

# RELIGION AND SCIENCE

## 1. ANSWERING OBJECTIONS

Any discussion aimed at reconciling religion with science opens the door to an array of possible objections. But these are not so decisive as to preclude plausible replies. It is instructive to examine this landscape of controversy somewhat more closely.

***"Is a scientist's dedication to knowledge not paramount to a degree where he could only accept a religion whose creedal commitments he would conscientiously consider as truths?"*** This is doubtless so. But even a conscientious scientist would do well to distinguish between literal and figurative truths, factual and normative truths, informative and orientational truths. After all, the question of what we as individuals should do with our lives and make of the various opportunities at our disposal is not a scientific issue. Once we decide this sort of thing science can undoubtedly help us to get there. But what our destination should be is a matter not for science but rather for our commitment to goals and values. And this sort of thing is simply outside the province of science which tells us what the world is like but not what we should do with our lives.

There will, of course, be overlapping issues where both religion and science will enter interactively. Religion calls on us to honor human life by according special treatment to the dead. By science will be needed to decide the question of whether Smith is in fact now dead so that these special procedures should be instituted. And so, while religion and science are distinct enterprises they certainly can and should interact with one another.

A further objection may well arise at this point: ***"Granted, science and religion have different roles to play and different questions to address. But there may well arise some issues in which they come into conflict, the age of the universe, the origin of the world, the origin of man, and perhaps others."*** Now the first thing to note here is that such seeming disagreements are mostly or even generally the products of misunderstandings (as is often the case with disagreements of all sorts). A deeper understanding of just exactly what the religious claims are and a fuller understanding of the scientific issues will often or even generally dissolve the conflict as the product of insufficiently deep understanding, and thereby as more apparent than real. But even were this not the case, there remain various options for coming to terms with such disagreements:

- ***Make religion give way to science.***  
Reconstrue those scientifically problematic religious Claims as symbolic, figurative, or metaphorical.
- ***Defer judgment.***  
Realize that scientific understanding is a work in progress which has often changed its mind about things and thus await with hopefulness a change that will put matters into alignment in the wake of further scientific Innovation.
- ***Simply combine the two and accept the resulting "inconsistency".***  
Take the line that we live in a complex, multifaceted world where science and religion are both true from their own perspectives, and accept that the two just don't jibe—that different conceptual perspectives can be combined no more than different visual ones can. This in effect leaves their fusion as a mystery that passes our understanding.
- ***Take recourse in humility.***  
Acknowledge that there are many things we just don't understand and that reconciling apparent divergences at the moment between science and religion may just be one of them. (After all, who knows how hypnotism or acupuncture work.)

Clearly, the "conflict between science and religion" does not leave one without options, seeing that a position can be developed to the effect that in cases of conflict some sort of reconciliation will in the end prove possible.

After all, science and religion are different enterprises that address different issues and concerns. Science answers questions about how the world works, religion answers questions about what we should do within the scope of what it affords us. Science deals with what are the actual workings of nature; religion deals with what are the appropriate doings of man. Different problems are at stake and neither serves the purposes of the other.

But now consider the objection: "***I want to be a modern, scientific person, who bases his belief on the teachings of science. And science does not speak for religion: one cannot base theism on scientific facts.***" Well, so be it. But the reality of it is that we stand committed to lots of things that we cannot base on scientific facts. Are the challenges and rewards of living ideas we base on science? We do — or should — bear a special responsibility for concern and care for our parents, brothers, spouses. Does science establish them as more lovable and worthy of our affection than other people? We try to earn the respect of others. Does science teach us that other-respect—or self-respect for that matter—is a paramount value? Do we base our values on the teachings of science rather than the impetus of our natural human feelings? It is simply not through science that we configure out loyalties, our allegiances, our values. Science tells us about *facts*; but their significance—religious significance included—will and must come from somewhere else. And it is just here that religious commitment comes into it.

