

The Outsider Test for Faith: How Serious a Challenge Is It?

The crusading atheist John Loftus, formerly a fundamentalist preacher who left the faith of his youth and set up the Debunking Christianity website, has made quite a splash in the blogosphere with his so-called Outsider Test for Faith. He first articulated his understanding of this test in his book *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity*,¹ and he defended it further and also responded to criticisms in "The Outsider Test for Faith Revisited."² The upshot is that he and others, many of whom frequent his website, seem to think that the Outsider Test represents a formidable challenge to faith of any kind. Frank Zindler, editor of *American Atheist Magazine*, has thus written: "If John Loftus never wrote anything else, he will be remembered a century from now for his *Outsider Test for Faith*."³ But is Zindler right about that? Do we really have here a serious challenge to religious belief? For my own part, I seriously doubt it.

Just what, then, is the Outsider Test for Faith (OTF), according to Loftus? He writes: "the central thesis is is a challenge to believers to test or examine their own religious faith as if they were outsiders with the same presumption of skepticism they use to test or examine other religious faiths" (p. 84). That, of course, raises two crucial and all-important questions: Just how are we to understand this "presumption of skepticism?" and how are we to understand the idea of an outsider in the present context? Accordingly, after examining Loftus' initial argument for the OTF and subjecting it to a couple of preliminary criticisms, I shall take up each of these questions in turn. I shall then argue that, once we remove a fundamental inconsistency in Loftus'

¹ John Loftus, *Why I Became an Atheist: A Former Preacher Rejects Christianity* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2008), Chapter 4.

² See Chapter 4 of John Loftus (ed.), *The Christian Delusion: Why Faith Fails* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2010). All page references embedded in the text will be to this work.

³ Quoted on an inside page of *The Christian Delusion*.

approach, the Outsider Test turns out to be relatively trivial and adds little or nothing of substance to any dispute that might arise between theists, atheists, and agnostics.

The Initial Argument

Step (1) and the lynchpin of Loftus's initial argument is the following "religious diversity thesis," as he calls it:

- (1) "Rational people in distinct geographical locations around the globe overwhelmingly adopt and defend a wide diversity of religious faiths due to their upbringing and cultural heritage" (p.82).

I propose to accept this as an empirical fact—bearing in mind, however, that we still need to examine, with some degree of specificity, how Loftus understands this so-called "wide" religious diversity.

From step (1) Loftus next draws, as an inductive inference, the following causal dependency thesis or what he calls the "religious dependency thesis":

- (2) "Consequently, it seems likely that adopting one's religious faith is not merely a matter of independent rational judgment but is causally dependent on cultural conditions to an overwhelming degree" (p. 82).

Now as it stands, (2) strikes me as too vague and unclear for anyone to assess its supposed import with any precision. In particular, it includes no distinction between those religious beliefs acquired in early childhood and those acquired (or perhaps reaffirmed) later in life after considerable reflection; neither does it distinguish between more reflective and less reflective persons, between those who really care about the truth or falsity of religious doctrines and those who could care less about such matters, or between those willing to challenge prevailing ideas (when it seems appropriate) and those who typically just go along with the crowd.

Vastly more important, however, is the relatively trivial⁴ nature of the claim that step (2) makes. Suppose we grant that, for some religious person S, the information recorded in step (1) confers a high degree of probability (much greater than .5) on the claim that S's religious faith is not merely a matter of independent rational judgment but is causally dependent on cultural conditions to an overwhelming degree. That is quite compatible, one should understand, with its being highly probable to the point of a near certainty, relative to another body of information (such as my knowledge of S's careful and critical approach to various issues), that S's *present* religious convictions are indeed a matter of independent rational judgment.⁵ Similarly, my knowing only that Gabriella and Emma, two of my own precious granddaughters, are feeding a swan at a local park may render it highly probable that they are feeding a white bird. But again, that is quite compatible, relative to another body of information, with an absolute certainty that they are in fact feeding a black swan. So step (2) of Loftus's argument does not have nearly the earth-shaking importance that he appears to attribute to it.

Still, having said all of that, I do want to acknowledge the important role that culture and upbringing play in shaping our early beliefs and in pointing us in a certain direction. Even my initial acceptance during my childhood of a host of empirically established truths—e.g., the truth that the earth is roughly spherical, even though it looked perfectly flat to me—was no doubt causally dependent on cultural conditions to an overwhelming degree. Nor is there much doubt, quite apart from various psychological and sociological studies of a kind that Loftus likes to cite, that we are not even minimally rational at the very beginning of our earthly lives; to the contrary, our rational and critical faculties emerge slowly and first begin operating in a context of

⁴ Trivial in the sense of being unimportant rather than in the sense of being redundant.

⁵ Of course an atheist might contend that no one *could* be a theist as a matter of independent rational judgment. But that amounts to little more than someone asserting dogmatically, "No one who disagrees with me on this matter exercises independent rational judgment."

ambiguity, ignorance, genetic predispositions, and powerful cultural influences. The corollary, Loftus contends, is a considerable degree of sociological determinism: "95 percent of people born and raised in Saudi Arabia are Muslim, while 95 percent of people born and raised in Thailand are Buddhist. If you were born in India, you'd likely be a Hindu. If you were born in Mexico, you'd likely be a Catholic" (p.83). We can, moreover, perhaps avoid getting bogged down in various perplexities about personal identity if we state the point this way: Because I was raised in a fundamentalist Christian community and church, it was highly probable (perhaps even inevitable) that I would start out my life as a (cultural) Christian; and if I had been switched as a baby and had been raised in a fundamentalist Muslim family in Saudi Arabia, it would again have been virtually inevitable that I would have started out my life as a Muslim. But so what? Why should it even matter, I ask, where or in what "accidental" set of circumstances someone's spiritual journey should begin?

