1. Bad Religion

In 2004 the philosopher Antony Flew, who had been to that time perhaps the world’s most prominent atheist, announced that he had changed his mind. While he had no intention of embracing Christianity or any of the other traditional monotheistic religions, he had, he revealed, been led by philosophical arguments to conclude that there really is a God after all – specifically, a First Cause of the universe of the sort described by Aristotle. The Aristotelian rationale for Flew’s change of view might be as surprising as the conversion itself. Aristotle and his teacher Plato are almost universally regarded as the two greatest philosophers ever to have lived. Their arguments have been known and studied for over 2,300 years. Flew was 81 years old at the time, and had been for over fifty years one of the most influential and respected philosophers in the world. Surely, one would have thought, there were no arguments for the existence of God he hadn’t already heard before. And yet at the end of his career, and in the face of the atheism he had for half a century made his reputation defending, Flew found himself admitting that the ancient Greek thinker the Medievals referred to simply as “The Philosopher” had been right all along. “I was not a specialist on Aristotle,” Flew explained, “so I was reading parts of his philosophy for the first time.”¹

Outside the ranks of religious believers, the response to Flew’s newfound philosophical theism seems to have been uniformly derisive. Comedian Jay Leno quipped, “Of course he believes in God now – he’s 81 years old!” while another commentator speculated that “confronted by the end of life,” Flew was simply “making one final desperate attempt at salvation” (though Flew had made it clear that he still did not believe in an afterlife).² One philosopher of
a secular bent dismissed his conversion as “sad” and “an embarrassment,” averring that “old age, as we know, takes its toll on people in many different ways” and that Flew’s understanding of relevant scientific theory “is not, shall we say, robust.” Another accused Flew of “willfully sloppy scholarship.” Other than alleging that his views rested on a scientifically disreputable “Intelligent Design” theory, and peremptorily dismissing them on that basis, most of Flew’s critics showed little interest in exploring in any detail what grounds he might have had for changing his mind. In particular, they studiously ignored the central role a reconsideration of Aristotle’s philosophy evidently played in his change of view. While Flew’s conversion was still just a rumor, his secularist admirers had scrambled furiously to deny that it could be true of so intelligent a man; when he confirmed the rumors himself, he was treated as a heretic and dupe of the fundamentalist enemy, and his arguments dismissed as unworthy of serious attention. “I have been denounced by my fellow unbelievers for stupidity, betrayal, senility and everything you could think of,” Flew complained, “and none of them have read a word that I have ever written.”

“The New Atheism”

This episode illustrates, in several respects, the main themes of this book. In their condescending assumption that belief in God could only be the product of wishful thinking, stupidity, ignorance, or intellectual dishonesty; in their corresponding refusal seriously to consider the possibility that that belief might be true and the arguments for it sound; and in their glib supposition that the only rational considerations relevant to the question are “scientific” ones, rather than philosophical; in all of these attitudes, Flew’s critics manifest the quintessential mindset of modern secularism. And insofar as its self-satisfied a priori dismissal of outsiders as benighted, and of defectors as wicked or mad, insulates it from ever having to deal with serious criticism, it is a mindset that echoes the closed-minded prejudice and irrationality it typically attributes to religious believers themselves. Secularism is, in its way, a religion to itself, and it is a religion that cannot tolerate infidels or heretics. We shall see by the end of this book that this is by no means an accident, a
mere byproduct of the passion and folly to which every human being succumbs from time to time. For secularism is, *necessarily and inherently*, a deeply irrational and immoral view of the world, and the more thoroughly it is assimilated by its adherents, the more thoroughly do they cut themselves off from the very possibility of rational and moral understanding. Moreover, and for this very reason, its adherents unavoidably find it difficult, indeed almost impossible, to perceive their true condition. The less they know, the less they know it.

These are, I realize, rather striking claims to make, not least because they are so utterly contrary to the self-understanding of secularists themselves. In the days and weeks following the 2004 U.S. presidential election – an election in which a concern for traditional moral and religious values is widely thought to have played a decisive part – secularists took to defining themselves as members of the “reality-based community,” in contrast to the purportedly “faith-based community” of religious believers. As if in answer to Flew’s abandonment of atheism, two secularist philosophers have, with much fanfare, recently published works purporting to demonstrate the moral and rational deficiencies of traditional religious belief: Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* and Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. These books were soon followed by biologist Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* and journalist Christopher Hitchens’s *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, and the press quickly took to pitting the “New Atheism” of Harris, Dennett, Dawkins, and Hitchens against a purportedly resurgent irrationalism and fundamentalism heralded by “Intelligent Design” advocates, “theocons,” and other secularist bogeymen. Several years ago, Dennett famously suggested in a *New York Times* piece that secularists adopt the label “brights” to distinguish them from religious believers. His proposal doesn’t seem to have caught on (perhaps because a grown man who goes around earnestly chirping “I’m a bright!” surely sounds rather like an idiot). But whatever the rhetorical deficiencies of “bright,” it perfectly encapsulates the self-satisfaction of the secularist mentality: “We’re intelligent, informed, and rational, while religious believers are stupid, ignorant, and irrational, not at all bright like us.”
The irony is that to anyone who actually knows something about the history and theology of the Western religious tradition for which Harris, Dennett, Dawkins, and Hitchens show so much contempt, their books stand out for their manifest ignorance of that tradition and for the breathtaking shallowness of their philosophical analysis of religious matters. Indeed, as we will see, these authors do not even so much as understand what the word “faith” itself has actually meant, historically, within the mainstream of that tradition. One gets the impression that the bulk of their education in Christian theology consisted of reading *Elmer Gantry* while in college, supplemented with a viewing of *Inherit the Wind* and a Sunday morning spent channel-surfing televangelists. Nor do they evince the slightest awareness of the historical centrality of ideas deriving from classical philosophy – the tradition of thought deriving from Plato and Aristotle and whose greatest representatives within Christianity are Augustine and Thomas Aquinas – to the content and self-understanding of the mainstream Western religious tradition. This is perhaps not surprising in the case of either Dawkins – a writer of pop science books who evidently wouldn’t know metaphysics from Metamucil – or *Vanity Fair* boy Hitchens, who probably thinks metaphysics is the sort of thing people like Shirley MacLaine start babbling about when they’ve lost their box office cachet. But such ignorance is simply disgraceful in the case of Dennett and Harris, who are trained philosophers. One would never guess from reading any of the “New Atheists” (not to mention the works of countless other secularist intellectuals) that the vast majority of the greatest philosophers and scientists in the history of Western civilization – not only the thinkers just mentioned but also many modern thinkers outside the classical tradition, including Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Boyle, Newton, and on and on – have firmly believed in the existence of God, and on the basis of entirely rational arguments. And, needless to say, they offer their readers no account of the grave philosophical challenges to which the naturalism they are committed to – the view that the natural, material world is all that exists and that empirical science is the only rational source of knowledge – has consistently been subjected throughout the history of philosophy, and which many influential and sophisticated contemporary philosophers continue to press upon it.
Yet the fact is that, contrary to the standard caricature of philosophers as inveterate skeptics who have no truck with religion, among philosophers the view that the existence of God can be rationally demonstrated “enjoyed wide currency, if not hegemony . . . from classical antiquity until well after the dawn of modernity” (to quote the philosopher David Conway, writing in a book that had a major influence on Flew’s conversion to philosophical theism)\(^9\); and the suggestion that human reason can be accounted for in purely materialistic terms has, historically speaking, been regarded by most philosophers as a logical absurdity, a demonstrable falsehood. Within the classical Western philosophical tradition, belief in the existence of God and the falsity of materialism has generally been thought to rest firmly and squarely on _reason_, not “faith.”

