Religious Apologetics: A Primer

Over the years, I've made a concerted effort to explore the vast offering of religious apologetics—in a sincere attempt to discover good reasons for adopting this or that religion.Almost without exception, I have come up short-handed.When formulating their sophistry, I've come to find, Christian apologists generally only manage to offer —to be blunt—grandiose, soaring garbage.

Worthwhile commentary on religion is quite limited.While many of the more educated Christian apologists (a very limited group) prefer the likes of Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Gerard Hughes, and N.T. Wright, there are much more erudite analyses available. I refer to none other than the analyses offered by Ludwig Feuerbach, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Roland Barthes, Stuart Kauffman, and Ernest Becker.(Robert Bellah is marginally insightful.)

Evolutionary psychology offers tremendous insight into religion (from Pascal Boyer to Scott Atran) as does memetics (most notably, Susan Blackmore's Meme Machine and Daniel C. Dennett's Breaking The Spell).Predictably, the more ardent religionists tend to shy away from such material, as they tend not to find a penetrating critical analysis of their coveted dogmatic system to be…palatable.

Here in the U.S., absurdist apologetics for the Judeo-Christian memeplex seem endless.From the litany of glaringly idiotic verbiage we hear from a few charlatans (notably, David Barton, M. Scott Peck, and Dinesh D'Souza) to the catalogue of wrong-headed statements we hear from low-level intellects (e.g. David Wolpe, Lee Strobel, Josh MacDowell, G.K. Chesterton, etc.), the inanity never seems to cease.

Meanwhile, in their attempts to indict secularism, religious apologists always seem to miss the point of the matter at hand (or they simply have no idea what they're talking about).In their effort to defend institutionalized dogmatism, I have found, they typically do the following four things:

- Tout inane claims
- Employ inane rhetoric
- Make inane comparisons
- Use inane terminology

I'll address each in turn.

INANE CLAIMS:

Among the many other bumble-headed things that David Wolpe has said, he once stated that religion doesn't cause people to do bad things; "it's being people that largely makes people do bad things."(What?)Wolpe isn't a moron, but he certainly tends to say moronic things whenever he speaks.As a celebrity charlatan of sorts, he strives diligently to sound profound (usually by providing poignant anecdotes and quotable platitudes for his audience).Yet, like any other apologist, he only ends up demonstrating a glaring lack of understanding of the subject matter.

According to many apologists, religion is an attempt to "get people to be better".This is a claim that is perfectly true, yet entirely meaningless—as it completely misses the point at hand.All cult activity ostensibly exists to make the followers (and the world) "better".Pick a cult, any cult, and the adherents will certainly insist that that's precisely what they're doing.Of course, the "catch" is: What is defined as "better"?"Better" according to who / what?

Every self-help guru, mountebank, witchdoctor, and scam artist alleges that he will make things "better" for those willing to play along.The relevant question, therefore, is: What is the state of alleged better-ness based on?What are the objective criteria by which that promised (superior) state is determined?(Of course, we promptly find that only a secular ethical framework can answer such questions adequately.On this point, refer to Spinoza, Kant, Paine, Marx, and Nietzsche.)

Whenever they are dogma-based, terms like "right" / "wrong" or "good" / "bad" are up for grabs.Simply declaring that something is one or the other, therefore, is just begging the question.What we're all "supposed to" and "not supposed to" do is what any ideology is about.So bragging that "MY ideology is the one that shows you what you're supposed to do" is like bragging that "MY diet plan is the one that tells you what you're supposed to eat."

Saying religion makes people objectively "better" is like saying non-science-based diet prescriptions make people "healthier" based on non-scientific standards.It's subjectively very meaningful, yet objectively utterly meaningless.

Once we acknowledge that an objective Reality exists, we see that there are right and wrong answers to certain questions.Even as it insists that it is eschewing relativism, religious apologetics regularly reveals itself to be predicated on relativism.It wears the garb of non-relativism (pointing to ersatz absolutes) so that it may plausibly accuse secularism of being a proxy for relativism.Of course, the only

objective moral foundation for ethics is a secular foundation.The ersatz absolutes offered by religion only end up being whatever psychological construct has been sanctified.One religionist's anointed construct poses as an absolute while the next anoints his own construct, deeming it absolute.

