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Mark Johnston: Saving God

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Chapter 1

Is Your God Really God?

BELIEVING IN GOD

God is *God*.—KARL BARTH

Saving God is saving God *from us*, from our lazy and self-satisfied conviction that our conventional patterns of belief and worship could themselves capture God. God is transcendent; that is, God can come into view, if he comes into view at all, only as a result of his self-presentation. One consequence of this is the difficulty of knowing whether *even as a believer* you believe in God.

What is it to believe in God? Believing *in* God is not to be reduced to believing in the truth of the proposition that God exists. No doubt the Devil, if there were a Devil, would fully accept the proposition that his sworn enemy, God, exists; but nevertheless the Devil is a paradigm case of someone who does not believe *in* God. Believing in God is standing in a relation of faith and trust to the being who is God. Set aside for a moment the question of belief in the proposition that God exists. Consider instead this question:

“Do you believe in God?”

It is a question that many people, amazingly, are ready to answer affirmatively just by voicing or inspecting their own *inner* convictions.

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Yet relying on a purely subjective basis for answering, “Yes, I do believe in God” is odd, and perhaps disturbing. For it shows that the one who answers so quickly does not understand the question, and so does not understand just what it is to believe in God.

Suppose you look into your heart and see that there is *a god*, that is, an object of conventional prayer and worship, which you do believe in. How does that show that you believe in God? No amount of inspecting your own psychological state can itself determine whether you believe in God, as opposed to *a god*.

Indeed, we shall soon discover that you could believe that there is a God, and believe that your god is God, and believe in your god, but still fail miserably in believing in God. The first three conditions you can determine by looking into your heart; the fourth is, in a certain way, beyond your immediate ken. It requires a certain success in hitting the correct target. Or, more exactly, it requires the arrow of God to have had you, or your religious tradition, as its target.

There is, then, a question as to whether your god is really God. This is an objective question that transcends what is settled by your own psychological state, your introspectible state of belief in and devotion toward any particular god made salient to you by this or that religious tradition.

Here is an induction from past cases which must worry anyone who supposes that he can just announce that he believes in *God*. There is a confused syncretism that identifies Yahweh with the Holy Trinity (or one member of it) and also with Allah, despite the overwhelming scriptural evidence to the contrary. If we set that confusion aside, then, for the reasons articulated at various points in what lies below, whatever one’s monotheistic persuasion might be, one must recognize that many subjectively sincere “believers” who announce that they believe in God, do not in fact believe in God. For, as the unconfused Christian would say, it is the Holy Trinity, the Triune God, at once Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who is God, and these people believe in Yahweh or Allah. Or, as the unconfused Jew would say (if he could but speak the name “Yahweh”), it is Yahweh alone who is God, and these people believe in Allah or the Holy Trinity. Or, as the unconfused Muslim would say, it is Allah alone who is God, and these people do not believe in Allah, but in Yahweh or the Holy Trinity.

We may summarize these charges and countercharges like this: “These people may be utterly sincere, but their god is not God. When they announce that they believe in God, they are indeed sincere, but they are mistaken. You cannot tell whether you believe in God, as opposed to a god, just by looking into your heart.”

The charge echoes back on those who make it: “How do you know that *your* god is God? Clearly, no amount of inspecting *your* own subjective psychological state, and giving voice to *your* belief in and devotion toward any particular object of conventional worship and prayer will settle that question.”

This simple point is obscured by a widespread syncretistic theology that automatically identifies the gods of the major theisms. I shall argue that the reasons against this identification are manifest and clear, even a cursory glance at the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam shows that the children of Abraham have come to address themselves to different gods. And it is a point of logic that *at most* one of these could be God.

Nevertheless, a syncretistic confusion dominates modern theology because of a kind of wishful thinking, a form of thinking in which a technical theological claim (the numerical identity of the gods of the monotheisms) is the illegitimate offspring of decent and widely held desires. All decent people want to avoid sectarian violence; all decent people want to respect others, and that means respecting their deeply held beliefs, and all decent believers want to cooperate with people of other faiths in the midst of the great challenges that face us all. These are very important ends. Still, our intense desires for these worthy ends do not in any way justify the belief that “we all worship the same God.”

