

# **Encountering Light\*Within**

**A Post-Christian Religion**

Arthur D'Adamo

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Arthur D'Adamo

artdadamo@gmail.com  
art@adamford.com

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# Encountering Light\*Within

## A Post-Christian Religion

Miscellaneous Notes on Finding God

### {1 Introduction}

I regard the Bible as a collection of fairy tales and Jesus as a fictional character born in the mythology of the ancient Roman Empire. Yet I know a Reality exists, vast and sublime, that deserves the name God. I've spent most of my life trying to draw closer to this Reality, trying to come to know it better, experience it more intimately, and love it more deeply.

### {2 Catholicism}

I first learned about God at my mother's knee, at age of four or five. The idea filled me with wonder and awe, in a way impossible to express. It still does.

About age six, my parents took me to Catholic Mass. At the time, the priest recited the Mass in Latin. I didn't like the meaningless mumbo jumbo the priest said, or the mumbo jumbo the people said in response. Adults, as I knew them, had various states. One, the animated state when greeting children: "Well, hello! Is this really little Artie? My, how big you've grown." State two, the routine adult-to-adult state, muted and matter-of-fact. State three, joy or sadness, laughter or anger. In the Mass, I saw a fourth state, a doped, semiconscious state

where adults mumbled meaningless words.

After a few times at Mass, I realized I'd made a mistake. The adults weren't speaking Latin. They were mumbling the Lord's Prayer in English, in a semiconscious state that made it difficult to recognize the words as English.

I wouldn't call my first experiences of the Catholic Mass or Church positive experiences.

At age seven, my parents sent me to an after-school religion class, in preparation for receiving the Catholic sacraments of Confirmation and First Communion. In class, I heard ideas about God that struck me as less than wonderful; grotesque, in fact. God, said the nun, condemned all who died without a Catholic baptism to eternal torture. And Catholics who died with unforgiven mortal sins suffered the same fate.

I wondered what happened to people born in non-Catholic countries. It didn't seem fair for God to send them to hell if they had never heard of Jesus. And what about the Jewish kids I played with? My neighborhood had mostly Italian, Irish, and Jewish. I played with the two Jewish kids about my age who lived in the next row house. The idea that they might die and go to hell seemed wrong. It didn't seem fair. In fact, it didn't seem fair for God to send anyone to hell.

I didn't think he did that. What I heard in Catholic religion classes didn't sound like the God I knew. It didn't sound like God at all.

At my coming First Communion, said the nun, I would eat the actual body of God, although it would appear as bread. For Jesus had said, "Unless you eat my body and drink my blood you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." The priest would drink Jesus's blood for us, which had the appearance of wine. But we had to eat his body.

The whole story seemed unlikely, somehow warped and unhealthy. I thought about refusing First Communion but lacked the courage to do so. So I had my First Communion, though I believed they were wrong—that the nuns and priest



didn't have it right, weren't telling me the truth about God.

In first and second grade I attended a public school. For third grade my mother convinced me to go to Catholic school. I didn't want to. But with more than a little parental pressure, I agreed and began my third year of education with maybe thirty other little boys and girls, and a nun as a teacher.

Mom remained a devout Catholic all her life and had a special devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Dad was a good man, well-liked, with a naturally cheerful disposition. He agreed, or at least acquiesced, with Mom about how my sister and I should be raised, though he seemed less religious and even skeptical of religion.

And so I found myself in third grade in Catholic school, in a regimented, authoritarian atmosphere. I followed the rules in school, didn't get into trouble, and got good grades. So the nuns probably saw me as a quiet kid who did what he was expected to do and believed what he was expected to believe. They were half right.

### {3 Post-Christian Religion}

I'm looking for a post-Christian religion. Islam sees itself as a post-Christian religion. But Islam accepts the idea of hell and eternal torture and is not the religion I'm looking for. Many Christians don't know about the post-Christian aspect of Islam so a few words may be in order.

One-upmanship is the art or practice of successively outdoing a competitor.—Wikipedia

The ancient Jews proclaimed themselves a Chosen People, a people special to God. Well, if they're God's chosen people and you're not Jewish, then where does that leave you?

Then the Christians came along and found a way to one-up the Jews, to see themselves as God's special darlings. They said the Jews rejected the savior sent by God, lost their favored place, and became God's formerly Chosen People. Now the

Christians, who followed God's only begotten son, were God's best buddies. And if you don't follow God's son, then you're God's barbeque, say the Christians.

Next, the Muslims entered the religious scene and found a way to one-up the Jews and Christians, to picture themselves as God's closest friends. It seems Moses had recorded part of what God wanted but not exactly what God wanted. So God had sent another prophet, Jesus. He did better than Moses but still didn't get it quite right. And his followers mistake him, a mere prophet, as God's son, a terrible error because God, according to Islam, neither begets nor is begotten. So God had to send yet another prophet, Mohammed, who finally got it right. God won't need to send any more prophets. So Islam calls Mohammed "the seal of the prophets," the last and final prophet. And it calls unbelievers fuel for the fires of hell.

Little Abe says, "Mom and Dad like me best." His brother Chris says, "Well, Mom and Dad may have liked you best before I came along. But you don't do what they tell you to, so now I'm Mom and Dad's favorite." "Chris," says brother Mahmoud, "you may be better behaved than Abe, but you're still not as nice as me, so I'm Mom and Dad's real favorite."

This brother refuses to see God as a parent who picks favorites, who doesn't love all his children equally.

#### {4 One-upmanship}

We find one-upmanship within Christianity, too. In school I learned the Catholic Church regards itself as the One, True Church. Through the centuries, Church leaders expressed this dogma: "There is no salvation outside the Church," meaning the Catholic Church. (The Catholic Church changed its tune a bit after Vatican II in the 1960s and said that maybe non-Catholics could get into heaven after all. In 2007, though, the pope said other churches "lack the means of salvation," reverting to traditional dogma.)

A church that lacks the means of salvation obviously cannot

give salvation to its members; it cannot give what it itself does not have. Sorry, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and all you others, if you didn't get your salvation from the one and only, franchised by Jesus, True Church®, then you didn't get the genuine article. Too bad.

Non-Catholic churches don't respond by turning the other cheek. Rather, they respond in kind: if you're Catholic, they say, you're the one going to hell, not them. A Jehovah's Witness once told me that only members of his religion get to live in heaven with God; other good people spend all eternity in an earthly paradise, while evil people after death cease to exist. As an adult I worked with a Baptist man who said Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses spend eternity in hell, while good Baptists, naturally, get to go to heaven.

As a child, I believed the Catholics had the best claim to being the one, true church, because if Jesus brought salvation to earth, I couldn't see how he could leave it with a Protestant church that didn't exist until fifteen centuries later. As an adult, I learned about the Greek Orthodox Church, which may have a better claim than Catholics to the salvation Jesus supposedly brought to earth. After all, New Testament manuscripts are written in Greek not Latin. And according to the Greek Orthodox, the Catholics went fatally wrong when they allowed the Filioque phrase to infect their dogma. Reading a book by a Greek Orthodox monk, I once saw the phrase, "the so-called churches of the West." It looks like the Greek Orthodox one-up the Catholics.

Man is the only animal that has the One, True Religion—  
several of them.— Mark Twain

### {5 Ways of Knowing}

I once watched a TV show about India's movie industry. One clip showed a man in a room, looking at two tough men, who obviously meant him harm, coming through the door. So the man takes off his shoes, holds the soles toward the men, and runs toward them. They flee. If I recall correctly, the men would

lose caste and become stigmatized if the shoes of a lower caste person touched them. India has other customs concerning feet. For instance, children symbolically take the dust of an elder's feet as a sign of respect.

Custom and culture, language, social norms, and religion differ between countries. But what we have found to be true—math and the sciences—does not differ. We don't have Indian chemistry, Spanish chemistry, and Japanese chemistry. Rather, we have chemistry. But we do have Indian religion, Spanish religion, and Japanese religion. And we find that children usually inherit religion from their parents, just as they inherit language, culture, and social norms.

If scientists all over the world can come to agreement on the truth, why can't religious leaders—even with the help of prayer, faith, God, the Holy Spirit, and all the rest? The answer concerns ways of knowing, what philosophers call epistemological methods.

Science uses a way of knowing the truth based on observation, experiment, and theory—not theory with the colloquial meaning of a guess, but with the scientific meaning of an idea that organizes facts and makes testable predictions. Scientists have a way of testing their theories and arriving at a true one: they use experiment and observation. For instance, Newton's theory of gravitation predicted the orbit of the planets, but its predictions of Mercury's orbit differed slightly from fact. Einstein's theory agreed better with fact, so Einstein's theory won out.

Religion uses a way of knowing based on revelation. Something is true because Jesus, the Bible, Buddha, Mohammed, or someone else said so. So religions have no way of finding a common truth. If Jesus said one thing—"I and my Father are one"—then Christians must believe it. And if Mohammed said a contrary thing—"God neither begets nor is begotten"—then Muslims must believe that. Christians and Muslims may try to convert each other, but they have no way of arriving at the truth together.

Religion's way of knowing at times hinders the search for truth. For instance, Saint Augustine regarded the Bible as free of error and contradiction, as do many Christians today. Yet he knew Matthew 27:9 attributes a passage to Jeremiah actually in Zechariah 11:13. So, did Augustine acknowledge the simple truth: Matthew erred? Did he change his belief to conform to fact? No, he argued the Holy Spirit allowed Matthew to write Jeremiah to show "the essential unity of the words of the prophets." If scientists accepted that kind of gibberish reasoning, they would still be trying to turn lead into gold, and we'd still be lighting our homes with candles.

Religion's way of knowing resembles the child's way. My mommy says this so it must be true. Well, my daddy says this, so your mommy is wrong. Is not. Is to. Is not. Is to. Science's way of knowing resembles the way adults discuss a question and arrive at an answer.

Could a religion ever be scientific? I think it could if it used science's way of knowing. That is, in "scientific religion" the term "scientific" would refer to the epistemological method, while "religion" would refer to the domain of values, morals, and ultimate questions usually addressed by religion, what philosophers call the ontological domain.

### {6 Salvation}

In the fourth century, the Empire of Rome moved the seat of its power from Rome to Constantinople. Thereafter, two main branches of Christianity existed; the Catholic, centered in Rome, and the Greek Orthodox, centered in New Rome (Constantinople). A few centuries later, Constantinople thrived as a city of more than a million, while barbarians ruled the empire in the West, still centered at Old Rome, whose population had fallen to the tens of thousands. Strife and disagreement marked relations between the two branches, especially because old, fallen Rome's bishop, also known as the Pope, claimed supremacy over all Christianity. The final divorce came in 1054 AD with one party claiming the other had been unfaithful to the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed dates from 325 AD when the first ecumenical council met in the city of Nicaea. As I learned it in Catholic school, the creed runs as follows.

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth . . . And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God . . . And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father **and the Son**

...

As originally written, the creed did not have the phrase “and the Son.” The Third Council of Toledo added it in 589. In 1014, the Catholic Church in Rome adopted the phrase. In 1054, the Greek Orthodox Church in Constantinople declared the phrase heretical.

So, according to the Greek Orthodox Church, I did not grow up in the One, True Church but in a heretical, “so-called” church. Prospects for my eternal salvation don’t look good, according to them.

According to a radio preacher I once heard, hell awaits anyone not baptized *by immersion*. So prospects for the eternal salvation of the Greek Orthodox don’t look good, according to the radio preacher.

Which brings up the question: If Jesus did indeed bring the means of salvation to earth, which church has it now? Which church provides the true, genuine way of salvation and which church offers a cheap imitation? That must seem the most important question in the world to people who genuinely believe in the existence of hell. But even genuinely religious people don’t often act as if they really believe in hell.

### {7 Hell}

In about fourth grade a boy in another class died of appendicitis. I knew enough religious dogma to know he might be suffering torture, a torture that would never end. That bothered me, though I didn’t know him personally.

The nuns, with assurance and confidence, taught “the truth”:

that there were venial and mortal sins; that if you died with venial sins on your soul you went to purgatory for a while but eventually went to heaven; that if you died with even one mortal sin on your soul you went to hell where you were tortured by fire forever; that missing Mass on Sunday and (at the time) eating meat on Friday were mortal sins.

So if my classmate had even one mortal sin on his soul and died before sincerely repenting, or confessing it to a priest and getting absolution, he went to hell—where he would stay forever. The possibility existed; he might be there. That possibility worried me. As far as I could tell, it didn't worry any adult. The nuns and priests, my family, even many of my friends, all seemed to have perfect assurance he had gone to heaven, but how could they know?

I had long doubted what I was taught. Now I began to suspect that even the teachers didn't believe it, not really. Jesus began to smell suspiciously like another person who knew when I was sleeping, knew when I was awake, knew if I'd been bad or good (so be good for goodness sake).

People acted as if hell didn't exist, and not only when the deceased was an innocent little grade-school boy. While I was still in grade school, an uncle passed away and then two aunts. There were W&F Catholics in the neighborhood—people who went to church only for weddings and funerals; such people regularly committed the mortal sin of missing Sunday Mass. But never, from childhood until now, have I attended a funeral where people show any genuine worry about the eternal fate of the deceased. They're sad, of course. They have sympathy for the family. But even the priest or preacher invariably acts as if the deceased certainly went to heaven.

Once upon a time, hellfire and brimstone preachers, thundering in the pulpit at funerals, reminded the congregation of hell and warned them to watch it, straighten up and fly right. Such preachers probably still exist, though I don't know any. And I don't miss them. But at least their actions match their words. They say hell exists, and they act as if they believe what they

say. I don't miss them, but I've got to give them credit for integrity.

### {8 Emotional Language}

We call a person who lacks integrity a hypocrite.

Years ago, as a graduate student in math, I decided to look up the definition of "hypocrisy." I had recently heard various politicians call one another "hypocrite" and realized I didn't have a clear idea of what the word meant. (In graduate math, definitions play a central role because all consequences must follow logically from the definitions. So a concern with definitions comes naturally.)

Hypocrisy is the state of pretending to have beliefs, opinions, virtues, feelings, qualities, or standards that one does not actually have.—Wikipedia

So we shouldn't call the man a hypocrite who says he hates dogs and, in fact, kicks a dog every chance he gets. (We may call him sick and in need of psychiatric help but not a hypocrite.) Rather the man who bills himself as an animal lover but who secretly kicks dogs is the hypocrite, because he pretends to have beliefs he doesn't have, because his acts do not follow his words.

Later I watched a play on TV with some friends. A character in the play preached that women were the weaker sex. His actions accorded with his words; he opened doors for them and did similar tasks. As we watched the show, a woman in the room, Penny, got more and more angry with the character. Finally, she blurted out, "That hypocrite!" I said jokingly, "But, Penny, a hypocrite is someone who says one thing but does the other. That man says women are the weaker sex and he treats them as such. So he's no hypocrite."

Everyone laughed except Penny, who was too angry to enjoy the joke. She looked at me exasperated and shouted, "You know what I mean." Everyone in the room knew what she meant. She meant, "You see that man in the play? Well, yuck



on him. Barf. Let's all blow him a raspberry! Let's all give him a Bronx cheer." In other words, "That hypocrite!" expressed emotion, not objective fact.

The idea of emotional language versus objective language has stayed with me. People often express emotion using objective language. For instance, a child says "My daddy is the best daddy in the whole, wide world" and we know what he means. He's expressing an emotion about his parent. Yet the child's words make an objective claim: that his dad is superior to all other dads. But we know to discount the words and read the emotion. It would be a dull-minded adult indeed who took the words seriously and said: "Now, wait a minute, little boy. Do you mean to say your dad is better than my dad? And how do you know if your dad is better than all other dads in the world? Have you even met all the other dads in the world? And by what criteria do you rate dads?"

The Bible calls Jesus the only begotten Son of God. Do New Testament authors use merely emotional language when they talk about Jesus, and are theologians like dull-minded adults?

### {9 Mass as Theatre}

Around the fifth grade, the call went out for boys interested in becoming altar boys. I volunteered, along with many other boys. I thought it might be fun being up there where the action was, rather than watching from the pews.

The Catholic Mass resembles theatre. You sit in the audience and watch. Whether you attend or not, no matter who the audience is, the performance is the same. Decades later a friend invited me to a Jewish service on a Friday. We sat around a table and shared wine and bread—real bread, loaves you broke with your hands, not the coin-size wafers of the Catholic Mass. And cups of wine. It occurred to me the Jewish service resembled a party, where the people who attend influence the dynamics of the event. A party can turn out differently depending on who comes or fails to come. A Mass in the church of my childhood, which holds more than a thousand people, would be the same

if I went or not. By high school I had stopped going.

My altar boy career didn't last long. At the first meeting, the priest gave us a page-long Latin prayer to memorize. At the second meeting, I had memorized a sentence or two, while other boys had reached far down the page. So ended my altar boy career.

I've never regretted not becoming an altar boy and, with all the publicity in recent years about priests who sexually molest children, I have sometimes thought it was for the best, though I never heard of priestly sexual misconduct occurring in my parish.

### {10 Enormous Lies, 1}

Another sign that religious leaders don't really believe what they preach about hell is how liberally they condemn their fellow human beings to go there. The radio preacher who said those not baptized by immersion went to hell, said it not with regret but with satisfaction, even glee. Christians who say non-Christians are going to hell don't usually show much sympathy or regret for the luckless people born into another religion, people who never heard of Jesus, or who heard of him from foreign oppressors or invading soldiers, and rejected him.

A believer might answer that he doesn't make the rules, God does; he might say he has faith and so accepts what God has ordained. One Christian, however, claims he can make the rules. It's instructive to see how freely he condemns others to hell.

The nuns in Catholic school taught that the pope can decree what is and is not a mortal sin. Jesus, they said, gave this ability to the first pope, Saint Peter: "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Peter, in turn, passed the ability on to the next pope, and so on, down to today.

Not all Christians accept that interpretation of scripture. We

may safely assume Martin Luther, who wrote “I know that the Pope is Antichrist, and that his seat is that of Satan himself,” disagreed with the interpretation. And if I recall correctly, my Jehovah’s Witness music teacher said Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit, not Peter, in the verses. But I’m not concerned with the proper interpretation of the verses (if indeed we may speak of the proper interpretation of fairy tales). The Catholic Church says it can make something a mortal sin. How freely does it use that power, knowing that the more acts it declares a mortal sin, the more people will go to hell?

The Church has made pre-marital sex, divorce, marrying a divorced person, intentionally missing Mass on Sunday, and masturbation mortal sins. Once it said eating meat on Friday was a mortal sin. So if my grade-school classmate decided to eat a hot dog on Friday (“Wow, doesn’t that look good. Well, it’s Friday and I shouldn’t. But it’ll be all right; I’ll just go to confession tomorrow.”) and died without a chance to repent, then at this very moment God tortures him, and shall do so for the rest of eternity.

The Catholic Church tells enormous lies about God.

### {11 Enormous Lies, 2}

Some Christians place no faith in the Catholic Church; they believe in the Bible. If anything contradicts the Bible—science, for instance—they say the Bible is right. But what about when the Bible contradicts the Bible?

Does the Bible contain contradictions? “No, not even one,” say many Christians, ignoring the obvious. In fact, it’s easy to find contradictions once you’re no longer blinded by dogma or fear. Let’s take one example.

