FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Do you think you have enough evidence to judge whether the secularization theory is simply wrong? Explain.
2. Give reasons why either accommodationism or anti-accommodationism is a better approach.
3. Some have said that when they read James Fowler’s theory of stages of faith development, that it reminds them of their own life so far. To what extent is this true of you?
4. To what extent are you persuaded by postmodernist arguments that science is not universally or objectively valid?

SUGGESTED READINGS


TO EVALUATE OR NOT

Evaluation is part of any academic study, including the study of religion. In a literature course students apply criteria for evaluating the literary merits of a work. In a political science course students review arguments for and against different forms of government. Why not also make evaluation part of the study of religion? The validity of the truth claims and the moral norms of various religions can be subjected to some interesting questions. So can the overall impact of this or that religion on peoples’ lives.

On the other hand, religion is touchier than politics or literature. In many modern nations it is considered a rather personal matter. Because we each have the right to believe as we choose, perhaps it is better not to try to evaluate different forms of religion at all. Postmodernism and cultural relativism support this by their claim that there are no objectively valid standards to use in making an evaluation of religion.

In one sense, however, it is too late to avoid evaluation. Atheists and agnostics have already offered their evaluations. If this were a textbook on the philosophy of religion, many segments would be devoted to the criticism of religion advanced by philosophers like David Hume and Karl Marx, or sociologists like Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Various skeptical groups today continue to challenge religious beliefs. Nonetheless, there are many who argue that it is better just to appreciate the development and diversity of religion, without engaging in critical evaluation of the truth claims and moral norms of various religions, or evaluating the impact of religion on people’s lives.

Many religions have agreed for a very traditional reason. They say that the only truth a person needs to know is the revelation from God, or a sacred text, or the prophetic vision that is the source of that religion. No human evaluation is legitimate if the evaluation challenges what comes from the divine or sacred source. Fallible human minds have neither the ability nor the right to question the divine. Orthodox Hindus know that the basic truths about karma and dharma contained in the Vedic tradition are unquestionable truth. Traditionalist Muslims accept God’s message contained in the
Qur’an as eternal truth. Fundamentalist Christians believe that God inspired the very words of the scriptures. In these and other cases, human evaluation can be an affront to the tradition itself. The only question allowed is whether a person is faithful to the tradition.

But avoiding evaluations has its costs. To avoid evaluating the plausibility of truth claims, even religious truth claims, is to act as though it were legitimate to ignore standards of truth in some areas of life. To avoid evaluating the validity of moral norms, including religious norms, is to act as though those moral rules were exempt from challenge. To avoid evaluating the impact of a religious tradition on people’s lives is to act as though it made no difference whether religion is helpful or harmful. In all these cases, to avoid evaluating tradition may allow harmful human interpretations or accretions to creep in. Many religious traditions, for example, have seen nothing wrong with slavery.

Furthermore, religious traditions tend to engage in their own internal evaluation, particularly as apologetics to defend that tradition. Such evaluations are normally quite positive, of course. We have seen that a good Muslim will argue that the poetic beauty of the Qur’an shows that it was not composed by the illiterate Messenger but comes directly from God. Here literary criteria are used to evaluate the sacred text. Early Christians used prophetic messages in the Hebrew scriptures to show that Jesus fulfilled certain prophecies. These Christians were arguing that the evidence of the Hebrew scriptures pointed to Jesus. This evidence was used to verify his mission and identity. There are studies today claiming to have evidence that those who are prayed for get well more quickly, even when they do not know about the prayers. This is offered as evidence of the power of prayer.

Most religious believers would probably prefer to offer an evaluation of their own religious tradition as a whole, linking together the beliefs, moral norms, sacred texts, symbols and rituals, and form of community, with a concern to show the connection of the present forms of the religion with its roots and tradition. A Sunni Muslim, for example, appeals to the consensus of the Muslim community about traditions which can be traced back to the noble disciples of Muhammad, who wrote down the words of the Qur’an as Muhammad recited them, and who interpreted these words in light of the life of Muhammad. It is this whole tradition, not just a particular doctrine or moral rule, that deserves evaluation, says the Muslim, and a very positive evaluation at that.

Yet even the good Muslim may sometimes evaluate selectively. One who cherishes the Qur’an and the tradition might nonetheless urge fellow Muslims to recapture the more rationalist and scientific spirit of many ninth- to eleventh-century Muslim philosophers (the Mu’tazili). This spirit was suppressed by faithful Muslims concerned that rationalist inquiry could undercut pious beliefs with overly critical questions. In the scientific era of the twenty-first century, a good Muslim might argue, it may be time to recover this philosophical spirit. In almost any religious tradition, there are those who praise highly one aspect of their faith but seek some changes in other aspects. Not all aspects are considered equally worthy of belief.

