The Philosopher and the Neuroscientist: Dewey, Harris, and the Nature of Religious Experiences

Jonathan Weidenbaum

I. Introduction

Sam Harris distinguishes himself from antireligious polemicists such as Dawkins and Hitchens in one regard: his open appreciation for religious experiences. Among other things, *The End of Faith* argues for the importance of examining states of consciousness ordinarily deemed mystical, though shorn of their encasing within theological dogma and theistic belief. While the book has courted much controversy, it has also received applause from a readership wary of the dangerous resurgence of fundamentalism both at home and abroad. Placed against many older currents of American thought, however, Harris is in good company. From the transcendentalists to William James, the American spiritual tradition has typically been experiential and anti-institutional in character. Harris's strident critique of religion can therefore be seen as only the latest and most forceful attempt to extract what is valuable in spirituality from the outworn creeds and "sepulchres of the fathers," to borrow a phrase from Emerson—whom Ahlstrom and Bloom acknowledge as the very founder of the American Religion.[1]

But to what extent does *The End of Faith* truly contribute to this venerable heritage? Throughout the pages which follow, I argue that the work of John Dewey not only anticipates many of Harris's themes, but contains resources for much more. Combining insights from his masterpieces on art and religion (*Art as Experience* and *A Common Faith*, respectively), I will demonstrate not only that Dewey provides an understanding of how religious belief first originates, but that his account can help to make sense of a far broader range of religious experience. Along the way I will point out the severe limitations of Harris's position. This is not only to further clarify the strengths of Dewey's more thorough analysis, but to serve the two larger goals of this essay: the forging of a sharper weapon against religious dogmatism (an example of which is the troubling resurgence of creationism) as well as the key to a more viable and effective reconstruction of our spiritual lives.[2]

II. Harris and Faith

This essay is mostly concerned with one theme of Harris's book, namely the call to rescue religious experiences from religion. But Harris's larger and more original contribution in *The End of Faith* is not merely the absurdity of literalistic belief, but the culpability of religious moderates (and civilization in general) for allowing such beliefs to thrive unchallenged. The goal of this section is to briefly outline the basic contours of

[1] From the first paragraph of "Nature"

[2] Genuine spirituality is marked by a thirst for completion and meaning beyond what the purely sensory world affords. Religion is, among other things, the use of rite and narrative to evoke and express a spiritual awareness. Needless to say, religion becomes problematic to the extent that its spiritual qualities are overshadowed by dogmatism.

Harris's argument and to provide the wider context for his discussion of the relevance of mystical experience.

Harris's polemic is overwhelmingly focused upon the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These are the traditions which center upon a transcendent creator God; a being who sends commandments and prophets, miracles and messiahs; a personal deity who leads history to its culmination in a day of judgment. While the third and newest of these religions is given the hardest and most detailed critique, in fact a whole chapter devoted to it ("The Problem with Islam"), his condemnation of the three Abrahamic faiths is the same in principle. Harris is able to grant that there is "much that is wise and consoling and beautiful in our religious books," yet much of the rest is a cruel and outmoded relic from the past:

> The Bible, it seems certain, was the work of sand-strewn men and women who thought the earth was flat and for whom a wheelbarrow would have been a breathtaking example of emerging technology. To rely on such a document as the basis for our worldview—however heroic the efforts of redactors—is to repudiate two thousand years of civilizing insights that the human mind has only just begun to inscribe upon itself through secular politics and scientific culture.[3]

The principle evil encouraged by these "sand-strewn men" is the encouragement that we should be obedient to some unverifiable, unscientific, and blatantly unrealistic articles of belief. This is how Harris understands faith.