The story of the census of David appears twice in the Bible. Similar or identical sentences show it to be two versions on the same story. For instance, here’s how the story ends:

15 So the LORD sent a plague on Israel . . . and seventy thousand of the people from Dan to Beersheba died. 16 When

the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the LORD relented concerning the disaster and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, "Enough! Withdraw your hand." The angel of the LORD was then at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. (2 Samuel 24)

14 So the LORD sent a plague on Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead. 15 . . . But as the angel was doing so, the LORD saw it and relented concerning the disaster and said to the angel who was destroying the people, "Enough! Withdraw your hand." The angel of the LORD was then standing at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. (1 Chronicles 21)

And here's how it begins:

1 Again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go and take a census of Israel and Judah." (2 Samuel 24)

1 Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel. (1 Chronicles 21)

So who incited David to take the census, God or Satan?

A Christian apologist's explanation is that God and Satan both provoked David to do the census. Contradiction explained? Well, let's look at the whole story and decide.

Once, King David decides to do a census of Israel. He doesn't make his decision freely. God and Satan incite him to do it; God and Satan tamper with his free will. After the census, David worries he has angered God. A prophet tells him that God indeed is angry and will allow him to choose his punishment: three years of famine, three months of running from his enemies, or three days of plague. Saying "Let us fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great," David picks plague. The plague kills seventy thousand people.

God provokes David to conduct a census, then gets angry about the census. So God murders seventy thousand people to punish David. God's mercies are great?

Now imagine the story began, "Once upon a time, King David decides to do a census of Israel." Doesn't that make more

sense?

The Bible tells enormous lies about God.

### {12 Jesus and Superman}

Seeing the Bible as fairy tales doesn't mean the Bible contains only fairy tales. It contains factual statements, too. Some of the people and cities it mentions existed. Did Jesus exist, too? I have two answers: possibly and no.

Let's discuss a parallel case first, did Superman really exist? Possibly, in that people named Clark Kent have lived. And one or more of them may have been exceptionally strong and worked for a newspaper. No, in that no "man of steel" ever lived who could fly, see through walls, and be harmed by a substance called kryptonite.

So, did Jesus ever live? Possibly, in that the Romans may have once crucified a Jewish rabbi named Jesus. In fact, several of the people they crucified may have been a rabbi and had the name Jesus. No, in that no man fathered by God who could walk on water and raise the dead ever lived.

Moreover, the name was almost certainly not "Jesus." Marcus, Aurelius, Brutus, Boethius—are all Roman names. "Jesus" is a Roman name, too, derived from a Jewish name rendered in English as "Joshua." A baby born to Jewish parents might have the name Joshua. And a character born in Roman mythology might have the name Jesus.

### {13 Disconfirming Evidence, 1}

When eighth grade began, the nun asked us to describe a place we visited over the summer. Theresa, a superior student and good girl who never got into trouble, reported on her visit to the YWCA. When she finished, the nun reminded us that non-Catholics go to the YWCA, and that we should always be on

guard not to lose our precious faith by associating too freely with non-Catholics.

Scholars who study the art of good decision-making recommend we look for disconfirming evidence, for evidence that tests our beliefs. If our beliefs withstand the test, we have that much more confidence in them. If the evidence demolishes our beliefs, then we grow wiser by losing a misconception.

The person who seeks truth welcomes evidence that tests their beliefs. The person who values comforting fairy tales knows in his heart his beliefs cannot withstand strong testing and avoids disconfirming evidence.

### {14 Pre-Christian Religions}

How many types of pre-Christian religions can you describe? I know of four types. Type one, a primitive type where superstitious savages prostrate before crude idols, and practice animal or human sacrifice. Type two, the religion of the ancient Greeks and Romans, having a pantheon of gods and goddesses with vices such as lust, anger, envy, and betrayal. Type three, the religion of the ancient Jews.

The fourth type consists of the many religions current in the Roman Empire centuries before the supposed birth of Jesus. Roman subjects worshipped various “sons of Jupiter” who were born of a virgin, such as Persia’s Zoroaster, son of the virgin Dughdova; the Phrygian god Attis, who practiced self-castration and whose teaching appears in the mouth of Jesus in Matthew 19:11-12; the Greek Heracles, who ascended to heaven; Egypt’s god Horus, called the Resurrection and the Life, born on December 25, who received gifts from three kings; India’s Krishna born more than 1,000 years before Jesus, who like Jesus escaped an evil king who murdered all children below a certain age; and Mithra, with too many similarities to Jesus to list.

And when we say also that the Word, who is the first-birth of God, was produced without sexual union, and that He, Jesus Christ, our Teacher, was crucified and died, and rose again,

and ascended into heaven, we propound nothing different from what you believe regarding those whom you esteem sons of Jupiter.—Justin Martyr, a Christian saint who died in 165 AD.

### {15 Sun God Stories}

The sky is important. It covers us. It speaks to us. . . . We would lie back in the dark and look up at all the points of light. Some points would come together to make a picture in the sky. One of us could see the pictures better than the rest. She taught us the star pictures and what names to call them. We would sit around late at night and make up stories about the pictures in the sky . . .—Carl Sagan, *Cosmos*

One summer, I camped in the New Mexico desert. Summer plus desert equals hot, right? The first night I learned the desert gets cold at night, quite cold. Early that morning I watched the sun come up, grateful for its heat and light.

Some ancient peoples worshipped the sun or gods who personify it. As early as 3000 BC, the ancient Egyptians worshipped the god Horus, whose life events mirror yearly events of the sun.

The Egyptians observed the course of the sun each year, as it passes through the zodiac's twelve major constellations: Capricorn, Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, and Sagittarius. Each day the sun rises, reaches a high point in the sky, and sets. The Egyptians noticed that during fall and winter, each day's apex is not as high as the previous day's. As winter approaches, the sun grows weaker and does not rise as high in the sky. The days grow shorter and the nights, longer.

On December 22, the sun's apex is lower than any previous day. On December 23 and 24, the apex seems about the same. For those three days, the sun lies near the constellation known as the Southern Cross. On December 25, the apex reaches a point slightly higher than the previous day. The sun has been reborn and will grow stronger, day by day. This is the day of winter solstice, a day celebrated by cultures throughout the

world.

Measuring the sun's apex each day to determine December 25 requires time and effort. The ancients discovered an easier way: four stars form a line that points to where the sun will appear on the horizon on the morning of December 25. The four stars are three stars in Orion's belt, called the Three Kings, and the star Sirius.

So a tale about a sun god might have him born on December 25. And his birth might be attended by three kings following a star. And he might die on a cross for three days before being reborn, resurrected. And over the centuries, the twelve constellations the sun travels among might become the twelve companions the sun god travels with. Hard to believe? In the 3,000 years between Horus and Jesus, we shouldn't be surprised if the story changed; we should be surprised it changed so little.

Do sun god stories form the basis of the ancient god-men myths, god-men who died for the salvation of their followers and rose again? I find it easy to believe they do, although we can see the story does not exactly match Jesus's story. For one, Jesus's resurrection occurs in the spring, not December 25. It occurs on Easter.

What determines the date of Easter? Each year Easter occurs on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. When a real person dies, the date of their death does not change from year to year. But we might expect the death of a mythical sky god to correspond to other astronomical events, like equinoxes and full moons.

### {16 Grade School}

I spent six years in Catholic grade school, from grades three to eight. During my first year, I disliked the atmosphere; I found it hostile and oppressive, and wished I was back in public school. A cousin my age, the son of my mother's sister, also attended my Catholic school. In grade four we were in the



same class so I felt more at ease in school. And I had resigned myself to the atmosphere so I more or less enjoyed that grade. I was an average to above-average student.

Perhaps as a response to the oppressive atmosphere, I began to eat more. By fifth grade, I was one of the heaviest boys in my class, an honor I shared with Ben B. When my parents took me to the clothes store, we went to the “husky” section.

Miss Mary, a tall blonde woman with a temper, taught grade five. She would throw erasers and sometimes her keys at misbehaving students. Not individual keys, but a fistful of keys on a key ring. I often wondered why she had so many keys, but never found out. We sat alphabetically in her class, with the boys in the front four rows, and the girls in the back. I had the misfortune to sit in front of John D., who often misbehaved. The keys often went whizzing by my head, aimed at John. So I always had to pay attention, in case her aim was bad that day. On the plus side, my grades went up, especially my math grades, which already had been good. I intuitively grasped the idea of fractions and became one of the class’s best math students.

The parish priest would visit the classrooms. In sixth or seventh grade, he came one day and said to the nun, “Oh, Sister! What nice boys and girls. And how many of you boys and girls are going to grow up to become priests and nuns?” A large proportion of the class raised their hands. I did not. I recall thinking: I’ll have something to do with God, but not with you.

In grade eight, my high school choices seemed to be the local Catholic high school or the local public high school. A boy in my class, Tom C., told me about a private college prep high school and I became interested. My grades were good enough so I decided I wanted to go there.

### {17 King David}

The story of King David’s census is not the only lie the Bible tells of God. There are many others. Here’s another that

concerns David. It appears in the twelfth chapter of Second Samuel.

Once upon a time, King David lusts for Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. So David arranges for Uriah's death and then takes Bathsheba as his wife. This angers God who says: "Behold, I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun. For thou didst it secretly: but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." Threatened with the public rape of his many wives, David repents. So God doesn't give David's wives to be publicly raped. Rather, "the Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bare unto David, and it was very sick. And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died."

Post-Christian religion is for people who want a religion free of gruesome fairy tales.

### {18 Types of Atheists}

I've read atheist books and watched Internet atheist shows. Atheists seem to fall into two types, which I'll call the natural atheist and the religious atheist.

A natural atheist either never had a belief in God, or perhaps had it as a naïve child but naturally outgrew it. Such a person lacks a need for belief in God. He or she is satisfied with the natural world and sees no need for anything beyond it. Some say that when you die you simply cease to exist. Others are cheerfully agnostic; they admit they don't know what happens after death and just as cheerfully admit they don't really care.

The religious atheist once had a deep faith. Some became atheist after coming, as I did, to see the Bible as fairy tales and Jesus as a mere man, at best. The atheism of such people, in my view, rests in large part on a certain self-centeredness, a certain inflated self-importance.

To illustrate, let's imagine Carl, who once believed deeply in Jesus and the Bible. Somewhere along the way, Carl begins to see problems, for example, contradictions in the Bible or

imperfections in the life and teaching of Jesus. Eventually, Carl can no longer resist the obvious conclusion that the Bible and Jesus are both false. So Carl becomes an atheist.

As a believer, Carl regarded other religions as false and other scriptures as fiction. For instance, he might have regarded the Quran and the Book of Mormon as fiction. He might have regarded Muslim and Mormon, Catholic and Hindu, as born into a false religion and destined for hell. Carl thanked God for being born into a true religion and never worried too much why God allowed so many others to be born into a false religion.

Then Carl comes to the conclusion he's been born into a false religion and becomes an atheist. To put his reasoning into words: "What? My religion is false? *My* religion? Well, obviously God cannot exist. Otherwise, God would never allow *me*, Carl Smith, the Great and Glorious Carl Smith, to be born into false religion. Yes, I've believed for years that God exists and yet allowed all those others, those Muslims and Catholics, those Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, to be born into a false religion. That was different. But if I, Carl Smith, if I was born into a false religion, well, then it's obvious that God does not, cannot, exist."

I learned from atheists of both types. If you're a Christian brave enough to confront disconfirming evidence, atheists are a handy source of such evidence.

### {19 Disconfirming Evidence, 2}

I've mentioned disconfirming evidence twice and perhaps should explain the idea a bit more. An alibi is a type of disconfirming evidence, the most familiar type.

Imagine a New York City bank robbery about seven o'clock PM on a Saturday night. The robbery seems the work of the famous bank robber Joey Bananas. So the police begin to collect evidence that Joey is indeed the thief. When they feel their case is strong, they take it to court. The police present their evidence. Then the defense attorney puts Joey on the stand and asks, "Joey, where were you on the night

in question?” Joey replies: “I was in L.A. that weekend, at my daughter’s wedding. About seven o’clock PM New York time, I was giving my speech. And I’ve got videos, about two hundred witnesses, and plane tickets to prove it.”

The case collapses and the police have wasted their time and look foolish. Why? Because the police did what no real police would ever do. They forgot to look for disconfirming evidence. Once they believed Joey did the crime, they forgot to look for evidence that he did not. They forgot to ask for an alibi.

Religion belief knows it’s too fragile, too unlikely, too false, to withstand disconfirming evidence, so it shields itself with threats of hell for leaving the faith, for disbelief, sometimes even for honest questioning and doubt.

### {20 High School}

Catholic elementary school ended after grade eight. After graduating, I went to a college-preparatory high school run by Jesuit priests. I had thought of getting out of the Catholic school system but didn’t want to go to the local public high school. I grew up South Philadelphia, a tough, blue-collar part of the city, and the local high school had a bad reputation for fights where kids sometimes got knifed. The local Catholic high school was safer, but I had good grades and liked the idea of a college prep school.

The all-boys prep school sat in a tough part of town, tougher than South Philly. Originally an upper class area when the school was built, the neighborhood had declined. The old brownstone mansions had been converted to apartments; crime had risen. But it was a four-block walk or trolley ride from the subway stop, down a large street, and it seemed safe enough. The school had an impressive marble foyer and staircase to the second floor. It seemed fitting that many of its students would go on to become doctors and lawyers and other pillars of society, which many of them did.

Father B. taught my religion class all four years of high school, a coincidence as there were other religion teachers

in the school, a fortunate coincidence. There was something different about Father B., something about the way he talked about God. I had heard nuns talk about God for years. And the high school was staffed by mostly priests and brothers, though there were some lay teachers, too.

I couldn't describe the difference then but, with hindsight, I believe Father B. stimulated a sense in me of the reality and presence of God. My other teachers spoke as if they were repeating something they'd been told. But Father B. gave you the feeling he spoke about something he'd experienced. I didn't always agree with what he said but I liked and respected him.

My music teacher is another man I feel fortunate to have known in my high school years. I had taken guitar lessons since about fifth grade so my cousin, an excellent musician himself, recommended I go to his teacher, who was widely known. I auditioned and Dennis S. accepted me as a student, his youngest; many of his other students were adults and professionals. Dennis was a Jehovah's Witness and very much devoted to God. Maybe two or three times in the four years I took lessons, we somehow got into a theological discussion. When that happen, his music teaching stopped and students waiting for lessons in the outer room just had to keep waiting. With Dennis, God came first. We didn't agree, but I respected him because of how he felt about God.

### {21 Meeting the Bible}

My first direct exposure to the Bible occurred in high school. In elementary school, we'd hear the parables of Jesus during class and during sermons. And we learned some Bible stories, too, such as Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden, and Noah and the Great Flood. I had a dim sense all the stories came from the Bible, but had never held one up close. On entering high school, we were given a list of books to buy; the list included the Bible.

To someone raised in a Bible-based religion my experience

may seem incredible. Though the Catholic Church compiled the Bible (i.e., decided which books belonged in it and which did not, at a church council about 397 AD), it had once forbidden good Catholics to read it or even to own it. In my day, it tolerated it as far as requiring me to buy one when I entered high school. But we never used it in class. Apparently, the school only required that we buy it.

I remember reading the book with interest. So this is where all those stories come from. I read it looking for wisdom but found disappointment. The histories, the smittings, the long list of begats at the start of the New Testament—what did any of that have to do with wisdom or God?

In particular, I found the first page of the New Testament a disaster. It begins, “This is the genealogy of Jesus,” but further down the page you discover it’s the genealogy of Joseph, not Jesus. Matthew says there are fourteen generations, fourteen more generations, and yet fourteen more. But I counted only thirteen generations in the last group of his long list of begats. He says Mary became pregnant “through the Holy Spirit.” Well, if the Holy Spirit fathered Jesus, then who is God the Father to Jesus, an uncle?

Lastly, Matthew says Joseph did not (sexually) “know” Mary until Jesus was born. It’s a central dogma of Catholicism that Joseph never “knew” Mary, that Mary remained a virgin her entire life. A footnote in the Bible explained: saying Joseph didn’t know Mary until Jesus was born doesn’t necessarily imply he knew her afterward. Logically, the point is valid; it doesn’t *necessarily* imply it. But I found it impossible to believe God inspired Matthew to write those words if Mary had, in fact, remained virgin her entire life.

“George Washington did not betray the US until he was fifty. I don’t mean George Washington ever did betray the US. In fact, he did not. I only mean that he didn’t do it *before* he was fifty.” Logicians and lawyers may enjoy splitting such hairs, slicing and dicing words for the fun of it. But if God’s book is that tricky, what good is it?

## {22 Fitting In}

I began high school as an outsider. By the time I left, I fit in, more or less. I went as an Italian American who grew up with mostly other Italian Americans. My parents were both born in the US, but my mother's mother, who lived four doors down the street, had been born in Italy. I combed my greased hair back and wore a leather jacket. To my surprise, I learned that I frightened some of the suburban boys who attended my prep high school. That amused me as I wasn't a particularly tough kid. I usually avoided fights when I could. And if forced to fight, I had to take a few punches before I got angry enough to seriously fight back. But I think some of my classmates worried I might put a mafia contract on them if they crossed me.

I learned that everyone except people from South Philadelphia called downtown Philadelphia "downtown." We called it "uptown." A little thing, but symptomatic of the larger issue of not fitting in.

Latin and the priest who taught it increased my feelings of alienation. Father B. (not the same Father B. who taught religion) and the subject he taught both seemed old and irrelevant to the times. Math and science taught how the world was, as God made it. They demanded reason and understanding, and offered insight and truth. Latin in contrast seemed to offer random strings of letters as names for things I already had a name for, such as "cathedra" for chair. It demanded dumb, rote memorization and offered what? Nothing that I valued.

My attitude toward Latin didn't extend to all subjects concerned with the past. History seemed interesting, especially when it talked about how people thought and how they lived. Interesting, but not very relevant to the world I lived in, to the world as it was then.

I've come to see history as relevant. When biologists want to understand an animal or plant, they study how it evolved over the centuries, how it changed and adapted. The world we live in evolved over the centuries to reach its present state.

Studying that evolution can give us a deeper understanding of the present.

And so I find myself with much to say about ancient Roman civilization. Roman civilization, in turn, inherited much from the even more ancient Egyptian civilization, which still reaches across the ages to touch us today.

### {23 College}

I did so poorly in Latin that after my first year the principal called me in for a private conference and suggested I continue my education at another school. His suggestion made sense; it was something I'd already considered. But I can be stubborn. Somehow, his suggestion made me determined not to leave. I didn't tell my parents. When the bill for second year came, they paid it so back I went.

I recall sitting in the classroom waiting to see who would be teaching Latin. When Father B. walked in, I groaned. He might have, too. But I managed to limp through. And I did extremely well in geometry, usually getting an A with little effort. I could intuitively see how to complete a proof. By the end of the year, I felt confident I could prove the parallel postulate, too.

By third year, my class seemed to include other Latin dummies and somehow the subject became easier. I no longer wore a leather jacket or greased my hair. I more or less fit in with the other guys in my all-boys high school.

In senior year I decided to go to Penn State for electrical engineering. In my blue-collar neighborhood, wanting to be an engineer seemed a reasonable goal; pure math or science seemed too esoteric. And Penn State was an obvious choice because of its good reputation and low tuition, an important consideration for my parents. Dad still worked at the Philadelphia Navy Yard in sheet metal. And Mom still was a homemaker, as was common during the 1960s in my neighborhood. We couldn't afford a Catholic college; besides, I had decided I'd had all the Catholic education I wanted.



The local Penn State campus in Abington seemed like a dream. It had a duck pond, trees, and *girls*. After four years at an inner city, all-boys Catholic high school, I felt I'd died and gone to heaven.

