

## **In defense of religion I: Why the sacred cannot be explained away**

This essay as a whole will concern the chief claim of all the world's religions: the existence of a divine order. Today, it seems that one must actually be willing to offer a defense, not only for accepting religious claims, but even for being willing to give them serious consideration. After all, it is said, hasn't science (meaning psychology, anthropology, or evolutionary biology) already explained why people have religions? Since these explanations are entirely materialistic, doesn't this prove that all religions—since they claim to relate to the supernatural—are false? Why even bother with the philosophical arguments for and against theism?

You'll notice that I referred to scientific "explanations" not "explanation", a first indication that the skeptics' house isn't entirely in order. The explanations are many and unrelated. Let us consider a few. First, it is claimed that religion is based on infantile wish-fulfillment fantasies. People who can't cope with the responsibilities of adulthood imagine that they are protected by some benevolent supernatural power. People who can't face death imagine that they will survive in some sort of afterlife. Second, it is said that religion is a personification of social forces. Because primitive people can't refer to abstract concepts like "community", they attribute the pressures applied to them by their communities to immaterial gods. They are so impressed by parental or tribal authority that they attribute divinity to ancestors and kings. Third, it is said that religion is a primitive form of science. Ignorant savages try to explain things like the weather or the growth of their crops by invoking the agency of imagined gods. They personify forces and aspects of nature, and even their own inner impulses, by identifying them as gods. So, for example, there is the god of the sea, the god of love, the god of death, etc. Fourth, it is said that religion is a scam perpetrated by the clergy. By persuading the people that the clergy can influence the gods, the shaman and priest have arranged to live off of others without having to work.

There are other theories, but I think this is a representative sample. The first thing to ask is how these explanations fare as purely scientific theories. Do they correctly predict the features of most religions, or at least of most religions among primitive people? The answer is no, not even remotely. When we look at primitive religions, the gods are more often capricious than benevolent. Nor is the promise of a pleasant afterlife a major part of most primitive religions. The Old Testament hardly mentions life after death. The original goal of Buddhism was to avoid an afterlife. When peoples later do develop an idea of life after death, it is often at first imagined to be an unpleasant and shadowy existence like that of Sheol or the Plains of Asphodel. Later, when the idea of justice is added to the idea of an afterlife, it is hell that receives far more attention than heaven. Nor do religious people have any trouble distinguishing between the laws of the community and the laws of God, as examples like Antigone and Thomas More make clear. In fact, most religions do draw a connection between the authority and the gods. However, it is not the psychological pressure that the community is able to exert on individuals that is considered divine, but the aspect of moral legitimacy—the fact that one is morally obliged to obey one's father or king whether one feels like it or not. Moral duty is an entirely different thing from psychological pressure. (Imagine one loyalist standing alone against a gang of mutineers.) The former is a spiritual thing, so it is no scandal that religion should be associated with it. The theory that religion is primitive science also fares poorly when confronted with actual religious experience. As just mentioned, one aspect of all religions is that they expound moral duties and prohibitions. They declare not only the existence of the gods, but also our duties towards them. Now, science itself can never lead to moral imperatives; science limits itself to empirical description. This in itself proves that religion is addressing more than scientific issues. Also, one often sees religious people, both primitive and modern, ascribing the same effect to both a natural and a supernatural cause. Consider a family that offers thanks to God for the food that they have just bought and prepared themselves. Obviously, the family is attributing causality on different levels to themselves and to God. Finally, if religion were a clerical scam, we would expect to find primitive religions to be the

most clerically organized, but in fact the opposite is true. Also, the life of the shaman is often hardly enviable.

All of these explanations have several features in common. First, they are only plausible if we assume that primitive peoples are unbelievably stupid. However, anthropologists have been studying primitive peoples for a century and have found them to be as intelligent as any other people. Second, when confronted with evidence that conflicts with their theories, the debunkers will blame the evidence rather than modify their theories. For example, the fact that religious people don't treat their beliefs like scientific hypotheses is said to prove that they are too stupid to do scientific thinking properly rather than that they're doing something other than science. But this way of proceeding is not proper scientific procedure. If the evidence doesn't support the theory, it is the theory and not the observed phenomenon that is at fault.

More seriously, none of the proposed explanations of religion can possibly succeed, because all of them ignore essential attributes of all religions. Each begins by mentally replacing religion with something simpler and more amenable to materialistic explanation, say servile fear or a tendency to believe comforting lies. They then proceed to concoct an evolutionary explanation for this thing and then claim that they have explained religion. Of course, this is only valid if religion really is reducible to one of these other things, or perhaps some combination of them. But we know that it isn't. Anyone who has experienced fear of nature, respect for authority, and religious reverence knows that these are qualitatively different intentional responses of the soul. Each has its own distinct nature; each responds to a different aspect of being. You can imagine increasing the fear directed at an object to as intense a level as you like, but it would still be only fear—it never transforms itself into respect or awe, because these are different things. Nor can one explain a qualitatively distinct response as a mere combination of other emotions, because this couldn't explain the unity of the thing. For example, materialists will often make claims such as that love is really a combination of sexual desire and possessiveness. Anyone who has been in love knows that this is simply false, and false as a matter of definition, because it ignores love's qualitatively distinct features. You can't combine purely selfish responses (like lust and possessiveness) and end up with an altruistic response (like love).

Chesterton puts this very nicely:

“It is commonly affirmed, again, that religion grew [from a combination of] first, the fear of the chief of the tribe...second, the phenomena of dreams, and third, the sacrificial associations of the harvest and the resurrection symbolized in the growing corn. I may remark in passing that it seems to me very doubtful psychology to refer one living and single spirit to three dead and disconnected causes...Suppose Mr. Wells, in one of his fascinating novels of the future, were to tell us that there would arise among men a new and yet nameless passion, of which men will dream as they dream of first love, for which they will die as they die for a flag and a fatherland. I think we should be a little puzzled if he told us that this singular sentiment would be a combination of the habit of smoking Woodbines, the increase of the income tax, and the pleasure of the motorist in exceeding the speed limit. We could not easily imagine this, because we could not imagine any connection between the three or any common feeling that could include them all. Nor could anyone imagine any connection between corn and dreams and an old chief with a spear, unless there was already a common feeling to include them all. But if there was such a common feeling it could only be the religious feeling; and these things could not be the beginnings of a religious feeling that existed already. I think anybody's common sense will tell him that it is far more likely that this sort of mystical sentiment did exist already; and that in the light of it dreams and kings and corn-fields could appear mystical then, as they can appear mystical now.

For the plain truth is that all this is a trick of making things seem distant and dehumanized, merely by pretending not to understand things that we do understand... Who does not find dreams mysterious, and feel that they lie on the dark borderland of being? Who does not feel the death and resurrection of the growing things of the earth as something near to the secret of the universe? Who does not understand that there must always be the savour of something sacred about the authority and the solidarity that is the soul of the tribe?"

