

## Religion and Respect

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### 1. Friday Dinner

Some years ago, without realizing what it might mean, I accepted a dinner invitation from a Jewish colleague for dinner on Friday night. I should say that my colleague had never appeared particularly orthodox, and he would have known that I am an atheist. However, in the course of the meal, some kind of observance was put in train, and it turned out I was expected to play along—put on a hat, or some such. I demurred, saying that I felt uncomfortable doing something that might be the expression of some belief that I do not hold, or of joining a “fellowship” with which I felt no special community, and with which I would not have any particular fellow-feeling beyond whatever I feel for human beings in general. I was assured that what it would signify, if I went through with the observance, was not that I shared the world views or beliefs of my host, or wished myself to identify uniquely with some particular small subset of humanity, but only that I respected his beliefs, or perhaps his stance. I replied that in that case, equally, I could not in conscience do what was required.

The evening was strained after that. But, I argued to myself, why should I “respect” belief systems that I do not share? I would not be expected to respect the beliefs of flat earthers or those of the people who believed that the Hale-Bopp comet was a

recycling facility for dead Californians, and killed themselves in order to join it. Had my host stood up and asked me to toast the Hale-Bopp hopefuls, or to break bread or some such in token of fellowship with them, I would have been just as embarrassed and indeed angry. I lament and regret the holding of such beliefs, and I deplore the features of humanity that make them so common. I wish people were different. And as far as toasting some particular subset of humanity goes, I also wish people were not keen on separating themselves from others, keen on difference and symbols of tribalism. I don't warm to badges of allegiance, flags, ostentatious signs of apartness, because I do not think they are good for the world. I am glad that the word "race" has lost most of its reputation recently, and I would rather like the word "culture", as it occurs in phrases like "cultural diversity" to follow it. More moderately, we might keep it, but also keep a beady eye on it. When people do things differently, sometimes it is fine, but sometimes it is not. This is especially so with overt signs of religious affiliation. By all means be apart, if you wish, but don't expect me to jump up and down with joy.

'Respect', of course is a tricky term. I may respect your gardening by just letting you get on with it. Or, I may respect it by admiring it and regarding it as a superior way to garden. The word seems to span a spectrum from simply not interfering, passing by on the other side, through admiration, right up to reverence and deference. This makes it uniquely well-placed for ideological purposes. People may start out by insisting on respect in the minimal sense, and in a generally liberal world they may not find it too difficult to obtain it. But then what we might call respect creep sets in, where the request for minimal toleration turns into a demand for more substantial respect, such as fellow-feeling, or esteem, and finally deference and reverence. In the limit, unless you let me

take over your mind and your life, you are not showing proper respect for my religious or ideological convictions.

We can respect, in the minimal sense of tolerating, those who hold false beliefs. We can pass by on the other side. We need not be concerned to change them, and in a liberal society we do not seek to suppress them or silence them. But once we are convinced that a belief is false, or even just that it is irrational, we cannot respect in any thicker sense those who hold it—not on account of their holding it. We may respect them for all sorts of other qualities, but not that one. We would prefer them to change their minds. Or, if it is to our advantage that they have false beliefs, as in a game of poker, and we are poised to profit from them, we may be wickedly pleased that they are taken in. But that is not a symptom of special substantial respect, but quite the reverse. It is one up to us, and one down to them.

I shall not in this essay dwell on the infirmity of ‘anything goes’ postmodernism. In the present context, that would be the view that belief is a purely personal matter, and furthermore one that is free from normative control. That is, any state of mind on such subjects is as good as any other, and it is some kind of infringement of a person’s right to suppose otherwise. The bullseye is drawn wherever the arrow of belief lands, and everyone, always, scores the same. I think this is inconsistent with any proper conception of belief, which essentially requires a contrast between getting something right and failing to do so. Archery where you are allowed to draw the bullseye wherever the arrow lands is not a sport in which you always score highly. It is an activity in which there is no score at all. But here I can rest on the simple reminder that nobody for a moment believes in this promiscuous equality of belief in everyday life. If high tide is at midday, the tide-

table that says that it is at midday is better than the one that says it is at six o'clock, and thereby puts you on the rocks.<sup>1</sup>

Religion may try to occupy a position where such inequalities of opinion do not apply. Perhaps there is no such thing as getting the nature of the Gods right. I think the only honest way to follow this path would be to query the cognitive trappings of religion, or in other words to admit that we are in the domain of emotion or attitude or stance rather than the domain of belief. I return to this below, but meanwhile I want to stick with the more traditional idea that there is such a thing as religious belief, and that those who express themselves by claiming that they believe things are sometimes right about themselves. They do have beliefs.

