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Faith: A Critical Review--What is Left at the End of the Day

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*Faith: a critical
review--what is left at
the end of the day*

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In what follows I will try to set out some of my own rethinking-- fundamental things I believe and believe in -- enduring terms of engagement about the universe, life, death, faith -- in a concern to sort out what we have left at the end of the day.

Thinking back on the earliest moorings of my own spiritual awakening (I would not have used this language at the time) I was maybe four or five, sleeping outside on the second-floor porch at my grandfather's house. There was no roof for the porch, and I would fall asleep looking into a star-filled night sky. I lived several years with my mother's parents; I loved my grandfather above all others in my life. He was an agricultural research engineer, but had an interest in everything, and had a gift for making things exciting and clear for his only grandson. He spent endless hours talking with me about things, as he would say, that mattered. Not that I would understand all that he said, but his way of informal instruction always brought a sense of caring and deep conviction. Our talks--or rather, his patient talk and my mostly attentive listening, had no special focus and covered a wide range of ordinary everyday topics about right and wrong, about love and friendship and family, but most of all about the inexhaustible excitement of learning; learning about the world, about science, about art and music, culture and religion. He had explained to me once about space, about the enormous universe that we can look into in the night sky. I remember him talking about how, looking into the deep space of the night sky, we were gazing into and through *time* as well, and I gradually came to see the night-world in a different way. It had always been a beautiful thing, but more and more the surface beauty transformed into wonder and awe. He said the obvious: that God had created the universe, the world and everything in it, and even so, God cared about human beings, that he cared about me and that if I ever felt lost or alone to remember this, to look into the night sky and know that I too was a part of this vast creation. Tendered with love, I believed and remembered every word he said. As children will, I had no trouble there are you want 33 in another 10 minutes and minutes try to get through this reconciling the vast creation of the universe by God, knowing at the same time He cared and watched over my life.

-- A long way, 70 years later, from there to here, a lot lost along the way, but somehow the awe and wonder from those early years is still with me. That is a *given* in my life, and a sure source of reassurance when the peopled world is too much with me

Setting aside, then, the usual suspects of organized religion and a list of what I no longer believe, my own thinking starts and ends with the wonder of it all: ***that the world is... at all / that life is... at all / that lives are progressive individually and collectively manifest*** in such an astounding variety that it is as if the whole of our language becomes a resource for talking about

God. But *the mystical / mystery* is at the heart of it. “It” here, is the project of understanding our deepest needs and insistent questions of human experience. It is in this context that inquiry and investigation are transformed into a journey of mind and spirit. It is in this context also that Kierkegaard remarked that the truth of a belief must be measured by what one becomes, *believing in it*.

Lots of questions surround this mystery-become-puzzle (i.e. shifting the context of fundamental belief (faith) to that of rational inquiry) such, for example, the grammatical contrast of meaning between “knowing *that...* / believing *that...* / in further contrast to *believing in...* And to notice, e.g., that there is no parallel grammar of “*knowing in...*” --only ‘knowing *that..*’ It is perhaps a trivial matter of analytical conceit to seek insight into the deep grammar of our lives reflected in speech and language, but such comparison and contrasts can generate powerful insights leading to further questions regarding the limiting structure and reach of the human mind.

II

There are many sources and resources that are open to us, talking about fundamental beliefs. One such text and tradition is the teachings of Jesus in the “Scriptures” and for me this is the positive and vital point of retaining any religious tradition— his teaching, understood as standing alone/ apart from the history of institutionalized church in Christianity. Joe remarks in his text that it is no great matter for him whether Jesus was/ is divine. I suppose this means whether he is the Christ, the chosen of God (?) The question for me, parsing this out, is how we are to regard Jesus as a *holy* person , how we are to regard his teachings as *sacred*? That is something I do believe, independent of the question whether indeed he is God (divine), or is any other relative of God’s (putting it this way in bald terms, suggests the absurd (?)) My own faith is not the result of any effort of logic; “the sacred” is a matter of decision and commitment, not discovery. Another way of putting this is that, for me, the life and teaching of Jesus is a paradigm of the sacred. There is, in my thinking, sufficient evidence to believe that the passion and truth of his teaching are embodied in his life. Compare the teaching and life of Socrates: once again it was his life, and the testimony of people who knew him that brings spiritual energy to his words as a *moral* paradigm, especially as Plato records and bears witness to them in the *Dialogues*. Neither Socrates nor Jesus ever wrote a word; their lives and their thoughts are framed within an oral

tradition that I think is essential in retaining, in the case of Jesus certainly, a sense of the mystical of which I spoke above.

As for other beliefs related to matters of the spirit I'm quite sure I no longer believe, if I once did, in the Christian "salvation" from *death(?)* story--certainly not on an individual basis, and certainly not dependent on the status or substance of my *moral* life. I suppose the larger issue for me: it is clear that God, conceived as creator of the universe, is *pro-life*, not *pro-good* (*this* is the prime "symbol" of consequence here/ not as a symbol of yearning for security, as Spong would have it focusing on the 'promise of salvation.' Once we focus on *this* "symbol"---the creation and perpetuation of life—as the domain of the mystical (: **that life is, not how it is**) the latter remains only as the principal domain of *moral* life.) Whether or not the spiritual and the moral converge is once again a decision and commitment of the individual. *Moral* life surely can and does proceed without a spiritual undergirding. However, without the awe of the mystery of life itself, then *moral* life, however worthy a task, remains just that --a task, one we owe to each other as communal (human) beings. A *spiritual* commitment of the individual to *moral* life connects it to the life force itself, which in the plainest of terms, is the name of God. If there is any reason to believe in an "afterlife", we should probably give up the notion of salvation (the salvaging of my individual inconsequential life) in the larger scheme of things and focus on the blessing and continuation of life itself—it seems to me that this is the *only* assurance we get from God. If God has anything to say about the good is this: *all life is good*

What are other things I believe *in*...? What beliefs have become embedded in my life, appropriated in the course of my living in the world with others and, as Heidegger would add, toward death? Obvious things of course: for example I believe in the (spiritual) goodness (sanctity)of life; in a different sense of 'believing in', I believe in the (moral) goodness of human beings, that is, in a commitment to search always in the hope of a manifest goodness in every person I meet. I believe in the power of the human intellect, in the exercise of reason within the limits of reasonable judgment in the communal affairs of human beings. I believe in the power of the human spirit, in love, in decency, in honor...the list, if not infinite, would be very long indeed... But these beliefs all fall, in my view, within the following categories that structure the grammar of our shared experience of the world. I've written at length several essays on the categories that compel common human interests, viz. **the true, the good, the beautiful, and the**

sacred. I have, incidentally, argued against the modern reduction of all values to **the useful**. It would be a summary statement of my spiritual ‘beliefs in’ to say that I believe in the imperative of truth /in the promise of the good/ in the privilege of the beautiful/ and in the depth of the sacred. Platonic stuff, here, replete with generic gaps; even so, it may be instructive toward the context within which we commonly frame our beliefs and our commitments. I believe finally that our language, our common language, the ordinary language that frames the story of our lives, is sufficient to clarify the worth of our beliefs. And that question of worth is, I believe, the most we can expect of ourselves-- what we have become/ living the multiplicity of our beliefs.

