
Is Religiosity Pathological?



Albert Ellis

This article will try to make a succinct and cogent case for the proposition that unbelief, humanism, skepticism, and even thoroughgoing atheism not only abet but are practically synonymous with mental health; and that devout belief, dogmatism, and religiosity distinctly contribute to, and in some ways are equal to, mental or emotional disturbance. The case against religiosity that I am about to make is, of course, hardly unassailable and is only presented as a firm (and undevout!) hypothesis that I believe has validity but that (like all scientific hypotheses) is tentative and revisable in the light of later substantiating or nonsubstantiating evidence. I shall try to state it so that, as Karl Popper has advocated, it is falsifiable and therefore scientific.

Before I attempt to write about the advantages and disadvantages of devout religion (or religiosity), let me try to define these terms clearly. Traditionally, the term *religion* has meant some kind of belief in the supernatural. Thus, Webster's *New World Dictionary* defines religion as: "(1) belief in a divine or superhuman power or powers to be obeyed and worshipped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe; (2) expression of this belief in conduct and ritual." However, in recent years religion has also come to be defined in broader terms than this, so that the same dictionary continues: "(3) Any specific system of belief, worship, conduct, etc., often involving a code of ethics and a philosophy: as, the Christian religion, the Buddhist religion, etc. Loosely, any system of beliefs, practices, ethical values, etc., resembling, suggestive of, or likened to such a system: as, humanism is his religion."

In the following article, I shall mainly discuss two particular forms of devout religion or religiosity. The first of these is a devout or orthodox belief in some kind of supernatural religion, such as Judaism, Christianity, or Muhammadism—the pious adherence to the kind of religion mentioned in Webster's first

two definitions. The second form of religiosity I shall discuss is a devout or rigid belief in some kind of secular ideology (like Libertarianism, Marxism, or Freudianism)—that is, a dogmatic, absolutistic conviction that some political, economic, social, or philosophic view is sacrosanct, provides ultimate answers to virtually all important questions, and is to be piously subscribed to and followed by everyone who wishes to lead a good life.

I shall not, then, particularly discuss Webster's third definition of religion, because I do not think that this kind of "religion" leads to any special individual or social harm. Stated a little differently: I shall now attempt to relate absolutistic *religiosity* rather than mild *religion* to the existence of mental and emotional health.

Although no group of authorities fully agrees on a definition of the term *mental health*, it seems to include several traits and behaviors that are frequently endorsed by leading theorists and therapists. I have outlined the desirability of these "healthy" traits in several of my writings on rational-emotive therapy (RET),¹ and they have also been generally endorsed by many other therapists, including Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, Erich Fromm, Rudolf Dreikurs, Fritz Perls, Abraham Maslow, Marie Jahoda, Carl Rogers, and Rollo May. These include such traits as self-interest, self-direction, social interest, tolerance, acceptance of ambiguity, acceptance of reality, commitment, risk-taking, self-acceptance, rationality, and scientific thinking. Not all mentally healthy individuals possess the highest degree of these traits at all times. But, when people seriously lack them or when they have extreme opposing behaviors, we often consider them to be at least somewhat emotionally disturbed.

Assuming that the above criteria for mental health and a few other related criteria are reasonably valid, how are they sabotaged by a system of devout religious belief or religiosity? And how are they abetted by adherence to the principles of unbelief, humanism, skepticism, and atheism? Let us now consider these questions.

1. *Self-interest.* Emotionally healthy people are true to themselves and do not masochistically subjugate themselves to or unduly sacrifice themselves for others. They tend to put

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themselves first—realizing that if they do not take care of themselves, who else will?—a few selected others a close second, and the rest of the world not too far behind.

Rather than be primarily self-interested, devout deity-oriented religionists put their hypothesized god(s) first and themselves second—or last. They are so overconcerned whether their god loves them, and whether they are doing the right thing to continue in this god's good graces, that they sacrifice some of their most cherished and enjoyable interests to supposedly appease this god. If, moreover, they are a member of any orthodox church or organization, they feel forced to choose their god's precepts first, those of their church or organization second, and their own views and preferences third.

