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Religion: A Mosaic

Louis J. Hammann
Gettysburg College

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Religion: A Mosaic

Description

Can we say of Religion what the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy said of Economics: It is not one homogeneous enterprise? If so, then what is religion as a plural phenomenon? Should we understand religious traditions as carriers of revealed truth in the current age of empirical science? Or should we appreciate the power of the human imagination to satisfy our curiosity? Can human ingenuity reconcile the psychological and historical biases of religious traditions? Can we see them as both individual and communal realities? I propose to understand religious traditions under the rubric of a metaphor. They are mosaics, subtle designs of human experiences—designs that have emerged from the human struggle of coping with the constant impulse to make sense of life. Human ingenuity is capable of creating counter-cultural communities that persist as chains of memory. Their historical function is celebrating relationships that define our destiny and who we are.

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An Invitation

Dear Reader,

You are about to read a logbook of an excursion through territory that may at first seem quite familiar. Before long, however, you may begin to wonder where you are and where the road is going. Perhaps a few signposts may relieve your uncertainty. Let me begin with my conclusion: Religion is more of a mosaic than a simple picture created by one artist. Actually this final judgment depends on other notions met along the way. There are two such:

1. That religion is not one homogeneous enterprise.
2. If that is so, we are in a good position to appreciate my basic "argument." We can now look for religion on what I call the "human continuum," and that is where this excursion is taking us.

But, why now? Because we live now in a culture in which we cannot avoid the power and presence of the "scientific method." Finding religion on the "human continuum" means simply that it is--pardon the repetition--a human phenomenon. In my judgment, however, this does not diminish the necessity and the power of religion. Rather, it allows us to extend the boundaries of our humanity.

For now it is clear that human beings have the opportunity of living in at least three dimensions:

1. Individual human beings have physical bodies: biological marvels that organize star dust into amazing sentience.

2. We have mental worlds in which we can take off on unpredictable adventures—creating ourselves and our histories

3. And we have, as aspects of those mental worlds, imaginations that can see and know realities that are both invisible and intelligible.

Eventually, I tell myself, in order to climb the “Mount Everest of Religion” we need folks whose lives are lived on that “continuum” and are willing and able to assist in the climb toward the peak of that mountain. Still, I shall not be surprised if the “argument” of this book may seem more personal than you expected. I shall acknowledge, a little later, that “wherever one stands one occupies a position inside a worldview as well as inside the cosmos...” We all explore the universe while occupying some place in it. I am willing to allow that this quasi confession applies to the author and accounts for, at least the appearance of, his being personal while he tries to find his way into the cosmos where we all “live and move and have our being.” To give the reader a choice I launch these essays with an Invitation from within a worldview where I venture to explore, if not the cosmos, then at least a tender piece of the behavior of a small part of the inhabitants of that cosmos.

The purpose of the stream of essays that follows is not to disparage religion nor to persuade adherents of particular traditions or those drawn to “religion in general” that they are at table with a Feast of Fools. It is to make the case that religion, like so many other personal experiences and components of culture, is a more complex and interesting reality than it seems to be in the realm of ordinary public discourse. Even its location and function in a cultural matrix cannot be accounted for by a single “cause,” whether supernatural, psychological, or historical. Any and all religious traditions bear the marks of their location, their cultural context, their place in a historical epoch, their psychological and social effects, their intellectual content, their

personal satisfactions, and their interpretation by gifted or desperate individuals.

Religion is no less complicated a perspective on life, personal or collective than, for example, the economy or a prevailing political system. I suspect that any and all such entanglements of our common “forms of life” lead often to a singular human moment. Sooner or later we discover the one reality that defines the human species on this planet: our mortality. And if nothing else, religious behavior eventually hits that wall and either climbs over it with ingenious athleticism or falls back in at least temporary despair.

For the contemporary atheists, it seems, our mortality is the singular fact that defines our humanity. For those who deny any superordinate reality there is no future beyond our human careers so there was no past that inflicted on us an unjust finale to our existence. I want to argue, however, that it is the ingenious “fictions of coherence” (more on this later) that the religious imagination conjures to cope with the despair that atheists prefer to ignore.

Here I must protest that the atheists’ polemics do not “prove” that the conjurations of the religious imagination lack all existential value. Religious experience and historical traditions are not false or useless simply because the rhetoric that expresses them is not “objective.”

Edwin Dobb (a former editor of *The Sciences*) offers the following critique of objectivity: “...wherever one stands one occupies a position inside a worldview as well as inside the cosmos, creatures of a two fold creation.”¹ He goes on to refine this observation: “Despite claims to objectivity, physics [with the other sciences] is a sophisticated, highly specialized attempt to humanize the world.”² Finally, with a touch of ambiguity, he assures us that the human story assumes the shape of longing.

