

Atheism and the Playing of the Religion Card

A friend directed me to a freethoughtblogs.com blog post by Greta Christina entitled *(X) is Just Like A Religion... No It's Not*. It's a sensible post written from an atheist point of view that seeks to shape the rhetoric and change the apparent overuse of the Religion Card. I



I think her last paragraph sums up her point of view quite well:

We don't get to have it both ways. We don't get to say that religion is unique – and uniquely harmful, and uniquely deserving of our efforts to persuade people out of it – and then, whenever anyone does anything stupid or harmful for any secular reason, turn around and say, "It's just like religion!" It's not. If it's not a belief in supernatural entities or forces with an effect on the natural world, then it's not religion. Let's please stop saying that it is.

For Christina the thing that demarcates religion as something "uniquely harmful" is belief in the supernatural. She asserts that this belief invokes the removal of a reality check that amplifies the more broadly present human negative human tendencies for power plays and oppression and the like.

Some points in response

1) It's interesting that the negative connotation of her unique descriptor of religion is indirect – she does not (because she can not) argue that belief in the supernatural is inherently wrong – she simply asserts that it tends to amplify existing tendencies. (Of course she is completely ignoring

the many situations where people speak and work against those same harmful tendencies from a framework and motivation that incorporates the supernatural).

2) What this means is that even though she wants to tighten down the variables (an admirable intention) and come up with a principle to argue against, she has to fall back to an "argument from consequences" position. And this cuts both ways! If religion/supernaturalism can be judged on the outcome of the behaviour of its adherents – then so can irreligion, secularism and atheism. And this is why atheists want to call Stalinism pseudo-religious because they want to avoid the association by playing "that's not a genuine expression of my philosophy" card – i.e. it's not truly atheism/secularism so it must be sort-of-like-religion because that's what they do. Christina seems to be agreeing that such an argument is stupid – but she seems to insist that the religious side have to play that same card; we are not allowed to disassociate ourselves from those supernaturalists who are obviously depraved!

3) Moreover, there is a problem with supernaturalism as a demarcator. The first problem is that she fails to define supernaturalism. In particular she fails at defining its bounds. This is not a problem for the religious supernaturalists amongst us – we fully acknowledge that the reality of life incorporates an interplay between the natural and supernatural – scientific research can and is a spiritual experience! We can cope with both fanciful imagination and analytical thought! But Christina must draw a line (which she doesn't). At what point does purely rational interaction with the natural end and supernatural beliefs (or at least language and experiences) creep in. Where would speculative imagination stretching the bounds of quantum mechanics go, for instance? She would need to draw a line that doesn't cut off the purely rational contemplation of the unknown (that which is, therefore, beyond-nature). It would be hard for such a

line not to be arbitrary.

4) Secondly, I would suggest that “supernaturalism” wouldn’t adequately draw a line around the dots on the Venn Diagram of philosophical life. Its not entirely unhelpful: but I find that when I interact with atheists the argument is not theological but epistemological. My epistemogical position as a “religious” person is that a certain amount of knowledge is *revelatory*. An atheist must insist that all truth has to be *deductive*. Drawing the epistemological line may be more indicative of reality, methinks. And it would also mean that I can still suggest to the disciples of Dawkins et al. who wait with bated breath for the next oracular dissertation of their supreme intellects that they, like me, like everyone, are religious beings.