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Believing in God

The currently fashionable discussions of religious belief arose partly in response to the confrontation between Christianity and modern science, and partly in response to the attacks of 9/11, which drew attention to another confrontation, between Islam and the modern world. In both confrontations, as popularly understood, reason points one way, and faith the other. And if faith justifies murder, faith is not an option.

However, the two confrontations have entirely different origins. One is intellectual, the other emotional. One concerns the nature of reality; the other concerns how we should live. Public intellectuals who have espoused the atheist cause often give the impression that religion is defined by a comprehensive explanation of the world, one that incidentally brings comfort and hope, but which, like every explanation, can be refuted by the evidence. But the religion of the Islamists is not like that. It is not primarily an attempt to explain the world, or to show the place of creation in the course of nature. It originates in a need for sacrifice and obedience. No doubt Islamists entertain many metaphysical beliefs, including the belief that the world was created by Allah. But they also believe that they are subject to Allah's commands, that they are called to sacrifice themselves on Allah's behalf, and that their lives will acquire a meaning when thrown away for Allah's sake. Those beliefs are more important to them than the metaphysics, and will survive any niggling attempt to refute the basic tenets of theology. They express an emotional need that precedes rational argument and which shapes the conclusions of theology in advance.

This emotional need can be widely observed, and not only among explicitly religious communities. The desire for sacrifice is rooted deep in all of us, and it is called upon not only by religions but also by

secular communities, especially in times of emergency and war. Indeed, if Durkheim is to be followed, this is the core religious experience: the experience of myself as a *member* of something, called upon to renounce my interests for the sake of the group and to celebrate my membership of the group in acts of devotion which might have no other justification than that they are commanded.¹ Others have emphasized the connection between sacrifice and meaning. Patočka, for example, argues that the meaning of life, even of life in the godless twentieth century, resides in the thing for which life—one's own life—can be sacrificed. This striking idea had a profound impact on Central European thought in the communist years, and notably on the writings of Václav Havel.² For it suggests that, in totalitarian societies, where the capacity for self-sacrifice is worn thin by the relentless stream of petty punishments, nothing stands out as worthy of our care. This is the secular residue of the core religious thought—the thought that the sacred and the sacrificial coincide. Of course, there is the greatest difference in the world between religions that demand self-sacrifice, and those (like that of the Aztecs) that demand the sacrifice of others. If there is anything that could be called progress in the religious history of mankind, it resides in the gradual preference for the self over the other as the primary sacrificial victim. It is precisely in this that the Christian religion rests its moral claim.

Religion and Evolutionary Psychology

We live in an age of debunking explanations, and the once-popular debunkings of the sociologists are now in their turn debunked by evolutionary psychology. There is a widespread sense that social facts that were previously understood as part of “culture” are now to be explained as adaptations, and that, when we have so explained them, we have removed their aura, so to speak, deprived them of any

¹Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), trans. Carol Cosman and Mark Sydney Cladis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²Jan Patočka, *Two Studies of Masaryk and Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. E. Kohák (Chicago: Open Court, 1996). Václav Havel, “Politics and Conscience,” available in several collections of Havel's essays.

independent hold on our beliefs and emotions, and reduced them to aspects of our biology. The Durkheimian account of religion has been pressed in this direction. Religions survive and gain a following, it is said, because they further the reproductive “strategies” of our genes.³ By belonging to a group whose members are bound by the rule of sacrifice, you obtain substantial reproductive benefits—territory, security, cooperation, and collective defense. Hence religions do not merely encourage and demand sacrifice: they show a consuming interest in the reproductive life of their members. The gods assemble at those rites of passage in which one generation prepares the way for, and concedes victory to, its successor—at birth, coming of age, marriage, and death. They are fascinated by our sexual habits, insisting in certain cases on genital mutilation, circumcision, and complicated rituals of sexual purity. They have set their faces against incest, adultery, and promiscuous sex, and in general constrain our sexual lives along the path that favors future children over present pleasures, and the transfer of social capital over the squandering of moral resources. So closely do traditional religions fit to the strategies of our genes, and so callously do they seem to favor the genotype over the phenotype, that it is tempting to say that there is little or nothing more to be understood by the one who is seeking an explanation of the religious urge. It is an adaptation like any other, and if it seems to be rooted so deeply within us as to be beyond the reach of rational argument, this is entirely to be expected, since that is how adaptations are passed on.

Adopting the point of view of evolutionary psychology, therefore, and taking on board both the recent defenses of “group selection,” and the attack on the “standard social science model” of social behavior, we arrive at a picture of religious belief that seems entirely to discount its rational credentials, as both illusory in themselves and irrelevant to the form and the force of religious feeling.⁴ It is important to face up to this kind of claim at the outset, since one of my

³See David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁴On the arguments for group selection, see Edward O. Wilson, *The Social Conquest of Earth* (New York: Liveright, 2012). On the demise of the “standard social science model,” see Jerome Berkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

purposes will be to suggest that functional explanations of the evolutionary kind have no bearing on the content of our religious beliefs and emotions.

My reasons for saying this are two. The first is this: explanations of the kind popularized in the contemporary literature overlook the aspect of our mental states that is most important to us, and through which we understand and act upon each other's motives, namely, their intentionality or "aboutness." The thought here is well illustrated by the incest taboo. Freud argued that the taboo is strong because it stands in the path of a strong desire. We are revolted by incest because we unconsciously want to do it. That explanation is rejected by evolutionary psychologists, who tell us that the revulsion against incest comes about not because we want to do it, but because we don't want to do it. We don't want to do it, because our not wanting has been selected for by evolution. Human beings not repelled by incest have for the most part died out.