Liberal and sophisticated theologians such as Paul Tillich can redefine faith in philosophically nuanced ways, yet "this is not the 'faith' that has animated the faithful for millennia."[4] Such theologians do more damage than they suppose. By legitimizing faith for the educated, an umbrella is provided under which the cruder forms of conviction may germinate—and yet be intellectually vindicated in doing so.[5] Harris almost takes delight in listing the "epistemological Ponzi schemes" designed to defend religious faith.[6] From Pascal's wager to Kierkegaard's leap of faith, each of these pseudo-arguments serves to protect "the truths of propositions for which no evidence is *conceivable*."[7]

It is child's play to list the objects of faith espoused by the Abrahamic religions: There are a virgin birth and the splitting of a sea, special revelations in caves and mountain tops, bodily resurrections and ascensions into heaven, exorcisms and the multiplying of loaves and fishes. Harris's point is that each of these episodes is immune to both justification and potential falsification and therefore can never be criticized. Ecumenicism and tolerance is a mere pretense, a sort of polite illusion which begs the question of how dialogue can occur between parties who adhere to such mutually exclusive articles of belief. The Christian believes not only that Jesus was crucified but

---

[3] *The End of Faith*, 45. The previous quote ("much that is wise and consoling…") is from p. 35.
[4] Ibid., 65.
[5] Walter Kaufmann argues the same point, and enlists Tillich in doing so. See *The Faith of a Heretic*, 122–24.
[6] *The End of Faith*, 62–63.
[7] Ibid., 23.

that the event is of cosmic importance. The Muslim, by contrast, believes that the crucifixion of Jesus was an illusion and that Prophet Jesus (*Isa* in the Qur'an) ascended into heaven unscathed. Since belief is not about empirical or historical evidence, how do believers from these two religions engage in discussion?

Most importantly, when value is placed on the *strength* of these beliefs as well as their immunity from rational inquiry, the result is often lethal. Suicide bombers in Iraq, Jewish militants in the West Bank, Christian fundamentalists bombing abortion clinics: It is the arrogance and presumptuousness of liberal theologians to insist that *these* are the perversions of the Bible and the Qur'an. An honest reader of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac (or Ishmael in Islam) would be hard-pressed to claim that such philosophical theologians as Paul Tillich are the true inheritors of Genesis, and not the followers of David Koresh. Sam Harris eloquently states:

> The men who committed the atrocities of September 11 were certainly not "cowards," as they where repeatedly described in the Western media, nor were they lunatics in any ordinary sense. They were men of faith—*perfect* faith, as it turns out—and this, it must be finally acknowledged, is a terrible thing to be.[8]

True knowledge, according to Harris, must lend itself to continuous development. This is something which articles of religious belief are not capable of. "There is no reason," he states, "that our ability to sustain ourselves emotionally and spiritually cannot evolve with technology, politics, and the rest of culture."[9] Religion is therefore an impediment to the general betterment of humanity, a clot in the stream of progress. There is even a pragmatism at work in Harris's worldview, a contention that beliefs are "*principles of action*," processes designed for the purposes of survival and adaptation.[10] As an unnecessary holdover from the past, religion is not just a dead end in our collective evolution, but the agent of our possible destruction. As recent headlines sadly attest, the ongoing attempt to buttress messianic fervor with nuclear weapons prevents this last statement from being an exaggeration.[11]

The above constitutes the dross out of which Harris seeks to sift the gold of genuine spirituality. The latter is defined by him quite succinctly as "the cultivation of happiness directly, through precise refinements of attention."[12] This is the meditative and experiential dimension of religion, and two things stand out concerning Harris's treatment of it. First, the reader is led to think that there is only one kind of religious experience. This is the overcoming of the self—a type of spirituality which has, according to Harris, solely been the specialty of the Eastern or Asian religions. Second, Harris draws upon his training in neuroscience in order to show the relevance of mysticism for understanding consciousness. These are important, and I will take each of these in turn.

---

[8] Ibid., 67.
[9] Ibid., 40.
[10] Ibid., 52.
[11] Those eager to point to point the finger at Iran would do well to read Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation*. Jewish extremists in Israel and Hindu nationalists in India might also be a little too close to nuclear weaponry for comfort.
[12] Ibid., 192.

