A Commentary on Ronald Dworkin’s *Religion Without God*

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Ronald Dworkin’s posthumous book *Religion Without God* searches for the possibility of atheistic religiosity. Rather than clarifying the situation, this book does more to confuse it, and succeeds in undermining his expressed humanitarian goals.

In *Religion Without God*, the just published last book by the recently deceased distinguished Professor of Law and Philosophy at New York University, Dr. Ronald Dworkin, he seeks to address the vital question of the possibility of atheistic religiosity. His intention is to show that “what divides godly and godless religion … is not as important as the faith in value that unites them.” Unfortunately, however, rather than clarifying the situation, this book does more to confuse it, and undermine his expressed humanitarian goals, and that for essentially four reasons.

First, he defines religion as presupposing a belief in the supernatural, “in a ‘force’ in the universe ‘greater than we are’.” But that is clearly an error. Of course, one might choose to stipulate any definition one wishes, but that would be far from convincing. Or one might try to extract a credible definition from an interpretation of the history of religions. However, any such interpretation is sure to be quite contentious. Thus he accepts as a working model the decision of the United States Supreme Court that recognized the existence of, among others, the religion of “secular humanism.”

However, as a member of the Board of a recognized secular religious organization, the Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island, I can tell you that we do not believe that “the religious attitude accepts the full, independent reality of value.” Rather, as we often begin our Sunday service, we state that “we choose to attribute value to all human beings,” thus making quite explicit that we do not claim that there is any “transcendental and objective value [that] pervades the universe,” which, for example, Dworkin approvingly attributes to Einstein in support of his position.

This definitional error follows from a deeper philosophical error. He mistakenly asserts that “the religious attitude rejects all forms of naturalism.” Not only does my work disprove that – in my *Critique of Western Philosophy and Social Theory*, for example. But
more significantly, so does that of John Dewey, to mention only one, who in his *A Common Faith* clearly develops an entirely naturalistic interpretation of religiosity, which he clearly distinguishes from the ossified structures of most traditional religions. Dr. Dworkin, in fact, shows no understanding of the metaphysics of natural emergence that undergirds these positions.

Thirdly, he simply asserts the truth of ‘Hume’s principle’, “that one cannot support a value judgment … just by establishing some scientific fact about how the world is or was or will be.” But that principle has come under quite convincing attack in recent times by numerous distinguished philosophers, often “naturalists,” including Hillary Putnam and Roy Bhaskar, to mention only two. But Dworkin uses this dubious principle to sustain an absolute distinction between values and facts in order to free traditional religious views and institutions from the problems created by their belief systems.

Finally, and worst of all, these confusions result from his effort to reduce scientific knowledge to simply another circular belief system that has no more solid grounds on which to rest than that of faith, just as religions do. He claims that “there is no finally noncircular way to certify our capacity to find truth of any kind in any intellectual domain.” But that is both intellectual confused and morally disastrous. It fails to address the independent role of experience and the operation of replicable experiments that establish warrantedly assertable objective truths. The consequent capacity of established science to predict events, often with astounding levels of accuracy – as in the case of the magnetic moment of the electron to the twelfth decimal place – as well as to develop astounding levels of technological proficiency and practical effectiveness, certainly marks off scientific practices and belief systems from the essentially subjective faiths of most traditional religions.

By thus “leveling the intellectual playing field,” Dworkin can, no doubt unintentionally, give a good conscience and intellectual legitimation to the most outrageous and dangerous beliefs and practices. Those beliefs and practices, many of which are threatening to the rights and dignity of individuals, and may even threaten the very survival of civilization, effectively undermine the admirable goals to which he sought to give expression.