

My Religion

The foe that I must fight is meaninglessness. Insignificance is the devil that lurks on every side. To me religion is about what matters most, and what matters most to me is that there be some consequence to my existence. Somehow *I* must matter—not merely in the immediate, everyday passing world but ultimately, when the cards are face up on the table.

That my existence embody something fundamentally unique and meaningful, that is the object of my being. A sense of the necessity of my existence, of its indispensability, that is what drives me. To be a measure that makes other measures measurable, that is what I would be.

Religion is to me a personal matter. It is my *personal* quest. To practice it I need not join a group or run with a crowd. On the contrary, the object of my religion excludes the objectives of others. It is limited to what I would do and what I would be. My religion is as unabashedly self-centered as it is singularly focused. I am both the center and the circumference of it—both its benefactor and its beneficiary. I am the sole “member” of my religion and in it I take my place at the head, heart, and foot.

My religion is about what to me is self-evident—things that are to me beyond question or doubt. It isn't about the world or my neighbor; it's about *me* and what *I* experience. It isn't about something I should learn, resolutions I should make, or habits I should acquire. To discover what my religion is I need consult no one apart from myself. No one could be a greater authority on the subject of what I believe than I am. My religion

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isn't comprised of a catalogue of beliefs that I could put to memory or recite from a catechism. It is rather about what I sense to be essential—what to me is fundamental—at the core of existence.

Religion, as I define it, is by its very nature singular to the person who holds it. I believe it impossible for two people to have the same religion. What makes people different likewise makes the object of their religion different. I think that people who belong to sects or churches not only gloss over but grossly underestimate their individual differences. To me the important thing is not that people believe the same but rather that what they hold to be true be something that is singularly beneficial and real to them personally. In my opinion, most people find themselves in the unfortunate circumstance of advocating beliefs they neither fully understand nor to which they fully subscribe. The result is that what they claim their religion to be and that toward which they principally direct themselves are not the same. Religion to them is therefore secondary. They give it a dutiful nod, all the while devoting themselves to things that never quite coincide with what their declared beliefs say they "really ought to be doing."

As I look at religion historically I see two categories of belief that have been most visible and have stood at the head of Western culture for the past 2000 years. These are monotheism and science. The first of these is, of course, a religion to which the vast majority of people in the West and Middle East give their allegiance. The second is what I regard as a highly persuasive and highly influential philosophy. My study of history tells me that in the Western world the original monotheists were men of Hebrew origins who probably began their work over 3000 years ago. I understand that

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from those first beginnings come the three principal Western religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I also understand that science or “natural philosophy” had its origins in ancient Greece about 2500 years ago. I see in the culture of which I am apart attitudes saturated with and derived from science. Science-based technology is a part of just about everything I do.

My understanding is that about four hundred years ago science began to challenge the Christian religion, and in Europe and America a tug of war went on between these two. They fought it out to see which one would prevail. I understand that about 1900 science began declaring itself the winner. The Christians never openly capitulated, but science was at the time the predominant cultural force. Then, my study tells me, fifty or sixty years later science began to lose ground. Although it had permeated virtually every form of human discipline and activity, by the 1960s the claim that science was a wholly objective discipline began to be questioned. By about 1980 the mid-century doctrines of the logical positivists (that science alone can arrive at truth and that religious beliefs and metaphysical theories are nothing more than wishfully thinking) were no longer widely entertained. It was not that something novel had arisen in either religion or philosophy but rather that science’s exclusive claim to knowledge had been found by people within its own camp to simply not be the case.

Their finding, as I understand it, was the opposite. Science is not only not the exclusive determiner of truth; it is not capable of arriving at certain or universal knowledge at all. Instead, its determinations are always in flux. What is held to be scientifically true today will not be tomorrow. Just as Newtonian deterministic physics has been sup-

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planted by Einstein's relativity, so too will Einstein's theories someday be "superceded" by something else. As I understand science, it is inherently innovative, and its fascination lies in its ability to lay down the old and take up the new. Significant new scientific discoveries, in literally every aspect of human activity, have resulted in technological advance. And so, I conclude, that science's main role has been to change the way people do things and the way they think about the everyday natural world. It has not, in my view, had a significant impact on the way people regard the fundamentals of existence or what they believe is ultimately most important.