The core and essence of all religious experiences, according to *The End of Faith*, is the uprooting of our sense of a separate and abiding ego-identity, as well as the general dissolving of the subject/object dichotomy which frames so much of our ordinary life. Nothing new here; these have been primary themes of Western romanticizers of mysticism for generations, including such popular figures as Alan Watts and Aldous Huxley. Harris just goes a bit further than others in charging the Occidental tradition with inadequacy in this regard:

> When the great philosopher mystics of the East are weighed against the patriarchs of the Western philosophical and theological traditions, the difference is unmistakable: Buddha, Shankara, Padmasambhava, Nagarjuna, Longchenpa, and countless others down to the present have no equivalent in the West. In spiritual terms, we appear to have been standing on the shoulders of dwarfs.[13]

Besides the sheer audacity of the last sentence, Harris's complaint is puzzling to those schooled in the mysticism of the Abrahamic faiths. Sufi and Hasidic literature are replete with discussions of self-nullification (*Fana* in Arabic, *Bittul-Ha-Yesh* in Hebrew/Yiddish), and Christian contemplatives such as Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross and Thomas Merton can hardly be labeled spiritual dwarfs.[14] Each of these movements and figures have exquisite and detailed guides for ecstatic experience on par with the best of what Hindu and Buddhist thinkers have to offer. And this is only according to the terms laid out by *The End of Faith* for what should count as religious experiences. Harris fails to recognize the presence of a long and influential countertradition concerning this topic running throughout the history of the West.

A second distinctive feature of Harris's view of spirituality is what he sees as its relevance for a science of the mind. It is worth quoting him at length:

> The claims of mystics are neurologically quite astute. No human being has ever experienced an objective world, or even a *world* at all. You are, at this moment, having a visionary experience. The world that you see and hear is nothing more than a modification of your consciousness, the physical status of which remains a mystery.…We really are such stuff as dreams are made of. Our waking and dreaming brains are engaged in substantially the same activity; it is just that while dreaming, our brains are far less constrained by sensory information or by the fact-checkers who appear to live somewhere in our frontal lobes. This is not to say that sensory experience offers us no indication of reality at large; it is merely to say that, as a matter of experience, nothing arises in consciousness that has not first been structured, edited, or amplified by the nervous system. While this gives rise to a few philosophical problems concerning the

[13] Ibid., 215.

[14] A more recent figure from the American spiritual tradition is Henry James Sr., the father of both the great philosopher and the novelist. The principle of all evil, he felt, was the illusion of the self. Unlike the transcendentalists, James's pantheism was influenced by Jonathan Edwards and Emmanuel Swedenborg, and not the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

> foundations of our knowledge, it also offers us a remarkable opportunity to deliberately transform the character of our experience.[15]

Harris's understanding of consciousness, while informed by the sciences, is a peculiar combination of reductionism and subject-centered idealism. It contradicts his earlier and avowedly pragmatist insights into the relationship between belief and action. For pragmatist thinkers (a number of which are mentioned by Harris), the mind is not primarily a device designed to passively register facts concerning the external world. We are not subjects set off cleanly from objects, but embodied agents for whom the environment contains direct import. Thus, it is the larger physical world (and not just the brain and nervous system) which lend our concepts and beliefs their meaning and significance.

I will return to both of these themes—that of an alternative understanding of what should count as a religious experience, as well as Harris's approach to experience in general—in the sections which follow.

III. Dewey and Religion

At the very end of *Lila*, the follow-up to his more famous philosophical travelogue *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig recalls a humorous and instructive misunderstanding between a friend and a Native American. When asked what kind of canine had just trotted into their company, the Native American (named John Wooden Leg) pauses a second and answers: "That's a good dog."[16] The remark is met with condescending laughter and then followed, as usual, by some of Pirsig's heady ruminations.

We are instructed that Pirsig's friend was seeking an answer within the framework of Western intellectual culture, one based on a world of value-neutral objects. "Good," in this context, is a mere adjective, an evaluative label slapped onto a substance as its property.[17] For John Wooden Leg however, *good* is part of the very fabric of things, a kind of core around which all of our encounters are organized. Everyday perception, when not squeezed into the innumerable dichotomies of traditional metaphysics, is already informed by this reality of the good—what Pirsig elsewhere calls "Quality." Many of the world's more elite cultures have drawn upon this feature of experience, only to covert it into either a supernal entity outside of our mundane lives (i.e., Plato's vision of "The Good") or into some deep ground of the soul. "In the orient," Pirsig explains, "they dress it up with rituals and incense and pagodas and chants and, of course, huge organizational enterprises that bring in the equivalent of millions of dollars every year."[18] Whether or not Pirsig has applied a similar mystification (or "orientialism" in Said's sense of the term) into Native American culture is arguable, but the point is clear: A common and overlooked factor of experience has been deemed foreign, exotic, and transmuted into an Absolute.