By way of a partial answer to such questions, Loftus suggests that most religious people, even among the most intelligent and reflective, never (formally) convert to another religion or de-convert from their initially acquired religion viewed as a cultural phenomenon: "In most cases," he says, "we rarely stray from what we were raised in but merely move around among versions of the same general religion" (p. 83). My own informal impression, however, is that, depending upon how one might measure such things, many people travel a huge distance (in a host of different directions) over the course of a normal lifespan; and many observers, such as hospice workers who work with end of life issues, sometimes report great spiritual growth, as they interpret it, in the final days and weeks of a person's earthly life. Beyond that, I see no reason to deny that even very small movements, as judged from the outside, can sometimes signify profound spiritual progress. Do I rest any argument of substance on such subjective matters, or

expect to achieve universal agreement on them? Not at all. But I do suggest that one should not trivialize, as Loftus appears to do above, what it might mean to "move around among versions of the same general religion."

Here is why. The Christian tradition, which is the religious tradition I know best, is so rich and includes so much diversity within it that the question of diversity between the Christian tradition as a whole and some other religious tradition, such as Islam, may have little or no coherent meaning. Put it this way: A cultural Christian has no need to embrace another religious or cultural tradition, at least not formally, in order to embrace religious views typically associated with some other tradition. Take, for example, the great Christian poet John Milton, who emphatically rejected the one substance theory of the Trinity, adopted the Arian view that Jesus Christ was on a lower ontological level than God the Father, and even set forth an elaborate biblical argument in defense of polygamy. He had no need, in other words, to embrace the Muslim religion *as a cultural phenomenon* in order to embrace a concept of God that was virtually identical with the Muslim concept;⁶ yet, C. S. Lewis and others (including myself) still consider him a great Christian poet. Similarly, those Christians who come to believe in reincarnation, as more than a few do despite their upbringing, have no need to embrace all the nuances of the typical Hindu understanding and certainly have no need to embrace all of the cultural trappings and conventions of some particular sect in the Hindu religion. My point is that moving "around among versions of the same general religion" may involve profound (and easy to overlook) changes in one's religious outlook, changes that may be at least as momentous as converting to another religion (or

⁶ Clearly, a Muslim could easily have written the following words from Milton's *On Christian Doctrine*: "But unless the terms unity and duality mean the same with God as with man, it would have been to no purpose that God had so repeatedly inculcated that first commandment, that he was the one and only God, if another could be said to exist besides, who also himself ought to be believed in as the one God. Unity and duality cannot consist of one and the same essence. If two subsistences or two persons be assigned to one essence, it involves a contradiction of terms, by representing the essence as at once simple and compound [*The Works of John Milton* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), p. 195]."

even as adopting a kind of practical atheism). For as Loftus himself points out, "Worldviews are dynamic rather than static things, anyway. They are constantly changing with additional education and experience" (p. 97). So again I ask: Given such dynamism and so many dynamic opportunities for spiritual growth (however that should be construed) within any one of the great religious traditions, why should it even matter where one's spiritual journey begins?

However one might answer such a question in the end, Loftus next draws a further inductive inference from the conjunction of his religious diversity thesis and his religious dependency thesis, as set forth in steps (1) and (2) above:

(3) "Hence the odds are highly likely that any given adopted religious faith is false" (p.82).

And from (3) he finally derives the OTF as a conclusion:

(4) "So the best way to test one's adopted religious faith is from the perspective of an outsider with the same level of skepticism used to evaluate other religious faiths" (p. 82).

The numbering of these four steps, I should perhaps point out, belongs to Loftus. It reproduces accurately the order of his own presentation, and I emphasize this because the order of these steps is relevant to one of my two initial criticisms in the following section.

Two Perplexities and a Comment about Religious Diversity

Quite frankly, the order of Loftus's presentation perplexes me more than a little. I could at least understand the strategy if Loftus were to appeal to the OTF in conjunction with both his religious diversity thesis (step (1)) and his religious dependency thesis (step (2)) in an effort to discredit religion. But why first try to discredit all religious beliefs in step (3) and then tack on the OTF as a kind of afterthought in step (4)? Should not an outsider test for belief (OTB), as Loftus calls the more general principle, stand or fall on its own, depending on how one answers the two questions identified at the outset? If the OTB is indeed a useful test, then it should *re-*

quire no assumption at all concerning the truth or falsity, or even the probability, of a given belief and no assumption concerning which beliefs will ultimately pass it. A competent scientist, for example, who formulates a new scientific hypothesis to explain a given set of data need not suppose the hypothesis to be false (or even probably false) in order to see the virtue of subjecting it to the same skepticism to which he or she might subject a competing hypothesis. For however true the newly formulated hypothesis may appear to be, a competent scientist will not only treat it with an appropriate skepticism, but will also try hard to refute it as a means of testing it.

So my first perplexity concerns why Loftus even includes step (3) in his argument for the OTF. My second perplexity concerns the meaning of step (3) itself. Just what might it mean to say, as Loftus does, that some religious faith or, more confusing yet, that some religion *as a whole* is false, or even probably false? We certainly know what it means for some *specific proposition*, religious or otherwise, to be false, and we know what it means for a conjunction of propositions to be false (in the event that one of its conjuncts is false). When we consider a religion as a whole, however, we consider a very complex collection of beliefs and practices; and when someone claims that a complex collection of beliefs is false, it is by no means clear what is being claimed.⁷

As a Christian universalist, for example, I reject the understanding of hell that many Muslims share with many Christians. Does it follow that I reject either religious faith as false even though I agree with a host of propositions—e.g., that God created the heavens and the earth—essential to both faiths? As it stands, the question has no clear meaning. Given that some Christians never find any organized church to agree with in every detail, how much of a given church's credal statement must one accept in order not to reject the religious faith it represents?

⁷ You might as well claim that the collection of beliefs embodied in the American Declaration of Independence is false. Just which beliefs are you claiming to be false? All of them? If only some of them, but not others, then which ones are you claiming to be false?