### {24 Rome}

The founding of Rome occurred about 750 BC. Rome grew steadily in power, becoming an empire about 27 BC, uniting its various peoples politically, economically, and culturally. In 300 AD, Rome attempted to bring religious unity to its subjects. It declared an official religion, named after a man born on December 25 of a virgin and a god. Magi and shepherds attended the birth of this god-man, who had twelve close followers later in life. His religion included baptism, a sacred meal of bread and wine, a final judgment, and a holy day of Sunday. This god-man sacrificed himself for the sake of his followers, descended into hell, but rose again on the third day. His name? Mithra.

Later, the emperor Constantine favored another god-man, who for the sake of his followers descended into hell, and rose again on the third day. In 313, in the Edict of Milan, Constantine proclaimed religious freedom. Christians could now freely follow their religion.

Religious freedom in the empire ended in 380 when Emperor Theodosius proclaimed the Edict of Thessalonica, which made Christianity the official state religion. Religion became not a matter of private conscience but political conformity. Worship of Mithra became punishable by death. Subjects of the Roman Empire now had to worship Jesus not Mithra. But Jesus so resembled Mithra that the Edict of Thessalonica had the effect of banning Pepsi-Cola on pain of death and requiring Coca-Cola instead.

### {25 Official Scripture}

An official state religion needs an official scripture. Today,

the earliest New Testament manuscripts we have date from about 350 AD. One, the “Codex Vaticanus,” has most books of the present New Testament, but not all of them. Another, the “Codex Sinaiticus,” contains every book in today’s New Testament, and two more.

When Rome declared its official religion should be called Christianity, hundreds of writings described the life and works of Jesus. Which writings should be regarded as fact, which as fantasy? Which belonged in scripture? Church officials addressed the question in 397, at the Third Council of Carthage.

The council excluded some books used by Christians for centuries, such as First and Second Clement, the Letter of Barnabas, Paul’s Epistle to the Laodiceans, and the Didache, which had been used by Christians since 150 AD. And the council included the Book of Revelations, which earlier councils had excluded.

As a matter of faith, Christians believe only those books God wished are included today in scripture. Yet the first page of Book of Revelations has, “The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show . . . what must soon take place. . . . Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him.” What the writer says “must soon take place” has not occurred at all. Did God wish the phantasmagoric Book of Revelations, which makes a false prophecy on its first page, included in Holy Scripture?

More than a millennium after the Third Council of Carthage, Protestants reopened the question of what books belong in the Bible and they evicted books still in the Catholic Bible. Would you like to read the Book of Tobit, the Book of Judith, the Wisdom of Sirach, First or Second Maccabees? You’ll find them in the Catholic Bible but not in Protestant Bibles? For Third Maccabees, however, you’ll have to go to a Greek Orthodox Bible; it’s not in Protestant or Catholic Bibles.

Even if we accept the books of today’s New Testament as what God wished, a subtle question remains: which version of the book? Earliest New Testament manuscripts date from

350 AD. For more than three centuries, a copyist could modify scripture to suit himself and his beliefs. In fact, for more than three centuries copyists did modify scripture, to express their own views or settle theological questions. The technical term is redaction. To accept a redacted writing as inspired scripture, a person would have to believe God inspired someone to write scripture, didn't like the result, and so inspired someone else to fix it. I am not such a person.

### {26 Year 1966}

Instead of semesters, Penn State had four quarters a year, with the fall, winter, and spring quarters corresponding to the two semesters of other schools. My grades started high in the fall quarter but dropped as I made friends and began to cut classes. The Penn State Abington campus is a long way from South Philly, maybe an hour and a half by public transportation. So students who didn't have cars looked for drivers, and drivers looked for people to share expenses. It was a good way of meeting other guys or girls from South Philly.

It was a heady time. I began Penn State in the fall of 1966, a time noted for its hippies, anti-war protests, student rebellions, Timothy Leary, and LSD. I left in 1970, an electrical engineer, aspiring to be a hippie.

### {27 The Book of Creation}

If we reject the Bible, then how may we learn about God? From the Quran? The Bhagavad Gita? The Book of Mormon? The Tripitaka? Don't we need a universal book? Ideally, a book beyond the power of humanity to alter or hide? Does such a book exist?

I like Thomas Paine's answer; in *The Age of Reason* he says: "It is only in the Creation that all our ideas and conceptions of a word of God can unite. The Creation speaks a universal language, independently of human speech or human language, multiplied and various as they may be. It is an ever-existing original, which every man can read. It cannot be forged; it cannot be counterfeited; it

cannot be lost; it cannot be altered; it cannot be suppressed. It does not depend upon the will of man whether it shall be published or not; it publishes itself from one end of the earth to the other. It preaches to all nations and to all worlds; and this word of God reveals to man all that is necessary for man to know of God.”

And how do we learn of the natural world? Through what we see and hear for ourselves. And from the writings of those who spend their lives trying to achieve an exact understanding of the subtle and hidden aspects of nature, that is, from scientists—not from mythologists.

### {28 Forbidden Planet}

The calculus and engineering classes at Penn State were tough, especially because I cut them now and then. But I got passing grades. In freshman year, I didn't have much choice as you might get drafted into the Army if your grades fell below a certain level. By second year, Congress had changed the law, so just being in college qualified you for a deferment. I also changed from being anti-communist to pro-peace.

In grade school, they'd told us about the evils of communism. I recall one textbook picture: the left frame showed the pope's way, with employer and worker shaking hands; the right frame showed Karl Marx's way, with employer and worker shaking guns at one another. For a while I viewed us as the good guys and them as the bad. However, when President Eisenhower publicly admitted he'd lied about the U-2 incident, I began to see that view as too simple-minded.

Actually, a science-fiction movie I'd seen years before had also subverted the simple-minded good guy/bad guy worldview. Though today the special effects of *Forbidden Planet* may seem amateurish, its storyline, based, I once read, on a play of Shakespeare, remains relevant, especially as computers become more powerful and we become more intimately tied to them.

By college, I didn't think evil belonged exclusively to foreign governments. Certainly, I still believed the Communists

and the Nazis had committed evil acts. But I could see our government had done so, too, in its treatment of the Native Americans, for instance, or the slaves.

### {29 The Id}

*Forbidden Planet's* “monsters from the id” gave me a name for a region of the human psyche, which I’d now describe as dark, primitive, and reptilian, where the Bible’s bloodlust fantasies originate. Such fantasies include the doctrine of hell and, to name but one more, the two she-bears the Bible’s god sent to tear forty-two children to pieces because the children made fun of a prophet’s bald head.

### {30 Just War}

Just War Theory is a doctrine of military ethics of Roman philosophical and Catholic origin.—Wikipedia

Saint Augustine introduced the idea of just war to Christianity. Early Christians refused to serve in the Roman army, and the emperors needed to purge this practice from Christianity before it could become Rome’s official religion. Augustine’s doctrine did the trick. The idea is that a war that satisfies certain conditions is just and in accord with God’s will. The conditions—just cause, right intention, last resort, etc.—seem reasonable. But, I have a question: since Augustine introduced the doctrine to Christianity about 400 AD, how many wars has a major Christian church declared unjust? How many wars has a major Christian church forbidden its followers to fight?

I once researched the question. The only case I found occurred, if I recall correctly, about 1500 AD. Catholic troops from a foreign country attacked the Vatican; the pope declared the conflict unjust and forbade them from continuing the attack under pain of mortal sin.

So, when American Catholics fought Italian Catholics in World War II, both sides fought justly? And when American Lutherans fought German Lutherans, both sides fought on

the side of right, with God's approval? Can we believe all the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of wars fought since Augustine's time—between Christian and Christian state, or Christian and non-Christian state—were just wars?

Or has a religion fashioned and mandated by the rulers of an ancient totalitarian empire remanded true to its charter and routinely given rulers of state *carte blanche* for any and all wars?

I once read that the German Lutheran church acknowledged it should have done more to oppose Hitler. The acknowledgement had the tone of "We made a mistake and failed to live up to our ideals, but we'll try to do better in the future." But their behavior dovetailed with Christianity's record of rubber-stamping wars that leaders of state want to fight. Rome's old state religion has a tradition of approving wars, a tradition that dates back at least 1,600 years and will probably continue until the religion dies away.

"I am now as before a Catholic and will always remain so," said Adolf Hitler in 1941. We may wonder if he spoke sincerely or lied. But if you wonder if the Catholic Church ever excommunicated Hitler for the wars he started, or if he died a member in good standing, look it up.

### {31 Miscellaneous}

Two miscellaneous thoughts.

One. I use the word "God" often in this book. So far, I've said a lot about what I don't mean when I use that word. But I haven't said much about what I do mean. I will. I spent four years doing graduate mathematics and know well the value and importance of definitions. To describe what I mean by God, I'll need to get somewhat philosophical and abstract, which may discourage some readers from finishing this book. But it cannot be helped; I don't like it when people continually use that mighty word, never saying what they mean by it. I intend to avoid that fault.

Two. Another fault, which I don't intend to avoid, is writing like the self-indulgent author who tells you personal details and beliefs as if you should be interested. Some years ago I wrote another book, *Science Without Bounds: A Synthesis of Science, Religion and Mysticism*, where I attempted to describe what I believe in abstract, philosophical terms, in a way mostly decoupled from my life and personal history. Though the book opens with a few personal details, it consists predominately of philosophical, metaphysical reasoning. Most people find it a tough or impossible read. I want to be more personal and down-to-earth in this book. So I make my points about God in the context of my life story, in a context that, hopefully, more people can relate to and get something out of.

So you, the reader, get to read about things I did and things I believe, not just philosophical, metaphysical reasoning. If you find my views about God interesting and want to learn more, I hope you keep reading, even if you disagree with some of my political views, and/or you find some of my life details uninteresting. If you prefer less personal stuff, try the book I mentioned above. As of this writing, you can download it free at [www.adamford.com](http://www.adamford.com).

### {32 Conformity}

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the Synoptic Gospels because they include many of the same stories, often in the same sequence, and sometimes exactly the same wording.—Wikipedia

Like the story of King David's census, the Synoptic Gospels are largely three versions of the same tale. As such, they pose a serious problem to someone trying to discover the truth. Which claim, which version of the same incident in the life of Jesus, accurately tells what happened, and which does not? To someone able to recognize the obvious, the Bible's internal contradictions show it cannot be wholly true.

But the Third Council of Carthage didn't aim for truth; it sought political unity and conformity. With the power of the empire behind it, it could simply declare something as true,

even if that something had internal contradictions. Thus the scripture it bequeathed to us has contradictory versions of the genealogy of Joseph, contradictory accounts of the last words of Jesus before he died, and such contradictory accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, arguably the most important event in Christianity, as to make a single, coherent version impossible.

### {33 The Last Words of Jesus}

Here are the last words of Jesus according to various authors.

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) . . . And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. (Matthew)

And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) . . . With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. (Mark)

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost. (Luke)

When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar, he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head, and gave up the ghost. (John)

God doesn't want you forever to believe an ancient Roman myth of the god-man, born of a god and a virgin, human mother. The Bible's contradictions show it to be an imperfect truth at best. Take courage and look beyond the myth. Give up fairy tales and seek the truth. (Me)

### {34 Creating a Religion}

Dr. Breed keeps telling me the main thing with Dr. Hoenikker was truth. . . . I just have trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person.— *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut

Some people value the truth above their life. Examples include Giordano Bruno and other heretics who burned at the stake rather than deny what they regarded as true. For many years, I



thought most people naturally want to know the truth. So the Bible story of the ancient Hebrews building and worshipping a golden calf struck me as incredible and odd. Didn't they know that they themselves had made the golden calf? How could they build an idol with their own hands and think the idol was God?

Later I came to believe the truth is of little interest to many people. With hindsight, it seems obvious. For in the hierarchy of needs, truth comes near last. First is the need to feel safe; people in desperate terror of losing their lives won't worry about truth too much. Next in importance come the physical needs—food, clothing, and shelter. Again, a starving, poorly dressed man standing in the rain can't afford the luxury of seeking the truth. Next come the physiological needs, the need to feel a part of society, to feel at home in a comfortable world that's not too large.

About 200 BC, Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the earth with surprising accuracy. His number threatened his countrymen because it showed all of Greece to be but a small part of the earth. They did not want to know the truth; they wanted emotional security. About the same time, critics accused Aristarchus of Samos of impiety for saying the earth revolves around the sun and is smaller than the sun. In 1600 AD, the Catholic Church burned Giordano Bruno, who said the Sun is a star and the universe contains a countless number of inhabited planets.

Some people want to be told they live in small, manageable, man-made world, not a vast, uncertain, and dangerous one. So they find a man-made God more comfortable. For what if in seeking truth we discover we are meaningless specks in an immense universe, a universe that spawned us with no purpose, a universe that will not remember or miss us when we are gone? Perhaps everyone except the most dedicated seeker of truth would prefer a religion fashioned over the centuries by humans for humans, a religion that fulfills our hopes and gives us assurance, even if it also preys upon our fears in order to ingrain itself deeply in our psyche.

So, how might a wise emperor fashion a single religion for his diverse peoples? Not by inventing a religion from scratch, probably. More likely by selecting from existing religions, whose appeal has been honed over the centuries. Such religions have beliefs and themes that matter, that resonate deeply within the human psyche, because the human psyche created them and molded them to suit itself. In the case of Christianity, we see molding in the changing of the foreign, Jewish name of its god-man founder to a Roman name, in the placing of the savior's birth at December 25, and in the changing of a Sabbath supposedly long hallowed by God to Sunday. Once the emperor decided on a religion, he would outlaw other religions and use the full power of the state, including torture and execution, against anyone who dared question or deny the official religion, or worship another god.

### {35 God for Aliens?}

Some descriptions of God seem to me obviously man-made. What would a truer description of God look like? For one, I believe the description would transcend politics; a God firmly on the side of one political group seems to me a man-made God, in all probability.

In fact, why should God appear humanlike? Once, when we believed the stars were little points of light in the sky, revolving along with the sun around the earth, it might have seemed reasonable *he* had made us in *his* image, though even at that time the idea that God had male genitals and was a “he” was foolish. But today with all we know about the age and vastness of the universe, the idea of God as a “he” seems only a bit more advanced than the idea of God as a golden calf.

Imagine one day we meet intelligent beings from another planet. And imagine the beings look something like rabbits, or spiders. And imagine their God also looks like a rabbit (who shed his fur for the sake of rabbits everywhere), or a spider. And our God looks like a human. We would be as unwilling to worship their rabbit or spider god as they would be to worship a god that looks like a human being. What type of

God transcends species? What kind could intelligent rabbit and spider and human worship together?

### {36 Composite Object}

Buddha on his deathbed (according to a Buddhist scripture) said: “Never forget: Decay is inherent in all composite things! Work out your salvation with diligence.”

The idea of composite things plays an important role in this book, but there’s another point I should mention first.

I’ve read many religious, spiritual, and mystical writings, and heard Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu teachers and monks. For a time, I regarded Eastern religions as superior to Western religions. I no longer feel that way. With Buddhism and Hinduism, I could take what seemed true to me and leave the rest. So I would call my experiences of those religions mostly positive. But Catholicism and, to a lesser extent, Bible-based Christianity imposed themselves on my life, so my experiences of them are more mixed, and I feel more animosity for them. If the situation were reversed—had I been born in India or Tibet—I’d probably have animosity toward the religion of my birth, and I’d probably take what I wished from Christianity and feel no animosity toward it.

So though some Buddhist and Hindu ideas have stayed with me—because I see them as true—I’m indifferent toward those religions in general. In particular, I would not care if contradictory accounts of the dying words of Buddha exist, because I’m interested in the philosophical idea of composite thing, not proving or disproving if Buddha existed, if Buddhism is true or false, etc.

So what does the term “composite thing,” also called “composite object,” mean? It means an object that has parts.

Imagine a car. It consists of parts—four tires, an engine, windows, seats, a steering wheel, etc.—and so may be called a composite object. Imagine a table. It has parts: four legs and a table top.

Now take a part and ask if it, in turn, has parts. Does a table leg have parts? No, you might say, it's just wood. But we know today that wood has parts, called atoms. Wood's parts are carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and other atoms. Now, again, take a part and ask if it, in turn, has parts of its own.

For instance, does a carbon atom have parts? It does: the electrons, protons, and neutrons.

Keep going. Do we ever reach bottom?

The idea of composite object naturally leads to the idea of ground of existence. Wood can exist without the table, but the table cannot exist without the wood. So the table has its existence based, "grounded," in wood. Wood serves as the table's ground of existence.

In turn, the wood has its existence grounded in its atoms, which, in turn, have their existence grounded in protons, neutron, and electrons.

Do we ever reach bottom? Do we ever reach an ultimate ground of existence for the table?

Notice that if an ultimate ground of existence exists—if it's a reality and not just an idea, and if all physical existence is grounded in it—then any sufficiently intelligent species would acknowledge that fact. Whether that has anything to do with God remains to be seen.

### {37 University Park}

For my first two years at Penn State I commuted from home to the Abington campus, a satellite campus. I enjoyed those two years a lot, made lots of friends, and even got passing grades.

For my third and fourth years, I had to go to the main campus, in University Park, Pennsylvania. University Park is close to the geographical center of the state, equally inconvenient to Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Erie, about a four-hour, two-hundred mile drive from Philadelphia.

I suppose every boy has a special time when he feels that finally he's becoming a man. I felt that way when I went to University Park, leaving the home of mom, dad, and sis, living on my own, being my own person. Mom cried as I drove away but I felt great (aside from seeing her cry).

I roomed with Carmen D., one of my friends from Abington. Carmen had an enthusiastic and excitable personality. I was a laid-back, "cool" type of person, especially after I started smoking grass (pot, marijuana) in sophomore year. Our personalities somehow complemented each other, and we got along well.

I lost touch with some of my friends from Abington at University Park, a huge campus of, if I recall correctly, about 30,000 students. But I made other friends, in the dorm and at class, and enjoyed myself—a bit too much as after junior year spring quarter I found myself on academic probation for poor grades. Although I might start with the best intentions, my walk across the campus on a beautiful spring day would often bring me not to the classroom, as I had intended, but to hanging out on the lawn with some friends.

Failing a course meant not "progressing normally toward graduation," which meant I might get drafted into the Army. Senior year I got a room by myself and hit the books hard. I also took two classes "by examination" (called "by challenge" in other schools), which meant I studied on my own and took the final exam. I passed a philosophy course, which consisted of mostly logic (truth tables, Venn diagrams, etc.) with an A. I passed an economics course the same way, but with a C. Fall quarter of my senior year, my grades were up and I managed to graduate on time, in the spring of 1970, with a BS in electrical engineering.

In college, I thought about God only rarely, but I recall one conversation. I and a fellow engineering student sat in a student lounge as the song Jesus Christ, Superstar, played in the background. He found the song sacrilegious. I didn't, so I asked him why. Because it questions who Jesus is, said he.

Well, some people aren't so sure, said I. He then gave me a long explanation of who Jesus was. The explanation sounded as if it came straight from some Bible class or religious textbook. At that point I lost interest in having a discussion about God with him because he couldn't tell me anything he hadn't read or been told.

### {38 LSD}

After Penn State, I went to work in Laurel, Maryland. I didn't know anyone there, but a college bulletin board helped me find two University of Maryland students to share a three-bedroom apartment with. It took a while to meet other people, but by Halloween I'd met some people who did LSD at parties.

