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HOLDING ONTO BELIEF

by

Benny Nyikos

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES
WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

in

**Philosophy
in the Department of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences**

Approved:

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Introduction

It seems that every major book of philosophy is composed of the author's personal views on the world. The philosopher presents his or her views not only to convince readers to take up his or her views but also to send the ideas in the book out for review and debate in order to test the reaction they receive. With this in mind, this paper will present ideas I have encountered in philosophy classes, read in books, and observed in the world at large. The focus will be on the claim that God is dead and what this means to people who still want to believe in Him. More specifically, I will explore the reasons for believing that God and religion no longer belong in our culture, and the contexts in which this is true and false.

I present these ideas without any intent to force people to change the way they think. They are given instead in the hope that they will give the reader something to think about and consider. The hope is that some idea included here will be interesting enough for the reader to prompt further thought. After all, perhaps what one believes is not as important as one's willingness to think about it.

Living with a set of beliefs is very important, but it is just as important to keep an open mind. The simple fact that people believe absolutely in so many different, mutually exclusive things shows that it is possible to be convinced you are correct when you are, in fact, mistaken. As philosophers often find themselves acting like sociologists and psychologists trying to cure the world's ills with good advice, I must present the following possibility: imagine that nobody in the world believes in anything absolutely. Instead of holding steadfastly to dogmas, they accept ideas that they imagine are true until something better comes along. When the better option is presented, they accept it in its turn, but are already preparing for something even better. An idea's longevity or personal appeal would never enter into it, only its validity. Of course, it is

hard to decide which ideas are valid and which are not, so people would always be discussing their views with others. They would never try to force their ideas on someone else, though, and would always listen to the other person's beliefs with as much enthusiasm and sincerity as they have in telling them of their own beliefs.

With this in mind, the question this paper will deal with is this: what is the state of religion and belief today? With the advances in science that have been made since the times when the major religions were founded, can the same claims still be made about those religions? Should people still believe in things that science disagrees with, and is it logical to have faith in God today?

I. Truth

The first thing to establish is the difference between truth and honesty. This paper is investigating truth; namely, whether religious claims are true or can be true. Today there is a tendency to believe that truth can be relative. People who want to believe certain religious claims, often when these claims are at odds with common thought, claim that there can be different truths that are all equally as valid. They believe that something is true when it can be believed and it is not hurting anyone. As it turns out, this description fits more closely with what I shall call honesty, and truth is something a lot more concrete. Honesty, in this case, is the virtuous telling of the truth, while truth itself is neither moral nor immoral.

It is important to note that a lot of people are used to thinking about truth as though it has a halo around it. Many supposedly philosophical ideas such as truth, human minds, good and evil, and beauty and ugliness are used as though they had a higher status than more mundane ideas. The fact is, though, that there is nothing special about such ideas. People can understand

and discuss them just like anything else. It is only when people start expecting such ideas to carry extra weight and have deeper meaning that confusion sets in. Ever since Socrates pestered any ancient Greek who would listen with questions about the nature of concepts like justice, people have been searching for some mystical explanation of what such ideas are. For instance, when Socrates asks Euthyphro, "Then tell me, what do you say the holy is? And what is the unholy?" (sec. 5e) he wants "holy" to be "just by itself, the same in every action" (sec. 5d). What Socrates seemed believe was that all things that could truthfully be called holy would possess a single thing that all holy things had in common, as though "holy" were a thing in itself. It is important to move away from such thoughts, taking inspiration from more modern philosophers. For instance, an early 20th-century philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, said that searches for nebulous meanings behind certain words are a waste of time, as people already know what the words mean and philosophers should stop acting as though they did not. The idea behind this claim, that ideas like truth can be understood by the common human, is what guides the following discussion of truth and its applications. In Section 11 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein alludes to this by saying, "Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy!" When we are doing philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, we are not applying words correctly. When Socrates asked Euthyphro what "holy" is "just by itself," he was asking for the word "holy" to be applied in a way that it is not meant to be applied. "Holy" is not anything "just by itself," and to try to define it as such is exactly the kind of philosophy that Wittgenstein is despairing about.