### The old philosophy

This brings us to another main theme of this book illustrated by the Flew episode, and indeed by Flew himself. When one seriously comes to understand the classical philosophical tradition represented by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas – and not merely the potted caricatures of it that even many professional philosophers, to their shame, tend to rely on – one learns just how contingent and open to question are the various modern, and typically “naturalistic,” philosophical assumptions that most contemporary thinkers (and certainly most secularists) simply take for granted without rational argument. And since the classical tradition is theistic and supernaturalist through and through, one also comes to see how powerful are the rational foundations of the Western religious tradition. Indeed, one comes to realize that the very possibility of reason and morality is deeply problematic at best on a modern naturalistic conception of the world, but perfectly intelligible on the classical philosophical worldview and the religious vision it sustains. More than that: One comes to see that it is very likely _only_ on the classical Western philosophical-cum-religious worldview that we can make sense of reason and morality. The truth is precisely the opposite of what secularism claims: Only a (certain kind of) religious view of the world is rational, morally responsible, and sane; and an irreligious worldview is accordingly deeply irrational,
immoral, and indeed insane. Secularism can never truly rest on reason, but only on “faith,” as secularists themselves understand that term (or rather misunderstand it, as we shall see): an unshakable commitment grounded not in reason but rather in sheer willfulness, a deeply ingrained desire to want things to be a certain way regardless of whether the evidence shows they are that way.

Again, these are bold claims, and they will be defended at length in the pages to follow. Suffice it for now to note, for what it is worth – and since we have already been considering the individual case of one specific philosopher, Flew – that my own experience bears them out. I was myself for many years a convinced atheist and naturalist. This is not to begin some emotional Road to Damascus saga: I was never militantly hostile to religion (Dennett and his ilk, I am glad to be able to say, always struck me as tiresome blowhards); nor did I suddenly “find Jesus” at the bottom of a whiskey bottle or at the end of some sob story, after the manner of the treacly conversion tales popular in our therapeutic age. It is just that for many years I was firmly persuaded, on intellectual grounds, that atheism and naturalism must be true, and then very gradually came to realize, again on intellectual grounds, that they were not in fact true and could not be true. This change in view began with, of all things, a consideration of the work of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, the very founders of the modern “analytic” tradition in philosophy to which Dennett and Harris, like so many secularists, are adherents. Frege put forward a powerful defense of a kind of Platonism – the view that there exists, in addition to the material world and the “world” within the human mind, a “third realm” of abstract entities, in particular of meanings and of mathematical objects like numbers – as the only way to make sense of the very possibility of linguistic communication. Russell argued that the nature of perceptual experience and of scientific theorizing entails that we can actually know very little about the material world, and in particular only its abstract structure but not its intrinsic nature. Their work convinced me how naïve and unfounded is the assumption of materialists and naturalists that the material world is the touchstone of reality and that we have better knowledge of it than of anything else. This conclusion was reinforced, to my mind, by the work of contemporary philosophers like John
Searle and Thomas Nagel – purely secular thinkers like Frege and Russell, incidentally – who despite their own commitment to naturalism argued that no existing materialist attempt to explain the human mind has come anywhere close to succeeding.¹⁰

The work of other contemporary philosophers like Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre showed me how powerful and still relevant Aristotle’s work was, particularly in the field of ethics. The writings of contemporary philosophers of religion like Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne applied the most rigorous of modern philosophical methods to the defense of religious belief, and the scholarship of writers like William Lane Craig and John Haldane revealed that the arguments of classical thinkers like Thomas Aquinas had been very badly misunderstood by modern critics and commentators. All of this led me eventually to a serious reconsideration of the Aristotelian tradition in philosophy in general, and of Aquinas’s adaptation of it in particular, and the end result was that I became convinced that the basic metaphysical assumptions which modern secular philosophers rather unreflectively take for granted, and which alone can make atheism seem at all plausible, were radically mistaken. The classical metaphysical picture of the world, which derives from Plato, was greatly modified first by Aristotle and later by Augustine, and was at last perfected by Aquinas and his followers, is, as I came to believe, essentially correct, and it effectively makes atheism and naturalism impossible.¹¹