---

[15] *The End of Faith*, 41.
[16] *Lila*, 407.
[17] Whitehead labels this mistaken view of reality as "the doctrine of vacuous actuality."
[18] *Lila*, 408.

Art as Experience and *A Common Faith*, both of which were published the same year (1934), trace the process by which factors found throughout our conscious life are reified into the objects of high art and religion, the museum and the monastery. Originally lecture series, the two texts articulate in detail what is only prefigured in *Experience and Nature*: That when aspects of experience are interpreted as separate realities, the result is "the esoteric character of culture and the supernatural quality of religion."[19] Though *A Common Faith* is more directly relevant to this essay, the two books share numerous themes. "There is no test," explains Dewey in *Art as Experience*, "that so surely reveals the one-sidedness of a philosophy as its treatment of art and aesthetic experience."[20] Replace "art and aesthetic" with "spirituality and religion" and the quote remains apt.

An overriding theme of *A Common Faith* is just this objectification of qualities found throughout our everyday experience into the dogmas and rites of organized religion. Labeling these as "the religious" and "religion" respectively, it is to the latter that Dewey devotes a critique every bit as forceful and thorough as Harris's polemic seven decades later.

Dewey affirms that there is only one route to truth: "Observation, experiment, record and controlled reflection." The fundamental difference between science and religion is not "this or that piecemeal *item* of belief," but the method by which belief is justified.[21] It is neither the strict and unwavering adherence to evolution nor the rejection of Genesis that marks off the naturalist from the theologian, but the willingness to discard a position in the face of new evidence. There are to be no sacred cows for science, nothing closed off from the light of analysis and public confirmation. As for the external world, so for the inner one: "He is bold to the point of rashness who asserts that intimate personal experience will never come within the ken of natural knowledge."[22]

At its worst, organized religion has helped to rationalize and even justify natural and moral evils; at its best it has served to waste and sideline the energies required to surmount them. "Men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing."[23] The sectarian and exclusive character of religion, explains Dewey, is also in direct opposition to the ideals of a democracy. There is nothing more difficult (and dishonest) than to feign empathy and loyalty to the saved and unsaved equally.

It would be redundant to list every parallel between Dewey and Harris. More pertinent to this study is Dewey's analysis of religious experiences, beginning with his denial that such a separate and monolithic category even exists. Religiousness is a quality found among a wide variety of experiences, few of which share a common denominator or single and identifiable essence. Harris's focus on ego-transcendence is not missing here. "The abrogation of the self" is included within a larger list of mystical

[19] *Experience and Nature*, 372.
[20] *Art as Experience*, 286.
[21] *A Common Faith*, 32.
[22] Ibid., 35.
[23] Ibid., 46.

states; a brief but inclusive repertoire including, among other things, "trances and semi-hysteria," "sudden unreasoning fear," and the crises "induced by fasting."[24]

This crucial passage of *A Common Faith* is reminiscent of James's epic study and comprises a kind of *Varieties of Religious Experience* in miniature. But while Dewey possesses James's wide range within his ken, he delves further into their roots, dissolving traditional boundaries between religious and other types of experiences. There exists as much difference between the serenity achieved through Zen Buddhist meditation and the heated ecstasy of a Protestant tent revival as there are between spiritual, aesthetic, and even political states of being. One can find something of the religious in each of these experiences—and these, in turn, with the most fulfilling moments of ordinary life.

> There is no reason for denying the existence of experiences that are called mystical. On the contrary, there is every reason to suppose that, in some degree of intensity, they occur so frequently that they may be regarded as normal manifestations that take place at certain rhythmic points in the movement of experience.[25]

As already noted, these high points are typically cleaved off from the rest of experience and set into an unchangeable principle or entity. Here is the origin of the living Christ, the Buddha Amitabha and the Holy Spirit—the objects of devotion proposed among the great world religions. Likewise, the values and styles of life which surround and inculcate these experiences are also made sacred, and "projected into a supernatural realm for safe-keeping and sanction."[26] For Dewey, what ended as the dogmas of a metaphysical and theological scheme—including both heaven and hell, sin and salvation—began within the texture of common experience.