I also understand that over the last five hundred years monotheism has suffered a series of critical setbacks. The Christian church has had to give up much of its influence regarding belief to science and most of its political authority to democracy. The exclusive dominion of the Roman Catholic Church as the final determiner of matters of faith came to an end with the rise of Protestantism in the 1500s. The political power of the Christian churches, both Protestant and Catholic, has been supplanted by democratic, secular governments. As in the case of science the singular failure of the church has been its inability to establish itself as the sole possessor of knowledge. While a few believers may make that claim today, my experience tells me that the vast majority of people would disagree. It's not that they wish to throw their monotheistic religion overboard, but despite their ostensible allegiance to tradition they are not about to acknowledge that any one religious leader or any one religious sect is the exclusive determiner of universal truth.

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My study of monotheistic religion indicates that it, like science, is speculative. I am aware of many contradictory statements concerning it that have been made over the centuries. I see these statements as canceling each other out, and to me their mutual incongruity puts the idea of monotheistic religion into question. A word that in my opinion is singularly descriptive of monotheism is *division*. From the three principal branches of the religion have come literally thousands of differing factions and from within each faction myriads of beliefs and dissenting voices. No one that I know of claims that this divisiveness is the work of an omnipotent entity in which resides the power of the universe. The blame is instead placed squarely on human shoulders. No one thinks that a caring father who “loves the world” would establish a system of belief that is characterized by discord, dissension, and disagreement. Nonetheless, the division and infighting are there. They can’t be ignored, and they cast a cloud over the modern remnants of the religion.

In my experience, when it comes to knowing something that won’t be questioned by someone else, people who have nothing to turn to but science and monotheism are significantly handicapped. When people today ask themselves what they know for sure beyond any question or doubt—something that can’t be disputed or challenged—it seems to me they’re hard pressed for answers. When it comes to *real* knowledge people are left to question what it is and where they should go to find it.

In my way of thinking, the reason both science and monotheistic religion fail in their attempts to produce knowledge is that they both start from the premise that truth lies outside of or apart from

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the individual person. My understanding is that both scientific and monotheistic inquirers believe that to arrive at truth people have to know something that is outside of them. Both scientists and monotheists believe there is nothing inherent that is significant in itself inside a person's mind. Only by observing what is in the world (physical science) or by receiving what is revealed by a Supreme Being (monotheistic religion) is it possible for anybody to know anything that matters.

Despite what I understand concerning the doctrines of science and monotheism, some introspection tells me that the *only* thing I really know for sure is what *I* personally experience. I don't question my personal experiences. I know the thoughts I think and what I see, hear, feel, taste, and smell. I'm not concerned with whether what I experience matches up with something in the world or with what "God" says. If I see the sky as blue and others claim it's turquoise, let them make their claim. The color of the sky is constantly changing, and who can demonstrate that one opinion of its color is any more authoritative than another? People only know what *they* experience. Therefore, as I see it, what matters *is* what people experience. If I see blue while someone else sees turquoise, fine. The differences people experience are not negatives but are rather what distinguishes one person from another. For me, knowledge is not about what the world is or what God says; it is about what a person experiences.

I realize that equating knowledge with personal experience is a radical departure from the doctrines of both science and monotheism and may therefore seem strange or out of place to the person steeped in those doctrines. A new perspective of knowledge takes time to get used to. It took me

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several years to come to the conclusion that the only knowledge is personal knowledge, and after I arrived at it, it took still longer to get past the habit of thinking that what I experience has to equate with something apart from me.

When it comes to questions about our personal origins, who and what we are, I believe that personal knowledge has much of significance to tell us. First of all, definitions regarding tangibility and intangibility are in my view much clearer and simpler when seen from a personal experience perspective. Contrarily, when tangible things are explained in terms of physical structure, the explanation ends in an infinite regress of components that are ever smaller, more remote, and increasingly more difficult to observe and identify. Further, because the question of some essential “stuff” that forms the basis of tangibility is one that is beyond the realm of science to unequivocally answer, knowledge from a scientific perspective as to what tangible things are is unattainable.

In contrast to what to me are abstruse, indeterminate explanations that science offers, the definition of tangibility provided by personal experience is, I think, refreshingly straightforward: tangible things are things I experience with my senses. Why is my worktable tangible? because I can feel it with my fingers, see it with my eyes, lean on it with my elbows, and so on. Tangibility, then, has its basis in sensory experience.

Intangible things, on the other hand, like thoughts and feelings, are things I can't experience with my senses. I know they are “there” because they are part of my experience, but I can't see, hear, touch, taste, or smell them.

When I stand in the pasture near my home in the early hours of the morning, my experience is

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memorable. A sea of grass lies before me. The leaves rock slowly in the breeze. The stocks reach high above my knees, and my boots are wet with early morning dew. The brisk morning air reddens my nose and nips my cheeks. Soon I see the sun creeping up the far side of the mountains, and then as it rises above them, it covers the valley with its rays of warmth and light. These are tangible experiences. My senses make them vivid, acute, and exhilarating.