Masochistic self-sacrifice is an integral part of most major organized religions—as shown, for example, in the ritualistic self-deprivation that Jews, Christians, and Muslims must continually bear if they are to keep their faith. Orthodox religions deliberately instill guilt (self-damnation) in their adherents and then give these adherents guilt-soothing rituals to allay (temporarily) this self-damning feeling.

Pious secular religionists, instead of bowing to supernatural gods, create semi-divine dictators (like Stalin and Hitler) and absolutistic entities (like the USSR and Third Reich) and

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masochistically demean themselves before these “noble” powers—again to the detriment of their own self-interest.

2. *Self-direction.* Mentally healthy people largely assume responsibility for their own lives, enjoy the independence of working out their own problems, and, while at times wanting or preferring the help of others, do not think that they absolutely must have such support for their effectiveness and well-being.

Devout religionists (both secular and divine) are almost necessarily dependent and other-directed rather than self-sufficient. To be true to orthodoxies, they first must immolate themselves to their god or god-like hero; second, to the religious hierarchy that runs their church or organization; and third, to all the other members of their religious sect, who are watching them with eagle-eyes to see if they defect an iota from the conduct that their god and their church leadership define as proper.

If devout religiosity, therefore, is often masochism, it is even more often dependency. For humans to be true believers and also to be strong and independent is well nigh impossible. Religiosity and self-sufficiency are contradictory terms.

3. *Social interest.* Emotionally and mentally healthy people are normally gregarious and decide to try to live happily in a social group. Because they want to live successfully with others, and usually to relate intimately to a few of these selected others, they work at feeling and displaying a considerable degree of

social interest and interpersonal competence. While they still are primarily interested in their personal survival and enjoyment, they also tend to be considerate and fair to others, to avoid needlessly harming these others, to engage in collaborative and cooperative endeavors, and to distinctly enjoy some measure of interpersonal and group relationships.

Devout deity-inspired religionists tend to sacrifice human love for godly love (*agape*) and to withdraw into monastic and holy affairs at the expense of intimate interpersonal relationships. They frequently are deficient in social competence. They spend immense amounts of time, effort, and money on establishing and maintaining churchly establishments rather than on social welfare. They foment religious fights, feuds, wars, and terrorism, in the course of which orthodox believers literally batter and kill rather than cooperatively help each other. They encourage charity that is highly parochial and that is linked to god's glory more than to the alleviation of human suffering. Their altruism is highly alloyed with egotistically proving to god how great and glorious they can be as human benefactors.

Devout secular religionists are often much more interested in the propagation of absolutistic creeds (e.g., Maoism) than they are in intimately relating to and in collaboratively helping humans. Like the god-inspired religionists, their charity is exceptionally parochial and is often given only to members of their own religious group while it discriminates against members of groups with opposing credos.

4. *Tolerance.* Emotionally healthy people tend to give other humans the right to be wrong. While disliking or abhorring others' *behavior*, they refuse to condemn *them*, as total *persons*, for performing their poor behavior. They fully accept the fact that all humans seem to be remarkably fallible; they refrain from unrealistically demanding and commanding that any of them be perfect; and they desist from damning people in toto when they err.

Tolerance is anathema to devout divinity-centered religionists, since they believe that their particular god is absolutely right and that all opposing deities and humans are positively and utterly false and wrong. According to orthodox religious *shalts* and *shalt nots*, you become not only a *wrongdoer* but an arrant *sinner* when you commit ethical and religious misdeeds; and, as a sinner, you become worthless, undeserving of any human happiness, and deserving of being forever damned (excommunicated) on Earth and perhaps roasted eternally in hell.

The pious secular religionist, without invoking god or hell, believes that the rules and regulation of his/her group or community (e.g., the orthodox religious faction in Iran) are completely right and that, at the very least, social ostracism, political banishment, and perhaps torture and death should be the lot of any dissenter. Religiosity, then, by setting up absolute standards of godly or proper conduct, makes you intolerant of yourself and others when you or they dishonor these standards. Born of this kind of piety-inspired intolerance of self and others come some of the most serious of emotional disorders—such as extreme anxiety, depression, self-hatred, and rage.