People sometimes say they respect the 'sincerity' of those who display passionate conviction, even when what they are convinced about is visibly false. Tony Blair is regularly given credit for his sincerity, at least by the right-wing media, as he remains the only person in the world to believe in Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. But surely we ought to find passion and conviction in such a case dangerous and lamentable. The tendency of mind that they indicate is the vice of weakness, not the virtue of strength. Far from being a sign of sincerity, passionate conviction in these shadowy regions is a sign of weakness, of a secretly known infirmity of representational confidence. If we sympathize with the doughty Victorian W. K. Clifford, we will see it as a sign of something worse: a

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph summarizes a longer treatment in my *Truth: A Guide for the Confused*, forthcoming from Penguin and Oxford University Press, New York.

dereliction of cognitive duty, or a crime against the ethics of belief, and hence, eventually, a crime against humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Sincerity is different from passion and conviction, since it is possible, and often appropriate, to be sincerely undecided. Here I like a remark of David Hume, who was perplexed by the frequent juxtaposition, in classical times, of bawdy or irreverent attitudes to the Gods with apparently contradictory tendencies to show real respect for the Gods, and especially real horror at impiety:

Men dare not avow, even to their own hearts, the doubts which they entertain on such subjects: They make a merit of implicit faith; and disguise to themselves their real infidelity, by the strongest asseverations and most positive bigotry. But nature is too hard for all their endeavours, and suffers not the obscure, glimmering light, afforded in those shadowy regions, to equal the strong impressions, made by common sense and by experience. The usual course of men's conduct belies their words, and shows, that their assent in these matters is some unaccountable operation of the mind between disbelief and conviction, but approaching much nearer to the former than to the latter.<sup>3</sup>

This unaccountable state of mind is better accounted for, I shall later argue, from an emotional rather than a cognitive perspective. But it could be interpreted, rather literally, in terms of 'being in two minds' about the Gods, in which case it oversimplifies to say that the subject believes, or that he does not believe. Rather he half believes, and whether his state approximates more to disbelief may vary with the context. The context of

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<sup>2</sup> W. K. Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief', in in *The Ethics of Belief Debate*, ed. Gerald D. McCarthy, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, XII.

relaxed conversation with friends is very different from the context of an opportunity to beat up an avowed heretic.

Phrases like ‘equal concern and respect’ trip off the tongue. But in any more than the most minimal sense of ‘deserving equal protection of the law’ or equal toleration, there are, quite properly, gradations of respect. We respect skill, ability, judgement, and experience. The opinion of someone who has demonstrated these qualities is more important to us than the opinion of a newcomer, or someone who is foolish and wild in his reasonings. We defer to some people more than we defer to others, and this deference is a measure of respect.

Equally, we respect some believers with whom we disagree more than others. The quality of mind that got someone to believe something with which, all the same, we do not agree, may itself be more or less admirable. Sometimes, we can easily see how someone careful and honest and cautious fell into error. The illusion to which they have succumbed may have been very tempting; perhaps we can see how we ourselves would have been taken in had something fortunate not happened. In this case, we suppose, the defect of their judgment is minimal. They may maintain a reputation for general trustworthiness. At the other end of the scale we can barely see how somebody could be so deluded at all, and we begin to think that they must be of infirm or unsound mind.

I think that intuitively we understand that beliefs are contagious. So if someone goes along with the herd and follows one of the major surrounding religions of their culture, this need not demonstrate much of a defect. But if someone gets taken in by a minority cult, there is less excuse. It might seem more or less wilful, or the result of an unfortunate stage of life at which they were especially at sea. Other things being equal,

someone who believes that Jesus walked on water is not, in our culture, so many bricks short of a load as someone who believed that the Hale-Bopp comet was his vehicle to heaven. Holding the first belief is excusable, given that so many people have been repeating it to you since childhood, whereas you have to go out of your way to pick up the second. You have to acquiesce in your own deception, or want to be deluded. It is said that religions are just cults with armies, but they are also cults with a greater number of practitioners and louder voices, and those greater numbers exert more pressure on children and even adults to join in. So joining in is less of a measure of cognitive vice. Quite sensible people get taken in. But it remains true that we cannot both hold that they believe a lot of things that it is perfectly irrational to believe, and respect them on that account.

