

The Religious Quest:

Groping for the God in Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being

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On April 29 I e-mailed our gracious host, Tapas, today's theme. He began very early to harass me for the three themes for the summer series. (I don't mention that after receiving them he loses them!) This is what I e-mailed him:

Good morning, Tapas. ...after sleepless nights, much prayer and fasting, coming to the brink of despair, here is the third installment...(Well that may be a bit overdrawn. One shouldn't be frivolous about things of ultimate concern!):

The Religious Quest: groping for the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

What has Athens to say to Jerusalem and vice versa? What has the pre-modern to say to the modern and vice versa? What has the post-modern to say to the modern and vice versa? A fascinating dimension of human reality is the God question or the religious question or the spiritual quest and question. Perhaps we can come to some clarity about our present as we review and reflect on the way we as humans have evolved in our search for meaning, for a place where our heart can rest and our mind remain open – a place of spiritual peace and intellectual integrity, the consequence of which would be global community marked by compassion.

Last month my theme was "Whose Truth Are You Living? By What Authority?" I'm trying to recall what moved me in that direction. I had addressed those questions in sermons in the past, but I think the immediate catalyst was the novel I referred to last month, Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, the story of a young Brahmin who strikes out on a journey to find the truth. From asceticism to lust and ease to coming finally to his own Truth out of despair and solitude, Siddhartha found his soul. Though he greatly admired the Buddha whom he met, he realized simply following the Buddha's teaching was not enough, for his breakthrough insight was that experience – the experience of enlightenment – cannot be taught. It must come to one amidst the quest – an epiphany in which one "sees," one "knows" beyond any rational or dogmatic system.

The reason I wondered about what made me write the paragraph above is because since deciding on that theme I have been introduced and have read the following books:

The Language God Talks, Herman Wouk;
This Is My God, Herman Wouk;
The Fingerprints of God, Barbara Hagerty;
How God Changes Your Brain, Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman;
The Case for God, Karen Armstrong.

With the exception of Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*, I had never heard of the four books nor did I go looking for them as references for today. What is almost spooky to me is that I wrote the above paragraph, I suppose, because it is and has long been the quest of my whole being, and then am introduced to those five volumes, all of which speak to my announced theme. Had I had the books in my possession, had I read them before I wrote the paragraph, the theme announced today would have reflected those resources to which to turn. But to announce a theme and then stumble on such rich resources is quite remarkable.

Serendipity? Providence? Or maybe there is a God who watches over poor preachers on the edge of senility.

Actually I go into this because the recent reading I've done has raised some fascinating questions about the human mind or soul and the dimension of Mystery that lies beyond our capacity to know through the exercise of our reason, our rational faculties. Is there a "knowing" beyond knowing? In ordinary lives, our space and time world? That is, is there more to reality than can be accessed by the use of human reason?

In light of my experience just related, was there something at work in me beyond that of which I was aware when I decided to address the ancient question, "What has Athens to say to Jerusalem?" I am not at all aware of being, nor have I ever claimed to be, clairvoyant. As for mystical experience, my confession has always been I've never had a tingle in my pinkie. Yet I confess I am beginning to wonder. It could be pure coincidence that I write a paragraph about what I want to address five months later and then, without making any effort, I am introduced to five books that address my question more fully and poignantly than I could ever imagine.

And it is not simply the "coincidence" to which I am pointing but that the respective books moved me in a direction that causes me even to raise this question. In other words, I got more than I bargained for and find myself quite surprised. It has made me go back over the years and reflect on the way I have come.

I have spoken of the struggle I had come to after seven years of pastoral ministry. My theology did not fit life as I was experiencing it as a pastor. My European study was an attempt to gain the education I had been too closed to gain while in college and seminary. I quake today as I realize I took my family including three small children to Europe, having arranged for a short-term lease on an apartment in Dordrecht knowing I would not remain there because there was no university there, but not knowing where I would go. A couple months before we left for The Netherlands I met Professor Hendrikus Berkhof at Kennedy airport in New York. Jammed into a shuttle that took him from one terminal to another, we talked about the possibility of studying with him at Leiden. That was my only contact with him. He gave me his telephone number and invited me to call him when I arrived in The Netherlands, which I did. We made an appointment.

I relate this because of an experience I had the day I met him in his study which was in his home. As I got up to leave, I noticed a piece of paper pinned on the drape that separated the study from the rest of the house. On the paper was a verse printed on a mimeograph machine – in typical blue ink like I had used in grade school. The lines were from Alfred Lord Tennyson's hymn "Strong Son of God, Immortal Love:"

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of Thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

I get goose bumps relating the incident because that day I knew I had found my teacher and today I can tell you those lines express beautifully and concisely what I experienced over the following four years of graduate study and the subsequent forty years of my theological, philosophical, spiritual quest to the present.

Those lines were an illumination for me in a deeply personal, spiritual expression. My freedom to wonder, to probe, to re-imagine came through lines that were a prayer, indeed, a personal address to God.