Now I don’t expect these philosophical references to mean much, at this point anyway, to readers unfamiliar with philosophy. (We will be exploring many of them in detail before long.) My aim for now is merely to forestall the standard *ad hominem* dismissal of religious conversion as a purely subjective affair, a matter of feeling rather than reason. It was, in my own case, a matter of objective rational argument. Nor is my case unique. Contrary to the caricatures peddled in secularist literature (and which have crept into the popular culture at large), the mainstream tradition within Western religion has in fact always insisted that its basic claims must be and can be rationally justified, and indeed that they can be shown to be rationally superior to the claims of atheism and naturalism. If some religious believers nevertheless manifest an unfortunate tendency toward fideism – the view that religion rests on “faith” alone,
understood as a kind of ungrounded will to believe – that is to a very great extent precisely because they have forgotten the history of their own tradition and bought into the secularist propaganda that has relentlessly been directed against it since the so-called “Enlightenment.”

Secularists who indulge in such *ad hominem* criticism ought, in any case, to realize that it can often be applied to them with equal justice (and in fact with far greater justice, as we will see by the end of this book). This is certainly true of the accusation that their beliefs often rest on ignorance – a judgment shared even by some secularist thinkers themselves. The philosopher Quentin Smith, a far more serious and formidable defender of atheism than any of the so-called “New Atheists,” has bemoaned the appalling lack of knowledge so many of his fellow secularist thinkers manifest when attempting to criticize religious belief. For they tend to show no awareness of the sophisticated arguments presented by philosophers of a religious bent, preferring instead to attack straw men and present simple-minded journalistic caricatures of religious belief. The upshot, in Smith’s view, is that apart from those few secularist philosophers who, like himself, specialize in familiarizing themselves with and attempting to answer the arguments of serious religious thinkers, “the great majority of naturalist philosophers have an unjustified belief that naturalism is true and an unjustified belief that theism (or supernaturalism) is false.” 12 Political philosopher Jeremy Waldron (by no means a member of the “religious right”) makes a similar judgment about the attitudes secularists display toward religious arguments in politics:

Secular theorists often assume they know what a religious argument is like: they present it as a crude prescription from God, backed up with threat of hellfire, derived from general or particular revelation, and they contrast it with the elegant complexity of a philosophical argument by Rawls (say) or Dworkin. With this image in mind, they think it obvious that religious argument should be excluded from public life. . . . But those who have bothered to make themselves familiar with existing religious-based arguments in modern political theory know that this is mostly a travesty . . . 13
Moreover, even when secular intellectuals do bother to consider the views of serious religious thinkers, they have a peculiar tendency to apply to them a standard they do not apply to other controversial arguments. A secularist can argue for the most offensive and intuitively preposterous conclusions – that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with bestiality, necrophilia, or infanticide, say, as Princeton ethicist Peter Singer suggests – and even philosophers who disagree with those conclusions are prepared to treat them with the very greatest seriousness, insisting that such views must, however prima facie implausible, at least get a respectful hearing. In every other area of controversy, virtually no argument is ever considered decisively refuted: The common attitude is that there is always some way a defender of a particular position might reply to the standard objections, so that the position must be considered “still on the table.” Yet where, say, an argument for the existence of God is concerned, the mere fact that someone somewhere has raised an objection to it is treated as proof positive that the religious believer simply “hasn’t made his case” and that his argument needn’t be paid any further attention. Secular ideas are guaranteed consideration as long as the thinker presenting them possesses a minimum of argumentative and rhetorical ability. However speculative, intuitively implausible, or even crackpot, they are valued as ways of “making us think,” of “advancing the discussion,” and of “looking at things in a new way,” and a place is made for them on the academic reading list and in the college curriculum. Religious ideas, by contrast, are treated as if only something as incontrovertible as a geometrical proof in their defense could make them worthy of a moment’s notice.

That secularists, who pride themselves on their supposed greater knowledge and reasonableness, so often condemn religious believers in studied ignorance of what they really believe or without applying to them the standards by which they would judge their own ideas, indicates that another factor often attributed to such believers is at work here – namely wishful thinking, a desire for some claim to be true which is so powerful that it trumps a sober consideration of the evidence for it. For it is by no means the case that only those who believe in God could possibly have a vested interest in the question of His existence. Philosopher Thomas Nagel acknowledges that a
“fear of religion” seems often to underlie the work of his fellow secularist intellectuals, and that it has had “large and often pernicious consequences for modern intellectual life.” He writes:

I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself: I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that. My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not a rare condition and that it is responsible for much of the scientism and reductionism of our time. One of the tendencies it supports is the ludicrous overuse of evolutionary biology to explain everything about human life, including everything about the human mind.14

It is true that a fear of death, a craving for cosmic justice, and a desire to see our lives as meaningful can lead us to want to believe that we have immortal souls specially created by a God who will reward or punish us for our deeds in this life. But it is no less true that a desire to be free of traditional moral standards, and a fear of certain (real or imagined) political and social consequences of the truth of religious belief, can also lead us to want to believe that we are just clever animals with no purpose to our lives other than the purposes we choose to give them, and that there is no cosmic judge who will punish us for disobeying an objective moral law. Atheism, like religion, can often rest more on a will to believe than on dispassionate rational arguments. Indeed, as the philosopher C.F.J. Martin has pointed out, the element of divine punishment – traditionally understood in the monotheistic religions as a sentence of eternal damnation in Hell – shows that atheism is hardly less plausibly motivated by wishful thinking than theism is. For while it is hard to understand why someone would want to believe that he is in danger of everlasting hellfire, it is not at all hard to see why one would desperately want not to believe this.15

The abuse of science

Nagel’s reference to evolutionary biology brings us to the third and
final theme of this book illustrated by the Flew episode, namely the assumption that the question of whether religious belief is rationally justifiable is ultimately a scientific one, and that anyone who understands modern science will see that it favors the secularist answer. Nagel goes on to note that “Darwin enabled modern secular culture to heave a great collective sigh of relief, by apparently providing a way to eliminate purpose, meaning, and design as fundamental features of the world.”16 In fact the idea that science eliminates “purpose, meaning, and design as fundamental features of the world” goes back, as we will see, long before Darwin, to the very beginnings of modern science. And it informs the widespread perception that there has for centuries been a war between science and religion and that religion has been steadily losing.