The idea of “true” is like the idea of “holy.” Though it is not a thing in itself, people can still understand the word and use it correctly. It does not take a lifetime of soul-searching and philosophizing to be able to understand the difference between something that is true and something that is untrue. There is therefore no need to define “true,” because, even if such a definition exists, it would not tell us anything that we need in order to talk about things being true. Instead, we can assume that people know what is meant by “true” and “untrue” and focus on whether something falls into one category or the other. After all, it does not do any good to be able to define “true” unless that definition can be used in classifying something as “true,” and if we can classify something as “true” without the definition, then by all means, let us do so.

We have grown accustomed to people claiming to tell us the truth. Every advertisement, every counseling friend, and almost every religion insists that they are telling the truth. As Pilate asked Jesus, “What is truth?” (John 18:38) How do we know if we are being told the truth, or merely being given something that looks enough like the truth to satisfy us?

It is plain that people often do not want to know the truth. In one famous example, a wife asks her husband if she looks good in the dress she is wearing. Of course, the example requires that she does not, so the man must make a decision: should he lie to his wife and make her feel better or tell the truth and make her feel worse? Nobody would blame the man if he tells his wife that she looks good in the dress. Though he is not telling the truth, then, he is not being entirely dishonest, either. He is not trying to deceive her, because he understands that when his wife asks him if she looks good, she is not asking for an honest appraisal of her appearance. She is asking for a compliment to soothe her worries about the way she looks in that dress. When her husband tells her that yes, she does look good, he is understanding her true meaning and performing the task she is implicitly asking of him. If he were to tell her no, she does not look good in the dress,

he would probably not be giving her any information she does not already possess. She knows that there is a possibility that people will find fault with her appearance. What she is doing is asking her husband not to be one of those people. If he tells her that she does not look good, then, he is failing to reassure her and also failing to inform her about the way she looks. Telling her that she does not look good in the dress, though it might be true, is not so much honesty in this case as it is a misunderstanding of what the wife means when she asks if she looks good.

There must therefore be a difference between truth-telling and honesty, which is illustrated in another classic example. Suppose that during World War Two a man is hiding a Jewish family in his house. A Nazi soldier arrives at his door and asks him if he knows anything about Jews hiding in people's houses. The man would never be accused of dishonesty if he said that he did not know of any hiding Jews. More than just this, however, if the man were to betray the Jews he had been harboring, people would call him dishonest for betraying his neighbors and working with the Nazis. The term "honesty" carries with it ideas of virtue and compassion, which the man is showing when he protects the Jews. The idea of "truth-telling" has no such connections. Suppose that another man in the same town is an informer for the Nazis. He consistently betrays any Jews he finds to the Nazis. Each time he tells the Nazis where a Jewish family is hiding, there turns out to be a Jewish family in the house. Therefore, nobody would have a problem with saying that the man always tells the truth. People would be more hesitant about calling the man honest, however, as honesty is a virtue, and thus is not something people want to associate with a man who works with Nazis.

As truth-telling and honesty are different, then, we have to decide whether we want the truth or whether we want people to be honest with us. Religious leaders, for instance, can be honest with their congregations in at least some senses of the word without telling them the

whole truth. Certain politicians gained fame for their honesty without anyone believing that they are telling the public everything they know. Still, most people would prefer to know the truth rather than merely being assured that the people who do know the truth have their best interest at heart. It would seem most desirable for someone to be both honest and truth-telling, so seeking the truth is understandably one of the most important things a person can aspire to.