Loftus himself identifies a particular religious faith with ðbeliefs that are essential for a member to be accepted in a particular religious community of faith who worship together and/or accept the same divinely inspired prophetic revelations whereby one's position in the afterlife dependsö (p. 82). But that merely muddies the waters further. For one thing, some charismatic individuals solve the problem of acceptance by the simple expedient of starting their own church, cult, or community of worship; for another, not every community of worship makes purity of belief a condition of acceptance or fellowship, and neither does every such community accept the fundamentalist assumption that one's religious beliefs at the moment of physical death determine ðone's position in the afterlife.ö

In order to achieve some degree of clarity, therefore, it is essential to set aside vague generalities about religions as a whole and to focus instead on very specific religious propositions. For when Loftus declares: ðAt best there can only be one true religion in what we observe to be a sea of false onesí ö (p. 99), I for one have no idea what he is trying to say. In addition to the confusion, mentioned above, inherent in declaring a complex set of beliefs to be false, the failure to distinguish between *very different* but logically consistent religious beliefs in different traditions, on the one hand, and *logically inconsistent* ones, on the other, further underscores the need to focus on specific propositions. It would also be unfair and discriminatory, as Victor Reppert once pointed out (see p. 99), to confine one's attention to the single category of religious propositions as opposed to moral, political, and metaphysical propositions. In what follows, therefore, I shall concern myself only with an outsider test, if there really is such a thing, as it applies to specific propositions of many different types.

But before considering the Outsider Test on its own merits, I want first to point out the extent to which Loftus still views the whole issue of religious diversity through the lens of his former fundamentalism. He writes:

Any loving god who requires us to believe correctly, when instead we have this extremely strong tendency to accept what we were raised to believe, especially if he'll punish us [everlastingly?] if we end up being wrong, should surely make the correct religious faith pass the OTF. If God exists and he doesn't care which religion we accept [or start out accepting, as I would put it], that kind of god might survive the OTF, but then we would end up believing in a nebulous god with no definable characteristics. But this god is much too different from the God of any full-blown Christianity and can safely be ignored (p. 84).

Observe first the implication here, which is absolutely correct in my opinion, that no perfectly loving God, such as the one pictured in the New Testament, would require us to believe correctly in some crucial matter without first providing us with overwhelmingly good reasons for doing so.⁸ Much less would he punish someone (everlastingly) for an honest mistake in abstract theology. But then, right after setting forth his *own correct description of what a truly loving (and wise) God would be like*, Loftus immediately contradicts himself, stating that such a God would also be a nebulous God with no definable characteristics. A perfectly loving and wise God would have no definable characteristics? That makes no sense at all. Why not say instead that such a God would never have started us out in so many diverse cultural contexts, or in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and illusion, unless he already knew that this would have no bearing whatsoever on our final destiny?

Observe also the following incongruity: After in effect conceding that a perfectly loving and wise God might indeed pass the OTF—conceding this, however, without ever explaining

⁸ In no way does this entail, however, that God must provide these overwhelmingly good reasons at the beginning of our earthly lives or even at some time during our earthly lives. In fact, I have elsewhere set forth the following hypothesis: For any independent center of consciousness and rational agent S, a metaphysically necessary condition of S's coming into being is that S start out in a context of ambiguity, ignorance, and even illusion. See Thomas Talbott, "Why Christians Should Not Be Determinists: Reflections on the Origin of Human Sin," *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008), pp. 300-316. See especially pp. 306-310.

what would count either as passing it or as failing it? Loftus then declares that such a loving and wise God would be much too different from the God of any full-blown Christianity and can safely be ignored. But that, if I may repeat myself, merely illustrates the extent to which he still views Christianity through a fundamentalist lens. For why else would he retain the fundamentalist assumption that, according to any full-blown Christianity, God will punish us if we end up being wrong? End up being wrong when, by the way? At the age of three? At the age of fifty? At the end of an earthly life? Whatever time limit (or limit of any kind) that some might place upon God's love and grace, the result will be, I contend, utterly inconsistent with the New Testament picture of God. One even wonders whether, according to Loftus's fundamentalist understanding, the Johannine declaration that God not only loves but *is* love (see I John 4:8 & 16) is likewise far removed from any full-blown Christianity. At the very least, he ought to acquaint himself with how those Christian universalists with no liberal anti-supernatural bias—George MacDonald and St. Gregory of Nyssa—would be but two examples—put biblical and theological ideas together.⁹ This is hardly the place to explain why I believe that the so-called biblical arguments for a traditional understanding of hell are so remarkably weak, or why I believe it so clear that St. Paul was himself a Christian universalist.¹⁰ It should perhaps suffice at this point simply to reproduce what I have written elsewhere about religious diversity:

Christian universalists, who believe that supreme power is at the service of supreme love and supreme wisdom, are in a unique position, among Christians, to put religious diversity into its proper perspective. They will no longer fear, for example, that an honest mistake in abstract theology might be eternally disastrous. They will simply proceed in the confidence that our Creator knows us from the

⁹ For a summary of MacDonald's way of putting biblical and theological ideas together, see Thomas Talbot, "The Just Mercy of God: Universal Salvation in George MacDonald" in Gregory MacDonald (ed.), *All Shall Be Well: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), Chapter 10. For why MacDonald, like Kierkegaard, held that possessing correct doctrine is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of saving faith, see pp. 224-227.

¹⁰ For my own interpretation of some of the relevant biblical material, see my four chapters in Robin Parry and Christopher Partridge, *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

inside out far better than we know ourselves; that he appreciates the ambiguities, the confusions, and the perplexities we face far better than we do; and that he understands the historical and cultural factors that shape our beliefs far better than any historian does. Such a Creator— loving, intimate, and wise— would know how to work with each of us in infinitely complex ways, how to shatter our illusions and transform our thinking when necessary, and how best to reveal himself to us in the end.¹¹

The Presumption of Skepticism

As indicated above, the OTF must, in my opinion, stand or fall on its own merits, which in turn depend upon how we answer the two questions identified at the outset. The first question was, “How should we understand the skepticism for which the OTF calls?” So let us now consider three very different kinds of skepticism, the first of which implies positive disbelief. Suppose someone should say: “I am very skeptical of global warming and, in particular, of the claim that humans are responsible for it. Are they also responsible for the global warming on Mars or on what used to be called the planet Pluto?” We would justifiably conclude, I think, that such a person positively *rejects* the idea of human caused global warming, or at least regards it as highly implausible or improbable. So call this the skepticism of disbelief.