With regard to the question of the existence of God, the great physicist Laplace offered the remark that "I had no need for that hypothesis." And this is certainly correct. For scientific questions have to be addressed on scientific principles. With respect to how things work in the cosmos the authority of science will be complete. If we want to know *how it is* that there are microbes in the world, we had best turn to biological science. But there are also questions which lie above and beyond the voice of science. And the question of *why it is* that that world is such that there are microbes in it is one of these. For what is basically at stake here is a value issue, presumably to the general effect that a world with microbes in it has some significant advantage over alternative publications. Of course someone might say that such a question is improper and illegitimate—that if an issue makes sense at all then science can resolve it. But this decidedly radical stance of scientism (as it is usually called) is matter not of good sense but of a rather radical and decidedly problematic ideology. Science-inspired anti-religionists often support their position by portraying theism as merely the response to a psychological need. Their reasoning goes essentially like this: "***Man is a weak and vulnerable creature existing in a difficult and often seemingly hostile world. As such he has a psychological need for reassurance that the world is a user-friendly habitat functioning under the auspices of a benign creative agent or agency.***" Now for one thing, to speak of something as "a mere psychological need of man" verges on self-contradiction. For there is nothing "mere" about such needs. When a psychological need achieves generality it thereby achieves a sort of objective validity as well. Given the realities of human development it is bound to reflect something that has survived in the operations of a rational creature, thereby betokening an efficacy that serves to evidenciate objective validity. Even as our felt need for food would not be there if our bodies were not sustained by nourishment so our felt need for spiritual sustenance could not be there if the world's Spiritual forces did not sustain it. But there is also another problem about consigning religions to the limbo of a "mere psychological need." For this argument effectively shoots itself in its own foot. The unbeliever who deploys it uses in defense a weapon that equally threatens himself, since it can just as readily be used against his own position. "Man is a willful and arrogant being for whom the thought of an all-observing and stern judge who condemns his wicked ways is intimidating and daunting. As such he has a psychological need to be liberated from the prospect of a sternly paternal judge who realizes

and condemns the evil of his ways, accordingly it is no more than the response to a psychological need." The upshot is clear: The Argument from Psychological Need is a two-edged sword that cuts both ways—usable against theism and atheism alike. In the quarrel between the atheist and the theist, argumentation from need is a wash.

**"But where is the evidence that speaks for the truth of religion?"** This question has to be approached from the opposite end—from the angle of the question "If those religious contentions were indeed true, what sort of evidence for this fact could we reasonably expect to obtain for it?" After all, belief in God is the sort of thing that is not a matter of scientific observation and theory. We do not, cannot, should not expect astronauts to come back with reports of angelic encounters in outer space. (As Nikita Khrushchev once complained they did not.) It has to be through inner urgings and impetus of their hearts that people are led to religion, not through outer observation. So if there were indeed a benevolent God we would expect that at least in the long run (and not necessarily the short) and at least in the aggregate (and not necessarily everywhere) those who live lives mindful of God's suppositions would derive some benefit thereby. And if it is miracles we demand, then is not our very life itself a constant reminder of the miracles in nature? Is not this sort of evidentiatio the best and most one could reasonably expect?

What is it you want? Tablets from the mountain? Voices from the clouds? Been there; done that; you just missed it, sorry. The best available evidence for physical theories is experimentation in the physical laboratory; the best available evidence for medical drugs is by clinical trials; the best available evidence for religion is by experimentation and testing in the laboratory of life. Are nonbelievers happier, better, more contented people than believers? Or is it the other way round? Look about and see for yourself. Here as elsewhere we must allow the indications of the evidence to speak.

The reality of it is that science itself is not exempt from "faith in things unseen." Nothing guarantees that the phenomena are always and everywhere as they are within our range of observation. Nothing guarantees that the laws and regularities that have been in Operation in cosmic history heretofore will continue unchanged in the future. Nothing guarantees that other universes (if such there are—and we presumably cannot get there from here) have any even remote resemblance of ours. That nature's laws are as we think them to be is something we cannot know for sure but can only ... hope.