Yet the idea in question is not itself a scientific one at all, but a philosophical one; and accordingly, the fabled “science versus religion” war is a myth – indeed, one might think of it as the founding myth of modern secularism, with Galileo and Newton taking the place of Romulus and Remus. For untold ages, modern secularists have told themselves (and everyone else), mankind lay in the darkness of religious bigotry, ignorance, and unreason; then came Science, and ever since the March of Progress has been relentless. The founding fathers of the scientific revolution got the ball rolling, Darwin accelerated it considerably, and now (so the story goes) a complete account of the universe in general and of human nature in particular in entirely materialistic terms – and in particular, without any reference whatsoever to “purpose, meaning, and design” – is within our grasp. Like most founding myths, this one is a mixture of oversimplification and falsehood. As historians of the period know, the Middle Ages were simply not in fact the benighted era of uniform superstition and barbarism portrayed in secular polemic and popular culture.17 And the elimination of purpose and meaning from the modern conception of the material universe was not and is not a “result” or “discovery” of modern science, but rather a philosophical interpretation of the results of modern science which owes more to early modern secularist philosophers like Hobbes and Hume – as well as to non-atheistic but equally anti-medieval philosophers like Descartes, Locke, and Kant – than it does to the great scientists of the last few centuries (even if many of these sci-
entists happened to accept this philosophical interpretation of their results). Finally, a complete account of the universe and of human nature in terms that make no reference whatsoever to purpose, meaning, and design is not within our grasp and never will be, for the simple reason that such an “account” is in principle impossible, and the hope for it based on nothing more than muddle-headedness mixed with wishful thinking. We can no more eliminate purpose and meaning from nature than we can square the circle.

Once again I am, I know, making large claims, but it is the point of the chapters that follow to justify them. Suffice it for now to say that the so-called “war between science and religion” is really a war between two rival philosophical worldviews, and not at bottom a scientific or theological dispute at all. Occasionally you’ll find a secularist who admits as much. Nagel is one example. Another is biologist Richard Lewontin, who has written:

Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. . . . It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a divine foot in the door.  

Similarly, physicist Paul Davies tells us that “science takes as its starting point the assumption that life wasn’t made by a god or a supernatural being,” and acknowledges that, partially out of fear of “open[ing] the door to religious fundamentalists . . . many investigators feel uneasy about stating in public that the origin of life is a mystery, even though behind closed doors they freely admit that
Among prominent contemporary philosophers, Tyler Burge opines that “materialism is not established, or even clearly supported, by science” and that its hold over his peers is analogous to that of a “political or religious ideology”\(^\text{20}\). John Searle tells us that “materialism is the religion of our time,” that “like more traditional religions, it is accepted without question and . . . provides the framework within which other questions can be posed, addressed, and answered,” and that “materialists are convinced, with a quasi-religious faith, that their view must be right”\(^\text{21}\); and William Lycan admits, in what he himself calls “an uncharacteristic exercise in intellectual honesty,” that the arguments for materialism are no better than the arguments against it, that his “own faith in materialism is based on science-worship,” and that “we also always hold our opponents to higher standards of argumentation than we obey ourselves.”\(^\text{22}\)

The conflict, then, is not over any actual results or discoveries of science, but rather over the more fundamental philosophical question of what sorts of results or discoveries will be allowed to *count* as “scientific” in the first place. In particular, it is a war between, on the one hand, what I have called the classical philosophical vision of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas, and on the other hand, the naturalistic orthodoxy of contemporary secularism, whose premises derive from modern philosophers like the ones mentioned above. As we shall see, the radical differences between these worldviews with respect to what at first glance might seem fairly abstruse questions of metaphysics – the relationship between the universal and the particular, form and matter, substance and attributes, the nature of cause and effect, and so forth – in fact have dramatic repercussions for religion, morality, and even politics. It is only when the results of modern science are interpreted in naturalistic metaphysical terms that they can be made to seem incompatible with traditional religious belief, and it is only when modern naturalistic metaphysical assumptions are taken for granted, and the classical alternatives neglected, that the philosophical arguments for the traditional religious worldview (e.g. for the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the natural law conception of morality) can be made to seem problematic. By ignoring the challenge posed by the classical philosophical worldview, and distorting its key
ideas and arguments on those rare occasions when it is taken account of at all, secularism maintains its illusory status as the rational default position. Prominent naturalists like the New Atheists are sure to “win” the public debate with their traditional religious critics every time, with the general public unaware that the game is being played with metaphysically loaded dice.

Religion and counter-religion

I have said that secularism is itself a kind of religion. Admittedly, this might seem odd considering that secularists think of themselves, of course, as rejecting all religion. So is there anything more to the charge than mere rhetorical turnabout, the flinging of an insult back at the person who first made it? There is – not least because I am very far from regarding “religion” and “religious” as per se insulting descriptions. Indeed, for reasons that will be clear by the end of this book – and they are reasons, not the ludicrous strawman conception of “faith” at which the “New Atheists” (like all village atheists) like to take pot shots – I would say that a truly religious man is, all things being equal (and of course they are often very far from equal), for that reason and to that extent a sane and virtuous man; while a man who is irreligious, and especially a man who is positively hostile to religion, is (again, all things being equal) for that very reason and to that extent a bad man, and an irrational man. In short, a religious sensibility, properly understood, is a moral and intellectual virtue; and indifference or hostility to religion is a moral and intellectual vice. So, when I say that secularism is a religion, and imply that this is a bad thing, I am speaking very loosely, “speaking with the vulgar” as it were – in particular, speaking with secularists themselves (there are no greater vulgarians), insofar as I have claimed that secularists are “religious” in their own eccentric sense of that word as connoting dogmatism, ignorance, and intolerance.