--continuing concerns about an intelligible understanding of belief and ...faith -- what remains/ at the end of the day...

III

Faith is not one thing—it is rather at any given moment, individually and collectively, the continuing field of our life, our continuous and continually changing lives. For our purposes here, reflecting back--it occurs to me that paradigm shifts in faith change with the seasons of our lives. As a child, faith in God was concurrent and continuous with my faith in life; this is not something anyone learns or adopts, but what came naturally to me, nor was it something I thought about. Everyone in my immediate life, I came to understand, was Christian, and my continuing experience of life was framed one way or another by the contextual language of Christianity that I assimilated growing up. It certainly was no way critical or for that matter conscious. In short, I became a Christian without knowing that I was one, or that I was in the process of developing a prism through which to view my life in community. / I hatched as we all do, from that early cocoon of innocence and comfort, growing gradually into diverse fields of interests and conflicting views of world and life. Adolescence and the death of childhood brought a torrent of feelings difficult to identify. I can remember feeling the disorientation and longing for some perspective that would make sense of my feelings, a longing for something that would replace the innocence and assurance of childhood. Thinking back this was a period in which I sought a groundwork in religion. It seems to me now that it came about naturally, but I’m sure there were specific nudges from family, friends and teachers which moved me in that direction— particularly from my grandfather, a devout non-practicing Christian, who was always, and remains still a calm voice of assurance amid the confusions of my life. But I also

recall long conversations with peers struggling with our common confusions about life that brought a new sense of depth and wonder to everything. Somewhere along the way I fell into identifying myself as Catholic and the church became important to me. The church had been a gathering point for family but also and always an asylum for me away from the tensions and worrisome conflicts within my family. Stories of the life of Jesus were always more important to me than the rituals of the Eucharist. Well, not always: not just the beauty of this ritual but the fact that his is it has occurred every day for the last 2000 years is itself a wonder. What seemed at the time endless agonies over one or another relationship always brought me back seeking the compassion of Jesus-- who became in my life a well of human understanding and healing; a spiritual touchstone that I could draw on at any moment. Even as I write these words a song comes to me unbidden "...be not afraid for I am with thee always..." The death of my grandfather left me at a loss that only my imagined but somehow acute relationship with the person of Jesus could replace.

A further shift in my field of spiritual awareness came from literature -- secular literature, poetry and novels which nonetheless carried spiritual depth. The great classical literature, the tragic dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, and most of all an introduction to the character and life of Socrates, whose voice along with that of Jesus grounded my sense of truth and worth. The continuance and renewal of tragic drama in Shakespeare- the poetry of Milton, Donne, Goethe, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Hopkins... the novels of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky... I could relate endless stories of the influence of all these writers on my spiritual life, but the strongest comes to mind, as prying me out of adolescence (that second stage and kind of innocence in the strong pull of Ideals) in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, a novel I have read many times, and have taught in university philosophy courses. At the time of its impact on my early life, I struggled with my own identity in relationship with each of the three major characters: **Alyosha**, the innocent novice monk -- the attraction here was strong enough that I seriously considered entering the novitiate at Loyola /, **Dimitri** the passionate, impulsive sensualist -- this identity conflict emerged in the testosterone flush of youth/ and the third brother **Ivan**, the enigmatic, coldly rational skeptic. It was this last identity which I fell into and later consolidated into the persona of my adult personal and professional life. It occurred to me at the time and I guess it still does that these three identities probably mark the passing of many persons from the innocence of childhood through the raging

intensity of hormones, giving way finally to the distanced reflection and irony of adulthood
This in any event marks the course of my life to a continuing present stage in which irony seems
often the closest we get to truth

Dostoyevsky's point in drawing out each of these kinds of character that identify the brothers, is that each of us carries within us the conflicting possibilities of innocence, of passion, and rational skepticism. I have found throughout my life a varying identification with each of these characters, and collectively they seem to represent the dimensions of spiritual or religious life. / Finally, in the stage of development of my professional life as a teacher of philosophy, I have been led to a systematic focus on varying and conflicting theories, on reality, nature and truth, on morality and beauty, on knowledge and belief, on theories of thought and feeling, on ideas and ideals, on all those things consequential in the life and minds and hearts of human beings...and to conflicting perspectives on the meaning of life itself. All of these constitute an attempt to bring a determined rational order to the disorder and hodgepodge opinions and beliefs that constitute the human project of understanding. But for all these reductive ambitions it remains simply that: rational inquiry. It is not a surprise I think, to counter such rational obsession with Pascal's reminder that the heart has reasons that reason cannot know. Does this in turn imply a regression to the innocence of the child? Would, sometimes, that it were so: but ...having writ, moves on, nor all thy piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all thy tears wash out a word of it. We are individually and collectively what we have made ourselves, what we have become, and so we blunder on. I am here reminded of Nietzsche's remarks about the metamorphosis of the spirit: first it must become a **Camel**, for the spirit must gather and carry the burden of all the assimilated knowledge of the world/ then the spirit must become a **Lion**, to claim and proclaim its own judgment and domain of knowledge/ and finally the spirit must become a **Child**, the most powerful form of the spirit, for with the child everything is possible. The cycle needs completing. One can, and presumably many do remain beasts of burden; one can and people do, remain fiercely tethered to a limited claim of ownership of knowledge; one can and perhaps some do attain to a final transformation, to a freedom of spirit in which the only limits are those of creative imagination. There have been times in my life in which I thought to have completed the cycle but then again and again I find myself back trudging – trying again to find the magic missing piece to complete the puzzle. I take heart in the importance sometimes for letting the impulse to certainty go, for not settling with the probable, and to set my soul free

to embrace possibility. The scriptural expression for this is that *with God all things are possible*. Nothing surprising here surely – – whether with Kant or Kierkegaard our minds and our language come finally up against their own limits and things like infinity/ impossibility/ eternity... are just signposts to God; meanwhile our spiritual calling is to exhaust the limits of the possible

IV

Celtic Twilight

‘Cast a cold eye...’

Something seductive about church doors,
At least or maybe most, for a lapsed Catholic.
Also something forbidding, foreboding
As if secret mutterings among white-collared keepers
Behind an altar rail were about me after all.
Something serious about these doors
Not unlike the door to the confessional,
The repentance kiosk
Where young children and old women queue,
Least likely suspects in a world foul with things to repent.
Regret fuels decades of guilt
But I cannot bring myself to once again cross that threshold
Into incense scented malignancies
That disfigured too many childhoods.
Good men surely among cloth people

No less than lay people:

Feed the hungry, clothe the naked...

Fulfill other of the rules of charity

But these, recall, are simple and ordinary courtesies

Apart and before any sanction of vestment.