To be sure, the hope that underpins the inductive proceedings of science are geared to the objectives of the enterprise—to expecting enhanced *cognitive* returns. And it is not for the sake of enhanced knowledge of world-explanative facts that we turn to religion but rather as a ways of situating oneself meaningfully within a difficult and complex world.

**"But surely scientists are among the smartest people there are, and for the most part they are not religious."** This objection, too, is inappropriate. For one thing, religiosity just is not a matter of smarts — of calculation, of figuring things out by brain power! It is, rather, a matter of having a reflective perspective on matters of life, death, and man's place in Reality's great scheme of things—of having a certain stance toward the world we live in and in which reactions like awe and wonder are significant and responses like worshipful humility figure significantly.

The idea that it is inappropriate for a scientist to be religious because the majority of scientists are not theists is quite misguided. After all, scientists themselves do not proceed in this manner. It is not part of the scientific mentality to "go with the flow" and accept what the majority thinks. Scientists try to figure things out for themselves as best they can.

Moreover, the reality of it is that while the majority of scientists are (probably) atheists nevertheless a very sizable minority of them are theists of one sort or another. Certainly this has

been so traditionally from Galileo to Newton to Maxwell to Einstein. But even today many fine scientists are theists, and in some fields—cosmological physics in particular—they often even put their theism in touch with their scientific work.

***"But the idea of an intelligent creator just doesn't make sense. After all, the universe has developed by some sort of cosmic evolution. And any sort of evolutionary product is inefficient, slow, wasteful. Surely an intelligent creator would do better."*** This sort of objection is predicated on the idea that an intelligent creator would not opt for getting the physical reality under way by a process of cosmic evolution proceeding developmentally from some un-state inaugurated in a big-bang-like Initiation event. The objector seems to think it would only be fitting to the divine dignity to inaugurate a universe by zapping it into existence *in medias res*, as a development-dispensing concern. It is, however, not readily apparent why this would be preferable. And it poses some distinctive problems of its own—for example, why the universe should not have been created five minutes ago, completely fitted out with geological traces, human memories, etc. With a view to evolution by a selection "rough in tooth and claw" John Stuart Mill viewed the ordinary course of Nature as ongoingly involved what in humans would be utterly abhorrent.<sup>[1]</sup> And T. H. Huxley held that men should not imitate Nature but should liberate themselves from it by substantiating ethical conduct for natural eventuations. Neither thinker was ready to look at the matter holistically and thus give Nature credit for Operation in natural processes that brought into being creatures capable of this superior mode of comportment.

Yet what of slowness? What of wastage? Well, where our objector complains of *wastage* a more generous spirit might see a Leibnizian Principle of Fertility at work that gives a wide variety of life forms their moment. (Perhaps the objector wouldn't think much of being a dinosaur, but then many is the small child who wouldn't agree.) Anyway, perhaps it is better to be a microbe than to be a "Wasn't that just Isn't," to invoke Dr. Seuss. But what of all that suffering that falls to the lot of organic existence? Perhaps it is just collateral damage unavoidable in the cosmic struggle towards intelligent life. But this is not the place or time for producing a *Theodicy* and address the theological Problem of Evil. The salient point is simply that the Wastage Objection is not automatically telling and that various lines of reply are available to deflect its impact.

And as to slowness, surely the proper response here is to ask: What's the hurry? In relation to a virtually infinite vastness of time, any finite initial timespan is but an instant.