To understand religion, we must consider it in its essence. What, then, is religion essentially? I think a suitable definition would be this: religion is man's response to the sacred. This definition has two key words—"response" and "sacred". When I say that religion is a response, this means that religious acts are intentional acts; they are always directed at something, and, I would include, are directed at something outside of oneself. In this way, religion is like sight or smell, like love or hatred. Religion is not a thing like fatigue—which need be directed at nothing in particular, nor is it a thing like self-confidence—which is directed at oneself. The other key word is "sacred". What religion responds to is a quality called "the sacred" or "the holy." When a person responds religiously to tribal authority, to the immensity of a storm, or to the cycles of death and rebirth in nature, it is to the aspect of holiness in these things that the religious person responds. All of these aspects of life—and many more—are indeed connected to religion, not because they "cause" it, but because these things reflect or participate in the sacred. Although it manifests itself in many ways, the sacred is a single, distinct dimension of being. This unity of object gives religion its coherence. The religious man knows that there is a logic connecting the concepts of God, purity, sacrifice, and priesthood. It is therefore foolish to look for separate evolutionary causes for the various aspects of religion, when we know that they are intelligibly connected. Given the basic facts of men's apprehension of the sacred and their capacity for abstract reasoning, we can count on them to have been drawn into the logic of the thing. We have no need for further hypotheses.

## **In defense of religion II: The meaning of the sacred**

Modern man has a terribly impoverished sense of the sacred, but most of us have experienced a hint of it at some point in our lives. It may happen in a church or other holy ground, at a funeral or other solemn event, at the sight of something immense like a mountain or something beautiful like music. Whatever the occasion, we felt ourselves to be in the presence of a mysterious *Something*. This "something" I will call "the sacred" or "the holy", because we have not yet established what it is. Historically, men experienced this awesome presence before they developed the concepts to explain it. Before we can decide whether religion is true, we must first know what it claims and how it views the world. That is the goal of this chapter.

### **The sacred as precious**

Even today, men use the word "sacred", as when one says that nature, human life, or marriage is "sacred". What do such claims mean? Most obviously, they are assertions of objective value. If a thing is sacred, we certainly shouldn't wantonly destroy it. What's more, we shouldn't treat it as a mere means to our own ends; a sacred thing demands to be respected for its own intrinsic goodness. Even this recognition, however, only begins to capture the value response demanded by something sacred. The sacred demands not only respect, but also reverence. It makes claims not only on our words and actions, but also on our thoughts and feelings. In this, the sacred is like other objects we rightly revere, such as our parents and our country, although even reverence is a weaker value response than the esteem we give to a thing we regard as holy.

When I am in the presence of the sacred, I feel that it demands my entire attention. Any turning away toward other things—what I cannot help but call "lesser things"—would be grossly inappropriate. The

sacred impresses me with its supreme *purity*, a word that those who have never experienced the sacred can't hope to understand. With the idea of the sacred comes the idea of the profane, of those things in which the sacred is absent or veiled. Profane things are not worthy of being in holy places. To rightly remain in the sacred presence, a thing must be consecrated, that is, the sacred must assimilate the thing to itself. The worshiper knows himself to be naturally profane, and he will only dare to approach the holy presence after separating himself from the rest of the profane world through ascetic practices and only with the aid of rituals that effect his own consecration. What is true of the worshiper is more emphatically true of the priest—he undergoes a more elaborate ritual consecration and makes a more extreme renunciation of the profane world.

The irreligious often have trouble understanding the idea of profanity. To be profane does not mean to be bad; it's no more an insult than not being royalty is an insult. In fact, many profane things are recognized by the religious person as good in themselves. Whereas bad things should not exist anywhere, profane things have their rightful place, but that place is outside the temple. For example, talking and joking among friends is itself a great blessing, but it is not compatible with the solemnity of worship. (Thus, the post-Vatican II effort to make Mass more "friendly" by encouraging parishioners to shake hands and chat reflects a gross lack of understanding of religious worship, as does the unfortunate habit priests have developed of telling jokes during the homily. The Mass is not meant to be fun or friendly—these things are good but profane. The Mass is meant to be a religious sacrifice.) Thus, the religious person recognizes more levels of value than the secular person. While the latter organizes the world into evil, neutral, and good, the former recognizes evil, neutral-profane, good-profane, and holy/sacred.

The religious man builds his world around his idea of the sacred. As Mircea Eliade pointed out, this is true even in a purely spatial sense: the holy ground provides a "center of the world", a fixed point with which to orient oneself, and around which everything else is ordered. At the heart of the home and the city was once a sacred place, an inner sanctuary. The home is where the sacred fire is kept, where the hearth gods dwell, where ancestors are worshiped. Even today, millions of worshipers face the holy city, Jerusalem or Mecca, to worship as a way of facing God. A religious people also put the sacred at the center of their social world. They are driven to consecrate and ritualize all that is most important to them: political authority, marriage, childbirth, coming of age, and death. This provides a holy ground to these things, a religious assurance that they belong above the level of mere instrumentality.

### **The sacred as awesome**

This begins to touch on other aspects of the sacred, because this word means more than just "supremely valuable". A thing may be valuable but fragile, like civil peace. A thing may be valuable but unnecessary, like an appreciation for art—a good thing, but a person who lacks it should not feel that his life has been superficial or incomplete. The sacred is not like this. It is central not only socially but ontologically. A man who encountered the sacred is convinced that he has touched the mysterious center of things. It's not just another aspect of reality that he's encountered; it is the most fundamental aspect, the most real. Whatever sacred beings he believes in, he knows that their being is the truth that lies beneath the surface of everyday life. Therefore, he can't help but see the life of the irreligious man as radically incomplete and superficial. Here, he thinks, is someone who lives only on the surface of things, who has never sensed their depth.

The sacred is indeed mysterious—how could the ultimate reality be anything else? Men have always sensed that something about the universe exceeds the grasp of their minds. The sacred is said to be immense, awesome, all-powerful. To describe the force of its presence, those who experience it use images of fire, of mountains, of storm and thunder. However, we must understand that sacred power has a distinctive character, just as sacred goodness does. Most especially, we must realize that these are not

separate qualities, but two aspects of holiness. It is not like the case of a king who is both just and powerful, but the two qualities are independent and could exist in separation. The power of the gods is at once physical and moral. It is more like the case of an immensely strong personality, in whose presence men fear their own personalities would be overwhelmed and overwritten, a personality that speaks with such authority that one almost expects the stones and the trees to obey it. This is the sort of force that the sacred has, not only to destroy me, but also to transform me. A fearful thing, indeed! A unique power gives rise to a unique dread, but also a unique hope. Here we should also remember that “awesome” does not mean “strong enough to kill me”, although no religious man doubts that the gods could do that. We also describe a brilliant sunset or a vast canyon as awesome. The sacred captivates my soul by its immensity, which is not just formless bigness, but overwhelming beauty. Such is the divine majesty, and we can see how baseless is the atheist claim that religious people only worship their gods because they fear them.

### **The sacred as principle**

Since the gods are, in some ways, beyond our understanding, one might expect them to be a disorderly influence in the world whose actions would always be associated with the irregular or the inexplicable. In fact, religious peoples have generally had the opposite belief. Namely, they hold that the divine is the source of the order in the universe. From the earliest times, man has been impressed by this order: season follows season, the stars follow precisely the same courses each year, and each animal reproduces its own kind. Surely, he thinks, the God who is the ultimate reality must be the author of this order. The cosmic order itself comes to be seen as a manifestation of the divine presence, i.e. it comes to be seen as a sacred order. By its very existence, it reveals the rationality of God. This intuition continued in man until at least the nineteenth century. For example, when Maupertuis and Euler discovered the principle of least action, they were convinced that something so simple and beautiful must be the work of God Himself. It is a strange claim made by atheists that the reason primitive man was religious was that he didn't know the world is governed by regular laws. In fact, it was the existence of regular laws that struck him as the most obvious manifestation of divine forces.

