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The Skeptical Dismissal of Religion and the Skepticism of the Religious: Emanuel Haldeman-Julius and Religion

DONALD WAYNE VINEY

Emanuel Haldeman-Julius (1889-1951), hereafter EHJ, is best known as the founder and editor of the Little Blue Books. He published many works skeptical of religion and he often turned his own pen to the subject. He was an uncompromising atheist, ever willing to make a rational case for his philosophy. Although he was amiable enough in person, he styled himself a debunker and a free thinker and he spared no rhetorical tool in combating what he considered to be religious bunk – indeed, for EHJ, the expression “religious bunk” is redundant. Attempts by preachers, theologians, philosophers, and scientists to reform religion were to EHJ’s way of thinking unavailing. In EHJ’s view, skepticism is an acid that corrodes the very core of religious belief and practice and leaves in its place only a husk of vague mysticism that cannot stand rational scrutiny. As far as EHJ was concerned, science suffices for a sane and satisfactory view of life. What is needed, he said, is more schools and fewer churches (*The Militant* 38).

EHJ believed that religion is both harmful and untrue. These ideas are echoed in the movement known as “the new atheism,” although, to date, EHJ’s name does not appear in the books of its most well-known representatives. Nevertheless, the Little Blue Books were widely read in their day, he was friends with the well-known skeptics of his time, and his friends understood his contributions to free thought. The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, I wish to celebrate the memory of EHJ and his work. He deserves to be recognized as a key figure in the history of skepticism about religion. He is a clever writer, full of wit; though not

in the same league with Voltaire, he was a “Kansas skeptic” (*The Militant* 26) worth remembering. Second, I propose that doubt and curiosity can be central values in a properly religious view of life. I believe that EHJ failed to appreciate that the skepticism exhibited by religious thinkers has often been a vital part of religion and that it need not lead to a skeptical dismissal of religion. The focus here is primarily on EHJ’s rejection of religion, his denial of the existence of God, his criticism of the concept of God, and his animadversions on modernist theology. He also found fault with Jesus, but that deserves a paper unto itself, so I won’t pursue that topic here.

Skeptical Dismissal of Religion and the Skepticism of the Religious

Skepticism about God and about the gods may be as old as are these beliefs. The Psalms speak of the heavens as declaring God’s glory (19:1), but they also speak of “the fool” who says in his heart that there is no God (14:1; 53:1). In antiquity, it was common to charge supposed troublemakers with impiety, which could mean either being religiously wayward or simply being an atheist. If Plato is to be believed, Socrates’ accusers meant to charge him not simply with denying the gods of the state but with denying the existence of any and every deity (Reeve 40, *Apology* 26c). Socrates denied the charge. It was Xenophanes who commented on the anthropomorphic way the gods are conceived, yet he defended a form of monotheism (Kirk et al. 169-70). Philosophers in antiquity often criticized popular piety while retaining a more refined form of theism. Socrates’ skepticism of Greek mythology is on full display in the dialogue *Euthyphro*, yet at his trial he maintained that he believed in the gods in a higher sense than did his accusers (Reeve 52, *Apology* 35d).

As the examples of Xenophanes and Socrates show, one may launch skeptical attacks on religious ideas while remaining religious. Thus, one should distinguish skeptical

dismissals of religion from the skepticism of the religious. Finding an example, prior to the eighteenth century, of anyone who explicitly self-identified as an atheist is difficult. The first number in EHJ's Little Blue Books series is the fifth version (1889) of Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the Rubaiyat, by the medieval Persian mathematician-astronomer Omar Khayyam (cf. Khayyám 121f). The poem is puzzling for how powerfully it expresses a skepticism about views that Khayyam defended elsewhere in his strictly philosophical writings (Aminrazavi and Van Brummelen; Hartshorne, *Thomas Aquinas*). The first example of a self-professed atheist in Western thought may well be Jean Meslier (1664-1729), a priest who spent his final decade secretly writing an indictment of the superstition and abuses of the church. He declares that there is no such being as God (Meslier: 341). Others were to follow. There is the story of David Hume – himself a pivotal skeptic – who visited Paris from 1763 to 1766. He attended a dinner party where contributors to the *Encyclopédie* were present. He announced that he had yet to meet a genuine atheist. Baron D'Holbach replied that there were seventeen atheists seated at the table (Merrill 107-8).