Scientifically speaking, there is no doubt which theory we should choose. Freud is not giving a true causal explanation of the incest taboo, but rather a redescription of it as part of a rational strategy, though one pursued by the unconscious. In order to make his explanation work, he has to invent an entity, the unconscious, for the existence of which we have no independent evidence, or evidence that comes only from more pseudo-explanations of the same kind. Nevertheless, we might feel a measure of sympathy for Freud. For he wants to explain not only why incest is forbidden, but also why the *thought* of it affects us in the deepest reaches of our being. The disgust we feel, and which led Oedipus to stab out his eyes and Jocasta to hang herself, has a peculiar intentionality or directedness. It focuses on the idea that this is my sister, mother, brother, or father, and it tells me that any sexual contact would be a kind of pollution, a spoiling of something that will never afterward be the same. Incest is therefore seen as an *existential* crime, one that changes what we are, both to ourselves and to others.

From the point of view of evolution it would be sufficient that incest should arouse disgust, in the way that rotten flesh or feces arouse disgust. The thought processes add nothing to the reproductive function. On the contrary, they compromise it, by winding it into the peculiar intentionality of our personal relations, causing us to lift this

reproductive error out of the dark realm of biology into the light of moral reflection, and so to find not only reasons against incest, but reasons *for* it too—of the kind familiar to the Egyptian pharaohs, or the kind that impressed themselves on Siegmund and Sieglinde in their sole moment of joy.

But this means that there is something in the incest taboo that the evolutionary explanation does not account for: namely, its “aboutness,” the aspect of it that is most important to us, and through which incest enters into our thinking and is in turn transformed by that thinking into something that may be wanted as well as forbidden. And that, surely, is what appeals to us in Freud—namely, that his explanation, however weak as science, is an attempt to account for the specificity of the incest taboo, and to show why we, rational, personal, self-conscious beings, experience it as a *taboo*, while other animals simply don’t do it (unless, of course, they do).

Internal and External Viewpoints

This leads me to my second reason for disregarding evolutionary explanations, which is that they cannot take note of the internal order of our states of mind. Evolution explains the connection between our thoughts and the world, and between our desires and their fulfillment, in pragmatic terms. We think and feel in ways that promote the goal of reproduction. But our mental states have no such goal. We pursue the true, the good, and the beautiful, even though the false, the nasty, and the messy might have been just as useful to our genes. The case of mathematics is especially vivid. We could have evolved without the capacity to understand the realm of mathematical truth and still be just as well adapted to solve the small-scale arithmetical conundrums of the hunter-gatherer. So what is it that explains the crucial fact: that our thinking “latches on” to a realm of necessary truth, reaching infinitely beyond the puzzles that we need to solve? Once over the hump, from an innumerate to a numerate creature, the human species was able to run forward into this new pasture, enjoying its wonderful fruit of futile knowledge, building theories and proofs, and in general transforming its vision of the world without any benefits to its reproductive potential—or with benefits that come far too late to exert

any evolutionary pressure in favor of the research that produces them. Evolutionary theory can give us a map of how the basic operations of arithmetic arise, but you could understand that map without understanding mathematics. And out of mathematical reasoning there arises the *true* philosophical question, the question that no amount of biology could ever solve: namely, what is mathematics *about*? What in the world *are* numbers, sets, and transfinite cardinals?

Nor is mathematics a special case. There are many ways in which people gain understanding of the world by interpreting signs and symbols, and even if this confers an evolutionary advantage, interpretation also unfolds another vision of the world than that contained in the theory of evolution.⁵ Language is the most striking example of this. We don't know how it arose. But we do know that language enables us to understand the world as no dumb animal could possibly understand it. Language enables us to distinguish truth and falsehood; past, present, and future; possible, actual, and necessary, and so on. It is fair to say that we live in another world from nonlinguistic creatures. They live immersed in nature; we stand forever at its edge. Since emotions and motives are founded on thoughts, our emotional life and our motives to act will be of an entirely different kind from those of the other animals. This is surely why we should question those theories of altruism as an "evolutionally stable strategy"—theories defended and refined by John Maynard Smith, David Sloan Wilson, Elliott Sober, Matt Ridley, and others.⁶ For altruism in people is not just an instinctive thing, even if it has an instinctive component. It is also a considered response, based sometimes on *agape* or neighbor love, sometimes on complex interpersonal emotions like pride and shame, which are in turn founded on the recognition of the other as another like me. In all cases altruism in people involves the judgment that what is bad for *the other* is something that *I* have a motive to remedy. And the existence of that thought is precisely what is not explained by the theory that tells us that altruism is also a dominant strategy in the game of reproduction.

⁵For some of the arguments around this issue, see Anthony O'Hear, *Beyond Evolution: Human Nature and the Limits of Evolutionary Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). The argument against naturalism is set out more formally in Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), chap. 12.

⁶See in particular Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue* (New York: Viking, 1996).

Just as mathematics opens before us the world of mathematical necessities, so does morality open the world of values, and science the world of natural laws. We think *about* the world, and this means thinking beyond our genetic needs, to the world of which we are a part. From the evolutionary point of view it is a sheer chance that we made this step, from useful instinct to directed thought. One philosopher, Thomas Nagel, has argued that such a thing cannot be a mere chance, suggesting that the universe must therefore be governed by teleological laws. On Nagel's view it is a *law of nature* that our scientific thinking tends toward the truth, our morality toward the good, and maybe (though he doesn't go this far) our tastes toward the beautiful.⁷ I return to that radical response in later chapters. Whatever we think of it, we must acknowledge that evolutionary psychology cannot give a complete picture either of our states of mind, or of the universe that is represented in them. The theory of evolution is itself a scientific theory. We have reason to believe it only because we trust that the directedness of our thinking is not an accidental by-product of the evolutionary process but an independent guide to the way things are, whose credentials go beyond its adaptive benefits. The theory of evolution may seem to offer an outside view of science. But it is written in the language of science. If the theory really did offer an outside view, then it could conceivably have led to the conclusion that false beliefs have a better survival value than true ones, and therefore that all our beliefs are likely to be false. But what then of the theory that tells us so? If true, it is likely to be false. In other words, if we attempt to reach the high ground of naturalism by this route, we encounter a version of the liar paradox: an obstacle to which there is only one response—turn back!