Overall, it would be profound error to oppose evolution to intelligent design—to see these two as somehow conflicting and incompatible. For natural selection—the survival of forms better able to realize self-replication in the face of challenges and to overcome the difficulties posed by the world's vicissitudes—affords an effective means to intelligent resolution of unavoidable problems. (It is no accident that whales and sophisticated counter-designed submarines share much the same physical configuration or that the age of iron succeeded that of bronze.) The process of natural selection at work in the unfolding of biological evolution is replicated in the rational selection we encounter throughout the history of human artifice. On either side, evolution reflects the capacity to overcome obstacles and resolve problems in the direction of greater efficiency and effectiveness. Selective evolutionary processes—alike in natural (biological) and rational (cultural) selection — are thus instrumentalities that move the developmental course of things in the direction of increasing rationality.

***"But in the light of such utilitarian considerations religion is perhaps simply a matter of evolution-engendered Impetus to belief, leaving truth altogether by the wayside, and thereby bereft of rational legitimacy."*** Yet does this conclusion really follow? Is conceding that a certain instinct has evolution's Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval not already to

concede to it a solid basis in fact? To say that religious belief is "no more" than the product of an evolutionary instinct is to have a strange idea about what can be considered "no more." For to say of a belief-instinct that it is grounded in evolution is automatically to concede to a significant evidential basis in the world's operative realities. Evolution is not a process that favors the misguided, deceitful, and false. As Darwin himself already noted in his *Descent of Man*, "belief in all-pervading spiritual agencies seems to be universal." And on the basis of evolutionary principles it is difficult to imagine that this would be so if such a belief were not somehow survival conducive. Belief in an ultimately benign cosmos is clearly likely to benefit agents of finite intelligence who must constantly act in the expectation that things will turn out well. And this is going to require the suitable backing of fact. Are things that taste good generally edible and things that taste bad not generally harmful? Is not the tendency to believe that things as are our experience indicates them to be not in general correct as well as essential to the conduct of life? Does evolution itself not proceed via a systemic coordination of Utility and correctness? Evolutionary grounding surely constitutes a positive credential rather than a refutation. After all, evolution will not back losers. For belief-motivated agents, cognitive adequacy is bound to prove survival conducive. Evolution will not — cannot — imprint us with tendencies that are systematically counterproductive — even optimal illusions root in processes that work to our advantage. Its motto is: survival of the most advantageous. And which is more advantageous for us: truth or falsehood? Will it advantage us to think that hostiles are friends and friends friendly, that poisons nourish and nourishments poison, that small objects are large and large ones small? There may be forces at work in the universe that engender tendencies to systematic error, but evolution is not one of them.

***"But what of the untold suffering that has been—and is—imposed on mankind in the name of religion?"*** All one can say here is that condemnation by association is not sensible—any more than guilt by association is. Pretty well anything useful in human affairs has the potential of abuse as well. The knife that helps to feed us can murder as well. The medicine that can cure can also poison. The police that sustain our peace can be an Instrument of oppression. The religions which should by rights sustain brotherhood can make for enmity. All this is true and regrettable. But there is nothing unique or different here — we confront a fact of life that obtains throughout the realm of human affairs. If we refrain from resort to those things which admit of abuse there is little we would be able to accomplish in this life. Moreover, people in glass houses should not throw stones. When complaining of harm done in the name of religion, one should not overlook entirely harm done under the auspices of science. Those greatest of all physico-experiments, atomic bombs, have killed far more people than the crusades. The medical experimentation of the German extermination camps killed more people than the Spanish Inquisition. The complex machinery of informed consent in matters of pharmacology and medicine represent so many ventures in closing barn doors after fled horses.

***"But what of all the wicked and even crazy things that people have done—and are doing—in the name of religion?"*** Here again condemnation by association does not work. Because some people pursue a project in evil ways does not mean that everyone need do so. The Situation is akin to the injunction *Find yourself a profession*. Clearly, the existence of wickedness in the group should not deter one from being a doctor, baker, or candlestick maker. One need not be estranged from religion by the fact that some practitioners are nasty any more than an accountant or professor need be. And of course the same thing goes for scientists as well. The proverbial "mad scientist" does not annihilate the value of the whole venture. To reject being affiliated to the wicked is to resign from the human race.