This is perhaps inevitable because religions are so complex. They include truth-claims, moral standards, ritual practices, sacred texts, and forms of social relations. The methods a person uses to evaluate a truth-claim will not necessarily be the same as the methods for evaluating a moral standard. A religious tradition may even use different standards for different parts of one of these categories. The Catholic Church offers strong support for the kind of social morality that the rather unreligious American Humanist Association also supports. Both oppose the death penalty; both promote liberal social programs by the government. Yet that same Church is at odds with the AHA on abortion and homosexual activity.

**ACADEMIC EVALUATION**

In addition to the evaluations offered by atheists and agnostics on the one hand, and by religions themselves on the other, there is a third type of evaluation that can at least be attempted. We can call it an academic evaluation. This would be an attempt to correlate religions truth claims, moral norms, and the impact of religion on people’s lives with relevant criteria of truth, morality, and standards of what is or is not good for people. The ideal relevant criteria would have to be validated, as though they were objectively correct and not just criteria reflecting some social interests or bias or tradition. And these ideally objective criteria would also need to be applied with a high degree of objectivity.

Identifying objectively valid norms and applying them with objective impartiality may be impossible goals, however. We have seen Berger and the postmodernists argue that all criteria are relative to the social context in which they arose, and that every person carries some hidden presuppositions and values that will distort any criteria that are applied. Everyone is raised somewhere, by some caretakers, in some social setting. Every location and family and society educates a person into a certain way of thinking. As was mentioned in a previous chapter, that is why the people of India tend mostly to be Hindus or Muslims, and the people of Brazil to be Christians.

An academic evaluation tries to compensate for individual bias and interest in applying standards of evaluation by using rules similar to those that science follows:
1) The evaluation must be conducted through public argumentation, so that others have a chance to identify any hidden presuppositions or values at work in the evaluation;

2) Anyone should have the opportunity to challenge the presuppositions and values and ask that they be justified in terms that people in general would find reasonable;

3) The evaluation is open-ended, always subject to further challenge; and

4) In the case of truth-claims made about the religion or by the religion, the criteria of “fit” with the evidence are to be used.

The intent of these standards is to move closer to the equivalent of objectivity. In theory a fully objective viewpoint is one that any truly intelligent, adequately informed, and open-minded person should agree with. Because it can be difficult to find many such persons, the alternative is to look for conclusions and arguments that even we moderately intelligent, partially informed, and somewhat biased people find reasonable. Conclusions and arguments that survive attack from all sides can be “warranted,” as the philosophers say, if they have sufficient evidence and logic to be persuasive even to people with different interests and raised in different societies.

But if some degree of objectivity can be attained in applying standards of evaluation, there remains the problem of deciding which standards are appropriate in the first place. When it is time to evaluate a religious tradition, or even evaluate religion in general (if there is such a thing), what kind of criteria should be applied? Why should religious truth-claims have to meet the criteria of evidence and logic, for example? If we cannot know for certain which standards should ideally count, can we fall back on some general agreement, among people with differing biases and interests and education and social location, as to which criteria are appropriate for evaluating religion, and how to apply them?

The descriptions in Chapter Eight of different types of moral reasoning, and in Chapter Fifteen of different stages of faith with different styles of thought, warn us that the prospects for any such general agreement are not likely. Knowledge that there are different stages of development makes us aware that each of us tends to rely on different standards of truth and value. Any given group of people will disagree among themselves on the relative importance of conforming to the group or finding specific universal moral laws. The same group of people will disagree among themselves about how much traditional authority is to be respected, or how much trust should be given to rationality and evidence.

On the other hand, the descriptions of types of moral reasoning and religious thought can narrow down the field of what we need to think about. We can compare the different kinds of evaluations that each of those stages would make. The various developmental theories suggest there are four major criteria that people use in evaluating whether beliefs are true. At each stage a different criterion tends to dominate. One criterion is how vividly the beliefs appeal to the imagination (though this is not what imaginative people would normally consider a primary criterion). A second is the authority of a community and its tradition. The third is the power of a narrative to give shape and meaning to a person’s life. And the fourth criterion is to test beliefs by an appeal to reason and evidence. The point at which a person learns the limits of reason and evidence, thereby becoming less dogmatic and more tentative, may deserve to be called a fifth stage. A review of these stages and their criteria will clarify what options are available. Some of those options will probably be more attractive than others.