Meanwhile, we're often reminded that there are many thoughtful, kind, caring people who are religious.Indeed, there are.The "catch" is that such people are thoughtful, kind, and caring in spite of, not because of, any systematized dogmatism they may be harboring.Probity requires no dogmatism.A moral compass requires no divine ordinance.A good life requires no instruction manual.And an objective ethical system exists perfectly well without religion.

Whether or not benign forms of religiosity can serve as a "moral prosthetic" (for those with a paucity self-discipline) is another matter altogether.(If true, this would be a matter of sheer pragmatism, nothing more.If true, it merely involves a useful illusion, handy for practical purposes only.Utility is not synonymous with legitimacy.)

From religious apologists, we're often treated to a cavalcade of cookie-cutter anecdotes that are passed off as "evidence".The touching stories are generally of the form: "But look at what THIS person did that was so beneficent!And, guess what: He was RELIGIOUS."Supposedly, it follows from these choice anecdotes that religion abets morality.It's like pointing to a healthy vegetarian, and concluding that tofu is the ultimate source of nutrition.

Good will requires no dogmatism. If anything, it is sullied by a dogmatic basis.After all, the motives for being kind also matter.When a free-thinker exhibits probity, there is an authenticity that often lacks when the noble conduct is predicated on sacred doctrine.

Alas, a thousand touching anecdotes don't an argument make.Goodness clearly exists independently of religion; yet religionists can't seem to recognize this simple fact.When religion is afoot, the goodness is attributed to the religiosity.So we'll continue to hear from the catalogue of moving testimonies (of religious people engaged in benevolent acts) as if that weren't completely missing the point of the discussion.

INANE RHETORIC:

A typical question that is posed: “But…then…HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THIS?” (referring to events depicted in the sacred-text-of-choice).Such flagrant question-begging seems to know no bounds.Religionists of the Abrahamic tradition can’t seem to grasp that nobody needs to account for ANYTHING in ANY sacred text, because just about all of it is fabricated.

Even before the modern age, there were urban legends.Just as they do today, some people just pulled things completely out of their own ass…then passed it along to the next guy as opportunity presented itself.Inevitably, some of it just happened to make it into a sacred text that—due to historical accident—managed to survive to the present.One may ask: How many (initially, orally-transmitted) urban legends are now taken seriously that arose in the past generation alone?(Extrapolate back two millennia, and do the math.)

William Lane Craig, a popular Christian apologist (who has somehow managed to never make a single good point in any appearance he’s ever made, ever) generally devotes all his time pursuing this inane avenue of inquiry—thereby wasting everyone’s time whenever he attempts to “debate”.“But how else could THAT have happened?” he’ll ask, referring to an event in the Bible.(It seems never to occur to his interlocutors to simply say, “Well, Bill, it DIDN’T happen.Somebody made it up.So nobody has to ‘explain’ anything.”

“Made it up?” comes the familiar reply.“Well, a billion people wouldn’t believe a myth.Nobody would die for a lie.”This platitude is especially ironic coming from a Christian apologist who, in the very next breath, will make the following observation about Islam: “Behold, a billion people believing in—and often dying for—something that isn’t true.”(Religiosity is a local anesthetic for cognitive dissonance.)

Christians criticizing other religions for having dubious grounds is like corporatists in America criticizing fascism, or Revisionist Zionists decrying racism, or astrologers berating someone for being superstitious.(Alas, pots often call kettles black.)I’ve even heard a Pentecostal minister mock Scientologists for being in a “cult”.The rule seems self-evident: Dogmatism doesn’t like mirrors. When it’s the other guy’s dogma, it’s sumarily dismissed as “just superstition”; but when it’s MY dogma, it’s smugly deemed a sacrosanct article of faith.

We could even go a step further: When other people are delusional, we have little problem calling it “being delusional”; but when we are delusional together, we call it “Faith”. (After all, delusions rarely announce themselves as delusions to those

harboring them.) The next time a religious apologist proclaims that we shall not subject his “Faith” to critical analysis, simply replace “Faith” with “delusion”, and note the shift in subjective meaning vis a vis the parity in objective meaning.