The religious view of cosmic order includes more than what we would now call the laws of physics and biology. The basic laws of morality, the natural law, were also thought to be part of the same order. To commit murder or adultery was to put oneself in antagonism with the order of the universe, to become “unnatural”. Such sins offend and enrage the gods, all religious men agreed. So it must be, for just as the motion of the stars reveals one aspect of God's rationality, so the natural moral law reveals the moral aspect of His rationality—His supreme justice. In fact, once the cosmic order has “tipped us off” to this aspect of the divine nature, we realize that it is a necessary part of the sacred. A god who did not love order and hate sin would not be God.

### **The sacred as source**

Since nothing has existence apart from its essential order, to bestow order is at the same time to give existence. This is another universally-agreed quality of the sacred presence, that it is uniquely creative. Religious man always finds his god at the source or origin of things. The images of creation and ordering are found in every religion: God separates the sky from the earth, the water from the land, and thus fashions our world. He is both the center, the heart, of the world of beings and also the source of their being. Here is another aspect of man's attraction to the divine: he wishes to return to his source, to recover the original purity of his existence. In Eliade's words, religious man has “nostalgia for origins” which is “nostalgia for being”. Communion with the sacred offers him a chance for “rebirth”, a chance to be “made new”. An echo of this religious desire is seen in a modern man's pining for lost innocence. This desire is not, as those who would dismiss it say, a wish to lose the wisdom and experience one has

gained through life. Nor is it merely the moral desire to stop sinning; a guiltless man can have the same yearning. It is a fundamentally religious desire to be back at the heart of things. A man gripped by it feels that his life is being dissipated in unimportant, superficial things, and he longs to recollect himself to the important and the *real*.

Beginnings are sacred—creation is when God touches the world. This is why the bond between parents and children partakes of the sacred in every culture. Because the divine creative force acted through my parents to create me, I owe a special religious duty to them. My parents are a personal religious icon, an image of God, for me. We should not be surprised to find that ancestor worship is one of the oldest and most common religious forms. The parental image carries over to a people's highest gods, whom they call "father" or "mother". The holiness of creation also acts in the other direction. I myself have heard mothers speak of a religious awe inspired by their newborns. Here one intuits with particular clarity the connection between newness/purity and the sacred. Not surprising is the special horror with which religious people regard parricide as well as (in those cultures where the humanity of the child is fully recognized) abortion and infanticide. These crimes are not just murder, but also desecration.

We needn't consider so exalted a thing as the creation of a human being to ignite the religious imagination. Anthropologists as far back as Frazer have noted the deep link between mythology and agriculture among primitive peoples. A divine power controls the growth of their crops, primitive farmers are convinced, and so farming is a religious practice. Properly understood, this is by no means a stupid or "superstitious" belief. Nor are such sentiments limited to primitive religions. It is by no arbitrary choice that Christian churches face east. The sun rises in the east; the eastern horizon is where the day begins, and hence where God—the source of all that is new—"touches" the earth.

How can this sacred presence be the source of every being? Why does it alone possess the power of creation and renewal? It can only be because the Holy One possesses being in its full plenitude. It possesses every perfection and every power necessarily and to a super-eminent degree. Such has been the conviction of theologians and mystics the world over. We exist by participating in God; He is where the stream of being finds its source.

This is religion. It is a set of experiences and a way of viewing the world. Seen in its true nature, we see how ignorant are those who dismiss it as foolish, or childish, or craven. Religion addresses man's highest intellectual, moral, and imaginative faculties. It does, certainly, assert a number of truth claims. Religion asserts that there exists a sacred Being, or a sacred aspect of all things, that is supremely good, powerful, majestic, beautiful, rational, and just. This sacred Being is the source of all other aspects of being, and It has no source outside Itself. The just and fitting response to this Being is worship. No matter how noble and beautiful religion is, for it to be valid, these claims must be true.

### **In defense of religion III: puzzling aspects of existence**

The existence and nature of God are philosophical problems, and it is to these that we now turn. To address these problems effectively, it will be necessary to first take what might seem like a detour to build up the needed metaphysical concepts. We will start by analyzing what it means for something to exist. This turns out to be less straightforward than one might think.

Let's start with a statement, an intuition we all share. We all know that light is something, but darkness is just the absence of light, not a thing in itself. Of course, if one wanted to, one could say that light is the absence of darkness—sometimes it's even convenient to describe a light pattern in terms of shadows rather than light rays. Still, the ontological truth is that it's light that exists. Does darkness exist? It

depends on what we mean by “exists”. One meaning of “darkness exists” would be “somewhere, something is dark”. In this sense, darkness certainly does, or at least can, exist. This meaning is the only one recognized by most analytic philosophers, but notice that it fails to capture the difference that we intuit between the way light exists and the way dark exists. By this first definition, it’s entirely the same. So let’s introduce a second definition: to exist means to be a positive presence, to be a “something there” rather than an absence or a relation. By this second definition, darkness doesn’t exist. Let’s consider a second example. You are out on a walk, and you see a wall with a hole in it. Does the hole exist? By the first definition, yes; “the hole exists” just means “the wall has a hole in it”. By the second definition, no; the hole is an absence, not a presence. (By contrast, the air in the hole exists in the second sense.) Below, I will use the terms “presence”, “actuality”, and “positive existence” as synonyms for the second definition of “exists”.

There are things that can be true only of things with positive existence—these are the prerogatives of actuality. One of these is the ability to be a cause, to share its presence with other things and act on them. True, we sometimes explain some effect in terms of an absence, e.g. we might blame our city being sacked on the aforementioned hole in the wall. But what we obviously mean is just that if the rest of the wall would have been present, the city wouldn’t have been sacked. We don’t really attribute a positive force to something without positive existence. Another prerogative of actuality we might call intelligibility or unity. Presence is never just presence in general; it’s always presence of some particular kind of thing—some nature, some pattern, some qualities. What is present in the wall? One type of solid. What is absent in the hole? An infinite number of kinds of things.

Let’s expand on this latter point. We can identify several layers of presence, sometimes all in a single thing. The most obvious level is material presence: a thing has mass, energy, electric charge, etc. Matter has a certain degree of intelligibility represented by the laws of physics. Living organisms possess another degree of presence (in addition, of course, to the material degree). In an organism, we find real, intrinsic teleology: the heart not only has a size and mass; we can also identify its function, how it keeps the organism going. This is a qualitatively unique feature of life. One could, of course, start identifying purposes to the parts of an atom or a star, but those purposes would either be arbitrary, or they would be defined by reference to something else (e.g. usefulness to us). For a living being, on the other hand, the function is forced on us. With it comes an objective meaning of health versus sickness or injury. It’s meaningless to say that a rock is healthy, but it’s exactly and scientifically meaningful to say that a dog is sick. Notice that the vitality of an organism is not a material distinct from the matter that makes up the organism. Nor is the telos of an organ a force acting on it the way pressure and gravity do. If these things were physical materials and forces, we would not be dealing with a different level of being. Indeed, if one were only interested in material level, one could consider an organism as a collection of molecules in equilibrium; in studying the motion of each molecule, one would never be forced to consider the function of each organ or the unity of the organism. This would, of course, be to miss the forest from the trees, to disregard a higher unity and intelligibility. Mental existence is a third level of being. With conscious subjects, we have another level of intelligibility above the material and the vital. There are more questions we can meaningfully ask and answer. For a material being, we can ask what caused it to do something. For a rational subject, we can ask what reason he had for doing something. Again, this does not mean a different kind of “stuff”—there’s no “soul-stuff”—but it does mean a different kind of

presence: conscious, rational, intentional presence. This is reflected in conventional speech, when we say that an inattentive person is “not with us” or “not all there”.