These shuttered doors will never suffer closure,

Will open each new day of these two thousand years

To welcome the lonely and hungry and faithful

Who, in the quiet space of private or public life

Have no distance from pain, or guilt or confusion.

Make no mistake; there is a terrible isolation in this world,

A felt need to hear in hard times that anyone knows or cares,

Some assurance that one is not alone.

A childhood friend, a priest of many years

Tells me that in the inner-city church people cry a lot.

Not cry out, just cry; that he feels inadequate to the task

Of saying anything truthful, any words of how it will be all right

Now or ever—find words in any prayer

That will amend the cruelty of poverty, pain and indifference.

Incense and candles still burn behind these doors,

Light filters bleak acceptance through stained windows,

But sanctuary and asylum

Having long lost any promise of protection

Frayed and severed from their proffered threads of hope.

I remember as if still in that dark place

The black robed God

Thundering his admonition to a trembling child:

‘Do you fear the loss of your immortal soul?!’

It wasn’t God of course, but his priest

I was later assured by a nun,

Who was, however, vicar of the Crucified Christ:

‘Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us

Now and at the hour of death...’

What did we know of death?

Only images of darkness and loss...

Much later still, reading the Greeks

Of tragedy eliciting terror and pity,

I understood well enough

The terror, the raw feel of it,

The shuddering threat of it

Still under the appalling apparition and wrath

Of those black robed specters of childhood’s imagination.

So I pass by these secreting doors now

Not without pause or regret at some forgotten loss,

Some lost hope of redemption from... I know not what.

A long time now, over seventy years,

But among the facts of time and life

The *mysterium* of that dark side

Haunts memory still.

I know by now Yeats' codicil and cryptic counsel:

'Horseman pass by...'

But... I wonder *.

*---And *wonder* is the final word, as should be clear from the first three parts of this narrative.

Reading this poem now after years away from it, it seems a dour remembrance, far outside the pale of my total experience at that time. More like I was drawn into the plight—indeed the lifelong agony--of children who cry in the playtime of others. The bitter response of my text must have been in response to the horror at the abuse of children by priests, more than my own remembrance of such. But in fact, looking in from the outside is never a reliable means of getting at the truth of anything. I believe this is the same case with the *Credo* and of my continuing worship at the altar at Mass. Within the context of worship, and taken as a whole, I believe every word.

Outside that context, when one brings critical analysis to bear on the language of the Mass (within which the analytical language has no ground), it is another thing entirely.

Op-----

V

“Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem caeli et terrae...”

-- The echoes of childhood are still alive in reciting this and in the echo of remembrance; moreover the assurance and the devotion I felt at the celebration of the mass (-- the

experience was unreflective/ we learned to lean on our missals struggling to get it right and learn it, and that was the end of it.)

I was away from the church for fairly long period of time; when I came back the Latin liturgy had been translated into English and I remember once again memorizing the English of the *Credo* without giving it much thought while celebrating mass in community of the faithful, intoning the *Credo* with everyone else. As long as I was in church at mass/ and this holds true still/ there are no critical skills engaged-- or indeed, appropriate.

By this time with life and education I had experienced the strong critical and analytic influences that have since guided my understanding and use of language (and life.). But an important codicil to this is my deep philosophical conviction that all meaning in language *is context dependent*. That the language of science is a different language than that of religion and that of history and art and indeed the multiplicity of languages that constitute our culture. But more importantly the context and language of worship is apart from and independent of the analytics of argument whether scientific, historical, philosophical...

So the present exercise puts the context and language of worship aside, it's intent is to bring the language of logical analysis to bear on the text of the *Credo* as it stands outside the context of worship:

NICENE CREED

Professed at Sunday Mass: “*We* believe in one God...”

So recited, a community is assumed, so this still carries (for me at least) a sense of worship, hereafter excluded.

Analysis:

I believe in one God the Father, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.

I do believe (this is the mystical, but no faith involved) that God created the universe, that he (it) is the force through which everything flows.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father: God from God,

I do believe that Jesus was a holy person and that his teaching carries the weight of the sacred, that is, scriptural.

Light from Light, true God from true God; begotten not made, one in being with the Father.

I do believe that Jesus embodies the light which brings faith to people in a community of worship.

Through Him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven.

I do not believe that there is another creator than God, nor that Jesus came down from heaven for anyone's salvation. (Hence, again, outside the context of worship

I have no belief in "the Trinity": hence no *Christianity*)

By the power of the Holy Spirit He was born of the Virgin Mary and became man.

I do believe Jesus had the power of the Holy Spirit within him. I do not believe he was born of a virgin becoming a man. He was a man simply, albeit holy.

For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered, died, and was buried.

I believe none of this prefaced by "For our sake...". Indeed, the whole of the rest of what follows may be rescinded to the domain (and context) of faith, not belief (i.e. belief as subject to analysis.)

On the third day He rose again, in fulfillment of the Scriptures.

No belief here-- see op cit.

He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

No belief here-- see op cit.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.

No belief here-- see op cit.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Again, I do believe all things flow from the creator including the spirit which was manifest in Jesus and is alive in the hearts of men

He has spoken through the prophets.

Only in the sense that Jesus cited the Scriptures of his Hebrew faith.

With the Father and the Son He is worshipped and glorified.

This is descriptively true of course, of Christians in the context of their worship. I have explained above that is a context I am enjoined only within a community of worship

I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

I do *not* believe in the description ‘one’ or ‘apostolic’ I do consider the community of the church to embody a sense of the sacred.

I acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

No belief here-- see op cit.

I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

No belief here-- see op cit.

Amen.

"so be it" : This confirmation, on closure, is grounded in the context of worship only. So here, confirmation is moot.

VI

The Beatitudes

This is the core text in the teaching of Jesus; a text I have always regarded as sacred (whatever that means of course, and that is what I'm trying to work out.)

In what follows I will once again assume the distinction between the context of worship and the context of analysis; our interest here is strictly analytical.

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the land.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the clean in heart,
for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

ANALYSIS:

I

Belief with respect to the Beatitudes depends on, and should focus on:

1. how one is to understand "blessing," Which I will understand as "a state of grace" (the circle of this definition, as in all others of complex meaning) comprehends many things, most of all peace with and within oneself.

2. what ‘poverty in spirit’ means == sense of an incomplete or unsatisfied spirit which then entails a search for wholeness in spiritual life.

3. how we can translate “the kingdom of heaven?” == I understand this as a state of being at one with oneself and all others, in communion with all life, which for me then can mean “before God” (as I have argued above) i.e. the spirit of the created universe..

II

In the light of the first beatitude, this blessing is as a state of grace == peace within oneself in the context mourning inevitable loss

III

Those who are gentle of spirit are in the state of grace before all men and in accord with the spirit of life == i.e. “before God”

IV-VIII all are directed toward conduct or action

IV Again == one is in moral righteousness as well as a state of grace, in being proactive in hunger and thirst after justice and spiritual wholeness.