We also have to decide if we want truth or honesty in religious discourse. Truth is preferable in such situations, as honesty relies on belief. Truth can be deceptive, but it is also incontestable. Someone could honestly tell someone else about his or her beliefs in an attempt to convert that person without bringing truth into it. Two people can honestly say two different, mutually exclusive things about the afterlife, for instance, and neither one would be guilty of deception because they both believe what they are saying. Only one of the people is telling the truth, however. In order to have meaningful religious discourse, it becomes necessary to look for truth.

As this suggests, another important distinction to make is the difference between truth and belief. If something is true, the truth is absolute, as can be arrived at by the theory of excluded middle. This theory is one of the backbones of logic and states that that things must either be something or not that something, never both. It can be either raining or not raining, but it can not rain and not rain at the same time. Therefore, something can be either true or untrue, but not both. Certainly someone can believe something to be true that someone else disagrees with, and this is the nature of belief. If two people, both fully informed of the facts and both of reasonable mind, can disagree about something's truth value, they are no longer arguing solely about truth, but also about belief. The perfect example is a situation in which all the facts that could possibly be known are known but people still disagree on what to make of them.

Claims about God will prove to be of this kind. Even when two people agree entirely about the nature of the scientific world, historical facts, and psychology, they can disagree about the existence of God. The most significant discussion on the existence of God begins after the debate about the existence of miracles and other breaks in the laws of science has ended.

II. God

Over one hundred years ago, Nietzsche famously declared that God is dead. He reasoned that humankind had gotten over its reliance on deities. Nietzsche believed that gods had been invented by less advanced humans to explain the world around them and give them comfort. Now that science was able to explain things, Nietzsche expected religions to become obsolete and be abandoned since science appeared to be a far better choice than superstition and myth. When speaking of Christians, he asserts that, “all notions of worship, all history, all natural science, all worldly experience, all knowledge, all politics, all psychology, all books, all art—his “wisdom” is precisely a *pure ignorance* of all such things” (sec. 32).

A century later, though, religion is as popular as ever and shows no sign of losing that popularity. People have proven to be unwilling to let go of their traditional beliefs and ethics. Traditions are not the only things that have endured, however, as many people still subscribe to beliefs that scientists have long since disproved. These believers have shown a willingness to take their clerics’ word over the word of science. For instance, many Creationists believe that, despite the evidence to the contrary, that the world is only a few thousand years old and evolution never occurred, while science shows the world to be billions of years old and clearly demonstrates the evolution of modern life from ancient ancestors.

This indicates that there is more to religion than Nietzsche allowed. Religion, it would appear, has survived independently of its original objective. People no longer need belief systems to explain the natural world, but people have shifted the purpose of religion to make similar explanations about metaphysical worlds. Religion has taken root in places where science cannot follow. Ethics, for instance, is tied fundamentally to religious beliefs, and while the sciences can tell us all about how and why we make our decisions, they can never tell us which decision we should make.

One of the most unsettling things I learned in philosophy classes was that scientists have isolated the chemical reactions that cause religious experiences. Supposedly they can cause people with no religious history to have an encounter with what is usually described as the divine simply by injecting them with a certain substance. The people thus tested would often change their lives based on this artificial religious event. Personal religious experiences are one of the most fundamental parts of religious belief; if they were entirely chemical in nature and had no relationship with anything metaphysical, there would be nothing left to believe in. Also, the suggestion that atheists could be made to believe in metaphysical phenomena based on a chemical injection means that the difference between someone who believes in religion and someone who does not could be as simple as whether or not that person has the right chemicals in the brain or has experienced the right combination of those chemicals. Based on this, I was afraid that science had finally explained everything about religion.

What made this even more worrying was the principle of Occam's Razor, which demands that when two explanations are given for one event, the simpler one be accepted. In this case, there were two explanations for religious experiences: that they are caused by God and involve chemicals in the brain or that they are caused by chemical activity in the brain. Occam's Razor

would suggest that, based just on these facts, one would have to logically accept that religious experiences are caused entirely by chemicals in the brain, since this explanation fully explains the situation without requiring additional beliefs.