Stage Styles and Criteria for Belief

A description of the typical thought style of young children reminds us that adults sometimes also believe ideas just because those ideas are vivid or dramatically interesting. On the face of it, one would hardly find it probable that an image that looks a bit like Jesus or Mary appearing in a tortilla or on the side of an oil storage tank is really a divine miracle. Yet many adults have believed such imaginative claims. The gods and demons of Buddhist tradition are similarly fascinating. The great flood in Noah’s time is a wonderful story. The fact that they appeal to the imagination, however, does not make them credible.

We can also learn from the behavior of older children, who are interested in discriminating clearly between truth and fancy. Like them, many adults will trust their own first-hand experiences and simple logic to identify false or highly improbable truth-claims. Like them, most adults will also trust the authority of those whose society. What everyone believes to be true or good, particularly that which is supported by religious leaders, is easy to hold as the truth. But there are many religions, with major differences in beliefs and values. Each of them is part of a social tradition which assures individuals that these beliefs and values are correct. And each also includes some rather vivid and dramatic ideas, for that matter.

Because some religious beliefs and values flatly contradict the beliefs and values of other religious traditions, at least one of these traditions is in some error. Muslims in India are highly conscious of this, because their tradition emphasizes the error of worshiping gods, but the worship of gods is the common religion of India. Protestants in Northern Ireland are conscious of this, because they fear that assimilation into a united Ireland will place them under laws that fit with Catholic morality. How does a person know which
tradition, which set of socially approved ideas, is correct? Some criterion is
needed beyond just the authority of the tradition or society.

The experience of early adolescence reminds us of the power of a grand
narrative. Such narratives might be persuasive because they appeal to the
imagination as vivid and dramatic tales, or because social authority stands
behind them. But a grand narrative may also implicitly appeal to the hidden
logic of blind faith described in Chapter Eleven. A narrative which can make
sense of life, in the face of confusion and challenges, which can provide
moral and practical guidance as well as courage and inspiration, is not to be
lightly dismissed. It is not surprising that such a narrative itself becomes the
standard that people then use to judge the validity of other ideas.

But once again, the existence of more than one grand narrative presents a
problem. In the West, the Christian narrative competes with only partially par-
allel Judaic or Mormon traditions or modern evolutionary theisms. In the East
the Hindu narrative competes with the only partially parallel Buddhist nar-
ratives. The unique narratives of the Japanese Shinto tradition, or of the modern
atheistic existential narrative of life are even more distinct. Each of these nar-
ratives forms a different religious (or nonreligious) community and tradition.

If Lindbeck’s postmodern analysis is correct, that is the final word. No one
can really expect more than to possess some grand narrative in some social
context and find therein the means to live a coherent and meaningful life.
No one can expect to be able to show that one of those narratives and the life
form associated with it is more correct or better than any other.

We often ask, however, whether a way of life is internally consistent, con-
structive in its effects on people, deeply meaningful, and so on. If we think
these questions apply to every narrative, we are using them as universal
standards. Such a universalist style of thought may be implicit in any inter-
est in an all-encompassing story. But universalist thought blossomed in the
more arduous axial-age style of thought that employs formal logic and seeks
overall rational coherence among ideas of all kinds, as in formal theology,
philosophy, and science. Late modern thought still relies on logic, but also
carefully tests all truth-claims against the relevant evidence.

The four major criteria religious people may use, then, some of them
unconsciously, include the vividness of images or ideas, the authority of a
community, the power of a grand narrative, and the force of reason and evi-
dence. The first three could each be called a kind of “faith.” There is a faith
in the power of imagination, or faith in one’s community, or a faith support-
red by the hidden logic that justifies accepting a grand narrative that shapes
and guides life meaningfully. The fourth approach is to trust mainly in rea-
son, whether dogmatically or more tentatively.

Chapter Twelve noted that some have claimed that trust in reason is also
a kind of faith, a faith that rationality will work better than reliance on a com-

munity’s time-tested beliefs and grand narratives. This claim, though, will
make most sense precisely to those who already rely on a community’s nar-
rative rather than on critical rationality. Others will say they have had the
experience that relying on logic and evidence to evaluate truth-claims has
been wonderfully effective, especially in science. To those who have had
such an experience, the fourth method of trusting reason has given good evi-
dence of its validity and need not be taken on faith.

Trust in narrative and trust in rationality are not necessarily opposed to
each other, at least not entirely. A mid-twentieth century French philosopher,
Paul Ricoeur, pointed out that there are three ways of treating narratives. The
first is to naïvely accept some narrative as the truth. The second is to critically
analyze one or more narratives with the tools of rationality, asking for ade-
quate evidence of its truth-claims before accepting it.