V *Being* toward all others is to be in a state of grace – the “reward” here as in all the other Beatitudes is *what one becomes being* merciful toward spiritual wholeness

VI a purity of heart-- A love of and for all things-- is again in a state of grace in pursuit of spiritual wholeness

VII Jesus as “the Prince of peace” inspires/ (*imitatio dei*) the love of others that confers a state of grace-- the spiritual children of God, in a sense parallel to calling secular genius (Mozart, Einstein, Gandhi, Keats “children of God.”

VIII Blessed are those who “fight the good fight” whose lives are meaningful and in the right before God whatever persecutions are brought to bear.

I realize this leaves a lot of things hanging; crucial here is my use of the expression “*state of grace*”

As with much else in my analysis it seems I want it both ways: *secular expressions* of the *spiritual* –and in that sense I mean by “state of grace” a state or framework or condition in which one is at one with oneself, free of the clutter of external influences and so open to possibilities to the mystical.

VII

...and science?

“How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, ‘This is better than we thought! The universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant. God must be even greater than we dreamed.’ ... A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.”

(Sagan, Carl, *Pale Blue Dot – A Vision of the Human Future in Space*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1994, p 50)

Everything that I have argued to this point --as I hope will be clear --is in accord with Sagan’s remarks as they relate to the *magnificence* of the universe as revealed by modern science... to draw forth reserves of *reverence and awe* not or hardly tapped by conventional faiths. However I am less sure about “Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.” -- how he would expect to extend science itself into a domain of *worship* (?) We might relate this to earlier historical projects and traditions in the development of some of the cults such as the Rosicrucians, Hermetics, Christian Science, and others like the secretive Masonic lodges, in which “science” is represented as esoteric to fit the (felt) requirements of religion

There is no question but that the whole history of modern science (of the various sciences), leading to the present, has transformed our world and what we can generally accept as credible in our collective experience. Without detailing those thinkers including Kant, who have shown the limits of science and scientific theory, we can assert the obvious to suggest both the problem and resolution of the problem. Consider this: once we have answered all the questions of science, we will not have touched on the questions of religion. And the same must be said of religion: its questions will find no ground within the language and theories of the sciences.

Someone will point out that literalists, who believe that every word of the Bible was written by or uttered by God, should be troubled by but likely will be dismissive of geologic time (‘blind faith’—that we should more rightly call ignorance, where it is not ‘bad faith’

I do believe it is well to keep the narratives of religion and science as distinct stories in which we make sense of our experience, not just of the world but of ourselves. It is obvious that the sciences do not take up questions of betrayal and treachery, or grief and mourning... Nor does religion take up or have the language to articulate even the simplicity of the Venturi effect or the Bernoulli principle, the speed of light much less nuclear fission or the subatomic particles in Quantum mechanics.

But, it might be argued, so much of science simply refutes claims of religion: we know for a fact that the world was not created in seven days however that might be construed. But we do not require science to be dismissive of the Judeo-Christian narrative of creation. As an *assertion* it is *not* false, it is *nonsense* simply in terms of common sense and understanding. Religious expression for this of course, is a *miracle*—could well concede that it is absurd in any ordinary context, but in the context of faith it is a miracle. So too with the resurrection of the dead, the scientific community would surely regard this as absurd; the same analysis again applies. For the religious this bears witness to their faith-- that with God all things are possible. None of the sciences investigate faith, or God-- there is no paradigm of science, or theoretical language with which to pursue these questions. The strategies of falsification and verification are absent in religious thought.

What are we to make of this? I suggest the following, given the incredible complexity our experience of the world and of ourselves. We have in response to this complexity developed different stories to make sense of the universe, of our relationships, of the nature of our minds, about the depth of our feelings... Many of these stories have developed throughout our tenure on earth, in our history and culture. One of the stories of course is *called* history: the effort to systematically make sense of the development of human communities. Then there are the various sciences which established different domains for inquiry and so develop different languages, different narratives, different stories. We have both theoretical science and practical science we have developed the investigation of the universe to the horizon of the infinite and to the abstract minutiae of subatomic physics-- incredible incomplete and continuing narratives. We have developed the social sciences --what are sometimes called the “debunking sciences” for their tendency to offset the rhetoric of ideals. Here and elsewhere some of the sciences overlapped (anthropology sociology psychology to name the obvious of the social sciences. The science of mathematics of course has become the language of the physical sciences; less so of the natural sciences such as biology. Honestly, I am stretching here-- I’m aware that the phylogenetic scale and the definition of species is now dependent on chemistry rather than the configurations of appearance, and so mathematics comes into play here.

So, the sciences are different principally in terms of the domain which they investigate; religions are different with respect to the scope and depth of their practices and rituals. They differ from

each other in many obvious and subtle ways some of which we suggested already: the sciences aspire to the completion of theoretical investigations. Religions aspire to a wholeness sustained by faith; it seeks not an explanation of the world but rather a confirmation of their convictions.

We are all living our convictions, successfully or unsuccessfully; these convictions are loosely associated in the living out of our stories. Some of those convictions we have learned through systematic study, others we have simply picked up along the way.

Result of this present inquiry at least so far, feels like a continuing journey and in this cycle has returned to where I began and I recognize the whole and in a new way, a more complete way.

The Counsel I give myself and would give others is this: stay open to the complexities of life in all its fullness, seek insight into how things are throughout the complete range of the stories we have herein considered. It would seem an easy thing to stay open to experience, but of course every crisis requires closure and all too soon we again become defensive of the biases which serve us. One of the important things of religion, one of the incredible insights of Jesus is found in the principle of forgiveness. In forgiving we are able to start over, to begin anew. It is the same with the biases that form themselves into prejudgments: we can--and this is the great gift of faith—let go/ ...and then begin again.

VIII

Prayer

Prayer is complex and contextual. I do not know that there is a prayer for every occasion; the difference in meaning, however, will depend on the occasion:

Example:

Silence/ broken by a shrieking whistle and the cry "Incoming! Suddenly the air explodes, the ground heaves, hot red shrapnel raking the compound, white phosphorus spreading, burning through everything and everyone...the horror! and...*god help us!*" The hackneyed expression

nonetheless fits: “No atheists in foxholes’--they are there are, of course-- but all of us, no matter, cling to silent prayers...’that I won’t die, won’t be torn apart, that this too shall pass!’

