WHY I AM A *SKEPTIC* ABOUT RELIGIOUS CLAIMS

Paul Kurtz

Paul Kurtz recommends we subject religious claims to proper critical scrutiny. He believes that when we do, we will discover that skepticism is the only sensible position to adopt.

I.

Unbelievers have debated the proper way to describe their position. Some scientists and philosophers – notably Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett – recently have been sympathetic to the term 'bright.' Proponents have thought it a clever idea; for the term 'bright' would overcome the negative connotations that other terms such as 'atheist' have aroused in the past. And many find this to be an attractive advantage. Critics of 'bright' have suggested that it is presumptuous for us to imply that we are 'bright,' and 'intelligent,' and that those who disagree with us are 'dull-witted' or 'dumb.' Clearly, many people have been turned off by the term 'atheism,' which they believe to be too negative or dogmatic. Others may seek refuge in one form of popular 'agnosticism,' which suggests that they are simply 'uncertain' about the God question, but this may enable them to resort to 'faith' or 'fidism' as an artful dodge.

May I introduce another term into the equation to describe the religious 'unbeliever' that I submit is appropriate. One may simply say, "I am a *skeptic*." This is a classical philosophical position, yet I submit that it is still relevant today, for many people are deeply *skeptical about religious claims*.

Skepticism is widely used in the sciences. Skeptics doubt theories or hypotheses unless they are able to verify or justify them by adequate evidential grounds. Similarly for skeptical inquirers of religion. The skeptic in religion is not dogmatic, nor does one reject religious claims *a priori*. One

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simply is unable to accept the case for God unless it is supported by adequate evidential grounds.

The burden of proof is upon theists to provide cogent reasons and evidence for his belief that God exists. Faith by itself is hardly sufficient for faiths collide and the appeal to faith to support one's creed is irrational in its pretentious claim based on the 'will to believe.' If one were to argue in this way then anyone would be entitled to believe whatever a person fancies.

A skeptic thus is a person who requires evidence and reasons for a hypothesis or belief before it is accepted. Always open to *inquiry*, the skeptical inquirer is prepared to change his beliefs in the light of new evidence or arguments. He or she will not accept appeals to authority or faith, custom or tradition, intuition or mysticism, reports of miracles or uncorroborated revelations. The skeptical inquirer is willing to suspend judgment about questions for which there is insufficient evidence. The skeptic is in that sense a genuine *agnostic*, in that the question is still open, though the skeptic remains an *unbeliever* in that he or she thinks there is insufficient evidence and invalid arguments offered by theists. Hence the existence of any god is *highly improbable*. In this sense a skeptic is a nontheist or an atheist. The better term to describe this stance, I submit, is that such a person is a *skeptic about religious claims*.

'Skepticism' as a coherent philosophical and scientific posture has always dealt with religious questions and it professed to find little scientific or philosophical justification for belief in God. Philosophers in the ancient world such as Pyrrho, Cratylus, Sextus Empiricus, and Carneades have questioned metaphysical and theological claims, and indeed modern philosophers such as Descartes, Bacon, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant have drawn heavily on classical skepticism in developing their scientific outlook. Many found the 'God question' unintelligible, and modern science could only proceed by rejecting occult claims as vacuous, as did Galileo and other working scientists. Similarly for latter-day authors such as Freud and Marx,

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Russell and Dewey, Sartre and Heidegger, Popper and Hook, Crick and Watson, Bunge and Wilson.

The term 'skeptic about religious claims' is more appropriate in my opinion than the term 'atheism,' for it emphasizes *inquiry*. Inquiry has an important *constructive component*; for it leads to scientific wisdom – human understanding of our place in the cosmos, and an ever-increasing fund of human knowledge.

The following outlines some of the evidence and reasons why many scientists and philosophers are skeptical of theistic religious claims. Its focus is primarily on supernatural theism and especially on monotheistic religions that emphasize command ethics, immortality of the soul, and the eschatology of heaven and hell. Given space limitations, what follows is only a thumbnail sketch of the case against God. Succinctly, I maintain that the skeptical inquirer is dubious of the claim (1) that God exists, (2) that He is a Person, (3) that our ultimate moral principles are derived from God, (4) that faith in God will provide eternal salvation, and/or (5) that one cannot be good without belief in God. I reiterate that the burden of proof rests upon those who believe in God. If they are unable to make the case for belief in God, then I have every right to remain a skeptic.