In my senior year at Penn State, I'd taken LSD once, at a friend's apartment, about maybe eight PM. We didn't know what to expect and, after an hour or two, decided we'd been sold some fake stuff, so I left and began walking home. A light snow fell as I cut diagonally across a large, empty supermarket parking lot. Suddenly I stopped and looked around. My footprints were the only marks on that pure, beautiful snow, which seemed to cover the parking lot like a blanket of fluffy manna from heaven. I felt bad, *so bad*, that my footprints marred it. If only I'd walked around the lot! Then I recall thinking: Hmm. Maybe something is happening after all.

It was a long night. Not a "bad trip" but not a particularly good one, either. Had I thought ahead, I wouldn't have chosen to be high on LSD, unprepared, not knowing what to expect, alone in my room in the middle of the night. I remember calling an old girlfriend at maybe three AM. She was nice to me, nicer probably than I deserved, but she didn't know what to do, and I probably wasn't making much sense, so after a while the call ended. I survived.

The people I met in Maryland gave me the opportunity to do LSD again, under better conditions—with friends in a supportive atmosphere. I took LSD or peyote maybe ten or twelve times that year. I found the peyote high calm, beautiful,

even spiritual. On the other hand, for me, LSD could be nice one minute and turn on me the next. A good trip could turn into a bad trip in a second. “My, isn’t the world just beautiful, as I walk down this street. I think I go kiss that tree. Wait, what’s that in the road? A dead squirrel. Squashed. Bummer. Like I feel the whole, freaking universe is just one, dark, evil machine, crushing us like that squirrel.” That kind of thing. With peyote, you could sit back and enjoy. With LSD, you had to stay on your toes, because you never knew what would happen next.

### {39 Drugs}

About January of 1971, my friends and I rented an old house that was to be demolished for a shopping center. We made it a hippie commune. I didn’t feel 100 percent sure about the commune, so I kept paying my share of the apartment rent, too. At the time I did pot, hashish (a stronger form of pot), LSD, and peyote. I would have tried psilocybin but never got the chance. After maybe a month, I found out someone at the commune did heroin; it shocked me. You mean you’re doing *drugs*?

It may seem silly now but it didn’t at the time. Tim Leary had preached about the “consciousness expanding” properties of LSD. A brave, new, enlightened world was coming; I wanted to be a part of it. Much idealism lay behind what I did.

In 1972, a religious experience pretty much ended my drug taking.

As to the “spiritual” properties of LSD, years later I knew a woman who said when the guys in the apartment downstairs did LSD, she could hear them raping their dog.

### {40 Post-\* Religion}

In this book I voice a lot of disapproval of Christianity, unavoidably so, because if I found Christianity satisfactory, if I believed in it, there would be no need for a post-Christian

religion or post-Christian view of God, and I would not be writing this book. I'll have a few more negative things to say about it, but only a few. I'll be turning more and more to what I do believe, rather than what I do not.

A minor point: I regard this religion as post-Christian because I come from a Christian background. But someone coming from a Jewish background might call it post-Jewish, from an Islamic background, post-Islamic, etc. So "post-Christian" as a label leaves something to be desired, because I'm not looking for a religion or view of God that's post anything. I'm looking for one that's *true*.

### {41 Natural Religion}

I think of post-Christian religion as a kind of natural religion. Natural religion derives its beliefs from what we can experience and reason for ourselves, as opposed to unnatural religion, also called supernatural religion.

Supernatural religion has special persons above nature, such as gods, goddesses, angels, and demons. It has special books that a god has caused to be written. And it has special earthly representatives who are human, such as popes and prophets, Mohammed and Joseph Smith, or gods themselves, such as Jesus and Krishna.

Natural religion has none of these things. True, it might have special respect for certain people who have led the way, just as physicists have a special respect for Einstein, and musicians for Mozart. But Einstein and Mozart remain human. Further, something is true in physics not because Einstein said it, but because others have verified it. In certain cases, Einstein erred. One day physics will progress beyond his theories, just as it eventually progressed beyond Newton's.

In contrast, a god reveals supernatural religion, so its teachings cannot be contradicted or mistaken. Thus the day will never come when Christianity admits Jesus erred, or when Islam says Mohammed made a mistake. In science and natural religion,



the simple truth trumps authority, tradition, and revelation. Not so in supernatural religion.

### {42 Two Threads}

I write one thread of this book, the thread of my life details, chronologically. I write another thread, what I believe, from the viewpoint of today. Thus, the opening sentence—"I regard the Bible as a collection of fairy tales, and Jesus as a fictional character born in the mythology of the ancient Roman Empire."—expresses a viewpoint it took me many years to arrive at. For a long time I didn't know what I thought of Jesus. I knew various features of Christianity I didn't care for, but I wouldn't have written such a frank opening sentence ten years ago or even five.

### {43 Jesus Spaceships}

I hope to publish this book someday. If I do, I expect I'll get letters or emails from Christians telling me I have got it wrong and am destined for hell unless I change my ways. In the past, I might have told them I don't believe in the Bible and listed some of its many, many contradictions. Or I might have criticized the theological foundation of salvation as unbelievable, for instance, where God impregnates a woman he is not married to, so he can sacrifice himself to himself to save us from himself.

Recently, I found a simpler, more powerful response. I'm amazed I did not see it until recently because I've known the individual facts for decades. I just didn't see the consequence.

I have already mentioned the individual facts. Christian religions one-up each other. The Catholic Church calls itself the One, True Church and says Protestant Churches "lack the means of salvation." The Eastern Orthodox Church refers to the "so-called churches of the West." Baptists say Catholics are going to hell. Jehovah's Witnesses say only they are going to heaven. Some sects say any Christian not baptized by immersion is going to hell. (I once wondered how many

Christian churches say only they have salvation and other Christian churches do not. After I found seven I stopped looking.)

So according to some Christian churches, to get into heaven it is not enough to believe in and accept Jesus. You must also belong to the proper church. If you do not belong to the right Christian church then you're going to hell when you die.

I realized recently this means that Jesus failed. Failed in what? In his mission to bring salvation to the world.

Why? Let's imagine an analogy. You're told the earth is doomed and Jesus, the Great Savior, has built spaceships that will take you to another planet, a wonderful planet where you will never be unhappy. So you go to the launching pad and what do you find? You see lots and lots of spaceships, some labeled "Catholic," others "Baptist," others "Jehovah's Witness," etc. But which spaceship should you get on? Opinions differ.

Some people tell you all spaceships are safe. Other people say some of the spaceships will fall into the sun, bringing you to a fiery death. There's a book saying which spaceship you should get on, but it's so muddled that people who read it come away with contradictory views. Some people say the book says any spaceship will do. Other people say the book clearly says only the Catholic spaceship is safe, or the Baptist spaceship. Other people say you need a second book to help you understand the first. Some tell you to read the Book of Mormon. Others, Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, by Mary Baker Eddy.

You would like to ask Jesus himself what spaceship to get on, but he is nowhere to be found. Some people say they have spoken to him, but they are no help because they disagree about what he says.

It occurs to you something's wrong. It occurs to you Jesus, the Great Savior, is not such a great savior after all; if he were, you wouldn't have to guess which spaceship to get on, you'd know. You suspect it's all a scam, perpetrated by spaceship

builders.

So we have the spectacle of the whole salvation drama: prophets, virgin birth, walking on water, painful death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. But when we come to the bottom line—OK, what exactly do I need to do to get saved, to avail myself of the salvation Jesus supposedly brought to earth?—the whole thing falls apart. As things stand today, you cannot accept Jesus and Christianity; you can only accept a particular brand of Jesus and Christianity. And whatever brand you accept, there will always be other Christians saying you have made the wrong choice and are going to hell.

### {44 Fractured Christianity}

Some people will say the Bible is perfectly clear about how to be saved. And they'll quote Bible passages to back up what they say. But if simple-minded references to isolated biblical passages could settle the matter, Christian churches would long ago have agreed on the way of salvation. They don't.

Christian churches disagree about the way of salvation. Fractured Christianity offers us, at best, a salvation lottery. Spin the wheel and pick your denomination. If you pick right, you win and advance to heaven. If you pick wrong, too bad, you go to the other place.

So to any Christian who wants to write me, asking me to accept Jesus, I say this: don't bother writing unless you can tell me why I should accept your brand of Christianity and reject others.

Better yet, don't write me at all. Don't bother trying to get me, just one person, to convert to your way of thinking. Rather, go save entire denominations.

Baptists, do you have some Bible verses you think clearly and convincingly say how to get saved? Don't waste them on me. Send them to the pope. When you convince him, you'll save not just one person, but the world's billion Catholics who follow him.

Catholics, don't waste your breath trying to get me to rejoin the church. Go convert that Baptist congregation down the street. After all, aren't you supposed to love your neighbor as you love yourselves? How, then, can you silently stand by and do nothing while your neighbors remain on the path to perdition?

Christians, get working! When Christian churches come together, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and agree about Jesus's way of salvation, then write me, in case I somehow miss the news. Once you all agree among yourselves, we will have something to talk about. Not before.

### {45 Excuses}

Jesus failed in his mission to bring us salvation. Christians will dispute that statement. They can hardly dispute that various Christian denominations say other Christian denominations do not have the way to salvation. So they may say the situation is the fault of human free will. Nonsense. Inventing a reason *why* he failed does not change the fact *that* he failed.

### {46 Commune}

I lived at the commune house from about January to about May of 1971. People would appear seemingly out of nowhere, friends of people who lived there, sometimes friends of friends. At times, there might be four or five people sleeping in a bedroom, more in the living room. Things could get hectic in the ongoing party atmosphere. By May, people were leaving. Some were going to California; others stayed around the area.

Many events remain in my memory but two have relevance to this story.

A plain looking woman named Ginger would drive up to the house on weekends from Virginia. Ginger had a down personality, maybe naturally, maybe because of some personal problems, I don't know. But it seemed to me that sometimes, even often, no one would talk to her. I tried once or twice but we just didn't hit it off. One day, Joyce, who lived at the house,

said I should wash with some solution because Ginger had crabs. I said I didn't have to because I'd never slept with her. Joyce looked at me skeptically, "Well, all the other guys did."

That bothered me, that guys would sleep with her at night but ignore her other times. Suddenly, my new, enlightened world did not feel so enlightened. (I suppose the guy who did heroin didn't disillusion me because other people disapproved, too, and after week or two he left.)

Another thing that dented my idealism concerned a good size chunk of hashish I'd stored in the fridge. One night I came home to find five people had smoked it all up. Something about that bothered me. Everyone considered stuff in the fridge fair game so people smoking my hash didn't bother me. I had done other people's stuff. So what bothered me? I thought about it for a while. Five people smoked my hash. What bothered me about that?

Five. I decided if fifteen or twenty people had smoked it, I would have been OK. But I saw five people smoking it as somehow ugly. Why? A little voice went off in my head and said "greed." Hadn't I learned in Catholic school the seven serious sins included greed? I had. And didn't I find greed ugly? I did. And didn't I find how Ginger had been used ugly? Yes.

I thought that maybe we called things sins not because they offend God, but because they bring us down, because they damage the society we might have and degrade the person we might be. The thought excited me. In childhood, I rejected the church's theological teachings, teachings that say the Eucharist wafer is Jesus's flesh, or teachings that find fault with things like missing Sunday Mass or not going to confession. But I accepted the church's moral teachings because they seemed right. But what if I could prove moral teachings experimentally in my own life? Rather than the childish situation of a stern nun telling us something is a no-no because it will hurt the feelings of some man in the sky, I would have concrete reasons for morality.

### {47 Expanded Consciousness}

At the commune I met Joyce's ex-boyfriend, Jerry, who didn't live there but came over now and then; he happened to live in my apartment complex. After the commune broke up, I moved back and started hanging out with him and his roommate. And I met other people in the complex. I continued living the life of a hippie, but something worried me. The life did not have what I thought it would.

At the time, one of my roommates had a poster on the living room wall; it showed a body with an enormous, transparent head, like a fishbowl, with all sorts of things swimming in it. That's the way I felt. I suppose LSD had delivered on Tim Leary's promised expanded consciousness but now that I had it, what should I do with it? Life seemed problematical. Nothing seemed simple. I could see multiple sides of a problem or question but sometimes could not make my mind up about it.

Other people must have felt the same way because "Ludes" began showing up at parties. I saw people on Quaaludes and did not like what I saw. It bought them down; they became lethargic and dull. Maybe I had trouble handling the expanded consciousness thing at times, but I couldn't see that Ludes would lead me anywhere I wanted to go. I never tried them. I began to feel the hippie life fading away. Something waited for me around the corner, but I didn't know what.

### {48 Actions}

The idea of composite object leads naturally to other ideas. For one, it gives us a new direction. We have front/back, left/right, and up/down. But as we travel down—from table to wood, wood to atoms, atoms to protons, neutrons, and electrons, etc.—we travel toward center.

Composite object also leads to the idea of relational existence. A table has a top and four legs, but we need more to make a table. The parts must maintain the proper relation to one another. If we attach the four legs pointing outward, rather

than down (so it all lies flat on the ground) the parts still exist, but we do not have a table. So we can say composite objects have relational existence because their existence depends on their parts *and* on the relation between the parts. As another example, curl your fingers and thumb into a fist. The fist exists only when the parts (fingers, thumb) exist and maintain the proper relation (curled).

Does anything exist which does not have relational existence, which, rather, has simple, absolute existence? If so, it has no parts.

The fist example leads to the idea of action. A fist exists only while we continue to curl our fingers and thumb. And the table exists only while its parts continue to maintain the proper relation to each other. Usually, we do not think of table, just sitting there, doing nothing, as in action. We usually think of something like walking or running as an action. But in a broad sense, any composite object may be seen as involving action, i.e., the action of its parts continuing to keep the proper relation through time.

So we might say an open hand is potentially a fist, while a curled hand is actually a fist, e.g., is in the *act* of making a fist—it is an action, in other words.

The broad meaning of action leads to a poetic image where we see the world, even when it seems static and dead, as dynamic, in movement. Like the spray of water in a fountain, which cannot exist unless the water moves, or a whirlpool, which must keep turning to exist, we can imagine that all the world's composite objects exist only by virtue of some sort of continual act. Continual act of what?

### {49 Be Here Now}

Around Christmas of 1971, I came home a few days. One day, I went to the uptown (downtown) department store where Mom now worked part-time, as a sales clerk. In grade school, my sister and I walked home for lunch, so Mom didn't work

outside the home. After my sister went to high school, Mom got a job. She enjoyed getting out of the house and meeting people, and the money helped for our college expenses.

In the department store, a table filled with square, blue books caught my eye. The books' cover had a round, geometric pattern overlaying a chair, and the words *Remember Be Here Now*. I paged through the book with interest. It mentioned LSD, had pictures of Indian yogis and other strange things. I bought it and took it back to Maryland after Christmas.

I suppose I would have learned about non-Christian religions sooner or later, somehow or other. Catholicism underwhelmed me. The Bible failed to impress me, so Protestant religions had little appeal. Various things at the time made me aware of Hinduism and, to a lesser extent, Buddhism. The Beatles had meditated and sat at the feet of Hindu gurus. George Harrison had released his spiritually-oriented *All Things Must Pass* album. Sooner or later my interest in God probably would have led me to explore those paths. As it happened, the *Be Here Now* book introduced me to them. And more.

### {50 Experience!}

My job in Maryland at a field office involved rotating shifts, eight AM to four PM, four PM to midnight, midnight to eight AM, as well as an occasional field trip to surrounding states. One night I had the apartment to myself—my college roommate had gone for a semester-break ski trip, my other roommate went on a ten-day field trip for work. I had a water bed, basically a large, water-filled balloon, on my bedroom floor, surrounded by a high wood frame. I sat on the floor, leaned against the frame and began reading the book I'd bought in Philadelphia.

I began to experience everything differently, intensely differently, profoundly differently. About eighteen years later, working on my first book, I wrote about people who had similar experiences. One woman wrote: "The world was flooded with light, the supernal light that so many of the mystics describe . . .



the experience was so overwhelmingly good that I couldn't mistrust it. . . . glory blazing all around me." The author, Genevieve Foster, published *The World Was Flooded with Light; A Mystical Experience Remembered* in 1985, at age eighty-two. She had had her experience forty years earlier and found it "so far from anything that I had thought in the realm of the possible, that it has taken me the rest of my life to come to terms with it."

For the next several days, light flooded my world, too. I would arrive at work at four PM and try to keep to myself and remained unnoticed for the one, long, long hour until five PM, when everyone left for the day. Then it would come on full force. I would lose myself in a world of light and forget my surroundings. I'd go home after work and it would be there, strong as ever. Another night, as I read, I closed my eyes and felt I could just fall and fall into it, further and further, and maybe never come back. I opened my eyes, scared.

I remember thinking that maybe when death comes, you see that light and just fall further and further into it.

At times I would bask in the Light, in ecstasy and glory, free of words and thought. Other times, there would be thought, insight. Sometimes I'd try to come down. I recall turning on the TV and watching some old Western movie. I thought, there are three levels of reality here: one, a young man (me) in a bedroom watching a movie; two, some cowboys and Indians; three, a record of what some actors did perhaps thirty years ago, when they drove to the studio and made the movie. That insight lasted maybe a second or two. Then there would be another. And another.

Eventually, I wanted it to stop. I couldn't live in the world if it went on. And stop it did. And so I spend the rest of my life trying to get it back.

### {51 Changed Worldview}

I told my friends about the book, of course. Some found it interesting, but no one seemed very impressed. One friend

ridiculed it for describing money as “green energy.”

I looked for other books. In the University of Maryland bookstore, I found *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, written in 1911 by Evelyn Underhill; I read it for years.

(To save having to repeat a book's title every time I mention it, I will use abbreviations. MEU will mean the book I just mentioned. SWB will mean the first book I wrote, which I mentioned earlier. BHN will be the *Remember Be Here Now* book. There's a list of abbreviations at the end of this book.)

I read to understand my experience, to try to fit it into my worldview. No, that's not right. Rather, I read to understand how to change my worldview to make sense of the experience.

About a month later, I took LSD for the last time. I wondered how it would feel. I took it alone and walked around my apartment complex. The experience felt hollow, meaningless. Yes, I had the same old funny visual effects and odd mental states, but I could find nothing of real interest anymore. About halfway through the trip, I began to feel bored; the effects seemed more annoying than enjoyable. I spent the last part of the trip waiting for it to end.

For some years afterwards I would do only pot, now and then, at a gathering when people passed it around. That stopped sometime in the 1980s. Alcohol has never done much for me; it makes me feel dopey and sleepy, so I rarely have any.

A few years ago in a suburban convenience store I noticed High Times (a magazine for marijuana users) and another pot-oriented magazine. It occurred to me that tiny convenience stores give precious shelf space only to what sells. The magazine rack had two pot magazines. I suppose pot use is still alive and well in the US. I found pot about as dangerous as wine and believe that it's not legal in the US speaks more to how politics is played in this country than to any dangers of the drug.

### {52 Guru Maharaj Ji}

Maybe a month later, a friend asked me if I wanted to go see a fifteen-year-old guru named Guru Maharaj Ji, at the Daughters of the American Revolution Constitution Hall (if I remember correctly) in Washington, D.C. I felt curious so off we went.

The presentation started with devotees telling us how wonderful the guru was, how highly they thought of him. Then his mother and one or two of his older brothers spoke. They talked about a meditation technique the guru gave, called Knowledge, that led to direct experience of God. The guru himself never showed up that night. When we left, I recall feeling the whole thing wasn't for me.