What could or would justify that belief is a cold, hard look at what we *do* worship. One reason why that is a difficult thing to do, one reason why reflex syncretism is so comforting, is that taking a cold, hard look at what we do worship would leave *us* with the anxious questions: Do *we* really believe in *God*? Is *our* god really God?

As we shall see, the major monotheisms originally defined themselves in part by denigrating the gods of others. The charge of idolatry, of worshipping a false god, is part of the self-defining rhetoric of monotheism. It is the charge one makes against others because they do not worship one’s own god, who (one supposes) is *God*. Monotheism with-

out the charge of idolatry is a bit like *Othello* without Desdemona. There would be little there to move the plot along.

To begin to understand the question “Do you believe in God?” we need to understand this charge of idolatry, and its role in the self-defining rhetoric of the major monotheisms.

First, however, it may be helpful to dwell a little on the meaning of “God.”

ON THE “NAMES” OF GOD

If we are to understand the question “Do you believe in God?” and so understand what it would be to believe in God, the first thing to understand is that “God,” if it is a name at all, is not an ordinary proper name like “Judas Maccabeus,” “Samuel Johnson,” or “Kurt Gödel.”

As the philosopher Saul Kripke established, we can use ordinary proper names perfectly competently even when we have quite false ideas about the bearers of those names. It is not part of being a competent user of an ordinary proper name that we associate some true description with the name, a description that the bearer happens to satisfy, and satisfy uniquely. To take Kripke’s example, all I may take myself to know of Kurt Gödel is that he proved the incompleteness of arithmetic; but if in truth he plagiarized this proof from a certain Fritz Schmidt, who was the one who actually proved the incompleteness of arithmetic, then I still have, and this needs some appreciation, *a false belief about Kurt Gödel, not a true belief about Fritz Schmidt*. The descriptive content I associate with the name “Kurt Gödel” does not make that name pick out Schmidt in the imagined situation, even though in the imagined situation that descriptive content is true of Schmidt and not of Gödel.¹

Just as I get to refer to Gödel by “Gödel” even in a state of ignorance or confusion about who exactly Gödel is, I also get to refer to a particular man by “Judas Maccabeus” because that name is a transformation of an original Jewish name that was used to dub a particular human being at a particular time, and was passed down through a certain lin-

1. See Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Harvard University Press, 1980).

eage of use, a lineage of use where the common intention is to employ the name “Judas Maccabeus,” or its original Hebrew form, to refer to the man who was originally so dubbed. I can connect to that lineage of use of the original name by way of using the English transformation of the name. I thereby refer to the man Judas Maccabeus, even though I might have thoroughly false beliefs about him.

Imagine, for example, that I confusedly think he is the same man as Judas Iscariot. Even so, the content of my confusion would be that Judas Maccabeus is Judas Iscariot. I could not be confused in that way unless I was still referring to Judas Maccabeus by “Judas Maccabeus” *despite my confusion about the facts*.

Considerations akin to these have been widely taken to establish at least this: in order to be competent with ordinary names, you need not be the master of some specific descriptive material that the bearer of the name uniquely satisfies. What you need to do is intentionally connect to a chain of reference that leads back to an original use of the name in question, a use in which the name was given to its bearer.

Could it be like that with “God”? Could you refer to and think about God, the true God, even if the descriptive content of your associated beliefs were not true of any being in particular, or true of something other than God? The syncretistic theology mentioned earlier seems to assume just that, and in doing so, this standard syncretism appears to treat “God” as on a par with an ordinary proper name like “Kurt Gödel” or “Samuel Johnson.” If “God” were an ordinary proper name, then the various monotheisms might succeed in referring to, addressing, and worshipping the same God, *despite* their very different and inconsistent collective beliefs about his nature and intentions. For ordinary proper names are forgiving in just this way, as Kripke showed. Gödel’s mother and a logic student who hears about him for the first time will have thought about Gödel in utterly different, and perhaps even disjoint and inconsistent ways. Still, it is Gödel they are thinking of.