Human longings, however are not uniform. Neither the subjectivist nor the objectivist can claim exclusive certainty for their truths. These excursive essays, like all human efforts, are essays—attempts—toward appreciating the ambiguity of the brain/mind’s ingenuity in simply making sense of the parade of

perceptions, the swarm of ideas, the circus of hopes that define our responses to the uncertainties, the ambiguities that drive us into our human futures. As I suggested above, religious experience and historical traditions are not false or useless simply because the rhetoric that expresses them is not “objective.”

Now I must protest further that I do not have any intention to defend religion either as a historical or a psychological phenomenon. Its persistence in varied versions of reimagining our world may tempt the philosopher and the scientists to attack or defend it. Neither response to finding religion “alive and well” and proliferating or evolving or withering away has any appeal for me. I take “religion” as a given in the global environment, making its appearance on the double stage of history and nature, as both personal experience and as complex traditions. Such traditions provide “fictions of coherence” that are embedded between human consciousness and the curious imagination. Here we find mind negotiating with brain in order to prompt humans to live into their futures while holding onto and imagining pictures of the world that contain traces from the past or expectations of a fluid present.

I am tempted to end this invitation with an analogy—a parable—of how humans struggle to balance the temptation as participants and as observers in the ordinary course of living. Take Soccer as an instance. There is, of course, the International Game that we can observe on the great pitches where pros play The Game. But then, there is the “home team,” that draws us in as participants—not actually in uniform kicking the ball, but still as emotionally and in our imagination “playing” the local version of the Game of Games. Religion is the same kind of reality. We can watch it and we can “play” it. My strategy in this book is to appreciate the ambiguity and at the same time try to describe it as both a universal in human history and an experience that engages us as individuals. It is both an objective and a subjective phenomenon. Certain aspects of religion satisfy complex needs and desires of human individuals and at the same time enable us to live as members of the human race. Our understanding of religion is best realized when we concede that it is not a simple

homogeneous phenomenon. Today it is for any one of us an opportunity to be part of whatever it is; tomorrow it may occupy our consciousness as The Game of Games.

For a moment let me shift the metaphor from game-oriented to a trip through unfamiliar territory. As we try to understand the phenomenon of religion, we should be aware of how we travel through its territory. As we maneuver our way through this wonderful, varied world of ideas and experience, we surely must notice—as participants—that for us humans, religion maintains a narrative of ancient memories that tempt us to interpret life as a reassurance that the universe is ultimately both a safe place to live and at the same time promises a destiny that transcends human mortality. In short, for participants—whether as solo individuals or as adherents of a historic community—religion is the repository of fictions and wisdom that persuade us that existence makes sense—and constrains us to certain behaviors both as individuals and as participants in social processes.

Those in the mode of observers, on the other hand, may maintain a degree of detachment that spares them such opportunities. Religion for them is more or less uncomplicated by doubts and uncertainties, as well as prospects of transcendence—of communion with what is other than life on Monday morning.

So these experiential modes tell us that there are at least two perspectives on the same thing. There are those persons involved in religion as an ineluctable presence, a complex and varied phenomenon, a multi-faceted mosaic rather than a stone wall that invites collision. Then there are the observers for whom religion is what preoccupies those who dream, at best hopefully, of what lies beyond the ordinary and prompts unfulfillable hopes of an existence that only seems to go beyond Monday morning.

Perhaps it comes down to this: For the participant religious experience hears the echo of the universe ³, for the observer there is at most the sound of life in the ordinary.

The person addressing the reader values with some reluctance both perspectival modes, confident, however, that religion is not a single homogeneous enterprise, rather a carillon than a single bell. This book tries to appreciate this ambiguity.

To accomplish this, I begin by supposing that the question, "Is that all there is?" offers an otherwise self-satisfied imagination an open playing field. Then I allow two contemporary poets to test the limits of such a rhetorical question.

While still confronting our inability—or hesitancy—to resolve the question, I venture to challenge what I can only call the belief paradigm that provides the rhetorical gestures of ordinary religious discourse. In the place of this habit of mind, I argue that it is (special) human relationships that persuade us to launch further inquiry and continue to navigate the waters of what we too easily call religious experience.

Of course, that experience in one way or another must allow us to cope with or casually invoke the concept of a superordinate reality into the struggle for certitude as we face a world crying out to be understood as our primary dwelling place.

Then at last, I assemble an array of interpretive ideas under the figure of a Mosaic. The point of this strategy is to allow that religion (as, for example, the economy) is not a single homogeneous enterprise. As phenomenon, religion exhibits a subtle variety of effects on the course of our human lives. We can only begin to appreciate these effects by confronting religion's practical ambiguity: The adherents of religious traditions must face their existential reality and manage their penchant to confront "the Wholly Other" (quite often, simply "God") while creating and maintaining their identity as human beings.

In this effort to resolve religion into its various aspects I also propose that its most energetic facet is what I call its *Weltbild*. An easier, though less precise term would be its "world picture," that is, how one sees—how one contemplates—his or her world.

