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February 6, 2014: Religion is a Lie

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2/6/2014—Shockingly, this statement is not authored by a Chris Hitchens or any of the other New Atheists. This statement was made, on many occasions in fact, either expressly or by implication, by Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the 20th Century. In the Teaching Company's series, *Skeptics and Believers*, Grinnell College Professor Tyler Roberts says that Barth is as great a skeptic of religion as any of the masters of suspicion: Nietzsche, Freud or Marx. But what could such skepticism mean for Barth, who was so earnest in his belief in God? For Barth, religion is the effort by human beings to grasp the divine. But humans lack all capacity for interaction with the divine. God is utterly beyond human beings. So, any statement humans utter about God in their religions is really a statement about themselves, as Feuerbach knew. Does that mean that the Christian story is false? No, of course not. But neither the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, nor the act of God in any other historical act in any other culture, is anything human beings have done. God alone reconciles with godless humans and their godless religions. Well, then, what is the difference? Don't our religious teachings then turn out to be true after all? For Barth, the answer is no. What humans learn from God's revelation is that God is true and we humans live in a lie. We lie to ourselves about ourselves and everything else. In seeking autonomy from God, we end up with the most bitter enslavement to outside powers and our own whims. Barth is often misunderstood, even by his translators. At one point in the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth is translated as saying, there is no secular realm in which Christ is absent or which is free from his control. But upon reading the German, it was clear that Barth never wrote of Christ's "control." Barth wrote instead of Christ's disposition—even in secular life, we have the example of Jesus before us. For Barth, God is never God over humanity, but God with humanity.