At this point, the reader will notice that experience is a persistent theme in any discussion of Dewey's ideas. This is hardly avoidable. From his early "Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology" through *Experience and Nature*, Dewey was an illuminator of our experiential life on par with the greatest representatives of European phenomenology. It is relevant that the inspiration for his conversion from Hegelian idealism to pragmatism began not with the technical essays of Peirce, but James's richly descriptive *Principles of Psychology*. On this topic, the difference between the perspective of a phenomenologist and a neuroscientist could not be more apparent.

As we have seen, Harris speaks of channels of sense and frontal lobes, spectras of light and "the prism of the brain." We experience not a world (at least not directly), but the product of the shaping and organizing tendencies of the nervous system. While giving rise to "a few philosophical problems," we are told by Harris that this is a depiction of consciousness which concurs with the insights of Eastern mystics.[27]

---

[24] Ibid., 35–36. "Sudden unreasoning fear" is no doubt a reference to the chilling psychological breakdowns suffered by *both* Henry James Sr. and his son, William James. For the father, see *The Literary Remains of Henry James*, 59. For William, see *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 145. William James's terrifying account, though attributed by him to someone else, is widely believed to be a cleverly disguised description of his own.

[25] *A Common Faith*, 37.

[26] Ibid., 73.

[27] *The End of Faith*, 41.

Of course, Dewey does not deny that these things are necessary conditions for experience and cognition. It is the idea that these are *sufficient* conditions, and separable from the whole act of experiencing that is the root of the problem. Perception is the larger and more general communion between an active and mobile organism and an external world—an activity in which senses and nervous systems play an important role. My perception of the computer does not occur within the confines of my eye and brain. In fact, I don't notice the patterns of light on my retina and have *never* seen my brain. Rather, I perceive the computer with eyes on a head, which in turn sits upon a moving body—all of which are employed in noticing and operating the computer. "It is the movement which is primary," explains Dewey, "and the sensation which is secondary, the movement of body, head, and eye muscles determining the quality of what is experienced. In other words, the real beginning is with the *act* of seeing; it is looking, and not a sensation of light."[28]

If Harris places the origins of experience in the structure of the senses and nervous system, Dewey places it in the entire person and his or her relationship to the environment. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey describes this relationship as an *impulsion*, "the movement outward and forward of the whole organism," a yearning for fulfillment and completion.[29] An experience wherein this is achieved is famously labeled by him as "having an experience."[30] This is perception framed by a sense of both inception and consummation, one marked by unity and enjoyed as such. Laden with spiritual and aesthetic content, such experiences do not occur merely *in* space and time. Rather, place and movement are caught up in the very trajectory and flow of meaning and thereby imbued with significance.[31] The stretch of clear sky beyond the canyon wall *is* liberation; the dark clouds before the court verdict *are* ominous. Ironically, there remains something Cartesian in Harris's discussion of non-dualistic awareness, for mystical states of consciousness as defined by him are *inner* as opposed to *outer* experiences.

Critical to the approach of Harris and Dewey towards experience are their respective epistemologies. Harris's discussion of consciousness resembles the positivism common among scientists and philosophers throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Facts pertaining to the central nervous system are weaned through careful study and experimentation and used to understand our inner life. As we have already seen, Dewey also holds that the empirical sciences are an indispensable and important strategy for obtaining knowledge. But his epistemology, clearly outlined in the first chapter of *Experience and Nature*, continually warns against confusing the rarefied and secondhand objects of science with what he calls "primary experience." The latter is experience received in all of its richness and ambiguity, and is already suffused with moral, aesthetic, and even spiritual qualities. Identifying the more specialized and refined objects of cognition with reality, and relegating the rest to an illusion, is the root of the most implacable philosophical problems.[32] In regards to

