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Course Plan

- October 20
 - The Parliament of the World's Religions
 - *Seeking Common Ground*
 - What is Religion? What is God?
- October 27
 - Arguments For and Against the Existence of God
 - The social and psychological value of religion
 - The Evolution of Religion and the Rise of the Nones
- November 3
 - Ethical Issues
 - Religion in Art and Culture
 - Religion as Ideology
- November 10
 - Religion without God?
 - Political Challenges
 - Religious Liberty and Secularism

Today's Notes:
<https://andrewfiala.com/rel-and-phil-3/>

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Seeking Common Ground Book Launch

Dublin, Ireland and on Zoom
Nov. 4, 12:30PM Pacific

- <https://www.eventbrite.ie/e/book-launch-seeking-common-ground-a-theistatheist-dialogue-tickets-192311096667>
- ZOOM Link: <https://dcu-ie.zoom.us/j/94928612384?pwd=Z25JOXRySkVWTWtFMEN3bW1GcStCZz09>

DCU
Office of the
Book Review
Dublin City University

Book Launch

Seeking Common Ground: A Theist /Atheist Dialogue

by Peter Admirand, DCU
and Andrew Fiala,
Fresno State University

As part of the launch, both authors will be joined by a panel of experts discussing the obstacles and hopes in atheist-theist dialogue:

Dr Ed Kessler MBE,
Founder President, Woolf Institute,
Cambridge

Michael Nugent,
Chairperson, Atheist Ireland.

Jillian Brennan,
Chief Executive Officer, The Humanist
Association of Ireland

Dr Sandra Cullen,
Lecturer in Religious Education,
DCU School of Human Development

Date:
Thursday, 4th November 2021

Time:
7.30 pm

Where:
John Hand Room,
DCU All Hallows Campus

RSVP:
Peter.admirand@dcu.ie

**SEEKING
COMMON
GROUND**
A Theist/Atheist Dialogue

Andrew Fiala Peter Admirand
foreword by Jack Moline

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Upcoming Ethics Center Events

- Nov. 15, 5-6pm
 - Ethical Leadership with Ashley Swearingin
 - <https://securelb.imodules.com/s/1692/GID2/blank.aspx?sid=1692&gid=2&pgid=1823&cid=3467>
- Fresno State Day of Giving, November 4
- Give to the Ethics Center: <https://dayofgiving.fresnostate.edu/giving-day/43710/donate?dept=43765>

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Fiala's Skeptical Atheist/Agnostic Argument

- "The Philosopher's God" is the best theory we have of God
 - Omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent God
- Atheism about revealed religions
 - The God of the revealed religions is not the philosopher's God: not omnipotent, omniscient, or omnibenevolent (cf. *Euthyphro*)
 - SO: the god of myth/scripture is not really God
- Agnosticism about The Philosopher's God
 - The Philosopher's God might exist or might not... How would we really know?

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Problem of Pluralism

- Which God/religion?
 - Religions do not agree (within or between traditions)
 - Some traditions are not theistic: Buddhism
- How would we know which tradition, texts, prophets, and interpretation is the right one?
- How could we decide without trying each and every religion?

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Two Kinds of Pluralism

- **Reductive Pluralism**
 - All Religions say the same thing...
Or agree about the most important things
- **Non-Reductive Pluralism**
 - Deep Diversity: Respect/Acknowledge Difference
 - The World's Religions do not agree



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Reductive Pluralism

Vivekananda at 1st Parliament of World's Religions (1893)

- As the different streams having their sources in different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee.

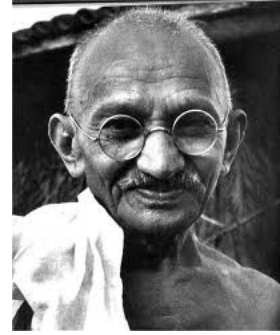


Vivekananda
1863 – 1902

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Reductive Pluralism Gandhi, “Religion and Truth”

To me God is Truth and Love; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of Light and Life and yet He is above and beyond all these. God is conscience. He is even the atheism of the atheist

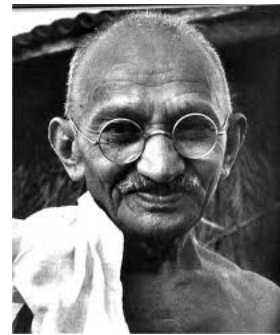


M.K. Gandhi
1869-1948

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Gandhi, “Religion and Truth”

He transcends speech and reason He is a personal God to those who need His personal presence. He is embodied to those who need His touch. He is the purest essence. He simply is to those who have faith. He is all things to all men.