David Hume makes what is probably the most articulate statement about religion as opposed to science in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. First, he says that, when people are given two conflicting sets of evidence, they must decide which is more likely based on which has more evidence. As he puts it, "In all cases, we must balance the opposite experiments, where they are opposite, and deduct the smaller number from the greater, in order to know the exact force of the superior evidence" (par. 87). It seems like a case of simple subtraction to find what to believe. As simple as this account seems, it appears accurate. It describes how people usually go about deciding which of two conflicting facts to believe. If someone were to ask you if the moon is made of cheese, for instance, you would consider that you have heard, occasionally, that the moon is made of cheese. A cartoon, for example, may have made that claim. Far more often, however, you have heard that the moon is made of rock, and not cheese. The sources who told you that the moon is made of rock, such as science classes and the Discovery Channel, proved reliable in the past. Because the evidence for the moon being made of rock is monumentally more numerous than the evidence for it being made of cheese, you believe that the moon is made of rock.

Religions make claims that are analogous to claiming that the moon is made of cheese. They claim, for instance, that the dead can return to life, or that water can become wine. Following the steps as before, it seems that these claims are not very reliable. Hume applies his test to religion when he states that "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very

nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined” (par. 90). Hume uses miracles to stand for religious claims that contradict science, which most people would agree is an accurate definition of a miracle. As Hume points out, when people make claims about miracles, it is always more reasonable to assume that the miracle did not happen. When religions make claims that conflict with science and everyday life, religion always loses.

Of course, believers take Biblical miracles to be matters of faith, but consider what happens when people make such claims today. Modern accounts are full of people who have claimed to either possess or have witnessed supernatural accounts. Though our focus is on religion, these claims do not have to be religious. Claims about flying saucers and extrasensory perception, for instance, can be considered miraculous in that they violate the laws of nature. Such claims are often used as analogous to miracles, except that, instead of proving a specific creed, they support conspiracy theories or alternative lifestyles. Hume would be equally opposed to such claims, as they also lack reliable support. The important thing for Hume is not whether a claim is religious or not, but whether the claim is reliable.

There is one final argument to be made for religious beliefs, however. No matter what scientists may discover, religious people will always have one answer readily available to them: that God made it that way. When the causes of weather were understood, for instance, we no longer needed to speak of God making storms. We could now refer entirely to changing pressure conditions, levels of precipitation and other such mundane causes. There was a loophole, though: God could be said to have made the pressure conditions, the precipitation, and everything else that scientists insisted made a storm. It was God who made the storm, then, as it was God that set up the things that science had just told us about. Even chemical processes in the brain that scientists have linked to religious experiences can work in this way. Though what were

previously thought of as religious experiences could now be interpreted completely without anything supernatural, anyone who wanted to could still believe that God had made those natural processes. In a manner of speaking, then, the supernatural is removed from religion, but God remains as the author of the natural.

Interestingly enough, following this line of reasoning allows you to conclude that a world without God and a world where God made everything are completely identical. In both, everything is set up scientifically and, in both, people are going to believe in God, even though God only exists in one of them. In the world where only natural phenomena exist, and they are a result of random scientific chance, belief in God would have no truth. In a seemingly identical world where the exact same events have happened throughout history, but with God originating them and orchestrating them from the beginning, belief in God would be true. Crucially, religious experiences and other miracles would appear and feel exactly the same in both possible worlds. Belief in God is therefore open to everyone, and depends on one thing: do you wish to believe in God?

The immediate response to this is that belief is not volitional. People cannot make themselves believe in something by an act of sheer willpower. Try to imagine, for instance, that there is a tiger in the room behind you. You will find that you have no reason to believe that there is a tiger there, and moreover, you have extremely compelling reasons to believe that no such tiger exists. It is possible, of course, to come up with some sort of story to how a tiger could have gotten into the room with you. It could have escaped from a zoo and jumped through your window, or your roommate could be part of an underground tiger smuggling movement, or a mad scientist could have just completed work on his tiger teleportation device and accidentally caused one to materialize in the room behind you. All of these stories are completely farfetched.

