusion assumes that religion has a core, or essence, which is reducible to belief in a supernatural God.⁷ He also relies on the assumption that religion is a universal phenomenon that is transhistorical and transcultural. He writes, “Why, if [the God hypothesis] is false, does every culture in the world have religion? True or false, religion is ubiquitous, so where does it come from?”⁸ It is this essentialist and universal conception of religion that gives him (and others) license to blame religion for the many ills of society. For example, he blames religion, or the “R-word,” as he refers to it at times, for attacks on abortion clinics in America, offenses to women in the Middle East, child abuse in the Catholic Church, countless religious wars, et

⁶ Ibid, 188-189

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid, 189

cetera, et cetera.⁹ What, however, makes each and all of these offenses “religious?” Again, Dawkins finds his answer in what he understands religion’s core, or essence to be: false belief, or faith. Dawkins writes, “Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument. Teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue primes them – given certain other ingredients that are not hard to come by – to grow up into potentially lethal weapons for future jihads or crusades.”¹⁰ Christopher Hitchens, in his book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, is less concerned with the “God-hypothesis” and more concerned with the negative role religion plays in our society.¹¹

Hitchens’s work demonstrates the extent to which such a thesis can be carried out. In other words, his conception of religion is explicitly essentialist and universal. He concludes his first chapter, which acts as the book’s introduction, by stating the following: “As I write these words, and as you read them, people of faith are in their different ways planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all the hard-won human attainments that I have touched upon. *Religion poisons everything.*”¹² Much like Dawkins, Hitchens relies on an essentialist, universal, transhistorical, and transcultural conception of religion in order to leverage his attacks. Religion, according to Hitchens, is an expired, “man-made” way of thinking, which is predicated upon peoples’ “fear of death” and acts to “kill” or “poison”

⁹ Ibid, 317-336

¹⁰ Ibid, 347-348

¹¹ Hitchens does engage with some of the arguments for the existence of God, however. He has a chapter titled, “Arguments from Design,” and another called, “The Resistance of the Rational,” which follow a similar line of thought to Dawkins. His use of this argumentation, however, is intended to reveal the pernicious core of “religion.”

¹² Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 13

everything and everyone.¹³ While these are some of Hitchens's more outrageous claims and word choices, he consistently equates "religion" with "evil."

According to Hitchens, the more religious someone is, the more evil his or her tendencies become. Speaking about Islamic violence and extremism, Hitchens writes, "The true believer cannot rest until the whole world bows the knee."¹⁴ Scores of Muslims would surely disagree, noting the variety of Islamic approaches to piety.¹⁵ Again, Hitchens writes, "The worse the offender, the more devout he turns out to be."¹⁶ This may appear, on the surface, to be a correlative truth to the average reader; however, such a claim presupposes a scale of religiosity that can be measured in some way. In other words, who is to say that any given position is more religious than another? Plenty of liberal Christians will find Evangelical Fundamentalists to be less religious, and vice-versa.

Lastly, in his survey of "all religion," Hitchens faces a problem posed by Eastern traditions. He understands them to be decidedly less violent and offensive. However, he must account for why these Eastern religions - Buddhism, Hinduism, and Shinto - might not fit into his model that all religion is evil and violent. First, he points out that Hinduism, despite our Western understanding of it, has actually had a fairly violent showing. He reminds us of the violent actions taken by the Tamils (who, in reality, consist of a variety of religious traditions but are predominantly

¹³ Ibid, 7, 12-13, 15

¹⁴ Ibid, 31

¹⁵ Pointing out that Hitchens relies on an essentialist notion of religion does not, however, excuse the various religious people who also subscribe to essentialist and universal definitions. It is often the case that religious believers themselves are the most effective in promoting such attitudes. It will become evident that the Analytic Theists examined in the following section (mainly William Lane Craig) are equally guilty of such offenses.

¹⁶ Ibid, 192

Hindu), the social injustices that result from the caste system, etc. Shinto, like Zen, is written off as a “quasi-religion,” therefore harder to pin down.¹⁷ Buddhism, Hitchens notes, can either be described as “not a religion at all,” or described as irrational, mindless, and at times, violent.¹⁸ Thus, Buddhism is either less violent because it is less religious, or it is more violent than we think. Either way, Hitchens makes it fit into his scheme. The Eastern traditions, furthermore, are defined as “religions” using a Western construction of the term. At this point it should be clear that Dawkins and Hitchens rely on at least three misguided, western-centric definitions of religion: (1) religion is primarily about belief, (2) the question of belief in God should be constructed as scientific hypothesis about the question of God’s existence, and (3) religion is a universal, transhistorical, and transcultural phenomenon.

