

Article

Religion and Its Public Critics

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Abstract: To have the right and possibility to criticize religions in public life is crucial for developing a healthy liberal democratic society. However, this criticism could take many different forms with respect to who offers the criticism, on what grounds it is based, its aim, what the target of the criticism is, and whom the critics try to convince. In this article, I develop a theoretical framework we can use to distinguish and assess different forms of criticism, focusing primarily on secular criticism of religion. Furthermore, I argue that in performing such a meta-study of criticism, it is vital that we reflect more carefully on how to develop plausible ethics of criticism. Finally, by comparing public criticism and academic criticism, I show that such ethics must be developed in a way that is sensitive to discourse.

Keywords: criticism of religion; ethics of criticism; new atheism; public; religion; religious criticism; secular; secularism; worldviews

1. Introduction

The issues about what role criticism of religions plays in public life, how it could and should be expressed, and how it does affect society, and not the least, the target of the criticism, are important ones. What options do we have when it comes to religious criticism, and which ways have proven to be more or less dead ends in that they increase violence, conflict, and resistance rather than foster peaceful coexistence, critical dialogue, revision of belief and practice, and the exchange of ideas? These issues need to be addressed, because a liberal democratic society must allow people who adhere to different worldviews to criticize each other's religious or non-religious beliefs, values, and practices but still maintain relations of harmony and comity across diverse outlooks on human life and its ends within its boundaries. This is especially so since a core liberal idea is that the state should be neutral to its citizens' comprehensive conceptions of the good, substantive ways of life or worldviews (Rawls 1996). Hence, an essential question for a liberal democratic society to find an answer is how—or to what extent—its citizens can encounter and engage with one another in critical but respectful and non-hostile ways. Philosophers of religion can, I think, make a vital contribution to these urgent social matters.

In this essay, I will take the first step toward this goal by providing a model of how we can distinguish between different forms of (religious) criticism. Once we have such a theoretical framework in place, we are in a better position to inquire how we can find fruitful ways to critically engage with religion in conditions of respect and toleration. I will start by defining religious criticism, proceed by giving a brief account of the social or societal background to my questions, then propose a model for distinguishing different forms of criticism,¹ and end by commenting on what norms “ethics of criticism” might reasonably contain and how they might apply to the public life of liberal democracy. I am working towards an ideal account of the ethics of criticism, and am not primarily concerned with the practical steps of the implementation of such an account when there is already such divisive discourse present in many societies.



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2. Criticism of Religion Explicated

Critique or criticism is an expression of questioning, disapproval, or rejection of someone or something. Hence, we could say that *criticism of religion* or *religious criticism* is the activity people exhibit when they question, challenge, or reject religious beliefs, values, practices, or institutions. For instance, the object of criticism could be *belief* in God or God's omnipotence, in karma, in reincarnation, or in an afterlife or *value judgments* such as that abortion is morally wrong, that only humans among living things on earth have intrinsic value, that God is worthy of worship, or the prohibition of blasphemy. However, the target of criticism could also be *practices* such as prayer, meditation, circumcision, or jihad or *institutions* such as the Catholic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, monasteries, mosques, or religious schools.

Moreover, the critics can criticize religion because they criticize all religions. They could claim that there is no evidence supporting any religion, so we should reject them all. As the perhaps most influential atheist today, Richard Dawkins, phrases it: "I am not attacking any particular version of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented" (Dawkins 2006, p. 36). The critics could also be less concerned with Buddhism and Christianity than Islam and express a disapproval of Islam in particular. Moreover, the target of criticism could be a specific feature of one or many but not all religions. For example, Martin Hägglund criticizes those religions that include a belief in an afterlife or eternal life. He maintains that "secular faith" that is "devoted to this world and invested in finite lives . . . [is] necessarily at odds with religious faith in eternity" (Hägglund 2019, p. 30). Therefore, an afterlife is not something we should believe in or hope for because it undermines our lives here and now. Therefore, religious criticism could target religion as a whole or merely a part of it.

I will assume that there is nothing special about criticism directed at religion; it is merely an instance of a broader category. Instead, the target of criticism could be science, politics, education, media, secularism, socialism, or capitalism, either as ideas, institutions, or practices. Moreover, the goal of criticism is not the same as the goal of understanding, even if the first should include elements of the second activity. It is hard to develop justified forms of criticism if one does not understand what one aims to assess critically. When I criticize what someone believes, values, or does, I think that something is wrong, lacking, or unjustified; I am not expressing a desire to grasp or comprehend why or what it means to believe, value, or do these things. We could perhaps say that the logic of criticism differs from the logic of understanding. Critique is an expression of disapproval of someone or something; the quest for understanding carries no such connotations.

