GOD, GUILT, and DEATH
AN EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELIGION

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Bloomington
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The Art of Understanding as an Alternative Approach in the Philosophy of Religion

Philosophy lives in the perennial danger of losing touch with the everyday experiences it seeks to illuminate. As philosophy of religion it easily overlooks the fact that “out there in the real world” the question of religious truth, important as it is, is hardly ever the first question we raise about the religious claims we encounter. Colloquially speaking, we are more apt to ask, What’s that all about? or Where are they coming from? than Is it really true? For unless we understand the meaning of the assertions we are invited to believe and the ideals we are urged to adopt, how can we even begin to pose coherent questions about their truth or value?

This question of meaning is often last as well as first. It does not disappear as soon as the question of truth has been decided. If that decision has been negative, one can become all the more curious about the secret of religion’s hold on people and come, like Nietzsche, to ask such questions as “What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?”

Even more, if one has become persuaded of certain religious truths and committed to certain religious ideals, that very persuasion and commitment will, unless they are shallow, generate an ever-renewed quest to understand more deeply the life one has chosen.

The question, then, that I invite you to join me in asking is, What does it mean to be religious? Among those for whom this will be a vital question and not merely an academic exercise are likely to be both those who are religiously committed and those hostile to reli-
igion, as well as those in between who fall on the spectrum from the mildly curious to the seriously searching. Our task will be to understand the religious life by interpreting its various manifestations.

1A. What a descriptive philosophy of religion is not:
   (a) evaluation

   In giving priority to the question of meaning over that of truth we will be departing from what most typically occurs as philosophy of religion. The debate about the proofs for the existence of God clearly stands at the heart of a long-standing and widespread tradition in philosophy of religion. Instead of joining that debate we shall be inquiring into the meaning of God or the Sacred for the religious life as part of the overall attempt to discover what religion is all about. In this respect our enterprise is analogous to the philosophy of science and the philosophy of art. For rather than trying to establish which scientific theories are true or which works of art are best, these modes of philosophical reflection are directed toward understanding what science is all about and what it is to create or appreciate a work of art.

   It is tempting to make this distinction as that between philosophizing about God and philosophizing about religion. But this won’t quite work. We cannot philosophize about religion without discussing the “object” of religion, God, the gods, the Sacred, and so forth. Nor can we philosophize about God without implying claims about religion, for example, that it is man’s highest activity or that it is one of his most deeply rooted illusions. The distinction that is really seeking expression here is between an evaluative or normative approach and a descriptive approach.

   As a normative discipline the philosophy of religion seeks to evaluate the truth of religious assertions (and the value of religious ideals). In the West this links up historically with (1) the tradition of natural theology, including proofs for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul; (2) the tradition of rational apologetics, seeking to establish the truth of the Christian religion from the evidence of miracles and fulfilled prophecy; (3) the negation of the first, with Hume and Kant in the foreground; and (4) the negation of the second with Hume and Lessing in the foreground. In each case the philosopher is seeking to determine whether or not there is rational justification for holding to certain religious beliefs. The question of truth or falsity prevails.

   If one comes to be disenchanted with these debates, either on the grounds that they cannot satisfactorily be resolved or on the grounds
that they tend misleadingly to reduce religion to its cognitive dimensions, one might come to wonder whether philosophy might have other tasks vis-à-vis religion than passing verdicts on its truth claims. Such tasks might well include the one we are undertaking, that of describing the religious life from within, that is, not as an observed fact but as a possible experience.

Historically speaking, Schleiermacher's *Speeches on Religion* (1799) represent the first major move toward such a descriptive philosophy of religion. As it subsequently became clearer that the interpretative task could be more fruitfully pursued when questions of truth (and value) were deliberately set aside or bracketed (Schleiermacher had presupposed a kind of pantheism), it came to be known as the phenomenology of religion.

There are historical precedents for this title. The first is the Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal, that is, between the real insofar as it appears to our experience and the real as it is in itself or as it would appear to an infinite intellect. Kant argued that God, freedom, and immortality do not belong to the phenomenal world, that they are not facts of our perceptual-scientific experience. A “transcendent metaphysics” seeking the truth about these putative realities which fall beyond the reach of experience is, for theoretical reasons at least, not possible as a science. But an “immanent metaphysics” describing the structures of human experience remains a legitimate and important philosophical task.

Kant's own development of such an “immanent metaphysics” was quite narrowly directed upon perceptual and scientific experience. But an analysis of the structure of religious experience would also fit into such a program, for while God may transcend perceptual-scientific experience, religion is an easily observed feature of the human world. Not even the most ardent atheist could deny that there are religious phenomena and that these can be described. It would be natural to call such a description a phenomenology of religion.

This naturalness is increased by two further historical precedents. Hegel, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and Husserl at the beginning of our own, both used the term phenomenology to designate systematic attempts to understand human experience by describing its structure and dynamics from within. Husserl is especially important for the development of two concepts related to the deliberate setting aside of truth questions of which mention has already been made.

The first of these is the intentionality of consciousness. To say that consciousness is intentional is to say that it is of or about something,
that it is directed toward its object. Husserl writes, "Cognitive mental processes . . . have an intentio, they refer to something, they are related in this or that way to an object. This activity of relating itself to an object belongs to them even if the object itself does not." For example, in imagination, hallucination, and dreaming consciousness directs itself toward an object which is not publicly there. How glad we often are that our dream objects turn out to be unreal and how sad that our Walter Mitty fantasies remain just that. Yet we can describe these objects as present to consciousness, even if absent from the real world.