Naturalism

This brings me back to religion. To explain religion in terms of its reproductive function is to leave unexplained and indeed unperceived the central core of the phenomenon, which is the religious *thought*—the *aboutness* of the urge to sacrifice, of the need to worship and obey,

⁷Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

of the trepidation of the one who approaches holy and forbidden things and who prays for their permission.

Of course, it does not follow that the explanation of this thought is to be found elsewhere than in the biological and social circumstances of the person in whom it occurs. Religious thoughts might be like dream thoughts, which we trace not to the objects represented in them, but to things going on in the nervous system during sleep. Indeed, there are cultures in which dreams are regarded as the principal vehicle through which the gods and their doings make themselves known. For that very reason, however, they do not share our theories concerning the bodily origin of dreams. Rather, they think of dreams as giving access to another realm and to the beings that haunt it.

It is easy to see, from the comparison with dreams, that there is a real problem about the *epistemology* of religious thoughts. The theological tradition to which we are heirs—which begins with Plato and Aristotle, and which achieves its high point of sophistication in medieval times, with Avicenna, Averroës, Maimonides, and Aquinas—tends to the view that there is one and only one God, who is the creator and sustainer of the physical world, but who is also transcendental, outside space and time, and therefore not *part* of the physical world. Fast-forwarding to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and then a bit further to Einstein's theory of relativity, we move to the conclusion that such a God cannot be part of the system of causes, since the space-time continuum is the matrix in which causes occur. If there is such a thing as (in Eliot's words) "the point of intersection of the timeless with time," it is not discoverable to physics. In which case there can be no causal connection between God and our thoughts of him.

Quine and others have argued that epistemology should be "naturalized," so as to provide the empirical explanation of our knowledge, rather than some putative a priori ground for it.⁸ According to those thinkers we should look on epistemological questions from outside, as questions concerning the relation between an organism and its environment. True beliefs and veridical perceptions are beliefs and perceptions that link the organism to its environment in the right way, so as to give reliable information about their causes. Illusions and

⁸W. V. Quine, "Ontological Relativity," *Journal of Philosophy* (1968), reprinted in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

false beliefs exemplify “deviant causal chains,” and are to be explained in some other way than by reference to the objects represented in them—as dreams, for example, are explained. Our ontology, on this view, consists of all those items that are referred to in the true explanation of our beliefs. It does not contain the creatures of our dreams or the characters in fiction; nor does it contain the gods and spirits that haunt our lives, however dear to us these are, and however impossible it may be to free ourselves from the belief in their existence.

However, if God is a transcendental being, who lies outside the space-time continuum, then it is a deep, perhaps even a necessary, truth that God has no causal role to play in the beliefs that target him—or in any other event in space and time. If this is sufficient to exclude God from our ontology, then many other things too must be excluded. We also have beliefs about numbers, sets, and other mathematical objects. And these too are outside space and time, or at any rate have no causal role in the physical world. Of course, the status of mathematical truth is, for this very reason, controversial. Does mathematics describe some transcendental realm of eternally existing objects? Or does it in some way outline the laws of thought, but without real ontological commitments? This is not the place to examine those questions, which have absorbed the energies of all the greatest philosophical minds from Plato to the present day. Suffice it to say that there have been advances in sophistication, but no advances in consensus, concerning the issue of mathematical truth. And this means that the issue of theological truth cannot be closed so simply as the atheists wish. Monotheists are constrained by their own theology to accept that the causal explanation of their belief in God can make no reference to the God in whom they believe. That this belief must be explained in terms of biological, social, or cultural processes is a truth contained in the belief itself. So how can those explanations show the belief to be false?

The Real Presence

That is not an argument for the truth of religious belief, but only a suggestion that will shift the onus away from the believer. It is tantamount to the demand that the atheist find arguments directed at

the *content* of the belief, rather than arguments directed at its origins. But a new problem now arises, and it is one that has been familiar to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theology from the early Middle Ages, and this is the problem of God's presence. This problem will be my starting point, and so I need to set it out carefully now.

That God is present among us and communicating directly with us is a central claim of the Old Testament. This "real presence" or *shekhinah* is, however, a mystery. God reveals himself by concealing himself, as he concealed himself from Moses in the burning bush, and as he conceals himself from his worshippers in the Tabernacle (*mishkhan*) and the Holy of Holies. The nouns *shekhinah* and *mishkhan* are both from the verb *shakhan*, to dwell or settle: *sakana* in Arabic, from which is derived the noun *sakīnah*, used here and there in the Koran (e.g., al-Baqara, 2, 248) to describe the peace or comfort that comes from God. Dwelling and settling are the underlying themes of the Torah, which tells the story of the Promised Land, and of the people who finally settle there, to build in Jerusalem the Temple whose design and rituals were given to Moses, and which will be a dwelling place for God. As the narrative makes clear, it is not the chosen people only who are in search of a place to settle: it is God too, who can dwell among them only by being ritually concealed from them. As God says to Moses, no man shall look on my face and live. And the whole tormented story of the relation between God and the chosen people brings home to us the terrible truth, which is that God *cannot* show himself in this world, except by hiding from those whom he traps into trusting him, as he trapped the Jews. The knowledge of his presence comes with the failure to find him.