One more thing we have to pay attention to is that nothing in my definition of religious criticism makes it impossible or even unlikely that religious practitioners could express criticism of religion. Thus, for example, religious practitioners could criticize that only men could become priests, that certain religious institutions are used to oppress certain groups of people, and so on. This kind of religious self-criticism or "intra-religious criticism" is actually one important reason why religions change over time. Moreover, we have people who belong to one religion that criticize other religions for failing to understand the basic constituents of reality or that salvation, liberation, or enlightenment can only be provided by their religion and not the one criticized. Muslims, for instance, have criticized Christians and Jews for forgetting, altering, or suppressing parts of their own scriptures. This criticism is among Muslim scholars based on the doctrine of *tahrif* (scriptural alternation or corruption) (Zebiri 2000, p. 6).

Therefore, it is easy to be misled into thinking that criticism comes from people outside of the religion in question, but it could just as well come from people engaged in it (in the same way as criticism of science could be provided by people external to science or by the scientists themselves). The exception, of course, is when the critics maintain that, for one reason or another, we should reject religion as such; we should all be non-religious persons, and society must become religionless.

2.1. The Societal Context of Religious Criticism

Criticism of religion has probably existed as long as religion itself has been an essential part of human culture. Thus, the phenomenon itself is hardly new, but some things are new in certain parts of the world. The societal setting has changed significantly in these places, affecting how religious criticism is conceptualized.

Over the last three centuries, we have seen the emergence of states that self-describe as “secular states”. The idea is that a state should not take a stand on religious issues. For example, a state should not favor or disfavor, say, Christianity over Islam or vice versa. People, not states, believe in God or go to churches or mosques. Understandably, this way of talking about the state as secular is widespread because, in the original case, the views between which the state should be neutral were all religious. Although, and this is important, that is not the case anymore. Today, there is a great variety of alternative non-religious outlooks on life, and there are many non-religious people. However, the core idea of liberal democracy is that the state should protect people in their belonging to whatever outlook or worldview they choose and treat them equally whatever their choice. Therefore, we should resist talking about the secular state and secularism in this way and instead talk about state neutrality. To the extent that it is possible, the state should be neutral or impartial to the different worldviews, comprehensive conceptions of the good, or substantive ways of life that its citizens embrace.²

I suggest that we use “secular” to refer to other changes in our society. I have in mind that a growing number of people—more so in some countries than others—do not consider themselves religious or hesitate to call themselves religious when self-identifying or who describe themselves as agnostics or simply say that they are atheists. Northern Europe, for instance, is increasingly populated by what sociologists call “religious nones” (Lee 2015; Thiessen and Wilkins-Laflamme 2017.) Now, I think we should also resist the terminology of religious nones or non-believers because it is not as if these people lack life-orienting beliefs or values. Rather, they hold other things as true in their lives than religious people do. They embrace *secular worldviews* or are—consciously or unconsciously—searching for secular alternatives to traditional religions, or as Charles Taylor phrases it, they try to develop immanent construals of human flourishing (Taylor 2007, p. 9). Such a conceptualization is certainly plausible if we define a worldview, roughly, as the constellation of attitudes, beliefs, and values that people, whether consciously or unconsciously, hold and which constitute their understanding of who they are, what the world is like, what their place in it is, what they should do to live a satisfying or good life, and what they can say, know, and rationally believe about these things (Stenmark 2021). Thus, I suggest that we call them “secular people” and thereby have a suitable contrast to “religious people”, not denying that there are many borderline cases.

Related to this change in society is a change in the condition of belief. Taylor points out that we in the Western world have experienced a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic to one in which it is understood to be one option among others and frequently not the easiest one to embrace. We have moved from a time when religious faith was the default position to a situation in which uncertainty or even unbelief is rather the point of departure. He concludes that it was “virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable” (Taylor 2007, p. 25). Hence, a society is secular in the senses that (a) many people in it do not consider themselves to be religious and (b) the intellectual default position—what is taken as the point of departure in public life—is not religious faith but doubt, uncertainty, or even unbelief. Accordingly, the presumption is becoming more and more that religious citizens must justify their views and practices.

Due to these changes, religious criticism has also taken a new form in a contemporary liberal democratic society. As a result, we can, in public life, see a move away from mere criticism from within religion or criticism between religions to secular criticism. Instead, religion is criticized from without by people who do not self-identify as religious. Hence, the people who deliver much of the criticism of religion have changed, and so have the

grounds for criticism and the aim of the criticism. Sometimes this condition of unbelief takes rather extreme expressions, as in the so-called “new atheist” attacks on religion. Sam Harris, for example, maintains:

Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity—a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible. When foisted upon each generation anew, it renders us incapable of realising just how much of our world has been unnecessarily ceded to a dark and barbarous past. (Harris 2006, p. 25)

Of course, this new default position in public life or this “secular norm” could be expressed in many less offensive and more accurate ways.