My best hope is that these excursions will both preserve and refine this pervasive reality that haunts our minds, consoles our emotions, and allows us to appreciate—sometimes casually, other times with serious intensity—at least something of the mystery of our humanity.

Chapter One

A Question Shall Lead Us

"Is that all there is?"

(Peggy Lee, 1969)

In our time, it seems, religion suffers a crisis of identity. It no longer has a consistent referent in the arena of public discourse. The shadow that it casts in history depends on a host of variables. Is it a personal experience; is it a communal phenomenon? A flood of natural and temporal circumstances, it seems, obscures the track it leaves along the course of human history. Can we name it as though it were a singular phenomenon? Does it claim its right to be what it is or do its human adherents define it as they use it for uncertain purposes?

Madeline Albright, in her book *The Mighty and the Almighty*, struggling in the face of the "East-West" encounters of religious traditions, finally acknowledges, "The years have not brought me certainty about religion."¹ Then in a confessional moment, she asserts, "I am a hopeful Christian [She was born Jewish and raised Catholic.] but an inadequate one, with doubts. I respect other religions because I think they are reaching for the same truth, though from a different angle."² Such a statement, of course, exhibits perhaps more confusion about "religion" than *bon fide* understanding.

I begin with Madeline Albright's reflections, however, because they are current and offered by a person in the public arena. I cite them also because they reflect the uncritical perspective of Gandhi and others whose interests are more political than philosophical. It is really the statement, "The years have not brought me certainty about religion," that piques my frustration. If one tunes into the public discourse about religion

it is clear that such a statement should be made by most journalists as well as so-called pundits. But it is the philosopher in me that has grown weary of the rhetorical reflexes in all such talk about religion. This unrelenting stream of talk about religion provokes in me despair at refining the rhetoric that scrambles religion, faith, belief, spirituality, and other conventional terms as though their referents were consistent with each other and generally agreed upon. I am sure that other concepts suffer from the same casual usage. Consider the ambiguity of such notions as “the economy,” “art,” “politics,” “culture,” and the like when they appear in public talk. I leave it to others to venture to bring such notions under critical scrutiny. My choice is to run against the stream of talk about religion, trying to introduce at least a modicum of consistency. It is tempting also to try to restore an appreciation of this complex phenomenon that seems so simple when it enters the realm of public discourse.

This motive is justified especially when we observe what happens when that old encounter between religion and science appears on the scene. According to the court transcript of the 2004 trial on teaching “intelligent design” in biology courses in the Dover, Pennsylvania public schools, a significant amount of time was given to “defining” science. No comparable effort was given to “defining” religion; a commonsense, conventional, uncritical understanding of religion pervaded the testimony.

So it is with great sympathy and tolerance that I observe, in the context of Albright’s rumination, that there is seldom any effort to deal critically with the disparities between the rhetoric of religious traditions and the multi-faceted reality that swings steadily between the personal and the institutional, between the historical and the transcendental, between the fictional and the verifiable. It is the unresolved dualistic bias, overriding critical reflections, that more often than not shapes and defines “religion” in the public realm. The result, personal “definitions” of religion displace, by default, any attempt at critical understanding. And why not? What I believe is what I believe and others do or should believe as well. As we shall see, it is the

very notion of “belief” in most religious discourse—as well as discourse about religion—that creates an aura of ambiguity.

In search of some road to clarity with regard to religion, then, where should we start? Perhaps with a “scientific” observation. Like certain kinds of trees religion has the capability to self-hybridize, that is, to create variants of itself that are distinctive. So, when we approach the fact of religion, we should be prepared to find a “vital” reality that requires ingenuity to understand. From this perspective, religion requires an approach that does not call on a simple or singular philosophical viewpoint.

“Religion,” then, has entered the realm of public discourse as an objective dynamic while at the same time it preoccupies individuals as subjective experience. Surely such a phenomenon should be approached with more curiosity than certainty. If we insist on being philosophical in our approach, we should let the reality of the thing advise us how we might appreciate it.

We should suppose, then, that the phenomenon of religion is not only something in itself but also involves real persons in subjective experience—whether one’s own or that of others. So, when we observe religion in all of its objectivity, we must be ready to meet it on its own terms. This means, but only in part, that we must be prepared to encounter the presumed Other that haunts religion’s own history and haunts the human psyche as well. Religion, however we define it, presents us with the shadow of god, a superordinate being or beings—though this reality is, in human terms, overwhelmed by other aspects of experience that allow (or require) the adjective “religious.” Hence we should have at our disposal a variety of tools that permit not only dissection but also excavation, not only understanding but also appreciation. For the best outcome of this inquiry, then, we should probe both for “religion’s” essence and manifestation as we encounter its immediate reality in history and personal experience. ³

Religion for the philosopher, then, is not simply game to be hunted for a trophy, nor merely a greenhouse of orchids to be

admired for their idiosyncratic charm. It is rather like an entire ecosystem in which life evolves through time. We must be prepared to encounter religion in its several aspects, entangled in the modalities of human behavior and thought as well as in the political and social processes that preoccupy human beings wending their way through history.