The important thing about such skepticism is that it is compatible with, and in some cases may even require, a kind of dogmatic certainty. Have you ever noticed that virtually every radio or television program on a topic such as UFOs, paranormal phenomena, channeling dead people and other spirits, or near death experiences has at least one token skeptic who comes across as the most closed-minded dogmatist on the program? I do not say this critically. Depending on the context, a settled belief on some topic might be perfectly appropriate. And who knows: If I were on a program featuring members of the Flat Earth Society (which was still in existence dur-

¹¹ Thomas Talbott, “Universalism,” Jerry Walls (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 447. I do not mean to imply that *only* Christian Universalists have an adequate solution to the problem of religious diversity. Many non-universalists among the freewill theists also hold that all of God’s loved ones, wherever their spiritual journey might begin, will sooner or later have an equal shot at being saved.

ing my high school days), I might come across as rather dogmatic myself. But the extent to which the skepticism of disbelief might be *justified* in a given context is not my present concern. I merely want to give a neutral description of it and to suggest that at times Loftus appears to have just this kind of skepticism in mind. For as he writes in one place, the "presumption" behind the OTF is that when examining any set of religious beliefs skepticism is warranted, since the odds are good that the particular set of religious beliefs you have adopted is wrong (p. 84). As far as I can tell, the claim here is not that, with respect to any significantly religious belief (such as a belief in the existence of God), the probability of its being true never rises above .5; the claim is instead that the probability inevitably sinks well below .5.

A second kind of skepticism derives from the tradition of philosophical skepticism. Millions of people around the globe believe in reincarnation, an idea that was never part of my own religious heritage at all. So do I reject this idea altogether? No. Do I accept any of the silly arguments, as I view them, that reincarnation is logically inconsistent with some teaching in the Bible? No. Have I, then, embraced this idea myself? No. Although I do believe that our earthly lives are but the preface of a much longer story, I am open to a host of different views concerning what our future might be like after our earthly lives come to an end. So with respect to the belief in reincarnation, I am a true skeptic in the following sense: Although I do not embrace this religious idea, neither do I reject it altogether. I have no settled belief one way or the other on the matter. Call this, then, the skepticism of suspended belief, because it is incompatible with dogmatic certainty and sometimes arises when one has the humility to recognize the limits of one's own knowledge. To put it another way: With respect to the Christian proclamation that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, a skeptic in this sense will be no less open to the possibility that such a proclamation is true as he or she will also be to the possibility that it is quite false.

According to a third (and looser) kind of skepticism, being skeptical is merely the opposite of being overly gullible. A man who loses a substantial sum of money in a scam may conclude that he had been far too gullible and had been taken in far too easily; he may even resolve to be a lot more skeptical in the future. This does not mean, however, that he will suspend belief altogether, which would be incompatible with discovering a scam in the first place. Much less does it mean that he will treat all people as scam artists and disbelieve everything they say. It means instead that he will proceed with caution in the future, that he will examine with care all of the relevant evidence he can find, and that he will neither jump to the conclusion that someone is, nor jump to the conclusion that someone is not, a scam artist. Call this the healthy skepticism implicit in critical reasoning. It just is good reasoning and an ability to evaluate evidence skillfully. It implies, on the one hand, being on the alert for fallacious arguments, vague and meaningless utterances, hasty generalizations, and the oversimplification of complicated issues, and it implies, on the other hand, making a serious effort to purge one's own thinking of the same.

But this kind of skepticism is harder to measure for an obvious reason: People from different backgrounds, with different philosophical perspectives, or who represent different belief systems will inevitably disagree concerning who is, and who is not, being overly gullible about something. Indeed, it seems unlikely in many cases that we will ever agree on which party to a given dispute is the more gullible (or not skeptical enough) until we can agree on which party is right and which is wrong. For the present, then, I'll restrict myself to a single example of what strikes me personally as the kind of sloppy thinking that implies excessive gullibility.

As already indicated, it seems to me that some of the so-called new atheists too often dispense vague and meaningless generalities about different faiths and different gods. They often quip, for example, that "we are all atheists with respect to the gods of other religions" which is

literal nonsense. And Loftus likewise quotes with approval Stephen Roberts as saying, "When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours" (p. 85). But in the absence of a specific example to examine and criticize, such a remark merely invites confusion. For the sake of linguistic clarity, any monotheist will of course distinguish the Creator of the universe (or at least the ultimate source of all that is) from any specific part of the universe, such as the sun, the moon, a planet, or a star. It hardly follows, however, that any monotheist, whether an adherent of the Jewish faith, a Christian, a Muslim, or a Hindu is an atheist with respect to the question of whether a supreme God exists. Neither does it follow that the relevant linguistic clarity provides *the same kind of reason* to deny a Creator of the universe as we have for distinguishing such a Creator, if it exists, from specific parts of the created universe. Equally confused is the assumption that the Christian God exists only if the God of some other monotheistic religion does not. In one place Loftus writes: "I can no more be angry with a God that doesn't exist than a Christian can be angry with Allah or Zeus."¹² The clear implication here is that Allah, the God of the Qur'an, and the Christian God of the New Testament are different individuals. But that strikes me as sheer nonsense as well, and more than a few Muslims, I presume, would be the first to insist that "Allah," "Yahweh," and "God" are merely different names for the very same individual. As for Christians, even St. Paul identified the Christian God with the unknown God of the Athenian philosophers and quoted the poet Epimenides of Crete in order to make the point that "in him [God] we live and move and have our being."¹³ Certainly Muslims, Orthodox Jews, and Christians hold some very different beliefs about God—although these differences are no greater, I would argue, than the differences between the Calvinist and the Arminian beliefs about God. But they all nonetheless agree that God, con-

¹² *Why I Became an Atheist*, p. 15.

