sources, not enough of a general atmosphere of common lore and oral tradition. Also, we ought to keep in mind, as Tor Andre, Lüling, and others do, that we need not draw a hard and fast line between the two donor religions, since early Islam was surely influenced by Ebionite Jewish Christianity and the Jewish-Christian sect of the Elchasites. The Zoroastrian influence on the Koran is made clear, as are some parallels to Hindu writings, but I kept waiting for the link to be made (as it surely ought to be) between the Koran’s storm demon Marut and the storm-stirring Maruts, attendants of the Vedic god Rudra.

Reading this survey of modern Koranic scholarship, a little over a century of it, one marvels at how long it has taken to get the critical enterprise off and running. Progress is still frustratingly slow, and Andre Rippin (“Literary Analysis of Koran, Tafsir, and Sira: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough,” 1985) explains why. On the one hand, even supposedly critical scholars find themselves unwilling to embrace

“thoroughgoing skepticism” even when the facts seem to warrant it, since then they will be left with no game pieces. They want to be able to say something about the origins of Islam or the Koran, and certain new theories would make this difficult to do. On the other, the new spirit of ecumenical dialogue between the great religions, while a salutary development for other reasons, has the unfortunate side effect that Christian scholars cleave to traditional Islamic views of the Koran and Muhammad so as to shorten the line of offense. Since Muslims do not appreciate suggestions that scribes and holy men often fabricated suras or hadith (any more than Christian laity appreciate the work of the Jesus Seminar), their dialogue partners are reluctant to embrace scholarship that presupposes widespread pious fraud.

WITTGENSTEIN WITHOUT A NET

Austin Dacey


The influential early twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked that “[a]n honest religious thinker is like a tightrope walker. He almost looks as though he were walking on nothing but air. His support is the slenderest imaginable. And yet it really is possible to walk on it.” Wittgenstein’s metaphor serves as the centerpiece of this volume, which is a collection of papers by Canadian philosophers and theologians written in response to the work of the renowned atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen, and in particular his 20-year-old debate with Hendrik Hart, Professor of Philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto.

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The early Nielsen-Hart exchanges were published in Search for Community in a Withering Tradition: Conversations between a Marxian Atheist and a Calvinian Christian (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990). That book and subsequent writings by Nielsen prompted two philosophy symposia from which the core of the present volume has been drawn.

Nielsen’s main contribution to the debate has been his defense of the claim that, at least for the relatively educated and affluent people of the contemporary West, belief in God is irrational. He offers a three-part argument for this claim. First, there are no good grounds to suppose that there is a God, anthropomorphically conceived. Second, the non-anthropomorphic conceptions of God prevalent in traditional theistic religions are actually incoherent. They attribute incom-
rationality of belief in such things.

The apparent problem with Wittgensteinian fideism, as Nielsen points out at length, is that “belief-in” is logically dependent on “belief-that” (p. 36). It is conceptually impossible, for example, to believe in one’s parents without believing that they exist. Believing-in without believing-that really would be walking on air. And if believing that God exists is rationally untenable, Nielsen continues, then so too is believing in God. Astonishingly, none of his theistic critics offers a systematic response to this charge.

Roger Beehler attempts the next best thing, by calling into question Nielsen’s case regarding the incoherence of theistic assertions. He claims that many scientific concepts, such as “continental drift,” once appeared incoherent but nevertheless eventually became part of a successful and cognitively respectable discourse. Unfortunately, such cases underscore Nielsen’s point that centuries of theological theorizing have not produced similarly intelligible interpretations of theistic concepts.

Of course, Nielsen is engaged in a highwire act of his own. Even as he forcefully advances his irrationality thesis, Nielsen refuses to brace himself on the presumption of universally authoritative, ahistorical, context-independent, and foundational standards of reason. Unlike his atheistic precursors of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Nielsen combines his unflinching rational defense of atheism with a historicist, contextualist, and anti-foundationalist pragmatism. Although this delicate balance is as complex and controversial as it is innovative and important, none of Nielsen’s opponents subjects it to detailed analysis and critique.

What’s worse, many of them seem not to even recognize that he holds it. Hart suggests that Nielsen’s commitment to transcendent norms of reason constitutes a religious faith (if we accept a problematically broad definition of religious faith as any trust in a transcendent reality). Yet this is exactly the sort of view of reason that Nielsen has explicitly disavowed since the beginning of his exchanges with Hart. Barry Allen inexplicably lumps Nielsen together with Enlightenment atheists, whom he accuses of Platonism about truth and naïve progressivism about human history. Nielsen has written extensively attacking such views.

The dialogue in Walking the Tightrope of Faith raises many profound philosophical questions about religion, philosophy, and rationality. It also elicits from Nielsen some valuable clarifications of his basic positions. Yet the failure of his interlocutors to carefully and critically engage these positions is disappointing. Nielsen’s Wittgensteinian critics are certainly successful at getting across this lesson: when walking a tightrope, try not to grasp at straws.

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**Personal Freethought**


Bernard Katz is a senior editor at the American Rationalist. He has written numerous thoughtful essays for the publication. In The Ways of an Atheist, Katz examines theology, biblical ethics, science and similar topics. In Chapter 7 (“The Problem of Evil”), Katz goes immediately to the heart of the matter. He argues that, if not for the problem of evil, there would be little reason for religion to exist. Religion seeks to explain the existence of evil, all of which he refutes.

In his chapter on biblical ethics, Katz demonstrates that Bible thumpers have a “dogmatic approach to ethics” (p. 36). He shows that the Bible clearly commands that witches and people of different religions must be put to death. The Bible regards women as the property of men, to be casually discarded as men see fit. Katz notes that, as time passed and circumstances changed, human beings and their religions became increasingly civilized.

In Chapter 35 (“Monotheism: Breeder of Intolerance, Destruction, and Genocide”) Katz discusses Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in unflattering terms. He argues that Christians learned how to be destructive, intolerant, and genocidal “from the monotheism of the Jews” (p. 113). Later, Muslims learned such traits from Jews and Christians. The absolute certainty with which religious fanatics clung to cherished religious beliefs left little room for tolerance of those not of a like mind.

Katz shows that the Israelites slaughtered their enemies and tried to destroy all traces of other religions by tearing down altars, smashing sacred pillars, and so forth. According to the Bible, the Israelites destroyed entire cities and wiped out civilizations such as the Amorites, Hittites, and Canaanites. Many religionists, however, fail to notice the blatant contradiction that exists between the idea that God is loving and infinitely merciful, and the hate-filled violence condoned by the same God in the Bible and the Qur’an. Indeed, Katz points out that Christ called for the slaying of his enemies. Moreover, in Revelation 19: 13–15, Christ, the “Prince of Peace” is “clothed with a robe dipped in blood. . . . And from his mouth comes a sharp word, so that He may smite the nations. . . .” The failure to note such contradictions might be the greatest religious miracle of all.

The Qur’an denounces polytheism and idolatry, and condemns unbelievers to Hell. Katz maintains that Muhammad legalized slavery, the subjection of women, polygamy, and “holy” wars. He forced idolaters to convert to Islam—or else! For these reasons and others, Katz argues that humanist standards of ethics and justice are far superior to those of monotheism.

The Ways of an Atheist has no footnotes, and no bibliography or index. The biblical quotations, however, are accurate, and this is a fine book for laypersons trying to understand the positions of freethinkers.

—Norm R. Allen, Jr.

**Standing Up to Religious Oppression**

Rage Against the Veil: The Courageous Life and Death of an Islamic Dissident, by Parvin Darabi