In order to appreciate the rich ambiguity of “religion” that is given to any philosophical venture, let us acknowledge the conundrum that religious traditions confront: Who among us knows enough to solve the mystery that infuses our many efforts to know who we are, what we are and where we are? On the other hand who among us knows enough to be absolutely certain that we do not know enough to answer those questions?

Perhaps if we place ourselves at the intersection of certainty and uncertainty, setting aside belief as not much more than subjective illusion, a stopgap that simply holds off confusion and any need to deal carefully with the ambiguities embedded in such utterances as Madeline Albright’s, we would recognize the basis for both the existential and metaphysical versions of these questions. There may be, however, an easier way to extricate ourselves from such a philosophical tangle. The clue to this prospect may lie in a quite unexpected moment.

When I first heard it evoked in a casually “philosophical” conversation, the refrain of a popular song was introduced in the give and take and immediately reverberated in my consciousness: “Is that all there is?” I had no idea of the source of that exclamatory question.

It turns out that it was a rhetorical question in the refrain of a popular song sung by Peggy Lee in 1969. Even before the version by Peggy Lee, however, there is evidence that the question was inspired by the 1896 story, *Dissillusionment* by Thomas Mann, adapted by Leiber and Stoller and broadcasted in San Francisco in 1964. Still more recent evidence of how tempting the question is can be found in the *The New Yorker*, August 15, 2012. James Wood, a critic at large, wrote an essay *Secularism and its Discontents* and entitled it, “Is That All There Is?”

This unanswerable – rhetorical – question jolted my rational imagination and took me beyond the Peggy Lee song itself. I need not quote the lyrics but the refrain itself should provide a basis for what I offer here as an *apologia*. By that I intend an explanation that warrants the use of the question in a critical task that may exceed the lyrics and the music of a “pop song.”

In one verse, after reminiscing about a house fire and a visit to the circus, she remembers a love affair some time in her life. Soon into the memory she recalls the moment: Her love went away abruptly and the surge of longing and fear hit her, “and I thought I would die,” but she didn’t. Then in a poignant philosophical moment she sang:

Is that all there is, is that all there is?

If that’s all there is, my friend, then let’s keep dancing. ⁴

Epiphanies of the dancing mind that come unbidden still might focus thoughts otherwise blurred or obscure. I ventured to myself: Perhaps religious experience may be nothing more—or nothing less—than the *crie de cour* in moments when reason and emotion are fully, mysteriously compatible; when insights create themselves out of immediate experience and the mind pirouettes with itself responsive, perhaps, to the music of the spheres.

Dare I discern such thoughts in the lyrics of what seems a casual refrain in a popular song: “Is that all there is?” At such a moment the mind may fall back upon itself and from that subjective platform realize, whether desperately or ecstatically, that the question being asked opens doors upon inner and outer worlds.

Still, the question is what it is. With this and countless other human utterances, one may claim the privilege of making it one’s own. We then have a question, whatever its origin, that we

need not refuse, however faintly it may reverberate in the channels of a questing mind.

This apologia is not simply a condescending gesture that says, "I'm sorry that you don't hear what I hear." It is rather a "word" to ward off misunderstanding, a reassurance that justifies a use that may not be immediately obvious. "Is that all there is?" In whatever other contexts it may have emerged, whatever the reasons for an original experiential moment, the question may carry the imagination beyond a casual state of complacency into unexplored territory of thought and intuition. Is it fair to talk about philosophical opportunism? Well, Peggy Lee and those others who raised it, whatever their personal intentions, have given us a *bona fide* opportunity to wax reflective.

I was slightly relieved of any further worry when I found a reference to a song by Bob Dylan in a book with a clearly philosophical bias. Jennifer Hecht, in her book *Doubt: A History*, invokes a popular folk singer as a source for authentic philosophical reflection. I'll let the context justify the invocation of Dylan's song:

Another huge difference between our human world and the universe as we know it is that, within the human world, as Bob Dylan sings, "Everybody's got to serve somebody." ⁵

The serious "argument" expressed in the verse is that "We are all inferior to someone in some areas." How many other unexpected sources may there be to guide one's reflection on life—or on religion? Is it too much to hope that, buried in unexpected places, we might find useful insights?