If atheism began to assert itself in the eighteenth century, it had stiff competition from deism which usually denied revelation and miracles, but which held that God created the universe and left human beings with the intellectual and moral tools to manage themselves. Two of the fiercest skeptics of the day, Voltaire and Thomas Paine – philosophers whose work EHJ admired and published – were deists. Among the founders of the United States, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson are famous for their skepticism towards popular religion and for their defenses of deism (Viney). Arguably, the deists are somewhere between an out-and-out skeptical dismissal of religion and the skepticism of the religious.

Atheism did not come into full flower, so to speak, until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Skepticism about revelation was fueled by the developmental perspectives

furnished by the new sciences of comparative linguistics, Egyptology, geology, and paleontology all of which cast a dark shadow over more literal interpretations of the Bible. The sociological theories of Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Émile Durkheim added weight to the atheist cause, as did the philosophical approaches of Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. The evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin eroded trust in the popular design argument for God's existence, which had so impressed the deists. After the Civil War, the orator Robert Ingersoll, known as "the great agnostic," brought skepticism about revelation and Christianity to throngs of people in his public speeches. The founder of American psychology, William James, was critical of traditional theology but lent a sympathetic ear to religion. However, Sigmund Freud, founder of psychoanalysis, could find in religion only the illusion of wish fulfillment.

Emanuel Haldeman-Julius' Skeptical Dismissal of Religion

EHJ was the beneficiary of this tradition of skepticism. His formal education stopped in the eighth grade, but he was an avid reader with an eagerness to learn, always seeking out those he considered best able to instruct him. The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, EHJ says that his parents "didn't seem to care a damn" about religion (*My First* 15). He never identified any more with Judaism than with any form of Christianity (*My First* 32). He says he was always a materialist (*My First* 29), which meant that he believed neither in a soul nor in a life after death (*My Second* 77). Commenting on crude visions of the afterlife proposed by some Christians, he said, "I'd rather *die* than go to Heaven" (*The Militant* 10). He was an atheist from his early teenage years after having read the writings of Khayyam, Voltaire, Paine, and Ingersoll, authors whose works would later appear in the early numbers of the Little Blue Books. The skeptical author whose titles appear more than any other in the series

is the English monk-turned-atheist, Joseph McCabe (1867-1955), whom EHJ met in the mid-1920s. His admiration for McCabe was boundless; he often described him as “the greatest scholar in the world” (*How the World's*). EHJ said that he would be entitled to “a footnote in the record of man’s cultural progress” if for no other reason than he had published an immense list of McCabe titles for a world-wide audience (*My Second* 20; cf. 92).

Another skeptical author whom EHJ admired was the English philosopher-mathematician Bertrand Russell. According to Alice, EHJ’s daughter, her father never met Russell (Ryan 54), but they corresponded, and he was happy to publish Russell’s essays – in many cases the essays’ first appearance was in the Blue Book series. One of Russell’s most well-known essays was “A Free Man’s Worship” (published in Little Blue Book 677); of this essay, EHJ said, “It’s one of the finest things I’ve ever read,” and he called it a “short masterpiece” (Ryan 56). He indicated that the booklet was not a popular number, but he kept it in print because of the value he saw in it. Four of the Little Books and fourteen of the Big Blue Books were titles by Russell.

EHJ’s friends and acquaintances were among the most well-known writers and thinkers of his day, beginning in his late teens when he was befriended by a librarian, Lilian Leonora Parsons, who introduced him to Mark Twain (*My First* 38-39). He recounted a meeting with the famous Missourian in an article published in 1910. Of Twain he later wrote, “No more bitter, devastating skeptic ever lived”; his impiety and irreverence were “Gargantuan, Niagaran, Himalayan (what weak and puny adjectives for him!)” (*The Militant* 117). In his twenties, he came to know Clarence Darrow, a man he described as “the wittiest, most humorous man I’ve ever known” (*My First* 26). In July 1925, EHJ and his wife, Marcet Haldeman-Julius (1887-1941), drove to Dayton, Tennessee, to witness the “Scopes Trial.” In September 1925, Darrow and his wife Ruby visited the Haldeman-Juliuses in Girard (Marcet HJ, “Famous” 17; Penland). EHJ published

the transcript of the exchange between Darrow and Bryan at the trial (*The Famous*). For her part, Marcet wrote lucid and insightful accounts of her experiences in Dayton and of Darrow (“Impressions”; “Famous”).