There is, of course, a major objection to all this. The materialist will insist that the first level of being, the material, is all that really exists. An organism or a person, he will say, is a collection of molecules; all vital or conscious activity can be reduced to the motion of these molecules. Therefore, a living or conscious being has no more “presence” than that of the atoms in its body. Against this, I will first say that I (a person) am obviously not identical with the molecules in my body. The material in my body has changed throughout my life while I have remained identifiably the same person. Furthermore, when I die, I will cease to exist (at least in my body), although the material of my body will still be there. The more sophisticated materialist will admit that there’s more to me than my molecules—there’s also their arrangement and the pattern they execute. If he admits this, he has largely granted my point. He may say that the material is somehow more fundamental than its arrangement, but it’s not clear how this would be maintained. The arrangement can’t exist without the material, true, but material can’t exist without being in some kind of arrangement either. One might say that molecules are understandable on their own apart from any arrangement, and so this makes them logically prior to their arrangement. However, biological and mental activity are also comprehensible on their own apart from the matter that instantiates them. One doesn’t need to know elementary particle physics to understand what knees are for or to understand the connection between love and jealousy. In fact, it’s no help whatsoever, because living beings and persons could just as well have been made of radically different types of particles, if such had existed, so long as they gave rise to suitably similar materials at the macroscopic level. This brings us to the most damning criticism of materialism: material causality cannot explain biological and mental activity because it can’t even address them. Function, reason, and intentionality are simply not material categories, so a material theory can’t even address them without importing ideas from outside.

For mental life, the arguments are particularly strong. Philosophers have long pointed out that qualia—what it’s like to experience particular mental states—is something that can’t be described in material terms, almost by definition. Imagine trying to describe the colors red and blue to a man who’s been blind from birth. He could know the wavelength of light for every color. He could know atom-for-atom what the state of the brain is for someone who’s seeing each color. None of this would get him any closer to knowing what red and blue actually look like. “What red looks like” is a meaningful question, but it’s not a material question; therefore materialism is wrong. One might say the same thing regarding hypothetical personal-identity paradoxes. If I downloaded my brain state into a computer, would the computer program really be conscious, and would it really be me?

A different, but related, line of criticism comes from some idealists, who also deny us warrant to speak of living or conscious beings. Here, the argument is that we divide the world into separate “things” or “beings” because it’s the only way to fit them into the categories of our thought, or, at least, of our language. All of our knowledge of the world is about distinct subjects because that’s all our language (in which sentences are arranged as subject-verb-object) allows us to talk about. It says nothing about the world as it is “in itself”. Here the asserted fact is simply not true—we don’t regard each thing as a unitary subject. I have no word for my-cat-and-my-smoke-detector, and I certainly don’t apply the category of substance to this combination. I do apply the category to my cat and my smoke detector separately. I don’t apply it to the right half of my smoke detector. Why do I apply it sometimes but not other times?

Apparently, some collections of atoms are more “subjectifiable” than others. That is, “substance” applies to them “in themselves” because they have a real principle of unity.

Let’s return to existence. We had little trouble above identifying cases of positive existence, but what criterion did we use to do that? What is it that things with positive existence have in common? The two simplest theories will turn out to be flawed. The first would be to say that things that exist have many properties and many actions, and that one of these acts/properties is existence. Existence means the same thing for all existents—it’s a sort of base line property; what makes things different and unique is the additional act of being a particular kind of thing on top of existing. This theory is wrong. I don’t have an act of existing and an act of being a man on top of it—the two are not separate even notionally. For me, *to be* is *to be a man*. As I said above, presence is always presence of something. To be a life form means to live. To be a conscious subject means to be aware. When I exist and a rock exists, we’re not doing the same thing by existing.

Again, what do things with positive existence have in common? A second theory would be to say that, since existence doesn’t mean exactly (univocally) the same thing in different subjects, it means something analogous. By “analogous” I mean the sort of analogies you identified on college entrance exams: “air is to bird as water is to fish”, etc. A technical name for this is “analogy of proportionality”. Perhaps we could say that human existence is to human nature as rock existence is to rock nature. Unlike the first theory, this one isn’t plainly wrong. In fact it is true as far as it goes, but it is incomplete. The reason it’s incomplete is that it doesn’t allow comparisons across species, but sometimes this can be done. Imagine you were an omnipotent being, and you saw a rock, and you decided to add consciousness to it, as Aphrodite did to Galatea. Rocks are by their nature non-sentient, so this would change our rock into something else, something more on the level of a human being. Now, if being were only proportionately analogous, we could not speak of an addition or subtraction of presence, merely of presence of a different type. However, in this example, it is quite clear that we have a greater and deeper presence after the metamorphosis than before. Something is missing in our description of existence. To sum up, the first theory exaggerates the commonality of the act of existence between different species, while the second theory exaggerates its difference.

#### **In defense of religion IV: unqualified being**

The above thought experiment about adding consciousness to a rock brought out a new aspect of positive existence: it admits of gradations. This is quite different from the first definition of existence ( $x$  exists =  $x$  is instantiated), which is an on-off affair. Of course, it is true that a thing either has some presence or none at all, but one thing may be present more deeply or extensively than another thing. A rock’s presence is limited; it lacks the vital and mental degrees of presence. Furthermore, its presence is limited in space and time, and even in those regions of space that it does occupy, at each point only a part of the rock is present, rather than the whole thing. One might say that the existence of the rock is qualified; we say “it is present”, then we add “but...” followed by a list of qualifications—“here” but not “there”, “in this way” but not “in that way”. This might seem an excessively negative, glass-half-empty way of looking at things. Why not express this as “and” instead of “but”: “the rock is present, and it is here”? The reason is that “ $x$  and  $y$ ” is only correct if  $y$  is not already contained in  $x$ , but “presence” already implicitly contains “presence here”. It’s not another concept. If I were to say “ $x$  is present, *period*”, i.e.

without qualification, the natural way to understand this is that x is present everywhere. Mental actuality provides another good example. Wisdom is an aspect of mental actuality, and one that admits of gradations. However, when I say that a person has a high degree of wisdom, I don't add another quality to that of wisdom; there is something odd in saying "he is wise, and to a high degree." On the other hand, we can say that a man is wise in some areas but foolish in others. His wisdom is qualified; he is wise, but with "buts" attached. If I say, "he is wise, *period*", this would imply the fullness of wisdom.