Whence, then the demand for respect, the demand that even if you are not with us, you must admire us, or salute us, or smilingly stand aside for us? And why do many people go along with it? For to my surprise, I found that people split fairly evenly over the dinner party. I think it was tactless, or perhaps provocative, to lead me into a kind of trap; it was demanding respect creep to expect me to join in. Others think I was an insensitive and ungrateful guest to make any kind of issue of it. Indeed, I am not sure I would behave in the same way now (I might have to raise analytic questions broached above, about just where on the spectrum of respect I would be being supposed to stand. But would such questions be well-received?). So why not just be a good chap and play along? After all, it would not have been sacrilegious to do so, not in my eyes.

## **2. Religion and Onto-Religion**

Perhaps we learn part of the answer if we turn to the non-cognitive side of religious practice. In postmodernist writings on religion, it is the done thing to distinguish between theology and ‘onto-theology’, or religion and ‘onto-religion’. Onto-theology makes existence claims. It takes religious language in the same spirit in which people calling themselves scientific realists take science. It makes claims about what exists, and these claims are more or less reasonable and convincing, and when they are true they point to explanation of the way things are in one respect or another. Onto-theology believes that there is, literally, a three-decker universe, somehow governed by a unified intelligence akin to a person who has various plans and preferences, and rewards and punishments at his disposal. The objects of religious belief—god or the gods—make things happen. They are part of the causal order. Religious beliefs are among the kinds of thing they make happen. Onto-theologians see no real difference between the way a chair explains my perception of a chair and subsequent belief that there is a chair there in front of me, and the way in which God explains the production of fire in a bush and the appearance of a couple of stones with commandments written on them.

Onto-religion is probably that which the ordinary person in the pew supposes himself to be holding and voicing by his observances. This is clearest when the observances include beliefs about this order of space-time, and the causally connected events that may be expected within it. A friend of mine at Cambridge once had a room cleaner who was a Jehovah’s Witness. Her life seemed to be passed mainly in happy expectation of shortly being among the few saved who would be privileged to ascend Castle Hill (a kind of hillock barely higher than the tallest buildings) and “watch the



slaughter”. She lived with a very definite expectation, just on a par with the expectation of night and day (or perhaps she did not quite, if Hume is to be believed). Much of what passes for religion in the so-called “religious right” seems about the same. When the shining day of Rapture comes, the air will be full of flying Christians, toting ghostly guns and riding ghostly SUVs, exulting over the slaughter of everyone else below. It is but a short step to supposing that there may be definite strategies for hurrying this desirable event along, such as blowing people up, or voting for President Bush.

Onto-theologians are the cheerleaders for this kind of religion. They puzzle, for instance, over questions such as whether heaven will make room for domestic animals, or what kinds of bodies, if any, we will find ourselves inhabiting after resurrection, or quite what will happen to unbelievers. They may not be quite as unsophisticated as the Jehovah’s witness or the millions stocking up food and gas for the Rapture, but they are in the same line of business.

In more sophisticated circles, onto-theology is old hat. Instead we should see religion in the light of poetry, symbol, myth, practice, emotion and attitude, or in general a *stance* towards the ordinary world, the everyday world around us. Religion is not to be taken to describe *other* worlds, nor even past and future events in *this* world, but only to orientate us towards this world. Religious language is not representational, giving an account of disconnected parts of the cosmos, regions of space-time, or even of something like space and something like time, but in which all kinds of different things are going on. It is symbolic or expressive, orientating us towards each other, or towards our place in this world.