According to Marcet, her husband said that he was “just not interested” in the struggles that people have with religious belief. In 1925, she explained EHJ’s attitude in this way:

Emanuel never has come, in a personal way, face to face with these questions. Questions, I have no doubt, decided in the end by one’s temperament rather than by logic, but, by most of us at least, faced and decided. It is almost unbelievable, but Emanuel never has passed through sorrow. Never has he lost – through death or disillusion – anyone inexpressibly dear to him. Never in all his life has he met with a devastating defeat. Hardship he has known – plenty of them – but not grief; struggle, but not failure. Never yet has he had to go down into the depths and innermost recesses of his own soul to search out in agony or humiliation its ultimate secrets. Life for Emanuel has been one long exhilarating conquering of obstacles; one exciting, but steady advance, a solidly-built pyramid of success. (*What the Editor's* 46)

By Marcet’s account, the existential crises that can occasion the adoption or rejection of religious belief were unknown to her husband. Nevertheless, he held strong and apparently unshakable opinions on the subject of religion. In his words, religion is “sham,” meaning that it is false and that it opposes what is useful and necessary for life (*The Militant* 23). Here is a typical statement of his views: “Religion is the record of men’s foolish, wild speculations and unintelligently narrow, severe dogmas about what they didn’t know” (*What Is* 6). EHJ would have appreciated the title of Christopher Hitchens’ book, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. According to EHJ, the effect of religion is to “frighten men and distort their views and poison every process of their reasoning” (*The Meaning* 5). More simply, “religion poisons the mind” (*The Meaning* 25).

EHJ did not provide a systematic account of the harm he found in religion. For this, he deferred to McCabe and others (like Russell), for the scholarly heavy lifting, so to

speak. EHJ edited and saw to the publication of McCabe's, *The Story of Religious Controversy* (1929), an imposing tome of over 600 pages, most of which originally appeared as thirty-one Little Blue Books published between 1926 and 1927. In his introduction to the book, EHJ spares no accolades for McCabe's character, scholarly acumen, and arguments. "It is the most important work ever written on religion by the man who is best qualified in every way for such an immense task" he gushed (McCabe viii). For EHJ, McCabe had made the definitive case against religion – the person eager to defend religion "sees his card-house of illusion scattered by the inexorable gale of facts" (McCabe x).

These glowing recommendations notwithstanding, McCabe's work did not meet the usual standards of scholarly rigor and it did not garner much attention from academicians. McCabe usually gave a few in-text citations, but EHJ was proud of the fact that McCabe used no footnotes. "Footnotes are like having to run downstairs during the first night of a honeymoon" (*My Second* 96). One may laugh, but for those accustomed to academic writing, there is no excuse for failing to carefully document all of one's sources. It is a point upon which any scholarly reviewer of McCabe's manuscripts would have insisted. Then again, EHJ says that he never rejected any of McCabe's manuscripts and never changed a single word of any of them (*My Second* 94). In other words, the only peer-review that McCabe's Blue Books had was EHJ himself, and he always accepted them without revision. Undaunted, EHJ was sure that, "A century hence, McCabe's books will still be read" (*My Second* 20).

Samuel S. Cohon's review of McCabe's *The Story of Religious Controversy*, published in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* (1932) – the only review I've been able to find – tells a different story. Cohon (Hebrew Union College) speaks of McCabe's "great show of learning" whereby he "juggles the data of anthropology and of history" to reach the conclusion that religion is "a body of mistaken notions of the world and of human life ..." (197). For McCabe, the great scientists

are "the true saviors of the race" except when they adopt religious views, in which case they are "plain frauds," ignorant of science as well as of religion, and McCabe takes it upon himself to instruct them on scientific topics (198). Cohon maintains that McCabe "presents a caricature of Higher Criticism and archaeology" (200). Contrary to the explicit injunction of Leviticus (19:18 and 34), McCabe claims that "Jews never even professed to love anybody but Jews" (qtd in Cohon 201). (Dawkins is guilty of the same error, see Friedman 208-14). Cohon concludes: "The book itself with its hostility to everything religious, its inaccuracies and crudities is of little consequence." It reflects the mentality of those "whose religion is to rid humanity of religion" (201).