A few months later, my grandmother became ill. I drove to Philadelphia to see her in the hospital. She looked confused and scared. I remember smiling and looking into her eyes, thinking, "It's all right, Grandmom. It's nothing to be afraid of." She smiled, too. A few weeks later, she passed away.

After her funeral, I began thinking about moving back to Philadelphia. After college, Mom hoped I'd move back home and get a job locally. I hoped to get a job far enough away to live on my own, but close enough to drive back now and then. I had gotten what I wanted. Now I wanted to go back home.

I moved home that summer and got a job at the Philadelphia Navy Yard but did not move in with Mom and Dad. I got an apartment on the other side of the Delaware River, in New Jersey.

### {53 God as Light}

I had a TV in my apartment but rarely watched it. I went out to go to work but not much else, although I would visit my family now and then. I wanted to understand what had happened and what it meant. And I'd found a whole new world, a God-centered world.

I learned from MEU (the book by Underhill) that mystics

exist in all religions. I began to see a part of Christianity I never suspected. MEU introduced me to some of the great Christian mystics: Eckhart, Suso, Boehme, Julian of Norwich, Ruysbroeck, Molinos. BHN and other books taught me about Hinduism and Buddhism. I wanted to learn everything I could. I felt like I was in love.

And the more I thought about it, the surer I felt that not only *might* an experience of God be an experience of Light, Uncreated, Eternal Light, but that an experience of God in some sense *should* be such an experience.

Because if God really looked like Jesus, then centuries before Columbus landed, some Native American might have written, “After praying in the desert to the Great Spirit for several days I saw the Great Spirit, as a man, like us. I know it was the Great Spirit; I feel it in my heart. But he had holes in his hands. I do not understand. What can the holes mean?”

I have never found such an account. Christians describe an experience of Jesus; Hindus describe an experience of Krishna, Shiva, or some other Hindu god. In other words, people who describe God as other than a kind of Light use descriptions from their culture.

### {54 Pascal}

Blaise Pascal, the famous mathematician and philosopher, carried a small piece of parchment sewn up in his jacket. On it, he had drawn a flaming cross and written, “From about half past ten in the evening until half past twelve—FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.”

Pascal has an experience of FIRE! and calls it the God of Abraham. Had Pascal been Hindu, what would he have called it? Not the God of Abraham. A Hindu might call it the Light of Krishna. A Buddhist might call it the Pure Light of the Void. An Eastern Orthodox Christian might call it the Uncreated Light of Mount Tabor. Each person might have the same experience but describe it differently.

Of course, Light does not mean the kind of light that comes from a lamp. It means Light, Uncreated Light, Eternal Light, the Light of Consciousness. We can say the Light is of God, we can say the Light is God, can we say more? Yes, we can use concepts to describe the relation of Light to our world, to the world that we experience. But the concepts we use remain mere concepts. Raw, direct experience differs from any concept. It's the difference between telling a blind person about vision and giving them sight, the difference between reading about electricity and touching it.

I mentioned earlier that beings from another planet who looked like bunnies or spiders would have gods who look like bunnies or spiders. We would not want to worship gods that look like bunnies or spiders, and they would not want to worship gods that look like us. But any species might worship Uncreated Light.

Once we saw the earth as the center of the universe and measured its age in thousands of years. And we had a cozy little god who looked like us, who lived above the clouds, who would come back soon to end it all and take us with him. That image of God, I believe, has the same relation to God as a rain drop has to the ocean.

### {55 Don't Go In}

In the morning, getting into my car to go to work, I would sometimes see a neighbor. We would nod hello. Eventually he invited me over after work to have a beer and watch a basketball game. I went but the conversation soon turned to what I read about and thought about most of my time. He got to hear about God, experience of God, the *Be Here Now* book, mystics, etc., more than he ever wanted to hear, I suppose. We never talked again.

I began to feel lonely. By the beginning of 1973, I began looking for . . . something, I didn't know what. I found (through a poster?) that devotees of Guru Maharaj Ji, the fifteen-year-old guru, met weekly, in central New Jersey. After thinking about

it for a few weeks, I went.

The drive over unfamiliar back roads lasted close to an hour and led me to an isolated, old farmhouse. I'd had doubts the whole drive but when I saw the house, I almost turned back. When a man or woman drives up to such a house in the dark of night, the movie audience groans and shouts "Don't do it! Don't go in! Don't go in!"

I went in. Several people sat in the living room, most of them more or less my age, including the woman who lived there, who welcomed me. Her husband, somewhat older, wrote professionally for a living. He told me they rented the old farm home from a company that planned eventually to demolish it to make way for a huge amusement park, Six Flags Great Adventure.

They called the meeting "satsang." Christians would call it "witnessing." We sat in a circle and people took turns talking about God, about enlightenment, about meditation, and about the guru, lots about the guru. After a few satsangs, I found the talks generally fell into two types: first, the cool, austere, philosophical/metaphysical intellectual type—"Buddha said desires lead to suffering, and we can see that in our life. For instance, yesterday when I . . ."; second, the warm and gooey emotional type—"When I see Guru Maharaj Ji, my heart just . . . just melts. You know? I mean . . . I mean . . . like wow . . ."

Of course, people didn't fall strictly into one type or the other; they might be philosophical/metaphysical one moment and warm and gooey the next. But generally they leaned to one side or the other.

Sometimes I could guess before a new person spoke which way they leaned. Sometimes I guessed wrong. I remember Jack, who greatly surprised me. He had fought in Vietnam but could get as warm and gooey as a little girl talking about her puppy.

## {56 “Knowledge”}

Aside from the guru, people at satsang often talked about “Knowledge,” the word for the guru’s meditation technique. To get Knowledge, you had to attend satsang for a while and then wait for a mahatma (the guru’s equivalent of a priest) to visit your part of the country. You signed up for the special day, went and listened to satsang from the mahatma himself, pledged to devote your life to Guru Maharaj Ji, promised to never, ever divulge the meditation technique, and then learned the technique.

Supposedly, practicing the Knowledge meditation technique brought you to direct experience of God. At this point, my spiritual practices consisted of reading, thinking, and taking long walks. I liked the idea of learning how to meditate. But could I pledge my life to “Guru Maharaj Ji,” the teenage guru? Not likely. But after repeatedly hearing people use the phrase “Guru Maharaj Ji” to mean God, I decided two could play that game. And so in February or March, I learned the meditation technique (which you can read about on the Internet if you are interested).

I liked the techniques; they made sense. They fit with my worldview, my ideas about God, the world, and myself.

## {57 Movie and Light}

After much reading and thinking I built up a worldview, a description of God, the world, and our place in it. I will use philosophical ideas to discuss the worldview and explore its various consequences. But first, here’s a simple image, a way of tying it all together, a helpful analogy.

The world is like a movie and God is like the light.

In this worldview, God is not someone who stands outside of creation and makes the world, like a watchmaker makes a watch. God *becomes* the world. Each and every second.

Various ideas lead to this view of God.

For instance, we take a composite object, a table, and select a part, the table top. The table top has parts, wood molecules. Molecules have parts, atoms. Atoms have parts . . . Do we ever reach bottom? A physicist might say we do when we reach energy, the E of Einstein's  $E=mc^2$ . Energy, as far as we know, cannot be created or destroyed. Something that cannot be created or destroyed must be eternal.

Wood constitutes the table's ground of existence. Molecules constitute the ground of existence of the wood. Do we ever reach an ultimate ground of existence?

Composite objects have parts. Their parts have parts. Do we ever reach something that does not have parts? If so, we can call that something non-composite and simple, simple not in the sense of easy to understand but in the sense of having no parts.

God is light, a light infinite and incomprehensible . . . one single light . . . simple, non-composite, timeless, eternal . . . The light is life. The light is immortality. The light is the source of life . . . the door of the kingdom of heaven. The light is the very kingdom itself.—Symeon the New Theologian, one of the greatest saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church

God is our very ground of existence. The world is an act of God.

### {58 Ashram}

After a few months, some devotees decided to form a community house, a sort of spiritual commune, called an ashram. The day in the ashram began with an hour-long meditation, using the Knowledge meditation technique. Then you had breakfast and went to work, either in "the world" or in the guru's organization. At night, you would have dinner, then satsang or free time. Before bed, we would have the "arati" ceremony, consisting of singing spiritual songs while someone waved a candle or oil lamp in front of a shrine. The shrine itself consisted of a picture of the guru, surrounded by flowers and candles, with maybe other religious symbols. Then there



would be another hour meditation before bed.

I wanted in. My parents didn't like the idea, to put it mildly. I could understand why. They had sacrificed raising me, sending me to college, and a thousand other ways. And now I wanted to leave my engineering job to go "throw my life away."

About that time, I wrote a story called "Two Letters," which I include at the end of this book. It shows something of my mindset at the time.

I moved into the ashram. Why? First, it concerned God, reason enough. But, also, I had done what my parents wanted, mostly, as a kid; as an adult I felt I should make my own life. So around May I moved into a four-bedroom house in an upper-class suburb of Philadelphia. The house had been condemned for a road construction, today called the Blue Route, and the owners temporarily rented it. For a time, I got a job working with plumbers on a nearby apartment construction project, then I drove a truck for the guru's thrift store.

### {59 Leaving}

I liked living in the ashram; I felt happy there. I did not particularly like the guru's picture on the shrine, but eventually I realized that the philosophical/metaphysical intellectual type of follower often had to tolerate things that the warm and gooey emotional type loved, and vice versa. Various tales revolve around the conflict between the two types.

For instance, to the intellectual type God is everywhere; the ultimate ground of existence of a crucifix or cathedral differs not one iota from the ultimate ground of existence of what a cat leaves in a litter box. To the emotional type, however, they differ a great deal. So we have stories like the one about the intellectual type sitting in a temple with his feet toward the altar. The emotional type criticizes him for pointing his feet toward the altar, toward God. "As you wish, brother," responds the intellectual type. "Pray, please turn my feet in a direction where God is not."

The mahatmas who visited the guru's ashrams seemed to fall into one type or another. Mahatma Fakiranand had an excess of emotion and nervous energy that could leave you exhausted after a short time. He once harshly berated a devotee for reading an organization magazine on the floor because the magazine had a picture of the guru. Other mahatmas looked like stone statues when they meditated and spoke in short, pointed phrases. "Desires lead to suffering. Oh, devotees, when will you give up desires?" Pause. "If you meditate you will see God, but you must work." Longer pause.

I left the ashram because of an incident concerning Mahatma Fakiranand. Pat Halley, a Detroit journalist, publically pushed a shaving cream pie in the guru's face. Under pretext of revealing the guru's secret meditation technique, Mahatma Fakiranand lured Halley into a room, told him to shut his eyes, and hit him on the head, fracturing his skull. (Fortunately, Mr. Halley survived.)

When I heard the story, I knew what must be done. After all, had not Buddha preached the middle way? Though we might lean one way or the other, we needed to balance intellect and emotion. Without emotion, intellect could be lame. Without intellect, emotion might run blind, might lead to something like what Mahatma Fakiranand had done. I saw it all so clearly.

The organization saw it a different way. They would release Mahatma Fakiranand's birth name to the press. It would appear some unknown devotee had gone off the deep end. They planned a cover-up, in other words. Shades of Watergate.

I moved in about May; I left near the end of August or the beginning of September, impulsively. I hitched a ride on a truck on its way back to the guru's main headquarters in Denver. I rode as far as Iowa then got out and hitched to Davenport, to visit some relatives there studying to be chiropractors. Then I flew back to Philadelphia, got my car, and headed out for Denver again, to get away from the ashram, and to look up Carol C., who had recently left for an ashram in Denver.

In those days, people often moved from one ashram to another. Go to any city with an ashram of the guru, and you had a place

to stay.

After staying maybe two weeks in Denver, I drove to Houston and stayed in another ashram a few weeks. Then drove back to Philadelphia, moved back with my parents, and started looking for a job.

### {60 E-Prime}

In this book I follow a style of writing called E-Prime, which attempts to reduce or eliminate use of the verbs “is” and “are.” Why? Because “is” and “are” assume a certain metaphysical view where we regard objects as having inherent properties. Grass *is* green; apples *are* red. “Is” and “are” use the language of eternity, a language perhaps appropriate to God but not to the universe in which we live. For instance, “God is love” says something about God yesterday, today, and tomorrow. But I *am* happy or I *am* sad says something that may cease to be true the next moment. We *are* not happy or sad. Rather, we *feel* happy or sad; we experience emotions as events in time.

A different metaphysical view uses the language of event and action. In this metaphysic—which better agrees with science, especially quantum mechanics—objects do not have inherent properties. Rather, objects appear a particular way to a particular observer. Grass and apples do not possess inherent color; rather they appear green and red to most human observers. But to a color-blind person, grass and apples appear gray. So instead of static properties, we have dynamic events in space-time.

My name *is* Art, we say in English. In French we would say, Je m’appelle Art (I call myself Art). One way of speaking sees my name as a static property, as something I have, as a part of me. The other pictures my name dynamically, as something I use to speak of myself.

Once, physicists wondered how the electron could possibly *be* a particle sometimes and *be* a wave at other times. Mysterious. How could that *be*? What *was* the electron, really? Now physicists say the electron behaves as a particle sometimes and

as a wave another. Not so mysterious.

Say that a child *is* a bad child and you label the child. From a child who *is* bad, what can you expect? But saying a child sometimes behaves badly stigmatizes the child less and better agrees with the facts.

I *was* tempted to write the last sentence, “But saying a child sometimes behaves badly *is* less stigmatizing and more accurate.” Sometimes writing in the style of E-Prime feels awkward but, so far, I think it adds more than it detracts.

Without E-Prime I might have written the first sentence of this book differently. You’ll recall it as, “I regard the Bible as a collection of fairy tales and Jesus as a fictional character born in the mythology of the ancient Roman Empire.” Without E-Prime I might have written, “The Bible *is* a collection of fairy tales and Jesus *is* just a fictional character born in the mythology of the ancient Roman Empire.” I see a significant difference between the two sentences. The E-Prime version states what I believe. The other version claims a God-like knowledge because it says the Bible *is* a collection of fairy tales, and implies if you don’t agree with me then you *are* wrong.

The E-Prime version of the sentence feels right to me; I claim no God-like knowledge. Rather, I state what I believe, what seems true to me. The difference between the two versions convinced me to try writing most of this book in E-Prime. So far, I like the result.

### {61 Prima Materia}

The idea of Prima Materia (first matter) goes back to Aristotle, who saw it as the dumb stuff of the universe. In his view, matter and form constitute an object. Form—the prototype, the abstract idea—somehow impresses itself on matter to create the object. For instance, the form of a hammer might be the abstract idea of a striking surface attached to a handle. Somehow this abstract idea, this form, “informs” dumb matter to create a hammer.

Prima Materia resembles the ultimate ground of existence; both are the foundation of the physical universe. But form and action differ.

Let's revisit the idea of action.

For a composite object to exist, its parts must continue to hold the proper relation to one another. A water molecule consists of one oxygen and two hydrogen atoms. If you separate the hydrogen and oxygen, water ceases to exist. Open your hand and your fist ceases to exist. A composite object depends on the "action" of its parts maintaining the proper relation.

Most people would call the act of continuing to hold your hand in a fist an action. But they might not see the act in a table's parts continuing to maintain the same static relation as the table moves through time. I use action in a broader sense than normal.

Aristotle says a physical object comes into existence when a non-physical form somehow impresses itself on dumb matter. In my view, a physical object results from an act of the Prima Materia, when it moves, when it dances. As a whirlpool results from the movement of water, the physical universe results from the movement, the acts of the ultimate ground of existence.

I find thinking of things as acts more satisfying than thinking of things as independent substances with inherent properties. For instance, in chemistry we learn that ordinary table salt is sodium chloride. So, we have sodium, a soft metal you can cut with a knife but which explodes if dropped in water. And we have chlorine, a yellow-green poisonous gas used as a weapon in World War I. And somehow we combine them to create ordinary salt. If you regard sodium and chlorine as independent substances with their own inherent properties, then how can they become table salt? It's odd, as if you somehow make a lamp out of a bunny and a hammer. But if you regard sodium, chlorine, and table salt as different "acts," then, to me, it seems as natural as combining a circular motion and a back and forth motion to get an oval motion.

### {62 Julian of Norwich}

Sometime after her birth in 1342 AD, an English woman asks her bishop for a Requiem Mass, a funeral Mass, for herself. After the special Mass, she enters her anchor-hold, a small living area the size of an apartment, with an open air courtyard perhaps. There she remains dead to the world for the rest of her natural life, in seclusion except for an occasional visitor. Dead to the world but “alive unto God.” The anchoress’s name is lost to us. We know her today as Julian of Norwich, named after the Church of St. Julian in Norwich, England.

If God is like the light and the world is like a movie, then the world is like a show.

Watch a movie and try to become conscious of the light, try to stay aware of it for a long time. What hinders you? The movie’s story line, its drama or comedy, which pulls you back into the story and makes you forget the light. So what would help you stay conscious of the light? A very boring movie, where little or nothing happens, where little or nothing distracts you from consciousness of light.

Thus we find the familiar figure of the great yogi, sitting in a cave, in constant meditation on God. In fact, religious contemplatives—monks, hermits, anchorites—throughout the ages have withdrawn from the world to find God.

I wanted to join them.

### {63 Year 1974}

By early 1974 I had a job in downtown Philadelphia and an apartment in the Germantown section of the city. I had no TV and spent much time meditating and reading.

To find if an egg is raw or hard-boiled, you spin it and briefly touch it. When you remove your finger, the raw egg begins spinning again, due to the momentum of the fluid matter still spinning inside.

I felt like the egg; my insides seemed to be spinning. I had gone to college, lived in a hippie commune, and an ashram. I felt I just wanted to sit still for a while.

My apartment sat near Philadelphia's Fairmount Park, a huge park occupying more than 9,200 acres. I would take day-long walks in the park, up toward Hermit Lane, named, I heard, after a hermit who once lived there. Or I would walk along the Schuylkill River, then through the city, down to my parents' home in South Philly, a distance of about thirteen miles.

Early that year I dated a woman who had a young child but I hardly had the frame of mind for marriage or a long-term relationship so the relationship ended. I didn't date again for more than four years.

### {64 No Savior Needed}

If indeed the world is like a movie and God is like the light, then we, as characters in the movie, have God as our ultimate ground of existence. As such we need no special savior or supernatural, baptismal rite. To become aware of the God within us, we need merely to remove what hinders our becoming aware.

Our mind is pure and simple, so when it is stripped of every alien thought, it enters the pure, simple, Divine light . . . God is light—the highest light . . . For if nothing interferes with its contemplation, the mind—the eye of the soul—sees God purely in a pure light.—Symeon the New Theologian

### {65 Lama Foundation}

People where I worked knew I meditated and read spiritual books, and sometimes they approached me, in fun, as the great guru. Once, Mark and Berge had a disagreement. "I think," began Mark and continued for some minutes. "I don't think," began Berge, who continued for at least as long. Who was right? they asked. With a counterfeit, Solomon-like wisdom, I ruled that since Mark said he thought and Berge admitted he

did not, Mark must be right. They smiled. My answer pleased them. Later, I reflected sourly on the incident. Did I have any real wisdom at all?

Another time, Tom, who spent much time buying and selling stocks and thinking about financial matters, said “Time is money and money is time, right? Well, if they have banks for money, why don’t they have banks for time?” “Because time is a river with no banks,” I said immediately, surprising us both.