M.K. Gandhi
1869-1948

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Dalai Lama

All of the different religious faiths, despite their philosophical differences, have a similar objective. Every religion emphasizes human improvement, love, respect for others, sharing other people's suffering. On these lines every religion has more or less the same viewpoint and the same goal.

Kindness, Clarity, and Light (1984)

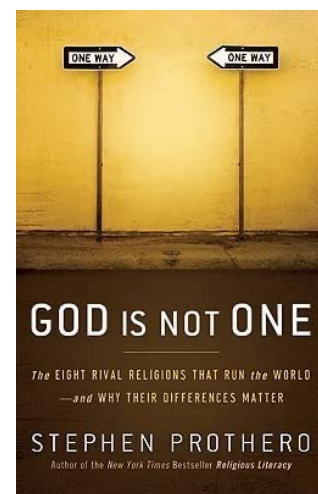


Tenzin Gyatso b. 1938

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Non-Reductive Pluralism Stephen Prothero

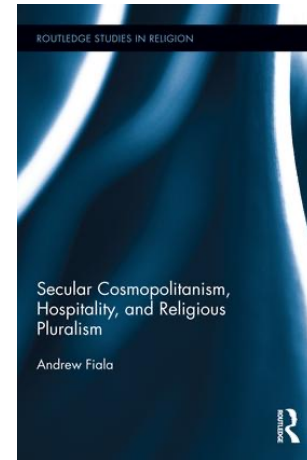
- It is comforting to pretend that the great religions make up one big, happy family. But this sentiment, however well-intentioned, is neither accurate nor ethically responsible. God is not one.
- Faith in the unity of religions is just that—faith (perhaps even a kind of fundamentalism). And the leap that gets us there is an act of the hyperactive imagination.
 - Prothero, *God is Not One* (2010)



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Non-Reductive Pluralism Fiala

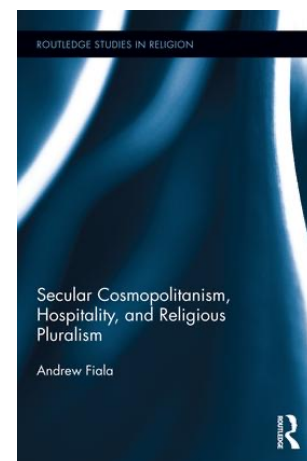
- Reductive pluralism is false because the world's religions simply do not agree about a lot of things. Religious people disagree about the existence of the soul and the existence of God. They disagree about the number of the gods and the ultimate destination of the universe. They disagree about which books and prophets to consult. And they disagree about rituals, holy places, Sabbath days, etc. As mentioned above, Muslims go to Mecca and Catholics go to mass. It is not possible to reconcile these differences. And indeed, it is insulting to suggest that Muslims should simply take mass or that Catholics should go to Mecca.



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Non-Reductive Pluralism Fiala

- The specificity of the beliefs and traditions matters to religious people. Meanwhile, non-religious people find all of this to be irrelevant to a good life: they neither take mass nor go to Mecca. Reductive pluralism of the Gandhian sort is nice, but it fails to account for all of this diversity. Indeed, religious pluralism of the reductive sort is dangerous because it is based upon a sort of wishful thinking that causes us to ignore and downplay religious difference.



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Discussion

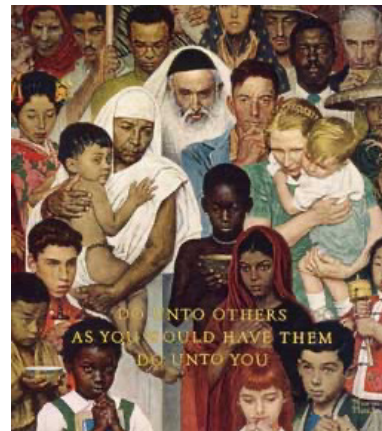
Do all Religions Say the Same Thing?