The other evening as the sun was setting in golden glory I was, as usual, sitting on our bluff overlooking Lake Michigan, and I began to sing those beloved lines. I became so aware of the significance of my "chance" reading of those lines on my Professor's study drape and of this presentation this morning where I would attempt to speak of the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

The God in whom we live and move and have our being. That is from St. Paul recorded in Acts 17:28 quoting "some of your own poets" – the intellectuals of Athens gathered on Mars Hill to hear what St. Paul had to say about Jesus and the resurrection. He was preaching the Gospel – "telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection." In his commentary on *Acts*, William Barclay paints the picture:

Athens had long since left behind her great days of action but she was still the greatest university town in the world, to which men seeking learning came from all over the world. She was a city of many gods. It was said that there were more statues of the gods in Athens than in all the rest of Greece put together, and that in Athens it was easier to meet a god than a man. In the great city square people met to talk, for in Athens they did little else. The days of action were past and now man talked all day and half the night about the newest idea. So Paul would have no difficulty in getting someone to talk to. The philosophers discovered him. There were the Epicureans. We may sum up their beliefs in this way. (i) They believed that everything happened by chance. (ii) They believed that death was the end of all. (iii) They believed that there were gods but the gods were remote from the world and did not care. (iv) They believed that pleasure was the chief end of man. They did not mean fleshly and worldly and material pleasure; for the highest pleasure was the pleasure that brought no pain to follow. There were the Stoics. We may sum up their beliefs in this way. (i) They believed that literally everything was God. God was fiery spirit. That spirit grew blunt and dull in matter but it was in everything. What gave men life was that a little spark of that spirit dwelt in them and when they died it returned to God. But for the Stoic everything was God. (ii) They believed that everything was fated because everything was the will of God; and therefore whatever happened we must not care. It is God's will and must be accepted. (iii) They believed that every so many years the world disintegrated in a conflagration and then started all over again on the same story. They took Paul to the Areopagus which is the Greek for Mars' Hill. It was the name both of the hill and the court that met on it.

I selected this story from *Acts* because one finds set forth there two philosophical schools of thought and, over against those two Greek philosophical schools, the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, a religious/spiritual expression by St. Paul. Thus philosophical discourse engaging religious claim and vice versa.

My intention is not to focus on Paul's claim nor the philosophical discussions of the Epicureans and Stoics. Rather I use this passage from *Acts* to indicate the setting and background of the famous question raised by the Early Church Father Tertullian – "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?"

Tertullian was a lawyer who converted to Christ before the end of the second century C.E. One citation will give a sense of Tertullian's thinking.

For philosophy is the material of the world's wisdom, the rash interpreter of the nature and dispensation of God. Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy. What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the Church? What have heretics to do with Christians? Our instruction comes from the porch of Solomon, who

had himself taught that the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart. Away with all attempts to produce a Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic Christianity! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after receiving the gospel! When we believe, we desire no further belief. For this is our first article of faith, that there is nothing which we ought to believe besides. (Tertullian, *Heretics*, (Stevenson, 166-167) from *Phoenicia.org*.

There you have it – two thousand years ago, the Jewish/Christian theologian, Paul, in the wake of his experience of the risen, ascended Jesus whom he now believed to be the Christ, the Messiah, engaged with the intellectuals of Athens – the greatest university city in the world – in dialogue/debate/conversation about God – he speaking from the Revelation he had experienced and clung to in faith, and the Athenians, in customary mode, weighing his claims in the context of the long tradition of Greek philosophical inquiry through the exercise of human reason. And a century and a half later the Latin lawyer from Carthage, Tertullian, drew the line sharply – an either/or – human reason expressed in philosophical categories had no place in Gospel given by revelation and embraced by faith.

And of course the God question didn't arise with Paul in Athens two thousand years ago. On Mars Hill he cites the Greeks' own poets – a tradition stemming back to earlier centuries – the Epicureans claiming the human existence ended in extinction or the Stoics looking to eventual absorption into God. And how long before that was the mark of the human that he or she was groping for God? Perhaps with the dawn of human consciousness, the earliest beginning of self-consciousness, of awareness, of awe and wonder before the presence of the Mystery of Being.

As indicated above, when I wrote the paragraph announcing today's theme, I had not read Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*. But reading it I found she has addressed precisely my questions following on "What has Athens to say to Jerusalem?":

"What has the pre-modern to say to the modern and vice versa?;
"What has the post-modern to say to the modern and vice versa?"

And further, she addresses explicitly what I hoped would be the result of our inquiry – to come to some clarity about our present...our search for meaning, for a place where our heart can rest and our mind remain open – a place of spiritual peace and intellectual integrity.

That search has marked my whole life since opening up to critical thinking in regard to my religious faith. The "heart" and "mind" issue was articulated most concisely for me in a little work on Christology by Professor John Knox – *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*. I refer to it here not because the Christological discussion – a discussion of the pre-existence of Jesus – is relevant to our theme,

but because Knox expressed so clearly the human quest for understanding that engages both heart and mind when confronted with a religious claim beyond human reason.

If neither the rejection nor the modification of kenosis is a possibility for us, nor yet its acceptance as a plain statement of fact, it is clear that we must receive the story as story and then interpret it as best we can, in rational and empirical terms, knowing all the while that we shall not exhaust in our interpretation what the story says and only the story can say, but also knowing that without the effort at interpretation the story will say precisely nothing at all. For a story like this can speak to us of matters beyond our understanding only if it has also spoken *to* our understanding – and, within the limits of our powers, been understood. There are two conditions under which a significant symbol loses (or, perhaps better, is shown to have lost) its vitality and power. One of these is when our hearts no longer need it, when all we want to say or need to say (or to have said to us) can be said without it. The other is when our minds, failing to discern in it the coherency of truth, are forced to reject it. *For our hearts cannot finally find true what our minds find false.* If they could, we should be hopelessly divided and any firm grasp of reality would be impossible. What we mean by ‘the heart’ in this connection is not something alien or counter to the mind, but is the mind itself quickened and extended. The wisdom the heart has found, if it be wisdom and not fantasy, is the same wisdom the mind all the while has been feeling after, if haply it might find it. It is a wisdom which, far from by-passing the understanding, enters through the doors of it, fills and stretches the space of it, and only then breaks through and soars above it. (*The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, p. 106f)

It was Eastertide, 1992, and my sermon series was “From Proclaimer to the One Proclaimed” and I was struggling with the Christological puzzle. In his little volume Knox charted the early Church’s attempts to express the mystery of Jesus Christ, resurrected, ascended Lord. That was very helpful for me but the real “gift” was his statement,

For our hearts cannot finally find true what our minds find false.