2.2. Different Forms of Religious Criticism

We now understand what criticism of religion is and have also identified some of the features that characterize the societal setting in which it takes place today, at least in some parts of the world. In what follows, I will propose a model that we can use to distinguish different forms of criticism from each other. Its core idea is as follows:

When *A* criticize *B*’s religious worldview *RW*, they base their criticism on reasons or arguments *R* and have (implicit or explicit) aims or a purposes *O* in mind in doing so, intending to convince *B* or a third party *C* with their argument, and this takes place in a social context or discourse *S* where certain (implicit or explicit) norms *N* govern the discourse and in a social situation in which a particular relation of power *P* is obtained between *A* and *B* (or what *A* and *B* represents).

Let me unpack this complex and dense proposition in a number of analytic questions.

2.3. The Critics

Who are the critics? As I have already alluded to, criticism could be internal or external to religion in relation to *who* it is who offers or expresses the criticism against the phenomenon in question. No clear-cut line could, of course, be drawn because people will disagree on who is in and who is out, who is a (true) religious believer or say a (true) Muslim, or, to make a parallel, who is a (good) scientist or (genuine) representative of science and who is not. Moreover, the distinction is context-sensitive, so in certain debates, I may be an insider, in others, I may be an outsider, and sometimes it will be hard to tell what I am. Either way, many of us have no problems identifying, say, Dawkins and Harris as outsiders in their criticism of religion.

It is criticism of religion from the outside that I am particularly interested in analyzing. (It is important, however, also to highlight that criticism could just as well come from within. Such a realization undermines secular rhetoric that dogmatism and blind faith are intrinsic features of religion). It is criticism of religion performed by people who are not engaged in the religious practice in question or who do not embrace these particular religious beliefs or values themselves. We can call this phenomenon *outsiders’ criticism of religion*. We need to distinguish between three types of religious criticism from outsiders, depending on which group of people expresses the criticism. It would be an instance of secular criticism of religion in merely one case.

I have already mentioned the first group. It consists of people who belong to a different religion than the one that is the target of criticism. Buddhists, for instance, might criticize Christians for failing to see that suffering or craving is the fundamental existential problem we face and that we all have to overcome it to escape the cycle of rebirth and become enlightened people. These people are *interreligious critics*. Let us call the people who criticize religion but do not belong to any religion at all and, in this sense, reject them, *secular critics*. What they have in common is that they self-identify as not being religious. They are secular and not religious people.

What about a scientist or a judge who criticizes religion? Are they secular critics? I would maintain that the correct answer is that they are neither secular nor interreligious

critics (nor, for that matter, intra-religious critics). That is so because both religious and secular people can be natural scientists, social scientists, scholars in the humanities, or judges in a liberal democratic society. People can, of course, at the same time be natural scientists and Muslims or social scientists and secular people. However, being a secular or religious person is not a requirement for upholding these professions. *Qua* scientist or judge, or by merely upholding that profession, one cannot be religious or secular. Hence, both *scientific critics* and *legal critics* belong to a different group of critics of religion, a profession-based group. It requires special academic training or particular skill to belong to that group. Thus, one could, as a professor of the Hebrew Bible, criticize Christians who believe that Moses has written Genesis, the first book of the Bible, but one is *not* doing this ipso facto as a religious or secular person but as a scholar within the humanities.

In summary, the *A* in the model could be religious critics, secular critics, or profession-based critics such as scientific critics and legal critics. The *B* in the model could be a particular group of religious practitioners, for instance, Christians or Muslims, or Jehovah's Witnesses or ISIS, whose religious worldview *RW*—understood as a set of beliefs, values, practices, or institutions—is the target of the criticism. Notice, though, that if I am right that secular people also have worldviews of one kind or another, then the target of criticism could be substituted with secular worldviews *SW*, and we would then have a model for the broader category of *worldview criticism*.

2.4. The Grounds of Criticism

On what ground is the criticism based? When *A* criticize *B*'s religious worldview *RW*, they base their criticism on reasons or arguments *R*. Hence, we have to identify the reasons, or better, the kinds of the reasons the critics ground their religious criticism on. One form of public criticism of religion appeals to its bad consequences. Religion (or a particular religion or type of religious orientation, such as fundamentalism) is harmful to society, so that the world would be better off without it. Richard Rorty expresses an interesting version of this form of criticism. He writes: "Whereas the philosophers who claim that atheism, unlike theism, is backed by evidence would say that religious belief is irrational, contemporary secularists like myself are content to say that it is politically dangerous" (Rorty 2005, p. 33). The first thing to notice is that his criticism is directed at religious institutions as political actors. It is an expression of "anti-clericalism". In his view, religion is unobjectionable as long as it is privatized. The second thing is that Rorty's argument (as well as the others of this kind that appeal to religion's bad consequences) gives, if it is sound, a moral reason to reject religion or, more exactly, ecclesiastical institutions. If we value liberal democracy, and religious institutions are a serious threat to liberal democracy, we should reject religion in public life.