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Pluralistic Convergence Ethics?

- The Golden Rule?
 - Positive: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.
 - Negative: don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you
- Love?
 - For near neighbors, kin, ethnic/tribal?
 - Or for all others?
- Compassion
 - For other humans?
 - For non-human beings?



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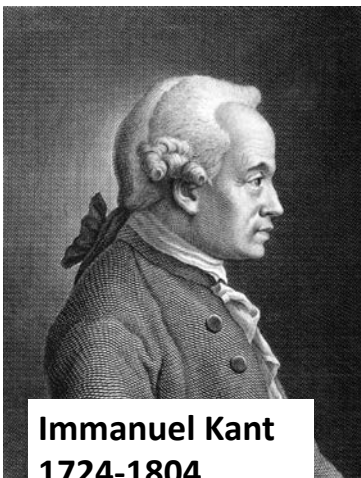
Ethical Questions/Problem

- Divine Command Ethics
 - God is the source of ethics and the motivation for being ethical
 - Love God and Love Your Neighbor
 - Can you love your neighbor without loving God?
 - Can atheists be ethical?

- You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the laws and the prophets.
 - Matthew 22:37–40 (see Mark 12:29–31; Luke 25:27)

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Kant's Interpretation of the Golden Rule



Immanuel Kant
1724-1804

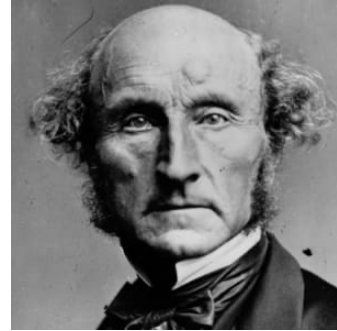
- Finally he (Jesus) combines all duties (1) in one universal rule, namely: Perform your duty for no motive other than unconditioned esteem for duty itself, i.e., love God (the Legislator of all duties) above all else; and (2) in a particular rule, that, namely, which concerns man's external relation to other men as universal duty: Love every one as yourself, i.e., further his welfare from good-will that is immediate and not derived from motives of self-advantage.

- Kant's deontological moral theory
 - Do your duty from pure motivation
 - Respect persons as ends in themselves
 - NOT doing your duty because you want God to reward you (or not punish you)

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Mill's Interpretation of the Golden Rule

- In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as one would be done by, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality.
- Mill's Utilitarian Moral Theory
 - Maximize the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people
 - "Religion of Humanity" is better than any supernatural religion

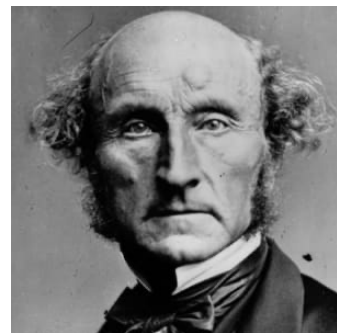


J.S. Mill
1806-1873

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Mill's Religion of Humanity

- ...the sense of unity with mankind, and a deep feeling for the general good, may be cultivated into a sentiment and a principle capable of fulfilling every important function of religion and itself justly entitled to the name...
- it is not only capable of fulfilling these functions, but would fulfil them better than any form whatever of supernaturalism. It is not only entitled to be called a religion: it is a better religion than any of those which are ordinarily called by that title.
 - Mill, *The Utility of Religion* (1850's)



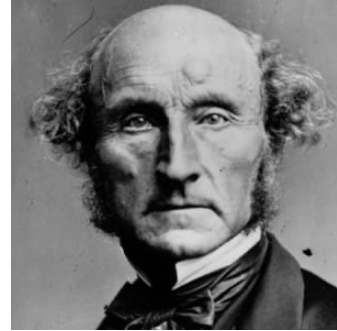
J.S. Mill
1806-1873

20

Mill's Religion of Humanity

- Even the Christ of the Gospels holds out the direct promise of reward from heaven as a primary inducement to the noble and beautiful beneficence towards our fellow-creatures which he so impressively inculcates. This is a radical inferiority of the best supernatural religions, compared with the Religion of Humanity; since the greatest thing which moral influences can do for the amelioration of human nature, is to cultivate the unselfish feelings in the only mode in which any active principle in human nature can be effectually cultivated, namely by habitual exercise: but the habit of expecting to be rewarded in another life for our conduct in this, makes even virtue itself no longer an exercise of the unselfish feelings.