"Is that all there is?" The reflective person may recognize here the great conundrum that philosophers have never fully resolved. What is the relation of how things appear and how things are? Kant's distinction still haunts rational discourse: The distinction between phenomenal and noumenal reality. What things seem to be and what things are "in reality"? But one need not be the philosophical type to appreciate the confusion that

observation elicits. The cliché that so bothered Longfellow, by no means beholden to the likes of Kant, is not idle rhetoric:

*Tell me not in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.*⁶

Is it mere superstition or legitimate suspicion that “things are not what they seem”? The poet seems quite unwilling to concede the truth of this maxim. Even ordinary experience raises the specter of uncertainty. “Is that all there is?” Our wandering or preoccupied minds need not go too deep into immediate experience or too far into the imagined array of galaxies to stumble onto this query. The human imagination at its most vulnerable may still suspect that it is constantly rubbing up against only the veneer of reality. The actual seems concealed at least in part by a shadow. It is the great paradox of the indigenous tradition of Japan that the living Kami in a Shinto shrine is revealed most clearly by being hidden in the semi-darkness of the inner sanctum. The ordinary mind may be restless until it finds some presumed rest in a divine presence. It is tempting to suppose, however, that such a presence is an illusion conjured by our desire to catch a glimpse of the ultimate panorama or to relieve the immediate pain of some vague uncertainty. One way or another, we cannot finally suppress the question, “Is that all there is?” May I risk at least the suggestion that it is a version of the “ultimate question” that sets the stage for religious experience in the sprawling array of religious traditions?

Which brings us to the gateway guarded by those two sentinels of the philosophical enterprise. There at the entryway to the labyrinth within the Great Labyrinth, Question guards the answers and Answer guards the question. In the hallway beyond the entry we meet the twin couple Uncertainty and Certainty. Under their direction we meet two other guests, Mind and World,

inviting us to tour the universe that is our sometime home, determined to discover a “homology between heavenly and earthly events.”⁷

Enough now of this rhetorical excess! Philosophy, not allegory, is the work at hand. Such work, however, need not lead us to the Museum of Philosophy and its docent whose only interest is history. There, it is true, in dimly lighted rooms we may contemplate what some philosophers have done, but we should also realize what any of us might do in sustained moments of curiosity and reflection.

Try thinking of philosophers as swimmers in the Ocean of Reality. In moments of panic—or in the throes of uncertainty—what might a swimmer do, especially when the waves threaten to pull him under or sweep him away? A choice, I think, presents itself when the philosopher-swimmer confronts “religion” disguised as the presumptive Answer to questions that threaten to overwhelm his casual breaststroke. It is also possible that “religion” may draw us to the shore of an unexplored land; only to strand the swimmer in a world he imagined he was struggling to transcend.

Against the background of such uncertainty I shall not presume to explain the phenomenon of Religion. I prefer rather to evoke an appreciation for this two-edged experience. The questions that follow take us in that direction. They cover a wide array of what the religion is that inhabits a privileged place on the human continuum. I am sure there are more than five that may help us chart the religious adventure of the human species.

1. Are its roots experiential or noetic?

Religious folks can hardly resist presuming certain knowledge. Surely experience tempts us at least to hope that our minds are not simply adrift in a sea of final uncertainty. Feeling, imagination, intuition, even guesses add up to a sense of being somewhere and sometime in the universe.

Even temporality offers us some sense of noetic potency. We know we are history.

2. Is revelation a subjective or an objective event? Or is a claim for "revelation" necessary to other religious claims or experience?

We can hardly resist "connecting the dots" of experience. Our subjectivity is restlessly determined that we live in a world that is at least hopeful, if not certain, about being in an intelligible universe. There is always, for human beings, a mental wind blowing back the veil of ignorance.

3. Are religious traditions radically idiosyncratic or do they tend toward universality?

There are two pathways through this conundrum. Every religious tradition has its own integrity, origin and configuration. It is distinctive if not unique. Personal experience, on the other hand, often finds it impossible to resist the notion of a universal way of being human. We suppose we are all on pathways that eventually converge. We also can hardly resist an uncertain confidence that the course of life is teleologically⁸ determined. Or is it?

4. Is there a common psychological template for the varieties of religious experience or does it depend on an individual's location in time and place?

Mystics, neurologists and psychologists wrestle with this puzzle. Certain philosophers have also thrown their hats into the ring. But when you assemble the variety of religious traditions that have surfaced in the course of human history, one can hardly expect to make the case that Japanese Shinto

and Chinese Confucianism are based on a single version of universal "spirituality." But among the monotheisms, including Zoroastrianism and the Solar religion of Egypt, it is easier to describe the systematic and imaginative differences among them. And then there are the religious traditions of what we now group together as belonging to "indigenous folks." Where in such a "template" would we find the beginnings of the Dreamtime of the Australian aborigines? But even though the psychological template might elude research, it seems to me presumptuous to say that there may not be some commonality overarching the historical differences.

5. Is religion primarily a social phenomenon or does it originate in solo moments and then ineluctably tempt others to imitate it—however imperfectly?

I am tempted to take shelter in a paradox: Religious traditions may have their beginning often enough in the experience of specific individuals, but given the universal human impulse to find others with whom to share work and feelings, what eventually emerges at specific times and places are traditions as social phenomena. But it would be reckless to insist that there can be no examples of bona fide solo religious experience.