If that is so, Husserl argues, we can also describe objects of consciousness we take to be really there without regard for their reality. We can set aside or bracket all questions and beliefs about the real existence of the objects of consciousness in order to describe the way in which they appear to consciousness. Husserl uses a Greek name for this suspension of judgment about the existence of our object. He calls it the epoché. This second fundamental concept of his has direct bearing on our project, for in not asking about the real existence of the objects of consciousness we are deliberately setting aside the question of the truth or falsity of claims about God's existence in order to focus attention on the ways he is present to human experience, regardless of whether that presence is to be taken as veridical perception or some kind of illusion.

On the basis of these precedents in Kant, Hegel, and Husserl, I have called this descriptive philosophy of religion a phenomenology of religion. I am greatly indebted to each of these thinkers. Still, the methodological and speculative specifics of their systems are both complicated and controversial, and I do not wish to invoke any of them in their totality. There is no reason why the difficulty in mastering the intricacies of these systems or the debate over their soundness should stand in the way of seeking to understand the religious life.

The reader who finds one of these frameworks useful, will, I suspect, have little difficulty fitting what follows into it. Other general standpoints from which easy approaches to this enterprise can be made include: Jaspers's psychology of meaning (verstehende Psychologie), Weber's interpretative sociology (verstehende Soziologie), Dilthey's critique of historical reason, Strawson's descriptive metaphysics, Austin's notion of ordinary language philosophy as "linguistic phenomenology," and post-Wittgensteian philosophy of action.

But none of these is really necessary. One need not have a ready-made philosophical methodology worked out in order to ask, What
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does it mean to be religious? In fact, it may well be an advantage not to have one, for there is always the danger, against which Hegel perennially warned, that method will obscure rather than illuminate what is to be grasped. But perhaps enough has been said both to indicate that our descriptive philosophy of religion need not be wedded to any particular philosophical tradition and to distinguish it from more traditional discussions of the existence of God, the problem of evil, the verification criterion of meaning, and the evidentiary value of mystical experience, all of which focus attention on the truth question. Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional approach, I am consciously seeking to develop an alternative in which evaluation (determination of truth and value) is temporarily suspended in order that description and thereby understanding may progress the more freely.4

1B. What a descriptive philosophy of religion is not:
(b) explanation

There is a very important sense in which explanation is passed over, along with evaluation, for the sake of description. This dual self-denying ordinance is clearly expressed by van der Leeuw in his attempt to interpret the religious significance of art. "We do not intend to pursue causal relationships, but rather to search for comprehensible associations. Further, we do not intend to investigate the truth behind the appearance, but we shall try to understand the phenomena themselves in their simple existence."5

While van der Leeuw's second sentence concerns the distinction we have just been discussing between a descriptive philosophy of religion and the tradition rooted in the debate over natural theology, his first sentence indicates that the alternative is not a kind of scientific study of religion modeled on the experimental sciences. Those sciences have causal explanation rather than understanding as their goal, a statement which itself calls for some explanation if it is to be understood.

In ordinary usage we don't normally think of explanation and understanding as related to distinct intellectual goals. We often say that we didn't understand this or that until someone explained it to us, and then we understood it perfectly. This commonsense interchangeability of the two is reinforced in the experimental context (or is it the other way around—common sense having translated into everyday obviousness an inheritance from the scientific world view?) where it is taken for granted that we really understand this or that only when a good theoretical explanation has been given.
But there are at least two philosophical contexts, relevant for our purposes, in which a fairly sharp distinction between description and interpretation on the one hand and causal explanation on the other, has been made. One is the largely German debate after Dithey over the methodological uniqueness of the Geisteswissenschaften; the other is the largely Anglo-Saxon philosophy of action in the aftermath of Wittgenstein and Ryle. In both cases it has been argued that when it comes to human behavior or action as the expression of the meaningful lived experience of persons, our primary cognitive tools are quite different from those of the experimental sciences. To understand human action is to be able to describe and interpret it in terms of the agent’s motives, intentions, wishes, desires, purposes, goals, reasons, and so on. This is quite different from giving the kind of causal explanation implied in Hume’s famous and much imitated “attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects,” a method grounded in the observation of constant conjunctions.6

To put it in Jaspers’s words, the difference between understanding and explanation is that between meaningful connections (van der Lecu’s “comprehensible associations”) and causal connections. In this context Verstehen (understanding) becomes a technical term and it is trivially true that we do not “understand” the movements of planets or positrons.7

The theory of action makes much the same point by distinguishing action or behavior from movement (in Aristotelian terms, etergeia from kinesis). There is an important difference between “my hand rising above my head in the shape of a fist” and either “my making a gesture of political defiance” or “my signaling, as referee, that it is fourth down.” The first movement would be involved in either of the other two actions, though the movement might not involve any action at all. You might learn, for example, that my arm moves in that way at the onset of an epileptic seizure or whenever an electrical signal is sent to an electrode implanted in my brain. (Question—is my own interpretation also fallible?) We specify which action, if any, we take the movement to express, by identifying the intention of the agent. In doing so we describe the movement at a new level of richness and interpret it as a specific piece of behavior.8

But do we also explain behavior when we describe and interpret it in terms of its motives, intentions, and so forth? This is the point at which the German tradition makes its sharp and uncompromising distinction between understanding and explanation, saying that the kind of interpretation we’ve been discussing involves understanding
but not explanation. Within the philosophy of action two more flexible responses are to be found. One is to say that we explain, but not causally. The other is to say that we explain causally, but not in the strict, that is, experimental, sense of causal explanation.