Metaphysically speaking, this is what we must expect. It is not just that the intervention of a transcendent God in the world of space and time would be a miracle—though miracles, for reasons made clear by Spinoza and Hume, are not the simple exceptions that their defenders make them out to be. It is rather that it is difficult to make sense of the idea that this, here, now is a revelation of an eternal and transcendental being. A direct personal encounter with God, when God is understood in the philosophical way of Avicenna or Aquinas, is no more possible than a direct personal encounter with the number 2. Now you see through a glass darkly, wrote Saint Paul, but then face-to-face.

However, by “then” he meant “beyond the here and now,” in the transcendental realm where God resides. Saint Paul may seem to be denying the hidden nature of God; in fact he is affirming it.

And yet the experience of the “real presence” is at the heart of revealed religion, and foundational to the liturgy and ritual both of the synagogue and of the main Christian churches. It is important to grasp this point. Many of those who currently write against religion (and specifically against the Christian religion) seem to think that faith is simply a matter of entertaining beliefs of a cosmological kind, concerning the creation of the world and the hope of eternal life. And these beliefs are imagined to be in some ways rivals to the theories of physics, and exposed to refutation by all that we know of the evolution of the universe. But the real *phenomena* of faith are nothing like that. They include prayer and the life of prayer; the love of God and the sense of his presence in the life of the faithful; obedience and submission in the face of temptation and the things of this world; the experience of certain times, places, objects, and words as “sacred,” which is to say, in Durkheim’s phrase, as “set aside and forbidden,” reserved for uses that can be understood only on the assumption that these experiences mediate between this world and another that is not otherwise revealed to us.

Two immensely difficult questions arise from those thoughts. They are not questions that trouble ordinary believers. But they are fundamental to understanding what is at stake in the religious worldview. The first is metaphysical, namely, how is it possible for the transcendental to manifest itself in the empirical—for the eternal God to be a real presence in the life of his earthly worshippers? The second is conceptual, namely, what is the *thought* that animates the encounter with sacred things: what concepts, beliefs, and perceptions define the intentionality of faith? The first of those questions is one that I shall postpone, since I don’t believe it can be answered until we have become clear about the second question. We rightly think that there is something mysterious and perhaps inexplicable about the “real presence.” But nobody who has the experience of that thing is likely to think it to be simply an illusion: it comes to us with a self-verifying character that silences skepticism, even if it also calls out for interpretation. Such was the *nuit de feu* of Pascal: the night of 23 November

1654 when, for two hours, he experienced the total certainty that he was in the presence of God—“the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, not the God of the philosophers and the wise men,” in other words a personal God, intimately revealed, not conjured by abstract argument. *Père juste, le monde ne t'a point connu, mais moi, je t'ai connu*, he wrote then, on the scrap of paper on which he recorded the experience: astonishing words, which only total conviction could have engendered.

Religion and Magic

When anthropologists first addressed the issue of the religious frame of mind, they very quickly discovered patterns of thinking that were both widespread among human beings, and also difficult or impossible to assimilate to the aims and methods of scientific inquiry. Although Sir James Frazer writes (in *The Golden Bough*) as though magical ways of thinking begin life as an attempt at science—being used in order to predict and control the reach of human actions—it is surely very clear both that magic does not, as science does, represent the world as something wholly independent of the will of the one who is seeking to understand it, and also that magic aims less to predict results than to command them. The primary device of magic is the spell. Unlike a scientific inference, a spell is addressed directly to the natural world, commanding it to obey the wishes of the one who casts it. Even if the magician needs to summon occult powers, to enlist the cooperation of gods and spirits, he is not trying to discover how nature works, or to use the laws of nature in order to produce some desired effect. He is trying to bypass prediction entirely, so as to address nature as a subject like himself—as something that can submit to his commands and be moved by his beseeching.⁹

⁹The argument that magic is *transcended* by religion, since the first acts directly on nature while the second invokes a supernatural being who acts on our behalf, was, in the wake of Frazer, widely accepted—see, for example, W. Warde Fowler's Gifford Lectures, *The Religious Experience of the Roman People* (London: Macmillan, 1911). I doubt that the distinction has much weight in the thinking of anthropologists today.

That attempt would be condemned by many people as superstition and idolatry. But, even if we put magical thinking behind us, there remains in the religious frame of mind the core thought of another subject, the god toward whom one's thoughts and feelings are directed. The real presence is not that of a mysterious nonentity, a fitting ghost, or a vision. It is the presence of a subject, a first-person singular who can be addressed, implored, reasoned with, and loved. Religious people may not entirely and completely believe that they are addressing another subject in their prayers—for their faith may be weak and vacillating, or they may enter the sacred moment with a measure of aesthetic distance, or in one way or another they may fail entirely to give themselves up to the immediate experience. Nevertheless their state of mind is "subject directed." It has the particular intentionality that informs all our interpersonal attitudes, and which adheres to them because they are forms of *address* from one person to another: a readiness to give and accept reasons, to make demands, and also to respond to demands, a recognition of mutual freedom and all the benefits and dangers that are implied by it. A readiness, as we might put it, remembering the Old Testament story of Jacob and the angel, to "wrestle with God"—the idea contained in the name *Isra-el*.

People who are looking for God are not looking for the proof of God's existence; nor would it help them to be persuaded, say, by Aquinas's Five Ways, or by Avicenna's version of the cosmological argument, or by any of those specious arguments that have been doing the rounds in recent years, concerning the improbability that the universe should be just as it is, and there be no God as its creator.¹⁰ They are not looking for arguments but for a subject-to-subject encounter, which occurs in this life, but which also in some way reaches beyond this life. Those who claim to have found God always write or speak in those terms, as having found the intimacy of a personal encounter and a moment of trust. The great witnesses to this—Saint Teresa of Avila, Margery Kempe, Saint John of the Cross, Rumi, Pascal—surely

¹⁰See, for example, Richard Swinburne, "Argument from the Fine-Tuning of the Universe," in *Physical Cosmology and Philosophy*, ed. John A. Leslie (New York: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 160–87. This and similar proposals are criticized by Elliott Sober, in "The Design Argument," in *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. W. Mann (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 117–47.

persuade us that one part, at least, of the encounter with God lies in the irruption into consciousness of an intersubjective state of mind, but one that connects with no merely human subject. And included within that state of mind is the sense of reciprocity: the sense of being targeted by the Other, I to I.