There is virtually no end to the string of queries that enmesh "religion" as reflective human beings observe it. When one is drawn into the web, the strands proliferate in a wondrous tangle that could easily discourage further inquiry. Still the weave taunts us to tease it apart—or perhaps tempts us to cut the Gordian knot with whatever tool might be at hand. Surely, however, we cannot gainsay the fact of religion, even if we sense how fragile and varied a fact it is. Fact? Yes, even though we might argue that it often plays fast and loose with many other facts of the world in which we find it.

The dilemma deepens in the presence of this phenomenon that we should reflect upon. What, in fact, does one reflect on when religion becomes an object of inquiry or contemplation? Such reflection necessarily requires binocular vision. When one thinks about religion one *ipso facto* thinks about oneself as much as she thinks about the world in which both reflect each other? But whatever the motive or method, the goal is clear: To appreciate the complexity of this “simple” reality that haunts history and the mind that contemplates that reality.

After many years of reflecting on “religion”—both as experienced and as observed, both as felt reality and as phenomenon—I venture to exercise candor and at the same time maintain a degree of intellectual integrity. How may I maintain such a balance? Shall I presume to explain the phenomenon or shall I presume to justify the experience? Surely it is possible to define the term and to elucidate the concept without performing a dissection that leaves the real thing dismembered and (maybe) lifeless?

This is not an idle question, given the attention now being directed by neuroscience even to questions about religion. Among all the critics that I might invoke to throw light on this trend, Gary Greenberg puts himself in the middle of this version of the business of science. The question he wrestles with is “Where is the you in the you when the brain is subjected to neurological examination and explanation?”⁹ In more conventional terms, where is that part of this person (me or you) that is capable of some presumed religious experience? Imagining that (distant?) day when neuroscience has charted and excavated the brain and discovered the mind in that organism—and the seat of transcendence, if such there is—Greenberg laments the consequences:

Of course, I think my grandchildren . . . will be missing out on something And if I complain out loud to the whippersnappers [read, neuroscientists] whose brains will no doubt have been trained and

bettered and perhaps even perfected, the loss I will regret the most is the uncertainty, the not knowing how the mind emerges from the brain, and the teasing possibility that there is something else lurking among my molecules. ¹⁰

Mind / Brain / Religion: Should we trust a scientific explanation of that triad? And if “religion” is a function of (depends on) the organic mind/brain singularity, would it not tempt us to consider “religion” a neurological condition—and even, perhaps, pathological—especially given the historical behavior of some religious folks? Is it possible (as certain contemporary atheists insist) that religion is indeed a sickness of the human species? But how many doctors have presumed to treat this ailing patient—if in fact it is ailing? How many shamans have attempted to revive the moribund client? How many priests have celebrated its vitality? Many, of course, would deny that religion requires any treatment at all, while others would insist that it is time to let it go the way of other relics of the desperate human imagination. Of course, there are also those whose lives would wither on the vine if they felt their religion dissolving into modernity.

The phenomenon of religion, however, is not exhausted by personal experience. It is also the context of serious truth claims. Even then the question pushes our minds and imaginations: Is the Truth of religion revealed or is it as much a conjuration of human ingenuity as any other system that interprets and enables human experience? But perhaps religion is as much an effect of human culture as, for example, is “the economy”—or are both *a priori* realities that are themselves causes of historical cultures? Does the human imagination create religion or does religion force the human mind to imagine a world—or rather a picture of a world—of multiple vistas?

From what vantage point do we best understand the ocean of religion? From the wet sands at the edge of the ocean or while breasting the waves that at once hold us up and threaten to overwhelm us? Do we appreciate the song of religion by singing

it or hearing it; is it best to be part of the chorus or to take the podium to direct it? How does being “religious” enable or shape our relationship with the world whose picture we harbor in our imaginations?

In the essay by Edwin Dobb cited earlier we find insights that add an extra dimension to this question. Dobb reminds us that: “Precisely when we grasp the vastness of the universe we also glimpse an equally vast interior.”¹¹ The philosopher especially should be sensitive to this exercise of the “binocular mind” that we may not even recognize: The mind that sees the world while it sees itself seeing that world. More often than not ordinary experience does not force any such realization upon us. Still the mind cannot avoid the dilemma that catches us in the web of uncertainty when we confront the universe with any hope of a perfectly clear picture that satisfies both our reflex subjectivity and our desperate effort at objectivity. Dobb ingeniously discovers the limits to perfect understanding that may disconcert some of us, at least as we seek religious insight without turning our backs on the scientific culture. We should let him say it once more:

We now know that we do not occupy the center of the universe, but we sometimes forget that we will always stand at the center of our picture of the universe.¹²

Eventually the web of questions, the tangle of alternatives may induce either fatigue of reason or weariness of spirit. Neither cognitive anodyne nor a sleeping potion for the soul gently relieve the pain or turmoil of inquiry. Nor can the will itself easily determine that we simply walk away. The ghosts of worry and doubt haunt some of us while awake or asleep, while hope wrestles with the irrepressible desire for certitude. We witness the strange, improvised dance of Doubt and Belief, while knowledge taunts faith and religion begins to shimmer like a phantasm of the imagination and then perhaps comes into focus as a solid reality that only a fool would risk denying.