Let us call this interpretation of religious practice the expressive interpretation. Like other anti-realist or anti-representational theories, it could be offered in a number of different ways. It might be offered as a description of the ‘somewhat unaccountable’ state of mind of the ordinary practitioner in the pew. But this is unlikely, for as we have already seen, there may be a good deal of actual expectation and causal belief in the repertoire of the man in the pew. It may be offered normatively: the people in the pew may think of themselves as representing mysterious regions of space and time, but they ought to see themselves as expressing stances. Following David Lewis we might call expressive theology the ‘minimal unconfused revision’ of the confused state of mind of the person in the pew.<sup>4</sup>

However we take it, expressive theology makes it harder to be an atheist. In the days of onto-theology, we knew what went on when someone claimed that ‘God exists’, and we knew how to argue that there is not the slightest reason to believe it. But once all that is dismissed as old-hat, the plot thickens. If someone thinks the events depicted in the Harry Potter films really happened, or are the kinds of event that really happen, we can hope to mobilize observation and science and human testimony to disabuse them. But if someone claims that the movies express emotions and dreams which it is good that people have, it is harder to mount resistance. Nobody wants to disallow uplifting fiction.

If ‘God exists’ becomes the expression of a stance towards the world, then rejection must be rejection of that stance. But we don’t know how to reject a stance until

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<sup>4</sup> David Lewis, ‘Quasi Realism is Fictionalism’ in *Fictionalism*, ed. Mark Kalderon, forthcoming.

we know what it is, and unfortunately, just here matters become somewhat indeterminate. Perhaps 'God exists' is to be seen as an expression of love or delight—and who wants to be put down as against love and delight?

But equally perhaps 'God exists' functions largely as a license to demand respect creep. It turns up an amplifier, and what it amplifies is often the meanest and most miserable side of human nature. I want your land, and it enables me to throw bigger and better tantrums, ones that you just have to listen to, if I find myself saying that God wants me to want your land. A tribe wants to enforce the chastity of its women, and the words of the supernatural work to terrify them into compliance. We don't like our neighbours, and it works if we say that they are infidels or heretics. This is religion used to ventilate and to amplify emotions of fear, self-righteousness, vengefulness, bitterness, hatred and self-hatred. If this is how the religious language functions, we on the sidelines should not want people to be using it, and we should not use it ourselves.

I do not think the expressive account of religion could possibly be the whole story. This is because I doubt whether religion could perform this amplifying function if expressive theology were accurate to the sociology or the sentiments of the ordinary believer. In other words, I believe that the amplification only works because in the 'somewhat unaccountable' state of mind there is a fair mix of onto-religion. The thought that God wants us to take the land or punish the women could not get its extra punch if everyone knew, and knew that everyone knew, that it was no more than a symbolic or metaphorical expression of the desire for the land or the repression of women that we have decided upon by ourselves. The idea of authority coming down, being delivered from outside, is crucial to the working. I believe it may be crucial even if we cannot find

anyone who puts their hand on their heart and admits to believing the ontological bit. It might still affect them as an imagining that they cannot shake—and just as imaginings which we know to be such can all the same be possible sources of emotions such as terror, so they can form a possible source of self-righteousness, and its associated respect creep.

All this is very depressing, as is the apparently unstoppable human need for it. Still, religions are human productions, and although human beings are bad, they are not all bad. Some of their productions and expressions of emotion are rather good. So if we are clear that onto-theology is no longer on the table, I fear that I become only an impure atheist. After all, I enjoy English parish churches, with their comfortable spaces and simple pieties, their quiet graveyards remembering past generations, the shadows of rooted lives in peaceful rural settings, the overwhelming sadness of lives cut short by events over which they had no control: outsiders' wars, pestilences, accidents. Inside these buildings, I do not feel the ghosts of people who wanted to watch the slaughter of others. Nor would I like to see such places disappear; I slip furtive coins or small notes into the preservation fund.

It is hard to confess, but I can enjoy religious music, and even religious poetry. I think the Book of Common Prayer, or the King James Bible, are great glories of the English language, and I am grateful for an education that did something to immerse me in their vocabulary and rhythms. I suppose I regard the Church of England as an old family pet: a bit moth-eaten, prone to scratch at its own fleas (gay marriages, women bishops) but familiar and somehow comforting, best when it is not making too much noise.

I do not think of these small and sporadic pieties of mine as themselves religious. I see them as second-order pieties; piety for those pieties of others with which I feel some empathy. The pieties of the people are human pieties, representing desire, hope, disappointment, remembrance, attempts to give public meaning to the great events of birth, marriage, and death. Even Christians are human. So these are pieties about which I am myself pious. I might even have to admit that I respect them in a fairly thick sense. I admire people who try to give voice to the great events and emotions of human life, and perhaps approach reverence if they do it as well as John Donne or Milton or Bach.