That summer I vacationed in Avalon on the New Jersey shore, alone. I rented a small place and spent my time meditating and walking, trying to stay continually mindful of God. I succeeded, more or less, the first week. The second week, it rained. At times I felt bored and would read or play solitaire.

The year 1974 turned into 1975. I wrote for information from the Lama Foundation, publishers of the *Be Here Now* book, which for many years I kept in my car to give to any hitchhikers I might pick up. The Foundation offered various summer retreats. Ram Dass, born Richard Alpert, formerly a Harvard psychiatrist and sidekick of Timothy Leary, led one of the retreats. Though many people had helped write *Be Here Now*, Ram Dass was its primary author. One of Ram Dass’s teachers, a Hindu yogi, offered another retreat.

I picked the retreat by Ram Dass’s teacher, perhaps out of a kind of spiritual pride—I would learn not from the great man but from the great man’s teacher—but probably out of a desire to protect myself from more disappointment in spiritual leaders. I liked Ram Dass and thought he knew a lot. What if, on closer contact, I came see him as a fraud? But if I didn’t like one of his teachers, it wouldn’t bother me as much.

So I went to the Foundation for my 1975 summer vacation, for a two-week retreat, which I enjoyed. One night in the library I came across a book that has stayed with me, *The Gospel of Ramakrishna* (GRK). Ramakrishna led an unusual, at times, bizarre life, but he seems to have genuinely loved God and to have experienced God in a degree far above what most people do. In India they regard him as an incarnation of God, as they



do many other radically God-centered individuals.

Though not everything he said and did felt right to me, much of it felt very, very right. For instance, “There are three classes of devotees. The lowest one says, ‘God is up there,’ and he points to heaven. The mediocre devotee says that God dwells in the heart . . . . But the highest devotee says: ‘God alone has become everything. All things that we perceive are so many forms of God.’ . . . God is the only Eternal Substance. . . . Unalloyed love of God is the essential thing.”

Perhaps I needed a spiritual ideal like Ramakrishna, one who seemed absolutely authentic and was safely dead (he passed in 1886) so he could not disappoint me. At the time, many people posed as spiritual teachers and some turned out to be less than ideal, like the guru who demanded his followers buy him one Rolls Royce automobile after another until he owned more than eighty.

When the retreat ended, I wanted to remain, to live there. They agreed to let me stay a few days while they considered the matter. Had I been immediately accepted I probably would have stayed. But as I waited for a decision, I began to feel that maybe it would be better if I left. After about a week, I went back to Philadelphia, where my job still waited—although they were not happy I had gone AWOL for a week.

My insides had stopped spinning; I felt ready for the next step.

### {66 Meditation Area}

Sometime after I found the *Be Here Now* book, I created a meditation area in my home, consisting of a meditation floor pillow in front of a coffee table. On the table sat a small Oriental rug, candles, and objects that changed over the years: a glass globe, a blue Buddha, a crucifix, a seashell. I also had a small, carved wooden book stand. I did not think of the area as an altar or shrine, but merely a place to sit, read, and meditate. After I came back from the Lama Foundation, *The Gospel of Ramakrishna* often occupied the book stand. Eventually I had a picture of Ramakrishna, too.

### {67 Christian Mystics}

When I discovered some of the great Christian mystics, my view of Christianity changed. I still disliked many aspects, but I developed a great respect for its contemplatives and read about Christian contemplative orders, like the Carthusians and Trappists. I also read about women contemplative orders, and thought of attending public Mass at the Carmelite Monastery at 66<sup>th</sup> and Old York Road in Philadelphia, but never did.

I sometimes would wonder if any way existed for me to join the Carthusians or Trappists and immediately dismiss the idea as foolish, ludicrous, given my beliefs. But the idea would reoccur. I have some sort of wool allergy (my parents had to have my suit pants lined) and I'd wonder if I could wear the Carthusian's wool habit. Or I'd wonder if I could possibly follow such an austere rule of life for any length of time. I often felt if I had been born in another time and place, with more blind devotion and a less doubting intellect, I might have been one of them.

It all came to naught except for an interesting encounter with a Carthusian some years later.

### {68 Karma and Reincarnation}

A post-Christian religion ought to address questions which existing religions address. High on any list of such questions we would probably find, Are all evil deeds eventually punished? and, What happens when I die?

Even as a child I doubted the standard Christian answers to those questions because they involved the possibility of hell. From my present viewpoint, I would no longer say I doubt, because "doubt" is too weak a word. Rather I see them as insane, or, to use a British phrase, barking mad. "God is sending you to hell because you were not baptized by immersion." "Oh No, God is sending *you* to hell because your church 'lacks the means of salvation.'" "No, no, no. God is sending you *both* to hell because you belong to so-called churches of the West."

Better that God should not exist than be the bloodthirsty sadist depicted by hell-believing religions!

Later, I encounter the Hindu idea of karma and liked it. No outlandish, eternal punishment for finite flaws. Rather, you suffer only enough to atone for an evil act. As you sow, so you shall reap; no more and no less. Such an idea, I supposed, motivated the Catholic idea of purgatory, where you pay the debt of your (venial) sins in preparation for entering heaven.

But karma seems to entail mammoth administration. “Let’s see, who’s next? Joe? Hmm, Joe verbally abused his wife and never gave to charity, so in this life let’s make Joe a timid husband and have his wife verbally abuse him, and let’s make him poor in a country where people don’t give to charity. Who’s next?”

A more sophisticated version of karma resembles Newton’s Third Law of Motion: for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Someone who habitually lies or cheats becomes a different person than someone who does not. Our actions affect our character, and our character affects how much or little we suffer in a given situation. So even if events occur at random, our character influences how they affect us.

All this, I admit, does not prove we live in a universe that eventually rewards every good deed and punishes every evil one. Perhaps we do live in such a universe but cannot see it. Or perhaps we don’t. I don’t know.

I also liked the idea of reincarnation where you keep coming back until you get it right, until you become pure enough, spiritual enough to merge with God. In this view, you reach the final end of all your human lives when you consciously and continuously merge with the Light. In the Hindu view, after about twenty-one days of such merging, the body “falls away” (dies) and, like a river reaching the ocean, you lose your individuality and merge with God.

Reincarnation seems a better answer than determining eternal bliss or torture based on one human life, especially an unusually

short life. Which eternal fate should be given to someone who died at age six? At age eight? But reincarnation rests upon a simple idea of personal identity. Tom is born, lives perhaps eighty years, dies, and is born again.

But what exactly stays the same through those eighty years and resurfaces in another life? Not memories, which we lose even over one life. Not personality necessarily, which can change. Some fixed essence that we call soul? If only one eternal, ultimate ground of existence exists, then how do we describe the soul?

For me, karma and reincarnation answer the questions more believably than Christianity does, but I do not feel they are 100 percent true, merely closer to the true.

### {69 Right Living}

We just discussed the two questions, Are all evil deeds eventually punished? and, What happens when I die? The reader may not find my answers entirely satisfactory. I don't.

Rather than looking for better answers, we can try a different strategy. We can look for a single, more fundamental question, and try to answer that question.

We sometimes experience the temptation to do things we shouldn't. So if we do the nasty deed, we worry, Will I be punished? We sometimes experience injustice or evil. So we wonder if the universe will eventually punish the evildoer, or must we do it ourselves? In both cases, the question is, What should I do? or, How should I live my life? If we had firm answers, we might find it easier not knowing the answers to other questions.

How should we live our lives? What should we value? More about this later.

## {70 Temple University}

By the fall of 1975 I was back at my job and feeling ready to take the next step. I had some money in the bank and thought of buying a home. I still leaned toward the monastic life but did not see a practical way to do it. Eventually I decided to go back to college. For my undergraduate degree, I had taken the practical route and studied electrical engineering. But I liked straight math better. I regarded the world of ideas as below the spiritual realm, but closer to it than the everyday world. So I saw college as a kind of secular monasticism. I could learn to live on less money and approach my studies as a kind of meditation.

I quit my job and looked for a cheaper living situation. An acquaintance from my undergraduate days drove a Cadillac and shared a posh, two-bedroom apartment with a guy from work, in a distant northern suburb of Philadelphia. Their company had hit hard times and temporarily laid them off, so they needed extra money. And so I began my secular monastic life by sharing the rent and sleeping in a sleeping bag on the floor of one of the bedrooms.

A twenty-minute drive to the west, in Sumneytown, Pennsylvania, Amrit Desai and his followers had purchased a large home and turned it into Kripalu ashram. I had known of the group for a few years. Now, I lived close enough to visit. I made a few visits, but did not go back. A few years later, after I had married, we went to one of the group's retreats in Summit Station, Pennsylvania.

I took some graduate math courses and did some part-time work. Sometimes I took the train to the city to study at the University of Pennsylvania library, which let you in without a school ID back then. In early 1976 my friend's company rehired him and his roommate, and I decided to find a place closer to the city. I moved back near my old apartment, in a rundown neighborhood, into a house with a college student and a guy who had a job.

I applied to Temple University, a state-run university in

Philadelphia, and in the fall of 1976 began as a full-time grad student in mathematics. Temple let me teach some low-level courses and, in return, gave me free tuition and a monthly stipend sufficient to pay food and rent.

I did not anticipate making any great mathematical discoveries. But I enjoyed learning, got good grades, and enjoyed teaching.

### {71 Guitar}

I played guitar beginning in fifth grade and took lessons to the end of high school, when I felt I had to make a choice between becoming a professional musician or an engineer. I picked engineer but continued playing now and then at home. A few months before I started Temple, I felt the need to simplify my life and get rid of material possessions. One day I walked into a thrift store on Germantown Avenue with the red 1965 Gibson ES 335 guitar I had bought in high school. I walked to the donation section, handed it to a man, and without a word turned and walked out.

### {72 Quakers}

During my first year at Temple, some friends and I went to a Quaker service. Jim, who had been born a Quaker, took me, Penny, Lisa, Murray, and Pavlova to the Greene Street Friends Meeting house in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. Sitting shyly and, we thought, unnoticed in the back of the meeting hall, we watched a traditional, “unprogrammed” meeting, where people sit in silence, trying to become aware of the God within themselves. If and when a person feels moved by the Spirit, they rise and speak, usually pointedly and briefly. If no one feels moved, then the meeting sits in silence until the hour ends. That day a few people spoke. When the meeting ended, the clerk rose and read a few announcements. Then he asked the meeting to greet its visitors, so the entire room turned toward us and nodded, smiled, or said hello. They knew we were there all the time.

The Quakers (officially called the Society of Friends) had impressed me years before when they took what I considered principled stances against the Vietnam war. The meeting impressed me, too, though I did not attend another for a few years, until I had moved to Pittsburgh.

George Fox, who founded the Society of Friends, had a religious experience where he saw Light. He wrote: “. . . there did a pure fire appear in me . . . The divine light of Christ manifesteth all things.” Believing that “there is that of God in all,” Quakers feel no need for ministers, religious statutes, or ornate churches. They sit together in a plain hall in silence and search for the God within. (At least, the traditional, unprogrammed meetings do; I have heard programmed meetings exist which have traditional Protestant services, but I have never been to one.) In meeting, Quakers look within themselves for God’s continuing revelation.

More than a century ago, Quakers found a revelation that said slavery should be abolished. Their opponents cited biblical verses that sanction and regulate slavery. Said Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States: “[Slavery] was established by decree of Almighty God . . . it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments.” We may portray the US Civil War in various ways: as a war about state versus federal power, as a war about slavery, as a war between the industrialized North and the agricultural South—or as a war between those who regard the Bible as the last word, and those who believe in a continuing revelation.

### {73 Augustine}

One year, I had cards printed and sent them to friends and relatives at Christmas, with these words of St. Augustine:

And being thence admonished to return to myself, I entered even into my inward self, Thou being my Guide: and able I was, for Thou wert become my Helper. And I entered and beheld with the eye of my soul (such as it was), above the same eye of my soul, above my mind, the Light Unchangeable. Not this ordinary light, which all flesh may look upon, nor as it were

a greater of the same kind, as though the brightness of this should be manifold brighter, and with its greatness take up all space. Not such was this light, but other, yea, far other from all these. Nor was it above my soul, as oil is above water, nor yet as heaven above earth: but above to my soul, because It made me; and I below It, because I was made by It. He that knows the Truth, knows what that Light is; and he that knows It, knows eternity. Love knoweth it. O Truth Who are Eternity! and Love Who art Truth! and Eternity Who art Love! Thou art my God . . .

Sometimes I cannot speak of God as I wish because English lacks certain words, certain pronouns. If I say my brother visited me, you may ask if *he* enjoyed *his* visit. If I say my sister visited, you may ask if *she* enjoyed *her* visit. But what if I say my cousin visited? You must use plural pronouns: did *they* enjoy *their* visit? English forces us to refer to God as either “he”, “she”, “it”, or just “God.” I mostly use the word God.

Speaking of God as the universe’s ultimate ground of existence emphasizes God’s impersonal aspect, God’s “it” aspect. But regarding God as our ultimate ground of existence shows God has in some sense a personal aspect; if we choose, we may think of God as a person, as Augustine’s passage demonstrates. I generally avoid using “he” and “she” when speaking about God, but if English had a pronoun that emphasized a genderless personhood I would probably use it at times. Ultimately, God transcends the dichotomy of object and person.

{74 Year 1978}

After Ramakrishna passed away, a religion formed around him. I discovered a Ramakrishna Center in New York City and decided to visit. I left early Sunday morning, took the subway, and then the train to New York City. Then I walked to the Center, near 94<sup>th</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Having lived in a hippie commune and an ashram with several ex-hippies, I found the Center too formal. The organ or viola music felt stiff, foreign; even some Catholic churches at the time used folk guitar. I could afford the train fare only



occasionally and went, perhaps, ten times in the two years I studied at Temple. I also discovered a local Ramakrishna study group, which met in the home of a University of Pennsylvania professor; I attended that, too. Now and then the group would host presentations of monks of the Ramakrishna Order.

God still occupied much of my life, but not as much as before; math and studies filled the remainder. I felt friendly toward the other graduate students, particularly my three office mates, but I had little social life. I shared a house with a married couple, Tom and Cheryl, and another person.

By the spring of 1978 I had completed the requirements for a MA in math. I had not dated for about four years and thought about starting again. My first date literally fell into my arms. Tom came down with what seemed at first like a bad cold but turned out to be leukemia. He had grown up in Pittsburgh; his friends from there came to visit him in the hospital. He looked very sick. As we walked into the room, Audrey took one look at Tom and fainted. I caught her.

Rutgers University had accepted me into its PhD math program. After meeting Audrey, I looked into Pittsburgh schools and ended up going to the University of Pittsburgh. I moved to Pittsburgh in the summer of 1978.

### {75 The Beauty of Mathematics}

The beauty of elegant thought attracted me to mathematics. It seemed a poor substitute to the experience of God I craved, but I had to do something with my life.

I find that beauty in philosophy, too, which I read now and then. As an example of elegant thought, consider this argument, which we owe to Aristotle. Suppose everything, right now, is either true or false. Then predestination must be true. Why? Well, “You will have toast tomorrow for breakfast” is now, at this moment, either true or false. If it is true, then eating toast tomorrow must be predestined for you. By similar reasoning, we may say all things are predestined.

I find in the argument a high level of reasoning, an elegance and beauty.

As an example of math reasoning, consider this story. To keep a class busy, a teacher assigns a problem: add up all the numbers from 1 to 100. That is, do  $1 + 2 + 3 + \dots$  and keep going until you reach  $\dots + 99 + 100$ . What is the answer? In the story, Gauss, one of the world's greatest mathematicians, gives the correct answer, 5,050, in less than a minute—at age six or seven.

How did he do it? Imagine fifty men and fifty women in a large room. The men are numbered 1 to 50; the women are numbered 51 to 100. Now pair them as follows: man 1 holds hands with woman 100, and together they walk out of the room. Man 2 goes with woman 99. Man 3 goes with woman 98. Following the pattern the last couple is man 50 and woman 51. How many couples walked out of the room? Fifty. How much did each couple add up to? A hundred and one. And fifty couples, each equaling a hundred and one, gives you? Fifty times a hundred and one, which equals 5,050.

A more advanced example of elegant mathematical thought may be found in Georg Cantor's theory of transfinite numbers, where he shows various grades of the infinite exist, with countable infinity being "less infinite" than uncountable infinity. For details, consult a friendly mathematician.

I suspect children who find beauty in shape and color often become artists. And those who lose themselves in sound become musicians. And those who can appreciate the thrill of elegant thought become mathematicians, philosophers, or scientists.

### {76 Albert Einstein}

One of the greatest scientists of the last century, Albert Einstein, knew the pleasure and thrill of thought. Pondering an apparently simple question—What would it be like to travel at the speed of light?—led him to profound discoveries about the

nature of our universe.

I once wondered what Einstein thought about religion, so I did a search. I found many things I liked, especially, “I am a deeply religious nonbeliever. . . . This is a somewhat new kind of religion.”

Einstein disbelieved in a personal God, that is, a God who is like a person. He said: “The idea of a personal God is an anthropological concept which I am unable to take seriously.” Also, “In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast power in the hands of the priests.”

Here are a few more quotes I like, without comment.

“The most beautiful and most profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior Reasoning Power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible Universe, forms my idea of God.”

“Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man. . . . In this way the pursuit of science leads to a religious feeling of a special sort, which is indeed quite different from the religiosity of someone more naive.”

“The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life. To make this a living force and bring it to clear consciousness is perhaps the foremost task of education. The foundation of morality should not be made dependent on myth nor tied to any authority lest doubt about the myth or about the legitimacy of the authority imperil the foundation of sound judgment and action.”

“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

### {77 Leaving School}

Audrey and I dated for a while, but it didn't last. A bit later, in October or November 1978, while studying in a student lounge of the University of Pittsburgh, I noticed a blonde woman sitting still on a sofa to my right. I watched her off and on for ten or twenty minutes; she hardly moved. When she finally got up, I went over and asked her if she had been meditating. She said yes. Her name was Peg. We began dating, and eventually married.

I had started Temple not expecting to complete a PhD. But after getting my MA, continuing seemed like the right thing to do. Now I was thirty and in a relationship. Peg was about two years younger than me. She had grown up in Pittsburgh, graduated college, moved away for a time, returned, and gone back to school.

In the summer of 1979 I took my math "prelims," the preliminary exams before choosing an advisor and PhD topic. I failed the exams. Failing was not unusual and many students would take them again and pass, but I felt my career as a graduate student might be ending. At the time, people talked about "tenure block," where lots of baby-boomers my age had already gone straight through, gotten their PhD, and were getting tenure—which meant PhD math teaching positions were becoming harder to find. Peg and I had scheduled the wedding for July 1980, so I did another year as a graduate student and looked for a job.

### {78 Viewing the Natural World Religiously}

"I am a deeply religious nonbeliever . . . This is a somewhat new kind of religion," said Einstein. A deeply religious nonbeliever; what can that mean? I take nonbeliever as nonbelief in the supernatural, in gods who are persons. So what is there left to believe? The natural world. So apparently Einstein had a deeply religious attitude toward the natural world, toward the world we see around us, an attitude we find in another quote: "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing

is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

If we see the world as a manifestation, quite literally an image, of the Eternal, then we might naturally feel a reverence and awe toward it. And without attachment to mythological stories of ancient gods we would have nothing to fear from the truth; we could wholeheartedly accept the findings of science. We might even imagine a scientific religion, a religion that addresses the questions traditionally addressed by religion yet in full accord with the scientific spirit, the scientific way of knowing.