As moderns forget to remember what they once were, the primitive and unsophisticated perhaps never forget what they remember. "Religion" is a habit of mind for most of us and a thorn in the flesh for many others. It is more often a reality that most cannot deny—as well as an illusion that many want not to be lured by.

When it surfaces in public discourse, is the occasional denial of religion simply a negative preference? But why should a mere personal preference against religion be justified over against the evidence of religion's persistence as a historical phenomenon? If we were to take a poll on the question, "Is religious truth a reality in the cosmos?" the number of "yeas" would surely swamp the "nays." So what? Is the reality of a world dependent on the agreement of opinions for or against its reality?

If these meandering thoughts seem tedious, I can only say that I speak here and now. My ruminations are provoked by the voice of public discourse as well as by the private voices of piety and belief. Religion is perhaps no longer what it was; though there are many who are desperate to preserve it for what they presume (or remember) it was. Of course, it still is what it was and at the same time it is becoming something else—though perhaps the "something else" is at least an aspect of what it always was.

Is the ambiguity that I have just rehearsed only self-inflicted? Or is it a *bona fide* response to current culture? Should we not simply respect the aura of other-worldliness that accompanies every and all religions? But is it not that very aura that provokes us in the here and now to recognize the confusion of our situation? The canons of scientific knowledge are devoid of other-worldliness.¹² Still, the skeptic may ask, "Are we human beings inescapably denizens of only the natural world?" Is there nothing else even in our humanity that lures the natural mind—in both its rational and imaginative modes—to contemplate a "something" or "somewhere" beyond itself? The question again springs to the surface: "Is that all there is?"

The question snares us in a dilemma: Not even our most intense contemplation of the beyond necessarily convinces the universe to be what we suppose it is. Does our thinking actually mock the cosmos or does the cosmos mock our thinking? Perhaps religion really is an opiate, an illusion or, worse, no more than a decoration that we admire only because we contrived it. Is it a poetic expression of personal experience or a final word spoken by the "Wholly Other," disguised as prophet or mystic?

But suppose we had never indulged ourselves in such a habit of mind. Would it then be necessarily true that there is nothing for us not to contemplate? Is it possible that Piet Hein's conundrum reflects the truth both of human thought and of the world it addresses:

A bit beyond perception's reach
I sometimes believe I see
That life is two locked boxes,
Each containing the other's key. ¹³

Quietly I hear reason scratching at the wall of what may be its own prison. It seems to be saying to itself: "I should stop now. This prison is only my natural self and that self is what I am, though haunted by a beyond that I conjure with a certainty that I have discovered what really exists." But there is another ghost that whispers, "Believe that what you believe is true, for why would you believe what is not true." Still a third ghost stirs its sheets and talks back, "You know in your heart of hearts that your reason is ingenious enough to fool itself with its own beliefs. It can conjure knowledge that persuades itself of its own certainty—and hence can entertain beliefs that may not be true, while at the same time struggling to reconcile itself to its own limits."

Perhaps, after all, the "beyond" that tempts human experience is both a subjective and an objective reality. And the pendulum of thought measures time, but only within eternity and alludes to eternity from among the interstices of time. Is it

possible that the beyond is within and that same pendulum of thought measures itself while it maintains itself with the hope that it participates in eternity?

Having woven this web too tightly, I should now venture a coda that may take us to the real starting point of my ruminations. We shall begin our last moments at a well's edge with Robert Frost, whom Mark Van Doren called "a philosophical poet" whose "profound and delicate heart was joined to an intellect which never ceased to search for the ultimate meaning of life." ¹⁴

For Once, Then, Something

*Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
Deeper down in the well than where the water
Gives me back in a shining surface picture
Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as though, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.
Water came to rebuke the too clear water,
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.* ¹⁵

In the well of thought the human discerns itself seeing itself beyond itself. And if Frost is correct, it sees "something white, uncertain, something more of the depth." Not only do we humans think "the beyond within," but perhaps also the "within

beyond." What else should we do than exclaim, "For once, then, something," whether the "something" is our self or Another? Is it not sensible that philosophical reflection on "religion" should start there at the opening of the enigma? When such reflection discerns "whatever it was lay there at bottom," even though it were "blurred," "blotted . . . out," perhaps we can do nothing less than suffer the thoughts that define our identity as human beings.

For Robert Frost perception seems to allow one almost desperately to see "something" where there may be nothing. There may be one consolation, however paradoxical: The well into which Frost peers has a bottom where he can catch a glimpse of what may be there, even if only to imagine it. Still for Frost, our longing seems to allow the mystery at least to appear to be "something."