- Mill, *The Utility of Religion* (1850's)

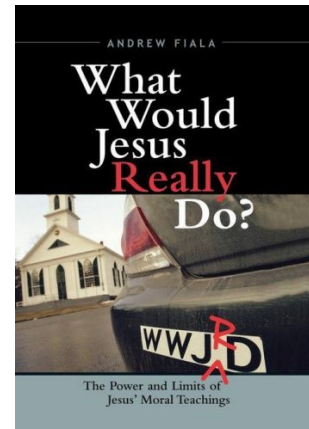


J.S. Mill
1806-1873

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Conflicting Ethical Messages

- There are ethical disagreements within religious traditions as well as between rival traditions. So even if there is a God, it is often not clear what is permitted or not permitted. Some Christians deplore homosexuality; others accept it. Some Christians forbid abortion; others permit it. Some Christians condemn euthanasia; others allow it. The problem of the divine command theory is thus that there is no univocal sense of what God commands. And the problem is exacerbated if we open our vistas beyond Christianity and take into account global religious diversity.



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Example: Abortion

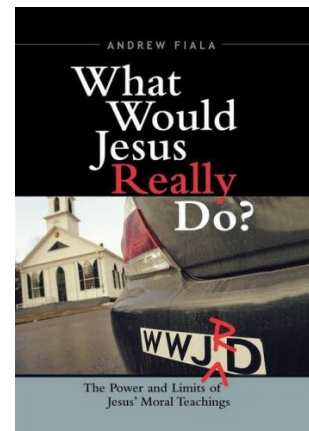
- Our creator endowed us with the right to life, and yet millions of children lose their right to life every year because of abortion.
- Governor Gregg Abbott, amicus brief for U.S. Supreme Court
 - <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-joins-pro-life-amicus-brief-in-u.s-supreme-court>



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Example: Abortion

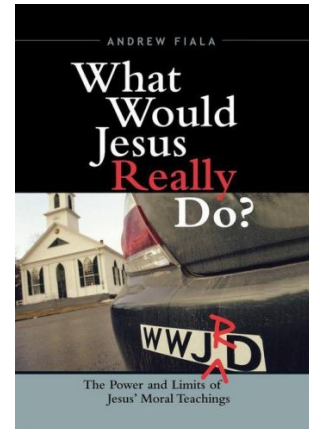
- Psalms 22:9–10 or 139:13–16, Jeremiah 1:5
 - Life in the womb
 - Luke 1: Jesus and John in their mother's wombs
 - He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15)
 - These are miraculous conceptions: Mary is a virgin; Elizabeth is a barren old woman
- Jesus loves children
 - "It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18:14)
 - But: Jesus is speaking of living children (not fetuses)
- The Apocalypse Problem
 - "For these are days of vengeance... Alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days" (Luke 21:22–23)
 - "Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck" (Luke 23:29).



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Example: Abortion

- Male Dominance in the Bible
 - Exodus 21:22–25
 - A miscarriage is caused
 - The husband's interest in punishment
 - Ancient understanding of reproduction → the mother and the child belong to the father
- Conclusion
 - Biblical texts are not definitive or reliable for thinking about abortion
 - We need humanistic ethics to help us think about these cases
 - And a secular legal system that allows for religious diversity



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Discussion/Questions Ethical Disputes

- Is there a unifying ethical message in the world's religions?
- Can we agree about ethical topics such as abortion?
- Do we need a more humanistic/philosophical approach to ethics?