***"But so far it has only been argued that a scientifically minded person can be religious: that various obstacles and objections can be removed. But it is one thing to hold that something can be done, and something else to hold that it should be done. So why should a modern scientifically minded person adopt a religion?"*** The answer is that one should only

do so if one *wants* to: only if there is urging in one's inner nature that impels one in this direction. But of course human nature being what it is, this is something that is likely to be the case—at least potentially—with all of us. For when we consider our place in the world's vast scheme of things, all of us are liable to that sense of awe and wonder that lies at the basis of religiosity and to yearn for a reassurance of our worth and dignity only faith (and not knowledge) can provide for us. Man — homo sapiens — is a rational animal. And what lifts us above the level of animality, is this very reason through which we come to knowledge — and preeminently scientific knowledge that includes us regarding the limits and limitations which call for a confirmation of meaning and value to which religious faith alone can adequately respond.

***"But can 't I lead an ethically good and evaluatively fruitful life without religion?"*** Certainly you can! Many people manage to do so. But it's a bit harder. It's like asking "Can't I be a good violin player without lots of practice?" or "Can't I be a fluent Mandarin Speaker if I only start learning at 30?" It can be done. Some very fortunate people can bring it off. But it is not easy—and scarcely practicable for most of us.

***"But all these considerations are vague and directionally inconclusive. They speak for having a religion but do not resolve the issue of which one."*** True enough. So what is one to make of the plurality of religions? The reality of different religions is a fact of life. Throughout the history of human civilization, different forms of religious commitment have co-existed on our planet. And it is perfectly clear why this should be so. For religions at once reflect and actualize how people relate to transcendent or "ultimate" realities that create and shape the world we live in and our destiny within it. But of course here as elsewhere how people relate to things is determined by their issue-relevant experience. And since people differently situated in variant historical and cultural contexts have different courses of experience, there are bound to be different religions. After all, some religions are simply unavailable to people for historical reasons. The ancient Greeks of Homer's day could not have become Muslims or Christians. And cultural context will clearly be another limiting factor. Some religions are inaccessible to people because the whole issue of their experience points them in altogether different directions. The Englishmen of the era of Pusey and Newman could be Nonconformist or Anglican — or Roman Catholic. They could not really have joined the Shinto faith, let alone that of the Mayans or the Aztecs. Cultural contexts limit the range of available options. And for particular individuals even one's personal and idiosyncratic temperament will limit the alternatives that are *realistically* available to people. So it seems as though the issue of religious pluralism is going to have to be personalistically relativized. There being many religions, the question — seemingly — will be "Which one of these various possibilities is going to be right for me — or for X? For the individual there is going to be a limit to the range of what William James characterized as "live options." In his characteristically vivid prose he wrote:

Ought it, indeed, to be assumed that the lives of all men should show identical religious elements? In other words, is the existence of so many religious types and sects and creeds regrettable? To these questions I answer "No" emphatically. And my reason is that I do not see how it is possible that creatures in such different positions and with such different powers as human individuals are, should have exactly the same functions and the same duties. No two of us have identical difficulties, nor should we be expected to work out identical Solutions. Each, from his peculiar angle of observation, takes in a certain sphere of fact and trouble, which each must deal with in a unique manner . . . If an Emerson were forced to be a Wesley, or a Moody forced to be a Whitman, the total human consciousness of the divine would suffer.[2]

So while there indeed are various religions, nevertheless the reality of it is that the range of religions that are *realistically available* to a given individual is drastically curtailed. In adopting a religion as in adopting a profession or selecting a place to live you have to make up your own

mind on the basis of the best information you have the time and energy to collect. And the range is confined by potent constraints and depends upon the person's culture, environment, familial Situation, personal disposition, and the like, to an extent that often as not narrows the range of alternatives down to one. The question "What religion is right for me?" is for most of us analogous to that of choosing a language. One's culture context does the Job for most of us. Of course there is some modest degree of choice — we can with great effort tear ourselves loose to go elsewhere. But only if you do so as a small child will the result ever be completely natural. The individual who shifts to another language as an adult will never speak it entirely as a native. And those who are able to make even a halfway successful job of it are comparatively few and far between.