But that is not the end of the story. It has been evident at least since Durkheim that religion is a *social* phenomenon, and the individual search for God answers to a deep need of the species. Human beings desire to “throw in their lot” with something, to cease to be cast out, rejected, *geworfen*, mere individuals, and to belong, even if the price of doing so is submission or *islām*. People join together in many different ways, and some, like hermits, seek to be alone with their God. But the normal tendency of the religious urge is toward membership, by which I mean a network of relations that are neither contractual nor negotiated, but which are received as a destiny and a gift. It is one of the weaknesses of modern political philosophy that it makes so little room for relations of this kind—the relations of belonging that precede political choice and make it possible. But, as I argue in chapter 4, they are the core of all true communities, and are recognized precisely by their “transcendent” character—that is to say, their character as arising from outside the arena of individual choice. Durkheim pointed out that you don’t merely *believe* a religion but (more importantly) you *belong* to it, and that disputes over religious doctrine are, as a rule, not simply arguments about abstruse questions of metaphysics but attempts to give a viable test of membership, and hence a way of identifying and excluding the heretics who threaten the community from within.

Religion and the Sacred

But what distinguishes religious membership from, say, kinship, nationhood, tribal loyalties, and the sense of territory and customs as “ours”? Durkheim writes that “a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community, called a ‘church,’ all those who adhere to them.” But his

definition simply shifts the problem onto the concepts invoked in it, the concepts of the sacred and the church.

Durkheim's parenthetical characterization of the sacred as "set apart and forbidden" is suggestive, but far from satisfying. We want to know in what way sacred things are set apart, and how forbidden. They are not forbidden in the way that chocolate is forbidden by parents, or drunk driving forbidden by the state. In the religious context that which is forbidden to one person is permitted to or even demanded of another. The host that it is sacrilegious for the ordinary believer to touch can nevertheless be offered to him at the altar from the hands of a priest. And in the Catholic tradition the believer is obliged to take the sacrament twice a year.

One thing is clear, which is that the old theories of magic, associated with Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, Frazer, and the nineteenth-century schools of anthropology, do not explain the sacred. There is a prosaic quality about magic, a here-and-now character, and a practicality too, which have little or nothing in common with the awe-inspiring otherworldliness of sacred things. Consider the examples familiar to us: the Eucharist, and the instruments associated with it; the prayers with which we address God; the Cross, the scroll of the Torah, the pages of the Koran. The faithful approach these things with awe, not because of their magic power, but because they seem to be both *in* our world, and also out of it—a passage between the immediate and the transcendental. They are both present and absent, like the *mishkhan* and what it hides from us.

That indeed seems to be a feature of the sacred in all religions. Sacred objects, words, animals, ceremonies, places, all seem to stand at the horizon of our world, looking out to that which is not of this world, because it belongs in the sphere of the divine, and looking also *into* our world, so as to meet us face-to-face. Through sacred things we can influence and be influenced by the transcendental. If there is to be a real presence of the divine in this world, it must be in the form of some sacred event, moment, place, or encounter: so at least we humans have believed.

There is truth in Durkheim's view that sacred things are in some way forbidden. But what is forbidden is to treat a sacred thing as though it belonged in the ordinary frame of nature: as though it had

no mediating role. Treating a sacred thing in this day-to-day way is a *profanation*.¹¹ One stage beyond profanation is *desecration*, in which a sacred object is deliberately wrenched from its apartness and trampled on or in some way reduced to its opposite, so as to become mean and disgusting. The Judaic tradition is rich in examples of the sacred: the Temple was, indeed, a kind of repository of sacred things, and stood as a symbol of God's protecting presence throughout the great years of Jewish triumph, and also later, when the Jews were able to negotiate sufficient autonomy to retain the Holy City as their own. The destruction of the Temple by the Romans in AD 70 was accompanied by acts of desecration, including the carrying away by pagan hands of the sacred vessels, and the burning of sacred texts. These acts were experienced by the Jews as a profound existential trauma—a repeat of the trauma of the first desecration, some six hundred years earlier, which forms the subject of the Lamentations of Jeremiah. The question in the minds of the Jews at both events was this: these sacred objects are under the special protection of God himself—they *belong* to him, and are *his own*. That is the origin of their sanctity. So if he permits their desecration, this is because he has abandoned us—rejected our gifts to him, and the practices through which we rehearse his presence among us. This is the terrifying thought in the Lamentations, a text that tries to come to terms with the desecration of the Temple by seeing it precisely as God's way of bringing home the fact that he has departed from us, leaving his temple and his people unprotected.

Frazer and his contemporaries were highly impressed by the Polynesian concept of *taboo*, a word that has since entered every language. Objects, people, words, places are taboo when they must be avoided, when they cannot be touched, approached, or perhaps even thought of without contagion. A taboo can be *placed* on something, like a curse; and it can attach itself to any kind of thing—object, animal, food, person, words, places, times. The idea goes hand in hand with the complementary notion of *mana*, which is the spiritual strength

¹¹ See the discussion of the sacred/profane distinction in Mircea Eliade's survey of the anthropological data, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959).

residing in things and radiating from them, by virtue of which they can effect changes in the human environment. There is a whole worldview contained in the ideas of *taboo* and *mana*, and it is not surprising that the early anthropologists tried to generalize those ideas to cover all religions. Thus the dietary laws laid down in Leviticus are often given as an example of taboo.¹² And maybe it is in terms of this concept that we should seek to understand the sacred: a thing becomes sacred when ordinary ways of using it are taboo, and when, in a certain special use, it possesses a *mana* of its own. Is that an advance?