... Few believe, I think, that God will somehow intercede and stop the carnage, but they pray it will not touch them. Prayer in this case is a place to withdraw from the terror, much as a child will withdraw in her mind, into a safe place apart from the horror of abuse to which she is subjected. Thus, prayer at a minimum is a creation of a space in which one can be alone--before God, as it were--thankful for the moment of peace and for life. It is difficult for me to regard prayer as a petition-- to ask for some favor of God with the expectation that it would be fulfilled. There are obvious everyday prayers for me and for others I’m sure, as in the case of praying for someone we care about who is ill, or praying for oneself in times of pain or bitter disappointment, or at times when one is seriously in harm’s way. In my case at least I do not pray with the expectation that there will be some intercession by God. The concern of such prayer is complex, but it is first of all an expression of hope; for me prayer creates a space apart where in the context of concern for another I can, as if by will, send that person energy and assurance that he or she is not alone. Prayer is *my* act of intended intercession. I do not imagine being connected as if by phone to God to plea for intercession. Within the quiet space of prayer, in the hope that my hope will somehow meet with that ongoing energy which sustains life and that things will be well. I often sense a presence while in prayer --not of anyone listening, but that someone or something is with me, simply, such that I am no longer alone in anguish for the other or for myself—prayer is a way of evening the ground or distributing the pain so that it does not overwhelm. I find that most of my prayers are prayers of gratitude. I wake up each day at 84 as I have for many years, saying out loud ‘thank you God for this day’. And often, ‘thank you God for the incredible beauty of this world.’ For me nature, the universe, the wonder of it all, is the sure face of God. I am never so much alone no matter how far away back in the mountains but that I feel the presence of God, the presence of the whole of time and life, that has come to that present moment. I often think of the contrasting prayers in Scripture in which Jesus, teaching, contrasts two people before the altar praying, the publican who confidently intones ‘I thank thee God that I am not as other men...robbers, or even as this tax collector...,’ / with that of the tax collector’ who, not even raising his eyes, prays simply ‘God be merciful unto me, a sinner..’ / -- The earlier promise is here in force: ‘Blessed be the humble, the meek, for theirs shall be the kingdom of God.’ The confessional prayer is the other side of prayers of gratitude:

‘I’m heartily sorry for all the ill I have caused and I am grateful for the gift of continuing life in which I can right the wrongs I have committed and herewith commit myself to a better life.’ And there is crucially the prayer that Jesus prayed and taught us to pray, saying ‘Our Father... forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us... ‘ It is a prayer of forgiveness and gratitude for the gift of bread and life, a plea and resolution in our lives to be free of evil. Finally, I believe the most powerful of prayers is that of *silence*, in which one enters what I have called a state of grace in which everything else falls away and we are at one in being with God and the life of the universe.

It may be that everyone remembers when they first were taught to pray. My first experiences were not promising. I remember at mass the prayers of the people, and I stumbled along dutifully, but most of all I just listened, not quite getting the point. On the other hand at home, from my grandmother I was taught the familiar prayer at bedtime: ‘Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep / if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.’ Once again I memorized the words before I understood them. I also remember that in the intimacy of this prayer as I gradually realized what I was saying, came the fear every child has about giving up the world, passing into sleep as a kind of death. And so, I was beset by the worrisome sense that I would die during the night and my soul (=?) would be whisked away.’ We had in my grandfather’s house and in other houses of my friends in the neighborhood stars hanging in the windows representing of all the men and sons that were serving in the Armed Forces and, as the war continued some of the blue stars turned into gold stars of those lost in war, I learned, listening to the hushed voices of the women of men, some of whom I knew, who were killed in action in some remote part of the world we knew nothing about, that some would never return home. A number of things conspired in those early days that brought the specter of death into our collective lives and somehow that prayer got tangled with it. I do not remember learning any more prayers nor did I have the occasion for some time of any felt need to pray. There is a long period of my life in which I do not remember praying at all. I had fallen away from the church and it was not until my firstborn began parochial school at St. Teresa’s and came home from his first day seemingly distressed so I asked what the problem was. He said “someone died and we had a funeral.” This made me realize that I had to return to the fray, to make sense of the mystery as best I could for my child as well as myself. I was never very successful in that way for any of our four children who went to parochial school for their first years before going on to public

schools. I suspect all of this is one of the reasons that I needed to find a different Scripture not centered on Jesus being sent down by God to die for our sins. Too much death, too much focus on death, So too, too much focus on sin. That whole negative doctrine somehow tied in with prayer did not fit with my sense of Jesus as a source of joy and comfort, so my attention turned to the alternative possibility in a gospel of joy. Unfortunately, the fundamental commandment to be loving in the standard doctrine of the church always came with the background of sin and death. I remember reading in the autobiography of some secular writer (Henry Miller, of all people) who expressed puzzlement that people should be so concerned for eternal life, to long and pray for eternal life, with so little concern about becoming fully alive in this life. For me religion was always an invitation to focus on *life now*, not some later speculative after-life. I thought it would be nice, of course as everyone must, if the alleged promise of eternal life was a possibility, but I could never quite see how that would work, or how it would even be appealing. I somewhere picked up the secular prayer ‘Oh my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible.’ This, along with a sense I picked up from many writers like Kierkegaard, persuaded me that the religious is about *this life*, here and now. And so my life centers in prayers of thanksgiving, thankfulness for this life, for the beauty in this life, for the love of my family and friends, for goodness in the hearts of human beings that resolutely strives for justice and honor and peace for all humankind.

Either my sense of the religious is comprehensive of my whole life—the secular, the sacred and the profane--a mix of the mystical and the mundane—or else it is a hodgepodge of loosely connected thoughts and feelings with only a fragile base in reality.

IX The Soul

The Scripture seems to make the distinction between spirit/ soul/ and body:

We usually judge situations according to our feelings and human reasoning; but if I have begun to seek God, I open myself to God’s Word. It discerns the thoughts of the *heart* and pierces and divides between soul and spirit – between that which is earthly (human) and which I absorb in my soul, and that which is spiritual and heavenly, which I receive into my spirit

--Hebrews 12:25 p.m. on

near

“And the God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ..

--1 Thessalonians 5:23

First, Mary’s spirit exulted in God; then her soul magnified the Lord. Her praise to God issued from her spirit and was expressed through her soul. Her spirit was filled with joy in God her Savior, and her soul manifested that joy for the magnifying of the Lord. She lived and acted in her spirit, which directed her soul.”

Luke 1:46

My own inclination is to think of spirit and soul as, if not the same (because we obviously can make distinctions, for example, the Holy Spirit, and not the ‘holy soul’) then they are at least mutually spiritual in nature. In my thinking, spirit is a gift/ the soul is an effort, ever a work in progress. In this way spirit is life, the soul is what one makes of it. I believe this is consistent with the above Scripture. The spirit as life is divine (‘emanating from God’); the soul is the measure of the degree to which we are open to what becomes the sacred in the work of the person to become whole as the soul develops. The soul is corruptible but repairable if not perfectible. The spirit can fail and fall away from the Holy Spirit, that is, absent itself from God and life (the Bard reminded us, speaking of cowards who die many times before their deaths, that ‘the valiant taste of death but once’.) The suggestion here, I think, is that there are many kinds of death--perhaps too, of spiritual death. At least one form of spiritual death I can think of is a result of cowardice, in the faulting of the soul, a refusal or default to become fully, spiritually alive. But my interest and focus here is with the soul. So many contextual uses of the word ‘soul’, many of which are, as I understand them, religious, and in that sense spiritual. One can think of soul music--that music which expresses and touches the soul, that can bring it to life to rejoice in the depth of sound and sense. Emily Brontë’s poem comes to mind here as well “No coward’s soul mine” the title of which suggests what I have in mind, although I do not share the degree of devotion expressed in the content of the poem--my point being the importance of courage in the exercise of the soul. A good deal of the world stands in opposition to the nurturing development of the soul, too many temptations to become a nonperson--a living replica of everyone else. The

journey of the soul that I have in mind may be considered again in what Nietzsche calls the ‘metamorphosis of the spirit’, which I discussed earlier. In literature and I think in ordinary discourse as well, the soul is aligned not with the mind but the *heart*. Consider Pascal’s reminder: “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things. It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason.” / In this passage, we could substitute *soul* in place of *heart* and the meaning would be the same. What is often meant citing the way the heart responds to experience is part of what I mean by the soul. It would be an interesting lateral exercise to follow out all of the locution’s in which the soul assimilates what the heart feels, however that would take us aside from the attention herein to trace the broader grounds of faith in my own life.