5. *Acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty.* Emotionally mature individuals accept this fact that, as far as has yet been discovered, we live in a world of probability and chance, where there are not, nor probably ever will be, absolute necessities or

complete certainties. Living in such a world is not only tolerable but, in terms of adventure, learning, and striving, very exciting and pleasurable.

If one of the requisites for emotional health is acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty, then divinity-oriented religiosity is the unhealthiest state imaginable—since its prime reason for being is to enable the religionist to believe in god-commanded certainty. Just because life is so uncertain and ambiguous, and because millions of people think that they cannot bear its vicissitudes, they invent absolutistic gods and thereby pretend that there is some final, invariant answer to human problems. Patently, these people are fooling themselves—and instead of healthfully admitting that they do not need certainty, but can live comfortably in this often disorderly world, they stubbornly protect their neurotic beliefs by insisting that there must be the kind of certainty that they wrongly believe they need.

This is like a young boy's believing that he must have a kindly father in order to survive; and then, when his father is unkind, or perhaps has died, the boy dreams up a father (who may be a neighbor, a movie star, or a pure figment of his imagination) and insists that this dream-father actually exists.

Devout secular religionists invent the "certainty" of unequivocally knowing that their special political, economic, social, or other creed is indubitably true and cannot be falsified. Like the superhuman-oriented religionists, they also pigheadedly refuse to accept ambiguity and uncertainty—and thereby render and keep themselves neurotically defensive and immature.

6. *Flexibility.* Emotionally sound people are intellectually flexible, tend to be open to change at all times, and are prone to take an unbigoted (or, at least, less bigoted) view of the infinitely varied people, ideas, and things in the world around them. They are not namby-pamby but can be firm and passionate in their thoughts and feelings; but they comfortably look at new evidence and often revise their notions of "reality" to conform to this evidence.

The trait of flexibility, which is so essential to effective emotional functioning, is frequently blocked and sabotaged by profound religiosity. For the person who dogmatically believes in a god, and who sustains this belief with a strong faith unfounded on fact—which a pious religionist of course does—clearly is not open to many aspects of change and, instead, sees things narrowly and bigotedly.

If, for example, a man's scriptures tell him that he shalt not even covet his neighbor's wife—let alone have actual adulterous relations with her—he cannot ask himself, "Why should I not lust after this woman, as long as I don't intend to do anything about my desire for her? What is really wrong about that?" For his god and his church have spoken; and there is no appeal from this arbitrary authority once he has brought himself to unconditionally accept it.

Any time, in fact, that people unempirically establish a god or a set of religious postulates that supposedly have a superhuman origin, they can thereafter use no empirical evidence to question the dictates of this god or those postulates, since they are (by definition) beyond scientific validation. Rigid secular religionists, too, cannot change the rules that their pious creeds establish. Thus, devout Nazis cannot accept any goodness of Jews or of Gypsies, even when it can be incontrovertibly shown

that such individuals performed good acts.

The best that devout religionists can do, if they want to change any of the rules that stem from their doctrines, is to change their religion itself. Otherwise, they are stuck with its absolutistic axioms, as well as their logical corollaries, that the religionists themselves have initially accepted on faith. We may therefore note again that, just as devout religion embraces masochism, other-directedness, intolerance, and the refusal to accept uncertainty, it also seems to be synonymous with mental and emotional inflexibility.

7. *Scientific thinking.* Emotionally stable people are reasonably (not totally!) objective, rational, and scientific. They not only construct reasonable and empirically substantiated theories relating to what goes on in the surrounding world (and with their fellow creatures who inhabit this world) but they also are able to apply the rules of logic and of the scientific method to their own lives and to their interpersonal relationships.