Underlying this quarrel is a fundamental agreement. Even those who argue that (1) since we give the agent’s motives, intentions, and so forth, in answer to the question, Why did he raise his fist? we must be explaining, and (2) since we reply, Because he wanted to signal fourth down, we must be giving a causal explanation, are eager to preserve the distinction intended by the original, absolute dichotomy between understanding and explanation. For it is widely agreed that whatever we are doing when we say, He raised his fist because he wanted to signal fourth down, we are not giving the kind of causal explanation involved in the experimental sciences and associated with the names of Hume, Mill, and Hempel.

There are three essential features of this kind of causal explanation which are not involved in interpreting action in terms of its motives, intentions, and so forth. (1) In the experimental sense cause and effect must be contingently related to each other, which means that the two must be independently identifiable. The one may not be a necessary ingredient in the description of the other. But intentions are not, at least in many instances, logically independent of the actions in which they are ingredient, but are necessary conditions (conceptually, not experimentally) of those actions. Without the intention to signal fourth down, my fist’s rising over my head simply doesn’t count as the action of signaling fourth down. In this sense, motives can’t be causes nor interpretations causal explanations.

(2) Causal explanations are nomological-predictive. That is to say they involve reference to the kind of general or universal rules that have predictive force. I explain a particular occurrence by showing how it could have been predicted and I both use and test the law by which the explanation was made by making other predictions with its aid.

But to understand an action in terms of its motives or intentions is not to invoke a law or any other kind of prediction generating uniformity. We understand the meaningful connection between the referee’s intention and his behavior, though there is no law suggesting that whenever someone wants to signal fourth down he raises a fist (it used to be done by raising four fingers), or vice versa that whenever someone raises his fist his intention is to signal fourth down.

It might be replied that such laws are operative, though with lesser scope than those normally associated with science. If we limit the
context to referees in football games we can, with the help of a human convention (artificial law), reliably predict that whenever the referee wants to signal fourth down he will raise his fist and vice versa. In order, then, to see the force of the original point we should consider an example from outside the framework of conventionally rule-governed behavior.

Jaspers give us such an example. "When Nietzsche shows how an awareness of one’s weakness, wretchedness and suffering gives rise to moral demands and religions of redemption, because in this roundabout way the psyche can gratify its will to power in spite of its weakness, we experience the force of his argument and are convinced. It strikes us as something self-evident. . . . Such conviction . . . is not acquired inductively through repetition of experience."^9 What convinces us as being self-evident in this situation is not that altruistic and ascetic morality and redemptive religion always or with any statistical regularity arise from these roots. There need be no law here nor power of prediction for us to see that there is a meaningful connection between a certain admixture of actual weakness and the will to power on the one hand, and certain moral and religious behavior on the other. The one arises intelligibly out of the other. Even if we were persuaded that this was the proper interpretation of morality and religion only in the single case of the women in Nietzsche’s childhood home, his account would help us to understand what it meant for them to be religious. Such an “explanation” would not in the least depend on any predictive power in the “meaningful connection” we had “understood” in “understanding” these women. Just as there are for Weber “non-understandable uniformities,” the laws of physical nature, so for Jaspers there are understandable non-uniformities, universals or typical patterns, since they may well be applicable to many instances, which are nevertheless not lawlike and predictive in their function. They are more accurately described as possibilities than as laws. The philosophy of action takes account of just these differences when motive and intention talk is said either to be non- causally explanatory or causally explanatory but not in the strict sense.

(3) In the example just given Jaspers stresses that the means by which meaningful connections are grasped is not the inductive procedure of observed regularity. This is perhaps most obvious in cases where the motive or intention (“cause”) and the behavior we interpret or “explain” by it (“effect”) are not logically or conceptually distinct. But his own example involves motivations which are not so tightly bound to the behavior that Nietzsche seeks to understand in
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terms of them. The frustrations of impotence are not related to vindictive righteousness in the same way that the intention to signal fourth down is related to signaling fourth down. Yet I understand the possible link between impotence and certain moral and religious attitudes not because I have frequently observed them together, but because I too am human. I know something of the pain of powerlessness and can see how satisfaction might be found in certain forms of vengeance masquerading as piety. I can, if I am honest, recall such behavior on my own part, or, if not, I can imagine myself deriving satisfaction from acting in that way. Thus even if there is some observable regularity which could be inductively explored, that is not how I grasp the meaningfulness of a meaningful connection. This accounts for the fact that understanding is often contrasted with causal explanation in terms of the distinction “from within” and “from outside,” and why the concepts of understanding and sympathy are so often linked.10

We have seen that it is possible by linguistic fiat entirely to separate the understanding which comprehends through motives and intentions from all notions of causality and explanation. Such a decision, though not entirely arbitrary, is nevertheless awkward. For motives and intentions have efficacy. Because they bring it about, various actions occur. In that sense, they are forces, even causes, which explain behavior. But unlike the causal forces of experimental science they are forces with meaning, and it is their meaningfulness rather than their efficacy which concerns us.11 For we do not seek the technical control that nomological-predictive science provides. Nor are we interested in a behavior modification technique, that we might either produce and nourish or weaken and extinguish the religious life. We seek simply to understand what it is to be religious.

1C. What a descriptive philosophy of religion is: three models

It is time to become more affirmative. In distinguishing our project from evaluative and explanatory approaches to religion, we have focused on what it is not. This has given some indirect insight into what it is, but this needs to be made direct and explicit. The best way to find out what this or any other kind of philosophical reflection is is to do it. Methodological reflection can never replace experience. As with golfing and gardening, there is a big difference between reading or talking about how it is done and actually doing it. Since in this instance “doing it” will itself be a reflective activity and not a physical activity, one of the things that would count as “doing it”
would be the thoughtful reading of the remaining chapters of this book. Nothing said in this chapter about what a descriptive philosophy of religion is can replace the understanding that will arise from working through the materials themselves.