### {79 Fact or Fantasy?}

One night, Peg and I went to see a science fiction movie called *Alien*. As a kid growing up in the 1950s, I'd seen lots of monster movies. Mom would give me twenty-five cents—twenty to get in and five for candy, like root beer barrels—and off I would go with the other kids. I had lots of scary fun watching Frankenstein, Dracula, Wolfman, the Blob, Godzilla, giant man-eating ants, spiders, and more. *Alien* left me somehow disgusted. In the movie, an alien baby implants itself in a man's chest, and grows until it's strong enough to break out, like a bird breaking out of an egg. What kind of perverted, unbalanced mind, I wondered, would create a movie like that?

Later I learned of the Jewel wasp, which lays its eggs in the belly of a cockroach; the baby wasps eventually eat their way out. What kind of God would create a world like that? What kind of God would create a world with so much pain and suffering? Where a tidal wave drowns thousands of babies, grandparents, and anyone in between? Where the bubonic plague killed one-third of all Europe in the Middle Ages? A world full of disease and natural disaster?

Atheists answer the question by saying God does not exist.

Religions address the question in two ways. First, they dismiss the question by calling it “the problem of evil,” as if labeling something a problem somehow makes it go away. Second, they create a wonderfully comforting image of God—a God

who loves *us*, who even came down to earth and gave his life for *us*. And who, if we do the right thing, will spend eternity with *us*. How very, very special we must be.

But fact may shatter illusion. Once religion assured us the entire universe revolved around the earth, revolved around *us*. Science proved that false. The Bible has Jesus saying: “Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?” Scientists tell us that during winter in the US, half of all birds starve to death.

And so we have a choice: fact or fantasy. Some people choose fantasy and insist that fact must be wrong; that evolution is false and the earth is only a few thousand years old, just as the Bible says. I choose fact, whatever the facts may be. I choose the universe as it exists. And I choose to regard the Eternal Ground of Existence of all fact with awe and reverence.

### {80 After Death?}

So where does that leave me? As an insignificant speck spawned by chance by an enormous universe that will not miss me when I am gone? Or in some secret way as one of God’s special creations, just as religion teaches? Or something else?

I found an answer once in a short story by Jorge Borges. The answer satisfies me and seems right; I’m sure many people will find it thoroughly unsatisfactory, even wrong.

The story, *The God Script*, tells of an Aztec priest named Tzinacan, long imprisoned by the Spaniards. One day in his prison, Tzinacan experiences “union with the divinity, with the universe . . . God has been seen in a blazing light.” Now Tzinacan believes he can shatter his stone prison, destroy the captors who tortured him, evict the Spaniards from Mexico, and rule the land. Yet he knows he never shall, for he no longer identifies with Tzinacan. “Whoever has seen the universe . . . cannot think in terms of one man, of that man’s trivial fortunes or misfortunes, though he be that very man.”

So to the question of whether I am an insignificant, accidental speck in a vast universe, or one of God's very special creations, or something else, I answer: I don't know and it really doesn't matter. God exists. That is what's important. And we can come to know God, to experience God directly. That is what's important.

After all, if death annihilates my personal identity, so what? I will not be here to miss it.

I do not fear death. I had been dead for billions and billions of years before I was born, and had not suffered the slightest inconvenience from it.—Mark Twain

And if we reincarnate until we evolve to such a high level of spiritual purity that we merge with God, then the "I" that I am now gradually evolves out of existence. The person at the start—let's suppose him a savage, barbarian—differs substantially from the person at the end—a spiritually evolved soul ready to give up individuality and merge back into the Light.

The only alternative I know says when we die, we go to heaven purged of all our sins and faults but essentially the same person. And that same person either (1) evolves to higher and higher spiritual levels or (2) remains the same throughout all eternity.

The first alternative resembles reincarnation except our evolution occurs in heaven rather than on earth or other planets.

The second alternative to me seems monstrous. It says that a child who dies at age seven and goes to heaven, becomes a nicer, more spiritual seven-year-old and remains that way for all eternity. Would anyone, if they really thought about it, really want to be a nicer, purified, unchanging version of their present self forever? I wouldn't.

Millions long for eternal life who do not know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon.—Susan Ertz

So what happens after death? Dissolve? Maybe. Or evolve to eventually dissolve? Maybe. Or go to heaven but remain separate from God *forever*? I hope not. And I don't think so,

because I feel that the only entity capable of existing for all eternity is the Entity that already has existed for all eternity, an entity which can neither be created nor destroyed.

### {81 Retreat at Kripalu}

I started working in the fall of 1980 at M.I.T. Lincoln Labs in Massachusetts, which did research, much of it for the US government. As a graduate student, I wrote FORTRAN programs for a math professor; at the Lab I did the same, for a PhD physicist. (Technically, I did not work for the Lab, I worked at the Lab, as a consultant. Lab employees sometimes observed with a smile that the cost center for consultants also paid for desks and chairs.)

As a married guy with a job, I suppose I almost qualified as “normal,” although Peg and I ate vegetarian and had no TV. We read a lot; much of it still concerning God and spirituality. And we meditated, sometimes regularly, sometimes now and then.

For our summer vacation in 1981, we drove down to Summit Station in Pennsylvania for a week-long retreat at Kripalu ashram, the group whose ashram I had visited in Sumneytown some years earlier. We camped in a tent.

The staff would start the day with an early morning run in the crisp air, then meditation. Guests were free to join them. Then everyone would have breakfast. During the day, guests would go to various classes and programs, or just enjoy free time.

I remember envying the staff, feeling inadequate. Here they were, devoting their entire day to God. And what was I doing with my life?

I went to a class on Buddhist meditation. We would sit cross-legged on floor pillows, while the instructor told us to follow our breath. Don't follow your thoughts; don't think about your body; just count your breaths and be mindful of each. Count to ten, then go back to one, with the object of stilling the mind. Once in a while, she would say, “Is your mind wandering?”



Now gently put thoughts aside and come back to the breath, come back to the breath.”

We would sit for fifty minutes, then rise and do a slow, walking meditation, with our eyes downward, conscious of each step—conscious of each part of each step, thinking “lifting, moving, touching, placing, shifting” for the right foot, then the same for the left. After about ten minutes, the instructor would say, “Slowly stop. Don’t look up. Locate your pillow in your mind. Now slowly walk back there and sit down.”

One day, as we headed toward our pillows, she asked, “Do you notice any difference when you’re walking around the room and when you’re walking to your pillow? Do you lose mindfulness of the present when you have a goal? Try to be as mindful when walking toward your pillow as when you walk in a circle.”

### {82 Francis}

After dinner, everyone would gather in a large room, with the guru, Amrit Desai, on stage. The session would begin with devotional chants, led by the guru playing a harmonium. Then the room would fall silent as everyone meditated. Then the guru would speak for a while. Lastly, he would invite questions. People would line up; one by one they would go up on stage and sit at his feet. Someone would hand them a microphone and they’d ask their questions and the guru would answer. There might be a follow-up question or a short discussion. Then the person would leave and the next person would come up.

I recall a man who went up a few nights in a row. He had the ascetic face and slim body of a St. Francis of Assisi. “Francis” had trouble asking his questions. He seemed in tremendous emotional turmoil. Sometimes his voice would crack, or he would sound close to tears.

It illuminates us, this light that never sets, without change, unalterable, never eclipsed; it speaks, it acts, it lives and vivifies, it transforms into light those whom it illumines. God is light, and those whom he deems worthy of seeing him see

him as light; . . . Those who have not seen this light have not seen God, for God is light. . . . If a man who possesses within him the light of the Holy Spirit is unable to bear its radiance, he falls prostrate on the ground and cries out in great fear and terror, as one who sees and experiences something beyond nature, above words or reason. He is then like a man whose entrails have been set on fire and, unable to bear the scorching flame, he is utterly devastated by it . . . —Symeon the New Theologian

### {83 Mary!}

One night, a woman who I'll call Mary asked a question. She spoke in a quiet, trembling voice.

Mary: It's so hard to express in words things that reach us, at the core of our being. And . . . I'm confused a little now, because I experienced Shakti to such a depth that it was like an epileptic convulsion, several of them. And . . . every time I meditated it kept repeating. And it was as if . . . it was beautiful . . . my meditations were wonderful, but it was as if I was out of control. And I was a tiny bit frightened.

Guru: When did this happen?

Mary: Yesterday . . . and this is a new field to me. I just started in yoga . . . And I know very little about it except it's connected to the kundalini . . . I really don't know what the Shakti is doing to me. Or how much I should allow it to do to me. When I meditate, it's so profound. And like I go into the light, into rings of light, into the sun. And . . . our meditation teacher keeps telling us, go back to the breath, go back to the breath. And that shatters my beautiful meditation. And the further I let myself be drawn into the sun, on into this visualization that occurs with rings of light, the more . . . the deeper and deeper I go, and that seems to be when the Shakti takes over. And yet, I'm confused now. How much do I let the Shakti take over, how much do I go back to the breath? I'm fighting going back to the breath, which I really don't need because I want to go on into the rings of light. And I'm just a little confused right now.

I trembled. I'd been sitting in the same meditation class, doing what? Counting my breath. While she had been there seeing God. My experience in Maryland came back to me. Not as strong as the first time, not as immediate, vicariously. But there it was. And God! how I wanted back in.

After the talk, I ran to find Mary, with no clear idea of what I would say. I found her standing near a wall, talking with Francis. I stood there and eventually we all talked. I remember saying, “I’ve been trying to get that back for years,” and her saying, “Well, you can have it.”

I bought the tape of that night’s session and have listened to it over the years.

### {84 Vedanta Centre}

After the retreat, I began running in the morning and then doing yoga and meditation. I set up a meditation area in the bedroom. And Peg and I visited spiritual groups, looking for one where we felt at home. We went to the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society on Deerfield Street in Boston, run by a monk of the Ramakrishna Order, but found it a bit too formal for our tastes.

Eventually I read about the Vedanta Center in Cohasset and called to inquire about public programs and get a feel for what they were about. The young woman who answered described it as a group of people who followed and lived with a woman who had been initiated by a monk of the Ramakrishna Order.

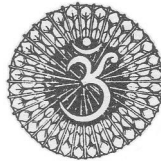
As you may have noticed, I have a caution and wariness toward spiritual leaders, perhaps because of some innate personality trait, perhaps because of certain experiences. I suppose the first and last spiritual teacher I trusted with all my heart was my mother, when I was six or seven. After that I attended Catholic school where from third grade to the end of high school I frequently doubted and mistrusted what the nuns and priests said about God. Then I had an experience of God in my apartment in Maryland, an experience triggered by the BHN book, true, but without the aid of a spiritual leader. Then as part of the Guru Maharaj Ji group, I met several mathatmas, one of them Mahatma Fakiranand, who as a spiritual teacher left something to be desired.

So I took what I had been told about the Vedanta Centre in

the most pessimistic way possible. I imagined some half-crazy woman who had been initiated, then declared herself enlightened, turned her family room into an altar to herself, and somehow persuaded some neighborhood teenagers to live with her and worship her. Or something along those lines. But I knew I could not let it rest there, and that one Sunday, sooner or later, we'd take the long drive to Cohasset to see for ourselves.

The Vedanta Centre in Cohasset occupies about twenty-two acres; the main building sits back from the road, up a tree-lined driveway. We parked and walked into the Temple, which impressed me. On the left and right walls hang symbols of the world's various religions. Above the altar shone the Hindu Om symbol in a round stained-glass window.

The idea of God as Eternal Light, as ultimate ground of existence, can be found in all world religions, but to find it in some religions you must look hard. Some Buddhist groups talk about the Clear Light of the Void, but as far as I know, have no symbol for it. Only Hindu religions, in the ubiquitous Om symbol, symbolize the idea of God that means so much to me.



I felt at home.

A woman about my age gave the talk, about the spiritual aspects of Alcoholic Anonymous's Twelve Step program. I found the talk interesting and intelligent. We learned later that the guru, Srimata Gayatri Devi, whom everyone called Ma, did not give the address because she divided her time between Cohasset and another community in California. Members of the Cohasset community took turns giving the Sunday talk while Ma was away.

We started going regularly. After maybe a month and a half

we heard that Ma would be giving next address. I didn't look forward to it, because by this time I had come to think highly of the Centre and worried I might not think the same of its leader.

Ma's talks showed her as the warm and gooey, emotional type. I had no problem with that. The majority of people devoted to God seem that type. So I had long resigned myself and learned how to get along with them. In her talks, Ma's devotees found a wonderful warmth, feelings of assurance and hope, and renewed devotion to God. I enjoyed some of her talks, too, though others left me cold. But I had no problem with her as a leader. She seemed honest and real.

### {85 Marital Problems}

By the end of 1982, Peg and I had problems in our marriage. I have always felt more at home with ideas than people. My interests include math, philosophy, and God. I've earned my living for the last few decades by programming and administering computers. I do not think anyone would call me a people person. It wouldn't surprise me if people with a personality like mine often have marital problem.

In addition, I often felt deeply unhappy, not with her but with myself. After the retreat at Summit Station, I felt more and more keenly my separation from God. What was I doing with my life? Such feelings occurred when I lived alone, before I married, but then they made no one miserable but myself. And in a weird way suffering for God had an undercurrent of happiness, like some song about how I'd rather miss you and suffer than be happy with someone else. When Peg told me she felt she came second in my life, I didn't know what to say.

### {86 Denys, the Carthusian}

One day (January 14, 1983, to be exact) I opened the *Boston Globe* and there on page two, occupying most of the page, I saw "A Carthusian monk reflects on prayer and John Lennon." The

article astonished me.

I had read about the Carthusians years before, when I discovered the mystical aspects of Christianity. I felt drawn to their meditative, hermit life. Carthusian monks form what has been described as a community of hermits, of people like Julian of Norwich. Their living quarters consists of a small two-floor cell; a workshop fills the first floor; a place to pray, study, eat, and sleep occupies the second. Cells have an attached, walled-in garden. Three times a day, monks meet for communal prayer. Once a week for a few hours and twice a year for an entire day, they break their silence and speak to one another. Contact with the outside world consists mostly of family members, who may visit once a year. Each monk lives an austere life of almost unbroken solitude. They do not preach or write. Rather they live in silence, meditation, prayer, focusing on “experiencing God.” Yet here in my newspaper I saw a photo and story about one.

The story concerned Denys Rackley, who described himself as “the exception to all the rules of the order.” Rackley had conducted public retreats—Christian retreats that include *Buddhist* meditation. The story said Rackley would lead another retreat during Holy Week, in late March, in Petersham, about an hour’s drive from where we lived.

If someone had said this was one of the most extraordinary events since the founding of the Carthusian order in 1084 AD, I would have believed it.

Naturally, I thought about going to the retreat in March. But I did not want to run away from our marital problems or make them worse. I felt quite divided for a long time, with one part of me saying don’t go, and the other part saying I had to go. Would going make things worse in my marriage? Could going somehow make them better? Regardless of the marriage, could I miss it? Eventually, I went. We sat in silent meditation about eight hours a day. Not in one sitting, of course. And we remained silent most of the time we were not in meditation. I had a mixed experience, sometimes putting worries and

thoughts aside and allowing the retreat to do its work, other times worrying about the situation at home and wondering if I had made the right choice.

Peg moved out in May.

### {87 Values}

Should I have gone to the retreat? This brings up the broader question of values, ethics, and morals. How should I decide what to do and what not to do? How I should live my life?

People who follow a supernatural religion believe values and morals come from God, who reveals good and evil. I say “reveals” because while some good and bad actions seem obvious—don’t murder, don’t steal, be honest, respect family and friends—others are not—don’t mix meat and dairy (Jewish revelation), believe in Jesus to gain heaven and avoid hell (Christian revelation), pray five times a day (Islamic revelation). Only if God told us, could we come to know some things that God supposedly wants us to do or avoid.

How can a person who follows a natural religion, who accepts the universe as God’s book of revelation, decide good and evil? I don’t think they can as long as we define good and evil as what some god up in the sky wants us to do or avoid.

So what remains? How can I find my way?

I think of morality in terms of helps and hindrances rather than good and evil. So I ground my morality in the nature of the universe, not in the supposed wishes of some absent god.

To illustrate, suppose someone wants to win an Olympic gold medal in ice skating. Then getting up every morning at five AM to practice for two hours before school will help them, and sleeping late will hinder them; neither act can be called good or evil.

So we have a type of mathematical function where we put in (1) what we want to achieve and (2) the nature of the universe,

and we get out (1) acts that will help us achieve our goal, and (2) acts that will make reaching the goal more difficult.

Because I want to be accepted as a good member of society (goal) and society demands I observe its laws (nature of the universe), I follow society's laws. When I had to choose between entering the guru's ashram or following my parents' wishes, I had two conflicting goals: finding God or respecting my parents' wishes, being a good son. The goal I valued more highly determined my action.

If I wanted to be accepted as a good member of society and my society accepted slavery then I would accept slavery, unless I wanted something more than acceptance, like faithfully following my conscience, the quiet voice of God that Quakers believe they can hear in stillness and silence.

But what should we value? That, I believe, is up to us. I value being a good member of society, a good husband and father, and finding God. What you value is up to you.

### {88 Morality and Ethics}

I've read ethical philosophy but consider myself a neophyte rather than an expert. So I don't regard my idea of helps and hindrances as a fully worked-out system of ethics and morals. My system may seem like a shabby, pitiful thing to people who believe that their own system of morals rests on God's eternal revelation. In my defense, I'll say I regard as deluded people who believe their system of morals derives from a revelation. For example, Christians ignore almost all of the Old Testament laws and many of the New. Supposedly God himself in the person of Jesus says don't take oaths and call no man "Father." Yet Christians take oaths and call their dad "Father." (For good measure, Catholics call priests "Father" too.)

As a rule, Christians don't follow what Jesus and the Bible say to do. Rather, they follow what their preachers tell them Jesus and the Bible say to do—which is just as well, because the Bible has a mix of good advice and truly bad advice.



My newspaper once had the sad story of a man in a neighboring town who raped his sister. I wondered what the Bible would have us do with the man.

Deuteronomy 22:23–24 says if a man rapes an engaged woman in a city and she doesn't cry out for help, then he and the woman must be stoned to death. The newspaper article didn't say if the girl was engaged or not. And I couldn't say if the neighboring town qualifies biblically as a city or not. So maybe the Bible would have us stone the raped girl to death, but maybe not.

If the woman is not engaged then a different law applies. Deuteronomy 22:28–29 says a man who rapes an unengaged woman must pay her father fifty pieces of silver and marry her for life. So the woman becomes her rapist's wife for life. And what if her father rather than her brother did the rape? The father would have to pay the money to himself and marry his daughter? And what if the rapist already has a wife? In biblical times many men had multiple wives but Christian societies frown upon that practice today.

Of course, many Christians believe the New Testament supersedes Old Testament books like Deuteronomy. So what would Jesus himself have us do with the brother who raped his sister? I can find no direct statement of Jesus about such a case. So, I suppose, general statements about forgive seventy times seven and turn the other cheek apply? Let he who is without sin cast the first stone?

So what should be done to a man who rapes his sister? Any competent preacher could invent an answer and convince his congregation the Bible solidly supports it. In fact, the Bible has no sensible answer.

People who believe their morality rests solidly on God's revelation believe fantasy, in my opinion; they ignore how much human picking and choosing goes into constructing what they are told is biblical morality.