[28] "The Unit of Behavior (The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology)." In *Pragmatism*, 263.
[29] *Art as Experience*, 60–61.
[30] Ibid. See Chapter 3.
[31] Ibid., 214–17.
[32] For example: Interpreting experience as the relationship between two separate substances—that of a subject and an object—has led to the problems which haunt modern theories of knowledge. For instance, how can we *know* that our experiences actually connect to with a world "out there"? By returning to

experience, Dewey can state with Miguel De Unamuno that Harris's approach yields not full-blooded facts but "dusts of facts."[33]

This foray into Dewey's philosophy of perception—including his insistence that we are embodied and environmentally embedded creatures—is not only pertinent to his differences with Harris over the nature of religious experiences (to be dealt with in the next section). It is also essential for understanding his need to retain a concept of God. Devotion to supernatural beings or forces may divert us from relying upon our efforts to solve problems, but Dewey seeks to point out that human agency does not occur in a vacuum. Social ideals do not arise within a disembodied consciousness, but from out of "the hard stuff of physical and social experience."[34] We are not, despite Harris (or Shakespeare), "the stuff dreams are made of," but beings whose efforts and goals are provided by and through nature.[35] Since our achievements and ideals have never been defined without reference to a wider universe, why not encourage a reverence for something larger than the self? A notion of God, however naturalized, is therefore useful for reminding us that we do not operate alone. "A humanistic religion," explains Dewey, "if it excludes our relation to nature, is pale and thin, as it is presumptuous, when it takes humanity as an object of worship."[36]

For Dewey, God is precisely this active relationship between intuited ideals and achieved actualities—neither of which are the properties of selves in isolation. Dewey's argument here parallels Heidegger's rebuttal to Sartre's "Existentialism as a Humanism": that even our freedom presupposes a field and context out of which it arises and borrows its existence. That we are measure of all things is the common assumption of both atheism and traditional theism, both of which place the human being and his or her welfare (or salvation) as the center of all meaning and purpose. Agnosticism, asserts Dewey, "is a shadow cast by the eclipse of the supernatural."[37]

IV. Religious Experiences

In the past two sections, I have outlined Harris and Dewey's view on what counts as a religious experience, as well as their understanding of experience in general. However, I have not yet demonstrated the extent to which their views on the latter have influenced their perspective on the former. The purpose of this last section is to argue that Dewey's account of experience has granted him a more inclusive appreciation for what counts as a religious state of being—and that this *matters* for any serious and penetrating revaluation of our collective religious heritage both East and West.

Though I have already made note of the sheer range of what Dewey acknowledges as a religious experience, there is little here that Harris would find compelling. Hysteria, crushing fear, and hallucinations induced by starvation are more easily classified as pathologies than high mysticism and offer no sacred mystery to a neuroscientist. What I seek to demonstrate is that Dewey not only does more justice to

---

primary experience, Dewey replaces the artificial subject-object split with his notion of *continuity*. Both consciousness and the environment form one seamless whole.

[33] *Tragic Sense of Life*, 7.

[34] *A Common Faith*, 49.

[35] *The End of Faith*, 41.

[36] *A Common Faith*, 54.

[37] Ibid., 86.

the tradition of self-transcendence, but that he offers insight into an alternative understanding of religious experiences, one with an equally long and profound legacy in the history of religion. I will further argue that the limits of Harris's analysis includes a blindness to the role which myth and ritual play in the invoking of such an experience. Thus, even with his professed appreciation of religious experiences, Harris joins the other "new atheists" in a certain ineffectiveness in regards to the deeper sources and motivations for religious commitment.

There are two main lines of religious experiences running through the history of the Occident. The first of these has strong parallels with the traditions of the East so favored by Harris, and is found primarily through the Neo-Platonist influence upon Western mystics. Labeled by Dewey as "the abrogation of the self" and Harris as "non-dualistic awareness," this is the overcoming of ego-identity and the evoking of a sense of unity with the totality of things. For Harris, since the ego or self is a neurological construct, it is therefore plastic and malleable. By learning the biological base of this illusion as well as its dissolution, we can induce the right experience through scientific means and segregate it from the theological dogma with which it has become identified.