Yet either before or after working through the materials themselves, or perhaps both before and after, it is useful to attempt to say what is going on in an affirmative as well as in a negative way. Our goal is understanding, and it would be foolish to suggest that there is a method for understanding in the sense of rules or recipes to be followed. But we can notice several non-philosophical modes of activity which are sufficiently like our project to throw some light rather directly upon it.

The first thing to notice is that in laying aside the question of truth, which is by no means a matter of indifference, and in abstaining from the kind of explanation which gives the power to control, there is a distinct distancing of ourselves from the field of active involvement with religion. We do not judge, and therefore we do not defend or attack, build up or tear down the religious phenomena we consider. It is not because we have abandoned the public domain in order to live out our personal piety or secularity in undisturbed privacy. It is because we want to see the whole public and private world of religion as only a measure of detachment permits it to be seen.

The visual arts depend on such detached perception. Erwin Straus suggests that it is just the distancing feature of vision, made possible by the upright posture, which permits seeing to become beholding or contemplation and makes the visual arts possible. "The eye of man, emancipated from the bondage of catching, grabbing, and gobbling, can dwell on the things themselves. . . . In the attitude of composure we reach the visible and yet leave it as is. Distance is the condition of seeing the other in his uniqueness. . . . The distant opens itself to our gaze in contemplative regard, not in aggressive action. . . . The first great abstraction of suchness is achieved in the beholding gaze: the eidos [form] discerned from the hyle [matter]."12

Some such understanding of artistic vision inspired the work of Cezanne. As Herbert Read tells it, he wanted to see the world objectively "without any intervention either of the tidy mind or the untidy emotions. His immediate predecessors, the Impressionists, had seen the world subjectively—that is to say, as it presented itself to their senses in various lights, or from various points of view. . . . But Cezanne wished to exclude this shimmering and ambiguous surface of things and penetrate to the reality that did not change, that was
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present beneath the bright but deceptive picture presented by the kaleidoscope of the senses.”"13

This is that discrimination of eidos from hyle (Straus) which only disengaged contemplation makes possible. In our case it is not catching, grabbing, and gobbling that need to be checked, since religion isn’t edible. But our eagerness to judge, and therefore to defend or attack, build up or tear down, involves the intervention of both the "tidy mind" and the "untidy emotions." While our lives would be poor indeed without either of these, it might well be richer if we were able to step back from both in the attempt to see things afresh. We could perhaps do worse than take this conception of artistic vision as one model for understanding our project of understanding.

A second model comes directly from a philosopher involved in developing a descriptive philosophy of religion. Paul Ricoeur’s goal is “the interpretation of living experience,” specifically the confession of fault. He calls his work “a purely descriptive phenomenology that permits the believing soul to speak. The philosopher adopts provisionally the motivations and intentions of the believing soul. He does not ‘feel’ them in their first naïveté; he ‘re-feels’ them in a neutralized mode, in the mode of ‘as if’. It is in this sense that phenomenology is a re-enactment in sympathetic imagination.”’14

The model here is that of the actor. When a great actress plays Lady Macbeth, she interprets the latter’s experience by re-enacting it; and the success of her interpretation depends on her powers of sympathetic imagination. She gets inside the experience of her subject to such a degree that for a great performance it is as true to say that she becomes Lady Macbeth as it is to say that, of course, she doesn’t. The aspect of imagination, of as if, of re-enactment is never completely transcended. The spontaneity of the original experience (in our case the religious life) is never simply duplicated. Yet the great actress (re)feels the motivations and intentions of Lady Macbeth and (re)enacts her deeds and her consequent torment. In doing so, both she and her audience come to understand Lady Macbeth.

The idea that our philosophical task involves something of the creative skills of the painter and the actress may be at once exhilarating and intimidating. There are dangers in both responses. If we are over-exhilarated, we may form such a grandiose image of our task that anything short of Sophoclean or Shakespearean grandeur will seem insignificant; while if we are over-intimidated, we may become afraid to get involved at all. In either case, it will be helpful to notice that the artistic skills we find ourselves in need of are related to another skill which comes from everyday life, rare and extraor-
dinary as it is. This will be our third model, and we are led to it by Ricoeur's reminder that as we seek to employ the craft of the painter and the actress our goal is simply to "permit the believing soul to speak." What we need for this is the skill of the good listener.

If I am a good listener, I don't interrupt the other nor plan my own next speech while pretending to be listening; I try to hear what is said, but I listen just as hard for what is not said and for what is said between the lines. I am not in a hurry, for there is no pre-appointed destination for the conversation. There is no need to get there, for we are already here; and in this present I am able to be fully present to the one who speaks. The speaker is not an object to be categorized or manipulated, but a subject whose life situation is enough like my own that I can understand it in spite of the differences between us. If I am a good listener, what we have in common will seem more important than what we have in conflict.  

This does not mean that I never say anything, but I am more likely to ask questions than to issue manifestos or make accusations. All the same, some of the questions I ask will seem to the other to be hostile questions. They will be the kind of questions the prosecuting attorney asks on cross examination, but they will not be asked in a prosecuting manner. They will rather be asked as a confessor or therapist asks them. For the purpose is not to win the case but to free understanding from self-deception. Though the goal is to "permit the believing soul to speak," it does not follow that the believing soul is automatically taken at face value.  