The Analytic Theists employ the same methodology as the New Atheist, only to prove the opposite point: God does exist. Religion, according them, is defensible through analytic reasoning, scientific inquiry, and various proofs. William Lane Craig and Chad Meister co-edited *God is Good, God is Great: Why Believing in God is Reasonable and Responsible*, a book of essays that present various arguments for the existence of God. In the introduction to the book Craig writes, “As you read through the following pages we challenge you to carefully weigh the arguments and evidences on both sides of these issues and, as Augustine exhorted, follow the truth wherever it leads.”¹⁹ Religious Truth, according Craig, can be found within the laws

¹⁷Ibid, 203

¹⁸ Ibid, 199-204

¹⁹ *God is Good, God is Great*, Edited by William Lane Craig and Chad Meister, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 10

of physics and logic and can be argued with evidence. In effect, what we have here is a competition between New Atheists and Analytic Theists centered on the question of God's existence. Craig writes,

“Our primary objective in compiling this book is to answer challenges advanced by the New Atheists’ writings and others raising objections to belief in God and Christian faith. Despite our overall impression of the New Atheists’ writings as fresh packaging for ‘tired, weak, and recycled arguments’ (to borrow a phrase from Alister and Joanna Collicutt McGrath’s assessment of Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*), they are making much more headway with their message than many religious believers are willing to admit.”²⁰

It would be one thing if the Analytic Theists disregarded the New Atheists arguments as “missing the point,” or “not relevant to questions about God,” but they do not do this. Rather, they proceed by constructing arguments that appeal to scientific reasoning, logic, and physical evidence. As Craig points out, they have drawn upon their “leading thinkers representing a wide range of expertise – from cosmology, astrophysics and biology to New Testament studies, theology and philosophy – to join in responding to these arguments and claims.”²¹ According to the Analytic Theists faith is not to be understood as unfettered belief in the improvable and inexplicable; faith in God can be tested, argued, and justified with evidence. Religion, therefore, is a matter of having the correct beliefs.

I will be using only one essay in this collection to show the ways in which the Analytic Theists rely on the same notion of religion as the New Atheists. To demonstrate the consistency of these themes across the essays in the collection, take note of some of the titles: “Evidence of a Morally Perfect God” by Paul K. Moser;

²⁰ Ibid, 9

²¹ Ibid, 9-10

“God and Physics” by John Polkinghorne; and “God and Evolution” by Michael J. Murray. In each of these essays, the author appeals to either scientific evidence, reason, or logic to prove the existence of God. William Lane Craig engages himself with Richard Dawkins’s arguments against the existence of God to show that (1) Dawkins is wrong, and (2) that the existence of God can be proven using the same methods of argumentation (and assumption that belief in God is central to religion).

William Lane Craig’s essay “Richard Dawkins on Arguments for God” takes up the question of God’s existence in response to Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*. Describing what makes a good argument, Craig writes,

“But before we look at specific arguments, we need to be clear what makes for a good argument. By an argument I mean a series of statements (called premises) leading to a conclusion. To be a good argument, an argument must meet three conditions: (1) it obeys the rules of logic; (2) its premises are true; (3) its premises are more plausible than their opposites. So defined, are there good arguments for God’s existence?”²²

Craig’s answer is “yes.” But his answer is of less concern to us. Rather, this paper is concerned with the methods he utilizes to come to any answer. Craig views the question of God’s existence to be a central religious question. If this question were not central to his beliefs about religion, he would likely dismiss the New Atheists for misunderstanding the meaning of religion and/or the “concept” of God. But he does not. He finds much reason to worry and, therefore, dedicates much time and space to respond.

Craig conceives of God as being inextricably intertwined with the nature of reality. If God exists, he can be explained within the laws of physics, or nature. He

²² Ibid, 14

believes this so firmly, that, if God is proven by such laws, he believes atheism must be proven wrong by the same laws. On the New Atheists (especially directed at Dawkins), he writes, “To suggest that things could just pop into being uncaused out of nothing is to quit doing serious philosophy and to resort to magic.”²³ The Analytic Theist’s and the New Atheist’s positions must be grounded in reality – reality which is informed by scientific evidence, logic, and high plausibility. Unsatisfied with the New Atheists’ explanation for the beginning of the cosmos, Craig posits the theistic story, “There seems to be only one way out of this dilemma, and that is to say that the cause of the universe’s beginning is a personal agent who freely chooses to create a universe in time. [...] We may therefore conclude that a personal Creator of the Universe exists, who is uncaused, beginningless, changeless, immaterial, timeless, spaceless and unimaginably powerful.”²⁴ (Italics mine) This explanation, according to Craig, is more in accordance with the laws of nature and physics.