It is interesting to note that even among most Asian religions, however, this kind of non-dualistic awareness is never strictly an internal one, and possesses implications for our understanding of a reality outside of the psyche. For instance, while Theravada Buddhism speaks of *nirvana* as the peak of moral and spiritual development, other branches would develop a concept of *sunyata* or "the void." This is a view of the cosmos as an interconnected whole and as possessing an ineffable or luminous quality—a feature labeled by Mahayana Buddhists as *tathata* or "suchness." The empty space of a Chinese landscape painting or the drifting clouds of Tibetan art are depictions of nature as perceived in this way. The figure of a man walking through the forest or a hut standing out of a mountainside are used to suggest infinity, much as how a figure is used to accentuate the presence of a larger, underlying ground.

Not a bit of this is lost on Dewey, who describes how "experience becomes mystical in the degree in which the sense, the feeling, of the unlimited envelope becomes intense—as it may do in experience of an object of art."[38] Mysticism is never simply about ecstasy, but claims a kind of epistemological significance. "About every explicit and focal object there is a recession into the implicit which is not intellectually grasped."[39] There is a truth-bearing character common to aesthetic and religious experiences, a means of access to the real. Hence, Dewey's descriptions better satisfy one of the conditions laid out by William James for a definition of mysticism, namely its "Noetic Quality."[40] By contrast, Harris accounts for a fragment of the story: the neurological activity accompanying the experience.

Dissolving the ego and identifying with an "enveloping undefined whole" comprise one kind of spirituality.[41] All of this is contrasted sharply by another religious sensibility—one no less experiential in character. This is the violent upheaval and

[38] *Art as Experience*, 201.
[39] Ibid., 202.
[40] *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 293. For James, mysticism concerns "states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect."
[41] *Art as Experience*, 203.

reorientation of the entire person, the transformation rather than transcendence of the ego.

If mystics speak of overcoming the boundaries between the individual and the divine, figures like Luther speak of the infinite distance between them. If mystics speak of dissolving the individual identity, Kierkegaard speaks of radical individuation, the need to embrace the trials of *becoming* a self. If Contemplatives and Sufis speak of returning to a primordial unity or ground of being, one both placid and still, the more existential and neo-orthodox traditions of Bultmann and Barth encourage the anxious if joyful anticipation of a future yet to be realized, a release from all complacency and security. It is only through expecting such a future that we discover a sense of peace in the here and now—an "eternal present" as some liberal theologians have described. It should be relevant that each of the above mentioned figures—Luther and Kierkegaard, Bultmann and Barth—were intimately acquainted with the more ecstatic and mystical brand of religious literature, only to consciously and purposefully reject it.[42] In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James states that "the faith-state and mystic state are practically convertible terms."[43] He could not have been more mistaken.

Harris effectively articulates the dangers and fallacies of theological dogma and religious belief, but makes no attempt to understand the depth experiences from which these beliefs derive their force and power. Kierkegaard's famous "leap of faith" is no "epistemological Ponzi scheme" (although it is occasionally employed as such), it is the Christian equivalent of the *koan*. The Danish father of existentialism is encouraging a disruption and overturning of our psychological life, a movement not of a knife across the throat of our firstborn but within the self.

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey speaks of "a composing and harmonizing of the various elements of our being," a re-creation of the person that is both "inclusive and deep-seated." Religiousness, as opposed to institutional religion, is that factor of our concrete, natural experience which manifests itself through a change "*of* will" rather than a special change "*in* will;" a redirection not of some quality of our personality, but in the very direction of our existence.[44] And while Dewey affirms the voluntary nature of this transformation, he elsewhere speaks of the integration of the self as an achievement surpassing the calculative abilities of the rational and conscious mind.

> An "adjustment" possesses the will rather than its express product. Religionists have been right in thinking of it as an influx from sources beyond conscious deliberation and purpose—a fact that helps explain, psychologically, why it has so generally been attributed to a supernatural source and that, perhaps, throws some light upon the reference of it by William James to unconscious factors.[45]

---

[42] And there are numerous Jewish thinkers who also fit this bill—including Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. Both thinkers are resolutely anti-mystical (despite Buber's novel interpretation of Hasidism). Levina goes so far as to depict self-transcendence as a kind of Dionysian darkness, a pagan revelry to be avoided rather than celebrated and encouraged.
[43] *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 324.
[44] *A Common Faith*, 16–17.
[45] Ibid., 19.