1D. Whether this philosophical task is worth the effort

The ability to distinguish descriptive philosophy of religion from evaluative and explanatory approaches and to characterize it positively with the help of our painter, actor, and good listener models does not guarantee that the enterprise will seem worthwhile. Some tasks are not worth undertaking and some books are not worth reading. This may be one of them. So I hope that by this time you are asking yourself not just what it is I'm up to, but whether it will be worth your time and effort to accept the invitation to join me in asking what it means to be religious. You might, of course, read the book anyway, because it's been directly or indirectly assigned, or you've agreed to review it. But reading about the project in this book will be intrinsically valuable to you only if you find the project to be worth attempting yourself. Neither I nor anyone else can answer that question for you, but I can indicate why I have found this mode of
philosophical reflection to be unusually fruitful both personally and pedagogically.

The central point has to do with noticing what is too obvious to be seen, with finding the glasses we've been wearing, or discovering that all our lives we've been speaking prose. This is what Hegel had in mind when he wrote, "The familiar, just because it is familiar, is not really understood." Because he saw this to be a major concern of philosophy, he praised Bacon's empiricism, crude as it was, for having "entirely set aside and rejected the scholastic method of reasoning from remote abstractions and being blind to what lies before one's eyes." It is the possibility of this blindness which makes possible the following provocative definition of discovery: to see what everyone has always seen and to think what no one has yet thought.

In our own time Merleau-Ponty has challenged philosophy to define itself in just these terms. "True philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world." For this to occur "we must break with our familiar acceptance of it...." For his philosophical purposes "reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's basis... it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice."

The idea that philosophy consists in getting acquainted with the familiar is closely related to the earlier idea that philosophical method can consist in imitating the painter, the actress, and the good listener. For the skills of the painter, actor, and good listener consist in large part of noticing and making explicit what is there to be seen by all but is for the most part overlooked.

My own experience has been that the religious life provides a thoroughly convincing example of this wisdom. Surely a major reason why I've spent more time in philosophy of religion than in philosophy of science or of art is that I came to philosophy more familiar with religion than with science or art. But stopping to ask the simple question about something so familiar, What does it mean to be religious? has initiated a process of relearning to look at the world of religion. I haven't ceased to be religious nor changed my religion; and yet the process has been anything but conservative. For I see so many things so differently. At times discovery has been exhilarating; at other times personally painful. At the same time I've been able to see students of every conceivable religious and non-religious attitude discover how such a simple question can open up avenues of understanding previously shut off by the familiarity of the subject matter.

It is just this goal of noticing what is so often overlooked which calls for the bracketing of evaluation and explanation. For the habits
of mind which blind us to what is before our eyes (to give as good a definition of prejudice as any) are deeply rooted in the categories and purposes at work when we ask those kinds of questions.

Suppose, for example, we wish to explore the significance of myth for religious life. If we are scientists before we are artists we may get ourselves into trouble. Schelling warns of this in his own monumental study of mythology, noting that the desire to explain brings with it the temptation to “suppress, devalue, diminish, or truncate” our subject matter, thereby making explanation easier. “It is not a question what notion must be derived from the appearance in order that it may easily be explained by some philosophy or other; but on the contrary, what philosophy is required to grow to the same height as the object. We must not ask how the phenomenon must be turned, twisted, made one-sided, or stunted so that it may still be explained by principles that we once determined not to transcend; but rather, in what direction our own thought must expand itself in order to keep in touch with the phenomenon.”

One might summarize by saying that we will understand mythology only if we are good listeners.

The critical urge as well as the explanatory urge can be a source of blindness. The problem here is one of intellectual territoriality. The desire to justify to myself and to others the position I have adopted can easily get in the way of noticing what is there. Have you, for example, ever seen a good listener in a dormitory bull-session on religion?

Freud was especially sensitive to this problem in a related context. His therapeutic task was to get his patients to see what was going on in their own experience entirely unobserved. He found the critical faculty to be a major obstacle to close self-observation, for ideas which were in some way personally threatening were either not allowed to arise at all or were given such short shrift that their significance was not discovered. So he prescribed a deliberate suspension of evaluative attitudes which bears a striking resemblance to our own bracketing, particularly in its purposive and temporary character. “The self-observer on the other hand need only take the trouble to suppress his critical faculty . . . . In the state used for the analysis of dreams and pathological ideas, the patient purposely and deliberately abandons this [critical] activity and employs the psychical energy thus saved . . . in attentively following the involuntary thoughts which now emerge . . . ” In other words, self-knowledge arises only when the non-judgmental attitude of the therapist is paralleled in the patient as well.
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The underlying rationale for this procedure is obvious and by no means limited to the pathological dimensions of experience. We all have a strong tendency to see what we want to see and not to see what we wish weren't there. That being so we can only assume that the influence of desire upon perception is a major cause of our not noticing what is directly before our eyes. Putting our desires out of play should improve our vision. We do that not by pretending we don't have desires, but by asking the kind of questions they are less likely to influence.

This, then, is the shape of my own reply to the question whether a descriptive philosophy of religion is worthy of my time and effort. I value the enterprise because I value its single, basic goal, becoming acquainted with a familiar but not always very well understood possibility for my own life and for our life together. If I abstain from evaluation and explanation in the process this is not an end in itself but simply a means to that goal.