Next, Craig looks to the “moral arguments” for proof of God’s existence. Because an in-depth exposition of each of these arguments would take up too much space, I will end this section shortly by summing up, once again, the methodological approach rather than the internal argumentation. The moral argument between the Analytic Theists and the New Atheists for God’s existence is not a matter of degree of goodness to a greatest good, but rather, about the “objective reality of moral values and duties to their foundation in reality.”²⁵ Therefore, it is not that Analytic Theists have either better or worse morals; morality itself is either a theistic

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid, 17

²⁵ Ibid, 19

conception or an atheistic one, both of which must find grounding in this world. Craig's moral argument, of course, is constructed to prove, via logic, that God does exist.²⁶

Thus, we see the Analytic Theists, much like the New Atheists, subscribing to essentialist conceptions of religion, whether it is ascribed to the other, or defended as its own. While the New Atheists see all "religion" in this fashion, the Analytic Theists focus on "the Christian Faith," which occupies the same space that "religion" holds in New Atheist critiques. That is to say, although the Analytic Theists may not feel comfortable calling the Christian faith "religion," they do respond to the New Atheist attacks on religion as threatening to something central to their faith. "Religion," be it the "Christian faith," or "religion in general," according to both sides, is a matter of cognitive belief that is subject to intellectual argumentation and scientific evidence. The next section, which looks to the work of Talal Asad, will primarily function to disaggregate this universal and cognitive belief-centered definition of religion that both the New Atheists and Analytic Theists rely upon. In other words, by tracing the construction of the category of "religion," it will become evident why the aforementioned conversations have come to think of religion in this way, and why it remains important to challenge such narrow, and largely unrepresentative, categorical definitions.

Talal Asad begins tracing the development of the modern notion of "religion" by looking to early post-enlightenment thought. Religion, at the time, was

²⁶ Craig's Moral Argument: "Here's a simple moral argument for God's existence: (1) If God does not exist, objective moral values and duties do not exist; (2) Objective moral values and duties do exist; (3) Therefore, God exists. What makes this little argument so powerful is not only that it is logically ironclad but also that people generally believe both premises." Ibid, 18.

understood to be an “early human condition from which modern law, science, and politics emerged and became detached.”²⁷ While the spheres of law, science, and politics were understood to be in line with the increasing emphasis on rationality and logic, religion was thought to be, in a way, less mature. However, many challenged this notion, insisting “religion has an autonomous essence” which can be defined “as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon.”²⁸ Asad points out that such universal definitions of religion are not true to the *various* forms of “religion” that have existed over time and location, and furthermore, that the very act of “defining” religion is itself a historically discursive practice. He writes,

“It is part of my basic argument that socially identifiable forms, preconditions, and effects of what was regarded as religion in the medieval Christian epoch were quite different from those so considered in modern society. [...] My argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.”²⁹

In order to ground his claims in historical practice, Asad focuses on Clifford Geertz, who, like many others, has offered an essentialist and universal definition of religion.³⁰ Part of my argument is that the New Atheists and Analytic Theists have reduced religion to the cognitive question of belief in God in ways that does not pay respect to the variety of possible elements which make up one’s religious identity. Asad agrees when speaking about Geertz’s definition of religion: “Cognitive questions are mixed up in this account with communicative ones, and this makes it

²⁷ Asad, 27

²⁸ Ibid, 28

²⁹ Ibid, 29

³⁰ Geertz’s definition of religion: Religion is “(1) a system of symbols which act to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” Ibid, 29-30.

difficult to inquire into the ways in which discourse and understanding are connected in social practice.”³¹ The problem with focusing on belief only, as the New Atheists and Analytic Theists do, is that many of the practitioner’s claims are abstracted to a degree where they no longer make sense. Proving the reality of transubstantiation during the Eucharist, for example, carries little to no weight, when disassociated with all of its other (non-cognitive belief) elements.

“It is a modern idea,” Asad tells us, “that a practitioner cannot know how to live religiously without being able to articulate that knowledge.”³² The boundaries between the religious and the secular, in other words, have not always been drawn in the same way. For centuries the authority of the Church, with its doctrine, practices, and creeds, remained central to dominant conceptions of what religion consisted of.³³ A shift occurred, according to Asad, which altered pre-Reformation conceptions of religion to more pointed definitions of religion. He writes, “In later centuries [...] discipline (intellectual and social) would [...] gradually abandon religious space, letting ‘belief,’ ‘conscience,’ and ‘sensibility’ take its place. *But theory would still be needed to define religion.*”³⁴ This need to define religion would take shape during the Early Modern period of European history, which champions reason, logic, and the natural sciences. Thus, we are provided with attractive definitions of religion that attempt to reconcile the spheres of church theology and post-Enlightenment thought. This leads to an emphasis on belief, Asad says, which “meant that henceforth religion could be conceived as a set of propositions to which