In regard to scientific thinking, it practically goes without saying that this kind of cerebration is antithetical to religiosity. The main requisites of the scientific method—as Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans Reichenbach, Herbert Feigl, Karl Popper, W. W. Bartley, Michael Mahoney, and a host of other philosophers of science have pointed out—include: (1) At least in some final analysis, or in principle, all scientific theories are to be stated in such a manner that they are confirmable by some form of human experience, by some empirical referents. (2) Scientific theories are those that can in some way be falsified. But deity-oriented religionists contend that the superhuman entities that they posit cannot be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt, or otherwise humanly experienced and that their gods and their principles are therefore beyond the realm of science. Pious deists and theists believe that the gods or spirits they construct are transcendent—which means, in theology or religion, that they are separate or beyond experience; that they exist apart from the material universe; that, whatever science says, they are indubitably true and real.

To believe devoutly in any of the usual religions, therefore, is to be unscientific; and we could well contend that the more devout one is, the less scientific one tends to be. Although a pious religionist need not be entirely unscientific (as, for that matter, neither need be a raving maniac), it is difficult to see how such a person could be consistently scientific.

While people may be both scientific and vaguely or generally religious (as, for example, many liberal Protestants and Reform Jews tend to be), it is doubtful whether they may simultaneously be thoroughly devout and objective. Devout secular religionists (such as fanatical believers in phrenology or reincarnation) are not necessarily driven to believe in superhuman and supernatural concepts. But they almost inevitably favor absolutistic convictions about certain other issues; and absolutism and dogma are the antitheses of science. Just about all absolutists, secular and godly, tend to flout some of the basic postulates of the scientific method.

8. *Commitment.* As I have noted on several occasions in my writing on RET, emotionally healthy and happy people are usually absorbed in something outside of themselves, whether this be people, things, or ideas. They seem to lead better lives when they have at least one major creative interest, as well as

some outstanding human involvement that they make very important to themselves and around which they structure a good part of their lives.

In regard to the trait of commitment, devoutly religious people may—for once!—have some advantages. For if they are truly religious, and therefore seriously committed to their god, church, or creed, to some extent they acquire a major interest in life. Pious religious commitment, however, frequently has its disadvantages, since it tends to be obsessive-compulsive and it may well interfere with other kinds of healthy commitments—such as deep involvements in sex-love relationships, in scientific pursuits, and even in artistic endeavors (because these may interfere with or contradict the religious commitments). Moreover, religious commitment is an absorption that is often motivated by guilt or hostility and that may consequently serve as a frenzied covering-up mechanism that masks, but that does not really eliminate, these underlying disturbed feelings. Pious god-inspired commitment, moreover, is frequently the kind of commitment that is based on falsehoods and illusions and that therefore can easily be shattered, thus plunging the previously committed individual into the depths of disillusionment and despair.

Not all forms of commitment, in other words, are equally healthy or beneficial. The grand inquisitors of the medieval Catholic church were utterly dedicated to their “holy” work, and Hitler and many of his associates were fanatically committed to their Nazi doctrines. But this hardly proves that they were emotionally stable humans. In fact, a good case can be made for the proposition that, although involvement in or passionate commitment to some cause or ideal is normally healthy and happiness-producing, devout, pious, or fanatic commitment to the same kind of cause or ideal is potentially pernicious and frequently (though not always) does much more harm than good.

9. *Risk-taking.* Emotionally sound people are able to take risks, to ask themselves what they would really like to do in life, and then to try to do this, even though they have to risk defeat or failure. They are reasonably adventurous (though not foolhardy); they are willing to try almost anything once, if only to see how they like it; and they look forward to some different or unusual breaks in their usual routines.

In regard to risk-taking, I think it is fairly obvious that pious theists are highly determined to avoid adventure and to refuse to take many of life’s normal risks. They strongly believe in rigid and unvalidatable assumptions precisely because they are often afraid to follow their own preferences and aims. They demand a guarantee that they will be safe and secure, come what may; and, since the real world does not provide them with any such guarantee, they invent some god or other higher power that will presumably give it to them. Their invention of this deity, and their piously subjugating themselves to it, thereby confirms their view that the world is too risky and gives them a further excuse for sticking to inhibiting, straight-and-narrow (and often joyless) paths of existence.