On this model, all the adherents of the different monotheisms would need to do is intend to connect with a chain of reference that leads back to some primordial dubbing of some being with some original, say Hebrew, form of the name “God.” Then they could think about the being who is God in very different, and even confused and false, ways.

However, that is not how “God” works. In the scriptures, no one actually turns up and says anything like “I am to be called by *the name* ‘God.’” No one says anything like “I hereby introduce *the name* ‘God’ as the name of THIS very impressive being.” There is no original dubbing of someone or something as “God,” a dubbing that we now can hope to fall back on. When the English translations of the scriptures refer to a being as “God” (the title associated with the Hebrew terms *el, elohim, elohay*), the point of the texts they translate is not to use “God” as the *proper name* of some very impressive being, but to convey something about the elevated status of that being.

To be sure, there is one dramatic act of divine self-naming in the Hebrew scriptures, but the name in question is not “God” or any name of which that is the translation. Exodus tells us that a divine being presented himself to Moses and dubbed himself “Yahweh,” a nature-revealing designator often translated as “I am” or “I am who am”:

“But,” said Moses to God, “when I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The god of your fathers has sent me to you,’ if they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what am I to tell them?” God replied, “I am who am.” Then he added, “This is what you shall tell the Israelites: I AM sent me to you . . . This is My eternal name, and this is how I am to be recalled for all generations.” (Exodus 3:14–15)

Even if, as the passage asserts, Yahweh is in fact God, the name “Yahweh” does not mean the same as “God.” For it is coherent to doubt, as the second-century theologian Marcion did, whether Yahweh is in fact God. Marcion also doubted that the god who appeared to Abraham was God. If Marcion was wrong about this, then his mistakes were not about the meanings of words. They would be mistakes as to the theological facts of the matter. This itself entails that “Yahweh” does not mean “God,” and that “God” does not mean “the god who appeared to Abraham.” If those were equivalences in meaning, then there would be no room for the relevant factual mistakes.

In fact, it is quite unclear whether “God,” as we now use it, is a *name* at all, as opposed to a compressed title, in effect something like “the

Supreme Being” or “the Most High.” Notice that the so-called Names of God that appear in the Hebrew scriptures are more like titles or honorific descriptions intended to highlight aspects of the nature of the god of Israel. The first such godly “name” appears in Genesis 1:1—

In the beginning *elohim* created the heaven and the earth.

—and *elohim* is just the plural form of a Hebrew root with a meaning that is something like “divine might” or “supremacy.” Throughout the Hebrew scriptures *elohim*, along with its cognate *elohay* and its simpler form *el*, is used to mean “god” or “the god of” as in the following:

elohim kedoshim, the holy god
elohay elohim, the god of all gods
elohay kedem, the god of the beginning
elohay yishi, the god who provides salvation
el elyon, the most high
el echad, the one god
el shaddai, the almighty god

These are clearly intended as either titles or honorific descriptions, whose point is in part to distinguish *el yisrael*, the god of Israel, from other, lesser gods.²

If “God” as we now use it is a name in any sense, it clearly does not function like an ordinary proper name. In its function, it is closest to what philosophers call a *descriptive name*, a name that in some way

2. One might describe “*el*” as a functional expression, comparable in the way it works to the English expression “the friend of,” which is an expression that connects with names, and phrases to generate various descriptions, as in “the friend of Samuel Johnson,” “The friend of the down-trodden,” and “the friend of the court.” Notice that there is no meaningful way to abstract out “Friend” from these descriptions, and use it as a name of one or another of the persons in question.