So actuality admits of degrees, and the highest degree seems to be the simplest one, the one in terms of which the others are understood. This suggests a third way of understanding actuality: in terms of a perfect case that all positively existing beings resemble except as they are limited in various ways. Existence would then be analogous, but by participation (i.e. by common reference to a single exemplary case) rather than proportionality. Do we ever assert connections like this in daily life? Here's an example. Suppose we read in the newspapers about three imperfect states. One is a gangster state where rulers wield power for selfish ends; a second has just rulers but ones who lack the coercive power to enforce their decrees; a third is ruled by libertarians, whose mad theories lead them to neglect the economy, the environment, and public morals. What do these three have in common? They are all imperfect states. The state itself is a simple idea: the nexus of authority that imposes justice and protects the common life. There are many ways of falling short of this one idea, though. Still, the three states fall into a single class by their reference to a common standard.

Could there be such a thing as pure existence, existence without qualification? Surely such an idea is crazy—there are an infinite number of ways of existing, and many of them contradict each other. A thing can't be both red and blue; it can't be both a bird and a fish. Whatever it is, it must miss out on the perfections of the things it isn't. Remember, though, that we mean unlimited existence of the second (presence) kind, not the first (instantiation). Each of the above things possesses a positive element and a negative element. Only the positive element is the actuality part. Red is light at one wavelength; blue is light at another. There's no reason why one can't have light at both wavelengths; it's only the definition of each color that excludes this, i.e. the definition contains this negative element. Similarly, if a fish is an animal that swims but doesn't fly, and a bird one that flies but doesn't swim, then there's no reason one couldn't have a being with the positive elements of both, an animal that both flies and swims. It's only the negative elements in the definition of "fish" and "bird" that would prevent us from calling this being a fish or a bird. It's not that fish and birds have something that the unqualified existent lacks. So existence without qualification would be some combination of light at all frequencies and a flying-swimming animal? No, because the terms "light", "flying", "swimming", and "animal" themselves contain negative elements as well as positive ones. Our work is just begun if we want to extract the purely positive. Thus, it is not obviously crazy to assert the idea of unqualified presence, although I certainly haven't yet proven that there are no hidden contradictions. Still, it seems that between one kind of being and another, it's the negative element in their definitions, rather than their positive actuality, that clash and can't combine.

Let us assume that unqualified existence is conceivable; what would its properties be? The most obvious form of limitation is limitation in space; a material object is present in some places but not others. Unqualified being can't be like that, so it must be everywhere and pervade the whole universe. However, it wouldn't do this in the way of an infinitely large object, such as a gas of infinite extents. Such a gas would be divided into parcels, and only one parcel would be present at each point in space. Therefore,

only a small part of the total object (gas) would be present to each point, so its existence everywhere would be limited. The unqualified being would have to be totally present everywhere, a property called **omnipresence**. Being totally present everywhere, it could not be spatially divided into parts; we should in fact say that an unlimited being is immaterial. This doesn't mean that it lacks any of the actuality of material beings (the way a ghost lacks a body), but that it lacks all of the limitations inherent in material existence. Assuming we can grant some ontological status to the past and the future, this same line of reasoning will apply to time as well as space, so that an unqualified being should be atemporal and eternal as well as immaterial and omnipresent.

The principle that divisibility into parts betokens limitation doesn't just apply to spatial and temporal divisibility; it is quite general. When a being's existence comprises several unrelated acts, this means that some acts are not present to others; the being is not fully integrated. For example, for human beings, the vital and mental processes are not fully integrated. I can't consciously control my heartbeat, and my heartbeat doesn't enter into my awareness. Parts of me are limited in their presence even to other parts of me. The unqualified being must be fully integrated, so that it either consists of only one utterly simple act, or all its acts are so interconnected and interpenetrating that they are like one act. The unqualified being supremely fulfills one of the prerogatives of actuality identified in the last chapter: unity.

The other prerogative of actuality we identified was causality. The ability to exert causality we may call power, so an unlimited being must be supremely powerful, i.e. **omnipotent**. What would omnipotence be like? Our physical intuition, that power consists in the ability to apply force on other things, gives a very impoverished intuition of power at its utmost limit. Just as omnipresence is qualitatively different from being infinitely big, omnipotence is qualitatively different from being able to apply infinite forces. At its heart, causality means sharing actuality; its positive (in the ontological, not just moral, sense) aspect is the ability to create. The ability to destroy has more to do with the limited ability of other beings to receive actuality than it does with the intrinsic power of the destroyer. The fact that I can make fire with my lighter is a real power; the fact that I can burn paper with this fire is just a statement on the weakness of paper. More real power means more real ability to create. We finite creatures are very limited in our creative ability—even those things we call our creations derive only a small part of their actuality from us. When a sculptor creates a bronze statue, he doesn't create the bronze; nor does he keep it in existence. All he does is impose a shape. An omnipotent being could generate all of the being of its creations; it would have no need of outside help from raw materials. This would be creation *ex nihilo*, a thing beyond our experience, but a necessary power for an unlimited being.

What about the mental dimension of awareness? In the last chapter, I argued that consciousness is a real and irreducible level of existence. Therefore, an unlimited being must have it, and to an unlimited degree. What would this entail? Mental presence is called awareness, and the distinct property of awareness is that it is intentional, i.e. it's awareness of something. Unqualified awareness would include awareness of everything—it would mean knowing everything, i.e. **omniscience**. Omniscience includes knowing all the true facts about the universe, including the past and future. However, it means much more than this. An omniscient being also has the fullness of what we call understanding and appreciation. It would have a perfect aesthetic and moral sense. It would be absurd to think that you could observe a work of art or a heroic act and appreciate something in such things that an unqualified being wouldn't also notice. That would mean you having an awareness that it lacks, so that its awareness wouldn't be unlimited. Also, an

omniscient being would fully appreciate the value of individuals—it could see that unique beauty in each person as much as (in fact more than) that person’s own mother. This kind of appreciation is something that we finite beings only really have for those we know and love deeply. So omniscience, unqualified awareness, includes complete knowledge, the fullness of wisdom, and the fullness of the appreciative aspect of love toward itself and every other being.

Our purpose, you’ll recall, is to see if the idea of unqualified existence is coherent. Our method for attempting to show that it is coherent is to derive a fairly complete set of properties such a being should have and to show that they are mutually consistent. If they are inconsistent, then the idea of unqualified being is meaningless. We have found that unqualified actuality in the material, vital, and mental orders would entail omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience. Are these properties consistent with each other, or do they clash? Clearly, they are mutually consistent. One doesn’t need to have any weakness to have all knowledge, etc. In fact, the different aspects of actuality actually seem to lose some of their distinctions in this limit. The material and vital aspects of presence basically collapse into the mental aspect for an immaterial being. Omnipotence and omniscience together constitute omnipresence, because they mean that a being’s knowledge and power are everywhere. When an omnipotent being creates something ex nihilo, it must have complete knowledge of its creature, because the creature has absolutely nothing in it that the creator didn’t put there. Since, as it will turn out, all finite beings are creations of an unqualified being, this being must be omniscient simply by knowing itself and its own creative decisions.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the third explanation of existence succeeds. The common element of everything that exists is that all things participate in unqualified being; they are all differently truncated versions of this being. Another surprise is to notice that, although “unqualified being” is such a counterintuitive—even esoteric—idea, every great civilization has known of it; they all call this being things we may translate as “God”. So far, we have only shown that the idea of God is coherent, not that He actually exists. In the example of the three imperfect states, which we said were related by reference to a common standard, there’s no reason to think this standard must actually be instantiated somewhere. Its existence might be purely Platonic. “Big deal,” an atheist might be tempted to say. “Who cares if the idea of God is coherent? The idea of Santa Claus is coherent too, but it’s still silly for people to believe in him.” True, but we have shown more than that the idea of God is coherent; we’ve shown that this idea is the hidden basis of the most profound truths about the cosmos: what distinguishes presence from absence, and what makes all of the beings in the universe a single family. One may disbelieve in God if one wishes, but it shows a gross lack of understanding to compare this belief to belief in the Great Pumpkin or flying spaghetti monsters. God isn’t just an idea; He’s the core idea. If He doesn’t exist, the universe is a rather absurd place for pointing to Him.