But there is more to it than this. Many secularists like to assimilate religion to superstition, when in fact superstition is not religion per se but at most the corruption of true religion – just as tyranny is not government per se but merely the corruption of government, just as wage labor is comparable to slavery only very remotely and
only under the very worst circumstances, and just as prostitution is not in any interesting sense even remotely comparable to marriage despite some extremely superficial analogies. Of course, there are people who deny that such obvious differences are real – Marxists, anarchists, radical feminists, and other denizens of the intellectual slums, who mistake an inability to make the simplest conceptual distinctions for deep insight. To these, it seems, we can add the ranks of secularist “thinkers.” When “New Atheists” and their ilk assure us in all seriousness that believing in God is just like believing in the Easter bunny, or that teaching religion is tantamount to child abuse, they remind me of the freshman philosophy student who once proudly declared to me his “discovery” that taking a girl out on a date was really no different from hiring a call girl, since what it’s “all about” is giving something in exchange for sex. In both cases, the analysis put forward is evidence not of profound philosophical understanding, but merely of being a shallow and sophomoric jackass.

Yet many secularists believe, or at least give every appearance of believing, things that are even more crassly stupid than this, things that merit them the label “superstitious” if anyone merits it. As the late David Stove has argued at length, Dawkins’s famous claim that we are all “manipulated” by our “selfish genes” could only be both true and interesting if interpreted, absurdly, as a literal attribution of superhuman intelligence and cunning to what are quite obviously mindless tiny bits of biological matter – that is, as an ascription of godlike powers to genes.23 (We shall see later why Dawkins and other “naturalistic” thinkers are, whether they intend this or not, necessarily pushed into such absurdities by the logic of their attempt to combine materialism with the biological fact that genes are carriers of information.) Dawkins also claims (as does his acolyte Dennett) that our minds are nothing more than congeries of “memes” – ideas, practices, and other cultural phenomena – that “compete” with one another the way genes do, and that the process of cultural evolution generated by this “competition” is what really determines our thoughts and behaviors. It is “natural selection” itself that is now treated as a pseudo-deity, guiding all our fates, with Dennett in particular constantly and shamelessly making reference to the “Good Design,” etc., that evolution manifests, even
though “evolution,” as a purportedly blind and purposeless natural process, couldn’t in any true and interesting sense manifest “design” or “guidance” without having godlike intelligence and will. (Again, there are reasons – which we will explore later on – why Dennett has to speak this way in order for his “naturalistic” worldview to come off as remotely plausible, but also why he nevertheless cannot possibly do so in a way that is ultimately consistent with his materialism and atheism.) And then there is, of course (and to go back to earlier generations of secularists), the quasi-divine status Marxists afforded the Laws of History and the quasi-ecclesiastical authority they invested in the Communist Party, Comte’s “Religion of Humanity,” and so forth.

G.K. Chesterton probably never actually said (as he is reputed to have said) that “he who does not believe in God will believe in anything.” But he surely would have said it had he been acquainted with the lunacies one finds peddled by contemporary secularists. At the most extreme end of the spectrum, we find “eliminative materialist” philosophers who deny the very existence of the human mind – a minority view, to be sure, but one which is (as we will see) the logical outcome of the “naturalistic” trend of modern philosophical thinking. We have already mentioned Singer’s obscene defense of infanticide, necrophilia, and bestiality. Or to take what is now, alas, a far less exotic example, there is the current push for “same-sex marriage,” a metaphysical absurdity on all fours with round squares (as, again, we will see later on) that even the ancient pagans would have regarded as a contemptible mark of extreme societal decadence. And then there are the various moralistic causes – environmentalism, “animal rights,” vegetarianism, veganism, and the like – not all inherently mad and not endorsed by all secularists, but often given a ridiculously exaggerated importance and fanatically pursued by them, each associated with its own obsessive-compulsive quasi-sacramental rituals (sorting one’s garbage into various piles for recycling, driving only “hybrid vehicles,” buying only “dolphin safe” tuna, etc.). Though he would scarcely have thought it possible, Chesterton would find that New Secularist Man circa 2008 is an even more absurd creature than the incarnation with which he had to deal: A copy of Skeptic magazine ostentatiously tucked under his arm, the Darwin fish on the bumper of his car
proudly signals his group identification with other members of the herd of “independent thinkers.” He “knows” that there is no God, and he isn’t sure whether even the thoughts he thinks he’s having are real or not. But he is pretty sure that his “selfish genes” and/or his “memes” in some way manipulate his every action, and quite certain that there’s nothing questionable per se about “marrying” another man, strangling an unwanted disabled infant, or sodomizing a goat or a corpse (if that’s “what you’re into”). Despite his hatred of religion, he thinks global warming a greater danger than Islamic terrorism, and whether “meat is murder” is a proposition he thinks eminently worthy of consideration. Evidently, they don’t make skeptics like they used to.