II.

Why do skeptics doubt the existence of God? First, *in examining the claims for God's existence*, (a) the skeptical inquirer does not find the traditional concept of God as a 'transcendent,' 'omnipotent,' 'omnipresent,' 'beneficent' being entirely coherent, intelligible, or meaningful. To postulate a transcendent being who is incomprehensible to the human mind (as theologians maintain) does not explain the world that we encounter. How can we say that such an indefinable being exists if we do not know in what sense? If God exists outside space and time, and if he transcends our capacity to comprehend his essence, in what sense does this make sense? Theists have postulated an unknowable 'X.' But if His content is unfathomable, then it

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is an empty speculative abstraction. Thus the skeptic in religion presents semantic objections to God language, which is *unintelligible* and lacks any clear referent.

(b) One argument adduced for the existence of this unknowable entity is that he is the First Cause, but we can ask of anyone who postulates this, "What is the cause of this first cause?" To say that He is uncaused only pushes our ignorance back one step. To step outside the physical universe is to assume an answer by a leap of faith.

(c) Nor does the claim that the universe manifests Intelligent Design (ID) explain the facts of conflict, the struggle for survival, tragedy and evil, pain and suffering encountered in the world of sentient beings. Regularities and chaos do not necessarily indicate design. The argument from design is reminiscent of Aristotle's teleological argument. But we can find no evidence for purpose in nature. Even if we were to find what appears to be design in the universe, this does not imply a Designer, for which there is insufficient evidence.

(d) The evolutionary hypothesis provides a more parsimonious explanation of the origins of species. The changes in species through time may be better accounted for by chance mutations, differential reproduction, natural selection, and adaptation, rather than by design. Moreover, vestigial remains, such as the appendix, tail bone, or male breasts in humans, hardly would suggest adequate design; similarly for vestigial organs in other species. Thus the doctrine of creation is hardly supported in empirical terms.

(e) Another version of the Intelligent Design argument is the so-called 'fine tuning' argument. Its proponents maintain there is a unique combination of 'physical constants' in the universe, and these are the only ones capable of sustaining life, especially sentient organic systems. This they attribute to a designer God. But this is inadequate, first because millions of species are extinct and were not 'fine tuned' to survive. Second, great numbers of human beings have been extinguished by natural causes – diseases and disasters. The tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004, which

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suddenly killed over 200,000 innocent men, women, and children was due to a shift in plate tectonics. This hardly indicates fine-tuning – for this could have been avoided by correcting defects on the surface of the planet. The so-called 'anthropic principle' is simply a form of anthropomorphism; that is, it reads into nature the fondest hopes and wishes of believers and is imposed upon the universe. But if we are to do this, should we not also inflict the errors and mistakes encountered in nature on the Designer?

(f) Related to this, of course, is the classical problem of evil. If an omnipotent, omnipresent, and beneficent God is responsible for the world as we know it, then how explain evil? Surely humans cannot be held responsible for a massive flood, or plague, for example, which destroys humans and other forms of life; unless we infer that God is malevolent, because he knew of, yet permitted, terrible destructive events to occur, or impotent to prevent evil. This would also suggest an unintelligent, deficient, or faulty Designer.

(g) The historic religions maintain that God has revealed himself in history and that he has manifested his presence to selected humans. These revelations are not corroborated by independent objective observers. They are disclosed, rather, to privileged prophets or mystics, whose claims have not been adequately verified: there is insufficient circumstantial evidence to confirm their authenticity.

(h) To attribute inexplicable events to miracles performed by God, as declared in the so-called sacred literature, is often a substitute for human ignorance. Scientific inquiry is able to explain alleged "miracles" by discovering natural causes.

(i) The Bible, Koran, and other classical documents are full of contradictions and factual errors. They were written by human beings in ancient civilizations, expressing the known scientific and moral speculations of their day. They do not convey the eternal word of God, but rather the yearnings of ancient tribes based on oral legends and received doctrines, hardly relevant to all cultures and times. The Old and New

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Testaments are not accurate accounts of historical events. The reliability of the Old Testament is highly questionable for the events or personages depicted; Moses, Abraham, Joseph, etc. are largely uncorroborated by historical evidence. None of the authors of the New Testament knew Jesus directly. The four Gospels were not written by eyewitnesses but are a product of an oral tradition and hearsay. There is flimsy and contradictory evidence for the Virgin Birth, the healings of Jesus, and the Resurrection. Similarly, there have been several versions of the Koran, which is likewise the product of oral traditions, and the *Hadith*, allegedly passed down by his companions, has not been independently confirmed by reliable historical research.