¹³ Acts 17:28. Interestingly enough, Epimenides rejected the popular mythical understanding of Zeus according to which Zeus was himself a mortal, whatever super-human powers he might have possessed.

ceived of as the supremely powerful, supremely intelligent, and supremely good Creator of the universe, actually exists.¹⁴

The Idea of an Outsider

Most cultural anthropologists would agree, I think, that the best way to appreciate another culture is to immerse oneself in it and to experience it first hand from the inside for a while. And similarly for a religion embedded in another culture; indeed, a plausible view, as I see it, is that the outward cultural forms of different religions sometimes conceal similar spiritual insights that might not be obvious from the outside. Christians who practice contemplative prayer as a means of experiencing more intimately the inner presence of God may thus be unaware of its similarity to Buddhist and Hindu meditation. There is also the possibility of very different but logically consistent religious doctrines, which opens up the further possibility of complementary rather than competing religious traditions. A Hindu, for example, can have great respect for the Christian religion and still coherently believe that many Christians have failed to grasp the important role of reincarnation in a person's eventual perfection; and similarly, a Christian can have great respect for the Hindu religion and still coherently believe that many Hindus, no less than Abraham, Isaac, and other exemplars of saving faith (see Hebrews 11), have never fully understood, at least not during their earthly lives, the essential role of the Cross in their own redemption and eventual perfection. So even though I would never endorse the sophomoric idea that all religious opinions are equal (whether equally true, equally false, or neither true nor false), the following seems to me altogether reasonable: Whatever one might think of the OTF as a means of assessing *one's own religion*, one should adopt a kind of Insiders Test for Faith (ITF), if I may

¹⁴ You and I may have some very different beliefs about Barack Obama. But it hardly follows that we disagree about who it is that occupies the Whitehouse as President of the United States. Similarly, a given Christian and a given Muslim may have some very different beliefs about God. But again, it simply does not follow that they worship a different God.

speaking rather roughly and inaccurately, as a means of assessing *a religion other than one's own*; that is, one should be just as open to possible spiritual insights in another religion as one is to such insights in one's own religion.

Now even though I doubt that either the OTF or the ITF is capable of rigorous expression, one might nonetheless think of them, roughly, as two sides of the same coin. For one way to be at least as skeptical of one's own religion as one is of other religions is to be no more skeptical of other religions than one is of one's own. Accordingly, as someone with great respect for the spiritual quest and for a religious, as opposed to a non-religious, vision of the world, it has never even occurred to me, at least not since my college days, to be more skeptical in my stance towards non-Christian religions than I am in my stance towards my own inherited Christian religion. With respect to many of the world's great religions, particularly the eastern religions, I no doubt remain an outsider in this sense: I have a far greater familiarity with, and intimate knowledge of, the Christian religion than I have in the case of these other religions. But for that very reason, I should be less (rather than more) prepared simply to dismiss that which I do not yet fully understand. And for a similar reason, a true outsider, whether a fundamentalist Christian or a crusading atheist, is the last person I would trust to evaluate a non-Christian religion accurately, whether it be Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, or Taoism. Such an outsider is also the last person I would trust to evaluate my own understanding of the Christian religion.

Be all of that as it may, we must now consider the perspective of an outsider, as Loftus himself understands it. Just as we have distinguished between different kinds of skepticism, so we can also distinguish between different ways in which one might qualify as an outsider. With respect to the Christian religion, an outsider might be (a) someone who has never encountered the Christian religion and therefore has no beliefs about it at all or (b) someone who has indeed

encountered the Christian religion but has not yet acquired any settled beliefs about it or (c) someone who has considered the Christian religion (or at least has some vague information about it) and chooses, for whatever reason, not to be identified with this religion.

So which of these three perspectives, if any, is the most relevant to an outsider test, as Loftus himself understands it? Given his most frequent description of the test, one may wonder whether any of them is even relevant. Recall that, according to Loftus, the OTF represents ða challenge to believers to test or examine their own religious faith as if they were outsiders with the same presumption of skepticism *they use to test or examine other religious faiths* [my emphasis]. Although he does suggest here that believers should examine their faith as if they were outsiders, the position of an outsider appears to have no role to play in the test itself. For consider what Loftus does *not* say. He does not say that religious people should test their own faith with the same degree of skepticism that some given outsider might adopt with respect to it; he says instead that they should test their own faith with the same degree of skepticism that *they themselves* adopt with respect to other religions. The standard for an individual Christian, then, is not an outsider's skeptical stance towards Christianity; it is instead the Christian's own skeptical stance towards other non-Christian religions. But here the problem, as already noted, is that not all Christians adopt the same dismissive attitude towards other religions.

Suppose that a group of Christian laity in a local discussion group should suddenly ðget religion,ö so to speak, and should decide to employ the OTF as a means of testing their own religious beliefs. Suppose further that these Christians, being unusually honest and humble, should also recognize that they know little or nothing about the major non-Christian religions, that they are therefore in no position to evaluate these religions fairly, and that any skeptical stance they might adopt towards them would thus rest upon ignorance rather than upon correct information.