A second reason for characterizing secularism as a religious phenomenon, then, is that in some respects it resembles, if not religion per se, at least a corrupted form of religion: superstition, with all the irrationality and credulity that goes along with it. But both of the “religious” characteristics of secularism I’ve described so far – its bigotry and its superstition – stem from a third and deeper respect in which secularism can only properly be understood in religious terms, namely that the content of secularism as a philosophy and a sensibility is entirely parasitic on religion. It is not just that secularists happen to reject and oppose religion; it’s that there is nothing more to their creed than rejecting and opposing religion. This point might seem obviously true, even banal, but it is not. For secularists often regard themselves as promoting a positive intellectual and moral vision of the world, not merely a critique of religion. They claim to have something new to put in its place. Hence they not only reject faith; they endorse reason and science. They not only reject traditional morality, especially in the area of sex; they affirm the value of free choice. They not only reject ecclesiastical authority; they promote democracy and tolerance. And so on. But look more closely and you’ll find that this “positive vision” is really nothing more than a restatement of the negative one. As I have said already, and as will be blindingly obvious by the end of this book, the mainstream Western religious tradition itself very firmly rests on and embraces reason and science. That tradition also insists that religious conviction and moral virtue must be adopted of one’s own free will, not imposed by force; and while it holds that some of the
things people choose to do are morally unacceptable, secularists, who also profess to believe that there is a difference between right and wrong, hold the same thing. The Protestant John Locke and the Catholic Second Vatican Council (to take just two examples) endorsed religious toleration and democracy, and on theological grounds at that, while secularists are none too happy with democracy when, say, it results in school boards that mandate the teaching of “Intelligent Design” theory alongside evolution. So what, pray tell, is distinctively “secularist” about reason, science, free choice, toleration, democracy, and the like? Nothing at all, as it happens. The fact is that secularists are “for” reason and science only to the extent that they don’t lead to religious conclusions; they celebrate free choice only insofar as one chooses against traditional or religiously oriented morality; and they are for democracy and toleration only to the extent that these might lead to a less religiously oriented social and political order. Again, the animus against religion is not merely a feature of the secularist mindset; it is the only feature.

In this connection we might take note of a curious fact about the practice of contemporary academic philosophers with respect to religion. Like Dennett and Harris, most of them are atheists. But unlike Dennett and Harris, most have very little if anything to say about religion in their published work. They are aware that some of their fellow philosophers are religious believers, and they regard the more obviously brilliant of these religious colleagues with a grudging and bemused respect. But the work of these religious philosophers, at least where it touches on religious matters, is mostly ignored. As John Searle has put it, with evident approval:

Nowadays nobody bothers [to attack religion], and it is considered in slightly bad taste to even raise the question of God’s existence. Matters of religion are like matters of sexual preference: they are not to be discussed in public, and even the abstract questions are discussed only by bores. . . . For us, the educated members of society, the world has become demystified. . . . The result of this demystification is that we have gone beyond atheism to a point where the issue no longer matters in the way it did to earlier generations.24
Yet anyone who reads very deeply in the work of contemporary analytic philosophers will find that one of their main obsessions, perhaps the main obsession, is the project of “naturalizing” this or that phenomenon – the mind, knowledge, ethics, and so forth – or showing, in other words, that it can be entirely accounted for in terms of “natural” properties and processes of the sort compatible with (their conception of) “natural science.” And given what was said above, what this ultimately means is just accounting for it in terms that make no reference to God, the soul, or any other immaterial reality. Those “tough-minded” secularist philosophers who like to pretend, to themselves and others, that they are well beyond giving religion any thought whatsoever in their day-to-day work, thus reveal by the substance of that work that they are in fact and at bottom interested in little else. In particular, their mania for “naturalizing” every philosophically problematic phenomenon they can get their hands on evinces a desire to rationalize their atheism, however indirectly. Thomas Nagel (whose *mea culpa* was quoted above) is just the rare secularist philosopher willing momentarily to let the mask drop.

Now if the content of secularism derives entirely from its opposition to religion, this does not, of course, suffice to make secularism itself a religion, any more than opposition to communism, say, makes one a communist. But then, anti-communists were often accused by their critics (usually unjustly, but let that pass) of having become, in their overzealousness, the very thing they hated. So passionate was their hatred, and so obsessively focused were they on destroying the object of their hatred rather than promoting a positive alternative, that their cure became as bad as the disease, and even manifested some of its symptoms. (Again, so it was claimed – though if you really think Joe McCarthy, for all his faults, was remotely comparable to Stalin, Mao, or even Castro, I’ve got a bridge over the Belomorkanal to sell you.) Well, when we consider: (a) the fact that secularism is little more than an animus against religion, without any positive content; (b) the fact that its adherents are often committed to ideas as superstitious and/or mad as any that the most corrupt forms of religion exhibit (ideas which, though not essential to secularism per se and thus not accepted among all secularists, nevertheless usually tend to follow

1. Bad Religion
upon the rejection of religion as a substitute for it); and (c) the fact that they also typically manifest toward religion and religious believers exactly the sort of ignorance, intolerance, and dogmatism they attribute to religion itself; when we add all these factors together, it is surely plausible to regard secularism as something that is as much a “religion” – as much, that is to say, the very sort of thing it claims to oppose – as anti-communism can be said to have become the very thing that it opposed. Indeed, more so, since (as I have said) the charges against anti-communists are mostly unfair. And since secularists themselves were so often the loudest makers of those false charges against anti-communists (communism having been one of the sacred cows of an earlier generation of secularists), it is only fitting that they should be hoist with their own petard.

So, whereas Dennett proposes explaining “religion as a natural phenomenon,” I propose interpreting naturalism and secularism as religious phenomena. Or rather, if secularism is not precisely a religion, it is what we might call a counter-religion. It has its countercastes (Darwin, Clarence Darrow, Carl Sagan); its “Old Testament” counter-prophets, stern and forbidding, brimming with apocalyptic doom or at least pessimism (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud); and its kinder and gentler “New Testament” counter-apostles, hopeful for a realization of the Kingdom of Godlessness on earth via “progressive” educational policy and other schemes of social uplift (Dennett, Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens – and into the bargain, each member of this foursome even has his own Gospel). It affords a sense of identity and meaning to those beholden to it, a metaphysics to interpret the world by and a value system to live by, even if all of this is little more than a negation of the sort of metaphysics and morality associated with religion: that is to say, a counter-metaphysics, a counter-morality.