You can come up with them, and imagine the scenario where they might be true, but they do not become any more convincing because you imagine them. It is impossible to make yourself believe something, but that turns out to be beside the point.

If somebody wants to believe in something, that person can put themselves into a position that fosters that belief. While it is impossible to force oneself to believe something using only willpower, it is possible to read books about the topic, surround oneself with people who believe in it, and start to tentatively act on that belief. This is the principle behind most conversions. If a person thinks about, talks about, and acts on a belief, sooner or later, that person will start to believe in it. Though belief itself is not volitional, a genuine desire to believe in something can lead someone to a position that fosters belief.

In the case of religion, a person who desires to believe in a certain religion can read religious texts and works by people who belong to that religion, talk to people who believe in it, and attend ceremonies and other gatherings of people who hold that religion. Another option is for a person who is interested in religion in general to try out the texts, people, and ceremonies of many different faiths, to find out which one appeals the most to that person. Obviously, neither situations guarantees that the person will find faith in any religion, but this is often the case. If a person genuinely wants to believe in something, enough time and effort should provide an opportunity for that desire to be realized.

All that it takes to believe in God is for a minimum of justification to be met. God does not have to be entirely justified. An attempt to do so would probably end in failure. Instead, someone who wishes to believe in God only has to reach a point where he or she can confidently claim that God made things the way they are. Then, regardless of how things actually are, the person can keep believing that God made them that way. Belief should be based on some degree

of truth, which is represented by the minimum of justification. If the entirety of a person's belief in God is based on unjustified faith, then that person cannot rationally make any claims about God. Indeed, such a person could believe any number of nonsensical things. Once the minimum is reached, the person can build on his or her faith, because that faith has a rational foundation.

The problem, then, is what constitutes a minimum rational justification. Traditionally, personal religious experiences have often justified belief. A person could feel at peace when praying, or another person could feel a loving presence when in a church. If science explains personal religious experience, however, it does not seem that such experiences can provide justification for belief. This is inaccurate, however, since only a minimum of justification is required, and personal religious experience can provide that. In that absence of personal religious experience, dialogue with people who believe may also provide justification. When a trusted source sincerely provides his or her own justification for faith, that can create justification for someone who had no previous faith. Again, the justification does not have to be entirely without inconsistencies or appeals to mystery. It only has to get the person who holds it to a place where that person can confidently claim that all scientific discoveries describe the way God made the world. Once the person seeking faith reaches that level of justification, faith eliminates the problems posed by any weakness in the justification.

Note

So far, miracles have been defined as supernatural events caused by a divine being. As such, they serve as reasons to believe in whichever religion claims them, as that religion provides an explanation for an event that science cannot explain. This is the kind of miracle that Hume discusses in his writings; however, there are some people who define miracles differently. An

alternative definition for a miracle is something that has a rational explanation that currently eludes people. According to this belief, miracles do not always have to be mysteries, but some day people might learn the secrets behind them and understand that they did not break the laws of nature after all. If this is the case, then the issue is not science's inability to explain miraculous events, but rather science's incomplete knowledge of natural phenomena. Hume's response does not fit this definition. Nevertheless, this definition is still inadequate in itself as justification for belief, because it does not necessitate the existence of a divine being at all.

The reasoning behind miracles is that they aid faith because they are things that cannot be understood. When something has no rational explanation, it has to be taken on faith. Supernatural events are exactly this kind of thing: because they are supernatural, no rational, scientific explanation will ever suffice. Supernatural events do not appeal to unknown laws; they break the laws that are both known and unknown. While there are certainly many natural laws that are not yet understood, even were such knowledge to be gained, the supernatural would still defy explanation.