This raises a scholarly question that goes beyond the bounds of the present discussion: Given that there is no capitalization in Hebrew, how far does the continual reappearance of the capitalized forms “Theos,” “Deus,” “Gott,” “God,” and the like, throughout the translations of the earliest Hebrew scriptures, represent something of a mistranslation, due to the reading back of a later monotheistic idea, essentially *our* idea, of God? Would it not be better to amend many of the occurrences of “God” in the standard translations to read instead as “the god” and “the god of . . .”?

abbreviates a description and so is tied to that description for its meaning. Perhaps this was true of the name “Hesperus” (or rather the name for which it is a transliteration) as it was originally introduced. “Hesperus” was introduced more or less as an abbreviation for a description like “the actual thing that appears in the night sky as the brightest heavenly body, after the moon.” For a while after the introduction of that name in that way, you couldn’t have been competent with that name without being disposed to treat that description, or something like it, as the criterion for determining the reference of the name. Then we may suppose that the connection to the original description faded away so that only those who call to mind the Latin and Greek roots of the name would explicitly associate the description with the name. The name “Hesperus” ceased to be a descriptive name and became more like an ordinary proper name.

Here is a fact about *descriptive* names: you can’t use such a name with its ordinary meaning without being disposed to use the description associated with the name to determine the reference of the name. And here is an even more relevant fact: you don’t get to refer to something by a descriptive name unless the thing in question actually satisfies the associated description. During the period when “Hesperus” was a descriptive name, if in truth it *had been* that Mars was brighter in the night sky than Venus, then “Hesperus” would have denoted Mars, not Venus. You don’t get “forgiven” for making crucial factual errors in the case of descriptive names, for the reference of such names is just that of their semantically associated descriptions.

So suppose that “God” is a descriptive name whose associated description is something like “the Highest One” and suppose, just for the sake of illustration, that in fact it is Allah and not the Holy Trinity who is the Highest One. Then it will follow that in their characteristic acts of worship, Christians are not worshipping God, because they do not worship Allah. *Christians would not just have false beliefs about God.* In the prayers and liturgical practices that are distinctive of the Christian religion, directed as they are essentially to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, *Christians would not even be addressing God.* And when Christians call on God *as such*, they would, unbeknownst to themselves, be calling not on the Holy Trinity, but on Allah. And as the Holy Koran

says, they would thereby be offering him a mighty insult in supposing he is a trinity of persons.

Thus if “God” is either an abbreviated title or a descriptive name, then the meaning of “God” is very unforgiving, unforgiving in a way that can only intensify the anxieties associated with the question

“Do you believe in *God*?”

We might develop those anxieties in this way. Once you understand the meaning of “God,” you should be able to see that even if you believe that God (the Highest One) exists, and even if that belief is true, and even though you sincerely believe in a god, *you may be very far from believing in God*. The wrong god may have captured your attention and your heart. Believing in God is *not a mere psychological state*. It is more akin to an achievement. For it involves hitting the mark, that is, directing your faith and trust toward the one who is in fact the Highest One.

This means that you are in no better position just to decide to believe in God than you are in a position just to decide to win your first marathon without ever having trained for it. And our position may be worse than that, for winning a marathon is an individual achievement, something that lies within the capacity of a few of us. But there is no chance of believing in God, unless God has disclosed himself to us. The achievement of believing in God can come about only in the wake of God’s self-revelation. And no religion, no practice or set of beliefs, however appealing, can make itself enlivened by God’s self-revelation. The Highest One cannot be manipulated by any cult; his appearance is a grace of fortune. To think otherwise is idolatrous, as we shall see.

Suppose that someone dedicates a temple to “the Highest One, Whoever or Whatever That Is.” (Someone, somewhere, should do this noble thing.) Presumably he believes that there is a Highest One, and builds the temple as an invitation to the Highest One to make itself manifest. Still, this noble person need not have any belief *in* the Highest One, that is, God. For merely building the temple as an invitation would not yet constitute a relation of faith and trust in God. To have that, not only do you have to understand the meaning of “God” and believe that there is a God, you would also have to focus on the right god—as it were, the right object of conventional worship—as “God.” *And it re-*

mains a live possibility that no object of conventional worship is, as yet, God.

That is why belief in God may be a much rarer thing than has been almost universally supposed.

And it leaves the question: What could possibly count as evidence that you believe in *God*? It can seem surprising that this question can be asked. But it is even more surprising that the answers are not ready to hand.

