Editorial preface

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It sometimes seems to me that in our modern secular age the audience for the questions that we philosophers of religion ask is growing ever smaller. I have sensed this in my students who are less passionate about religious matters with each passing year; and I sense it more widely as a palpable cultural spirit of neutrality regarding such issues. Many of my students, and I suspect a growing number of others, readily and without apology identify themselves as secularists. And I am coming to see that this does mean that they are confessing atheism or even agnosticism. I take it rather that these secularists are declaring that they simply do not care one way or another when it comes to questions of theism and atheism. Such issues are no longer live for them.

Our articles in this issue address some of the reasons, among the many that could be adduced, that might account for the fading importance of religious faith in our secular age. In the first essay, Fred Dalimayr tracks the diagnoses of Charles Taylor and Raimon Panikkar who offer different etiologies of what they agree as secular culture's "deficit of religiosity". Taylor traces this deficit to a loss of a sense of transcendence, while Panikkar sees this loss as a result of a loss of immanence, a loss of our being in the world, or if you will, our failure to be in sync with the "rhythm of being."

In the second article, Andrew Smith thinks that religion has suffered because those who are enthusiastic about positively settling religious questions, e.g. fundamentalists and evangelicals, have turned the discussion of religion into an epistemological battle with science. This may be unfortunate for religious faith since in our secular world most concede that science holds the winning hand. To redress this, Smith argues that the battle lines may have been wrongly drawn. Charles Taylor's work is again

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brought to bear as Smith argues that positions like those advocated by Stephen Carter, to wit, that biblical literalism and science operate on very different epistemological assumptions, is mistaken. The line between the two sides in the battle, Smith argues, should not be understood as epistemological but as ethical. Once this is seen, the possibility of an epistemological rapprochement between science and religion becomes possible.

In our next article, Craig Ross argues for the surprising thesis that Daniel Dennett, a noted champion of secular culture and scientific naturalism, just might be a closet deist. This suggests that secularization may not succeed in rooting out every trace of religiosity. We meet in a philosopher like Dennett a good test case for the plausibility of this suggestion that religion cannot be completely buried even in a person who is one of its leading critics. Ross notes that as Dennett develops his world view we find hints at what we might describe as a positive treatment of religious-like issues. We find these hints in Dennett's express sympathy with the likes of Marx and Hegel. Clearly these philosophers of history understand the mechanisms of nature (the clock that functions on its own to keep time, to use a deist metaphor) as unfolding (causally) towards some purposeful or meaningful end or goal. What Dennett fails to notice is that these concepts of purpose and meaning are more at home within a religious framework than they are within a thoroughgoing secular (naturalistic) one.

And finally, our last article raises for me the question of whether the deficit of religiosity in the modern secular age may be traced in part to a loss of the special status that a particular religious tradition has usually carried for its believers. In our modern age, we know so much more about the various religions of the world, or at least that there are many different ones; and this has made it appear (to some) that one tradition might be just as good as another; and perhaps, and in the end, there is no way to make a reliable choice as to which way, if any, is the right or best way (for me). Indeed, there is a growing consensus in our secular age that religious exclusivism is not acceptable. As Robert McKim argues, we no longer question the pluralistic assumption that our own religious tradition is on a par with (in some particular respect or in general) other such traditions. Instead, we find Quinn arguing with Hick about what the best pluralistic hypothesis is and overlooking the question of the plausibility the hypothesis itself. But perhaps the uncritical acceptance of this hypothesis has had some deleterious effects, effects along the lines of what I think of as the leveling effects of modern indifference that Kierkegaard described as leveling. McKim suggests that we consider alternatives to the pluralistic hypothesis. One such alternative is what he calls inclusivism. This alternative would make room for an appropriate respect for religious traditions other than one's own but would not force us into accepting the pluralistic hypothesis that all of these traditions are on a par.