In Scripture the question is put ‘what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and **suffers the loss of his soul?**’ The soul, this suggests, is a treasure to which not the whole world much less anything in it compares. Ours is a time in which we see many voraciously strive to attain everything and anything they can at the cost of their soul, that is, at the cost of what would make them whole as human beings. Clearly not everyone believes this in our time or perhaps in any time, but the very idea of what makes us human beings, what is at stake, what gathers us into what we call humanity, is the soul

X Hope

Given everything I have said so far, what is it that I hope for? If I were to consider the whole of my life as a prayer, what would that prayer be? That all human beings would come to share a sense of community, of devotion to themselves and to all others in a spirit of love and gratitude for the precious gift of life. I take this to be the life prayer of Jesus not exclusive to Christianity. A simple enough prayer but the fulfillment of it devoutly to be hoped for as the heritage and promise of humanity. What stands against such an obvious and simple solution to the human condition? Apparently, everything. We often speak in general terms about the ‘nature of man’ such as it has become, that argues against any genuine resolution. Scripture offers the seven deadly sins or what in ordinary terms could be expressed as continual shooting each other in the foot when we are not stabbing each other in the back. There is a saying among pundits that ‘it is not enough that I win/ my friends must lose.’ But if such is the state of competition among

friends, what must one wish for one's enemies? There is always in the world competition for goods. Given the prodigious productivity of the world, however, there should no longer be competition simply for survival. There is in fact no reason that any child should go hungry and yet even in the most affluent nations such as the United States children can be found in back alleys scavenging for food in garbage cans. This seems to be the contemporary reality of the natural condition of man: enough food and water for all humans to flourish, not merely survive. Why then not? Raw desire seems to be at the heart of all that the Scripture calls deadly sins. I understand 'raw desire' to be individual desire unchecked by any governing counterbalance, whether of religion or morals or reason or the fragile appeal of empathy and civility. The transition from the natural world primarily governed by need, to the human world seemingly governed by greed, was in many ways a poor choice or an unfortunate development in our collective history and development. I have just called and told us that although Sarah is right here now you want an answer generally can't come back in the other room that. For all the power language has generated, reason cannot replace or measure up to what was once the natural governance of life. In biblical terms, presenting the contest between good and evil, evil, if not simply holding dominion, is clearly dominant. Nature in the context of human development seems to favor evil. Nothing new here; recall Thucydides' remarks in the *Melian Dialogue*-- words not limited to the aftermath of war-- that 'the strong do what they can/ the weak suffer what they must'. And, as the cynics and skeptics, and probably the great majority of people in this world would say, 'that's simply how it is' (and so 'it is what it is' full stop) The appeals of religion and rational morality to principles of generosity or equality or justice are clearly not enough to undo the too often destructive structures that civilization has wrought. My primary concern here is with religion and faith, not reason and morality so it may be important to ask what was/is the point of it all?—to 'fight the good fight' in the sure knowledge of defeat? To offer weak clichés as in Pope's *Essay on Man* that "hope springs eternal in the breasts of men" (as against all odds?) It may be, as I do believe in some sense, that 'with God all things are possible' but notice even here nothing is probable much less certain. Evil then, is the ready resource of bad men, those who are undeterred by moral or even legal sanctions, much less the denunciations that their actions are *sinful*. I understand by sin an offense not just against human beings but against God. However, unless one concedes that there are things which are sacred, as life is sacred, then such admonitions are empty.

This is a discouraging way to end things-- that one can only bear witness to the good, hold to what is sacred perhaps only for me--but it needs to be enough, and for me it is, at least enough to keep the faith.

XI

music movement song and dance

There is a lot still to be said of the religious, even in the infinitely small and pathetic setting of 'me'. The religious expression for what is still open to us is that 'with God everything is possible' and that 'God is in *everything*'--in the smile of child, in the harbinger of spring, the crocus, peeking up through the snow, and in things allegedly without life, such as rocks and rivers. God is alive some would say in the crags and Canyon under my feet no less than the crags and canyons of my heart.

Leslie Marmon Silko, a Lakota poet, wrote some lines directed toward white eyes, but relevant to what I mean by those who do (and do not) see life (and God) in all things.

A Telling :

Long ago, out on the high desert, there was a meeting of witches.
And there was a contest to see which one was most powerful.
The first witch danced and brought forth rain from a cloudless Summer sky.
Another beat an ancient drum, and its rhythm slowed the swift river currents
and swayed the branches of the high mountain Fir and Spruce.
Another drew lines in the sand with a feather, and snakes came to rest in the hollows.
"What I have is a story," one said, and the others laughed.
"Go ahead, laugh if you want to, but as I tell the story it will begin to happen:
Across the ocean in caves of dark hills are white skin people,
like the belly of a fish covered with hair.
They grow away from the earth. They grow away from the sun.
They grow away from plants and animals.
They see no life. When they look, they see only objects.
The world is a dead thing for them.
The trees and rivers are not alive, the mountains and stones are not alive.
The deer and the bear are objects. They see no life.
They are a people of fear. They fear the world.
They destroy what they fear. They fear themselves.
....Set in motion now, set in motion... to destroy, to kill.

...Whirling...whirling..."

So the other witches said: "Take it back! Call that story back!"

But the witch just shook its head at the others in their stinking animal skins, fur, and feathers.

"It's already turned loose. It's already coming. It can't be called back."

--after Leslie Marmon Silko

Silko tells this story against the backdrop of the 500-year genocide against native peoples in America; the destruction she alludes to here resulted in the deaths of over 100 million Native Americans. She offers no explanation except to locate the germ that grew to such devastation which I will refer to here simply as loss of a sense of the sacredness of life. That this is also self-destructive adds to the point and poignancy of this loss. Against this ascription, stories of the life of Francis and Clare speak to the possibilities of redemption, that we might take an interest again in the simple commonplace of faith.