³¹ Ibid, 30-31

³² Ibid, 36

³³ Ibid, 39

³⁴ Ibid

believers gave assent, and which could therefore be judged and compared as between different religions and as against natural science.”³⁵

By this time, however, many other religions had already been identified around the world and not all of them had scripture. This made it more difficult to construct a universal definition of religion that would include various “religions” while still upholding the central authority of scripture. The idea of scripture became less essential (or non-essential) to definitions of religion; therefore, another shift occurred. God’s words (scripture) were no longer of highest authority; rather, God’s works (nature) “became the real space of divine writing, and eventually the indisputable authority for the truth of all sacred texts written in merely human nature.”³⁶ “Nature” becomes the universal evidence for truth while scripture merely contains truth, but is ultimately subject to erroneous human interpretation. This becomes materialized in the conversations between New Atheists and Analytic Theists, who construct their arguments in response to fundamental realities about nature.

This methodology, however, does not necessarily develop in response to fundamental truths about the world, but rather from particularly Christian problems. Asad explains, “I want to emphasize that the idea of Natural Religion was a crucial step in the formation of the modern concept of religious belief, experience, and practice, and that it was an idea developed in response to problems specific to Christian theology at a particular historical juncture.”³⁷ When evangelizing

³⁵ Ibid, 40-41

³⁶ Ibid, 41

³⁷ Ibid, 42

throughout the world, Christian missionaries worked out of the assumption that “religion” should be able to “affirm something about the fundamental nature of reality,” otherwise it should be considered plain “nonsense.”³⁸ Asad criticizes Geertz for contributing heavily to the notion that religious theory and practice must be essentially cognitive, whereby religion can be cleanly defined and identified.³⁹ Such a cognitive conception of religious belief is a historical development. Changes in belief have occurred over time and by location, thus, Asad is correct to say, “what the Christian believes today about God, life after death, the universe, is not what he believed a millennium ago – nor is the way he responds to ignorance, pain and injustice the same now as it was then.”⁴⁰

Furthermore, the central authority placed on belief is unwarranted, for, as Asad notes, “belief” (especially the western-constructed cognitive form of belief) is not a common characteristic of all religions.⁴¹ Belief is always related to one’s society and the set of propositions the society functions upon. “At any rate,” Asad explains, “I think it is not too unreasonable to maintain that ‘the basic axiom’ underlying what Geertz calls ‘the religious perspective’ is *not* everywhere the same. It is preeminently the Christian church that has occupied itself with identifying, cultivating, and testing belief as a verbalizable inner condition of true religion.”⁴²

It becomes our responsibility, therefore, to challenge the modern cognitivist notion of religion, which is espoused by the New Atheists and Analytic Theists alike.

³⁸ Ibid, 43

³⁹ Ibid, 44

⁴⁰ Ibid, 46

⁴¹ Ibid, 48

⁴² Ibid

Religion cannot be extracted from its lived form; therefore, when we speak about religion we must speak about how religious symbols are constructed and implemented within a social-structure and psychological process. Asad explains, when he writes, “Religious symbols – whether one thinks of them in terms of communication or of cognition, of guiding action or of expressing emotion – cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols.”⁴³

Therefore, when New Atheists and Analytic Theists leverage criticisms or supply justifications for and against “religion,” or “belief,” we must question their foundational assumptions. The relevant question to ask is not “Does God exist?” but rather, what does belief or disbelief in God mean to those who find value in the question. It is my contention that people find religious meaning outside cognitive belief. They find value in practice and ritual, in experiencing the world through a set of unquestioned assumptions. When asked what role religion plays in peoples lives, I would be surprised to hear a response that references the logical soundness of the ontological or teleological argument for God’s existence. I am not convinced that people find value in their religious lives because the scientific evidence is persuasive. Likewise, I question the New Atheists in their approach. Why, if, as they claim, our leading scientists, physicists, and evolutionary biologists can prove that God does not exist, are people in general largely unconvinced to leave their faith? Perhaps it is because people are not religious or irreligious for these reasons. It is

⁴³ Ibid, 53

not that the New Atheists and Analytic Theists have the wrong answers; rather, they are simply asking the wrong questions.

Bibliography

Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Craig, William Lane. "Richard Dawkins on Arguments for God," In *God is Good, God is Great*, edited by William Lane Craig and Chad Meister, 13-31. Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009.

Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. New York, NY: First Mariner Books, 2006 and 2008.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973.

Hitchens, Christopher. *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2007.