Though there are, of course, other types of reasons that we can appeal to in criticism of religion, such as biological reasons, psychological reasons, sociological reasons, statistical reasons, medical reasons, historical reasons, hermeneutical reasons, legal reasons, philosophical reasons, logical reasons, political reasons, religious reasons, and secular reasons.

Presumably, the professor of the Hebrew Bible who criticized those Christians who believed that Moses had written Genesis, did this based on historical-exegetical reasons. Likewise, a biologist can criticize those Christians and Muslims who believe that the earth is 10,000–15,000 years old by saying that the available scientific evidence suggests that the earth is around 4.5 billion years old. This criticism of religion is based on geological reasons. Of course, we do not have to be scientists to appeal to scientific reasons when criticizing religious beliefs and practices. We could do that merely as religious or secular people. After all, we frequently appeal to reasons or evidence that we ourselves have not confirmed the truth of when we argue.

One distinctive feature of many of the new atheists is that they maintain that science is the only way to understand the real world and, since there are no scientific reasons that support religion in any way—rather, the available scientific evidence conclusively

points in the other direction—it is not rational to be religious today. A secular critic, such as Massimo Pigliucci, rejects this exclusive focus on scientific evidence in his criticism of new atheism since all facts are not scientific facts, since the best arguments against religion are philosophical and not scientific, and since science cannot give us values—and, therefore, any argument which appeals to values is disqualified from the start (Pigliucci 2013). Pigliucci argues that besides scientific reasons, important philosophical reasons and moral reasons must play a central role in an acceptable form of secular criticism of religion.

What would then “religious reasons” be, and how could they be used to criticize religion? For example, suppose one Muslim gets into a public debate with another about whether people must be Muslims in order to obtain salvation or have success in life hereafter. The person he discusses this with maintains that one must be a Muslim because the only way to God is by practicing Islam. In response, the critic points out that in the Qur’an, we can read that “Believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans—whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does what is right—shall be rewarded by their Lord; they have nothing to fear or to regret” (Surah 2:62). He maintains that for this reason, his interlocutor is wrong, because at least practicing, sincere Jews and Christians can obtain salvation. However, he would perhaps agree with his Muslim opponent that the truth claims of Islam are superior to those of Judaism and Christianity. Hence, he offers a religious reason why Muslims should not be religious exclusivists (Stenmark 2006, 2009). I suggest that we take a *religious reason* to be a reason that, in one way or another, presupposes the truth of religion or, more accurately, the truth of a specific religion. A religious argument would then have key premises that are internal to the worldview of a religious community. Therefore, it is a reason that normally does not convince beyond the boundaries of a religious community.

When Christians claim that we should believe that all people have equal worth because we are all created in the image of God, we have another example of such a religious reason. It could be aimed at other Christians who deny that we all have equal value, but it could also be directed at other religious or secular people who reject or question the equal worth of all humans. Consequently, whether the religious reasons given for or against a belief, value, or practice are internal or external depends on the target of criticism. Moreover, religious reasons are just like the other kinds of reasons that we have considered, in that *everyone* can use them. Therefore, secular critics could, in an argument against Christians who discriminate against a particular group of people, appeal to the Christian conviction that people have equal worth because we all are created in the image of God. Thus, the critics argue that there is an inconsistency in this group’s Christian worldview and that the best way to solve this inconsistency is to stop discriminating against this group of people.

It follows that the distinction we used before between an outsider’s criticism and an insider’s criticism needs to be supplemented with a distinction between *external criticism* and *internal* or *immanent criticism*. Moreover, both outsiders and insiders can be engaged in external criticism as well as immanent criticism. We engage in immanent criticism when we base our criticism on reasons, premises, norms, or standards that we can find within the boundaries of the criticized party’s worldview.³ We appeal to *internal reasons*. External criticism brings considerations to the table that can be found outside of these boundaries in order to justify the critical conclusions. Such critics ground their religious criticism on *external reasons*. As immanent critics of religion, we try to argue positively from our own (as insiders) or our opponents’ (as outsiders) religious premises to the conclusion that the change in our or their religious worldview that we propose should be acceptable.⁴ If successful, we—as insiders or outsiders—can find some religious people wrong in light of their own beliefs, values, or practices. Consequently, and importantly, secular criticism of religion could take the form of both external and immanent criticism.