As we well know, people die for lies all the time, all over the world.Why?Because they really, really, really want to believe that it’s true—and will stake their lives on a sacrosanct illusion.Even relatively smart, well-intentioned people sometimes swear on their life that X is true when the evidence is overwhelming that X is clearly false. (The examples of this occurrence—every day—are too numerous to be worth mentioning.)

Other rhetorical maneuvers are commonplace: The apologist will often import legitimate (and quite admirable) purposes into his arguments, as if religion were the best—or even the only—vehicle for such noble things:

- The experience of transcendence
- Human solidarity / a sense of community
- A moral compass / an ethical framework
- A sense of purpose (something “to live for”)
- Hope

The fact of the matter is that the secular life offers all these things—without the dogmatism and the groupthink.Any claim that these are the reasons religion is important is, therefore, question-begging.

We all crave a sense of security, a sense of belonging, a sense of mattering, of a sense of being part of something significant.We all want to have some kind of spiritual element to our lives.We all yearn for something wonderful to look forward to—the prospect of better days ahead.We all long for something that offers solace and validation.We all need something (solid and dependable) to “hold on to”—especially in trying times.We all strive to find “meaning” in life.

There is no doubt that religions typically offer all these enticing things—from Scientology to Wicca, from Salafism to Hassidism, from Roman Catholicism to Heaven’s Gate, from Juche to the People’s Temple, from Stalinism to Maoism (or whatever so-called “Marxism-Leninism is in fashion).These are, of course, all extremely different religions.Yet—for any worthwhile definition of “religion”—they are clearly all religions.

Indeed, most cults satiate these universal, eminently human desires.The question, then, is: Based on what? To what end?At what expense?And, most importantly: Can we address these needs secularly?(The answer to this last query is quite plain; the jury is no longer out.Not only CAN there be a secular basis for such things; a secular basis has often proven to be the best basis for such things.)So to argue for religion because it offers any of these things is to beg the question—like insisting that we should use a horse and buggy to get from here to there (rather than some other mode of transportation) because a horse and buggy can get us from here to there.

Suffice to say that some apologists—as if grasping at straws—strive to salvage the credence of their coveted dogma by conceding that, yes, the sacred doctrines are just social constructs (and so, not to be taken literally)…but that the designated texts are still important for other reasons.What other reasons?There seem to be two:

1. Sustaining a community's heritage / legacy
2. Conveying the desired message in a compelling way

Regarding the first point, we can't help but agree.The "catch" is that there is a penchant to become parochial and insular when doing so—a recipe for tribalism.Thus, so long as one can marry this maintenance of heritage / legacy to cosmopolitanism, it is in keeping with a noble endeavor.

Regarding the second point, we're told: The spirit behind the fables (and the stories' pedagogic value) make the sacred text indispensable.Here, apologists insist that the sanctified folklore must be promoted for didactic purposes.Not only does the lore (taken as parable) serve as crucial pedagogic tool (i.e. as a compelling narrative vehicle), the argument goes, it offers desperately-needed inspiration.

Ok, fine.All we ask is that a spade be called a spade.If you support religion because you think it's pragmatic, then say so.But don't turn around and pretend that it's anything more than that.

INANE COMPARISONS:

For alleged examples of the "bad effects" of "secularism", religious apologists from the Abrahamic tradition often point to non-Abrahamic religions that were extra-horrific—as if not being an Abrahamic religion means it's not a "real" religion.The "chosen" religions, then, can divorce themselves from the ill effects of religion per se.

The notion that non-Abrahamic religions don’t count as religion is actually quite popular here in America—be it treatments of Nazism, Stalinism, Maoism, Scientology, or Juche.By implicitly making the assertion that these relgions weren’t “really” religions, such apologists can then say: “Look!SEE what happens when people aren’t religious!”The argument is, of course, silly…yet it often works.

Abrahamic apologists are often willing to concede that—though non-Abrahamic—Buddhism and Hinduism are bona fide religions.(Presumably, they’re fine with counting these two religions as religions because—though non-Abrahamic—they are quite popular, have been around for a long time, and seem not to have done much harm in the world.)Because this concession doesn’t conflict with the desired conclusions, the slight modification to the accepted taxonomy is permitted.So, barring these two exceptions, “secular” simply means “non-Abrahamic”.