The best thing a believer can say in response to the question “Do you believe in God?” is “I can only hope that I do. I can only hope that I actually stand in a tradition in which God has genuinely revealed himself.”

Think of this essay as an exploration of how things look when that hope seeks understanding.

THE MEANING OF “GOD” AND THE COMMON CONCEPTION OF GOD

The history of monotheism was for a long period of time the history of Jewish monotheism, and we would do well to look to the descriptions that are applied to Yahweh in the Hebrew scriptures, by way of asserting that Yahweh is indeed, as we would now put it, God.

Descriptions like “*el yisrael*,” or “the god of Israel,” are not of the relevant sort, for it remains a substantial question, a question to be settled by the truth or falsity of the Jewish faith, and not by the meaning of words, whether *el yisrael* is God.

What we therefore need, in order to clarify the meaning of “God” thought of as a descriptive name, is a conjunction of descriptions, call it *D*, such that it no longer seems a substantial question whether *D* is God. Here are the sorts of descriptions that bid fair to be included in *D*:

elohay elohim, the god over all gods
elohay yishi, the god who provides salvation
el elyon, the Most High

The god of gods, the Most High who gives salvation—*now* it no longer seems a substantial question whether that being would, if it existed, be God.

The substantial question then becomes: Who or what is God?

Here we are close to the meaning of “God” as we now use that term. But we can simplify and refine this account. Notice that the honorific description *elohay elohim*, the god over all the gods, is an expression not so much of Jewish monotheism, the belief in one god, but of what scholars call Jewish “henotheism”: the belief that there is a god preeminent among the gods. This is indeed how Yahweh seems to be depicted in Psalm 82 and at Deuteronomy 32:8–9 and elsewhere.

In Psalm 82, Yahweh is described as calling together the heavenly council of the lesser gods (*elohim*) that he has placed over the gentiles.

He presides in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment

Henotheism is a stage on the journey from polytheism to monotheism, a journey that is completed with the cry “There is no god but God,” or, as the psalmist puts it,

All the gods of the gentiles are idols. (Psalm 96:5)

Standing at the end of this journey, we no longer conceive of God as the head of a council of gods. We do not think of God as the god of gods, or if we do think of him, say, as presiding over angelic hierarchies, at least we think of this as only the outer manifestation of his true superiority as the Highest One in the sense of the Most Perfect Being.

Is that description on its own adequate to capture the sense of “God”? It is conceivable that mathematical reality taken as a whole is the Most Perfect Being, because it is utterly complete, beautiful, self-contained, and inherently intelligible, in a way that cannot be approximated by anything in the spatiotemporal realm. Even if this were true, there would be something unserious about using “God” as a name for mathematical reality. This is *because the existence and nature of mathe-*

*matical reality in no way bears on our salvation.*³ The same could be said to those who believe that there is such a thing as the Universe considered as an ordered whole, the Cosmos if you will, and who hold that the Cosmos is in some relevant sense the Most Perfect Being. It would be forced, even perhaps idle, to call the Cosmos “God” unless its nature in some way leaves a special place for our salvation.

So, for example, when Baruch Spinoza in the *Ethics* calls the one substance that is the Cosmos “Deus sive Natura,” that is, “God or Nature,” this is not idle because Spinoza finds within the Cosmos a definite path to salvation, a condition that he calls the intellectual love of God, a condition in which one experiences freedom from the bondage of destructive emotions and inadequate ideas. Otherwise, Spinoza’s appropriation of the term “God” would be a forced addition to his philosophical monism, the thesis that everything is a manifestation of the one substance.

This is not because salvation enters into the meaning of the descriptive name “God.” The name or title “God” does not literally mean

the Highest One, and the one from whom flows our salvation.

For it is thinkable, indeed more than thinkable, that God exists but has no interest in our salvation.