Apart from any other consideration, such honesty and humility would effectively prevent them from applying the OTF as described above. They could no doubt try to achieve a better understanding of other religions. But, as often happens, this might also result in their acquiring a greater respect for all religions, including their own, particularly if they encounter an important teaching of the Vedic Scriptures. For as Huston Smith has pointed out, "Early on, the Vedas announced Hinduism's classic contention that the various religions are but different languages through which God speaks to the human heart."¹⁵

Things get even messier if we try to make an outsider's skeptical stance towards Christianity the standard for an individual Christian.¹⁶ First, not every outsider perspective will be equally cogent. If a schizophrenic young man should become highly skeptical of Christianity on the supposed ground that some space aliens had abducted him and had explained to him that no God exists, this would hardly qualify as a cogent outsider perspective. Or consider Loftus's own application of the OTF in the following comment: "Just think how it would sound to Christians if Muslims explained the lack of belief in Allah [as occurring] because Allah is a hidden God?" (p. 87). As a Christian myself, this hypothetical Muslim explanation makes perfectly good sense to me; it should also make sense to those Christians who translate the Bible into Arabic and translate "God" with the Arabic word pronounced "Allah." Is not the whole purpose of such a translation, at least from a Christian point of view, to cultivate a deeper faith in Allah? So, because Loftus seems to me seriously confused in treating "God" and "Allah" (but not "God" and "Yahweh") as if they named different individuals, his outsider perspective also seems to me, for that

¹⁵ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 77.

¹⁶ In one place Loftus writes: "we must examine any belief learned on our mother's knees with the skepticism of outsiders [my emphasis], unless we can verify it for ourselves" (p. 100). One might wonder whether the final clause in this quotation gives away the proverbial farm, since many who first acquired their religious faith at their mother's knee, no less than those who acquired it later in life, would no doubt claim that they have indeed verified it for themselves. But I shall here let that pass.

very reason, less than cogent, at least *in this particular matter*. And I mention this in order to illustrate the following point: Whatever complicated factors may figure into someone's adopting a given moral, religious, or metaphysical perspective, these same factors will likewise make an outsider's perspective appear less than fully cogent.

Second, just how might one go about adopting an outsider perspective, or the skepticism of an outsider? Should Christians merely *pretend* that they have never encountered the Christian faith, or *pretend* that they do not believe it, or *pretend* that they have considered it and then rejected it? If so, how are they to manage such a feat? Consider, by way of contrast, Descartes's famous Method of Doubt: a method whereby one *pretends* to doubt a host of common sense beliefs even as one proceeds to examine the implications of a radically skeptical hypothesis, such as that of a malignant demon systematically deceiving us. Here one has a pretty clear idea of how to proceed, of how to examine the implications of some skeptical hypothesis even if one disagrees with it or just thinks it pretty silly. But many of our deepest convictions, such as Loftus's conviction that rape is wrong (see below) or my own conviction that the universe is an expression of divine love, are simply not under the control of our wills. Beyond that, I have no idea how to manufacture in myself, however heroically I might try, skepticism concerning a host of common sense beliefs, including my belief in the uniformity of nature,¹⁷ my belief in other minds, and my belief in an extended past. For in general, you cannot *both* believe that some proposition *p* is true *and*, at the same time, disbelieve it in a sense that the skepticism of disbelief entails or even suspend belief in the sense that the skepticism of suspended belief entails. You can, of course, re-examine your beliefs as often as you want; that is, you can examine the logical

¹⁷ By "the uniformity of nature," I do not mean the idea, which I personally reject, that every event is an instance of a universal law of nature. I mean instead the idea that the same laws of nature, for example the same laws of motion, that operated in the past will continue to operate tomorrow and the same laws that operate in one context will operate in all others as well.

relations between them, consider the position of a given belief in the complex web of your beliefs, and evaluate different kinds of belief and the kind of justification that may (or may not) be relevant to each of them.¹⁸ All of which brings us back to the skepticism implicit in critically reasoning. But if the OTF represents nothing more than an exhortation for people to examine their own beliefs critically and carefully, then it contributes nothing new and nothing substantial to any dispute that might arise between theists, atheists, and agnostics.

A Fundamental Inconsistency in the Loftus Approach

Because the Outsider Test appears to be so utterly subjective in the absence of rigorous rules for its application, perhaps we are now in a position to appreciate why Victor Reppert, for one, has argued that Loftus applies the test in an inconsistent manner. Although Reppert's previously expressed arguments are pretty decisive in my opinion, we also need to account for Loftus's replies to them.

When Reppert asked whether his belief that rape is morally wrong could pass an outsider test, Loftus replied as follows: "I know of no skeptical person in today's world who would ever want to morally justify rape. Beliefs like the acceptability of rape (and honor killings) are based on religious faiths and ancient texts, so they must be scrutinized with the OTF" (p. 100). But that response will never do, and there are three decisive objections to it. First, the issue is not whether some skeptical persons today (or some who mistakenly think they are skeptics) would ever want to morally justify rape. The issue is whether the belief that rape is morally wrong passes the Outsider Test; and if so, how. Second, the number of irreligious soldiers who have thought it quite acceptable to rape the women of a conquered people probably numbers in the millions (if not tens of millions) over the course of human history. And finally, one could easily

¹⁸ Our belief in an extended past will not be a matter of direct evidence in the same way the belief that Lincoln was assassinated in 1865 is. Its justification will have more to do with its position in a whole system of beliefs about the past and how it underlies everything that would count as evidence about the past.

appeal to cultural relativism and construct an argument that parallels exactly Loftus's initial four step argument; and in this argument, the third step would read: "Loftus's belief that rape is morally wrong is probably false." In addition to the fact that Loftus fails to cite a single example of an ancient religious text that, as he interprets it, justifies rape, he can hardly deny that many religions condemn it. So I cannot think of anything beyond a sheer anti-religious prejudice that would lead him to trace every moral view he rejects, and no moral view he accepts, to some religious influence.

Or consider, as another test case, how Loftus defends his own belief in an external *material* world: "I know as surely as I can know anything that there is a material world, and that I can reasonably trust my senses" (p. 95). When Reppert pointed out that many people in India (cultural relativism again) regard the physical world as *maya* or an illusion, Loftus responded as follows:

I was not just taught to think there is an external world. I experience it daily. In fact, to deny this would require denying everything I personally experience throughout every day of my life. And denying this would deny science—the very thing that has produced the modern world through testable experience. I think it's a categorical mistake [a category mistake?] to equate the nonverifiable religious view that there is no external world with the scientific view that there is one. (George Berkeley's similar view was inspired by his religious commitment to solve the mind/brain problem) So I would argue that people born in India would have to subject their own religious upbringing to the OTF, whereas the consensus of scientists has already passed the OTF, in that it has already survived the scientific method (p. 100).