Dewey, of course, is not vindicating belief in the supernatural but describing the experiences which give rise to religious faith. It is only because he places experience within the whole person that he can speak of the integration of a formerly dispersed and fragmented self. It is similarly with other phenomena found within the religious life of humankind, including the yearning for a state of ultimate fulfillment. I have outlined earlier how, for Dewey, human ideals and goals do not arise out of a vacuum, but through the imagination of an organism embedded in both a body and an environment. Dewey elsewhere describes this concrete and worldly life as one of change, flux, and uncertainty. Only this depiction of experience can help to make sense of some of the strongest and long-standing impulses in the history of religion. "We envisage with pleasure Nirvana and a uniform heavenly bliss," explains Dewey, "only because they are projected upon the background of our present world of stress and conflict."[46]

When these spiritual goals are projected outward and ahead of the present they become *eschatological* in character, and depict a state of nature and society where all wrongs are righted, all problems resolved. But as we have seen in the last section, eschatology is not the only manner in which space and time are made significant. "In the arts," explains Dewey, spatial and temporal relations "are neither the empty containers nor formal relations that schools of philosophy have sometimes represented them to be."[47] The graceful and formalized rituals of a Japanese tea ceremony evoke the Buddha nature through the passing of earth-brown ceramic cups, the patient whisking of a tea bowl, the abundance of air and sunlight, and the position of the participants on wide and spacious blue mats. Add to this the feverish whirling of a Sufi Dervish, the trembling of a Hasidic Rabbi in prayer, the Stations of the Cross adorning the walls of a cathedral, the emotional buildup and crescendo of a Catholic mass, and the hand gestures of a Brahmin priest enacting fire sacrifices over the Ganges.

Despite Harris's description of mystical experience, the world is not a direct product of our consciousness, but the reverse. Unreflective dogma may fall before the light of scientific inquiry, but in each case there is an aesthetic which remains, a series of movements and patterns inseparable from the experience. "Sense qualities," states Dewey, "are carriers of meanings, not as vehicles carry goods, but as a mother carries a baby when the baby is part of her own organism."[48] A Muslim man asserts that the verses of the Qur'an, recited orally, are the rhythms of his heart. It is not implausible that this man is no literalist, and perhaps a professor of biology. The student of religion would do well to understand this.

Seen in this light, religious myth and narrative are not just the ignorant delusions of "sand-strewn men" and women. The image of Jesus walking on water, the exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, and Mohammed's flight on a winged beast may be dangerous and absurd when taken as objective truth. Stripping away such severity and simplicity of belief is undoubtedly a welcome and much-needed task for our "new atheists" as well as those who follow in step. But ignore the potency of myth and ritual for instilling and maintaining religious states of being—as well as the full range of these experiences—and surprisingly little is accomplished.

---

[46] *Art as Experience*, 16–17.
[47] Ibid., 214.
[48] Ibid.

Though Harris has called for the end of faith, his target is a straw man, and his take on spirituality is really that of a rather deracinated and barely recognizable version of Eastern mysticism. I have sought to demonstrate that the insights of John Dewey offer a far richer understanding of both the origins of belief as well as the nature of religious experiences.

Works Cited

Ahlstrom, Sydney. *A Religious History of the American People.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

Bloom, Harold. *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

De Unamuno, Miguel. *Tragic Sense of Life*. Translated by J.E. Crawford Flitch. New York: Dover Publications, 1954.

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience.* New York: Perigee, 1934.

_____. *A Common Faith*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934.

_____. *Experience and Nature.* New York: Dover Publications, 1958

_____. "The Unit of Behavior (The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology)." In *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*, ed. H. Standish Thayer. New York: Mentor Books, 1970.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature." In *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson Jr. New York: Bantam Books, 1990.

Harris, Sam. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason.* New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004.

James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience.* New York: Penguin Books, 1958.

Kaufmann, Walter. *The Faith of a Heretic*. New York: Anchor Books, 1963.

Pirsig, Robert. *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals.* New York: Bantam Books, 1991.