Still, the three monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are essentially religions of *salvation history*, religions whose revelations purportedly show God in search of humanity, in order to save that peculiar creature. Monotheism is in part the extraordinary idea that *we* matter that much to the Highest One. The very idea of salvation history is thus extraordinary; in fact it is utterly shocking, and so it is clearly not guaranteed by the idea of God as such. That God is our salvation is monotheism’s shocking and very substantial claim, which is to say that it does not follow from the meaning of “God,” the title or descriptive name whose *meaning* is best understood as given by a description like “the Highest One.”⁴

3. The Pythagoreans might have disagreed. But then, the little we know of Pythagoreanism makes it look more like a quasi-religion than like a mere philosophy.

4. Semanticists will ask: Do I mean “the actual Highest One,” so that “God” would denote the same being in any possible situation, even one in which a Higher One than any actual one exists?

Even so, anyone using the title or descriptive name “God” in an attempt to connect with the monotheistic tradition should bear in mind that it would be unserious to assert that God exists without supposing that there is a Highest One from whom our salvation flows. For that is the *common conception* of God in the major monotheisms.

If only we could say what salvation is, we could then explain this common conception, in order to further explore the question of who or what God is.

One advantage of this approach is that we would then not have to prematurely settle questions of existence. Instead, we could treat the major monotheisms “phenomenologically”—which is to say, we could bracket the questions of whether Allah exists or whether Yahweh exists or whether the Holy Trinity exists. We could take the religious sensibilities and orientations associated with the worship of each of these beings *on their own terms*, and then ask: Which of these beings, *if it existed*, would be God, that is, the Highest One, from whom or from which flows our salvation?

WHAT IS SALVATION?

That may seem to be a pointless approach, unless we can find a relatively neutral account of salvation, an account that does not stack the deck in favor of one or the other of the major monotheisms. But how could there be a neutral account of salvation, neutral across the major monotheisms? After all, Judaism has for most of its history shown little interest in the afterlife, Islam allows itself vivid descriptions of material and sensual reward in the afterlife, and Christianity offers us the Beatific Vision, understood as partial participation in the inner life of the Holy Trinity. These accounts of salvation clearly conflict in their concrete details. Any neutral account of salvation would have to be a higher-order account, which the three monotheisms could be seen as filling out, each in its own particular way.

I do mean “the actual Highest One,” but I also take it that if this description picks out anything, it picks out an entity that is such that there *could not* be a Higher in this world or in any other. There is a certain very High minimum that would have to be met by something if it is to be “the Highest One.” I take it that this is part of the understanding of “the Most High” and the like. But I am setting that aside here in the interests of brevity.

The neutral account, if it is to illuminate the common conception of God, understood as

the Highest One, from whom (or from which) flows our salvation

should satisfy another condition. It should be a characterization that is at least *comprehensible* to unbelievers. For at least some unbelievers understand the common conception and use it to express their unbelief.

We might admit a third constraint. It is not just the monotheistic religions that offer salvation; the same is arguably true of Buddhism and Hinduism, though of course the concrete conception of salvation in these religions is very different from what we find in the monotheisms. In fact, Buddhism vividly disjoins salvation from any idea of the Highest One; salvation lies in the overcoming of anxious desire by means of the Eightfold Path. This is the essential antitheism of Buddhism; it breaks apart the common conception of the three monotheisms, by disconnecting salvation from the Highest One. If that is the right characterization of how Buddhism stands to the three monotheisms, then there ought to be a neutral account of salvation that makes some sense of what is going on in Buddhism as well.

SALVATION VERSUS SPIRITUAL MATERIALISM

In offering a first pass at a neutral account of salvation, we might begin with the idea of spiritual materialism. “Spiritual materialism” is a term from the sixties, used then to denote the consumerist attitude of self-described “seekers” who were always on the lookout for the latest, most fashionable guru or meditation technique or method of self-transformation.

The implied criticism was that the spiritually “materialistic” seekers had undergone no fundamental change in their orientation to life but had simply taken up the hobby of self-improvement, with its endless opportunities for self-worship. The ordinary unredeemed self remained at the center of things; the same lust for advantage and desire for power that drive people in ordinary life were simply projected onto the sup-

posedly spiritual realm disclosed by LSD or Zen or Vedanta or Buddhism or Transcendental Meditation.

It was a charge of religious fraudulence in some ways akin to the old charge of idolatry made by the monotheisms as they defined themselves against their own polytheistic and henotheistic origins.