Although Loftus here speaks of "an external world" and omits the word "material," his reference to George Berkeley, the larger context, and the previous quotation in which he does not omit the word "material," all make it abundantly clear that he has in mind something more than our *experience* of a stable environment; he clearly has in mind the existence of something irreducibly *ma-*

terial, an ultimate physical reality of some kind, that exists independently of mind. Call that *physical realism*.

Now it is certainly plausible to think that something external to ourselves causes our *perceptions* of a physical environment and keeps them consistent; Loftus is right about that. But what science has in fact demonstrated, it seems, is something quite different from the truth of physical realism. For whatever external to us causes us under predictable conditions to see tables, chairs, rocks, and trees is not something that, in itself, has the *physical qualities* of these tables, chairs, rocks, and trees. So if energy and mass are interchangeable, as the scientists tell us, and energy, like the power of God, is simply the ability to do work, why not at least entertain the possibility, along with St. Paul, the poet Epimenides, and a host of writers from many different traditions that in God ðwe live and move and have our beingð? Why not entertain the possibility, in other words, that a spiritual reality, namely God, is our physical environment, no less than our moral and spiritual environment?¹⁹

It is not my purpose here, I should point out, to defend such a religious vision, which some have called the perennial philosophy because a similar vision manifests itself in so many different cultural contexts. I merely call attention to the fact that Loftus dismisses it even as he also dismisses Berkeley's idealism; he even claims that Berkeley's idealism was ðinspired by his religious commitment to solve the mind/brain problem.ð Why an attempt to solve the ðmind/brain problemð would require a religious motive, Loftus does not say, and his dismissal of Berkeley illustrates once again the extent to which he associates every view he dislikes with some religious influence and every view he likes with science. But that will simply not work in the pre-

¹⁹ For a recent defense of the view that ðeverything that is real in the last analysis is sufficiently spiritual in character to be aptly conceived on the model of our own minds, as experienced from the inside,ð see Robert M. Adams, ðIdealism Vindicatedð in Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman, *Persons: Human and Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 35-54. The quotation is from p. 35. For another defense of *mentalism*, see John Foster, *The Case for Idealism* (Boston and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1982).

sent context. For even if Berkeley's rejection of an external material world *were* influenced by his religious commitments, which is more than doubtful,²⁰ the same could not be said of the atheist David Hume who, for exactly the same reasons that Berkeley offered, likewise rejected the very idea of material substance. Nor does Loftus even try to counter the view of those early 20th Century physicists and mathematicians, such as Sir James Jeans and Sir Arthur Eddington, who viewed the new physics of quantum mechanics as an indication that Berkeley may have been right after all. As Sir James Jeans put it: "Modern science seems to me to lead, by a very different road, to a not altogether dissimilar conclusion [from that of Berkeley.] í [As for physical objects,] their objectivity arises from their subsisting in the mind of some Eternal Spirit."²¹ Elsewhere Jeans indicates just how widespread such an idealist view was among the scientists of his own day:

To-day there is a wide measure of agreement, which on the physical side of science approaches almost to unanimity, that the stream of knowledge is heading towards a non-mechanical reality; the universe begins to look more like a great thought than like a great machine. Mind no longer appears as an accidental intruder into the realm of matter; we are beginning to suspect that we ought rather to hail it as the creator and governor of the realm of matter— not of course our individual minds, but the mind in which the atoms out of which our individual minds have grown exist as thoughts.²²

Now Loftus evidently believes that, unlike the early 20th Century consensus among scientists, "the consensus of scientists" today is on the side of an external physical reality. Remarkably, he cites neither a single scientist who addresses the issue nor a single scientific experiment

²⁰ It most likely went, I think, the other way around. His philosophical reflections probably influenced his theology—his understanding of creation, for example.

²¹ See Sir James Jeans, *The Mysterious Universe* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1930), p. 147. The single quotation marks indicate words quoted from Berkeley. In using the words "by a different road," Jeans may have had in mind the difference between Berkeley's philosophical arguments for a kind of subjective idealism and the scientist's reduction of the physical world to something that appears to have no physical qualities of an ordinary kind.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 158. A thought, of course, implies intentionality, and so a critic of Jeans would probably argue that in speaking of the universe as "a great thought" he injects intentionality where it does not belong. But *scientific evidence* for the assumption that intentionality does not belong here, whatever such evidence might look like, is another matter.

that is supposedly relevant to it. The main point I want to make, however, is how differently he treats a scientifically unverified belief he accepts from the religious beliefs he rejects. With respect to his belief in an external physical reality, the perspective of an outsider would be that of many Hindus, an idealist, a panpsychist, a panentheist, or perhaps even a philosophical skeptic such as David Hume. So if Loftus should subject his own belief in an external physical reality to the Outsider Test, then he would need to examine that belief at least as skeptically as an idealist or some other outsider might examine it. And yet, one searches in vain for the slightest hint of doubt on his part or even for a willingness to examine an outsider argument against physical realism (of which there are many).²³ In a way, this is perfectly understandable for reasons of a kind already cited: In general our beliefs are not under the explicit control of our wills, and Loftus could hardly *both* believe that an external physical reality exists *and*, at the same time, adopt an attitude of skeptical disbelief, or even an attitude of suspended belief, towards it. What I find truly astonishing, however, is how gullible and dogmatic he seems to be in the above quotations and how little of the skepticism implicit in critical reasoning he displays. Is his dogmatic (and question begging) assertion, "I experience it [an external *physical* reality] daily," any more relevant than Samuel Johnson's attempted refutation of Berkeley's idealism? The very religious Dr. Johnson simply stamped on a stone and exclaimed, "I disprove it thus!" But such a response,