***"But is this sort of position not that of an indifferentist relativism ('its all just a matter of taste and inclination—there is no rhyme or reason to it. ')? No. It certainly is not. Rather, it is that of a reasoned contextualism based on what is appropriate for people given circumstances of their particular Situation. And contexts can grow — especially under the impetus of expanding experience — personal and vicarious. And there is, of course, no reason why these circumstances should not include a critical scrutiny of the alternatives. For religions are not created equal. An intelligent and enterprising person should not hesitate to explore the options: a religion is not a gift horse into whose mouth one should not look critically.***

But what sense can one make of the question "Is there one single, uniquely best and appropriate religion?" What sort of cogent case could the antipluralist advocate of "one uniquely true religion" possibly have in view?

To all visible intents and purposes this question comes down to: "Is there one religion which any rational person would accept given the opportunity — that is, would freely choose in the light of full Information about it and its alternatives?" We are, to all appearance, driven back to Kant's question about "religion within the limits of reason alone."

On this basis someone could well protest: "Does not this very approach seriously prejudice matters by prejudging a very fundamental issue. For does it not put Reason in the driver's seat by putting it in the role of the arbiter of religion. And does it thus not ride roughshod over Pascal's insistence that some human fundamentals are properly matters of the Mind and others of the Heart?" But this objection simply has to be put aside as contextually inappropriate. If that question about the one true and optimal religion is indeed meaningful then there will and must be a pre-commitment neutral, rationally cogent answer to it that is being demanded. We have no sensible alternative here. What sort of answer to our question could we want that is not reasonable? For sure, it would make no sense to assess the merit of a religion on its own telling. Some commitment-neutral standpoint is needed. And what better place is there to go than the realm of reason?

So what is it that our rationality has to say on the matter? If it is our intent and purpose to proceed objectively and appraise religions on a basis that involves no prior Substantive religious commitments and proceeds from a standpoint entirely devoid of Substantive religious precommitments, then we have no real alternative but to proceed functionally — to go back to square one and begin with the question of the aims and purposes that religions serve as modes of human belief and practice. And so there is really only one path before us. It is — prepare for a shock! — the way of pragmatism, that is, of a functionally oriented inquiry into the question of which religion it is which optimally accomplishes the aims and purposes for which religions are instituted as operative practices within human communities. For if what lies before us is the question of religious optimality — of which of those multiple religions is to qualify as best — then the question of "How for the best?" simply cannot be avoided. At this stage we have no realistic alternative but to view religions in a purposive light and inquire into the aims and purposes for which religions are instituted in human communities. We will—here as



elsewhere—have to confront the question of the aims of the enterprise, asking: *"Why is it that people should undertake a religious commitment at all? What sensible human purpose is realized by making a religious commitment a significant part of one's life? What's in it for us—to put it crassly."* In approaching religion from such a practicalist point of view—inquiring into the human aims and objectives which adherence to a religion can and should facilitate—one is going to come up with some such list as:

- Providing a framework for understanding the world and our personal place within it that energizes what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature."
- Providing a focus for the sense of awe, wonder, and worship as we puny creatures confront a natural world of vast extent and power, giving a sense of comfort in the face of the vast forces beyond our control. And possibilizing constructive interaction with an agency that govern the fate of all we hold dear.
- Providing for an evaluative appreciation of the universe and giving an impetus to human productivity and creativity within it. Enabling a frail and vulnerable creature to feel "at home" in the universe and strengthening the sense of opportunity to have a "meaningful life."
- Providing people with a perspective that gives their lives a meaningful position in the universe's grand scheme of things, providing them a world-view supportive of human aspirations and diminishing any sense of futility, alienation, and dehumanization.
- Providing for a sense of social solidarity with our fellows and for an appreciation of the worth and dignity of human potential in a way that strengthens the fabric of mutual concern, care, and respect for one another and a diminishing of man's inhumanity to man.