(j) Some claim to believe in God because they say that God has entered into his or her personal life; and that this has contributed new meaning. This is a psychological or phenomenological account of a person's inner experiences. It is hardly adequate evidence for the existence of a divine being independent of his or her internal soliloquies. Appeals to mystical experience or private subjective states hardly suffice as evidential support that some external being or force caused such altered states of consciousness; and the skeptical inquirers have a legitimate basis for doubt unless or until it is independently corroborated. That God or gods, angels or demons, talk to someone may disturb or entrance a person, but the question is whether these internal subjective states have some external veracity. This especially applies to those who claim some sort of special revelation from On High, the hearing of voices or commandments.

III.

Second, *is God a Person*? Does he take on human form? Has he communicated in discernible form as the Holy Spirit to Moses, Abraham, Jesus, Mohammed, or other prophets? These claims again are uncorroborated by objective eyewitnesses. They are rather promulgated by propagandists for a Faith, which have been inflicted on societies, enforced by

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entrenched ecclesiastical authorities and political powers. They are supported by customs and traditions, buried for millennia by the sands of time and institutional inertia. They are simply assumed to be true without question.

The ancient documents alleging God's existence are preliterate, prephilosophical, and, in any case, they are not confirmed by scientific inquiry. They are often eloquent literary expressions of existential moral poetry, but they are unverified by archæological evidence or careful historical investigation. Moreover, they contradict each other in their claims for authenticity and legitimacy.

The ancient faith that God is a Person has not been corroborated by the historical record. Such conceptions of God are anthropomorphic and anthropocentric, reading into the universe human predilections and feelings. "If lions had gods they would be lion-like in character," said Xenophon. Thus, human Gods are an extrapolation of human hopes and aspirations, fanciful tales of imaginative fiction.

IV.

Third, the *claim that our ultimate moral values are derived from God* is likewise highly suspect. The so-called sacred moral codes reflect the sociohistorical cultures in which they emerged. The Old Testament commands that adulterers, blasphemers, disobedient sons, bastards, witches, and homosexuals be stoned to death. It threatens collective guilt; punishment is inflicted by Jehovah on the children's children of unbelievers. It has defended patriarchy and the dominion of men over women. It has condoned slavery and genocide in the name of God.

The New Testament leaves "unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's"; it demands that women be obedient to their husbands; it accepts faith healing, exorcisms, and miracles; it exalts obedience over independence; fear and trembling over courage; piety over self-determination.

The Koran does not tolerate dissent, freedom of conscience, or the right to unbelief; it flouts the rights of women; it proclaims *jihad* and holy war against infidels.

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It demands utter submission to the Word of God as revealed by Muhammad. It rejects the separation of mosque and state, thus installing the law of *sharia* and the theocracy of imams and mullahs.

From the fatherhood of God, contradictory moral commandments have been derived, and theists have often lined up on opposite sides of moral issues: there are those who are for and against war; the sword versus the olive branch; for and against slavery; capital punishment and retribution instead of rehabilitation and mercy; the divine right of kings instead of democracy; enslavement versus freedom, patriarchy instead of the emancipation of women; the absolute prohibition of contraception, euthanasia, abortion; opposition to sexual and gender equality versus their acceptance; for and against freedom of scientific research; for and against the libertarian ideals of a free society.

True believers have in the past often found little or no room for human autonomy, individual freedom, or self-reliance. They have emphasized submission to the word of God instead of self-determination, faith over reason, credulity over doubt. They have had all too often little confidence in the ability of humans to solve problems and create a better future by drawing on their own resources. In the face of tragedy, they supplicate God through prayer instead of summoning the courage to overcome adversity and build a better future. The skeptic concludes, "No deity will save us"; if we are to be saved it must be by our own efforts.