I would not be surprised if I took a visitor to such a place, and they felt no weight of English history—probably largely mythical, as history always is—and I would not be particularly surprised or disappointed if I had expected a shared response which then was not forthcoming. But in some corner, I myself “demand” that other people respect my little spasm of second-order piety. How would I feel if someone was not only left cold but in turn found me sentimental, or embarrassing, or just laughable for feeling moved? I fear I would be upset, as I know I am if I visit a foreign country and others of the party avert their eyes from the new scenes around them and wilfully, as it seems, just chatter on about their own concerns.

*De gustibus non disputandum*, but there are very few such matters of taste. Kant thought that the judgement that something is beautiful instanced a paradox. Itself it is subject to no rule, no deduction or proof of the one right way in which it is to be conducted. So it seems to be nothing but the expression of wayward pleasure. The paradox is that this pleasure ‘can be demanded’ of others. Almost magically, it turns itself from a subjective expression of a personal reaction, into a public requirement. ‘Demand’

probably first seems to strong to us, twenty-first relativists, not very concerned about the diverse ways in which judgements of beauty bubbles up in others. But when we know ourselves better, it may start to seem right. If we go to the Grand Canyon, and my experience of awe and terror and elevation are only met by your indifference and wish for an ice-cream, the rift between us is serious. Of course, you may excuse yourself—you were tired, out of sorts, preoccupied, angry at something, had seen it often before—but unless you at least feel the need to excuse yourself, we are on the road to alienation and potential hostility. If you only see the Grand Canyon as an opportunity for starting franchises and tourist camps, then I would be disappointed in you. We might have to split up.

And it is a degree worse if you only see the productions of human beings in that light. The nave of Durham, the Taj Mahal, Stonehenge, Lindisfarne, make moral demands, because they testify to a human spirit which deserves some admiration, and even awe. It is not that we have to respect the beliefs that lay behind them (in the case of Stonehenge nobody has any idea what these were, and in the case of the Taj Mahal few visitors do) It is the beauty and the energy, the sheer single-mindedness, as well as the pageant of the past, that strike us as sublime, and awe-inspiring, and command our respect. If you cannot respond to that demand, we have to split up even more definitively than in the case of the Grand Canyon.

### **3. Emotions and Respect**

Expressive theology is rightly an object of suspicion. People who go in for it sound like atheists in dog collars. It sounds as though they have discovered a nice cheat. You need only defend religious sayings as a kind of fiction, which is not too hard, for who can

object to fictions? But then you can go ahead and use the sayings with all the force of conviction and belief. You have relieved yourself of epistemic obligations, but kept the old fire and fury. And, as I have said, I think that a cheat is embodied in the whole procedure: the function of the language (the legitimation of attitudes and attitudes to attitudes) actually depends on ontological imaginings that the position officially disavows. Otherwise 'God has told me this is my land', and 'get off!' would function no differently, and if one were prey to uncertainty in issuing the injunction, it would be no help to couch it the first way.

On the other hand, expressive theologians have a point. In the eighteenth century, people gradually realized that the classical arguments to the existence of God did not get you as far as you wanted. Even if the cosmological argument, or the argument to design, convinced you as proofs of existence, you then had to go on to think of some attributes for the God or Gods you had arrived at. And that was bound to be a process of projection. If your culture applauds vengeance, you find a vengeful God; if your culture applauds jealousy, you find a jealous God, and so on. But in that case, why bother with the theological journey in the first place? The cash value of religious sayings and doings becomes the emotional license they give you. The apparent representations of transcendental fact simply serve to reinforce the stances of the culture.

The expressivist theologian says that this is exactly the core that is to be retained. The appearance that we are describing a transcendental part of reality is to be downplayed. It is but window dressing, clothing the emotional realities in ways that make them salient, or enable them to be communicated and practised. It is like the myth of a journey up the mountain, to find words about how to live. But by keeping the people in

the pews, it keeps them on side. The myth, and the dignities of the setting, the familiar repetitions, or the ritual or the priest, then impress whatever stance is celebrated upon the minds of the congregation. To the outsider, however it is more sinister than that. It is not just that the dignities of the setting and the rest express what was there before. The trouble lies in the amplification, the joyous rejection of reason, doubt, negotiation and compromise.