I have seldom found intimacy or depth in 'church music' that would lead to faith. The hymns of praise and declarations of love, for me at least, fail to express what the text is about. I am referring to the standard music of Catholic and Protestant hymnals. That music has been refined and orchestrated to the point that is most often joyless. I know there are exceptions to this, for example in the Black churches where there is a shared and participatory singing and dancing, the movement of bodies expressing the joy of music in the expression of faith. Gospel singing of spirituals embraces the life history of a people who are still struggling against the whip and lash of slavery. The joy of their spiritual identity in song and movement comes from the depth of pain they have suffered as a people. While this is music I know about, it is basically inaccessible to me. There is for me a distinction between church music and sacred music. The prodigious faith that inspired the great religious works of Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Handel.. -- Bach's *B minor mass*, Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, or the ode to Joy in his ninth Symphony, Mozart's *C minor mass* and *Requiem*, Handel's *Messiah*, Verdi's *Requiem* (Opera to the dead) are all magnificent

and moving in their own ways, and bear testimony to a greatness of spirit in the celebration of life. All of this has been crucial in my understanding of the depth of the religious-- from the simplicity in the life and thought of St. Francis, the black spirituals, the sometimes painful anguish of soul music-- I'm thinking here of Billie Holiday's rendition of the secular song

Strange Fruit:

Southern trees bearing strange fruit

Blood on the leaves and blood at the roots

Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze

Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees...

I doubt this qualifies as a 'negro spiritual', but for me it carries the weight of an open appeal to the God of justice. I knew nothing about horror as a child, I did know however that I would look forward to fun at camp in the summer my black friends left out, left behind standing on the corner looking forward to nothing. There is also for me, but other (white children) must have the same experience, the remembered simplicity of camp songs. 'Oh come to the church in the Wildwood...' and "I walk in the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses..." ...the coming of Jesus to walk with us in the garden or in the woods for that quiet respite is a form of prayer, one of those deep ties to the multiplicity of sources we draw on for faith. There are many moments between the simplicity of song, to the magnificent, joyful celebration of the Masters-- of Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart...those who understandably are called "the children of God", for if there is work of the 'Holy Spirit' within the standard frame of Christianity, it is surely found in the hearts, minds, and music of these composers.,

I have always felt the movement of dance to be a freeing of the spirit. We do not dance enough, any of us, alone or together. I am not here referring to the formal 'ecumenical dance' before the

altar in church, but rather the spontaneous movement at times when we feel that vital impulse to celebrate the flow of life within us. This again is what I have in mind by ‘in a state of grace.’

XII

Theology

By theology I mean, in the classic formulation of Saint Anselm, “faith seeking understanding.”

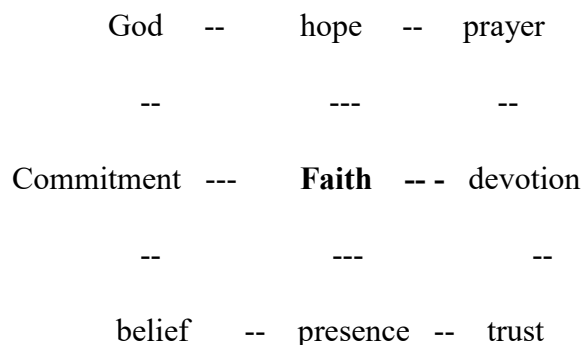
This seems to be a description of the way my life has gone. Childhood’s embrace of faith, the gradual filling in and falling away from that embrace, the experience of those variegated and often conflicting life experiences that always threatened to undermine what I so dearly held to in infancy and youth, to what I have reconciled at the closing of day. Theology is a step outside religious celebrations in an attempt to frame an understanding of the whole project of God. That brings the issue of theology into this present project.

n.b. Wittgenstein’s further reminder re. theology: ‘*theo-logos*’ the *logos*, the grammar of ‘God’

I said earlier that there is a sense in which the whole of our natural, shared language is a resource for understanding ourselves, with others, toward death, and before God. In all these cases there is a suggested hermeneutics in which we surround the concept of God with the essential features of our understanding, which more than anything else at least in my case, declares our past and continuing experience with the mystical. There has always been the effort of philosophers and theologians to formulate and formalize an inclusive and definitive description of God. But unless this understanding is anchored in individual experience, in the range of our individual experiences, no formal declarations are worth much. Often a list is made that names, and provides descriptions of God, and God’s activities in the various Scriptures of religions. This is not a list to which I would subscribe, as has proved clear to me in thinking through the fundamental moorings and development of my religious faith in this project. We must expand our inquiry and understanding to include the whole of the universe, unconstrained by stories in the Bible or any other institutional texts, else we will have no hope of comprehending the whole of that which is God.

So, what would a cosmic theology look like? It would in the first place be an open question and not a closed system. It must include whatever understanding that comes to us as individuals that carries religious import. What comes to us as individuals in prayer and meditation in any mystical experience may not be or become intelligible or relational to others. A common exercise in philosophy addresses this problem. It is to center on some concept and then investigate what accrues to it. So, if we begin with the concept of faith, then what other concepts come into play? What are those concepts which surround and when connected to each other and to the central concept so that a richer more inclusive concept may emerge? The strategy is called a “hermeneutic circle” constructed to consider what would occur to you (that I will do in my own case) and then we can better compare our understanding of faith. I will try to diagram what would be called a hermeneutic circle, which aspires to understanding the meaning of a concept: here ‘faith’ --leaving aside the limits of definition,

Imagine the following as a circle, surrounding the concept of “faith”:



People will likely have different ideas about what should be placed in this circle and this is the point at which dialogue can be crucial. One could thus easily expand this circle to be inclusive of other relevant concepts, but the point is that there is a circle of meaningful relationships which taken together will lead to an understanding or perhaps one hopefully should say *better* understanding of the meaning of faith --because in some sense, to ask a question already presupposes an understanding of the concept in question, and likely too, a range of answers. To put the question ‘what is faith?’ we already know a good deal about what it is we are asking. The idea of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ is to begin to fill in that understanding-- again forsaking the

closed captioning or label of definition. This idea of hermeneutic circle in pursuit of meaning is primarily a strategy used in teaching, of course, to elicit the response of students to the question; but it may also be used as a tool for individual investigation. (This process is similar to what used to be called, I think, 'brainstorming.')

The origin of 'hermeneutics' is theology itself -- an instrument long used in inquiry into the *meaning* of some passage in Scripture..

XIII

DEATH...Full Stop !