Devout nontheistic religionists mainly substitute dogmatic belief in some philosophy or cause for a fanatical belief in god; and they use this sacralized cause to inhibit themselves against adventure and risk-taking. Thus, pious nutritionists will under

no conditions risk eating white bread or sugar, even when it might do them some good. And devout adherents of cognitive therapy (including devout RETers) may not tolerate the idea that *any* feeling can be free of thought and will insist that *all* dysfunctional behaviors (like headaches and feelings of depression) *must* be of purely ideological origin.

Enormously fearing failure and rejection, and falsely defining their own worth as humans in terms of achievement and approval, devout religionists sacrifice time, energy, and material goods and pleasures to the worship of their assumed gods or god-like philosophies, so that they can be sure that at least their god loves and supports them or that an inherent rightness is on their side. All devout religions seem to be distinctly inhibiting—which means, in effect, that piously religious individuals sell their soul, surrender their own basic urges and pleasures, in order to feel comfortable with the heavenly helper or the indubitably correct creed that they have invented or adopted. Religiosity, then, consists of needless, self-defeating inhibition.

10. *Self-acceptance.* People who are emotionally healthy are usually glad to be alive and accept themselves as “deserving” of continued life and happiness just because they exist and because they have some present or future potential to enjoy themselves. In accordance with the principles of RET, they *fully* or *unconditionally* accept themselves (or give themselves what Carl Rogers calls “unconditional positive regard”). They try to perform adequately or competently in their affairs and to win the approval and love of others; but they do so for enjoyment and not for ego-gratification or for self-deification. They consequently try to rate only their acts, deeds, and traits in the light of the goals, values, and purposes they choose (like the goals of graduating from school or of having an enjoyable sex-love relationship); and they rigorously try to avoid rating their *self*, their *being*, their *essence*, or their *totality*.

Healthy people, in other words, unconditionally accept themselves because they *choose* to do so, regardless of how well or badly they perform and regardless of how much approval they receive from others. They distinctly *prefer* to act competently and to win others’ favor; and they accordingly assess and criticize their own *behaviors* when they fail in these respects. But they don’t hold that they absolutely *must* do well or be loved; and they therefore don’t conclude that they, in toto, are good people when they succeed and are rotten individuals when they fail.

In regard to self-acceptance, it seems clear that devout religionists cannot accept themselves just because they are alive and because they have some power to enjoy life. Rather, orthodox theists make their self-acceptance contingent on their being accepted by the god, the church, the clergy, and the other members of the religious denomination in which they believe. If all these extrinsic persons and things accept them, then and only then are they able to accept themselves—which means that these religionists define themselves only through the reflected appraisals of god and of other humans. Fanatical religion, for such individuals, almost necessarily winds up with lack of unconditional self-acceptance and, instead, with a considerable degree of self-abasement and self-abnegation—as virtually all the saints and mystics have found.

What about theistic religions, like Christianity, that presum-

ably give grace to all people who accept their tenets and thereby allow all humans to accept themselves unconditionally? As far as I know, there are no theistic creeds that actually do this. The best of them—like Science of Mind—state that God (or Jesus) is all-loving and that s/he therefore always gives everyone grace or unconditional acceptance. But these theistic religions still require their adherents to believe (1) that a god (or son of god) must exist; (2) that s/he personally gives you unconditional acceptance or grace; and (3) that, consequently, you must believe in this religion and its god to receive this “unconditional” grace. Unless you accept these three conditions of grace, you will presumably never be fully self-accepting. And these conditions, of course, make your acceptance of yourself conditional rather than *unconditional*. Nonreligious philosophies, like RET, teach that you can always choose to accept yourself *because* you decide to do so, and that you require no conditions or redundant beliefs in God or religion to help you do this choosing.

Ironically, when you do decide to adopt a religious view and choose to accept yourself conditionally (because you believe in a grace-giving god or son-of-god), *you* choose to believe in this religion and *you* consequently create the grace-giver who “makes” you self-acceptable. All religious-inspired forms of self-acceptance, therefore, in the final analysis depend on *your* belief system; and they are consequently actually *self-inspired*! Even when a religion supposedly “gives” you grace, you really *choose* it yourself, and the religious trappings in which you frame your self-acceptance consist of a redundant hypothesis (that god exists and that s/he gives you grace) that is utterly unprovable and unfalsifiable and that really adds nothing to your *own* decision to be self-accepting.