And yet it is also a belief system that is, as I have said, deeply irrational and immoral, indeed the very negation of reason and morality. Thus do I call it the last superstition: not merely “last” in the sense of being the superstition that remains when all the others have purportedly been abolished by it, but also “last” in the sense of being the ultimate superstition, “the mother of all superstitions.”
Things to come
The burden of the following chapters, then, will be to show that: 1. the so-called “war between science and religion” is in fact a war between rival philosophical or metaphysical systems, namely the classical worldview of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas on the one hand, and modern naturalism on the other; 2. the naturalistic worldview, on which secularism rests, makes reason and morality impossible, though they are perfectly intelligible on (indeed only intelligible on) the classical view; and 3. secularism therefore cannot fail to manifest the irrationalism and immorality it falsely attributes to religion, while the religious vision enshrined in classical philosophical theism cannot fail to commend itself to every rational and morally decent human being who correctly understands it, free of the falsehoods and caricatures of it peddled by secularist critics.

Nothing that follows will require of the reader any prior acquaintance with philosophy or its history, but the discussion will in some places get a little abstract and technical – though never dull, I think, and the dramatic relevance of the occasional abstraction or technicality to issues in religion, morality, and science will amply reward the patient reader. Some abstraction and technicality is, in any case, unavoidable. The basic philosophical case for the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the natural law conception of morality is at one level fairly straightforward. But the issues have become ever more greatly obscured in the centuries since so-called “Enlightenment” thinkers and their predecessors first started darkening the understanding of Western man, and a nearly impenetrable philosophical smokescreen of unexamined assumptions, falsehoods, clichés, caricatures, prejudices, propaganda, and general muddle-headedness now surrounds the average person’s (including the average intellectual’s) thinking about religion. It takes considerable intellectual effort to dissipate this Kultursmog (to borrow R. Emmett Tyrrell’s apt coinage).

The task is not unlike that which faces debunkers of popular but intellectually unsupported conspiracy theories. As Vincent Bugliosi laments in Reclaiming History, his recent mammoth study of the JFK assassination, “it takes only one sentence to make the
argument that organized crime had Kennedy killed to get his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, off its back, but it takes a great many pages to demonstrate the invalidity of that charge."25

One of the reasons for this is that certain fallacies and errors committed by conspiracy theorists can only be exposed via painstaking examination of eyewitness testimony, ballistic evidence, historical context, and other such minutiae. Another is the bias embodied in the vast number of things that people think they know about a particular case that just aren’t so. To take only one example, everyone who has read a conspiracy theory book or seen Oliver Stone’s JFK “knows” that a single bullet couldn’t possibly have made the wounds in Kennedy’s neck and in Governor Connally, since Connally was sitting directly in front of the President and the shot in question came diagonally from the rear – except that Connally was demonstrably not sitting directly in front of Kennedy, but to the front left and slightly below him on a jump seat, making his wounds perfectly in line with the one in Kennedy’s neck.26

Similarly, everyone “knows” that the cosmological argument for God’s existence says “Everything has a cause, so the universe has a cause, namely God” and that this argument is easily refuted by asking “Well, if everything has a cause, what caused God, then?” – except that that is not what the cosmological argument says, and none of the philosophers who have famously defended the argument – not Aristotle, not Aquinas, not Leibniz, not anyone else – ever committed such a stupid and obvious fallacy. Everyone “knows” that to say that morality depends on religion means that God arbitrarily decides to command something or other (“just ‘cause He feels like it” apparently) and the only reason to obey is fear of hellfire – except that that is not what it means to say that morality depends on religion, certainly not in the thinking of the many serious philosophers who have defended that claim. And so on and on. To correct widespread and tiresome misconceptions like these requires an explanation of how the classical philosophical tradition understands what it is to be the “cause” of something, what it means to describe something as “good” or “bad,” and a great many other philosophical issues our understanding of which modern philosophers and their successors have severely distorted. What began as bad philosophy and anti-religious propaganda in
the writings of various early modern- and Enlightenment-era thinkers has congealed into a kind of pseudo-common sense, falsehoods and confusions so deeply enmeshed in contemporary thinking that few even realize there is any alternative to them.

This is as true of most contemporary philosophers and other intellectuals as it is of anyone else. Bugliosi relates how 85 to 90 percent of an audience of 600 lawyers he once polled said they rejected the findings of the Warren Commission. Yet while about the same number said that they had seen Stone’s movie *JFK* or read a conspiracy theory book, almost none of them – and these are lawyers, mind you, whom one would like to think would be sensitive to the need to hear both sides of a case – had actually read the Warren Report itself, presumably since they “already knew” that it’s wrong. Similarly, a secularist colleague of mine once assured me that he didn’t need to bother reading writers like Aquinas, since he “already knew” that they must be wrong – though judging from his grasp of what such writers mean by “God” (he confidently trotted out a few stupid anthropomorphisms, tiresome comparisons to the Easter bunny, etc.), it was obvious that he knew no such thing. It was like trying to discuss Titian with a three-year-old who thinks painting is something you do with your fingers. As we saw Quentin Smith and Jeremy Waldron complain above, apart from the few who make a professional specialty of arguing about religion, secularist thinkers are generally unacquainted with anything but absurd caricatures of traditional religious ideas and arguments, are utterly unaware that anything other than these caricatures exist, and thus don’t bother to look for anything but straw men to attack. They simply don’t know what they’re talking about, and they don’t know that they don’t know it. If things are this bad with the people who are supposed to know these things – academics, writers, philosophers, scientists, and other intellectuals – it is hardly surprising if the average educated reader is no less ignorant. A detailed philosophical case of the sort I will be making in this book is thus unavoidable if the job is to be done adequately.