I have in mind, after completing each section, that I should end this enquiry, but then something else occurs to me. I doubt, too, that I will end with this chapter (#13) and this speaks to certain lateral and peripheral notions of the spiritual, namely 'superstition.' This is something I suspect we all pick up along the way at some roadside attraction that stays with us marginally, even in the absence of any credible belief whatsoever. But here I want to focus on the idea of death, of death as the end of my life and so the end of my world, the end of all the others I have loved and that I would hold dearly in my heart forever if I could. This of course is the consolation of traditional religion or at least of Christianity. It is, as I said earlier, although a consummation devoutly to be wished, and for which I do wish--except that, once again, outside the bounds of worship, I cannot get my head around it, cannot realistically come to believe. I have found in my own life and reading that the poets have the most to say about this... of what may lie 'beyond the bourn' and so this is perhaps still a work in progress for me. I fully understand the importance of 'letting go' when we really do not and cannot know. So, I suppose at the end there will be a contest between mind and heart, and I will pull for the heart to prevail. On the other hand, looking back --which is mostly what you do at 84, as I am living forward-- I am O.K. with, if not bursting with pride in how I have lived that life. With the acute realization that I could and should have used whatever gifts I have from God, to do more, and could have done better; still I have no regrets and can meet with the inevitability of death and the possibility of whatever might follow, with ease. Having said that, I do not expect to go gentle into this good night , and I may indeed rage against the dying of the light, but hopefully all that will be extended in an effort to live my life out to the fullest to the end. I expect this is true of most philosophers as well as 'true

believers.’ In its simplest expression, philosophy is the ‘search for wisdom’, not the possession, obsession nor aspiration for knowledge; and by wisdom again in its simplest expression is meant the acceptance and indeed embrace finally of how the world is. As the children say ‘It is what it is’ and, as James Joyce would add,...and that’s that he and the she of it’

XIV

The End

... As T.S. Eliot reminds us about serious inquiry, ‘the end of all our **exploring**. will be to arrive where we started...and know the place for the first time.’ My thought began with the memories of my own childhood, and I think now of my children and of all the children from my teaching years as essential and instrumental in my growth as a person. It is with marriage and the experience of my own children and that of others in my care that I learned the depth and reach of love. It must come to every parent that moment in which trust becomes sacred, in my case both as a parent and as a teacher I signed on as spiritually responsible, absolutely responsible in the case of my children for the care of their lives. This is a critical point in adult life, that we undertake the total responsibility of lives other than our own. I think it’s fair to say that love comes to be the expression of that responsibility; for a thoughtful couple whether in marriage or otherwise, it takes a great deal of courage and, yes, faith, to have children, to commit wholly to their welfare as long as you live. *Living* one’s life for another, no less than *giving* one’s life for another, is perhaps the greatest love and anchors the deepest faith. God knows that faith is strained and challenged in a thousand ways throughout the lives we share with our children, all our children. In the case of ourselves, life is a gift, which I have suggested-- if we think about it enough--calls for a ‘thanks be to God.’ Everything else is a choice for which we must take responsibility on ourselves. We may thank God for the gift of our children, but the responsibility is all ours to nurture them and love them, no matter. Thus, in the broadest possible understanding of God, we live our lives before God, we live our responsibilities before God as well.

This is religion as I understand it: how we undertake life as a precious gift, and how we continue to live that life as a sacred trust.

Adendum

Via et Veritas et Vita

This expression as declaration seems to me the most important element in reference to the life of Jesus-- how he described himself: “I am the way the truth and the life, whoever believes in me shall not know what it is to die” John 14:6

If you understand this self-description of Jesus, then you have the whole of the spiritual import of his life. If you further assimilate this and appropriate it into your own life, then you are well on your way to spiritual realization-- of making the spirit *real*. This is the sense of engaging *the Holy Spirit*, in any case as I understand it.

I will try to set out my understanding of this expression: The obvious and important distinction at the outset is the grammatical distinction between having/ doing/ and being. Jesus is not saying that he *has* the truth to declare or argue, rather his expression is “I *am* the truth” --in other words ‘it is *my Life* that is the Truth/ in further words, the New Testament is a spiritual biography of Jesus. We are presented with a life not merely a series of teachings. Look to the meaning, not the words. What we must appropriate to be in the Holy Spirit, is the life of Jesus not just the words. My son, a musician and teacher, provides a reminder not just for musicians, but to anyone who can make use of the analogy: ‘play the music not the notes” (for example, ‘understand the meaning, not the words’ / the point of hermeneutics.) This comes to mind in what I am trying to say here: taking the authority of Jesus as the paradigm of the spiritual life— the commandment is ‘*appropriate my Life* as your spiritual task’

So far then, we understand the *Veritas* as the *Vita*: the Truth as the Life. The third part of this equation *Via*, follows as the night the day, as The Way. Thus, the directive of Jesus is, as the Scripture has it: “Follow me” / “take up my life, my cross” (which we need to explicate further.) This is not simply to understand his life, his words, but rather appropriate them into your own life. Once again, the task is *to live in the truth* (this is the importance of ‘believing **in**’, ‘having faith **in**’ as we argued earlier in this document--not merely to argue it, declare it, adopt it, as if

this were an incidental matter, something you could take up and leave off, but a truth you must *live*.

My understanding of the rest of the expression “whoever believes in me shall not know what it is to die” has nothing to do with an afterlife, or eternity, or immortality. As I discussed earlier the point for me is *this* life’, not some other afterlife. The promise of Jesus seems to me to be that insofar as you follow him and take up his life as your spiritual task, then you will become fully alive, fully human, become at one with the cosmic energy of Holy Spirit. Another way of expressing the same thing for me is “to become fully a human being” such that the soul is attuned to the spirit.

And how are we to do this exactly? This is the situation as I understand it: “Follow me and you will *know* (in the biblical sense of...), be in The Truth—and, this is the crucial part: “...*and the Truth shall make you free.*” It is important that we understand what this is about is not the *negative* ‘freedom *from*...’ (e.g. *from* ‘the burden of *sin*’, as the standard version of the story goes) but rather the positive “freedom *for*’ ...loving (e.g. ‘the joyful expression of the soul’.)

And here is the heart of the matter for me:

The fundamental command of the free soul in the singular appeal from Jesus is this: ‘Love.’ Ground your being in *being* loving, not simply to your neighbor as yourself but toward all of life, toward all being--Being which is God. Recall that parallel to the self-description of Jesus is the self-description of God ‘I am who am’ that is ‘I Be –the whole, all of it’ referring back to the earlier discussion of The Brothers Karamazov, recall the remark of the ancient dying monk Father Zossiana, that he had been painfully struggling the whole of his life with the question ‘What is hell?’ “...now, finally at the end of my life I’ve come to realize that *Hell is the inability to love.*” If indeed as we have been arguing, the commandment of Jesus is to love, and that God is Love, then Hell is the absence of God, alienated from the source of being, that is, to be spiritually dead.

The codicil to all this, in reference to the standard understanding of the *New Testament*, is a rejection of the idea that God would send his son his only son Jesus to die on the cross to redeem man from sin, from the original sin as set out at the beginning of the Bible. That negative socket in which the whole of Christian worship turns, seems to me simply wrongheaded. Rather I

believe that Jesus is that singular person born of woman, sacred in being not only fully human but fully alive. Jesus's *life*, not his death, is the crux of the matter. If indeed, as the story goes, Jesus was sent into the world to redeem man from sin/death, then it is his *life*, that embodies the commandment to *love*, to be loving...this alone is the way in which man is to be redeemed from sin and death-- that is, to become fully, spiritually, alive.