Later when I'm alone in my room I picture images in my mind and relive those former moments. In my mind I see the acres of grass, in my mind I feel the briskness of the air, and in my mind I see the sun above the mountains. Now the vividness has subsided. The images are less pronounced, somewhat vague and dreamlike. And too they are more pliable. I can turn them this way and that, remove them from their context, reconfigure them, remix them, and make them into something new. These are intangible experiences. They include the thoughts I think, the emotions I feel, and the images I picture in my mind.

This simple difference between the tangible and the intangible is a central feature of my religion. Also fundamental to it are change and constancy. The stimulus I receive from my senses is ongoing. During my waking hours my senses are continuously sending "data" to my mind. My attention is constantly moving from one image, thought, or feeling to another. My experience of both the tangible and the intangible is a continuous stream. My consciousness is an unceasing flow. As an experiment I try to intentionally stop this constant change. I try to think about one thing only and to keep my attention from turning to subsequent thoughts, images, or feelings. I find it is impossi-

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ble. I can think about the same subject for an extended time, but my attention is constantly shifting from one thing (related or not) to another.

Pitted against this continuous change is an inherent power within me to differentiate (to recognize differences). Within me is the ability to distinguish in a seemingly infinite number of ways. The determination of size, shape, color, and vertical, horizontal, and depth dimensions are examples of my distinguishing capabilities. When I put my mind to cataloguing the many differentiations I can make, I'm literally amazed at both their variety and number. In visual aspects they include no end of forms and patterns; in sounds they encompass a seemingly infinite variety of articulations, pitches, inflections, and timbres; in touch a great variety of textures; and in taste and smell a seemingly endless array of savors and aromas.

I note that my ability to determine differences is constant. Unlike my senses, it isn't dependent on the condition of my tangible body. As I grow older my sensory abilities change, but my capacity to differentiate doesn't. At an older age I can't see as well, but my ability to differentiate is as acute as ever.

Among my abilities to differentiate is my ability to distinguish between what is tangible and what is intangible and to realize that while tangible things are subject to change, intangibles remain constant. I find it fascinating that though a blind man can't see anything, he is still *able* to see! His state of blindness is always temporary. It's only because his visual organs fail to function properly that he doesn't see. He *always* has the *ability* to see. That ability is intangible and doesn't change.

I understand that a mechanical apparatus such as a camera can focus light in ways similar to

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the eye, that data can be transferred through electronic circuits just as it can through the optic nerves, and that a computer can format the data into a useable form as can the brain. But I realize that in addition to these mechanical processes something else is necessary for a person to *see*. The *act* of seeing is something different than the tangible process of focusing, transferring, and formatting. The act of seeing is something *intangible*. It is an ability that can be neither explained nor understood in tangible terms. My ability to see isn't dependent on the condition of my eyes, optic nerves, or brain. I can *always* see, but if my tangible organs related to sight fail to function properly there will be nothing "there" for me to see.

To me this distinction between tangible processes and the intangible act of experiencing is fundamental. It is nonetheless a distinction that few seem to make or acknowledge. For example, most people seem to gloss over the difference between the tangible process of *making* a sound and the intangible experience of *hearing* a sound. When a tree falls in the forest, when no living creature with hearing capabilities is present, is a sound or a sound wave the result? Most people seem to neither ask nor answer this question. Because they don't realize that their ability to hear is an intangible and unchanging ability, they don't make a distinction between the *process* of making a sound and the *act* of hearing one.

Further, my experience tells me that most people tend to focus on tangible processes as opposed to the act of experiencing itself. Because their attention is directed toward tangible things that change, their attention is directed toward change only. They are not aware of anything that is constant. They therefore assume that there is noth-

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ing in them that is constant. It doesn't occur to them that their ability to experience is something that doesn't change. They don't think of themselves as in *any way* unchangeable. To them *everything*, including their own selves, is subject to change. *Nothing* is constant.

Nothing, that is, except "God." Why do they believe in an all-powerful unchanging entity? because everything they are aware of is changing and therefore fleeting and vain. "All this will pass away," they say to themselves. "But obviously *everything* can't pass away, because if it did there wouldn't be anything at all. Unchanging omnipotence is the constant upon which all else depends, and from that unchanging power *must* come the changing world. Without a constant the change we experience would have no basis."

My experience tells me that this is the conclusion that people reach and that they reach it because they fail to acknowledge a *fundamental* ability. They fail to acknowledge that within *themselves* is a constant: the ability to experience. By failing to acknowledge that the intangible act of experiencing on the one hand and tangible processes on the other are different, they fail to realize that something in *them* is constant. That single realization, if they could reach it, would change their entire view of who and what they are. They would realize that they are *not* entirely fleeting and that there *is* something within them that will *never* pass away!