One may add to Cohon's critique that McCabe had difficulty being true to his own principles. He contrasts the cleanliness, tolerance, and science of Moorish Spain with the squalor, intolerance, and ignorance of Christian Europe. He is careful to clarify that Muhammad's "religion was not a civilizing force – no religion is or ever has been ..." (McCabe 430-31). A few pages later he claims that "the Moors set up their high culture rather in defiance of the Koran"; he concedes, however, that their philanthropy and their toleration of Jews and Christians were based on the Koran, "though it had its chief source in refinement and chivalry" (437). This qualification allows McCabe to maintain a tenuous connection to his anti-religious views. He praises the great Mosque of Cordova, never mentioning the obvious, but to his view embarrassing fact, that it was a Muslim house of worship in the days of the Moors. He misrepresents Ibn Rushd as claiming that "all revealed religions were impostures" (445). (See Najjar's translation of Averroës 2001 for a more accurate view.) Finally, McCabe praises Maimonides and the contributions of Jews to this civilization, especially the high medical knowledge. One is left to wonder: where, in all of this, is the *intrinsic antagonism* that McCabe continually posits between religion and science?

Alfred North Whitehead warned that the obsession with

the idea of the necessary goodness of religion is “a dangerous delusion” (Whitehead 18). McCabe and EHJ were obsessed by the contrary extreme, attributing the bulk of human-made catastrophes to religion. The focus of their ire was usually Christianity in its Roman Catholic and Protestant forms. McCabe had been a Catholic, and EHJ lived in a largely rural area of southeast Kansas and so he was more familiar with Protestant Christianity, especially Methodists and Baptists. He was especially offended by the support for the Ku Klux Klan among those he called “Methobaptist” (*The Militant* 59; cf. *My First* 34). EHJ had a legitimate complaint. In the early part of the century, in large segments of the country, the KKK was not recognized for the terrorist organization that it was (and remains). D. F. Griffith’s silent film, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), released when EHJ was twenty-six, lionized the Klan, and associated its aims with the ideals of Christianity. Moreover, there is no gainsaying the complaints about the opposition of the Catholic Church to progressive causes like birth control and the Church’s support of censorship as in the Comstock law of 1873.

There are evils aplenty to lay at the doors of the churches and religious fanatics, and these provided a seemingly endless supply of examples from which McCabe and EHJ made their case against religion. Yet, Moorish Spain demonstrates that it is simplistic to always consider religion as a cancer that causes social ills and never as a partial cure for them. History is much messier than that. The era of the American Civil War, of recent memory for those of McCabe’s and EHJ’s generation, saw churches on both sides of the slavery issue, each camp confidently citing their favored Bible verses. In the words of historian Mark A. Noll, the Civil War was “a theological crisis” (Noll 2006). In the past two centuries, the rise of political regimes openly hostile to religion and others exhibiting intolerant religious ideologies have caused untold misery. The philosopher Charles Hartshorne made the following observation:

[There are] hateful as well as superstitious and no longer

reasonably believable forms of religion. This is only too true. But there is also no scarcity of hateful and not reasonably believable forms of atheism and quasi-deifications of the planetary species to which we belong. (393)

What is needed is a nuanced approach that recognizes both the harms and the goods that spring from human motives which themselves inform social, political, and religious ideals.

Philosophical Arguments

Wrangling over the truth of religious ideas is at least as old as the Pre-Socratic philosophers, and the debates continue unabated. EHJ staked his claim in this centuries-long discussion, both criticizing arguments for God’s existence, and complaining of absurdities in the very concept of God. He was confident that science could give an account of the universe, and everything within it, without appealing to something outside the natural order as an explanation.