### **In defense of religion V: individuality and existence of God and creatures**

There’s a serious objection that could be made against the idea of unqualified being. In the last chapter, when we talked about limits or qualifications to existence, they seemed to serve an entirely negative function—they keep a being from being everywhere, from knowing everything, or from having any of God’s other perfections. However, in actual, concrete finite beings, limits don’t seem to be entirely negative. In every finite being, one can identify an active element and a passive element. The active element is the element of positive existence, the quality we’ve described above. The passive element is

the subject that receives this actuality, that in which the element of actuality is instantiated. The passive element (sometimes called “potency”, but I will continue to use the term “subject”) limits the act to itself, but in doing so it also individualizes the act. It makes the finite being to be a concrete individual. Consider a human being, like myself. My passive elements are quite important to my existence. My human nature is a sort of subject of my act of existence; this nature limits my existence, and in doing so makes it to be existence of a particular kind. Human nature is itself a form, a pattern, which can only have concrete existence if it’s instantiated in a subject, namely the matter in my body. My life pattern is limited to my matter; the passive element provided by my matter creates a “gap” between human nature in general and my concrete life form, so that I never exemplify the full possibilities of human nature. On the other hand, without my matter, the subject, my human nature would just be an abstraction with no concrete existence. The passive, limiting element is necessary to make me a real individual.

Now if individuality is necessary to be a real, concrete being, and a limiting, passive element is needed to make a thing individual, than it would seem that God can’t really exist. We’ve been too greedy with the demand for unlimited actuality, and we’ve ended up with something that can’t be anything but an abstraction. Remember, though, our method for establishing divine attributes. For each quality in finite beings, we separate the positive and the negative elements, and attribute only the former to God. The first necessary condition for the coherence of God is that the two elements can logically be separated. The second is that purely positive elements don’t clash. Can we perform this separation operation for this case? The two functions of the passive element in finite beings are individuation and limitation. The first, which denotes concrete rather than abstract existence, is positive, so we must attribute it to God. The second function is negative, and so does not belong to God. Thus God must be individual without having a passive element; there is no subject logically distinct from God’s unqualified actuality that receives and limits this actuality. Unqualified being is individual on its own. An immediate consequence is that there can only be one God. This is a remarkable conclusion. It’s not just that two Gods couldn’t coexist because the universe isn’t big enough for two omnipotent beings; it’s that the divine nature itself specifies one individual. It’s as if you set out to describe human nature in general, and your description ended up singling out your friend Bill who lives next door as the Unique Man. In God, there is no distinction between act and subject, between nature and individual.

Here’s a simpler way to see that there could only be one God. Suppose there were three possible Gods; call them “Zeus”, “Apollo”, and “Demeter”. What could make them different? It would have to be something positive—differing personality traits for each God—or something negative—limitation into different subjects, e.g. Zeus is made out of this matter here, while Apollo is made out of that matter there. It can’t be something positive, because each unqualified being would have to have every positive quality. It can’t be something negative either, since unqualified beings can’t have limitations. Therefore, there can be nothing to distinguish between two or more Gods.

It turns out that the number of finite beings is actually more problematic than the number of Gods. Finite beings have a passive element, so the same pattern can be instantiated multiple times. Why, then, should there be any particular number of any given type of being? Why are there six billion humans but zero unicorns? For that matter, how do I know an infinite number of unicorns won’t pop into existence in five minutes and fill up the whole universe? Unlike God, finite beings seem to be dangerously underdetermined.

As a matter of fact, we must be pretty sure that an infinite number of unicorns aren't going to pop into existence. If things like that could happen, the universe would be completely unintelligible. It would not evolve according to regular laws, as it seems to. How do we explain this? First, let me note two explanations that won't do. First, we can't explain why things don't pop into existence by invoking a law of physics: conservation of mass or energy, symmetries in a Lagrangian, a divergence-free stress-energy tensor, etc. These are just mathematical restatements of the fact that things don't just pop into existence. Second, we can't get away with saying that things can pop into existence, but that their probability for its occurrence is low (like quantum tunneling across a high energy barrier), so that it happens sufficiently rarely that it is unnoticed. Suppose this were true, and a certain non-existent object had a certain low probability of popping into existence. I could always imagine another object, no more nonexistent than the first, with all of the same properties but a very high probability of popping. All nonexistent beings are equally nonexistent, so this second kind of object is as valid as the first. If we say that the probability of popping is set by some other object that actually does exist, then that object would be the cause of the other thing's coming into being. We would have a case of one being acting to cause another, something that doesn't raise any problems for the intelligibility of the universe. It seems that this type of coming into existence, that of being caused by something that existed already, is the only way that finite beings can come to exist.

One might object that things popping into existence uncaused must be possible, because physicists sometimes assert that such things happen: virtual particle-antiparticle pairs pop into and out of existence out of nothing, and the universe itself is said to have popped into existence during the big bang. No doubt physicists do make such claims in popular expositions of their work, but it's a very sloppy description of the actual theories. I once attended a colloquium at which a string theorist boasted that it had been proven that the universe came into existence out of nothing, but that "nothing" has a structure which they're still working out. Now, of course, if something has a structure, one with causal effects on the actual universe, it's most certainly not "nothing". Similarly, the picture of particles popping into existence uncaused is not a tenable interpretation of quantum field theory. First of all, it's not just anything, but standard-model particles in particular combinations that are said to populate the vacuum. If this really were uncaused creation, any particle one could imagine might pop into existence, the popping wouldn't satisfy any conservation laws (like charge or lepton number), and so forth. Of course, this doesn't happen. What does happen is limited by the standard-model Lagrangian. Why? It must be because this Lagrangian reflects the nature of something—a field, a collection of fields, or a medium of which the known particles are oscillations—that actually exists prior to the particle creation and, being its cause, fixes what can even temporarily come into being. Avoiding the metaphysical impossibility of uncaused creation is the very condition for having a sensible interpretation of these or any other physical theories. (A good deal more might be said about the pitfalls to be avoided in going from mathematics to ontology in contemporary physics, such as the unwarranted assumption that terms in a series expansion—which is all Feynman diagrams really are—represent actual events. However, what I've said already should convince the reader that modern high-energy physics does nothing to alter the basic problem of finite existence.)

So, finite beings have a passive element which adds an element of indeterminacy to them. Some of their qualities, including their fact of existing itself, are not self-determined but have to be set from outside. Now, how can it be that my existence is determined by something outside myself? Surely, it's because this "something" is giving me my existence—otherwise it couldn't be the determining factor. To insure

the intelligibility of the universe, we assert that *limited being is received being*. God is the only being who could be entirely self-determined. He alone has no element of indeterminacy that has to be fixed from outside.