If we understand religious reasons in the way I have proposed, then there also will be reasons that, in one way or another, presuppose the falsehood of religion and, hence, the truth of a secular worldview. They are reasons that normally do not convince beyond the boundaries of a secular community. Let us call them *secular reasons*. For instance, Karl Marx, in his famous criticism of religion, states that:

The foundation of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion*, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. . . . *Religious* suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people. (Marx 1844)

In his criticism, Marx assumes from the outset that religious claims are false and then asks what function they, as an expression of false consciousness, could have in society. However, such a premise, in an argument against religion, does not convince beyond the boundaries of the secular community. A secular argument would then have key premises that are internal to the worldview of a secular community.

Finally, *public reasons* would be those which people on either side of a critical assessment of religion can accept, independent of their own particular religious or secular worldview—although they might disagree about their strength or relevance. We should not, as Habermas does, equate public reasons with secular reasons (Habermas 2006, p. 15). It is better and less confusing to keep them apart, especially if we want to talk about secular worldviews and contrast them to religious ones.

2.5. The Goals of Criticism

What is the aim of the criticism? In raising this third question, we are interested in knowing what those issuing the criticism of religion hope to achieve with their critical assessment: what is its purpose? At least two levels of goals are operating here that I would like to draw our attention to.

When criticizing something, the aim we, as critics, often have is to show that our criticism is justified. We have an epistemic goal of showing that something is true or false, right or wrong. We want people to believe what is true and avoid believing what is false. We intend to give a sound argument or counterargument in the service of the truth. (I am, here, merely assuming an ordinary, non-theoretical concept of truth—one that says that to label an individual's claim as true is to say that what it states is how things actually are.) However, we also want our criticism to be rationally persuasive. We aim to convince the target that they are wrong or should change what they believe or do. Hence, there is typically a crucial pragmatic goal involved in criticism, as well. We could say that criticism is *pragmatically successful* if it leads to changes in the direction the critics intended in some of the target group's beliefs, values, or practices. Criticism is *epistemically successful* if it tracks the truth or shows that a belief is false or a practice morally wrong. However, we can also have less noble goals; perhaps we would like to garner attention, become famous, sell many books, start a conflict, increase an existing polarization in society, or humiliate other people. If this is what we are after, it might be better to exaggerate our criticism, intentionally misinterpret the criticized party, and use biased terminology than to construct sound and rationally persuasive arguments. Let us call these motives of criticism simply "unflattering" goals.

The second level of goals has more to do with the value we attach to the (religious) worldview to which the criticized beliefs, values, practices, or institutions belong. The aim of the insiders' religious criticism will typically not be to undermine completely or debunk their religion. Instead, they want to reform or improve it so that it can overcome internal tensions or be of relevance to contemporary society. Sallie McFague, for instance, criticizes the traditional patriarchal imagery of God in the Christian faith for being harmful and dangerous in an ecological, nuclear age (McFague 1987, p. ix). Given this overarching goal of improvement, these critics could be engaged in a *negative* form of criticism. They could try to show that a religious belief is not convincing because there are good reasons to reject it or that a religious practice unfairly harms a group of people. The previous example of criticism against young-earth creationism is purely negative; it says what Christians and Muslims should not believe about creation. If the goal of negative forms of criticism is to

show deficiencies, find faults, or even completely undermine the criticized position, the objective of *constructive* forms of criticism is to investigate possible ways of improvement. McFague's constructive proposal is that Christians should use imagery of God in which the world is taken to be God's body (McFague 1987, p. 69f). The critics of young-earth creationism, to go back to the other example, could propose that these Christians and Muslims should embrace theistic evolution instead of creationism. With constructive criticism, the critics try to show how a particular line of reasoning, an argument, or a point of view could become more coherent, justified, or convincing if specific changes are made.

In addition, the outsiders' criticism could be constructive in that they suggest ways of improving religious beliefs, values, or practices. Although, it could also aim to undermine completely or debunk the target in question. For example, in their criticism of Islam, a group of Christians could have as their objective to show that this religion is false and should be rejected by all honest and well-informed people, or vice versa. This would be an example of an interreligious critical debunking argument. These days, those forms of secular criticism that aim to undermine religion in all its forms seem to be more common. To once again take Harris as an example, he claims: "The greatest problem confronting civilization is not merely religious extremism: rather, it is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations we have made to faith itself. Religious moderates are, in large part, responsible for the religious conflict in our world, because their beliefs provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed." Religion in all forms should be rejected.