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Religion: Art and Culture

This feature of religion—its aesthetic, creative, and playful nature—is something to be celebrated and enjoyed. All of this is an attempt to make sense of the world and of human life against the background of our sense of vulnerability, fragility, and mortality.

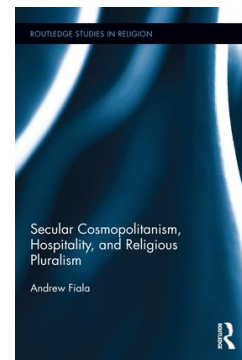


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Art and Culture

Religion as imaginative construction of meaning

- Religion—like art, politics, and even philosophy—is an imaginative construction of meaning. It is symbolic activity done within a community of shared understanding that is only loosely connected to the descriptive ontologies of scientific cosmology, biology, or history. Epistemological inquiries into the question of the truth of religious belief can cause a certain blindness toward the meaning of its symbols.

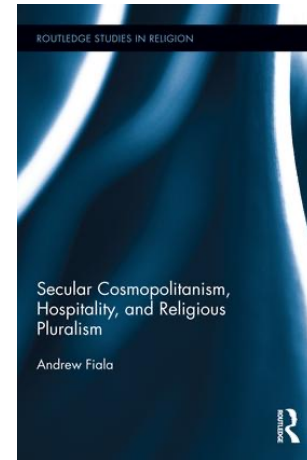


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Art and Culture

Religion as Consolation and Meaning Making

- Our sense of finitude and vulnerability is what leads us to religion in the first place. It is also what leads us toward political life—and the other consolations and solutions of the human spirit: art, music, literature, and the like.

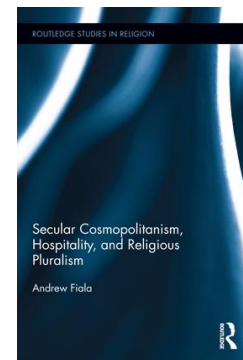


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Art and Culture

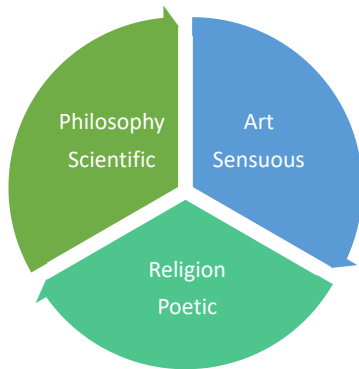
Religious “suspension of disbelief”

- Religion is as much art as it is science. The arts—painting, sculpture, music, theater, poetry, and story-telling—disclose things and make claims. But art is not science: its primary function is not to present a singular truth about the way the world is. Religion can be like that: a way of disclosing hopes, dreams, fears, and wonders that is not merely a declaration of truth. Like art, religion also demands a momentary suspension of disbelief that occurs and is reinforced within a community of participants.
- When we go to the theater or enter a museum, we put ourselves into a certain frame of receptivity, along with the others in the building, who share certain expectations of a kind of experience to be enjoyed in this space.
- The same is true of those who enter a religious space together: a socially constructed and mutually supportive form of experience is created through the rituals that unfold within the sacred space. It is easy to step outside of this and see it as silly, contrived, and superficial make-believe. And from a certain vantage point, this is the truth of religion and of art: it is a contrivance and a game of make-believe.

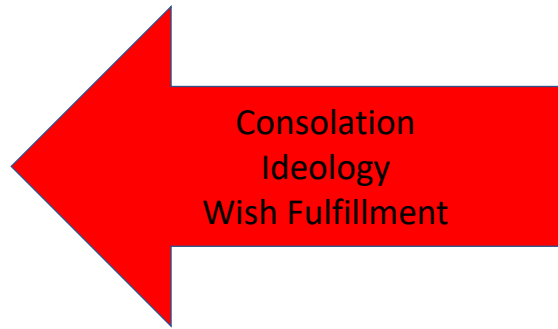


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Hegel's account of Absolute Spirit And Feuerbach/Marx/Freud Critique