A taboo, Freud believed, exists in order to forbid something that is intensely desired. It is the collective response to individual temptation. The principal arena of temptation is sex, and the principal taboo is that forbidding incest, in particular incest between son and mother—the taboo issued by the primeval father to his sons. In *Totem and Taboo*, therefore, Freud gives a theory of primitive religion on the same lines as the theory of the Oedipus complex. And the theory has an interesting corollary, which is that religious awe and the sense of the sacred belong in the same psychic area as sexual desire and its associated ethic of purity and pollution. Freud arrives at this conclusion by way of the contentious, and indeed discredited, theory of the Oedipus complex. But it is a connection that has been made in different ways down the centuries—for example, in Dante's account of Beatrice, forbidden object of his erotic longing, who reveals to him the mysteries of Paradise.

Many people today would say that Freud's account of taboo is fanciful, a product of the same collection of obsessive themes and hostilities that produced his frankly unbelievable account of infantile sexuality. But there is an interesting thought behind the theory, which is this: the forbidden quality of sacred things is such a strange feature, and puts such intense social and psychological demands on those who receive it, that it must have a special explanation. There must be a way in which this strange idea *enters* into a human community,

¹²Though a heroic attempt to justify them in other and more spiritual terms is made by Leon Kass, in his brilliant book *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfection of Our Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

changing it from a loose assemblage of people in competition with each other, into a social unit bound together by its sense of the transcendental significance of the rituals that its members share. *Totem and Taboo* is therefore a theory of “hominization,” of the transition from the simian tribe to the human community. According to the theory, this transition is effected by the original sin of parricide, as a result of which the entire community becomes bound by prohibitions and subdued by the unconscious burden of collective guilt. Just such a conception lies behind the equally imaginative theory of the sacred developed by René Girard in *La Violence et le sacré* (1972) and subsequent works. This theory is worth rehearsing now, since my argument will touch on many of the matters that motivate it.

Thoughts on Girard

Girard begins from an observation that no impartial reader of the Hebrew Bible or the Koran can fail to make, which is that monotheistic religion may promise peace, but is also deeply implicated in violence. The God presented in those writings is frequently angry, given to insane fits of destruction and seldom deserving of the epithets bestowed upon him in the Koran—*al-rahmān al-rahīm*, “the compassionate, the merciful.” He makes outrageous and bloodthirsty demands—such as the demand that Abraham sacrifice his son. This particular demand, pivotal for all three Abrahamic religions, is singled out by Kierkegaard as the ultimate test of faith, to which Abraham must respond by an “infinite resignation,” thereby conceding that everything, his son included, belongs to God. Others, by contrast, have seen this story as a provocation, an invitation to condemn religion, as a force that can override even the most binding moral imperatives.¹³

For Girard, however, the story has another significance entirely. It illustrates the true role of religion, not as the cause of violence, but as the solution to it, even if the solution must take the form, as here, of a

¹³Kierkegaard’s study is *Fear and Trembling* (1843). For the use of the story against the religion conveyed by it, see Paul Cliteur, *The Secular Outlook: In Defence of Moral and Political Secularism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

sacrificial offering. The violence itself comes from another source, and there is no society without it since it is engendered by the very attempt of human beings to live together as individuals, rather than as members of a pack or herd. The same can be said too of the obsession with sexuality: religion is not the cause of this, but an attempt to resolve it. In both those thoughts Girard is close to Freud, and indeed *Totem and Taboo* is one of the most frequently cited works in his discussion.

Girard sees the primeval condition of society as one of conflict. It is in the effort to resolve this conflict that the experience of the sacred is born. This experience comes to us in many forms—in religious ritual, in prayer, in tragedy—but its true origin is in an act of communal violence. Primitive societies emerge from the state of nature and the bondage of animal life, only to be invaded by “mimetic desire,” as rivals struggle to match each other’s social and material acquisitions, so heightening antagonism and precipitating the cycle of revenge. This human form of violence is not a “war of all against all,” of the kind attributed to the state of nature by Hobbes. It is already a social phenomenon, involving a strong sense of the other as another like me. The solution to this kind of violence is to identify a victim, one marked by fate as “outside” the community and therefore not entitled to vengeance against it, who can be the target of the accumulated bloodlust, and who can bring the chain of retribution to an end. Scapegoating is society’s way of re-creating “difference” and so restoring itself. By uniting against the scapegoat, people are released from their rivalries and reconciled. Through his death the victim purges society of its violence. His resulting sanctity is the long-term echo of the awe, relief, and visceral reattachment to the community that was experienced at his death. Through incest, kingship, or worldly hubris the victim marks himself out as the outsider, the one who is not with us, and whom we can therefore sacrifice without renewing the cycle of revenge. The victim is thus both sacrificed and sacred, the source of the city’s plagues and their cure.

The experience of the sacred is not, on this view, an irrational residue of primitive fears, nor is it a form of superstition that will one day be chased away by science. According to Girard, it is a *solution* to the accumulated aggression that lies in the heart of human communities. However, it is a solution that, in its original version, places

violence in the heart of things. In a singular argument, Girard suggests that Jesus was the first scapegoat to understand the need for his own death and to forgive those who inflicted it. And in submitting to this, Girard argues, Jesus gave the best evidence, and perhaps the only possible evidence, of his divine nature. He was the Lamb of God, the innocent victim, and also Emmanuel, God among us, who came to release us from the violence that had hitherto been locked into the heart of our communities.¹⁴ On him all the sins of the world—sins of envy, rivalry, and malice—could be discharged, and he would accept the death that these states of mind are inwardly longing for. This mystical idea is celebrated in the Christian Eucharist, when the communicants rehearse the sacrifice of a God who took their sins upon himself, and so purchased their forgiveness.