Consequently the likes of Hmong, Shinto, Santeria, Wicca, Druidism, Scientology, and Baha’i are disqualified from this privileged categorization scheme (because those are “just cults”)—as are nationalist religions like Nazism, Stalinism, Maoism, Juche, or the Red Cambodians (because those are “secular” ideologies).A “cult”, apparently, is an unpopular religion.Of course, that just means that “religion” is a popular cult.

Unapproved deviations from the standard Abrahamic religions (such as Hassidism, The Church of Unification, and Jehovah’s Witnesses) are also dismissed as “just cults”.Meanwhile, accepted deviations, like Sikhism, Sufism, and Mormonism, are often given the benefit of the doubt.But this only begs the question.If there were a billion Moonies, would we acquiesce and deem it a religion?(Saying, “It’s just a cult, not a bona fide religion” is analogous to saying, “It’s just an orb, not a bona fide sphere.”)

When the alleged non-religion religions are depicted as instances of “secularism”, the specious argument seems to hold water.Here, the usual suspects include some of the most blatant cult leaders in recorded history: Hitler, Pol Pot, Kims Il Sung and Jong Il, Mao Tse Tung, as well as Soviet leaders from the Bolshevik Revolution up through the 70’s.In other words, the most flagrant examples of religion are used as examples of…absence of religion.Dinesh D’Souza is a common transgressor on this count.(Memo to Dinesh D’Souza: North Korea is about as secular as the Vatican.)

The Red Cambodians embodied secularity approximately as much as did Jonestown residents.To wit: not in the least.And, yes, Stalin believed in a god; its name was “Stalin”.Mao’s god went by another name.(One guess as to what it was.)Deification is deification.(If Juche isn’t a religion, then what does the word “religion” even mean?Of course, you’re welcome to loudly proclaim that Kim Il Sung isn’t a deity on the streets of Pyong-Yang—if you don’t mind being imprisoned for life.Juche’s strict doctrine would make the Taliban envious.If Juche is an example of secularism, then the Taliban was the quintessence of secularism.)

Alas, we often hear that Marxism-Leninism and the rest were all examples of what happens when people become too secular.The inverted logic of this rhetorical maneuver is almost comic to behold.Nevertheless, Judeo-Christian apologists (Dinesh D’Souza, Newt Gingrich, Jonah Goldberg, etc.) use it regularly.Ironically, it serves as a perfect argument against the thesis that the religious apologist is trying so desperately to defend.For it all proves what happens when people become religious—be it Nazism, Angkar, Juche, The People’s Temple, or Soviet-style Communism.

The reality is not very convenient when one wishes to make the case for religion (and thus against secularism).Be that as it may, Juche is as much a religion as Catholicism.By the same token, Catholicism is as much a cult as Juche.But don’t point this out to a Catholic; he will surely cringe when the obvious parallels between the two institutions is brought to his attention.(See the six key attributes listed below.)

When encountering this fatuous “secular vs. religious” categorization, the response is simply to point out that it is a rigged taxonomy.(Indeed, if Nazism wasn’t a religion, then nothing is a “religion”.)So, we must be clear on what we even mean by “religion”—lest we talk past each other, fixating on loaded terms and vague impressions instead of establishing the objective meaning of the words we use.

Currently, there are four totalitarian theocracies in the world: the monarchy of Saudi Arabia (Wahhabism), the Iranian Grand Ayatollahs (politicized Shiism), Vatican City (Roman Catholicism), and North Korea (Juche).This isn’t to say that the four are “the same”.Nor is it to insinuate that there is parity of malignancy.It’s simply to say that they are different manifestations—very different manifestations—of the same underlying phenomenon.

These four examples are illustrative.To overlook the salient parallels is to miss crucial points about the nature of power structures.To fail to recognize that they are different versions of the same thing is to fail to recognize how human institutions sometimes work.Institutionalized dogmatism is institutionalized dogmatism.Groupthink is groupthink. (The hypocrisy in the cult vs. religion taxonomy is plain to see. When one person does it, it's called mental illness. When more than a dozen people do it, it's called a cult When hundreds of thousands do it, we call it "religion".)