A similar statement, his or some other’s, states it simply as

The heart cannot rest where the mind cannot follow.

If John Knox put the matter concisely, Karen Armstrong puts the God question, the whole human spiritual endeavor, in the context of the whole human story in her *The Case for God*. The persons, schools, movements to which she points and which she discusses have long been familiar to me through long years of

theological work. But the picture she paints, the story she tells casts a fresh light on the whole human effort of “groping after God.”

The book is divided into two parts. Part I deals with “The Unknown God,” covering the centuries from 30,000 B.C.E. to 1500 C.E. Part II explains “The Modern God” (1500 C.E. to the present). Each part is divided into six chapters and there is an Introduction and Epilogue. There is a richness and fullness in the story she tells and I will in no way give a full analysis of the work. What I do hope to do is lift up what is so striking in her work as it relates to our present theme – the relation of the heart to the mind, faith to reason, religion as a way of life and practice and religion as a rational dogmatic system to be assented to by our reason.

With voluminous documentation, Armstrong establishes her major thesis that historically, from the earliest evidence of religious activity until the advent of the modern period, religious practice as ritual found transcendence in myth. She notes that many date the beginning of the modern period with Columbus’ voyage in 1492. While still a solidly Christian nation with Catholic monarchs, Spain was in an age of transition. Armstrong writes,

The people of Europe had started their journey to modernity, but the traditional myths of religion still gave meaning to their rational and scientific explorations. (p. 162)

But that would change in the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Counter-Reformation and the early breakthroughs in the investigations of the natural sciences, for example the work of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo. Armstrong gives a rich picture of the interplay of reforming religion – Catholic and Protestant and the unlocking of the secrets of the universe.

I have moved quickly from the earliest evidence of human religious practice to the beginnings of the modern period, because it was at that point that religious practice changed. And it is the change of religious practice that has brought us to the present unhappy place of aggressive, dogmatic fundamentalism and equally aggressive, militant atheism. Our author sets the stage for this unfortunate religious development in the Introduction with reference to the two ways of thinking, speaking and acquiring knowledge in the premodern cultures:

In most premodern cultures, there were two recognized ways of thinking, speaking, and acquiring knowledge. The Greeks called them *mythos* and *logos*. Both were essential and neither was considered superior to the other; they were not in conflict but complementary. Each had its own sphere of competence, and it was considered unwise to mix the two. *Logos* (“reason”) was the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled people to function effectively in the world. It had, therefore, to correspond accurately to external reality. People have always needed *logos* to make an

efficient weapon, organize their societies, or plan an expedition. *Logos* was forward-looking, continually on the lookout for new ways of controlling the environment, improving old insights, or inventing something fresh. *Logos* was essential to the survival of our species. But it had its limitations: it could not assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life's struggles. For that people turned to *mythos* or "myth."

Today we live in a society of scientific *logos*, and myth has fallen into disrepute. In popular parlance, a "myth" is something that is not true. But in the past, myth was not self-indulgent fantasy; rather, like *logos*, it helped people to live effectively in our confusing world, though in a different way. Myths may have told stories about the gods, but they were really focused on the more elusive, puzzling, and tragic aspects of the human predicament that lay outside the remit of *logos*. Myth has been called a primitive form of psychology. When a myth described heroes threading their way through labyrinths, descending into the underworld, or fighting monsters, these were not understood as primarily factual stories. They were designed to help people negotiate the obscure regions of the psyche, which are difficult to access but which profoundly influence our thought and behavior. People had to enter the warren of their own minds and fight their personal demons. When Freud and Jung began to chart their scientific search for the soul, they instinctively turned to these ancient myths. A myth was never intended as an accurate account of a historical event; it was *something that had in some sense happened once but that also happens all the time*. (p. xi)

This is not new information from Karen Armstrong. She gives a full treatment of the role of mythology in her *A Short History of Myth* (2005). But she brings us to our present situation in regard to theology and institutional religious practice by documenting the place of *logos* and *mythos*. She points out that a myth was not something one simply "believed in." It became effective only as a program of action. "It could put you in the correct spiritual or psychological posture, but it was up to you to take the next step and make the 'truth' of the myth a reality in your own life." (p. xii)

But if we failed to apply it to our situation, a myth would remain abstract and incredible. From a very early date, people reenacted their myths in stylized ceremonies that worked aesthetically upon participants and, like any work of art, introduced them to a deeper dimension of existence. Myth and ritual were thus inseparable, so much so that it is often a matter of scholarly debate which came first: the mythical story or the rites attached to it. Without ritual, myths made no sense and would remain as opaque as a musical score, which is impenetrable to most of us until interpreted instrumentally.

Religion, therefore, was not primarily something that people thought but something they did. Its truth was acquired by practical action. It is no use imagining that you will be able to drive a car if you simply read the manual or study the rules of the road. You cannot learn to dance, paint, or cook by perusing texts or recipes. (p. xii)

It is this perspective Karen Armstrong brings to the whole purview of religious history. The insight, wisdom and comfort of good religions is not the result of believing certain ‘truths’ or creedal propositions but disciplined practice. She points to the musician lost in her music or the dancer inseparable from the dance – a satisfaction, she contends, that goes deeper than merely “feeling good.” It can lead to “ekstasis” – a “stepping outside” the norm.