To suggest that miracles have rational explanation undermines this line of reasoning, but it does have one advantage: if a miracle is defined as anything that people cannot yet rationally understand, then it is much easier to call something a miracle. If a miracle has to be a supernatural occurrence, then it is necessary to rule out all possible natural explanations before settling definitely on a supernatural one. Since human knowledge is limited, it is very hard to rule out all natural explanations. The limits of human knowledge are what give the natural definition of miracles its ease of applicability, meaning that the weakness of the traditional definition is the strength of the alternate definition.

The alternate definition is still the weaker one, despite this one advantage, because its links to a divine being are tenuous at best. After all, there are things that people do not understand yet even outside of the realm of religious discourse. As humans are limited, it is necessary to assert that human knowledge will always be limited, so there are some natural laws and scientific truths that people will never know. Currently, relatively new sciences like quantum physics are proving that the world is fundamentally different from what people previously believed. If history has shown any trend in science, it is that explanations for scientific things tend to move further and further from the way things appear. The sun appears to go around the Earth, for instance, but science first proved that the opposite is true and later proved that the sun, too, moves around another point as part of the galaxy. Each time science progresses, it becomes harder to grasp, so that less people can readily comprehend it. It is reasonable to assert, therefore, that there are some scientific laws that are so hard to comprehend that nobody will ever discover them. Thus, there will always be miracles by the second definition. This explanation has completely avoided the need to speak of a divine being orchestrating the miracles, however, as the definition relies on the limits of human knowledge, not on the actions of a miraculous entity.

If miracles are defined as things that have natural explanations that people do not yet know, atheists can correctly claim that certain events are miracles. This does not mean that everything that people call miracles are miracles. If someone wins a lottery or emerges unscathed from a car accident, they might say that it was a miracle, even though a natural explanation can easily account for what happened without the need to either call in a supernatural agent or an unknown physical force. In the case of a lottery winner, statistics dictate that someone must win, so, though a win is hugely improbable, it occurs all the time. In the case of someone emerging unharmed from a car accident, a reconstruction of the accident can show how the forces acting

on the person and on the car just happened to be structured so that no excessive force was transferred into the person's body. Both occurrences are improbable, but both have simple explanations that we can fully comprehend. The sorts of miracles atheists can identify by the second definition are the ones that have no known natural explanation. A doctor who is not religious could still call an unexplained recovery miraculous, for instance, and he or she would be right, if the recovery went against all reasoning. If the patient had been days from death and there was no reason for any hope at all, and then the patient made a complete recovery with no sign of the disease remaining, it would be an occurrence of a miracle by the second definition, and an atheist doctor could agree with no reservations about faith. The doctor would admit that there must have been some physiological event that modern medicine does not explain. Whatever happened, it was not miraculous in the sense of breaking scientific laws; it simply went against the scientific laws we currently hold to.

If an atheist can ascribe truth value to a miracle without admitting to the existence of a divine being, therefore, miracles become worthless to those who would use them as a way to believe. Thus, even though defining miracles as unexplained natural phenomena gets around Hume's objections to miracles, in the end it makes miracles useless as a basis for faith.

III. Worship

If the belief in God is so personal, then, is there a need for organized religion? It would seem that the proper way to ensure that we serve only God would be to ensure that there is nothing else possibly being worshipped instead. The person who is to follow God's will should interpret it for themselves; letting someone else do so seems a terrible risk. The dangers of

having someone exploit one's personal beliefs for their own gain would suggest that everything someone claims in God's name is potentially an attempt at taking advantage of the person's faith.