In the case of religious narratives this in fact has often ended in skepti-
cism. Sometimes it is skepticism about only this or that part of a narrative.
The deists became skeptical about the miracle stories in Christianity, but not
about the existence of God. At other times it is a thorough skepticism about
a whole religious tradition or about religion in general.

There is a third way to treat grand narratives, however, which Ricoeur
calls a “second naïveté.” This is a post-critical re-appropriation of a narra-
tive. “Post-critical” means that a person has first subjected the grand narra-
tive to a critical examination, asking whether the relevant evidence and logic
support the narrative, and perhaps becoming skeptical about the literal truth
of the story. “Re-appropriation” stands for recognizing great and valuable
power in the narrative, nonetheless. As we have seen, grand narratives can
make sense of life, provide a meaningful identity, help form, and sustain a
community, provide values and incentives to live by those values. There can
be very good reasons to hold on to some narratives, even if a person is some-
what critical of specific truth-claims inherent in that narrative.

Narratives have great power to guide and inspire us, even when we have
seen behind the curtain and recognize that the narratives are products of
people like us. Many a motion picture has had a great impact, even though
everyone knows the parts are played by actors and the names of the director
and screenwriter are there to remind everyone of the human origins of the
film. A great narrative can pull people into a kind of temporary naive state
where they forget for a moment to keep a critical distance and allow them-
selves to be swallowed up in the meaning of the story. At other times a per-
son can be deeply moved even while recognizing the film-maker’s art and
the actors’ skills. This is a kind of post-critical appropriation of the meanings
in the film (though the word naïveté may no longer be the best to describe
this state. Life lived by scientific or philosophical rationality alone would be rather cold. To contribute meaningfully to life, the conclusions of rationality must eventually be located within a humanly significant narrative.

The re-appropriation of a religious narrative in a second naïveté respects the value and power of the narrative. But if it really follows upon a prior critical analysis, it also recognizes that the narrative is the product of social history, of human thought. It recognizes that religious narratives, like scientific theories also, are open to further evaluation and development.

From the viewpoint of modern religion as described in Chapter Fourteen, this need not lead to religious skepticism. Modern religion in the West, for example, still trusts that the Ultimate Mystery is best re-represented by persons, that this world and its history are ultimately the work and presence of the divine. If it is persons, in their concrete history and communities, who produce the grand narratives, modern religion can see this as an ongoing response to the divine Mystery. Not all religious people will be comfortable with this view of their narratives, however; much depends on their basic religious style as described by Fowler.

Evaluating Three Kinds of Religious Truth-Claims

The skeptical challenge to specific religious beliefs is still part of these late modern (or postmodern) times. For some religious people part of their response to the challenge of science lies in distinguishing among different kinds of truth-claims. First, there are claims that God (or Bodhisattvas or Vishnu, etc.) intervenes in the world to make something happen that otherwise would not have occurred as it did. This is the category of miracles. The second kind of truth-claim is not about specific interventions but about the general order of the entire universe. This is the category of the cosmic. The argument that the whole cosmos seems finely tuned to produce intelligent life, for example, does not require belief in divine interventions. Proponents claim that God planned, created, sustains, and drives the entire universe forward. But God can do this by a single divine ongoing creative act. The third kind of truth-claim is the metaphysical. To assert that there is a single Ultimate behind everything, whether it is God or Atman or the Tao, is a metaphysical assertion. The first two of these kinds of religious truth-claims can be tested against relevant evidence. The metaphysical claim cannot be so tested, as we will see.

Miracles can fall into two categories, the public and the hidden. Public miracles are empirically testable truth-claims. Evidence has accumulated that a wide range of events that once were explained as the effects of invisible beings, whether spirits, gods, or God, turned out to have natural explanations. Many odd and wondrous things that were once attributed to God, Aurora, or Ares—remission of disease, Northern lights, victory of the underdog in battle—can be attributed to natural causes. Insanity is not the result of demonic possession. Lightning is a natural phenomenon, and church bells will not drive away a storm. Comets are not sent by God to warn of the downfall of a royal ruler.

In any case, miracles are specific finite events. Any event can be examined to see what might have caused it. A person can claim that an event is a miracle only if the person has examined all the evidence very carefully and compared it to all the possible natural explanations, and has then concluded that natural causality cannot account for the event. So to determine that something is a miracle, it is first necessary to examine it as a scientist would. Subjecting miracles to empirical investigation is obviously valuable in the case of fraudulent miracles. There have been religious figures who used gimmickry to create the impression that a statue or painting is crying, for example. Empirical investigation can root out such fraud precisely because any supposed miracle is a specific concrete event taking place in this physical world.