1E. Warnings

In undertaking this task I am flying in the face of warnings from three philosophers for whom I have the greatest respect, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Since Kierkegaard's objection can be treated most briefly we shall consider it first. He argues that while it is possible to understand what Christianity is without being a Christian, it is not similarly possible to understand what it is to be a Christian without being one.22 We can safely assume that he would generalize from this to the claim that we cannot understand what it means to be religious unless we are religious. That pinches. The invitation for you to join me in asking what it means to be religious assumes that whether or not you are already living the religious life in some form you already have some understanding of it and can broaden and deepen that understanding through a disciplined interpretation of the religious life as others have expressed it. The very notion of sympathetic imagination involves the claim that we can comprehend beyond the limits of our own experience. As Weber puts it, "One need not have been Caesar in order to understand Caesar."23

This disagreement with Kierkegaard is not total, however, and we would do well to heed his warning. There is a real difference between understanding the objective meaning of doctrinal propositions and understanding the subjective meaning of a life grounded in them.24 Objective understanding may be a necessary condition for subjective
understanding, but it is not a sufficient condition. When a bank president says, "I embezzled half a million dollars," we understand immediately what is said, though we may not comprehend nearly so well what the person who says it is going through. Or when a friend tells us her fiancé has been killed in an automobile accident, we know what has happened but may not realize very thoroughly what she is living through.

But though subjective understanding is clearly more difficult (and often more important) than objective understanding, it is clearly not impossible. We do not normally assume that we are cut off from the meaningful lived experiences of others unless we have experienced the same thing (an impossibility in any case). Just the opposite. Even if we’ve never been an executive, nor an embezzler, nor a bereaved lover, we can imagine ourselves in those situations and gain some idea of what such a person is going through, just as we can in some measure understand Lady Macbeth without having first to become adulterers and murderers.

The situations where this is not true are the exceptions rather than the rule, and we call attention to their unusual nature by saying, "I just can’t imagine what it would be like to be..." Even if there are cases where this is literally true, we would normally be speaking more accurately if we said, "I find it extraordinarily difficult to imagine what it would be like to be...

My own conclusion is that (1) we should learn from Kierkegaard not to confuse the relatively easy task of understanding objective meanings with the much more difficult goal we have given ourselves of understanding what it means to be religious, and (2) we should continue to assume that whether or not we are religious we can deepen our understanding of the religious life. Kierkegaard’s distinction is an important one, but it does not separate an impossible from a possible task.

Nietzsche’s objection is perhaps more formidable. Aware of the power of unconscious motives and of our endless capacity for bad faith and self-deception, he asks whether it is sufficient to “let the believing soul speak,” to search out that motive “which seems to the actor himself the meaningful ground of his behavior,” or to interpret behavior “under its intentional description for the agent.” Do not such phrases define a philosophy of consciousness which dogmatically affirms with Descartes the mind’s transparency to itself?

Like the prophet Jeremiah, Nietzsche knows that “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt,” and he wonders out loud whether we can ever really understand ourselves. “But how
do we recognize ourselves? How can man know himself? He is a dark and hidden thing; whereas the hare is said to have seven skins, man can take off seven times seventy skins and still not be able to say: 'That is you as you really are, that is no longer mere external appearance.' Besides, it is a painful and dangerous undertaking to dig down into oneself in this way to descend violently and directly into the core of one's being.'

It follows for Nietzsche that the philosopher in search of self-knowledge "has a duty to suspicion today, to squint maliciously out of every abyss of suspicion." To be sure we don't miss the point, he spells out this suspicion in detail. "... we immoralists have the suspicion that the decisive value of an action lies precisely in what is unintentional in it, while everything that is intention, everything about it that can be seen, known, 'conscious' still belongs to its surface and skin—which, like every skin, betrays something but conceals even more. In short, we believe that the intention is merely a sign and a symptom that still requires interpretation—moreover, a sign that means too much and therefore, taken by itself alone, almost nothing."

Nietzsche's suspicion about intentions can take a weak or a strong form, corresponding to two quite different meanings we can give to the question, Why are they doing that? In one case the question is equivalent to, What are they doing? We see movement that we cannot understand as meaningful behavior and use either question to request that the action be identified. But suppose the answer is that they are doing a tribal rain dance and that we already know this when we ask, Why are they doing that? We wonder whether they are trying to make it rain or to impress some talent scouts or to discover the aerobic value of such dancing. In this case our Why question is not equivalent to the What question. We are not inquiring about the intention which makes the action the action it is, but about a contingently related motive which leads to the performance of that action.

In its weaker version, Nietzschean suspicion suggests that we cannot simply let the believing souls speak, because while they may well know what they are doing, they don't always know why. Hidden motives may well be at work. The stronger version would be that they don't even know what they are doing. This wouldn't mean that they couldn't answer questions about what they are doing, but rather that because of the influence of unnoticed motives, these answers might very well be wrong. The believer might say, I am worshipping God, while the suspicious critic might conclude, No, you are only seeking
the approval of your peers, or No, you're not expressing your love of God but only your fear.

It seems to be the stronger thesis which leads Scheler to write that "men may be firmly convinced with their conscious judgment that they profess the Christian idea of God. . . . But at the same time, as to the actual form of their Weltanschauung, they may be ruled by a totally different idea of God. For the structure of the natural religious consciousness can only include God's love . . . if men live with a sense that love is what leads, governs, prevails in their midst—not if completely different things (power, economic expansion, etc.), are so 'felt'. Therefore not the slightest inference as to a community's true natural beliefs may be drawn from the fact that its intellectuals (philosophers, theologians) teach in schools the Christian concept of God and reject in theory, say, Nietzsche's doctrine of power.'"27

In replying to Nietzsche two important facts need to be noted. First, the idea that behavior often arises from motives and intentions not noticed by the agent is not the special thesis of a particular philosophical school. One need not be a Freudian or a Nietzschean to talk about unconscious motives and self-deception. The idea has more nearly the status of a self-evident commonplace in the discussion of human action. It is, for example, casually assumed in the Verstehen tradition, in the philosophy of action, and in phenomenology, even where the special theories of Freud and Nietzsche about the nature of unconscious motives are not accepted.