Girard's vision of the Eucharist is anticipated in Wagner's *Parsifal*, as is the ineffable peace that flows from the moment of our redemption. The self-sacrifice of the Redeemer turns conflict to forgiveness and violence to peace. Such is the meaning of the sublimely tranquil Good Friday music of act 3, music that conveys the smiling face of the world on the day when the sacrifice is made. Girard's theory of the sacrament is also anticipated by Hegel, who writes that "in the *sacraments* reconciliation is brought into feeling, into the here and now of present and sensible consciousness; and all the manifold actions are embraced under the aspect of *sacrifice*."¹⁵ Girard, like Hegel, takes himself to be describing deep features of the human condition, which can be observed as well in the mystery cults of antiquity and the local shrines of Hinduism as in the everyday rite of the Eucharist. And like Hegel, he wishes to single out the Christian religion for special treatment. The Christian sacraments rehearse the solution that previous explorations of the sacred could not find, which is the self-sacrifice of God.

Whatever its merits as a Christian apologetic, Girard's narrative fails to explain what it is to regard a thing as sacred. Girard draws on the fact that the sacrificial animal is regarded as sacred by those who slaughter it. But why? Does the theory answer that question or does

¹⁴See especially the argument in *Le Bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982).

¹⁵G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. Hodgson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 193.

it rather suppose that it is already answered? Retelling the theory in the language of evolutionary psychology avoids that question. You can describe a ritual as an adaptation without mentioning how the participants interpret what they are doing. You might simply suggest that sacrificial rituals overcome aggression between tribal members by providing a substitute target against which rivals can unite. They therefore perpetuate the benefits of group membership. But again there is something missing from the evolutionary explanation, namely, a philosophical account of the *thought* on which our conceptions of the sacred are built. And that thing is missing from Girard's theory too.

Moreover, the theory is not easy to extend to other areas in which we are inclined to speak of sacred things. The ideas of the sacred and the sacramental attach themselves to birth, to sexual union and marriage, and also to the ordinary death of ordinary people—these are all things that are set apart, regarded with awe, in which God is directly concerned, and which can be desecrated. Why are not these just as important as the more explicitly sacrificial aspects of the religious way of life? Rites of passage are surely more basic than ritual sacrifices—sometimes, perhaps, the occasion for ritual sacrifices, but in themselves far more necessary to the psychic health and togetherness of the community than the sacrifice of the occasional scapegoat. The sense of the sacred surely *precedes* ritual sacrifice, is more primitive, more basic, more fundamental to the human condition than any of the phenomena normally invoked to explain it. This does not mean that genealogical accounts of the kind advanced by Girard are of no value. They help to bring out fundamental features of the phenomenon that they purport to explain. But they do not in fact explain it. They have the character—which I shall further analyze in chapter 5—of a “myth of origins,” a story that represents the layers of social reality as stages in a temporal process.

Still, we can now say something a little more definite about the intentionality of the religious frame of mind. It is a reaching out from subject to subject; it searches for a relation that is close, intimate, and personal, with a being who is present in this world though not of this world; and in this reaching out there is a movement toward sacrifice, in which both self and other might give themselves completely and thereby achieve a reconciliation that lies beyond the reach

of ordinary human dialogue. Maybe this frame of mind is connected to those primitive forms of violence to which Girard alludes. Certainly it resonates with the stories of sacrificial victims, and suggests that there are roots to this state of mind that are far darker than we can, in our daily lives, easily acknowledge. But the essential character of the religious frame of mind is that of an intersubjective awareness in which the readiness for sacrifice is in some way contained. And in judging religions, we are acutely aware of the extent to which the sacrifices they ask for are sacrifices of others or sacrifices of self. It is surely that, above all else, that has entered our awareness through the actions of the Islamist “martyrs.”

The Epistemology of the Sacred

The other great question remains, which is the question of veracity. *Is there anything that answers to this search for the sacred? Can the eternal be present among us in the way that rewards our search for it?* We must not think of this merely as a theological or metaphysical question. For it is a question that inhabits the religious sentiment itself. It is the source of religious doubt and also the challenge offered to faith. Often, when a faith-community settles on some particular object, or rite, or words as sacred, it *loses* the presence of the thing in question, which retreats into the eternal as did the God of Moses and Abraham when his temple was destroyed. The same retreat into the eternal occurred, at a certain stage, with the God of the Koran. If the Koran is really a revelation from God, spoken by the Eternal, the scholars asked, then how can it exist in time, as a mere text among others, to be interpreted and applied through the arguments of ordinary mortals? This question particularly troubled the ‘Asharite school of theology, and the conclusion its scholars drew was that the Koran must be eternal, outside time and change, and therefore not open to interpretation or amendment. From that moment the gate of *ijtihad* (creative interpretation) was closed.¹⁶ To put it from a Christian perspective, the Koran ceased to be a record of God’s presence among

¹⁶See Robert Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2010).

us, and became the proof of his absence—the trace left behind as he departed forever from our midst. The Sufis did not accept this, and the prayers and invocations of Rumi, Hafiz, and Omar Khayyam call upon God once again as the Friend, who moves among us, who meets us in this world, yet freely and unforeseeably, like the *sakīnah* of the Koran. But as for the Sunni Orthodoxy, which tells us that God revealed himself, but only in a book that exists outside space and time, this leaves the question of God's presence in our world exactly as it was—a question without an answer.