After an empirical investigation of a possible miracle, those who conclude that science cannot explain how the event occurred are using an "argument from ignorance." They are saying that because we cannot figure out how the event could have occurred naturally, it must have had a supernatural or non-natural cause. If we do not know, for example, of any reason that would account for the sudden remission of a serious case of cancer, we may be tempted to say this may be a miracle. Yet the key words are "we do not know." If we do not know of anything natural that could possibly cure this cancer, we are confessing our ignorance of how the cure came about. We may choose to believe it was a miracle. But we cannot prove it.

The argument from ignorance sometimes takes a more positive form when it claims that we do know enough to be able to say that natural causes could not possibly account for this event. But there is a lot we do not know; our knowledge has limits. It is always possible that it is the limits of what we know about how nature operates—our current relative ignorance—that makes us certain nature could not have produced the event. Up until Darwin offered his theory of natural selection taking place over millions of years, it seemed clearly impossible that unguided natural causes could have produced something so marvelous as a spider, with its equipment and instincts for weaving intricate webs. But Darwin's theory, along with the billions of years of natural history, shows how it is at least possible that natural causes alone could produce life on this planet as we know it. It is difficult to prove that any event could not possibly be explained by natural causes.

The second type of miracle we can refer to as the hidden miracle. Some Christian theologians have suggested that God may be directing events in the universe in ways that are so subtle that they could never be identified. Perhaps God works on the subatomic level nudging otherwise indetermi-
nate possibilities one way rather than another. Or perhaps God operates more as some Muslim theology proposes, directly producing each and every event in the universe but doing so in such a way that it all looks entirely natural. There is clearly no way to disprove such hidden activities. On the other hand, if God works only in such hidden ways, this would make it appear that God wants the process to look like cosmic naturalism, and as though God wants to leave no clues to divine intervention in the world.

Empirical evidence can also count for or against belief in a cosmic Designer, even one who does not intervene in the process of the universe. That is why there still are arguments from design, such as over the fine tuning of the universe described in Chapter Fourteen, which appeals to the evidence. For some the evidence suggests only randomness; for others the evidence clearly implies an Intelligent Designer. But in either case, evidence counts.

Metaphysical truth-claims are another matter. The word "metaphysical" has appeared a few times here already. Like many words it has too many meanings. Some New Age thought calls itself metaphorical. In the New Age vocabulary this refers to the spiritual dimension, sometimes literally a different dimension, the "astral plane," where spirit beings dwell and where the soul may go to rest and recover between its many reincarnations. The question of whether the existence of such a dimension is open to empirical testing is interesting.

Certainly many claims about visitors or messages from this dimension have been tested and proved false. In 1848 the Fox sisters, Margaret (1836-1893) and Catherine (1841-1892), heard strange rappings, which they claimed came from the spirit world. Thousands of people took up spiritualism because of the sisters. The sisters later confessed that they had made the rapping sounds by cracking the knuckle in their big toes. The great magician Harry Houdini spent years exposing fraud after spiritualist fraud at seances; another stage magician, James ("The Amazing") Randi has been doing the same for some decades now. Strictly speaking, consistent failure to find evidence of such a dimension is not the same as proof that there is no such dimension. But the real reason for the popularity of such belief would seem to lie in its hold on the imagination, and in its ability to satisfy emotional needs for contact with a departed loved one, or for assurance of life after death.

In some philosophies, the metaphysical is whatever is universal. Thus the law of cause and effect can be called metaphysical because every event requires some cause to account for it. But then even natural aspects of the universe are "metaphysical," and the word does not really seem necessary. One could call such universals "cosmic" instead.

The most rigorous use of the word metaphysical restricts its application to one reality—whatever it is that is the single, truly ultimate that accounts for everything else. The ultimate questions described in Chapter Four are meta-physical questions because they are about the ultimate origins, conditions, or goal of all things. Thus either God, or Brahman, or the Tao is the sole metaphysical reality. It alone is the source of the universe or the ultimate goal of the universe. It is this third meaning that the word "metaphysical" carries here. It is the kind of reality that is probably beyond what evidence can establish.