Second, suspicion of religion based on this idea does not arise only from the anti-religious. Ricoeur, it is true, adds the name of Marx to those of Nietzsche and Freud and calls them the "school of suspicion," a group conspicuously hostile to religion.28 But he might well have included Kierkegaard, and there are few more passionately believing souls. Kierkegaard writes that for true piety "seriousness consists precisely in having this honest suspicion of thyself, treating thyself as a suspicious character, as a capitalist treats an insolvent person . . . ." Many of his writings are best understood in the light of this statement.29 Similarly, we have already seen the suspicion of Scheler, who is as friendly to religion in On the Eternal in Man as Nietzsche is hostile; and we have already compared Nietzsche to Jeremiah, which should remind us that the Hebrew prophets, like Jesus in their tradition, were highly suspicious of much of the religion surrounding them.30 Whether Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud really added much to their discoveries is a question without an immediately obvious answer.
The Art of Understanding

So the question posed by Nietzsche is not (1) whether behavior has unconscious motives or (2) whether we must seek to downplay this factor of religious life if we are to remain free from prejudice against religion. We have not committed ourselves to the transparency of consciousness to itself. On the contrary, we have questioned whether the agent’s interpretation of his behavior is infallible and have implied that it is not, by allowing the good listener to cross-examine the believing soul, whose speech is not automatically to be taken at face value. We are prepared for the idea that the full meaning of the religious life can be grasped only through understanding believing souls better than they understand themselves.

Our problem arises at another point. Whether in the hands of ardent prophets or militant atheists, suspicion has typically been used for evaluative rather than descriptive purposes. Prophets use it to discredit the religious lives of those whose religion they take to be inauthentic, and atheists seek to go a step further and discredit the beliefs as well as the believers. In doing so, they open themselves to the question whether they are guilty of the genetic fallacy, but that won’t be our problem, since we are not seeking to evaluate at either level. What we need to know is whether suspicion can be incorporated into a descriptive philosophy of religion. Can the believer be cross-examined as well as allowed to speak, while the goal still remains simply to understand the religious life?

At this point Peter Berger’s idea of “methodological atheism” will be helpful to us. He seeks to bring the insights of a functionalist sociology to bear on religion, while at the same time carefully bracketing all truth questions. The sociological glasses through which he looks at religion are clearly not those of the believer. They reveal religion to be “an immense projection of human meanings into the empty vastness of the universe.” This notion of projection, which Berger relates to the school of suspicion and behind them to Feuerbach, has been the basic tool of much modern atheism. For if it tells the whole story about religion, religion would be a human invention and not a discovery or a response. We would have created God in our own image rather than vice versa.

But Berger insists that while it is undeniable that the religious affirmation of meaning is a human act, it is just not an empirical question whether this act is an invention or a discovery, illusory or revelatory. In describing religion as a projection the sociologist highlights its observable characteristic of being a human act. But it would be presumptuous for the sociologist as empirical observer to assume either that this human act is nothing but a human act or that it is
something much more. Correspondingly "rigorous brackets have to be placed around the question as to whether these projections may not also be something else than that (or, more accurately, refer to something else than the human world in which they empirically originate). In other words, every inquiry into religious matters that limits itself to the empirically available must necessarily be based on a 'methodological atheism.' """

Though our philosophy of religion does not seek to be "empirical" in Berger's sense, our interest in remaining descriptive places us under similar restraints. We might well view our letting the believing soul speak as methodological theism, since we are not committed to taking what is said at face value on either the question of meaning or truth, just as our cross-examination of the believing soul is methodological atheism, since we are no more committed to the thesis that self-deception is the basic fact about the religious life.

This incorporation of suspicion into our methodology is an acknowledgment that Nietzsche's critique is not simply to be repudiated, any more than Kierkegaard's. But we will incorporate it in our own way, much as Ricoeur seeks to incorporate Freudian suspicion into a phenomenological interpretation of religion. "My working hypothesis," he writes, "... is that psychoanalysis is necessarily iconoclastic, regardless of the faith or non-faith of the psychoanalyst, and that this 'destruction' of religion can be the counterpart of a faith purified of all idolatry. Psychoanalysis as such cannot go beyond the necessity of iconoclasm. This necessity is open to a double necessity, that of faith and that of non-faith, but the decision about these two possibilities does not rest with psychoanalysis ... The question remains open for every man whether the destruction of idols is without remainder; this question no longer falls within the competency of psychoanalysis."^33

Needless to say, the descriptive philosopher of religion is no more in a position to answer this question than the sociologist or psychoanalyst. This may generate a measure of anxiety in the believer and unbeliever alike. Both are asked to enter into a conversation devoid of the assuring assumption that their own stances are justified.

We come now to Hegel's warning. Like the "third wave" in Plato's Republic this difficulty may be the most challenging of all. If, as Keith Campbell suggests, the move from questions of truth to questions of meaning defines "philosophy's new bad image," can a descriptive philosophy of religion be more than just another instance of contemporary philosophy's lapse into "pedantic triviality?"^34 Worse yet, does not the bracketing of truth questions involve a posture of timid
detachment and fastidious objectivity so distant from religious attitudes themselves as to constitute a prejudice against them, even if, mirabile dictu, we come to understand the religious life in the process?