Then too, there is the role of religion in easing people's anguish and anxiety in the face of life's frustrations and difficulties. The spiritual impact of "lifting people's spirits" is a vibrant reality. In augmenting the quality of their lives and enhancing their performance in meeting life's challenges religion can and should make a positive contribution to the quality of life.

On this basis, it emerges that a complex fabric of potential psychological, social, and cognitive benefits are at issue with a person's commitment to a religion. In other words there is — or can be — something in it for us. And a chain of natural connections links all of these by a line that runs from cosmic congeniality to individual selfworth, to the worth of our peers, to human solidarity at large. More than any other ideological posture, religious faith makes manifest "the power of positive thinking." Without religion, in sum, it is somewhere between difficult and impossible to realize various salient positivities that are conducive, and perhaps even to some extent indispensable, to human flourishing.

We confront the question of compassion where to all appearances the best we can then do is to apply the Standard of humanity itself and ask: What form of religion is it that most effectively succeeds in calling forth the best in people and most supportively energizing them into a way of life that deserves our admiration and respect? Within the narrow confines that are now upon us this seems to be the best and most one can do to effect and "objective" comparison. For without serious commitment to cultivation of the great goods whose pursuit is an opportunity afforded us by human existence — goodness, happiness, virtue, beauty, knowledge — a religion builds on sandy ground. Even without question-begging precommitments we can look at religions not only subjectively in terms of their capacity to speak to us personally but more impersonally in terms of their capacity to address that larger issue that confront all of us humans relative to the challenges of creating an intellectually and emotionally satisfying life within the circumstances of a complex and often difficult world. Where entry into a Community of faith is concerned, we humans, as rational beings, are not just entitled but effectively obligated to look for a religion that is intellectually satisfying, personally congenial, and socially benign. A religion whose theologians avoid the difficult questions, whose preachers do



not engage the sympathy of our hearts, and whose practitioners are not energized to exert effort for the general good of mankind and the alleviation of suffering is surely thereby one unworthy of enlisting the allegiance of sensible and sensitive people.

Admittedly, there is little doubt that, judged by the aforementioned standards, the record of all of the world's major religions is rather spotty. Unquestionably, our religions—like all other human enterprises and mutilations — will reflect the frailties and imperfections of our species though the fact of its being a structure built up of and by the crooked timber of humanity. But the issue is not one of perfection. It is a matter of the seriousness of effort and the comparative extent of success.

To be sure, someone who becomes religious only from considerations of "What's in it for him" is not an authentically religious person at all. But the crux is that religious commitment is *transformative*. No matter how you enter in — be it for reasons of human solidarity, or even for crass and self-advantaging motives — you will not manage to remain there. Commitment, no matter how modest at first, will undergo a natural process of growth.

***"But what if I can't get myself to believe all those creedal doctrines and teachings that go with a religion?"*** You might begin by realizing that getting into a religion is not a matter of all-at-once. Make a Start! Give God a chance! The odds are that he'll help you work things out as life moves along. And get to know and interact with other believers; solidarity of association will help. (Reading Blaise Pascal's *Thoughts (Pensées)* may give you good guidance here!)[3,4]

## 2. ANTITHEOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGIZING

The fact of it is that atheism admits of demonstrative proof as little as does theism itself. And given our natural yearning for an explanation of nature's nature and the inevitability of transcendence here, it cannot be plausibly maintained that the bodies of proof automatically on atheism's side.