²³ Loftus does jump on William Lane Craig for referencing the film *The Matrix* in an effort to illustrate skepticism concerning an external world; Loftus then suggests, correctly, that this "story is extremely implausible" (p. 95). But Craig's reference to *The Matrix* was clearly a pedagogical device for the purpose of providing a popular audience with a glimpse of a much more sophisticated idea. More than once I have startled students with the observation that *The Matrix* is a convoluted and inconsistent film; in fact, I hated it when I saw it. So I certainly agree with Loftus's criticisms of the film, even though, like Craig, I too have often found it a convenient pedagogical device. Most of the kiddies, after all, have seen it and understand it. But a convoluted and inconsistent film should not be confused with the relevant philosophical arguments it is used to illustrate, and neither should idealism be confused with a thoroughgoing philosophical skepticism in any case.

which fails even to address Berkeley's philosophical arguments,²⁴ has nothing to do with science and everything to do with Dr. Johnson's own religious "common sense."

It seems to me, therefore, that Reppert is right: Loftus's own application of the Outsider test is unfair, discriminatory, and utterly inconsistent. Beyond that, religious people are no more required to apply such a meaningless test to their own religious beliefs than Loftus is required to apply it to the moral and metaphysical beliefs he holds. The point is not that religious, moral, and metaphysical beliefs are beyond criticism; the point is that the idea of an Outsider Test is too subjective to add anything substantial to the criticism.

A Concluding Comment on Faith and Skepticism

The very first sentence in "The Outsider Test for Faith *Revisited*" reads: "The most important question of all when it comes to assessing the truth claims of Christian theism (or religion in general) is whether we should approach the available evidence through the eyes of faith or with skepticism" (p. 81). Although one would expect a careful analysis of the two crucial concepts here, that of *faith* and *skepticism*, to follow such an opening sentence, one searches the chapter in vain for any analysis of them at all. And apart from any such analysis, one can only wonder: Why even suppose that faith stands in opposition to a skeptical attitude at all? Here I can only guess that Loftus understands faith as believing something on insufficient evidence, or perhaps as believing it *in spite of* the evidence. And I would certainly agree that there is no particular virtue in trying to manufacture belief in oneself or in believing something in spite of overwhelming evidence against it. But then, for my own part, I would never dream of using the term "faith" in this way. For as I and a substantial minority of religious writers use the term, the opposite of faith is faithlessness, disloyalty, or even hypocrisy, not intellectual doubt. In fact,

²⁴ As Sir James Jeans noted, "This little experiment [of Dr. Johnson's] had of course not the slightest bearing on the philosophical problem it claimed to solve" (*op. cit.*, pp. 148-149).

faith is not essentially a matter of believing something at all; much less is it a matter of generating belief in oneself by means of an heroic act of will. It is instead a matter of *owning up* to whatever knowledge one has, of allowing one's settled beliefs about the world and one's deepest moral convictions (or whatever light one has acquired, as a religious person might call it) to transform one's life and to reflect itself in one's actions. In a word, it is just the opposite of what Sartre would have called "bad faith."

Of course, the term "Christian Faith," like the terms "Jewish Faith" and "Muslim Faith," typically signifies a complex religious tradition, which includes an identifiable set of doctrines (beliefs) as well as a set of practices and rituals. But as Loftus insists as well, our religious beliefs, if we have any at all, are almost never an explicit matter of will or choice. Loftus himself puts it this way: "Religious beliefs are not chosen by us. They are given to us. We inherit them. They are caught--not taught" (p. 83). Although his claim that religious beliefs are not taught seems to me clearly wrong, I agree wholeheartedly that they are not chosen. I no more chose to believe in the existence of God than Loftus chose to believe in an external material world or anyone else has chosen to believe in an extended past.

I would also point out, finally, that many people have religious reasons, grounded in a particular understanding of revelation, for conceding the probability that, with respect to any given person's religious beliefs, at least some of them are false and many others are at best only partially true or perhaps only pointers in the direction of the truth. Not even an omnipotent being, after all, could reveal himself to a stone, and neither could such a being reveal more in a particular set of cultural circumstances than one is able to receive in them. Do we have any reason to believe that an absolutely accurate propositional revelation, floating down from heaven like a balloon,²⁵ would likely reveal more to its primitive recipients than an absolutely accurate description of

²⁵ I borrow this expression from the New Testament scholar Donald Hagner.

Einstein's special theory of relativity would likely have revealed to an early 20th Century African Bushman? As any good teacher knows, a less than fully accurate statement will sometimes reveal more to beginning students, or do more to nudge them in the right direction, than a fully accurate statement will when the latter would be unintelligible to them. As I have elsewhere put it: "like many teachers, I often find myself saying things to beginning students that I would prefer them to reinterpret (perhaps even to discard) as they mature into more advanced students."²⁶ And, for similar reasons, George MacDonald concluded that no "revelation can be other than partial." Because of a lower condition of the receiver, a more partial revelation might be truer than that would be which constituted a fuller revelation to one in a higher condition; for the former might reveal much to him, the latter might reveal nothing.²⁷

All of which leads naturally to the idea of *progressive* revelation and to the idea that in different cultural contexts any revelation, assuming for a moment that such a thing is truly possible, would have to accommodate very different patterns of thought. And that casts a rather different light on the whole issue of religious diversity. For a religious person who believes in revelation or even in revelatory experiences should expect religious diversity every bit as much as an atheist or an agnostic might expect it.

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²⁶ "Of Pedagogy and Revelation" (published with a title that was not of my own choosing: "What Teaching Can Teach Us about Scripture"), *The Reformed Journal* 36, September, 1986, p. 13.

²⁷ George MacDonald, "The Consuming Fire" in Roland Hein, *George MacDonald: Creation in Christ* (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1976), p. 161.