Additionally, though faith in God can always be justified by claims that God made things the way they are, as stated before, many beliefs cannot be salvaged with this approach. The belief that there was a worldwide flood, for instance, is made untenable by the fact that there is not enough water on Earth to completely flood it. In such cases, someone who believes in something that seems impossible has two options: they can believe that scientists are lying to them and go on believing or they can accept what the scientists have said and change their minds. It becomes imperative that the person in question analyze their reasons for holding their belief in the first place. Do they hang onto it because someone they trust told it to them and they do not want to imagine that that person was wrong? Is their belief something that is comfortable and they fear change? Do they fear reprisal and scorn in their community when their peers accuse them of losing their faith? In these cases, the person would do better to face the discomfort of admitting that the views he or she has held could be wrong and face the consequences than choose to go on believing in those things for reasons that are less than compelling.

These three reasons are all too common. The first, trust, is where belief begins. Many religious people can trace their beliefs back as far as they can remember. Religions, after all, run in families and regions, and depending on what region and family someone is born into, that is the faith they grow up in. Later, they might claim to know that their religion is the only true one, but, in the beginning, the place of their birth and the family they came from was a matter of chance. The belief they cling to later in life was not arrived at through logic and reasoning, but came from a child's instinctive trust for his or her parents. Beliefs about deity and the nature of

the world were told to the child by his or her parents and community members along with facts about the shape of the world, the countries on it, the solar system, etc. As Nietzsche bitterly puts it in *The Antichrist*, “the kingdom of heaven belongs to *children*; the faith that is voiced here is no more an embattled faith—it is at hand, it has been from the beginning, it is a sort of recrudescence of childishness of the spirit” (sec. 32). The faith has not been tested, or “embattled,” but it is as simple as a child accepting the parent’s account of things. As usual, Nietzsche is using this fact to put down religions and religious people, but it does not have to be taken as such. It can be accepted as fact, instead. Of course, it would be wise for people who have accepted this fact to treat other religions with more fairness once they realize that the source of their own faith was happenstance.

The second reason is the fear of change. A religion that someone grows up in is a religion that he or she knows well. Often, people avoid learning about other religions for fear of weakening their own resolve. In any case, someone cannot be expected to know as much about religions that person has had no previous exposure to as about the religion that person has heard preached his or her entire life. People naturally fear change and feel affection for familiar things. It therefore makes sense that someone would fear a change of religion and feel affection for his or her religion. Additionally, change takes effort. If a person feels that his or her religion is meeting all of his or her needs, that person often does not want to put the effort into learning about other religions or philosophies. A change of religion in this case would seem to be a waste of time. Similarly, if a person is more comfortable holding a set of beliefs than he or she would be if those beliefs were to change, then that person has little to motivate him or her to change.

The third thing that often keeps people in their religions is fear of reprisal for change. People do not want to be seen as being capricious or untrustworthy. Since religions often depend

on their members' affirmations of the truth of their doctrine, someone who changes his or her mind about his or her religion appears to be taking back those affirmations. Members of a religion are often hostile to someone who once belonged to that religion but has since left it. They can take it personally, believing that any problem the person had with the religion was a problem he or she had with its followers. They could also feel threatened by one person leaving the religion, especially if that person had previously seemed to believe strongly. After all, if a person who once believed as much as they do now left, perhaps their own faith is not as well-placed as they would like to think. This might be a chance for some people to rethink their beliefs, but more often it is simply a source of bitterness and censure.

The dependence on others that comes from religion may lead some to desire truth that can be arrived at without relying on anyone else. Many philosophers in the past have believed that the ability to understand the world is inherent in all people and all it takes to access this understanding is time spent reflecting on the nature of the world. Descartes, one of these "armchair philosophers," notoriously spent a lot of time in his room believing that he could discover all the truths of the sciences as easily as the laws of mathematics. As he says in *Discourse on Method*, "I have noted certain laws that God has so established in nature, and of which he has impressed in our souls such notions, that, after having reflected sufficiently on these matters, we cannot doubt that they are strictly adhered to in everything that exists or occurs in the world" (par. 41). Because these laws are "impressed in our souls," we will discover them once we have "reflected sufficiently." This is a desirable idea, as it negates the possibility of being misled by others because it depends only on one's own reasoning.