Could it be that God doesn't exist, and finite beings are all that there is? Can a collection of entities, each of which receives its existence from outside itself, exist without a self-sufficient being (God) to cause them to exist? There are only two ways one might try to set up such a system. First, we could imagine a cycle. A receives being from B, who receives it from C, who receives it from A (schematically:  $A \leftarrow B \leftarrow C \leftarrow A$ ). Could this happen? No. If it could, A+B+C systems could randomly pop into existence. A receiving being B is very different from A depending on B or B being a necessary condition for A. Being dependent and being a necessary condition can be mutual; giving and receiving being cannot be, because a received being has nothing that its cause doesn't give it. Therefore, this cycle demands that A get its actuality ultimately from itself, which we've already said can't happen for a finite being. Nor would it help to have A receive being from both B and C, or any other combination of dependencies. The second possibility would be to extend the series out to infinity:  $A \leftarrow B \leftarrow C \leftarrow D \leftarrow E \leftarrow \dots$ . Could this work? No. An infinite series of possible beings is not one step closer to existence without an actual being to actualize the whole series. The above would allow infinitely large systems to pop into existence, which is hardly an improvement. Therefore, a collection of beings with received existence cannot exist unless God creates it. Since finite beings do exist, God necessarily exists also.

The existence of a creator God vindicates a large part of most religions. God is the sacred something that religious people worship. He is indeed as awesome and powerful as one could imagine, infinitely more so, in fact. He is truly the source of all being, the source of the order of the cosmos, and the ultimate truth about the world.

### **In defense of religion VI: Value, Morality, and God**

The idea of God allows us to make sense of otherwise puzzling aspects of positive existence, particularly the fact that it seems to be neither univocal nor straightforwardly analogous. God performs the same function in the realm of practical reason, where the relevant quality is not being, but value or goodness. We can ask of value the same thing we asked of actuality: what do valuable things have in common? What makes something good? Of course, I should point out at once that by "goodness" and "value", I mean the value something has in itself, *not* the value something might have for us as a means to some other goal. Things valuable in themselves may also be valuable for us, but the sign of intrinsic value is that we feel obliged to recognize the goodness of something whether or not it is of any use to us.

Being has at least three levels—material, vital, and mental—and value also has these levels. At the material level, we have aesthetic value or beauty. For living beings, there is the value of organisms achieving their own telos, i.e. health and vitality. Mental existence has a different kind of teleology, and thus a different kind of goodness, because mental life is directed towards other beings, not to some purely immanent kind of completion. Goodness for conscious beings means giving everything its due. The most important virtues are the moral virtues that allow us to respond adequately to the value of other beings. Just as in the case of actuality, univocal and proportionately analogical theories of goodness fail to explain the thing. A good dog, a good novel, and a good neighbor don't have a quality, the same for all

of them, that makes them good. Understanding “good” in an analogical sense is better; we could say that to be good means to fulfill one’s nature, whatever it is. A good dog is one that fully executes canine nature, rather than imperfectly instantiating canine nature due to sickness, injury, isolation from the pack, or whatever. Similarly, to be a good bridge, a good argument, or a good eye means having the relation of full execution to bridge, argument, or eye nature. This is true as far as it goes, but value seems to have an element that cuts across natures. It’s better to be a good dog than a bad dog, and better to be a good human than a bad human, but it’s also better to be a human than to be a dog. We have no trouble making the latter comparison of value even though there’s no common nature to use as a reference. If goodness were just proportionately analogous, all we could say about a dog that transformed into a human is that it got better by the standard of human nature but worse by the standard of dog nature.

So we need a third theory. Inspired by its success in studying being, the religious mind naturally tries analogy by participation—we postulate a mode of being that would be unqualified goodness, and say that other things are good by participating in this type of goodness but to a limited extent. Not surprisingly, unqualified being and unqualified goodness turn out to be the same thing, namely God. This is because value is always associated with some form of actuality, while vice is always associated with the absence of something that should be present: an incomplete execution of some nature, a failure of self-control, or a failure to fully recognize the value of something or someone.

Thus things are ultimately good by reference to God. This does not mean that they are valuable only because God arbitrarily chooses to value them (although since He is unqualified goodness, we can be sure that He fully values all that is valuable). It means that they are valuable insofar as they reflect His nature, insofar as they are “close” to Him. On the one hand, the religious man values all good things for God’s sake; on the other hand, it is his knowledge of God that prompts him to see the intrinsic goodness of all God’s creatures. An injustice against any creature is a mistreatment of a divine manifestation and hence an offense against God. Furthermore, since all beings are linked by drawing their existence and goodness from a single Source, a sin against one being can be seen as a sin against them all. From this intuition comes the conviction that a single sin can separate a man from nature, society, and God. The intuition that all sin offends God also gives believers a stronger motive to avoid “victimless” crimes like non-malicious lies, use of pornography, masturbation, or disrespect toward the dead. An atheist may realize the immorality of these things, but he would not have the same incentive to avoid them, because, after all, he wouldn’t see how they harm anyone. The believer’s love for God gives urgency to all aspects of morality.

In Chapter II, we introduced the idea of the holy—holy things attain a higher level of value by the fact that they are uniquely close to God and because they have the power to show forth His presence. This idea of sacredness is the main thing that distinguishes religious from secular morality. Where the two clash, it’s always because religious men and women identify something as sacred, and their secular colleagues can make no sense of this. One way to test the plausibility of theism versus atheism is to compare the moral intuitions fostered by each and ask which seems more adequate and wiser.

First, religious reason and secular reason differ in how they explain the special value of human beings, i.e. what reason is given for the “dignity of man”. From the religious point of view, this is simple: the greatness of man is that he is ordered directly to God, and his fulfillment is to know and love God. Lesser

beings can be fulfilled by finite goods. An animal with food, warmth, mates, and children is completely satisfied; if it knows how to procure these things, it will have no further curiosity about the world. Human beings have a higher calling. Our minds are open to all of existence, even those parts—like distant galaxies—that don't affect us. Our intellects search for the reason behind everything. Morally, we feel obliged to respect all true values; we would acknowledge the rights of extraterrestrials if we ever found them. We might violate those rights, but then we would be sinning, and we would know it. Now, if an animal got nutrition from anything with some certain chemical, we would say that that chemical itself was a part of, or a prerequisite to, that animal's flourishing. Since humans recognize goodness in all its forms, the goodness we are ordered to isn't just some aspect of goodness, but goodness itself, i.e. unqualified goodness which is God.

The atheist also recognizes this radical openness of human beings. However, he can only state it negatively. He sees that no finite good exhausts man's capacity for allegiance, but he knows of no other kind of good. Therefore, he expresses the intuition by saying that man's dignity is that he has no fulfillment. He has no fixed nature to fulfill. Through his own will, he creates his own self, his own values, and his own meanings. His dignity lies in his indeterminacy and freedom. Justice between persons is reduced to giving equal weight to each person's will. There is something to the atheist's idea of human dignity, but it is insufficient—it reduces a human being to his capacity for free choice, while taking away the idea of objective value that makes our choices meaningful. The religious man knows the intuition that the atheist is getting at, and with the language of God, the religious man can express it more adequately.