Religion is a practical discipline that teaches us to discover new capacities of mind and heart. This will be one of the major themes of this book. It is no use magisterially weighing up the teachings of religion to judge their truth or falsehood before embarking on a religious way of life. You will discover their truth – or lack of it – only if you translate these doctrines into ritual or ethical action. Like any skill, religion requires perseverance, hard work, and discipline. Some people will be better at it than others, some appallingly inept, and some will miss the point entirely. But those who do not apply themselves will get nowhere at all. Religious people find it hard to explain how their rituals and practices work, just as a skater may not be fully conscious of the physical laws that enable her to glide over the ice on a thin blade. (p. xiii)

For those who engage in religious practice – meditating, participation in liturgy and ritual-witness to the discovery of a transcendent dimension of life - that has been a fact of human life, but it was impossible to explain what that transcendent dimension was in terms of *logos*. However, she writes:

This imprecision was not frustrating, as a modern Western person might imagine, but brought with it an *ekstasis* that lifted practitioners beyond the constricting confines of self. Our scientifically oriented knowledge seeks to master reality, explain it, and bring it under the control of reason, but a delight in unknowing has also been part of the human experience. Even today, poets, philosophers, mathematicians, and scientists find that the contemplation of the insoluble is a source of joy, astonishment, and contentment.

Armstrong cites the early Daoists who saw religion as a “knack” acquired by constant practice. Speaking of our own situation, she suggests we have not been doing our practice and have lost the “knack” of religion. The origin of our dilemma lies in the modern period.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a time that historians call the early modern period, Western people began to develop an entirely new kind of civilization, governed by scientific rationality and based economically on technology and capital investment. *Logos* achieved such spectacular results that myth was discredited and the scientific method was thought to be the only reliable means of attaining truth. This would make religion difficult, if not impossible. As theologians began to adopt the criteria of science, the *mythos* of Christianity were interpreted as empirically, rationally, and historically verifiable and forced into a style of thinking that was alien to them. Philosophers and scientists could no longer see the point of ritual, and religious knowledge became theoretical rather than practical. We lost the art of interpreting the old tales of gods walking the earth, dead men striding out of tombs, or seas parting miraculously. We began to understand concepts such as faith, revelation, myth, mystery, and dogma in a way that would have been very surprising to our ancestors. In particular, the meaning of the word “belief” changed, so that a credulous acceptance of creedal doctrines became the prerequisite of faith, so much so that today we often speak of religious people as “believers,” as though accepting orthodox dogma “on faith” were their most important activity. (p. xv)

That paragraph really expresses the heart of Armstrong’s contention as she addresses our contemporary situation with *The Case for God*. She does a marvelous job of describing the rise of modernity as it emerged from the late medieval period – the early development of the scientific method, the inductive method of empirical research and experimentation. She chronicles with clarity the triumph of *logos* in the mastering of the natural world, the growing consensus that *logos* was the sole means of acquiring true knowledge and how, in turn, the theologians sought by means of rational thought to express religious truth.

Such a move by the religious scholars to abandon mythical thinking and seek to establish God-talk and spiritual reality by means of the canons of human reason – while understandable given the climate of opinion of modernity, especially the Enlightenment – was a disaster for it is an impossibility. And, further, it has led to the rejection of the spiritual dimension of our human experience and the abandonment of religious practice wherein the human family had found hope, comfort and healing. She describes the consequences of the move in the modern age of religious discourse from myth to reason.

This rationalized interpretation of religion has resulted in two distinctively modern phenomena: fundamentalism and atheism. The two are related. The defensive piety popularly known as fundamentalism erupted in almost every major faith during the twentieth century. In their desire to produce a wholly rational, scientific faith that abolished *mythos* in favor of *logos*, Christian fundamentalists have interpreted scripture with a literalism that

is unparalleled in the history of religion. In the United States, protestant fundamentalists have evolved an ideology known as “creation science” that regards the *mythoi* of the Bible as scientifically accurate. They have, therefore, campaigned against the teaching of evolution in the public schools, because it contradicts the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis. (p.xv)

Armstrong points out that atheism is rarely “a blanket denial of the sacred per se” but most often a rejection of some particular conception of the Divine. This can be demonstrated in the rise of classical Western atheism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as its present expression.

Atheism is therefore parasitically dependent on the form of theism it seeks to eliminate and becomes its reverse mirror image. Classical Western atheism was developed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, whose ideology was essentially a response to and dictated by the theological perception of God that had developed in Europe and the United States during the modern period. The more recent atheism of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris is rather different, because it has focused exclusively on the God developed by the fundamentalisms, and all three insist that fundamentalism constitutes the essence and core of all religion. This has weakened their critique, because fundamentalism is in fact a defiantly unorthodox form of faith that frequently misrepresents the tradition it is trying to defend. But the “new atheists” command a wide readership, not only in secular Europe but even in the more conventionally religious United States. The popularity of their books suggests that many people are bewildered and even angered by the God concept they have inherited. (p. xvi)

But the whole broad picture of human knowing has undergone and is undergoing a major shift in understanding. Our era has no name except “post-modernity”. Obviously the label points to the contention that we as a human family in the pursuit of truth, knowledge of our world, have moved beyond the assumptions of the modern age with its certainty of *logos* as the only and final arbiter of truth. She explains:

Philosophy, theology, and mythology have always responded to the science of the day, and a philosophical movement has developed since the 1980s that has embraced the indeterminacy of the new cosmology. Postmodern thinking is heir to Hume and Kant in its assumption that what we call reality is constructed by the mind and that all human understanding is therefore interpretation rather than the acquisition of accurate, objective information. From this it follows that no single vision can be sovereign; that our knowledge is relative, subjective, and fallible rather than certain and absolute; and that truth is inherently ambiguous. Received ideas that

are the products of a particular historical and cultural milieu must, therefore, be stringently deconstructed. But this analysis must not be based on any absolute principle, and there is no assurance that we will ever arrive at – or even approximate – a wholly accurate version of the truth. Fundamental to postmodern thought is the conviction that instead of ideologies mirroring external conditions, the world is profoundly affected by the ideology that human beings impose upon it. We are not forced by sense data to adopt a particular worldview, so we have a choice in what we affirm – as well as an immense responsibility. (p. 311)

That is a major shift! Armstrong cites an Italian postmodernist, Vattimo, who has focused on the French thinker Derrida's later work. Vattimo argues that from the beginning religion had recognized that it was "an essentially interpretive discourse: it had traditionally proceeded by endless deconstructing its sacred texts, so that from the start it had the potential to liberate itself from metaphysical orthodoxy." (p. 313)

Modernity, Vattimo believes, is over; when we contemplate history, we cannot now see the future as an inevitable and unilinear progression toward emancipation. Freedom no longer lies in the perfect knowledge of and conformity to the necessary structure of reality, but in an appreciation of multiple discourses and the historicity, contingency, and finitude of all religious, ethical, and political values – including our own. (p. 314)

Postmodernity, the American philosopher John D. Caputo contends, should be "a more enlightened Enlightenment, that is no longer taken in by the dream of pure objectivity."

Armstrong concludes her chapter on "Death of God?" quoting Caputo:

If modern atheism is the rejection of a modern God, then the delimitation of modernity opens up another possibility, less the resuscitation of premodern theism than the chance of something beyond both the theism and the atheism of modernity. (p. 317)

Armstrong concludes the section, "...how best can we move beyond premodern theism into a perception of "God" that truly speaks to all the complex realities and needs of our time?" And she begins her Epilogue with the statement, "Religion was never supposed to provide answers to questions that lay within the reach of human reason." (p. 318) Underscoring the point made throughout the study, "Religion is a practical discipline, and its insights are not derived from abstract speculation but from spiritual exercises and a dedicated lifestyle." (p. 318) But she anticipates the question that will inevitably arise – "Are we doomed to the perpetual regression of postmodern thought?" (p. 327) She answers,

Perhaps the only viable “natural theology” lies in religious experience. By this, of course, I do not mean fervid emotional piety. We have seen that in the past scholars and spiritual directors had little time for this religious positivism. Instead of seeking out exotic raptures, Schleiermacher, Bultmann, Rahner, and Lonergan have all suggested that we should explore the normal workings of our minds and notice how frequently these propel us quite naturally into transcendence. Instead of looking for what we call God “outside ourselves” (*foris*) in the cosmos, we should, like Augustine, turn within and become aware of the way quite ordinary responses segue into “otherness.” We have seen how the inherent finitude of language was regularly exploited by teachers like Denys to make the faithful aware of the silence we encounter on the other side of speech. It has been well said that music, which, as we saw at the beginning of this book, is a “definitively” rational activity, is itself a “natural theology.” In music the mind experiences a pure, direct emotion that transcends ego and fuses subjectivity and objectivity.

As Basil explained, we can never know the ineffable *ousia* of God but can glimpse only its traces or effects (*energeiai*) in our time-bound, sense-bound world. It is clear that the meditation, yoga, and rituals that work aesthetically on a congregation have, when practiced assiduously over a lifetime, a marked effect on the personality – an effect that is another form of natural theology. There is no dramatic “born-again” conversion but a slow, incremental, and imperceptible transformation. Above all, the habitual practice of compassion and the Golden Rule “all day and every day” demands perpetual *kenosis*. The constant “stepping outside” of our own preferences, convictions, and prejudices is an *ekstasis* that is not a glamorous rapture but, as Confucius’s pupil Yan Hui explained, is itself the transcendence we seek. The effect of these practices cannot give us concrete information about God; it is certainly not a scientific “proof.” But something indefinable happens to people who involve themselves in these disciplines with commitment and talent. This “something” remains opaque to those who do not undergo these disciplines, however, just as the Eleusinian “mystery” sounded trivial and absurd to somebody who remained obstinately outside the cult hall and refused to undergo the initiation. (p. 327f)

In these two citations, Armstrong readily acknowledges that these practices give us no “concrete information about God” – no scientific “proof.” Nonetheless she points to the effects of the disciplined practice of religious exercises.

That that is in fact the case has been documented. As I began I listed the books that fell serendipitously into my hands. One of them by Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman is entitled *How God Changes Your Brain*. It is beyond my purpose to deal with the neurological research set forth in this work. The author’s research gives them no basis for affirming or denying the existence of God. What

they do as neural scientists is map the brain registering the physical response in the brains of various persons and groups as they are actually engaged in meditation, contemplation – in some form of spiritual practice. In the opening pages of the book, Newberg gives a concise summary of what he and his colleagues are about.