However, this is not the only aim that secular criticism of religion can have in contemporary society. For example, although Jürgen Habermas is critical of many forms of religion, he still maintains that a secular, liberal democratic society needs the moral and spiritual resources of religion to not cut itself off from key resources for the creation of meaning and identity. What we need to overcome, he argues, is a narrow secularist consciousness and, instead, take religious contributions to contentious political issues seriously and not see religions as "archaic relics of pre-modern societies" and lacking "any intrinsic justification to exist" (Habermas 2006, p. 15).

For the above reason, it might be essential to separate "secularists" from "pluralists" within the group of secular people. *Secularism* comes in many forms, but I would say that all of them aim at minimizing the influence of religion on society or on all aspects of life and hope that religion will one day cease to be a live option for people. Society is better off without religion because it is not only false and irrational but also dangerous to human well-being and democratic society. Therefore, we should actively push history forward towards the goal of a non-religious world. However, secular people could, and many of them (such as Habermas) do, reject this vision of a future society without religion. Perhaps we could say that they embrace the idea of a *worldview-pluralistic society* (or abbreviated, *pluralism*) instead. It is a society in which it is desirable that both secular and religious citizens exist and continue to exist because they can learn things from each other in complementary learning processes that cannot occur if all people embrace a secular worldview. These secular pluralists do not think that it is religion, as such, that is the problem. Instead, they maintain that religions in the form of religious fundamentalism or militant extremism constitute the real problem. Such a form of secular criticism could, in contrast to the previous secularistic one, also be constructive and aim at improving religious belief or practice and treating faith respectfully, not because it is faith but because, as the atheist Graham Oppy maintains, "it is incredible to suppose that there are no religious believers who are reasonable in their religious beliefs, at least by any ordinary standards of reasonableness" (Oppy 2011, p. 121).⁵

In conclusion, the goal of religious criticism could be epistemic, pragmatic, or (at the very least) unflattering, negative or positive/constructive, reformative or debunking, not, thereby, suggesting that these are the only possible goals.

2.6. The Intended Audience

Who is it that the critics are trying to convince with their argument? The obvious answer to this fourth question seems to be that when *A* criticize *B*'s religious worldview *RW*, the critics try to convince *B* that they are mistaken or wrong so that they ought to reject *RW* or modify *RW* in a certain way. However, I do not think that that is always the case. Sometimes it is a third party *C* that they try to convince with their argument. In secular forms of religious criticism in public life, I suspect that it is often other people rather than those criticized whom the critics try to convince, people who perhaps hesitate to call themselves religious but have never really thought that it was anything obviously irrational or dangerous to be religious. Such groups of secular critics try to create a public opinion and are not particularly interested in whether *B* (the religious people criticized) find the criticism convincing. Therefore, their criticism of Islam in this regard might not be intended to change what Muslims think on these issues but to convince the general public that the criticism is fair and justified. We can call such arguments *third-party-target-arguments*.

Sometimes, or even often, convincing a third party, *C*, located closer to or further away from the primary target of criticism *B*, is what we actually aim at with our critical engagement. However, those we want to convince with our arguments might be much more closely related to or associated with the target group *B*. In arguing against militant Islamism, the secular or religious critics might not think that they really could convince these extremists themselves. Therefore, their objective is primarily to formulate a criticism of ISIS or similar groups of Muslims that have a real possibility of reaching Muslims living, say, in the European Union, for example, young people exposed to the danger of being recruited by such extremist groups.

2.7. Academic and Public Criticism

*What characterizes the social discourse *S* where the criticism is located, and what (explicit or implicit) norms *N* govern activities in that context?* This is the last of the analytic questions that I have space to explore in this essay. In a way, I have already given a general answer to the first part of this question. I have said that the criticism of religion I focus on arises in a liberal democratic society which is or should be guided by the regulative idea of worldview neutrality, but in which many citizens (or very influential ones) embrace a secular rather than religious worldview and in which the default assumption in public life is not faith but doubt, uncertainty, or even unbelief. This, however, is not what I am after in raising this question. I am rather thinking about whether religious criticism is expressed in academic discourse or public discourse, in a debate article or an editorial in a newspaper, in a satirical comedy or a documentary film, etc.⁶ Why is this important? It is essential because if we aspire to develop adequate ethics of criticism, we must consider this.

Legally speaking, freedom of speech in liberal democracies includes the right to massively criticize religion and even ridicule religious beliefs and practices, at least as long as critics do not intend to stir up religious hatred. How far such a right extends is an important and challenging legal issue to address, but one that I leave to scholars with legal competence to analyze (see [Clarke 2007](#)). (Of course, freedom of speech works both ways: it includes also the religious criticism of secular worldviews or religious people's criticism of a liberal democratic society.) What I am concerned about is, instead, the ethical and epistemic aspects of criticism: when is the criticism fair and justified, when is it unfair and unjustified? Of course, much needs to be said about these things as well; I here merely limit myself to the claim that these norms must be sensitive to the different discourses within which criticism occurs.⁷ I will exemplify and defend this thesis by comparing public criticism and academic criticism.