On the other hand, if you were convinced by theological arguments in Chapter Eleven for the existence of God, then you may think that rational argument based on evidence of the universe can establish at least the existence of an Ultimate, even though that theology ends up describing the Ultimate as infinite and incomprehensible. Others, less convinced by theology, conclude that we should therefore be agnostic about the Ultimate, about the metaphysical. Still others conclude, with William James or Karl Rahner, that we have a free choice about how to interpret life, whether to choose to accept it trustingly as ultimately meaningful, or to think of it as ultimately meaningless. Those who choose an ultimate trust find allies in those who stress a positive experience of an ultimate wholeness or depth of life. Rational argument for belief, rational grounds for agnosticism (or the weak atheism described in the Introduction), a deliberate choice to trust, or a personal religious experience—all remain options concerning the metaphysical. Unlike the case with supernatural interventions, and perhaps with cosmic questions, an appeal to empirical evidence cannot resolve questions about the Ultimate. As these pages have said often, questions about the Ultimate bring us to the presence of mystery—or Mystery.

Four Types of Defenses Against Rationalistic Skepticism

The distinction among these three types of religious beliefs is relevant to certain defenses of religion against rational skepticism. Each of these defenses seeks to exempt religion from outside evaluation, including the test of whether they fit with empirical evidence. We can call them "exemptive" defenses. To each of them certain responses have been offered. You may find one or more of them appealing. Many religious people do.

The first is the postliberal approach of Lindbeck, discussed in the previous chapter. This claims that no community's form of life or basic narrative can be legitimately evaluated by an outsider. Every outsider operates out of some community and its narrative, so there is no objective or neutral place from which a person in one community can sit in judgment on other communities. Each community is exempt from outside criticism. A common response to this exemptive argument has often been to note (see Chapter Fifteen) that postmodern or postliberal thought tends to believe in some universal about morality and so on. To whatever extent postmodern thinkers
have such universalist norms, they can use them to evaluate other communities, including religious communities and their traditions.

A second eximutive defense, mentioned briefly in previous chapters, claims that the object of religion is sui generis. This is a claim that religion is concerned with the sacred (or holy or transcendent), and that the sacred is not the kind of empirical reality that science can study. The ordinary evidence of the senses, as well as evidence from various technological testing devices, is simply irrelevant in judging the reality of the sacred. A common response to this claim is to point out that those offering this defense are not always clear on just what they mean by the "sacred" (or the holy or transcendent). If they mean the infinite and incomprehensible metaphysical Ultimate, then the defense probably works well. As we have just seen, the metaphysical Ultimate is probably beyond evidence. If the defenders mean a cosmic Designer, then the defense seems misplaced, because the order of the universe can be examined to see whether it constitutes evidence for or against such a Designer. If the defenders are protecting belief in miracles by arguing that they are not subject to empirical testing, that does not seem to work either for reasons given here.

A third type of eximutive defense, often connected to the sui generis approach, also points to the special character of sacredness which believers attribute to certain place, objects, or beings like the gods or God. Then, as we saw Eliade do in Chapter Fourteen, this defense proposes to treat all these sacred realities "phenomenologically." It treats religions as "phenomena" in the original meaning of that Greek word—"to appear." The phenomenological approach strives earnestly to understand a religion just as it appears, and as it is understood by its adherents. Taking believers' faith very seriously, this approach refuses to apply any external criteria to determine whether that faith is correct. It "brackets" the question of validity. It makes no claims for the logical consistency or the empirical adequacy of religious beliefs. It leaves open the possibility that the phenomena may be taken as true by their adherents and be accepted as genuine by their own world of meaning.

This means that it reaches the same postliberal conclusion at which George Lindbeck arrived: namely, that a religion cannot be judged by the criteria of any other religion or philosophy or science. Religious people need concern themselves only with their own religion and its beliefs and values and traditions. The difference between the postmodern position and a phenomenological position lies mainly in how each is justified. Postmodern thought claims that every set of ideas and criteria is socially constructed and therefore has no universal validity. The phenomenological approach justifies its own restraint simply as a way of maintaining sympathetic respect for religious traditions in order to report accurately on how those traditions are experienced by their participants. But both end up saying the same thing: no outside criteria should be applied to judge whether a religion is true, good, and constructive. Only insiders can judge, by the criteria they draw from within the tradition.

One response to this defense of religion is to make a distinction between describing a religion and explaining it. The phenomenologists are correct in saying that an outsider studying a religion must understand it well enough to describe it as it appears to the participants in the religious tradition. A description of a religion is inaccurate if it fails to portray vividly and completely the religious form of life as it appears to the believers. A description of a religion should be strong and detailed enough that active and earnest participants in the religion would recognize themselves in it and be able to say, "Yes, that is what I do, think, feel, perceive, value, and pursue in my religion."