Along with my research staff at the University of Pennsylvania and the Center for Spirituality and the Mind, we are currently studying Sikhs, Sufis, yoga practitioners, and advanced meditators to map the neurochemical changes caused by spiritual and religious practices. Our research has led us to the following conclusions:

1. Each part of the brain constructs a different perception of God.
2. Every human brain assembles its perceptions of God in uniquely different ways, thus giving God different qualities of meaning and value.
3. Spiritual practices, even when stripped of religious beliefs, enhance the neural functioning of the brain in ways that improve physical and emotional health.
4. Intense, long-term contemplation of God and other spiritual values appears to permanently change the structure of those parts of the brain that control our moods, give rise to our conscious notions of self, and shape our sensory perceptions of the world.
5. Contemplative practices strengthen a specific neurological circuit that generates peacefulness, social awareness, and compassion for others.

Spiritual practices also can be used to enhance cognition, communication, and creativity, and over time can even change our neurological perception of reality itself. Yet, it is a reality that we cannot objectively confirm. Instead, our research has led us to conclude that three separate realities intermingle to give us a working model of the world: the reality that actually exists outside of our brain, and two internal realities – maps that our brain constructs about the world. One of these maps is subconscious and primarily concerned with survival and the biological maintenance of the body. But this map is not the world itself; it's just a guide that helps us navigate the terrain. Human beings, however, construct a second internal reality – a map that reflects our *conscious* awareness of the universe. This consciousness is very different from the subconscious map formed by our sensory and emotional circuits. We know that these two internal maps exist, but we have yet to discover if, and to what degree, these two inner realities communicate with each other.

Overall, our consciousness represents a reality that is the farthest removed from the world that actually exists outside of the brain. Thus, if God does

exist, there would be three separate realities to consider: the God that exists in the world, our subconscious perception of that God, and the conscious images and concepts that we construct in a very small part of our frontal, temporal, and parietal lobes. It has been my goal to show that spiritual practices may help us to bridge the chasm between these inner and outer realities, which would then bring us closer to what actually exists in the world. I still don't know if it's possible, but the health benefits associated with meditation and religious ritual cannot be denied. (p. 6)

Interestingly, in an Epilogue entitled, "Is God Real?", Newberg writes more personally about the God question.

For those who embark on a spiritual journey, God becomes a metaphor reflecting their personal search for Truth. It is a journey inward toward self-awareness, salvation or enlightenment, and for those who are touched by this mystical experience, life becomes more meaningful and rich.

Personally, I believe there has to be an absolute truth about the universe. I don't know what it is, but I am driven to seek it, using science, philosophy, and spirituality as my guide...

...I harbor the hope and feeling that God or some ultimate reality, in whatever form it may take, actually exists. I don't know if my intuition is true, but I am quite comfortable with my uncertainty. (p. 246)

Barbara Bradley Hagerty was not "comfortable with her uncertainty." She set out on a serious quest to research the God question, engaging with persons who have had experience of another dimension, of God, of being transported into another realm of reality, as well as those pursuing the science of brain research in relation to spiritual experience. She is NPR's award-winning religion correspondent and was formerly a reporter at the Christian Science Monitor and thus combines a journalist's research and writing skills. The end product of her intensive research is the book *Fingerprints of God* (2009). A review in *Publishers Weekly* expresses the terrain covered by Hagerty concisely.

National Public Radio correspondent Hagerty acts as a tour guide through the rocky terrain of scientists who study religious experience. Is there a so-called God gene? Why do some people have mystical experiences while others never see the so-called light? Yet to each interview, whether with a world-renowned neuroscientist or a back-road mystic, [Hagerty] brings a suitably skeptical eye. Along the way, she manages to explain some pretty cutting-edge science – psychoneuroimmunology, anyone? – and unravel some people's pretty hard-to-comprehend religious experiences without sacrificing depth or complexity. Then, with equal aplomb, she dances off to peyote ceremonies, church service and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. The real beauty of this book lies in watching Hagerty gracefully balance

her own trust in faith and science and, in the end, come down with one foot planted firmly in both.”

That says it well; this is an exceptional study in my opinion. Seldom has one gone “groping after God” with such passionate engagement combined with intellectual integrity. Barbara Hagerty’s heart would not rest where her mind could not follow. Deep yearning to believe that the experiences of another dimension breaking into our space-time world are indeed the fingerprints of God, has not kept her from asking the tough questions and acknowledging the limits of scientific proof when focused on the question of the existence of God. She finally wrote her book because she couldn’t keep the questions at bay.

And yet I could not keep the questions at bay. Is there another reality that occasionally breaks into our world and bends the laws of nature? Is there a being or intelligence who weaves together the living universe, and if so, does He, She, or It fit the description I have been given? I was not worried about losing the old man with a beard – but what about the young man on a cross? Is there a spiritual world every bit as real as the phone ringing in the kitchen or my dog sitting on my foot, a dimension that eludes physical sight and hearing and touch? In the end, my questions boiled down to five words: *Is there more than this?* (p. 6)

Is there more than this? That is the question that drives those who long for some sign of a greater Reality that embraces us, yet insist on living with more than wishful thinking.

Barbara Hagerty was raised in a very positive and powerful Christian Science family environment but in her mid-thirties she left the practice of Christian Science, yet holding “to the idea of God, of a creator above and within this messy creation called my life and yours.” Researching a story on the Saddleback Church in California she had a powerful mystical experience – “...I was engulfed by a presence I could feel but not touch...Those few moments, the time it takes to boil water for tea, reoriented my life. The episode left a mark on my psyche that I bear to this day.” (p. 5). And thus her book *Fingerprints of God*.