Although liberal religionists (like the followers of Science of Mind) may be largely self-accepting, devout religionists have much more trouble in gaining any measure of unconditional acceptance. This goes for devout secular as well as pious theistic believers, for the former cannot unconditionally accept themselves because they invariably seem to make self-acceptance (or, worse yet, ego-inflation or self-esteem) depend on rigid adherence to the tenets of their particular creed. Thus, fanatical Nazis only see themselves (and others) as good people if they are good Nazis; and if they perform non-Nazi or anti-Nazi acts (e.g., espouse internationalism or help Jews or Gypsies) they damn themselves as rotten individuals, who presumably deserve to suffer and die. Ku Klux Klanners, along with attacking Blacks, Jews, Catholics, and others, excoriate *themselves* as worthless when they fail to live up to ideal KKK standards.

A special way in which devout religiosity sabotages unconditional self-acceptance is its strong tendency to encourage ego-aggrandizement or grandiosity. It is clearly self-defeating to tell yourself, “I am a good person because I have good character” or “I can esteem myself because I am highly competent.” If you give yourself this kind of ego-bolstering you make yourself highly liable to self-downing as soon as it can be shown that your character is not so good or that you are beginning, in some important way, to act incompetently.

You will do even worse if you make such self-statements as, “I am a great or noble person because I do outstandingly well at work or at art” or “Because I subscribe to this particular

fine philosophy or cause I am better than you are and am indeed a superior individual!” This kind of holier-than-thou self-rating, or arrant grandiosity, assumes that you and other people can be truly superior and godlike—and that you and they are thoroughly ordinary or worthless when not looking down from some kind of heavenly perch.

Devout religiosity particularly foments ego-bolstering and grandiosity. Where mild religionists think of themselves as good people because they are members in good standing of their own religious group, pious ones frequently think of themselves as utterly noble and great because of their religious convictions. Thus, pious Christians, Jews, fascists, and communists tend to deify themselves for their beliefs and allegiances; and probably devout atheists also tend to feel somewhat godlike and holy! Grandiosity is one of the most common of human disturbed feelings; and it often compensates for underlying feelings of slobhood. In fact, as Camilla Anderson, a notably sane psychiatrist, has shown, few of us would ever wind up feeling like turds if we did not start off with the grandiose assumptions that we must—yes, *must*—be noble and great.

Anyway, devout religionists are frequently attracted and bound to their piety largely because it presumably offers them holier-than-thouness and oneupsmanship over nonreligionists. And by its appeal to such disturbed individuals, devout religious creeds encourage some of the craziest kinds of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and favor severe manifestations of neurosis, borderline personality states, and sometimes even psychosis.

11. Emotionally healthy people, it almost goes without saying, accept what is going on in the world. This means several

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important things: (1) They have a reasonably good perception of reality and do not see things that do not exist and do not refuse to see things that do. (2) They find various aspects of reality, in accordance with their own goals and inclinations, "good" and certain aspects "bad"—but they accept both of these aspects, without exaggerating the "good" realities and without denying or whining about the "bad" ones. (3) They do their best to work at changing those aspects of reality that they view as "bad," to accept those that they cannot change, and to acknowledge the difference between the two.

Devout theistic religionists frequently refuse to accept reality in all three of the ways just listed: (1) They are sure that they see things—gods, angels, devils, and absolute laws of the universe—for which there is no confirmatory empirical data. And they refuse to see some obvious things—such as the ubiquity of human fallibility and the overwhelming unlikelihood that any humans will ever be perfect—that almost certainly do exist. (2) They often whine and scream—and even have their gods whine and scream (as Jehovah presumably did when he turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for looking back at Sodom and Gomorrah) when they see something "bad." They especially indulge in childish whining and in temper tantrums when other religionists or nonbelievers refuse to see the virtues of the devout theists' favored religious dogmas. (3) Instead of working hard to change grim reality, they often pray to their god(s) to bring about such changes while they impotently sit on their rumps waiting for their prayers to be answered. When certain obnoxious things are unchangeable—such as the propensity of humans to become ill and to die—they refuse to accept these realities and often invent utopian heavens where humans presumably live forever in perfect bliss.