Here atheism stands on pretty much the same footing as religion as itself a version of faith and indemonstrable belief. (In this regard the Situation is pretty much that of a coincidence of oppositions and it is little exaggeration to saying that atheism is itself something of a religion.)

Of course, there still remains the well-trodden prospect of antitheological psychologizing. The general line is all too familiar: "You see the traditional monotheistic God as desirable merely because he answers a psychological need of yours. You have a psychological yearning for acceptance, validation, support. Your God is a mere parent-substitute to meet the needs of a weak and dependent creature." So argues the psychologizing Opponent of axiological theism.

But this sort of facile sort of psychologizing ultimately cuts both ways. For the axiological theist can readily respond along the following lines:

You see the traditional monotheistic God as undesirable because you find the very idea threatening. You atheists too are "God fearing," but in a rather different sense. You are afraid of God. You have an adolescent's fixated fear of and a condemnation by authority. Your atheism roots in self-contempt. Recognizing what an imperfect creature you yourself are, you have a fear of being judged and found wanting. The very idea of God is threatening to you because you fear the condemnation of an intelligent observer who knows what you think and do. You are enmeshed in an adolescent aversion to parental disapproval.

So runs the psychologizing counterargument. And this line is not without surface plausibility. Many people are in fact frightened by the prospect of a belief in God because they ultimately have a contempt of themselves. They feel threatened by a belief that God might exist,

because they feel that, were it so, God would not approve of them. For them, atheism is a security shield of sorts that protects them against an ego-damaging disapproval by somebody who "knows all, sees all." Atheists are not infrequently people on whose inmost nature the vice of self-contempt has its strongest hold. Pretensions to the contrary notwithstanding, the atheist's actual posture is generally not a self-confident independence of spirit, but a fear of being judged. In this regard, then, there is simply a standoff in regard to a Freud-style psychologizing about religion. Those psychologizing arguments that impute rationally questionable motives that can be deployed against the believer are not difficult to revise and redirect as arguments against the atheists. Psychologizing is a sword that cuts both ways in regard to axiological theism. Both sides can easily play the game of projecting, on a speculative basis, a daunting variety of intellectually non-respectable motives for holding the point of view that they oppose.

## NOTES

1. John Steward Mill, "The Claims of Labor," *Dissertations and Discussions*, 15 vol's, (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1867), Vol II, pp. 288.
2. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York & London: Longmans Green, 1902), p. 487
3. A vast body of excellent material is available on the topic of this lecture. Michael Ruse's *Can a Darwinian be a Christian* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) is a good example and the writings of William James afford a classic source. A fine contemporary anthology is A. R. Peacock ed., *The Science and Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1985). The website of an organization of Christians in Science and engineering of the American Scientific Association (ASA) at <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/topics/empty/WebList/List1WebBooks.html> points to many excellent discussions of these topics. Some stimulating deliberations are offered in such personal Statements of Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006) and Owen Gingerich *God's Universe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006). An interesting collection of Interviews with twelve leading scientists is presented in P. Clayton and J. Schaal (eds.) *Practicing Science, Living Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Two scholarly Journals of excellent quality are devoted to cognate issues: *Faith and Philosophy* and *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. The Templeton Foundation has sponsored numberless Conferences and workshops for constructive interchange between scientists and theologians. Many scientific investigators are nowadays pursuing lines of research that have religious ramifications. An example of a scientifically sophisticated paper of theological bearing whose general drift, at least, may be accessible to a scientifically untutored reader is Euan J. Squires, "Do We Live in the Simplest Possible Interesting World?" *The European Journal of Physics*, vol. 2 (1981), pp. 55-57.
4. This essay is dedicated to my daughter Catherine, who encouraged me to discuss the question that it addresses. I am grateful to Robert Kaita, James V. Maher, and Aug Tong for constructive suggestions.

Aus: Nicholas Rescher, "Reason and Religion", Heusenstamm (2013), S. 25 - S. 42

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