I have said that holding a false belief does not give anyone a title to respect. Insofar as I cannot share your belief, I have no reason to respect you for holding it—quite the reverse, in fact. But the same is not true of emotions. If I happen upon the funeral of a stranger, I cannot feel the same grief as the close relatives and mourners. But I don't think they are making any kind of mistake, or displaying any kind of fault or flaw or vice. On the contrary, we admire them for giving public expression to their grief, and if they did not show this kind of feeling they would be alien to us, and objects of suspicion. It is fair to say that we ought to respect their grief, and in practice we do. We may withdraw from the scene. Or, we may inconvenience ourselves to let them go ahead (we turn down our radio). Or, we may waive demands that would otherwise be made (we give them time off work). Similarly a birth or wedding is a happy occasion, and it is bad form to intrude on them with trouble and grief (let alone prophesies of such, as in many fairy stories)

So, expressivist theology can profit from distinguishing cognitive disagreement, which very likely does not coincide with substantial respect, from emotional difference, which often does coincide with respect. Peoples' emotions are important, and whether or not we can empathize with them, we do accord them time and space and a kind of shelter.



Putting emotion at the centre also helps with Hume's 'somewhat unaccountable' states of mind. Emotions can easily display exactly the ambiguity or ambivalence he notices, and without us thinking that the subject is in two minds about anything. A mother may berate her errant son, call down all the imprecations of heaven upon his bad behaviour, find his music or his amours just a joke, yet simultaneously fight for him like a tigress if others try the same. It is not so much that she is in two minds about her son, as in a position to claim privileges that she denies to others, less close to him. Classical authors making licentious jokes about the Gods but then prepared to attack infidelity are in exactly the same case.

Unfortunately, it is a gross simplification to bring the essence of religion down to *emotion*. The stances involved are far more often ones of *attitude*. And it is a fraud to take the space and shelter we rightly offer to emotional difference, and use it to demand respect for any old divergence of attitude. The relevant attitudes are often ones where difference implies disagreement, and then, like belief, we cannot combine any kind of disagreement with substantial respect. Attitudes are public.<sup>5</sup>

Suppose, for example, the journey up the mountain brought back the words that a woman is worth only a fraction of a man, as is held in Islam. This is not directly an expression of an emotion. It is the expression of a practical stance or attitude, that may come out in all sorts of ways. It is not an attitude that commends itself in the egalitarian West. So should we 'respect' it? Not at all. The case is the same as that of the Hale-Bopp

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003.

comet. I think it is a dreadful attitude and it is a blot on the face of humanity that there are people who hold it and laws and customs that express it.

I have said that the ‘surplus meaning’, or the ontological parts that the expressive theologian would like to jettison, is in fact essential to the working of the attitude that he wants to retain. What does this mean? It is easy to imagine a stance towards women that more or less coincides with that of Islam, but where the people who hold it are subject to no religious beliefs or imaginings, or somewhat unaccountable fusions of the two. I think that the ontological imaginings do their work at a slightly different place. They work to close off questions and doubts, and in effect to fend off reason. They cement a particular way of associating ‘ought’ and ‘is’ and insulate it from criticism. So it would be almost impossible to defend the view that women are worth a fraction of men on purely secular grounds (which is not to deny its purely secular origin—its origin in indefensible attitudes and practices). It would be much harder to say that the facts as we find them in the world not only make the evaluation reasonable, but make it secure, beyond doubt, such that it is a grave sign of villainy to query it. It is this bit that the ontological imaginings bring with them. It is not just that the right way to kill a goat is by cutting its throat, but that denial of this sets you so far beyond the pale as to jeopardize your membership of the group, or even your life. By closing its eyes to this bit, expressive theology in fact repudiates everything that makes religious language the power that it is.

One of the more depressing findings of social anthropology is that societies professing a religion are more stable, and last longer than those that do not. It is estimated that breakaway groups like communes or new age communities last some four times longer if they profess a common religion than if they do not. We can now see why this

should be so. A religious community can be defined in terms of the grip of imaginings that sprinkle fairy dust on the transition between 'is' and 'ought', ensuring communal support for whatever transition has become salient, enforcing uniformity and making dissent difficult or impossible.