What makes one religious orientation fraudulent and another authentic? In the context of monotheism the primary conception of religious fraudulence has centered on idolatry, that is, worshipping the wrong god, or the right god in the wrong way. But the more popular religious orientations of the sixties were varieties of Buddhism along with practical meditation techniques drawn from Hinduism. These were not essentially theistic orientations, so the charge of religious fraudulence inherent in the term "spiritual materialism" was not the charge of idolatry. What was it, and what was the related conception of religious authenticity, which could extend even to nontheistic religious practice?

Genuine or true religion must be genuinely directed upon what religion is for. There are certain large-scale structural defects in human life that no amount of psychological adjustment or practical success can free us from. These include arbitrary suffering, aging (once it has reached the corrosive stage), our profound ignorance of our condition, the isolation of ordinary self-involvement, the vulnerability of everything we cherish to time and chance, and, finally, to untimely death. (Yes, death can be a release, but only when suffering or corrosive aging has already undermined the goods that an untimely death would have otherwise destroyed.)

The religious or redeemed life is a form of life in which we are reconciled to these large-scale defects of ordinary life. I do not say that redemption or salvation in this sense must require that all the wounds are healed, or that everything has turned out, or will turn out, for the best. There are things so horrible and tragic that nothing that subsequently happens can diminish the tragedy or the horror; and anyone who tells you otherwise is just making it up, or relying on someone else who just made it up. Worse, the attempt to put an otherworldly frame around such things so they seem not to be the tragedies or the horrors that they manifestly are, borders on the childish and the obscene. Still, the idea of salvation says that even in the face of such things there must

be a way to go on, keeping faith in the importance of goodness, and an openness to love.

Now there are certain virtues (i.e., beneficial dispositions of character) that religious practice deepens. The virtues in question somehow reconcile us to the large-scale defects of human life. Herein lies the distinction between the “ordinary” and the so-called theological virtues. Ordinary virtue—self-confidence, flexibility, openness, self-directed irony, perseverance, fair-dealing, moderation, and good judgment—takes life on its own unredeemed terms and makes the most of it by way of these dispositions of character often so beneficial in ordinary life. By contrast, the so-called theological virtues change the terms of life. Thus, in the Christian tradition, faith, hope, and love are cited not merely as intensifications of ordinary virtue, but as the conditions of a transformed or redeemed life.

That might help us understand the charge of spiritual materialism, even as it applies outside the theistic religions. The spiritual materialist is inauthentic in his engagement with religion, and with his spiritual quest or search, precisely because he simply turns his ordinary unredeemed desires toward some supposedly spiritual realm. However intense his experiences, they do not deepen in him the theological virtues that constitute the change of orientation that makes for a new life.

Salvation, understood as the goal of religious or spiritual life, is a new orientation that authentically addresses the large-scale defects of human life, and thereby provides a reservoir of energy otherwise dissipated in denial of, and resistance to, necessary suffering. Salvation, so understood, is not the mere feeling or conviction that you are “saved.” It is a new form of life.

If there is a God that corresponds to the outlook of the three monotheisms, then it must be that, somehow, in properly relating to the Highest One, a person acquires such a new orientation and is *eo ipso* saved. Belief in God is not a matter of believing in the proposition that he exists; it is an orientation in which the Highest One comes into view, with salvific effect.

Real atheism, as opposed to mere disbelief in Yahweh, Allah, and the Holy Trinity, is the conviction either that there is no Highest One, or that if there were there is no reason to suppose that it could, or would, offer us salvation. That leaves one religious option, even for a real athe-

ist, namely, finding an orientation out of which one can live, without denying or resisting the necessary suffering that is inherent in the large-scale defects of human life.

Then there are those whom we might call, in the fashion of Richard Rorty's own self-description, the "religiously tone-deaf": those who simply find these remarks about necessary suffering and the large-scale structural defects of human life to be odd or overblown or, perhaps, just in bad taste. I wish them well, but I feel obliged to warn them not to waste their time by reading on.