There is yet another hurdle anyone making such a case must face, and again it has a parallel in debates over conspiracy theories. Bugliosi notes that “people inevitably find conspiracies fascinating and intriguing, and hence subconsciously are more receptive to
conspiratorial hypotheses”; those who debunk such hypotheses are thus seen as “taking the fun out of” things. And as I have argued elsewhere, conspiracy theories also thrive on the widespread (but, as we will be seeing, quite false) modern assumption that science, philosophy, and “critical thinking” in general are all essentially in the business of undermining authority, debunking “official stories,” and overthrowing received wisdom and common sense. Similarly, given that even today most people have a religious upbringing of some sort and that a religious perspective inevitably has the status of being the traditional or received view of things, secularist views, however feebly defended, cannot fail to come across as new, exciting, and “intellectual,” while the defender of religious belief, however powerful his arguments, is bound to seem an out-of-touch and tiresome killjoy. Rationally speaking, this is all quite juvenile and frivolous, of course, but it makes it that much more imperative for the defender of religious belief to rely on the sheer philosophical power of a detailed case, for he has precious little to offer in the way of “sex appeal.” (All the same, I can promise that I will be saying some frank and offensive things about sex – though I suspect it is precisely those who most like to think of themselves as welcoming frank talk about sex who will be the most offended.)

Here, then, is the plan of the chapters to follow. Chapters 2 through 5 constitute a “crash course” in the history of Western philosophy, albeit a highly selective one, our focus being on those trends that led toward and led away from what I have called the “classical” philosophical picture of the world that underlies the Western religious tradition. Specifically, Chapter 2 surveys the key metaphysical ideas of Plato and Aristotle and their respective schools of thought; Chapters 3 and 4 explain how these ideas were developed and utilized by the medieval Scholastic thinkers, especially Aquinas, to articulate a comprehensive systematic account of the existence of God, the immateriality and immortality of the soul, and the natural moral law; and Chapter 5 examines the way in which “modern” philosophers, who broke radically with this Greek and medieval “classical” inheritance, set in motion a process that would gradually but relentlessly undermine not only the traditional Western moral and religious heritage, but also the foundations of reason, morality, and science itself.
Our story, then, is one of a steady ascent from sunny Greek valleys to the divine light of the medieval Gothic heights – followed by a nightmarish toboggan ride down into the dark bowels of modernity’s version of Plato’s cave. Chapter 6 shows us the way out and back up. Specifically, it shows that the classical metaphysical picture the modern one replaced is rationally unavoidable, and thus every bit as defensible today as it was in the days of Thomas Aquinas; and also that, since this picture is unavoidable, the traditional Western religious worldview it entails is rationally unavoidable as well.

As I have said, we will in the course of this book occasionally be addressing certain technical philosophical issues. (Some readers might find parts of Chapters 2 and 5 especially challenging.) But the technicalities are no more difficult than those one might find in a popular science book, and I am heartened by the example of Mortimer Adler, who devoted a career to expounding *Aristotle for Everybody* (to cite the title of one of his better-known books) and apparently made a gazillion dollars doing it. (OK, not really. Still, you’ve discovered my secret: I went into philosophy for the money. I’m starting to think my high school guidance counselor was something of a prankster.) As I have also said, the point of the technicalities will in any case be made evident when we see the many implications they have for religion, morality, and science. And I think I can guarantee this much: If you make the effort to work through the ideas I’ll be setting out in this book, then even if you do not end up agreeing with me that the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the natural law conception of morality are rationally unavoidable, you *will* understand how reasonable people could be convinced of this.

As the reader has no doubt already figured out, this book will also be as polemical as it is philosophical, though hardly more so than the books written by the “New Atheists” to whom I am responding. I believe this tone is appropriate, indeed necessary, for the New Atheism derives whatever influence it has far more from its rhetorical force and “sex appeal” (as I have called it) than from its very thin intellectual content. It is essential, then, not only that its intellectual pretensions are exposed but that its rhetoric is met with equal and opposite force. In any event, as the argument of this book
will show, it is the defenders of the traditional Western philosophical and religious worldview, and certainly not the “New Atheists,” who have earned the intellectual right to indulge in polemics.

All the same, and notwithstanding what I have said in this chapter, I want to emphasize that I do not deny for a moment that there are secularists, atheists, and naturalists of good will, who are (apart from their rejection of religion) reasonable and morally admirable. What I deny is that they have or can have — whether they realize this or not — any cogent rational grounds for their trust in reason or morality given their atheism and naturalism, and I deny also that they can rationally remain secularists, atheists, or naturalists if they come to a proper understanding both of the religious views they reject and of the difficulties inherent in their own position. Of course, I am not so foolish as to think that no reasonable person could possibly fail to agree with me after reading this book. No single book on any subject, however well-argued and correct in its conclusions, can be expected to convince every reasonable person, certainly not all at once, all by itself, or after a single reading; the way in which we human beings come to believe things is, for good or ill, much more complicated than that. (There are no “magic bullets” in philosophy any more than in the JFK assassination.) Still, I urge secularist readers at least to consider that what I have to say in this book is merely the tip of an intellectual iceberg, and that if they explore more thoroughly the (no doubt far better) works of other writers in the tradition of thought my arguments represent, they will find that they have been far, far too glib in their dismissal of religious belief — and perhaps utterly mistaken in rejecting it.

I urge secular readers, then, to do what Dennett so tiresomely and condescendingly asks religious readers to do throughout his book Breaking the Spell — to consider that they have been wrong. I hope to show them that if they are, as they claim to be, truly rational and moral, they will come to see that they have hated what they should have loved. Not to put too fine a point on it, they ought – literally – to get down on their knees and worship the God who mercifully sustains them in being at every instant, even as they foolishly scoff at Him. This is not only an act of faith, rightly understood; it is the highest manifestation and fulfillment, in this life anyway, of human reason itself.