These views are obviously false, however, as it is impossible to know many things without experiencing them firsthand. And while it is certainly possible to arrive at many truths

through contemplation, the path would be much quicker if they were instead discovered through books or lectures. Though one must always doubt the truth of things one hears from others, once one hears the theories others have come up with one can contemplate, research and pass judgment on them for oneself. If one must wade through books full of opinions and lectures full of conjecture to find the few bits of truth hidden there, at least the act of sorting out truths will be worthwhile.

IV. Church

Formal religions have benefits to offer besides exposing you to truths. The simple acts of prayer, meditation and worship in a church can be spiritually uplifting experiences that imply the importance of going to a church regularly. Religious services that churches offer give an opportunity for spending time in worship and contemplation, away from distractions or the mundane. The act of going to church at a certain time and place every week guarantees that time will be spent regularly at religious activities, whereas depending on oneself alone to set aside this time invites laxity. While going to churches, however, it is important not to get lost in the outward signs of what should always remain a fundamentally internal thing. Everything in a church building is, after all, merely physical. Of course, some items may be considered specially blessed, but even these are experienced as material. It is impossible to sense these blessings directly, so obsessing over the appearance of blessed items is a mistake.

If someone is religious, nothing should ever be more important than religion in someone's life. What is dangerous, though, is when certain things seem to be able to be mutually important with spirituality. For too many people who claim to be spiritual, religion seems to be just another organization that they belong to. They go to church on Sundays and pray with their families, but they do so with the same dedication and enthusiasm that they show to taking their

kids to soccer games, attend fraternity or sorority events, or go to club activities. Their religion becomes a series of social gatherings that, while important, is no more elevated than any other social gathering. It seems strange that something that promises peace and eternal life should be treated as just another activity. Religion should be part of someone's philosophy on life and thus influence everything that person does. Once someone stops taking someone else's word for it and starts deciding things for him-or herself, religion will become more personal and therefore more important.

V. Life, the Universe, and Everything Else

So what is left? After people have sorted out their religions understand the beliefs they hold and found something that logically makes sense, what is left to do? Perhaps the most important thing is yet to be done, actually, as the final consideration is to make sure that, when everything has been figured out and everyone is behaving logically, people still have compassion.

One would hope that compassion is one of humanity's most indelible features, but this would most likely be wishful thinking. If people allow logic to rule their lives they will be inclined to treat others as acquaintances that are there for mutual benefit or as pawns for self-advancement. People would tend to insist that there is no such thing as true altruism, meaning nobody does anything without expecting to gain something in return.

As the argument goes, there is no altruism because even when people do seemingly selfless acts they are doing them for rewards, just not in the usual sense. Martyrs, for instance, certainly are not giving their lives for money or fame, as they will be dead, but they expect a reward in the afterlife. Their reward, then, is better than worldly gains, so in one way of looking

at it martyrs are after the biggest reward there is. People who die for a reason but do not believe in an afterlife might do so for the posthumous fame and glory, for honor, or because they think that death is preferable to life.

Certainly there are many examples that would seem to contradict this. Surely Mother Teresa did not serve the poor of India only to ensure a heavenly reward. Parents often say that they sacrifice for their kids out of love, not out of a sense of duty or to make themselves look better in the eyes of the community. There is no way of proving it one way or the other, but it is still extremely easy to imagine that these people are working in their own self-interest.

Perhaps the true sign of enlightenment is a mind's ability to be aware of itself. Once someone has learned enough to be aware of his or her thought processes, it becomes important to use that knowledge to reflect on and even alter those thought processes. If this is the case, then it is the responsibility of those who would be enlightened to monitor their actions and ensure that they remain good people. Exactly what they consider to be a good person is irrelevant. In fact, it is possible that the person does not even believe that there is such a thing as a good person. What is important is that the person is compassionate, helpful, and understanding. That, more than any specific creed or lack thereof, is what must surely determine who is virtuous and who is not.

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