But understanding a religion from the insider in this way is distinct from the task of explaining the cause or source of the religion. Believers may say that the beliefs come from divine revelation or inspiration, and that participation in the religion depends on sacred power or divine grace. An outsider may still ask skeptically whether this is so. While believers may be opposed to such skepticism, believers themselves tend to be skeptical about religions that are quite different from their own. The alternative is to refuse to be skeptical about any religious beliefs. This does not seem prudent. At least some religious beliefs in history have been quite harmful, by most standards, from the practice of ancient Canaanites offering children in sacrifice, to the practice of the Taliban in Afghanistan forbidding women to hold professional positions. A fourth type of eximutive defense of religion against skeptics divides all human thought into two major types: the natural sciences ("natuurwissenschaft") in German) and the human or spiritual sciences ("geistwissenschaft"). This division was promoted by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). The word "science" is used in the second case because the word in Europe tends to mean any organized body of study. In English the word is used only for what Europeans would normally call the natural sciences. In Europe philosophy, theology, and history, as well as the social sciences, are all called "sciences," the "natural sciences" being regarded as the "exact sciences." The natural sciences seek education for knowledge of the natural world, said Dilthey. But the human sciences seek to understand the realm of meaning. By this he meant that human life, individually and culturally, is a collection of interpretations of reality that expose what is meaningful in life. It is not the bare natural facts that really count; it is the value and beauty and significance and purpose of things to the human person. Religion is one of the major aspects of the realm of meaning. It is concerned not with the natural world of facts but with the meaningfulness of life expressed in various rituals, symbols, texts, and community life. So the criteria of truth used by the natural sciences are simply inapplicable to religion.

The usual response to this analysis is to agree, but only in part. Religions are indeed important because they provide a meaningful direction to life and possess powerful narratives, rituals, and symbols in support of that direction. If religions refrain from making any truth-claims about how things are
in the world, then the religions are indeed exempt from critique according to the method of natural science. Or if the only truth-claim that religions made were about the metaphysical Ultimate, then the scientific method would also be irrelevant.

But religions do make truth claims, about whether the order of the world implies a Designer, or whether certain events were miraculous interventions by God, or whether certain texts with instructions on how to live are divinely revealed. Many religious believers themselves offer what they take to be empirical evidence in favor of such religious truth-claims. It should not be surprising if skeptics also appeal to natural evidence to make their contrary case. The tension between religious truth-claims and scientific method and theories will continue.

**CURRENT OPTIONS**

This Epilogue has noted the appeal of imagination, the authority of a community and its tradition, the general human tendency to live by a grand narrative, and the use of reason and evidence, as different criteria for evaluating a religion. The appeal of imagination, as well as the hidden logic of living by a grand narrative, are usually only implicit in a people’s consciousness rather than explicitly recognized standards. Other possible sources of religiousness mentioned in Chapter Two also usually go unrecognized. Few will say that they are religious because they have a Freudian need for a parent figure who will save them from death, or because they have a genetic tendency to anthropomorphize, as Stewart Guthrie argued. Whether any given religion is based on divine revelation and inspiration or not, these implicit reasons for belief will remain part of human life. They will provide ongoing motives to seek explicit justification for faith, such as arguments for the existence of God or for the reasonableness of making a choice to believe. That probably means that religion is not going to fade away as the secularization thesis claimed, though it does not seem that atheism and agnosticism will disappear either.

On the supposition that religion will remain influential, there are different responses possible. Religious people will continue to differ among themselves on which aspects of religion they emphasize. For some religious people, it will be enough to enjoy the company of other participants in the practices of their faith. For many religious people, it will be a matter of some urgency to convert others to what the believers consider the true faith. For still others the goal will be to draw respectfully upon a religious tradition for its rich resources for future social developments, as the religion and the secular culture interact. For yet others, it will be very important to apply standards of rationality in religion, perhaps to place limits on what otherwise would be directionless wild imagination or to counterbalance tendencies to a mindless conformity to tradition. For others still, the main goal of their religiousness will be to exert a positive moral effect.

Those outside any religious tradition, particularly those who are atheists or agnostics, will similarly have choices. One is simply to attack all religion, overlooking differences in styles, stages, emphases, and moralities. Another is to try to create alternative forms of morality based on nonreligious science or philosophy, such as the Skeptics Society or the American Humanist Association. Yet another choice is to support those aspects of religion that seem constructive, moral, and reasonable, but to criticize those aspects that seem harmful. With such complicated issues and such a variety of choices, knowing what is best is not easy. Life continues in the ongoing presence of mystery—or Mystery.