Now that the Taliban regime (a totalitarian Salafist theocracy) no longer rules Afghanistan, we find that—thankfully—theocracy continues to play an ever-smaller role in our world.The secularization of Germany, France and Scandinavia has ushered in much healthier societies—arguably the healthiest the world has ever seen.We can pray this trend continues—even as RZ in Israel seems to be undeterred…and Christian fundamentalism is still thriving in the American heartland, while increasingly influencing sub-Saharan nations.

Admittedly, tyrannies (nay, anti-democratic regimes in general) don't necessarily require religion (i.e. a theocratic element) in order to exist.Nevertheless, cult activity of SOME sort comes in handy when one wants to control people en masse.Thus, ostensibly "secular" tyrannies like those of Idi Amin (Uganda), CeauÅŸescu (Romania), Tito (Yugoslavia), Franco (Spain), Marcos (Philippines), Pinochet (Chile), and Sadaam Hussein (Iraq) (to name seven hallmark cases) benefited from a proximal "cult of personality".Like any other despot, each of them surrounded himself with (fanatically) loyal followers: True Believers.What is such a thing if not a religious element?

Such notable figures demonstrate the main point.Their tyrannical ways most certainly were not attributable to a "lack of religion".(In other words, their problem wasn't that they hadn't read the Pentateuch carefully enough.)Insofar as such regimes could be said to be "secular", they were tyrannical in spite of that fact.It's safe to say that a surfeit of free-thought was not to blame for their ignoble ways.

Attributing these horrific regimes to a paucity of institutionalized dogmatism is to miss the point of HOW and WHY they were so dysfunctional.To associate secularism with tyranny is like associating vegetarianism with Nazism (yes, Adolph was vegetarian).It's a ridiculous non sequitor that should be dismissed out of hand.The problem with Nazis was not their dietary habits.(Nor was it, as Jonah Goldberg likes

to say, child labor laws.)And even if not a single Jew / Gypsy / Pol / Homosexual was harmed, Germany's Third Kingdom would have been a staggeringly horrific regime.It's important to understand why.

Point in case: Burma.Do we look at the military junta of "Myanmar" and lament, "If only they were more religious"?Is what the military junta in Burma really needs Rick Warren?Another point in case: post-Soviet Russia.Would we look at the plutocracy in Moscow and conclude that lack of religion was the root of the nation's problems? (Perhaps if Putin read The Purpose Drive Life…)

Let's look at quasi-religious tyrants, like Libya's Gaddhafi, Indonesia's Suharto, Pakistan's Zia-ul-Haq, or Egypt's Mubarak (the last three supported by the U.S. government, by the way).Would we have suggested that they become more religious as the best means to democratize their nations?(The religion at hand in these four cases, Islam, needn't distract us from the fact that we're talking about religion per se.)The key, it is plain to see, is to GET RID OF the dogma and groupthink—not to augment it.(Should we suppose that Colonel Gaddhafi would have been a better leader if only he'd converted to Baptism?)

There is a pattern that becomes apparent upon surveying the world's most dysfunctional regimes.The last thing such nations need is increased archaism and more parochialism.Democracy, after all, is based on patently secular principles—as Thomases Paine and Jefferson would surely attest.We should stop pretending that free-thought has ever caused any of the world's major problems.We can only hope that the most dysfunctional states in the world become more secular.In every case, that would be the first step toward democracy.

NOTE:

The "catch" with all the above regimes is that their iniquitous leaders all strived to AUGMENT the (limited) cult of personality they had already managed to accrue.The seven quasi-secular men mentioned earlier could have only dreamed of achieving the cult of personality that was mobilized by, say, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Kim Il Sung, or Pol Pot (i.e. the five who essentially established full-fledged theocracies).To fail to see that Germany's Third Kingdom was a textbook totalitarian theocracy is to fail to understand what "theocracy" means—or to betray an ignorance of what the Third Kingdom was.