This book tackles the existence of God, “the reality of the unseen,” as psychologist William James had it. After talking to countless scientists far more knowledgeable and insightful than I, I have concluded that science cannot prove God – but science is entirely consistent with God. It all depends on how you define “God.” If you are trying to locate deity in a thirty-three-year-old carpenter or the unseen divider of the Red Sea, science will offer no help. But if you look for God in the math of the universe, if you perceive God as the Mind that rigged existence to create life, then science can indeed accommodate. If you see God in the breathtaking complexity of our brains, as the architect of our bodies and

our minds who planted the question *Is there more?* – well, science has room for that kind of God. (p. 11f)

The book deserves a full treatment in its own right but that is beyond the limits of this presentation. I bring in Hagerty's research and conclusions as a confirmation of all we have learned from Karen Armstrong's *The Case for God*.

Recounting a great mass of personal experiences she learned of by interviewing persons with spiritual/mystical experiences, Hagerty begins to formulate the conclusions to which she is coming through conversation with a variety of scholars whose focus and research deal with the experiences that break the mold of materialism and its absolute denial of another dimension of reality.

From a lecture by Francis Collins, one of the country's leading geneticists and head of the Human Genome Project, Hagerty writes,

"God" may not be, as the atheists have it, a *delusion* – but perhaps a *conclusion* driven by the math of the universe. The infinite intelligence that maintains the planets in their orbits and tailors the molecular composition of air to each breath we take – this intelligence is not the figment of a narrow fundamentalist mind but the property of the most rigorous scientific minds. This is a God who makes sense to me, a defensible God, and one who has a starring role in a new batch of scientific experiments. (p. 246)

Continuing in this chapter entitled "A New Name for God," she brings in the ideas of Larry Dossey.

Imagine stripping God of all His imagery. Gone is the throne, the beard, the Michelangelo painting of a majestic Being nearly touching Adam's finger with the spark of life. Gone, too, are the stories of a God who intervened, who favored a certain people, who assumed the physique of a man. This stripped-down version would be the sum of his attributes, which would include infinite information, an omnipresence that fills all space and connects all atoms, a taste for mathematics that keeps the planets in their orbit, and the power to do so. This is a God who might appeal to the concrete thinking of a scientist. I came to think of this as "God 1.0" – God minus the love and the narrative history.

Larry Dossey calls this God "non-local mind." Dossey, a doctor and author, coined the term in his 1989 book *Recovering the Soul*. It bears more than a smart scientific ring. "Non-locality" is a staple of quantum mechanics, and one of the spookier aspects of physics. For Dossey and others on the edge of science, "non-local mind" refers to a consciousness that defies the bounds of space or time.

“Perhaps the place to start is to say that non-locality is simply a fancified word for infinitude,” Dossey told me one luminous day in July 2006. “If consciousness is non-local, then it is infinite in space and time. If something is infinite in *space*, it’s omnipresent. If it’s infinite in *time*, it’s eternal, or immortal. So you can see that from the get-go there’s theological dynamite that’s hooked up with this idea of non-local mind.” ...

What he proposes is a revolution in science. If non-local mind were merely the equivalent of the Divine Watchmaker, who created the universe and then let it tick away on its own, the idea would unsettle fewer of his colleagues. But Dossey’s claim is far more galling: he suggests that his non-local mind interacts – has a relationship, even – with a person’s individual, *local* mind, in the same way that many Christians or Jews believe that God interacts with people. According to Dossey and a growing number of scientists (along with most of the American population), this cosmic consciousness permeates our world and soaks into our human affairs.

Think of your “local” mind as your personal computer. You can keep files and write documents that no one else can access. “Non-local” mind is like the Internet: it contains enormous amounts of information, shared by billions of people (potentially by everyone on earth), and is always available for you to access with your individual mind.

Dossey theorizes that your consciousness shares qualities with non-local mind, that the local and the infinite are “two sides of the same coin.” This may seem far-fetched until you begin reading the mystics or practicing meditation or listening to anyone who has enjoyed a profoundly spiritual experience. They witness to being “at one” with the universe and God, feeling the boundlessness of the infinite, and experiencing “the divine within.” And if there is a dialogue, so to speak, between your mind and the larger non-local mind, then it follows that your mind could do things that modern science says is impossible, such as impact other minds or know things that you simply should not know. ...

“One of the things that scientists have had a difficult time doing is to imagine how consciousness might behave non-locally,” Dossey observed. “That it might exert its effects beyond the individual brain and the body, as in the stuff that parapsychology deals with, like ESP, clairvoyance, this sort of thing. And, we must add, intercessory prayer, which has always been a claim of all major religions. So it has been verboten to suggest that this actually happens, that the mind can behave non-locally, because every respectable scientist is dragooned into the notion that, by definition, *that can’t happen*.” (pp. 246-248)

Following on her discussion about Dossey, Hagerty relates another fascinating conversation with Dean Radin, a senior scientist at the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS). Dean Radin has a hypothesis: We have “entangled minds.” Hagerty quotes Radin.

“Early on I was attracted to the notion that there were multiple layers to any story,” he recalled, gazing out his window at the mountains surrounding the IONS compound, a wilderness paradise some forty miles north of San Francisco. “I never forgot that virtually anything that people are presenting to you, even in science, has multiple levels of meaning.”

This intuition – that there may be a hidden reality – led Radin to *entanglement*. The idea of entanglement is this: when you delve down to the subatomic or quantum level, particles remain connected even when they are apparently separated. Albert Einstein called these connections in quantum theory “spooky action at a distance.”