The qualifier "academic" is important because the university setting matters. Scholars accept norms that would be too strict when construed as general norms binding on all rational inquirers and critics. In a university setting, we expect higher standards of accurate interpretation, reasoning, argument, and response to counterarguments than in the public arena. For one thing, an *empathic imagination* is required of academic inquirers in the

hermeneutical task of interpreting religious beliefs and practices. As a scholar, one should put oneself in the position of the religious practitioners one is examining, trying to imagine what the world looks like from that point of view so one can arrive at a detailed and accurate interpretation of the phenomena in question. In doing so, the scholar becomes familiar with the complexity, diversity, and historical–social context of the religious faith in question. If necessary, one can then re-describe it using an academic vocabulary, but one must be able to justify such a re-interpretation, and one should avoid as many as possible highly (negative or positive) value-loaded terms. Hence, there is also a norm in play in academic discourse *against the use of biased language*.

Furthermore, one should be guided by *the principle of charity* if one, as a scholar, also aims at criticizing religion of one kind or another. In academic criticism, we should choose a representation of the criticized faith that is the best possible given the limitations set by the material with which we are working. We should do so because our purpose, as academic inquirers, is to discover what is true or what is the best justified view on a subject matter. The principle should be honored because it aims to establish maximally conducive conditions for a shared academic inquiry.

We are not required to subsume such strict ethical and epistemic norms in public debates. It is permissible that our goal is merely to win the debate and convince other citizens—who perhaps are not so well informed—that the criticized party is wrong. If our goal is to defeat our opponents or to make it seem as if we have defeated them, then success is more likely if we attack a weaker form of religious faith. If we (as public critics of religion) represent the religious position as weaker than it actually is or focus on the less elaborated understandings of religious faith rather than the best ones, we are more likely to appear as the victors. If we aim to persuade, we may be well advised to choose the weaker or less sophisticated versions, especially if our audience is unaware that stronger versions are available. However, if what matters is—as in academic criticism—whether the ideas in question or the conclusions of the arguments are true, then we should choose the best available representations of religious faith. Moreover, the academic community does not care who wins the argument (even if, presumably, scholars personally do); therefore, means such as peer evaluation and blind reviews have been developed to discourage such tendentious manners of criticism within the university setting. What the academic community cares about is that truth is discovered or that it becomes clear what the evidence supports or fails to support, not who wins or fails to win certain debates or arguments.

Granted, we cannot reasonably assume that exactly the same ethics of criticism apply or should apply to public criticism as to academic criticism or, more generally speaking, in all social contexts or discourses. However, what about the *public intellectuals* who criticize religion? Must they satisfy the more strict academic norms of epistemic conduct? To answer this question is trickier. Suppose that we take the term “public intellectuals” to describe the intellectuals who, in the public square, speak out about issues of key concern to the society in which they live, in addition to making an academic career. They attempt to rise above the partial preoccupation of their academic profession to engage with issues they and many others conceive to be of great importance for a healthy liberal democratic society. As a result, public intellectuals shape public opinion, or, at the very least, the public dialogue about what things are important and what should be thought about and done about those things. Dawkins and Habermas are two influential public intellectual critics of religion that I have referred to in this article. In fact, most of the individuals I have quoted can be classified as public intellectuals.

What makes it tricky to answer the question of what norms of criticism they should honor is this: On the one hand, these people have received academic training; they might even be professors—they quite frequently draw attention to this fact in their argument—and, sometimes, people listen to them precisely for this reason. Public intellectuals have a certain epistemic authority due to their academic credentials. One would then expect that not merely the prestige of academic competence but also the included obligations, such as the norms of academic criticism, would apply to them in their role as public

intellectuals. On the other hand, they often aim to start a debate and, in order to gain attention, they might need to exaggerate and simplify things. In order to reach the public, they cannot employ technical vocabulary and the careful terminology of scholarship with all its qualifiers. Simplifying things without straying too far from the truth is, in fact, one feature that characterizes a skilled public intellectual. What also matters is whether the public intellectuals write short articles in a magazine or newspaper or publish books in which they criticize religion. A public intellectual has space to provide a more nuanced view in a monography, and thus it is reasonable to expect such nuances there, and the person is blameworthy if such epistemic obligation is violated.