Another poet, Philip Larkin, allows himself not even that much reassurance. The mystery is not "something" but in reality is "nothing." That judgment is not as rare as believers may suppose. Not only Marxists or existentialists are tempted to warn those with a confidence in certain religious truths that their minds are deluded even while held captive by hope. Larkin in his poem "Aubade" reflects on:

*The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.* ¹⁶

In Larkin's case, one of his commentators finds that the poet is responsive to the honesty he hears in the Blues musical tradition.

The banning of other worldliness [by the poet] is in part a consequence of the blues' honesty—trouble is not so easily evaded as the church pretends—but secularism is

also a necessary ingredient in the state of mind without which the blues could not exist. If religion could resolve the worry of which the bluesman sings, then the most fundamental of the blues conventions and attitudes would be undermined.¹⁷

As Leggett reads "Aubade," the poet invokes a "blues" attitude with which to confront the ordinary fears that religious convictions presume to deny. He argues, "the method of the poem is an honesty so plain that religion and logic seem contrived against it."¹⁸ He refers to "Aubade's" third stanza:

*This is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die.*¹⁹

For Larkin religion is not so much an illusion but more a decoration that we create or contrive. The imagery is rare but the sentiment is not: "That vast moth-eaten musical brocade" is only a pretentious antique in face of Frost's "something more of the depths." The ghost ship of religion navigates an endless sea, discovering not even "that whiteness" that Frost may have seen. Even if not quite an opiate, for Larkin religion is still "The anesthetic from which none come around."

Both poetic evocations raise doubts that religious experience relies on an objective reality authorized by a system of religious beliefs. Might not the philosopher take warning from the artist that religion's promise of reasonable certainty is at best dubious? Neither Frost nor Larkin seems willing to give into religious belief as carrying with it any warrant of truth. Larkin pays no heed to a definition of religion that presumes certainty of belief; Frost, with some reluctance, at least allows that the mind might entertain the mystery—which may or may not be a gesture toward affirming what we may normally think

of as religious belief. Is there no way to grasp religious experience other than as a response to historical conventions that seem to define religion once for all as insisting that our only option is to “believe the unbelievable”?

It is tempting to respond to this dilemma with conventional reason or dogmatic science as defining the limits of human experience. If we refuse to locate religion on the “human continuum,” where does the rational imagination go? We are left only with the radical certainty of uncertainty. How then to appreciate the persistence of human religion in refusing surrender to a vision of a flat world devoid of authentic mystery and wonder—and its insistence in asking the question, “Is that all there is?” Even Bryan Magee seems unable—or certainly unwilling—to settle for such a loss.

While tracking Bryan Magee through his philosophical confessions, two insights broke the surface for me. Magee was lamenting the fact that Tolstoy, when he decided that philosophy would yield “no ultimate answers,” despaired of philosophy and embraced religion. Magee then tries to justify his disappointment with the great artist:

If even the crabbed skeptics admit that the statements of religion cannot be confuted by reason, why should I not believe in them, since they have so much on their side—tradition, the concurrence of mankind, and all the consolation they yield? Yes, why not? But do not deceive yourself into thinking that with such arguments you are following the path of correct reasoning. If ever there was a case of facile argument, this is one. Ignorance is ignorance; no right to believe anything is derived from it. ²⁰

Magee picks up the cudgel again and wields it more precisely:

And that is the point: If we do not know, we do not know. Any talk about this opening up the way for faith is a dangerous playing with words. Ignorance is no justification for believing anything.²¹

May I entreat my reader to hear that last statement—but by shifting the emphasis within the proposition? For example, “Ignorance is no justification for believing anything.” “Ignorance is no justification for believing anything.” “Ignorance is no justification for believing anything.” And so forth, from first word to last and for combinations as well.

As we draw closer to a broad and appreciative perspective on “religion,” I shall argue that the most elemental religious experience is in fact not to be identified with belief—as it usually is in many of its invocations. Again Magee allows another insight to surface. He is discussing Heidegger’s concept of the self:

At the heart of the mystery [of the non-objective self], it seems to me, must lie the relationship between the self and the empirical world in which it is not an object. In fact I am tempted to believe that the ultimate mystery is the relationship between the self and the empirical world.²²

I shall grant Magee his right “to believe” what he wants to. After all, perhaps the assertion of such a belief is little more than a convenient rhetorical gesture. But the insight is so compelling that I am inclined to tinker ever so carefully with his statement. I would prefer to locate the “ultimate mystery” in the self’s experience of its relationship with the empirical world. It would be interesting indeed to confront Frost and especially Larkin with such a judgment.

In the next chapter, I shall test the possibility of (re)defining “religion” in experiential terms rather than accept the interpretive paradigm that presents “religion” as captured by or expressed in simple utterances of belief. I trust that, so far, I

have set the stage for philosophical reflections that avoid that quite limited way of understanding a phenomenon that is historical and psychological, and at the same time alludes to the possibility of transcending the very empirical world in which it is firmly planted.