When Einstein was alive, entanglement was only an idea that was predicted by mathematics, but it had not yet been demonstrated in the laboratory. That would begin to happen in the 1970s, when researchers first started to explore whether the predicted properties of entanglement could be observed in the laboratory. In a groundbreaking study in the 1980s, French scientist Alain Aspect and his colleagues experimentally caused two photons, or light particles, to become entangled. When a property of light – such as spin, position, or momentum – was measured in one of the particles, the “twin” particle instantly showed the opposite property. What was especially spooky was that distance between particles did not matter. Even though the twins were more than thirty miles apart, they behaved as if they were still connected. They were entangled.

Radin is quick to point out that entanglement has been shown only at the subatomic level, and that we human beings are much bigger than that. But since people and things are composed of subatomic particles, Radin argues, entanglement may suggest that *everything* is interconnected, even people. We are not billiard balls on a pool table that occasionally bump into each other. We are part of a fabric woven so tightly that pulling one thread alters the whole tapestry. Or, try this: Reality is like Jell-O: Poke one side of the bowl and the green stuff on the other side jiggles. According to Dean Radin’s entangled reality, if that “poke” is an event – say, a car accident – information about that event could pop into someone’s head miles away. (p. 250f)

Hagerty tells of attending a conference at Cambridge University in 2005, one of ten seasoned journalists invited by The Templeton Foundation and Cambridge University to observe celebrities in the world of science present their ideas about biology, string theory, and multiverses. The question underlying the

presentations was: Could God retain a place in the intelligent man's world? Or, in the scientific age: Has God been reduced to a superstitious belief lacking any rational basis? Hagerty felt after eight days of lectures that God was losing. She writes that she was witnessing a blitzkrieg of scientific materialism overrunning the quaint but untestable claims of God and that irked her. The decks were stacked, the outcome certain. How could it be any different – “The rules of the game – the paradigm of modern science – revolve around certain core beliefs. One of them dictates that scientists can study only what they can measure: The physical world and observable behavior. Try to investigate something that cannot be precisely measured – such as spiritual experience that transforms a person's life – well, that's cause for immediate disqualification.” (p. 269) She goes on:

Another rule is the mind-brain paradigm: everything we are, see, feel, do, or think is a physical state, the electrical and chemical activity in three pounds of tissue called the brain. Mind, consciousness – forget about the *soul* – must be reduced to matter. It is a closed loop, excluding any notion of God or a spiritual realm. (p. 269)

But then she tells of quite an amazing happening.

But on that rainy morning in Cambridge I witnessed something extraordinary, akin to Dorothy spotting the little bald man pulling the levers of the Wizard of Oz. For only a moment, the curtain pulled back and we saw the fight for what it was: two *belief systems* duking it out.

John Barrows, a brilliant Cambridge mathematician, was speed-walking us through the hypothesis of a “fine-tuned” universe that is exquisitely and astonishingly calibrated to allow for life. He explained the concept of “multiverses,” which posits that we live in one of 10,500 universes. Then he said, almost as an aside, “I'm quite happy with a traditional theistic view of the universe.”

He might as well have dropped an anvil on Richard Dawkins's foot. Dawkins is a renowned evolutionary biologist at Oxford University and possibly the world's most famous atheist, certainly one of the most militant. Two days earlier, Dawkins had delivered a talk that he believed would prove the impossibility of God, and which would later be published as a book called *The God Delusion*. He had remained in Cambridge to hear the lectures of other researchers, particularly the world-class John Barrow. When Barrow, who turned out to be an Anglican, mentioned his belief in God, Dawkins began roiling with frustration like a teakettle about to blow.

“Why on earth do you believe in God? Dawkins blurted.

All heads turned to Barrow. “If you want to look for divine action, physicists look at the rationality of the universe and the mathematical structure of the world.”

“Yes, but *why do you want to look for divine action?*” Dawkins demanded.

“For the same reason that someone might *not* want to,” Barrow responded with a little smile, as all of us erupted in laughter – except for Dawkins.

So there you have it. The paradigm is not a law, it is a choice: a choice to look for – or exclude – the action of a divine intelligence. The paradigm to exclude a divine intelligence, or “Other,” or “God,” to reduce all things to matter, has reigned triumphant for some four hundred years, since the dawn of the Age of Reason. Today, a small yet growing number of scientists are trying to chip away at the paradigm, suspecting that its feet are made of clay. (pp. 269f)

After all of her travels, interviews and investigation of mind-brain research, Hagerty came to a place where head and heart could comfortably dwell. This is her witness.

I came to define God by His handiwork: a craftsman who builds the hope of eternity into our genes, a master electrician and chemist who outfits our brains to access another dimension, a guru who rewards our spiritual efforts by allowing us to feel united with all things, an intelligence that pervades every atom and every nanosecond, all time and space, in the throes of death or the ecstasy of life.

This view of God and spiritual reality offers an alternative to superstition. It allows you to steer through an all-or-nothing attitude – that either there is a God who intervenes, depending on His mood and whether you’ve been naughty or nice; or that “God” is the product of ignorance and we live in a cold, uncaring, random universe. It seems to me that advances in science, and particularly in quantum physics, are offering another description of reality in which all things are guided by and connected to an Infinite Mind. This description, of course, echoes the words of mystics down the ages. (p. 277f)

Finally, the originating question, “Is there more than this?” She answers, yes, there is and she believes the new science of spirituality buttresses her instinct that we are crafted with astonishing precision so that we can, on occasion, peer into a spiritual world and know God.

This is a place the heart can rest and the mind can follow. And there is more to come!

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