**Again the Tension of the Human Quest**

This Epilogue has been rather abstract, categorizing and analyzing various approaches to evaluating religion. It has also raised questions that can seriously challenge some or all religious beliefs. It might seem better just to leave religion alone, without all the critical reflections on it. You may find yourself agreeing with Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) at this point, that too much consciousness is a curse. We might be better off not to think too deeply and too critically. Or you may agree with Fromm that we sometimes want to escape from the burden of making our own critical evaluations. And yet the distinctive ability that makes us different from other beings on this planet is precisely the ability to reflect critically, to engage in this sort of “self-transcendence,” and make choices based on such reflection. The last section of Chapter Eleven identified what it calls “the tension of the human quest.”

This is the tension between our ability to think critically and endlessly about everything, including our religious beliefs, and our need to have a clear identity and set of values in life, whether from some master narrative or from a formal theology or philosophy.

We can deal with this tension somewhat abstractly, by talking in theoretical terms about what it means to be human. Sartre did this by speaking of what he says it is to be authentically human. Authenticity for Sartre is achieved by accepting what we are, the beings who have the capacity to be free, and are thus responsible for who we are.

Sartre thus thinks that of course we should think critically about our religious beliefs. But a religious tradition may insist that we humans are children of God, born to know and obey God. When critical thought and free choice lead us from a life of obedience to God, they have gone too far. Or a different religious tradition may argue that no matter what we think and
choose, the law of karma will prevail. We will be better off if we accept that as the starting point of our thoughts and choices. But Sartre, and before him Feuerbach and Freud, then ask us to engage in critical reflection on the religious beliefs about God or karma. The theoretical arguments can go on endlessly.

We can also deal with this tension more practically. At several places in this book you may have thought it would be better to cease reading and get back to real life. It is an interesting choice to consider, partly because it raises the question of how critically we should think about this choice. We can all ask ourselves the question of whether in the long run we think it is wise to get in the habit of reflecting critically on all our choices. Will we benefit more from open-ended critical thought, or will it produce more problems than benefits? There is no simple answer to this question. At some point, often long before we can be sure we have all the information we need, we must choose. As William James pointed out, if we wait for total certitude we might never make decisions.

We can also ask ourselves the sort of question that a basic value moralist asks—am I the sort of person I would admire? The answer depends on what you find admirable. Do you think highly of someone who strives to reflect honestly and objectively about her or his beliefs and practices? Do you think highly of someone who takes personal responsibility for his or her own basic values? What we find admirable depends on the particular kind of moral stage or cognitive style that predominates in our own lives at this point. So these questions might just keep us within the same circle of values and beliefs we already possess. On the other hand, by asking such questions we may open ourselves up to further developments in our own thinking. Because we all live in the presence of the ever-receding horizon of mystery, further development is always possible.

Summary

Although religious people often seek to exempt their own tradition from evaluation by outsiders, they themselves evaluate their own and other religions. Academic evaluations of religion strive for objectivity. But many factors influence the outcome. This includes the development of the person, and whether it is the miraculous, the cosmic, or the metaphysical that is under review. Various ways to exempt religion from outside evaluation do not entirely succeed. Yet religion remains a complex and powerful aspect of human history. We have our own difficult choices to make about it.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Explain which of the arguments for or against evaluating religion from the outside make most sense to you and why. Indicate whether you reject any of those arguments and why.
2. Do you think that a fairly objective academic analysis of religion is really possible? Explain why or why not.
3. Identify and describe in your own life or someone else's the operation of more than one of the criteria for belief: imagination, traditional authority, the appeal of a grand narrative, rational analysis.
4. Does the so-called second naiveté seem to you to be a valid and constructive mode of religiousness? Explain.
5. Of the options offered in the paragraph immediately preceding the summary, which attitude do you think that agnostics and atheists should take toward religion?

SUGGESTED READINGS

Russell T. McCutcheon, ed., The Insider/ Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader, 1999. An excellent collection of twenty-seven articles representing a wide range of positions on the problem of evaluating religion. The earliest article is from Kant. Articles by Otto, Eliade, and Wach, who seek to exempt religion from outside analysis, are also included, but so are a good number of those who recommend such analysis. The six major parts represent every approach, except perhaps that of the traditional theologian. The chapters consist, for the most part, of articles from academic journals, and are sometimes difficult to read.

Ninian Smart, World Religions: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs, 1995 (2nd ed.). A simpler explanation of a phenomenological approach than those of his writings that are excerpted in McCutcheon's book.

Robert A. Hinde, Why Gods Persist: A Scientific Approach to Religion, 1999. This proposes that science-minded people who think religious beliefs are false should not attack religion but take a more balanced approach. See especially the first chapter and the concluding chapter.