Second, religion deepens a person's idea of authority. For the religious man, all legitimate authority is delegated from God. When a man obeys his ruler, he is really obeying God. Without a divine commission, what right would any man have to rule over any other? To express it concisely, authority is sacred. It doesn't matter whether the authority is monarchical, aristocratic, or democratic; however the ruler or rulers are chosen, their authority comes from God. Whatever the majority thinks, these rulers are bound by the laws of the One who grants them their legitimacy. The atheist, of course, rejects the idea that government is in any way sacred, but in doing so, he finds it impossible to maintain the idea of authority at all. He invents devices like the "social contract", which justify government by invoking the implicit consent of the governed or appealing to their enlightened self-interest. In either case, the reality of authority is lost. Saying a people should obey because they have (implicitly) decided to obey is not a reason. Saying they should obey because it's in their interest is a reason, but a practical rather than a moral one. It doesn't capture the distinct nature of authority, which is a kind of moral obligation.

Third, religions assert that sexual intercourse belongs to God in a special way. This is the act whereby new humans are made; it is a portal through which the divine creative power replenishes the human world. Religious men and women feel a particular awe for everything touching on the sex act. It is a sacred thing, and religious sexual morality is largely an expression of the religious imperative to keep the sacred unpolluted by the profane. The simultaneous religious and sexual overtones are perfectly captured in the virtue called *purity*. The pure man and woman see the sexual realm as belonging to God in a direct way. They do not presume to enter this realm without the divine permission of a wedding ceremony. Once married, they refuse to instrumentalize the act by frustrating its natural end—it is not for us mortals to pick out bits and pieces of a sacred act to suit our fancies. Of course, nothing infuriates the atheist

more than this idea of sex, which he doesn't understand at all. Sex is not sacred, he says, and thinking that it is just makes people miserable by keeping them from harmless satisfactions. However, in "liberating" sex, the atheist inevitably trivializes it. Why limit oneself to one partner? Why think the act creates any kind of bond, any more than having someone scratch your back creates a bond? Why not engage in the act in public for the whole profane world to see? Surely there is more to sex than the atheist allows.

These are the main differences between the religious and the atheist moral visions. In each case, the religious vision seems to more fully capture our moral intuitions about the world. The atheist vision, by contrast, seems gravely inadequate. I would not say that this is a proof that the former is true, and the latter is false, but it is important collaborating evidence.

### **In defense of religion VII: The reasonableness of revelation**

Of course, no one believes in religion in general; nearly everyone who believes in God believes in some particular religion—Christianity, Islam, etc. These religions contain the elements described in earlier chapters: a sense of the sacred, God, and His connection to morality. They contain another element, though, and this is the assertion that a revelation has taken place. Each religion that is more than a school of speculation affirms that, at some particular times and places and to certain particular people, God has communicated information about Himself and instructions to His worshipers. The rest of the followers of the religion get these messages not directly from God, but from other believers, who in turn got them from other believers, and so on until we get back to the people who directly received the revelation. The original revelation is generally given to very few people, often just one, and usually in isolated places like a cave or a mountain, where there is a dearth of witnesses.

I think it's fair to say that revelation is the thing about religion that strikes atheists as being the most absurd. Even if the above chapters were to convince them that there is good reason to believe in God, surely it is too much to believe that the Creator of the universe would arrange his relations with mankind in this way. Of course, one cannot deny that God could supernaturally communicate with particular people, just as the revelation stories say—He is omnipotent, after all. Nor I think does it make sense to say that God would have no motive for communicating with His creatures. Man, as we have shown, is ordered to God, so there would be nothing more beneficial to us than for God to help us to know Him and to establish a regular relationship with us. No, what makes the whole thing seem implausible is that it seems like an omnipotent Being could have gotten His messages across in a more certain and forceful way. Why act through messengers at all? We can understand why a professor with a class of hundreds would have most of his teaching done through teaching assistants—there's just too many students for one man to give them all any kind of attention. But that's because the professor is a limited being. God is not limited; He could give everyone a revelation if He wanted to. If He wanted to, He could have equipped every human being with a sort of spiritual antenna and then blared out His messages at all times and places, so that everyone would get them loud and clear. He could have done it, but He didn't. Why?

Let's rephrase the question. Is there any reason, other than lack of ability to do otherwise, that a teacher would instruct some students and then have those students instruct other students, rather than having them all get it directly from the teacher? I can think of one reason. It may be that the teacher's intention is not

just to share knowledge, but also to form a connection of his students with each other. If all the students were to sit passively and listen to the teacher, each of them might as well be alone with the teacher. The presence of other students contributes nothing. (Any teachers reading this will know that it actually detracts something, because students are more reluctant to ask questions in large groups, and teachers are unable to interact with individual students to see how well they're following the material.) On the other hand, if I have to learn something from another student, then I must rely on that student, and he has an obligation to me. If I know that I'll have to pass down the knowledge in turn, then I'll be learning not just for myself, but for the students that I'll have to instruct later.

Of course, we can't prove that God has done or will do one thing or the other; He can do whatever He wants. However, it's not unreasonable that He might want His revelation to both connect humans with Himself and connect humans with each other. He might want His revelation to become a tradition. "Tradition" literally means something handed down. A tradition can be a belief or a practice, but what separates it from other beliefs or practices is that it creates a bond between the people who share it. For example, walking upright is a practice, but it's not a tradition. If I see a total stranger walking upright, I don't think to myself, "Here is another of my people, who shares my customs and history!" It doesn't mean anything that a man walks upright, because that's the only sensible way for a biped-structured animal like man to walk. Two men may both walk the same way and have no cultural affinity whatsoever. To be a tradition, therefore, a thing must not be necessary. To be meaningful as a tradition, it can't be something that everyone just logically must believe or do. So if God wanted to establish a tradition, He couldn't just blare out His message always and everywhere. If He did, belief would create no bond among the faithful, everyone would have God's revelation with no dependence on anyone else, because not believing would be as crazy as walking on all fours. Actual religions are traditions; they bind the faithful currently living to each other, and they bind them to the dead and the unborn. Revelation is a trust received with gratitude ultimately from God, but directly through our ancestors. The story of revelation coming to Ireland involves both Christ and Saint Patrick, and the more the Irish revere Christ, the more grateful they will be to Patrick. Through tradition, God doesn't usurp the honor given to our ancestors, but rather cements it by making our ancestors His own messengers. Nor does the believer think revelation is given to him solely for his own use and his own salvation. Like all traditions, it is a trust, and each link in the chain has a sacred duty to pass down what they have received. Each generation knows that if they apostasize, they will break the chain and condemn not only themselves, but future generations as well.

None of this, of course, establishes which if any of the world's religious traditions is founded on a genuine revelation. To determine that, one would have to examine the historical evidence of each revelation to see how strong it is, and one would have to examine the content of each revelation to see how compelling it is and whether it is consistent with all we know from other sources. However, it is certainly plausible that one revelation is genuine (or more, if they don't conflict with each other). My recommendations are as follows: First, truth must always be the ultimate issue, not whether a religion is popular, whether its adherents are morally or intellectually exemplary, or whether it is regarded as "progressive". Second, where truth is doubtful, be not quick to abandon the faith of your fathers and the bond to home and kin you'll find in it.