#### **4. Meaning in the World<sup>6</sup>**

In this final section I want to challenge the idea that religion itself occupies the entire territory of spirituality, or the search for meaning in life.

There are two directions in which people look for the meaning of life. One is beyond life itself; this is the transcendent and ontological option. We are to fix our gaze and our hopes on another world, another way of being, which is free of the mess and sorrow, the meaningless motions and events of present life. We are to transcend the small, squalid, contingent, finite, animal nature of earthly existence. Our insignificance in this cosmos is only compensated by assurance of significance in a wider scheme of things. There is hope in another world. And if this is hard to believe, spiritual disciplines of contemplation and prayer are there to help us. Others who have made the journey, wise men and mystics, inspire us with their reports, telling us of glimpses of the world beyond.

In this picture the source of meaning transcends the ordinary mundane world of our bounded lives and bounded visions. The literature, art, music, and practices of

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<sup>6</sup> This section rehearses material I originally presented at a Nexus conference in Tijnburg in 2003, responding to an address by Roger Scruton. It has hitherto appeared in Dutch, and I am grateful to the Nexus trustees for permission to use it here.

religion are then thought to give voice to this attitude to meaning. This is, of course, onto-religion, since the attitudes are only possible if we believe in a world beyond.

But there is another option for meaning, and for our interpretation of religious art, which is to look only within life itself. This is the immanent option. It is content with the everyday. There is sufficient meaning for human beings in the human world – the world of familiar, and even humdrum doings and experiences. In the immanent option, the smile of the baby, the grace of the dancer, the sound of voices, the movement of a lover, give meaning to life. For some it is activity and achievement: gaining the summit of the mountain, crossing the finishing line first, finding the cure or writing the poem. These things last only their short time, but that does not deny them meaning. A smile does not need to go on forever in order to mean what it does. There is nothing beyond or apart from the processes of life. Furthermore, there is no one goal to which all these processes tend, but we can find something precious, value and meaning, in the processes themselves. There is no such thing as *the* meaning of life, but there can be many meanings within a life.

A fine expression of the immanent option comes in the scene that culminates in the death of Bergotte, the writer, in Proust:

At last he came to the Vermeer which he remembered as more striking, more different from anything else he knew, but in which, thanks to the critic's article, he noticed for the first time some small figures in blue, that the sand was pink, and, finally, the precious substance of the tiny patch of yellow wall. His dizziness increased; he fixed his gaze, like a child upon a yellow butterfly that it wants to catch, on the precious patch of wall. "That's how I ought to have written," he said. "My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of colour, made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall."

Just as Renoir or Hals enable us to see pleasure in the everyday, so Vermeer enables us to discover something precious in it, a dignity and tranquility that require no purpose

beyond the objects of everyday life themselves. In this vision there is only the simple harmony of everyday being, beautifully captured by André Gide when he described how in his still-life paintings Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin depicted “la vie silencieuse des objets” — the silent life of objects.

Some find themselves pointing in a transcendental direction and some in the immanent direction. I suspect this is not a matter of deliberate choice, but more a matter of temperament and experience, aided and abetted by the surrounding culture and accidents of education. Some are more comfortable in the everyday world than others, and some are more comfortable with transcendent hopes than others. Many lives have few or no moments of either dignity or tranquility, and for those living them the consolations of belief in something higher may prove irresistible. In moments of despair and desolation the belief that this is all that there is may be hard to bear.

But equally many hopes are vain and reports of the transcendent realm strike many of us as nothing but wish-fulfilment, fiction and delusion. And there is surely something self-defeating about imagining a world modelled on this, yet whose existence would give meaning to this, as if we could grasp a mode of being that would not, at the bottom, be just more of the same. And things do not gain meaning just by going on for a very long time, or even forever. Indeed, they lose it. A piece of music, a conversation, even a glance of adoration or a moment of unity have their allotted time. Too much and they become boring. An infinity and they would be intolerable.