Consider the case of Dawkins. He maintains, in his book *The God Delusion*, that religious “Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument” (Dawkins 2006, p. 308). (Dawkins makes a similar claim in *The Selfish Gene*, where he defines faith as “blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence” (Dawkins 1989, p. 198)). However, he engages critically with Richard Swinburne’s views and his arguments for God’s existence in *The God Delusion* (Dawkins 2006, pp. 147–50). Therefore, Dawkins is aware that there are theists who, like Swinburne, maintain that religious faith goes beyond the evidence but not against evidence. No doubt, *some* religious people would hold the view of religious faith that Dawkins criticizes,⁸ but not all of them understand their faith in that way. Arguably, the view that faith goes beyond the evidence is the official Catholic understanding of faith.

Moreover, this Swinburneian kind of faith is quite common in ordinary life. People have faith in their marriage, their friends, and their favorite football team that goes beyond the evidence, and we would not think that there is necessarily anything irrational about it. Here, we then have an example of how a public intellectual uses a self-serving definition that he—in his capacity as an “intellectual”—knows is biased, violates what I suggest are reasonable ethics of criticism, and also has the space in a monography to take into account.

3. Some Concluding Remarks

To have the right and possibility to criticize religions in public life is crucial for developing a healthy liberal democratic society. This criticism could take many different forms with respect to who offers the criticism, on what grounds it is based, what its objective is, what the target of the criticism is, and whom the critics try to convince. However, during the last decades, we have seen the development of quite aggressive forms of secular criticism of religion. This is troublesome from a secular perspective because it might increase violence, polarization, hostility, and resistance rather than bring enlightenment to religious people. We must also acknowledge that more respectful forms of secular criticism can be found (although these secular critics do not seem to sell as many books and invite as many headlines in the press). They do not see religion itself but rather certain forms of it as a problem. Some of these secular pluralists even think that they could learn something from a critical engagement with specific groups of religious people, which could improve their secular way of life.

It is important that philosophers of religion not merely express religious criticism themselves or offer a critical response to such criticism but also analyze these different forms of criticism found in public and academic life. In this article, I have suggested one way this could be accomplished. In the process of performing such a meta-study of criticism, it is also vital that we reflect more carefully on how to develop plausible ethics of criticism. We can ground that normative inquiry on the common-sense idea that criticism can be fair or unfair, justified or unjustified, an idea we all seem to take to be self-evidently true, but that we should develop, as I have suggested, in a discourse-sensitive way. The illumination of such ethics of criticism would, of course, not solve the problem of the hostile worldview conflicts that we find in today’s society, but it would help us understand that the commitment to rational criticism is sensitive to the discourse in question.

I have also pointed out that secular people are not blank slates, so it is not merely religious people who have faith and believe things, whereas the former do neither.⁹ Religion

is not simply an add-on to what we all already accept. Instead, it is a particular mode of living and interpreting reality as a whole. Moreover, secular people have, or express in their lives, particular attitudes, beliefs, and values about who they are, what the world is like, what their place in it is, what they must do to live a good life, and what they can know and rationally believe about these things. In short, whether or not they are conscious about it, they have a secular worldview of one kind or another. However, if virtually everyone has a worldview, then we need to go beyond religious criticism and explore different forms of worldview criticism.

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Notes

- ¹ I have previously developed some of these ideas in [Stenmark \(2021\)](#), pp. 17–25.
- ² To what extent such worldview neutrality is actually possible and also desirable in a liberal democracy is a complicated question worthy of a discussion in its own right (see, for instance, [Laborde 2017](#)). My point is simply that “secular” is not an adequate notion to use anymore to capture this relationship between the state and its citizens’ competing worldviews or conceptions of the good.
- ³ Notice, however, that this understanding of immanent criticism is related to but differs from how it is used in the scholarly discourse of social criticism. Within social criticism, immanent critique is understood to be “very roughly, the evaluation of society according to criteria that are in some sense contained within it, rather than imposed from without” ([Diehl 2021](#)).
- ⁴ An excellent exemplification and analysis of forms of immanent criticism of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can be found in [Zackariasson \(2020\)](#).
- ⁵ By “ordinary standards of reasonableness”, Oppy means to say that there are religious believers who are no less reasonable in their religious beliefs than is the majority of humanity in the rest of its beliefs.
- ⁶ See [Jensdotter and Lövhheim \(2020\)](#) for an interesting analysis of the relevance of mediatization on the public debate about religion.
- ⁷ For example, Hilde Heine ([Heine 1968](#)) highlights another important aspect, namely the relevance of meta-theoretical commitments in assessments of evidence supporting or undermining competing worldviews.
- ⁸ There is no doubt that Dawkins thinks that Swinburne’s arguments for the existence of God are not convincing, but that is a different matter.
- ⁹ I have argued more extensively for this in [Stenmark \(2021\)](#) and also exemplified what two such secular worldviews might look like in [Stenmark \(2022\)](#).

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