This, I believe, is the heart of the question Hegel raises in the aftermath of Hume and Kant, whose assault on the proofs of God's existence provided, as we have briefly noted, the historical setting in which our own project originally had its roots. He finds that assault to have generated the assumption that "we do not know God," an assumption which "permits us to speak merely of our relation to him, to speak of religion and not of God Himself. It does not permit a theology, a doctrine of God, though it certainly does allow a doctrine of religion. . . . We at least hear much talk . . . about religion, and therefore all the less about God Himself." This complaint from just two years before Hegel's death echoes one from an early essay. "Since the firm standpoint which the almighty age and its culture have fixed for philosophy is one of reason dependent upon sensibility, it follows that such philosophy can proceed to knowing, not God, but what one calls Man."**

What Hegel has in mind is the move from what Kant called "transcendent metaphysics" to "immanent metaphysics," from religious-philosophical affirmation to the description of human experience. In the context of an empiricist repudiation of metaphysics it is clear that what bothers Hegel is not primarily the re-direction of attention from God to man and his religion, as if he thought the two must be forever kept separate; it is rather the attitude which underlies this re-direction. Just as Hume wanted "to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects," so Kant wanted to find the royal road to metaphysics as a science. In other words, it seems to be the desire for the detached objectivity of the natural sciences which motivates the move to the descriptive, and Hegel suspects that the result is an attitude alien to the true aims of both religion and philosophy. Might not that pursuit of objectivity which limits itself to the phenomenal, observable, perhaps even to the testable domain be a fear of error which turns out to be a fear of truth?** Is not a descriptive philosophy of religion methodologically prejudiced against its subject matter, just as much in its methodological theism as in its methodological atheism?

To be methodologically prejudiced against a subject matter is to be committed by one's method to an approach so alien to the subject matter as to preclude the possibility of any deep understanding. To study love with a microscope or electrons with the tools of a literary
critic is to be methodologically prejudiced against one’s subject matter.

This problem comes sharply to light in one of the classics in the descriptive philosophy of religion. In the opening paragraph of Religion in Essence and Manifestation, Gerardus van der Leeuw writes, “That which those sciences concerned with Religion regard as the Object of Religion is, for Religion itself, the active and primary Agent in the situation or, in this sense of the term, the Subject. In other words, the religious man perceives that with which his religion deals as primal, as originative or causal; and only to reflective thought does this become the Object of the experience that is contemplated. For Religion, then, God is the active Agent in relation to man, while the sciences in question can concern themselves only with the activity of man in his relation to God; of the acts of God himself they can give no account whatever.”

This stark antithesis of agent and spectator perspectives on religion enables us to see that on this point at least there is important agreement between Hegel and the nineteenth-century existentialists. For Kierkegaard and Nietzsche can gladly join in and even push the point a step further. Both would agree with Antonin Artaud when he says, “If our life lacks brimstone, i.e., a constant magic, it is because we choose to observe our acts and lose ourselves in considerations of their imagined form instead of being impelled by their force.”

One would have to be intrepid to the point of foolhardiness simply to dismiss this danger of methodological prejudice. Even more than the previous warnings this one has too much substance to be ignored. We are in danger of being put out of business at the start by becoming persuaded of the incoherence of our project. There is, I believe, only one way to avoid this result. That is to establish that the stance of detachment and disengagement which defines the descriptive attitude is not motivated by the desire to be rigorously scientific, but rather by a passion for self-understanding that is itself neither detached nor disengaged. There are two ways of practicing the Platonic dialectic which finds the world too much with us and withdraws from the gallimaufry of the cave. There is the Socratic way arising from a deep, inner need which supersedes the rights of business as usual, and there is the Aristotelian practice which turns into a luxury of the leisure class. Our own transcendence of the cave, our stepping back from the immediacy of everyday involvements must take Socrates and not Aristotle as its mentor.

In our own time it is Merleau-Ponty who has perhaps expressed this best. Against Husserl’s ideal of a descriptive philosophy which
would be a rigorous science he presents the alternative of an existential phenomenology in which the phenomenological or descriptive component is not an end in itself but is in the service of existential, personal needs. As in our use of the painter model, Merleau-Ponty notices the role of theoría or contemplation in the detachment of essence or possibility from existence or fact (cf. Strauss in 1C. above). But he places that entire process in its larger context, which is not the pursuit of scientific security. "That means that we cannot subject our perception of the world to philosophical scrutiny without ceasing to be identified with that act of positing the world, with that interest in it which delimits us, without drawing aback from our commitment which is itself thus made to appear as a spectacle, without passing from the fact of our existence to its nature, from the Dasein to the Wesen. But it is clear that the essence is here not the end, but a means, that our effective involvement in the world is precisely what has to be understood and made amenable to conceptualization, for it is what polarizes all our conceptual particularizations. The need to proceed by way of essences does not mean that philosophy takes them as its object, but on the contrary, that our existence is too tightly held in the world to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement, and that it requires the field of ideality in order to become acquainted with and to prevail over its facticity."

This brings us back to our earlier theme of self-knowledge through becoming acquainted with the familiar. The familiarity of this theme by now must not hide from us, however, the doubly radical way in which Merleau-Ponty develops it. First, it is not merely our beliefs and assertions about the world which are to be subjected to philosophical scrutiny; it is our perception of the world, the way we see and feel it. We have already learned, especially from Scheler, that we must dig beneath the level of theory and creed to the experience which these express and sometimes disguise. Second, this deep digging pursuit of self-understanding does not arise from purely theoretical motives, nor does it arise out of idle curiosity. We seek to understand our effective involvement in the world, not to fill the storehouse of knowledge, but in order to prevail over the facticity of our existence, to preside over our lives. Freud once wrote, "We are lived by unknown and uncontrollable forces." Knowing how true this is so much of the time, Merleau-Ponty points us to philosophical reflection in the descriptive mode as an active struggle against that kind of inert living. In doing so he leads us back to the perennial source of the best philosophical inspiration, to Socrates.