We turn to science for our understanding of the phenomena of life, near or far, large or small, and there is nowhere else that we can turn – certainly not to any wordy excursions into theology. ... Life is only to be explained in terms of itself – in direct, natural terms – and not in any superfluous God terminology. (*Facing* 26-27)

To those who ask, “Who made the universe?” EHJ’s response was, “Who made God?” J. S. Mill famously raised the same question (Mill 34). The monotheist considers God to be unmade, but EHJ asks, if one posits something unmade, why could it not be the universe itself? Here are his words from a public debate in 1930 in Kansas City with Rev. Burris Jenkins:

If everything must have a cause, then the First Cause must be caused. To say that this first Cause always existed is to deny the basic assumption of the theory and to provoke the rejoinder that if it is reasonable to assume a First Cause as having always existed, why is it unreasonable to assume that the materials of the universe always existed? (*Is Theism* 27).

EHJ calls this a “keen, penetrating objection to theology” (*The Age-Old* 43). Russell had used this reasoning in his

1927 radio address, "Why I am not a Christian" (Seckel 59). The new atheists are also fond of variations of this argument (Dennett 155; Dawkins 157; Hitchens 71). The claim is that theism, by introducing God as the reason for why there is a universe, has no explanatory advantage over atheism.

Since many of the greatest philosophers have been theists, it is not surprising that they thought of responses to these questions. The great monotheisms – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – teach that God is uncreated, not made by anything else. Arguably, this is a *defining feature* of God. Otherwise, monotheism is no different than the typical brand of polytheism, where there are origin stories for the gods, as in Hesiod's *Theogony*. This was Hume's point in his *Natural History of Religion* when he referred to polytheism as "superstitious atheism" (Hume 145). The counter-argument can be rephrased: If the question "Who made God?" *so much as makes sense*, then God does not exist. Therefore, to suppose that the question does make sense, as EHJ and others do, is to beg the question against theism. Put somewhat differently, it is a defining feature of monotheism that not everything has a cause of its existence, for God's existence is uncaused. This is precisely the conclusion of the various forms of the cosmological argument for God's existence. Contrary to EHJ's parody, *no* great philosopher argued for God's existence from the premise that everything must have a cause (see the schematics of the arguments in Craig; see also Clarke). This is as it should be, for as EHJ says, this would "deny the basic assumption of the [theistic] theory." Suffice it to say that the great philosophers did not enter the pantheon of philosophy by making such a silly mistake. Whatever defect cosmological arguments may have, this is not one of them.

As EHJ avers, the atheist is free to make a similar move, to wit, to show that, if atheism is true, there is one thing that has no cause, namely, the universe. In recent memory, Stephen Hawking argued that the universe is finite but uncaused (Hawking 2018). The verdict is still out on Hawking's

proposal. In any event, it is unclear whether Hawking is addressing the same question that the theist is raising, for like EHJ, he seems to think of God as a being that would exist *temporally prior* to the first moment of the universe, but this is not the standard monotheistic view, whether Christian or non-Christian, from Aristotle to Whitehead. If it could be successfully argued that the universe needs no cause, then the theist and the atheist would have hit an impasse on the nature of the uncaused entity or entities that exist. In that case, at least the opposing sides might understand each other and dispense with question-begging arguments that assume that every existing thing must have a causal explanation of its existence.

EHJ not only believed that God was not needed to explain the universe, he also argued that certain features of the universe point to the non-existence of God conceived as perfect in goodness and power. Following a long tradition of philosophers, he found the problem of evil insurmountable: injustice and pain are distributed as if at random, and too often it seems that innocent people suffer more than guilty people. In EHJ's words: "Yes, the problem of evil is too much for theologians. It can't be reconciled with the God idea. It is understandable only in a naturalistic, atheistic view of things" (*The Meaning* 14). As an example, EHJ noted how tornados are indiscriminate destructive forces. He mentions the tri-state twister of March 18, 1925 which killed 695 people in Missouri, Indiana, and Illinois (*The Militant* 59). Or again, on November 19, 1930, at 9:30 in the morning – an unusual month and time for a tornado – an F-4 funnel killed twenty-three people in Bethany, Oklahoma, a couple of hundred miles south-west of Girard. EHJ noted that the Haldeman-Julius plant was producing "an enormous stream of atheistic literature and godless modern knowledge pour[ing] forth to enlighten the masses" (*The Meaning* 26). He avers that God missed a golden opportunity by sparing the Girard publishing house. These disasters, he says, "come upon the just and the unjust, the pious and the impious" (*The Meaning* 27).