Devout nontheistic religionists rarely seem to deny reality as much as do devout theists. But because they dogmatically and absolutistically follow narrow creeds, they frequently distort reality in their effort to understand it according to their utopian or teleological systems.

I don't wish to deny that for some people—some of the time—religious notions, even when they are devoutly and rigidly held, have some benefits. Of course they do. Devout adherence to a theistic or secular form of religion can at times motivate people to help others who are needy, to give up unhealthy addictions (to cigarettes or to alcohol, for example), to follow valuable disciplines (dieting or exercising), to go for psychotherapy, to strive for world peace, to follow long-range instead of short-range hedonism, and to work for many other kinds of valuable goals. Historical and biographical data abound to show this good side of religiosity. But I would still contend that on the whole the beneficent behaviors that religious piety sometimes abets would most likely be more frequent and profound without its influence.

Unquestionably, many devout religionists (St. Francis and St. Theresa, for example) have led notably unangry and loving existences themselves, and many others (Pope John Paul II, for example) have helped in the creation of world peace. So pious religion and surcease from human aggression are hardly completely incompatible. The fact remains, however, that fanaticism of any kind, especially religious fanaticism, has

clearly produced, and in all probability will continue to produce, enormous amounts of bickering, fighting, violence, bloodshed, homicide, feuds, wars, and genocide. For all its peace-inviting potential, therefore, arrant (not to mention arrogant) religiosity has led to immense individual and social harm by fomenting an incredible amount of antihuman and antihumane aggression. It can therefore be concluded that anger-attacking and peace-loving religious views that are held undevoutly and unrigidly, as well as similar views that are held by non-religionists and antireligionists, probably serve humankind far better than religiosity-inspired peace efforts.

If religiosity is so inimical to mental health and happiness, what are the chances of unbelief, humanism, skepticism, and thoroughgoing atheism helping humans in this important aspect of their lives? I would say excellent. My own view—based on more than forty-five years of research and clinical work in the field of psychology and psychotherapy, but still admittedly prejudiced by my personal predilections and feelings—is that, if people were thoroughly unbelieving of any dogmas, if they were highly skeptical of all hypotheses and theories that they formulated, if they believed in no kinds of gods, devils, or other supernatural beings, and if they subscribed to no forms of absolutistic thinking, they would be minimally emotionally disturbed and maximally healthy. Stated a little differently: If you, I, and everyone else in the world were thoroughly scientific, and if we consistently used the scientific method in our own lives and in our relationships with others, we would rarely seriously upset ourselves about anything—and I mean *anything*.

In sum, it is my contention that both pietistic theists and secular religionists—like virtually all people imbued with intense religiosity and fanaticism—are emotionally disturbed: usually neurotic but sometimes psychotic. For they strongly and rigidly believe in the same kinds of profound irrationalities, absolutistic musts, and unconditional necessities in which seriously disturbed people powerfully believe. When, however, they employ the logico-empirical methods of science, and when they fully accept (while often distinctly disliking and actively trying to change) reality, they are able to surrender their devoutness and become significantly less disturbed. Indeed, I hypothesize, the more scientific, open-minded, and straight-thinking about themselves, about others, and about the world people are the less neurotically they will think, feel, and behave. This is my major hypothesis about the relationship between absolutistic religious belief (religiosity) and mental health. The evidence that I have found, clinically and experimentally, in support of this hypothesis (as well as the evidence falsifying the hypothesis that devout religiosity is significantly correlated with and probably causative of good mental health) seems to be most impressive. But much more investigation of this issue had better be done, since it is up to me and others to bolster or disconfirm these hypotheses empirically.

Note

1. See my "Two Forms of Humanistic Psychology," published in *FI*, Fall 1985.