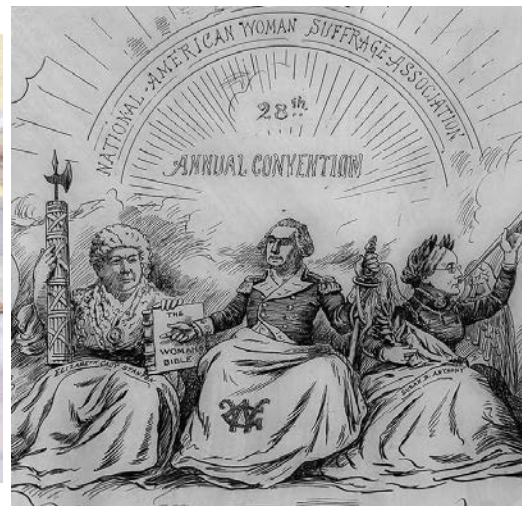
Hegel (1820's): The sentiment of art like the religious sentiment, like scientific curiosity, is born of wonder; the man who wonders at nothing lives in a state of imbecility and stupidity... Art is then the interpreter of religious ideas.



Marx (1844): Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.

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Whose symbols? What meaning?

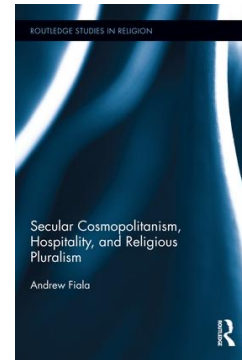


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The Problem of Fundamentalism/Monism

Taking one artform as supreme

- The reality of all of this is, however, obviously pluralistic. There are multiple religious games, just as there are a variety of arts and artists.
- We would quickly recognize the absurdity if one of the arts declared itself as the one true art: if tragedy declared itself superior to comedy, if sculpture declared itself superior to painting, or if opera declared itself superior to jazz.
- The human world is plural. Each of the arts is of interest, as is each of the religions. No one is superior to the other. Each discloses or creates a unique experience of the world, each responds to human finitude in its own way.



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Art and Culture

Texas: The Bible as the “state book”?

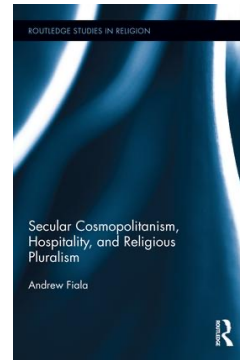
<https://spectrumlocalnews.com/tx/south-texas-el-paso/news/2021/09/30/lawmaker-files-resolution-to-have-bible-designated-state-book-of-texas->

- WHEREAS, The Bible has filled many roles in the saga of Texas, serving as a social and cultural touchstone that has been integral to the state's history and development; and...
- WHEREAS, During the Texas Revolution, such heroic figures as Sam Houston, William Travis, Juan Seguin, and Davy Crockett carried their Bibles for wisdom and inspiration; a Bible believed to be Sam Houston's own has been used to swear in more than 30 Texas governors in an enduring inaugural tradition, and it serves as a powerful symbol of continuity and state leadership; and...
- WHEREAS, The State of Texas grants official recognition to symbols that resonate broadly with the public and that have played an important part in shaping our state's identity; as a prominent element in the rich fabric of our Texas heritage, the Bible is truly deserving of such acknowledgment; now, therefore, be it
- RESOLVED, That the 87th Legislature of the State of Texas, 3rd Called Session, hereby designate the Bible as the official state book of Texas.

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Conclusion: *Secular Cosmopolitanism*

- I am agnostic about the deep metaphysical questions. There may be a God. The soul may be reincarnated. History may have a plan. But how would I know?
- My agnosticism leaves me convinced that no religion is actually true.
- And yet I am persuaded that truth does not matter much in religion, which is best understood in cultural terms as a form of life or set of practices.
- Most of the time, religion is performed, played, or practiced naively and without bothering with philosophical questions. This explains the need for liberty, civility, toleration, and hospitality. Different people practice their religions in different ways. They should be free to do so, so long as they do not oppress others. And we should greet one another civilly and with generosity and good will.



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Discussion/Conclusion

- Is Religion a form of playful make-believe similar to art?
- Are there ideological problems?
- How do we decide which form of art/religion to play along with?
- Can secular toleration allow us to co-exist?

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