It is tempting to despair of answering this sort of skepticism, for the problem is as old as the Bible itself, probably older (cf. Habakkuk 1:13). Voltaire said that those who argue the case "are like convicts who play with their chains" (Voltaire 71). An important clarification is whether the problem should be construed in the spirit of a skeptical dismissal of religion or as arising from the skepticism of the religious. EHJ clearly considered the problem of evil as another nail in the coffin of God. However, there are any number of theists who raise legitimate – which is to say, honest and non-evasive – questions about the meaning of divine power. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "All confess that God is omnipotent; but it seems difficult to explain in what His omnipotence precisely consists" (Pegis 262 [ST I, Q 25, a.3]). Thomas went on to argue that it is nonsensical to claim that God could create a circle with unequal radii, restore a person's virginity who had lost it, or act in a way contrary to God's own nature (Aquinas 75 [SCG II, ch. 25, para. 14]). For Thomas, whatever else one means by "divine power" it must be framed within these parameters.

Others have gone further. Hartshorne argued that there are states of affairs that, *in principle*, no single being could bring about. The quality of the relationship between two people depends on the actions of both. Neither person individually can bring about the relationship. The logic of the matter does not change if God is one of the persons. For this reason, Hartshorne argued that the traditional idea of God being able to create, singlehandedly, any conceivable state of affairs, "is not even coherent enough to be false" (86). With multiple decision-makers comes the possibility of tragedy, for the confluence of decisions does not always make for the best possible outcome. Following the Russian theologian Nicholas Berdyaev, Hartshorne held that there can be tragedy even for God (Hartshorne). More generally, he developed a metaphysic according to which every genuine individual has some creative power. He often quoted the Frenchman Jules Lequyer [or Lequier] who spoke of God

"who created me creator of myself" (Lequier 70). Others would make similar statements, explicitly tying the idea to evolution (Kingsley 231; Teilhard 39, 217; Bergson 325). Hartshorne's difference from Lequyer was to generalize the concept of creativity to allow for multiple forms, subhuman, human, and superhuman or cosmic (as in the case of God). For Hartshorne, divine creative power is exercised in maintaining a world of multiple lesser forms of power and in luring the creatures to richer forms of experience.

I mention these ideas not to solve the problem of evil but to show that, contrary to EHJ, it was, and remains, an open question, a question that is treated intelligently with arguments that approach life realistically, a value that EHJ was keen to promote (*Facing Life*). Nor is it a question of a hackneyed fundamentalism. With the exception of Lequyer, who wrote before Darwin, the theists mentioned in the previous paragraph were evolutionists. Moreover, Hartshorne was both a philosopher and an ornithologist who completed a major scientific study of song birds (Hartshorne). It is safe to say that EHJ would have rejected all of these philosophies, for he believed that evolution is inimical to theism (*The Militant* 92), and he was a thoroughgoing mechanistic determinist. He was convinced that free will is an illusion (65). He also spoke of the "strong authority for the idea that man, like the lower animals, is a mechanism – a machine – and that the whole universe is mechanical" (*Is Theism* 25).

It is undoubtedly true that the mechanical *analogy* for animals, for humans, and even for the universe has been extremely useful. However, to extend the analogy to literalism is to engage in *metaphor*, and metaphors, by their very nature are literally false. For example, to treat animals or humans simply as machines is to treat them as mere *things*, as *its*, having *uses*, but as having no *feeling*, no *emotions*, no *personality*, no *subjective awareness*, no *point-of-view*, no *intrinsic worth*. Are we, then, simply more complicated machines, products of a merely mechanical evolutionary process, more complicated than the machines

of human contrivance? We know that machines can be made to *simulate* human characteristics, but could a complicated enough machine be alive? Be a person? Perhaps. But this is, after all, the stuff of science fantasy. It is *not* an established deliverance of science or philosophy. It is a promissory note, and it takes a leap of faith to suppose that the mechanical philosophy has the funds in its account to cover the cost.