Centuries of propaganda have left many people vaguely guilty about taking the immanent option. It is stigmatized as ‘materialistic’ or ‘unspiritual’: the transcendental option uses every device it can to demand respect creep. But one must not allow the

transcendent option to monopolize everything good or deep about the notion of spirituality. A piece of music or a great painting may allow us a respite from everyday concerns, or give us the occasion for uses of the imagination that expand our range of sympathy and understanding. They can take us out of ourselves. But they do not do so by taking us anywhere else. The imagination they unlock, or the sentiments and feelings they inspire, still belong to this world. In the best cases, it is this world only now seen less egocentrically, seen without we ourselves being at the centre of it, seen as Vermeer saw the patch of wall, or as Bergotte (or Proust) saw the representation by Vermeer. Such experiences can be called spiritual if we wish, although the word may have suffered so much from its religious captivity that it cannot be said without embarrassment. Fortunately, the phenomenon it describes does not die with it.

This is why an atheist should not feel guilt about responding to great religious works of art. If they are great, it is not because they excite the ontological imaginings, the bit that serves, if I am right, to inflame and cement peoples' moral convictions. Their greatness lies in the domain of emotion rather than that of ontology, and when there is a distinction, more in the domain of emotion than that of attitude. And emotions are reactions to this life, to the here and now. As I said above, even Christians are human, and their common humanity is expressed in the greatest Christian art. And the same applies to other religions.

The same strictures apply to ontological religious appropriation of the idea of something sacred, which blurs the distinction between emotion and attitude. The attitude part is that which really matters however. To regard something as sacred is to see it as marking a boundary to what may be done. Something is regarded as sacred when it is not

to be sacrificed to other things, not to be weighed in a cost-benefit analysis, not to be touched. The memory of a loved one is sacred when it is not to be questioned or assessed. The scientist says that truth is sacred, when he regards deception, or even just inaccuracy, as shocking, and regards the idea that we might go in for a bit of it, say, for financial gain, undiscussable. We regard the night sky as sacred if, no matter how many people want it, or how much money they would pay, the idea of putting a large advertising satellite up in it, permanently reflecting Coca Cola or McDonald advertisements, is not even discussable. We do not have to be conventionally religious to give these things their absolute importance. If someone tramples on them, it would be quite in order to talk of desecration.

If too many things are regarded as sacred, we have a life surrounded and hedged by fetishes. If too few things are so regarded, we slide into a world where everything is to be bought and sold, a matter of profit and loss. There is a balance to be struck, and it may well be a regrettable feature of modernity that we have not found it, and a severe condemnation of the capitalist world that it may make it impossible to give it political expression. What Big Business wants, Big Business gets, and just as that now includes the human genome, and interesting prime numbers, so it may well come to include compromise with truth, and the invasion of the night sky.

If I think the night sky is to be treated as untouchable, and feel profoundly shocked and despondent at the idea of commercial exploitation of it, then I cannot respect those who feel otherwise. That is, I cannot respect them for that different feeling (I may grudgingly admire their ingenuity or the scale of their ambition). We have an issue. Nor can we agree to differ, for in practice that amounts to letting them have their way, if they

can raise the money or interest the sponsors. I have to hold that they are wrong. Having the wrong attitudes is as bad or worse than having the wrong beliefs. The fault or flaw is more obvious here, when it is not buried inside a cognitive architecture, than in other cases where we think something must have gone wrong with a belief system, but find it difficult to say just what it is. As epistemologists all know, it is not easy to locate the various vices of belief formation, nor to defend the view that they are vices.

But in this kind of case it is easier. Here it is insensitivity and willingness to impose, the equivalent at least of playing loud and often unwanted music everywhere, all the time. It is denying people a solace they want, or a set of feelings that can no longer be expressed, and that is a crime against humanity. We may call it a crime against the night sky, but I see that as shorthand for what is really going wrong. The cosmos is big enough to take the odd MacDonald's advertisement, but we are not.

So in the end, should I have behaved differently that Friday night? I fear the matter is indeterminate. Was I being asked to express substantial respect for an ontological self-deception whose primary purpose includes protecting arbitrary attitudes and customs from the scrutiny of reason? Or was I being asked to show minimal respect, not much more than toleration, for remembrances and pieties that it is human to have, and that desperately need protection against the encroaching world of cost-benefit analysis and the surrendering of unbridled power to economic interest? I fear there is no one answer. I fear that the somewhat unaccountable state of mind of my host may be interpreted in either way, and no doubt in yet other ways again.