Perhaps something like that is true of the Protestant tradition too. Paul Ricoeur has argued that the task of religion (and he means the Christian religion) in our time is to complete the expulsion of the sacred from the practice of faith—so that we confront God as he is, not confined in this or that moment or this or that corner of the world.¹⁷ Yet we know that this excision of the sacred does not encourage faith but merely deprives it of the soil in which it grows. The real question for religion in our time is not how to excise the sacred, but how to rediscover it, so that the moment of pure intersubjectivity, in which nothing concrete appears, but in which everything hangs on the here and now, can exist in pure and God-directed form. Only when we are sure that this moment of the real presence exists in the human being who experiences it, can we then ask the question whether it is or is not a true revelation—a moment not just of faith but of knowledge, and a gift of Grace.

Confronting the Skeptic

I will return to the topic of the sacred. But those few remarks prompt observations that will be important for my argument in the next two chapters. There are, it seems to me, two ways in to the topic of theology: the cosmological and the psychological. We can speculate about the nature and origin of the world, in search of the Being upon whom the natural order depends. And we can speculate about

¹⁷See Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and the Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

the experience of holiness, in which individuals encounter another order of things, an intrusion into the natural world from a sphere “beyond” it. Both ways point toward the supernatural. There could not be an explanation of the world as a whole in natural terms since the explanation must reach beyond the realm of nature to its transcendental ground. There could not be an account of holiness—of the “numinous”—that did not relate the experience to a transcendental subject. The experience of sacred things is, I have suggested, a kind of interpersonal encounter. It is as though you address, and are addressed by, another I, but one that has no embodiment in the natural order. Your experience “reaches beyond” the empirical realm, to a place on its horizon. This idea is vividly conveyed in the Upanishads, in which Brahman, the creative principle, is represented as transcendental, universal, and also as *atman*, the self in which all our separate selves aspire to be absorbed and united.

The skeptical response to those observations is to say that they are both illusions. It is an illusion that the natural world has some other explanation than itself. For what is explanation, if not the demonstration that some phenomenon belongs in the natural order, the order of cause and effect as this is explored by science? It is an illusion that there are sacred things, sacred moments, holy mysteries. For we explain such things as we explain everything else, by showing their place in the order of nature. These experiences arise from the pressure of social life, which causes us to read intention, reason, and desire into all that surrounds us so that, finding no human cause for those things that most deeply affect us, we imagine a divine cause instead.

If we are to take seriously the argument of Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and that of Hume in the *Dialogues of Natural Religion*, then surely we have no choice but to accept that the two ways to the transcendental—the cosmological and the psychological—are both effectively blocked. We cannot, for reasons made clear by Kant, reason beyond the limits of our own point of view, which is circumscribed by the law of causality, and by the forms of space and time. We have no access to the transcendental perspective from which the question of the ultimate ground of reality can be meaningfully asked, let alone answered. And we cannot, for reasons made clear by Hume, deduce from our religious experiences that they are not illusions. To

understand religious experiences, we should not look at them from the first-person point of view, but from outside—as though they were the experiences of others. And we should look for the natural explanation, the one that would appeal to us, were we trying to understand, as an anthropologist might, the customs of a foreign tribe. We might arrive at the conclusion that the experience of the sacred is a vital adaptation, like the horror of incest. But this does nothing to justify the perspective of the religious believer, for whom this experience is a window onto the transcendental and an encounter with the hidden God.

I share that skepticism, up to a point. But it does not satisfy me, and I shall briefly state the reason here. Kant is right in his claim that scientific knowledge shows the world from our point of view—the point of view of “possible experience”—and as bounded by space, time, and causality. He is also right, however, that reason is tempted to reach beyond those boundaries, striving to grasp the world as a whole and from a transcendental perspective. Kant believed that this temptation leads to contradictions, some of which he exposed in the “Antinomies” chapter of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. His greatest successor, Hegel, denied that those contradictions set limits to rational inquiry. Reason, for Hegel, is constantly transcending its own partial viewpoints, on its journey toward the “Absolute Idea.” Reason aims of its nature toward a kind of final narrative of how things are, in which all the contradictions (which are contradictions only from a partial perspective) are overcome. If Hegel is right, then the cosmological path points beyond the edge of the world as science describes it, to a place where another kind of question can be asked, a question that cannot be answered with a cause, but only with a reason: the question “why?” asked of the world as a whole—the question addressed to Brahman. We can answer such a question only by giving a teleological, rather than a causal, account of things. That account will make no difference to, and have no contact with, cosmological science.

Undoubtedly, from the scientific point of view, religious beliefs and practices are not to be explained as the pious would wish. The two centuries of skeptical reasoning, from Diderot and Hume through Feuerbach and Renan to the evolutionary psychologists today, must

alert us to the evident truth that religion is a natural phenomenon like any other, to be explained first in terms of its social and evolutionary function and second in terms of things going on in the brain of the believer. Of course religions offer a powerful narrative of past events and unseen presences, through which to endow the trivial matter of our species life with a goal and a meaning. It is through these fictions that people understand the experience of sacred things. But the fictions neither explain the experience nor justify its intrinsic claim to veracity.

Yet here too there is more to be said. Of course there are idolatrous religions and religions that muddle the natural and the supernatural in ways that make nonsense of both. But there are also religions that turn their backs on idolatrous practices, that invite us to address the specific moments of ritual involvement with an alertness that reaches precisely beyond what is present to the senses, toward the perspective lying on the edge of things, which addresses us I to I. The narrative of a religion is like a commentary on these moments, a prop to be discarded when the experience, the *sakīnah*, has been fully grasped. This “reaching beyond” of the religious moment is not different, I shall suggest, from the transcendental urge of reason itself. Ultimately the cosmological and the psychological paths are paths toward the same destination, and that destination lies on the far horizon of our world.