EHJ mentions "strong authority" as being on his side, but that is bluster. The authorities disagree with one another. Three years prior to his debate with Rev. Jenkins, EHJ published Little Blue book 509, a debate at Carnegie Hall between Clarence Darrow and Will Durant on the subject, "Are We Machines?" Durant took the negative and lined up six well-known scientists of the day, both in physics and the life sciences, who found the machine metaphor wanting. For good measure, Durant threw in Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Although Durant did not mention him, it would be difficult to find a stronger authority than C. S. Peirce, a philosopher who was among America's greatest logicians and himself no mean scientist. Peirce argued that, as far as science is concerned, mind is "quite as little understood as matter, and the relations between the two an enigma" (Buchler 53). Anyone familiar with the philosophy of mind knows that this statement remains true to our day (see Searle's well-received introduction to the subject). Peirce argued for a metaphysic according to which matter is "merely mind hidebound with habits" (Buchler 350). To be sure, this is a speculative proposal, but no more so than materialist theories of mind. It is either ignorant or disingenuous to dismiss the Peircean view, and others similar to it, as inimical to the spirit of science.

These speculations are relevant to the subject of divine power. This is because concepts of God have implications for understanding the nature of the universe no less than the nature of the universe has implications for concepts of God. Theists like those mentioned above – especially, Lequyer, Kingsley, Berdayev, Teilhard, Peirce, Bergson, Whitehead,

and Hartshorne – would agree with EHJ in rejecting the all-determining God that some theologies promote or imply. Contrary to EHJ, they reject the machine-metaphor as fully adequate to understanding reality; they recognize it as useful, but it fails to do justice to what Teilhard called "the heart of matter," a reality that is much more dynamic than any actual machine of which we are aware. Their metaphysical views, so often informed by a deep understanding of evolution, allow for a God that is in give-and-take relationships with the creatures. Rather than asking what the world would be like if a perfect God existed (EHJ's approach), they ask what perfection in God would be like given the nature of the world (not EHJ's machine-world). Rabbi Abraham Heschel replaced the unmoved mover of traditional theology with a "most moved mover." Hartshorne modified this: God is "the most *and best* moved mover" (Viney 2006).

Modernist Theology in the Crosshairs

Both McCabe and EHJ viewed the attempt to modernize religion as an exercise in futility. In EHJ's words:

Modernism is an attempt to escape the intellectual difficulties, the absurdities, of religion by the dodge of vagueness and pious, sentimental generalization instead of the direct way of rationalism. (*Outline* 231)

EHJ wrote Little Blue Books criticizing well-known modernist scientists (*Is "Knowledge"*; *Sir James*) and modernist preachers (*What Is; Is Science*). His basic criticism of the modernists is that they concede that science has put the lie to traditional religious ideas but the "religion" that remains is nothing like what the person in the pew believes – no infallible Bible, no creeds, no miracles, no literal resurrection, no heaven and hell, etc. – "the religion of the masses" (*The Meaning* 4). What remains, according to EHJ is "dim religious shadow thinking" and "poetry mistaking itself for formal thought" (*Is Science* 28, 30). As he cleverly put the point, "when all of the religious ideas are taken out of religion" then "there is no conflict between science and

religion" (35).

It is a fair question whether EHJ had an unduly narrow view of religion as well as an inflated idea of the competencies of science. He insists that religion must die if it changes. In fairness, there are some religious people who agree. Fundamentalists usually think of the Bible as an ancient and unchanging source of immutable truth, the inerrant word of an infallible God. By contrast, EHJ, who said he cut his eye-teeth on Paine's *Age of Reason* (Sue Haldeman-Julius: 7), sounded like the old patriot when he declared:

[The Bible] is a degrading book, bloodthirsty, illogical, untrue and hate-breeding. It has been a curse to all generations, a burden to civilization, and should be relegated to a place alongside the historically interesting, but unacceptable, myths of other decayed and spent religions. (*The Militant* 56)