The classical religions have too often waged wars of intolerance not only against other religions or ideologies that dispute the legitimacy of their divine revelations, but even against sects which are variations of the same religion (e.g. Catholic versus Protestant, Shiite versus Sunni). Religions claim to speak in the name of God; yet bloodshed, tyranny, and untold horrors have often been justified on behalf of the Holy Creed. True believers have all too often opposed human progress, such as the abolition of slavery, the liberation of women, equal rights for transgendered people and gays, democracy and human rights.

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I realize that liberal religionists generally have rejected the absolutistic creeds of fundamentalism. Fortunately they have been influenced by modern democratic and humanistic values, which mitigate intolerance. Nevertheless a key article of faith of the three major Abraham monotheistic religions – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – is the promise of eternal salvation.

V.

Fourth, will those who believe in God actually achieve *immortality of the soul* and *eternal salvation*, as promised?

The first objection of the skeptic to this claim is that these are highly sectarian forms of salvation offered. The Hebrew Bible promises salvation for the Chosen People; the New Testament the Rapture to those who have faith in Jesus Christ; the Koran heaven to those who accept the will of Allah as transmitted by Mohammed.

Such promises generally are not universal but apply only to those who acquiesce to a specific creed, as interpreted by priests, ministers, rabbis, or mullahs. Bloody wars have been waged to establish the legitimacy of the papacy (between Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy), or the priority of Mohammed and the Koran, or the authenticity of the Old Testament.

A second objection is that there is insufficient scientific evidence for the claim that the 'soul' can exist separate from the body and that it can survive death as a 'discarnate' being, and persists throughout eternity. Science points to the fact that the 'mind' or 'consciousness' is a function of the brain and nervous system, and that with the physical death of the body the 'self' or 'person' disappears. To claim that a person's soul can persist forever has no evidence at all to support it, except pious hope.

All efforts to communicate with such discarnate entities have been fruitless. Sightings of alleged ghosts have not been corroborated by reliable eyewitness testimony.

The appeal to near-death experiences simply reports the phenomenological experiences of the dying process, not of

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a person who has died, gone to "the other side," and returned. These experiences can be explained in terms of natural, psychological, and physiological causes.

VI.

Fifth, theists maintain that *one cannot be good unless one believes in God*. Skepticism about God's existence and divine plan does not imply pessimism, nihilism, the collapse of all values, nor the implication that "anything goes." It has been demonstrated time and again by countless numbers of humans that it is possible to be morally concerned with the needs of others, to be a good citizen and lead a life of nobility and excellence, without religion. Thus one can be righteous and altruistic, compassionate and benevolent, without belief in a Deity. A person can develop the common moral virtues and express a good will to others without devotion to God. It is possible to be empathetic toward others and at the same to be concerned with one's own well-being. Secular ethical principles and values thus can be supported by evidence and reason, the cultivation of moral growth and development, the finding of common ground that brings people together. It can be vindicated by examining the consequences of choices and modifying them in light of experience. Skeptics who are humanists focus on the good life here and now, and they advise us to live creatively, seeking a life full of happiness, even joyful exuberance. They urge us to face the tragedies encountered in life with equanimity and to marshal the courage and stoic forbearance to live meaningfully in spite of adversity, and in the light of our satisfactions and achievements. Life can be relished and is intrinsically worthwhile for its own sake, without need for an external support.

Although ethical values and principles are relative to human interests and needs, they need not be subjective, but are amenable to objective, critical evaluation and modification in the light of reason. A new paradigm has emerged that integrates skepticism and secular humanism, and is based on scientific wisdom, eupraxsophy, and a

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naturalistic conception of nature. Thus the skeptic in religion, who is also a humanist in ethics, can be affirmative and positive about the potentialities for achieving the good life. Such a person can not only live fully, but also be morally concerned about the needs of others.

VII.

In summary, the skeptical inquirer finds inconclusive evidence or reasons to believe that God exists, that God is a Person, that all ethical principles must be derived from God, that Faith in divinity will enable the soul to achieve eternal salvation, and/or that ethical conduct is impossible without belief in God.

On the contrary, skepticism based on scientific inquiry leaves room for a naturalistic account of the universe. It also can recommend alternative secular and humanist forms of moral conduct. Accordingly, one can simply affirm, when asked if he or she believes in God, "No, I do not; I am a skeptic," and one may add "I believe in doing good!"

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