## {89 With Enough Shovels}

Peg's leaving hit me hard. I had always thought of marriage as for life. In the Italian-American household I grew up in, couples did not divorce, although one of my father's many nephews had married a divorced woman. I had always expected to be married for life.

I stayed in the apartment for a few more months and changed jobs. I had begun looking for another job while we were still together, because I'd become dissatisfied with the type of work done at the Labs. The Labs did much of its work for the US government, much of that related to war, like research for better cruise missiles and nuclear attack submarines.

About this time, a US Deputy Under Secretary of Defense said an all-out nuclear war would not be as devastating as people thought, that the US could recover in about four years, and that "If there are enough shovels to go around, everybody's going to make it."

We lived in a suburb of Boston; my parents still lived in South Philadelphia. I couldn't see how we could possibly be part of the "everybody" who would survive a nuclear war. I supposed by everybody he meant everybody except the millions vaporized when the bombs hit the cities. People in the suburbs some distance from the bombs would survive if they dug a hole, covered it with a door or plywood sheet, and piled about three feet of dirt on top, said he. "It's the dirt that does it," the press quoted him as saying.

Survive for how long? With radiation in the sky and on the ground, perhaps freezing temperatures, with grocery stores emptied in a few days? Maybe by "everyone" he meant everyone who mattered, everyone taken to safety in some underground mountain command center? I decided to look for another job, and in September started working at Brigham and Women's hospital in Boston, doing image processing programming.

We digitized medical images from CAT and MRI machines and

programmed the computer to extract information. For instance, I worked on a program to trace an artery and automatically calculate how much the artery narrowed (i.e., the degree of stenosis). I found the work interesting and felt it did something constructive for the world.

My job at the Labs was northwest of downtown Boston. My search for a job unrelated to war had led me to the hospital, which was south of downtown Boston, within commuting distance of Cohasset. I had intended to move out of the apartment anyway. So I moved into a large house in Cohasset, on Border Street. The house had five other people: on the third floor Bob and Deneen, who went to the Vedanta Centre; myself and Wendy and Gail on the second floor; and John on the first floor; all of us over thirty except John. I went to work, attended the Vedanta Centre's programs and services, and tried to figure out what to do with my life.

One day at a flea market I saw a Yamaha acoustic guitar, bought it, and started playing again.

### {90 Moving In}

A monk of the Ramakrishna Order founded the Vedanta Centre in 1909. Born in India in 1906, Ma joined the community in 1926, and assumed leadership when the monk passed in 1940. On its twenty-two acres lived about five women monastics in the main house, four or five men monastics in a cabin, an elderly couple in a separate home, and a couple in their thirties in another home. I attended regularly and began to hope one day to live there, though I wondered how they felt about formerly married people becoming a monastic. I came to know the people who lived there, who must have put in a good word for me, because in March of 1984 Ma asked me if I would like to live there. I said yes and moved in the next month.

I cannot express how I felt when I moved in. I had been looking to devote my life to God full-time since my experience in Maryland, twelve years earlier. In April or May, I began a fast that ended up lasting for ten days. The first day I had two

apples, after that just water until about day eight, when I had some tomato juice, which I probably had on day nine and ten, too.

Two things surprised me during the fast. One, how I did not think about food much after the first or second day. Two, how susceptible I became to cold; I would take a hooded sweatshirt to work at the hospital and sometimes put it on in my small office. I had read about fasting and so I knew how to break a fast, starting with just a bit of food and gradually increasing my intake over the course of a few days, though about day two after the fast I made the mistake of drinking some ginger ale. It burned; I felt like a kid taking a shot of whiskey.

In June I quit my job at the hospital to live at the Centre full time. I found the experience intense. The days seemed full and, often, long. Sometimes I'd get back to my room at night, rest on my bed, and feel I had been away for a week. Or I'd feel exhausted, not from work but from the constant interpersonal interaction. People came in the summer and stayed for days or weeks in one of several guest houses. So life at the Centre in the summertime could be especially hectic, like having your in-laws move in for a few weeks.

But I never felt bored and I never regretted it.

### {91 Moving Out}

Things slowed at the Centre after summer visitors stopped coming. In October my parents came to visit for my thirty-sixth birthday. I am sure they had no hope of persuading me to leave; they just wanted to see me. Somehow I felt sad for them. Dad was seventy-six and Mom was sixty-six. In the previous two years, I had been home for two funerals—Mom's older brothers. Since college I had done what I wanted and always knew my parents would be there for me, but after they left I started thinking how someday they would be gone.

About Thanksgiving or Christmas I found myself thinking about women a lot. I had always thought about women, since

puberty. But I had also gone for four years in my twenties without a date. Now, somehow, it seemed different. Maybe my having been married made it different. Or maybe because now, as a monastic, I couldn't go on a date whenever I felt like it, whereas before I could—just as people can easily walk on a broad beam on the ground because if they step off nothing happens, but raise the beam high above the ground, and they'll have problems. Whatever the reasons, I began having doubts about remaining a monastic for the long term.

In March I went to Boston for some reason and dropped in on the people I used to work with at the hospital. My ex-supervisor asked if I wanted my old job back. I said no. Over the next few weeks I had second thoughts. I had really liked the job. And I felt I would be leaving the Centre eventually anyway. I changed my mind and went back to work at the hospital. After I went back to work, I moved out of the brothers' quarters into a guest cabin. In June I got an apartment in the city, near the hospital. I had lived at the Centre for fourteen months.

I began dating again later that year. I did not go to bars because alcohol does not do much for me except make me dopey and sleepy, and I can't hear a conversation in loud background noise. I began going to Contra dances, a kind of folk dancing. And I began thinking about moving back to Philadelphia, which I did in May of 1987.

### {92 Normal Years}

I wrote earlier about my spiritual awakening after reading *Be Here Now*: “Eventually, I wanted it to stop. I couldn't live in the world if it went on. And stop it did. And so I spend the rest of my life trying to get it back.” After I left the Centre, my trying to get it back became less focused. I still meditated but with little hope or expectation of re-experiencing what I had in Maryland. I still attended the Vedanta Centre frequently, and if I had not left Boston, probably still would.

For many years afterward my spiritual life and everyday life separated, with spiritual life becoming something I did in my

spare time.

In Philadelphia, for a long time I had no place like the Vedanta Centre where I felt at home, so for a while my spiritual life consisted of meditation and reading, which I always did a lot of. When I bought my first PC (with a twenty megabyte hard disk) I started writing, too. I began my first book, *Science Without Bounds*, and worked on it for a few years.

I went to Quaker meetings in downtown Philadelphia now and then. One event remains vivid in my memory. During meeting for worship, a man borrowed an older woman's cane, walked to the front, and in the theatrical, bombastic manner of some fundamentalist preacher began, "When Moses parted the Red Sea with his staff . . .", using the cane as a prop. He continued for some time. After a while, people began to stand silently in place, in protest. As more and more people stood, his voice got softer and softer. Finally, someone walked up to him, took his hand and said, "Now, Richard. You know, you've promised not to do this anymore." He allowed himself to be led back to his chair. In other churches, I imagined police or a few husky ushers forcibly evicting him. The Quaker example of nonviolence impressed me.

Dad passed away in 1990. I married again in 1993. The years from then to now, 2011, have been good and eventful but less intense and more normal than previous years.

Ma passed away in 1995 and I flew up to Cohasset for the service. My wife and I started going to a local Quaker meeting regularly in 1996.

### {93 Atheism}

In 1997 I read much about "Quietist" Christian mystics, such as Michael de Molinos, Francois Fenelon, and Jeanne Guyon. Over the years I had seen references to *The Spiritual Guide* of Molinos, so I decided to buy a copy but none existed. So I obtained a microfilmed copy of a 1688 English edition, itself a translation of a 1685 edition printed in Venice; I transcribed

it, and uploaded it to the Christian Classics Ethereal Library on the Internet.

Two years later, I read much freethought and atheist material, material critical of Christianity. I had read material that points out Christianity's contradictions and flaws, when I found a used copy of *Arsenal for Skeptics* on a table in Temple's book store when I was in graduate school. I had learned things that shocked me, things I never forgot: for instance, biblical scholars intentionally mistranslate Isaiah 7:14 to make it agree with Matthew 1:22–23. I found such revelations painful and did not pursue the topic at the time, probably because I felt more interested in finding the truth, finding what I did believe, rather than learning about lies, errors, and contradictions. In 1999 I returned to the topic, again finding it painful but feeling unwilling to turn away. How can we hope for the grand and great Truth if we turn away from humble truths? After much reading, I arrived at the view of Christianity and Jesus which I describe in this book .

### {94 Son and Mother}

In 2000, our son was born, Mom was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and entered a nursing home, and my sister and I became alienated, partly over Mom.

Caring for an infant seemed to leave us less time for other things, so by 2001 we had mostly stopped attending the Quaker meeting where we had been active. Besides, my view of Christianity and Jesus left me wondering if I still fit in there and I hesitated going where I might feel compelled to speak a message that, I felt, so many people might not want to hear. (Our Quaker meeting sits in silence until someone feels moved to stand and speak.)

### {95 False Flag}

In 2004 I spent much time looking into the claim that the US government orchestrated the attacks of September 11, 2001, as

a “false-flag” operation, and decided that it had.

In 1992 I went to see the film *JFK*. The news media at the time had much to say about the film’s inaccuracies; how it supposedly bent the truth. But who demands historical accuracy from Hollywood? I had previously gone to see *Mississippi Burning*, though it portrays a black FBI agent in 1964, when the FBI had no black agents. So I went to see *JFK* and left impressed; it seemed accurate enough, especially the unarguably accurate Zapruder clip that shows JFK’s head thrown violently backward, supposedly *toward* the bullet striking him, violating at least one law of physics. After the film, I learned enough to believe Oswald had indeed been set up as a fall guy, as he claimed.

And I read about Operation Northwoods, a false-flag operation proposed to JFK, documented in official US papers released by the Freedom of Information Act. Operation Northwoods called for acts of terrorism against US cities, such as bombings and plane hijackings, carried out by the CIA and blamed on Cuba, to create public support for an invasion.

Believing the United States had once undergone a coup d’état, knowing a false-flag operation had once been seriously proposed to the president, left me open to the idea that 9/11 was a false-flag operation, too. After some investigation, I accepted the false-flag conspiracy theory as a better explanation than the official conspiracy theory for the events of 9/11.

For me, the official 9/11 conspiracy theory—nineteen men armed with box cutters—left too many facts unexplained. A theory must explain the facts. And if we value truth above emotional reassurance or political conformity, we will accept the theory that best explains them. The official 9/11 conspiracy theory did not best explain the facts.

For instance, how can we understand President Bush’s actions in the Booker Elementary School video? We see an aide briefly whisper something, supposedly “A second plane hit the second tower. America is under attack.” But we do not see the president ask any questions, such as: “Are there any incoming



nuclear missiles?” or, “Are my wife and daughters safe?” Our military’s commander in chief acts as if he’s just received a progress report rather than shocking, unexpected news of a surprise attack.

After the report, we see President Bush sit there for at least five long minutes and listen to second-grade children read *The Pet Goat*. He seems like a man for whom things are going according to plan, rather than the leader of a nation in the midst of the worse surprise attack since Pearl Harbor.

Further, the president remains at the school to address the nation, though the previous day’s newspaper announced he would be there. His speech ends only a few minutes before something strikes the Pentagon, so how did the president know the school would not be struck even as he spoke?

How did he know during the minutes he sat listening to children that his family was safe and nuclear missiles were not flying toward America?

Rightly or wrongly, I found myself unable to believe the official conspiracy theory.

Later in 2004, pictures of the Abu Ghraib torture war crimes surfaced. Later still, President Bush was declared the winner of the Ohio and therefore the US presidential election.

### {96 Shelter}

In most parts of the world, a man or woman outdoors naked won’t survive the heat or cold for long. So we clothe ourselves and construct homes to protect us from the natural world, homes that shut out the stars. Psychically, we do the same by constructing religious views, where we are God’s special darlings, and social views, where we are part of a society and country that is noble and good and right. To see the stars, we leave our home. And, I think, to see the truth rightly we must abandon comforting religious and social illusions. We speak of someone who becomes disillusioned—who loses their illusions—with sympathy; if we valued truth above comfort,

we would rejoice.

Underhill in MEU talks about the “dark night,” when God withdraws supports and consolations to purify a person of reliance on externals, to help them rely more completely on God alone. I tried to accept my disillusionments in that spirit and, at times, even welcomed them, felt grateful for them.

In 2010 we began attending Quaker meeting again. In 2011 Mom passed away after being bedridden for more than two years. About two months later, I began writing this book.

### {97 Worldviews}

A discussion of worldviews seems a fitting way to bring this book to a close. A worldview answers two questions. What exists (ontology)? And how we can come to know and understand it (epistemology)?

Science says the natural world exists and uses observation and theory to understand it. We look and observe, or we experiment and observe, then we devise a theory that explains our observations and makes testable predictions. Science officially says nothing about the supernatural world, if it exists or not, if it can be known or not.

Because science admits only the natural world exists, its ontology can be called monistic, meaning acknowledging only one basic reality. And because science limits itself to the natural world, its theories contain only natural causes. Religion can theorize that God caused the universe, but science cannot.

Religion says two worlds exist, the natural world and a supernatural world. Religion says we can come to know the supernatural world through revelation, when God reveals certain facts to prophets who write them down in a book, or when God takes human form and tells the facts to disciples. (Once, religion said revelation tells us facts about the natural world—that the sun revolves around the earth, for instance. That belief has lost some power today though many people still get the age of the earth from Genesis and disbelieve evolution

for religious reasons.)

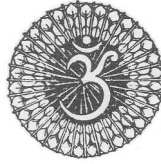
Because religion says two worlds exist, the natural and the supernatural, its ontology may be called dualistic.

The worldview presented in this book shares traits with both the scientific and the religious worldviews. First, the worldview is monistic: there is but one reality. The reality manifests as the natural world, which we come to know by observation, experiment, and theory. But a human being can come to know that reality more intimately; we can see into the very heart of the universe. We come to know this reality by direct experience.

So far, our worldview agrees with the scientific worldview except for the claim we can directly experience the universe's ultimate ground of existence. I once had a long discussion over the Internet with someone who thought that claim ridiculous. How, he asked, can we possibly come to know what lies below the level of everyday existence, below the level of even atoms and protons and quarks? By what sense can we perceive it? Not by touch or sight.

I answered his question with a question of my own. The universe's ultimate ground of existence does not differ from our own ultimate ground. In it, we live and move and have our being. How then do we *not* perceive it? I answered that we do perceive it, yet we do not, just as when we see a movie we see the light and yet do not; rather we see people and sky and homes and many other things. But sometimes, the Light breaks through into our consciousness and changes our life forever.

And our worldview regards the Light as sacred, as nearer to us than we are to ourselves, as the very heart of reality. Our worldview gives the same reverence and love and awe to this Reality that religion gives to God, because it is God.



{98 Two Letters}

({58} mentions this story)

Dear Nephew Fabius,

Your mother is desperately concerned, as you must realize. She cannot understand your flight to Rome or your strange new beliefs. Almost daily I assure her she will once again see the son she loves so much, after time has softened your grief. Your father was a noble man, Fabius. Do nothing to disgrace his memory or your family's reputation, I beg you.

How I wish I could come to Rome and see you face to face, but—alas!—my business does not allow. A ship of wool from Greece is already five days late. And slaves must be doubly watched when there is no work for them. So be it.

You say a life like mine could never hold you. I think you are right. And I know your parents expected better things for you than the mere trading of wool. Your father, Fabius, was once a senator of Rome—never forget that! I have promised your mother you will do nothing to shame her or the memory of your father. Do not make my words false, Fabius, I beg you.

You are still young, my nephew. Your intelligence and decisiveness, wisely employed, could carry you far. Any Roman might well envy the gifts the gods have given you. And the ladies, my nephew, will not be unappreciative.

But these people with whom you associate are mad. You will only destroy your family's honor and ruin yourself, ending up no better than the slaves and other rabble that you now call "your brothers and sisters."

You have youth and sensitivity, Fabius, but these are no excuse. The man—and he was a man, no more—whose memory you

worship was no mere criminal but an enemy of the state. Treason! What crime is worse? And his followers—mark these words! nephew—will end up no better than he. For what other fate can await those who meet secretly in catacombs, among the bones and spirits of the dead, to eat flesh and drink blood? What is in this madness that holds you?

Who was this man they call “the anointed one”? Was he learned or noble? Did he have a home, a wife and family? No, he wandered about, engaged in no useful labor, building nothing, living off the people. Is this a man to follow? What did he accomplish, this man they call Jesus? He spoke fair words. Nothing more. Ovid and the other poets speak words just as fair, words with more sense that do not entrance the young or fill them with foolish notions.

Remember when you were young and we all lived in Rome, Fabius, how you loved the Colosseum? Remember how you idolized Jason, the gladiator? You wanted to be strong like him. You wanted to grow up to be a gladiator. How your mother would laugh when you said such things. And your father, may the gods be kind to his spirit, would speak of the Senate. You are strong, Fabius. You have the will and ability to lead. The Empire needs men like you. Power, fortune, fame, do these really mean so little to you?

In time this foolishness of yours will pass. Do nothing now you may regret later. I myself have seen the fish sign defacing the walls of some of the best homes in Alexandria. Do these accursed Christians know no fear? They soon shall.

Mercifully, the gods have not let knowledge of your involvement pass beyond your mother and myself. The man who bears this letter is a friend of mine whose business takes him to Rome. He believes grief alone drove you there.

He will give you proper clothes and passage back to Alexandria. Take them, Fabius. Do not waste your life.

Your Uncle,

Maximus

Dear Uncle Maximus,

Thank you for your letter; your concern is appreciated but unnecessary. I hope mother is well. Tell her not to worry. I do what I do not to bring dishonor to our family but to follow Our Lord, Jesus, and the true path He has shown us. In doing this, I do not waste my life but save it.

You say this “foolishness” will pass. Perhaps it shall, as all things must. Will not power, wealth and fame pass? Must we use our lives to chase this tinsel on Life’s tree? Where is father now? Can the Senate be of any use to him? Where is Jason, the gladiator?

Once, our nation was young and strong, my uncle. Our people believed in the gods and in themselves. We were not yet fat and cruel and interested only in the games.

You say the empire needs me. Perhaps it does. But do I need the empire? Would it not corrupt me as it is corrupt? Our priests are insincere. They are like gladiators, playing their drama on a different stage, to a different script. The spirit has left us and one day the empire will be no more.

But what of the day, my uncle, when you are no more? Will your wealth and fine home and wool be of any use? You have given your life to these things—can they save it? Is not life more than just a flame? Where does it go when its candle is done?

I wish I could fill your heart with the love of the true God and open your eyes to see His Truth and walk in His Light. We are all children of the One Father. We must all live in Peace and Truth as all men are our brothers.

The path to God is long. One day it may lead from Rome to Alexandria. Today my work lies here. Here I serve my brothers and sisters in God. We grow daily in Truth and Love. We walk the Path as well as we are able. Here I stay.

He Lives!

Fabius

\*

Arthur D'Adamo

artdadamo@gmail.com

art@adamford.com

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## Abbreviations

BHN — *Remember Be Here Now*, Lama Foundation, 1971

GRK — *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, by Swami Nihilananda with a forward by Aldous Huxley, 1942

MEU — *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, Evelyn Underhill, 1911

SWB — *Science Without Bounds: A Synthesis of Science, Religion and Mysticism*, Arthur D'Adamo, 1993, 2004