The fundamentalists and EHJ share an important assumption. They treat the Bible as though it were a single book instead of the library of writings that it is, redacted at different times by different editors. A more historically informed view is that the biblical authors, inspired or not, did not agree on every subject on which they wrote. They penned different accounts of creation, they wrote and rewrote histories, and they revised or discarded various ideas from their predecessors about a variety of subjects, both religious and non-religious. Harry Emerson Fosdick – about whom EHJ had a low opinion – wrote a detailed, but very readable, account of the development of ideas in the Bible (*Religion*). The developmental approach to the writings of the Bible allows one to move past what I have called the skeptical dismissal of religion and to track, through history, the skepticism of the religious, including its presence in the Bible.

As hard as some people try to freeze, for all subsequent generations, what they see as the verities of their faith, the religion does not exist that has remained static over time. Fosdick wrote that "one of the best things about [religious organizations] is that, in spite of themselves, they cannot remain as they are" (*Religion* 5). Likewise with theology: All

theology tentatively phrases in current thought and language the best that, up to date, thinkers on religion have achieved; and the most hopeful thing about any system of theology is that it will not last (*Religion*).

Doubtless, some religious believers would prefer that there is a single idea of God, but it is one of the tasks of systematic theology to inquire about the meaning of the concept of God. The best theologians do not close the book on God, they open it. When EHJ – echoed by Richard Dawkins many years later – said: "God is the most desperate character, the worst villain in all fiction" (*The Meaning* 16; cf. Dawkins: 31), it is fair to ask, "To which concept of God are you referring?" It is unavailing to speak of "the God of the Bible." There may well be a God to whom biblical authors refer and which they reveal – let us abstain on that question – but they refer to that being in so many different ways that one cannot simply assume that there is a single concept of God in the Bible. The evidence is against it. What Fosdick says of the New Testament is true of the Bible as a whole: *there is no such thing as biblical theology, only biblical theologies* (*A Guide* 121-22). The many things said of God help to account for the variety of philosophical and theological ideas that have developed over time – for a sampling of this variety see the books by Hartshorne and Reese and Pessin.

Playing with a Bag of Notions

EHJ's rhetoric was often strident and he could seem unsympathetic to his foes. Yet, for all his venom for religious ideas, he was capable of almost sounding like a liberal theologian:

If I am any judge, the preachers have made no end of trouble for the Most High. They have loaded him with all sorts of crazy responsibilities, blamed him for everything under the sun, and praised him for things that, it may well be, were disgusting in his sight. (*The Militant* 63)

Of course, this is said tongue-in-cheek, but it is also the stuff of which the skepticism of the religious is made, from Socrates

to Hartshorne. It is an intersection of thought between EHJ and the modernists he criticizes.

Another point of agreement occurs when EHJ tones down his critique and reflects on his own fallibility.

We men gabble too much. Look at me! Look at the good, white paper I use up each week carrying my chatter to my listeners. But one thing should commend me to God: I never pretend to talk for God. ... I can speak what I know, or rather, what I think I know, for I am frank enough to label my most precious thoughts and ideals as notions. I have a bag of notions that I play with, while searching for the truth. They are notions, nevertheless. Some of them give one a hint, perhaps a glimmer of truth, but in essence they are still notions. ... How much better it would be if all of us – scientists, philosophers, theologians – were to throw all our ideas into a heap, call them notions, and begin all over again. Too many of us belong to our ideas, when really the ideas should belong to us. Beware of being labeled and filed away. Be bigger than labels. And the best way to begin is to label all your pet ideas notions. (*The Militant* 62)

In a similar vein, Hartshorne counselled that we should not only be skeptical, but we should also be skeptical of our skepticisms (*Creativity* 7). And surely, the best way to do that is not through dogmatic assertions of religious creeds, overblown claims about the reach of scientific methods, or declarations of certainty. Again, there could be a meeting of the minds between EHJ and the modernists – or at least those who follow in their footsteps. I hope modernists would agree in saying that EHJ's efforts on behalf of public education, his advocacy of reasoned discourse, his devotion to the good of society, and his interest in the matters of ultimate concern with which philosophy and religion have always dealt make him a deserving object of our gratitude.

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