To put it another way, the seven supposed “secular” despots would have jumped at the chance to start a new religion—a religion in which they themselves were the anointed head (i.e. the idol).Had any of them opted to appropriate an Abrahamic religion for their purposes, things would not have been any better.That they never managed to forge a full-fledged religion around themselves doesn’t mean that the basic elements of religion weren’t at play.

To attribute their tyrannies to “being too secular”, then, is rather absurd.When one evaluates any of the horrible regimes listed in this essay, one need only ask: “What, exactly, was defective about the institution?”The answer, one finds, parallels much of what is wrong with fundamentalist religion—to wit:

- Highly-monitored loyalty / supplication (a.k.a. super-patriotism)
- Demands for strict conformity / rigid compliance (being pathologically doctrinal)
- Calls for homogeneity (i.e. “staying in line”)
- The championing of tribal honor / glory
- Systematic groupthink
- Idolatry (i.e. fealty to a demagogue)

Is there any more accurate description of the logic behind fundamentalist Christianity / Islam?To drive the point home: These six key features are exactly what secularism is NOT characterized by.Enforced observance of the anointed doctrine is the very antithesis of free-thought.Tribalism is antithetical to cosmopolitanism in every way.Contrast this to current cult movements that are often not recognized as cult movements, like America’s G.O.P.

Once a legitimate taxonomy is elucidated, we find that secularism is almost always a good thing.(To put it simply: too much free-thought has never been to blame for societal dysfunction.)Of course, we can see quite clearly what happens when people are actually secular.If we don’t want to take a trip to Switzerland or Denmark, we need only look at 95% of the greatest thinkers in human history…or at 95% of NSF and NAS members…or at the vast majority of human rights activists around the world…or the vast majority of the greatest scholars alive today.(For more on this point, see my A Trend Of Secularism and Secularism In History.)

INANE TERMS:

Sometimes, we hear inane terms, such as “organized religion”.Organized religion: What in heaven’s name does that mean? (As opposed to what?Dis-organized religion?)Religion is, by definition, organized—lest it simply be a matter of ad hoc, personal spirituality (in which case it’s called “personal spirituality”).

Upon hearing this peculiar phrase, we may ask: What would an un-organized religion be?(Of one thing we can be quite certain: If it’s poorly coordinated, it probably won’t last long.Ask the Shakers.)The phrase seems to make sense only when we opt to call personal spirituality “religion”, as William James did.But such a pejorative use of “religion” is very misleading.As for poorly-organized religions, a case-study would be the Shakers.Though inadequately orchestrated, it was still a religion…temporarily.We should keep in mind that the degree to which something is “organized” is a spectrum.Different instances of cult activity is “organized” to different degrees.It’s all still cult activity.

And what of the odd term, “false prophet”?This is like saying “wet water”.All prophets are ipso facto con men.Looking for a non-false prophet would be like searching for dry water. Yet the positing of this spurious qualification, “false” insinuates that there is the possibility of a genuine prophet.

The only way that “false” makes sense before the term “prophet” is if it is used in the sense of a “false positive”.(In this sense, “false X” simply means something we erroneously treated as an example of X.But this only works if “prophet” is taken to be synonymous with “scam artist” or “delusional person”.)We no more need to put the qualifier “false” before “prophet” than we need to insert the specification “unhealthy” before “illness” or “fictional” before “unicorn”.

The agenda of anyone who claims to have a “special line” to a creator and master of the universe is highly suspect—even if we grant the existence of such a supernatural entity.Any person who professes to be in a uniquely privileged position to offer profound insights into the innermost workings of the cosmos has forfeited his right to be taken seriously by reasonable people.(That all three Abrahamic religions are predicated on precisely this renders their foundation—to put it mildly—dubious at best.)

“I’m doing god’s work” is perhaps the most dangerous thing any human has ever said.“Because it’s God’s will” is, of course, the most easily appropriate-able rationalization ever concocted by man.Needless to say, we never feel the need to put the adjective “dishonest” before “con man”…and there are no non-fictional unicorns.

Another inane term is “bad theology”.This is an odd utterance.(It’s like saying “bad alchemy” or “bad astrology”.)The fact of the matter is that all theology is “bad”—in the salient sense—because it’s theology.Can one be “bad” at shamanism?What would it mean to be a “bad” witchdoctor?(A “bad” fortune-teller would simply be a fortune teller who wasn’t adept at duping people.So it’s the “good” fortune tellers that we have to worry about.Shall we say the same of those who are “good” at theology?)To be “bad” at theology could only possibly mean what we mean when we say one is “bad” a bullshitting.

So what is “theology” then?Theology is simply a kind of ersatz philosophy (in an analogous way that Scientology is an ersatz science).Anyone who says otherwise either isn’t familiar with what genuine philosophy is…or doesn’t understand what is actually meant by “theology”.Once one has been exposed to the great existential philosophers, such as Schopenhauer or Kierkegaard, one sees that which is now dubbed “theology” for what it really is: pretentious obscurantism masquerading as profound spiritual insight.In other words: bullshit.

Theology is predicated on faux intellectualism.When bullshit (specifically, bullshit in the realm of ontology, epistemology, cosmology, cosmogony, teleology, and spirituality) is made systematic and fancy-sounding, some people are inclined to label it “theology” (probably because “theology” sounds better than “bullshit”).But we mustn’t allow a snazzy label to obfuscate what’s really going on.A weed by any other name…

It only stands to reason that when people are duped into taking certain bullshit seriously (i.e. the anointed bullshit), then they don’t consider that particular load of bullshit to be bullshit.Rather, they happily deem it to be some kind of “profound insight”…and then call it a day.Presumably, this helps them remain smug during their dogmatic excursions.

In the event that one can make a profession out of “theology”, one can give oneself a pat on the back for being “good” at theology, and even make lots of money doing it.If one is especially savvy at concocting pedantic rationalizations for silly beliefs,

one can congratulate oneself for being “profound”, and even qualify as a professional “theologian”.(After all, “theologian” sounds a tad more respectable than “dogma peddler”.)And so it goes.

When systematized dogmatism becomes academic, we sometimes call it “theology”.When people come up with pedantic balderdash in an attempt to rationalize their religion, we call it “theology”.When religionists want to masquerade as genuine scholars, they like to call what they do “theology”.(This gives them something to label their college department.)When someone promoting a cult wants to pass himself off as an “intellectual”, he need only say that what he’s doing is “theology”.

We should not be impressed by this fatuous ploy.

Alas, whenever we hear “theology”, we’d be prudent to react in the same manner we would if we heard “scientology” (which is itself a brand of theology).Scientology is no better and no worse than any of the other brands of theology with which we’re accustomed.(Meanwhile, how do most of us react when someone claims that they’re experts in astrology?The difference is only a matter of branding.)

Theology is comprised primarily of what Daniel Dennett calls “deepities”: statements that in one sense are true yet inane, and in another sense are false yet deep-sounding.The joke is on those who take such statements to be both true and deep-sounding.(The verbiage of New Age mysticism operates in this way—from Shamanism to Deepak Chopra.)Certain people seem to have an insatiable craving for deepities.So deepity-peddling is a booming business.

Theology generally operates under the pretense of bona fide philosophy—yet is ultimately just formalized hogwash made to sound profound to the untutored ear.The verbiage—often vacuous—is fashioned to be taken seriously by the target audience (a.k.a. the laity).Proselytizing is especially effective when authority figures give the verbiage a veneer of credibility.Religious people, then, can feel better about their dogmas.

The readership of theology brings to mind an infant drawn to a shiny object: It’s grandiose, it’s ornate, it’s captivating, and it’s completely made of plastic.Alas, charisma goes a long way in the realm of religion.(By contrast, with bona fide philosophy, charisma means absolutely nothing.)So the flock is readily corralled…so long as the prose is made sufficiently “shiny”.

Like New Age pulp, theology appeals only to the un-edified and credulous.The problem, of course, is that most Americans are un-edified and credulous.(So, tragically, the target audience for deepities is quite large.)Eager ears are often unaware of an elementary fact: Candy-coated bullshit is still bullshit.It may be more palatable, but it’s not the healthy diet we thought it was.

Religious apologetics preys on ignorance, exploits gullibility, and capitalizes on groupthink.In essence, it is PR for institutionalized dogmatism.It’s time to call a spade a spade.