I've never known anyone who seems to realize that experience lies at the heart of *everything* and that *everything* is dependent on it. I read about how people are in awe of the magnificence and vastness of the universe. They marvel at the great expanse that encompasses them and shrink at the thought of how miniscule and insignificant

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they are in comparison. And yet, I ask myself, where would the universe be without anyone to experience it? How grand is a universe that no one has ever witnessed or imagined? How wonderful is something if no one *thinks* it is wonderful?

The same is true of the omnipotent power that people believe to be the creator of the universe. What if, I ask myself, no one believed in such a power? What if there were *no one* to imagine what such a power might be? I've often thought that the object of monotheistic religion may not be God as much as it is a *belief* in God. And because, in my view, belief, no matter what its object, is based on experience, no matter what people believe, they believe it because of something they have experienced. They don't experience God directly; rather the things they experience they attribute to God. God to most people is the substance of a world that seems to have no substance. If they could once experience something substantive in themselves I think their view of things would be altogether different. Once that happened they would realize that God is *not* the basis of existence. The basis of existence is something within them that doesn't change: their own ability to experience!

I think that the essential question regarding existence is, why does anything exist? The answer I give the question is, because people experience things as existing. Without experience there would be no existence and no things. And so I draw the conclusion: existence is fundamentally dependent on one thing and one thing only: experience. And, I add, experience is the product of individuals. It is the product of each individual personally. Therefore, it is not monistic; it is pluralistic. It is not one; it is many. It is not of a single kind; it is of an infinite variety of kinds.

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Experience is, as I have said, divisible into two distinct categories: tangible and intangible. That said, I also realize that the tangibility and intangibility of experience cannot be separated. Experience consists of these two together. The two are inseparably connected. The tangible objects I experience are particular: this table, that chair, and so on. They are things I experience as changing. My table does not appear the same today as it did yesterday. It looks more cluttered and dustier than before. However, it also has certain qualities that do not change. For example, it is rectangular in shape. I could saw it off and make it into a square, but what it means to be a rectangle or what it means to be a square doesn't change. Categories of shape that can apply to more than one object are always the same. They are referred to as "universals" because they serve as qualities of an infinite variety of particular things. Universals are constants. Circles, squares, rectangles, and triangles are qualities that stay the same. And so my experience includes tangibles that change and intangibles that do not change.

If I hypothetically suppose that my experience could be limited to tangibles only that are void of intangibles, right away I see how incongruous such a supposition would be. A table that has no shape obviously isn't a table. Right away I see I can't separate the tangible and intangible elements of what I consider to be tangible experiences. I realize that these two are inseparably tied together.

I arrive at the same conclusion when I consider my intangible experiences. As stated, the thoughts I think, the emotions I feel, and the images I picture in my mind are intangibles that I don't experience with my senses. They are, however, invariably tied to the tangible things I do ex-

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perience with my senses. I think no thoughts, feel no emotions, and picture no images in my mind that are void of tangible references. An abstract thought such as the substance of something, an emotion such as anger, and the mental image of say a “headless horseman” are all meaningless outside of the context of tangible experience. The thoughts I think no matter how abstract, the emotions I feel no matter how refined, the images I picture no matter how contrived are all related in one way or another to the tangible things I experience with my senses.

Experience, in my view then, consists of *both* the tangible *and* the intangible *together*. I don't think there is an experience that is *only* tangible or *only* intangible. Tangible experiences include the intangible, and intangible experiences include the tangible. I regard some experiences as tangible because they are experienced with my senses. I regard others as intangible because they are not experienced with my senses. Yet the two are tied together. Although I consider certain aspects of them to be tangible and certain others to be intangible, yet tangibility and intangibility are inseparably interlocked and interwoven together. The tangible and intangible elements of experience are *always* together. They are *never* separate.

As I've said, people don't tend to make a distinction between the tangible and intangible aspects of experience. That's not the case, however, when it comes to what they claim to believe. When it comes to formal beliefs the difference between the tangible and the intangible gets a lot of attention. People tend to divide themselves into two camps, each of which makes one of two denials and one of two affirmations. One group denies the reality of the tangible world and affirms the existence

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of a wholly intangible or supernatural reality (the monotheists), while the other denies the reality of an intangible or supernatural world and affirms the existence of a wholly tangible or natural reality (the scientists). There are of course many crossovers and few purists in either camp, but the purist position of each is the absolute denial of what the other absolutely affirms.

That both of these positions are untenable is to me (in light of my personal experience) obvious. As I said, in my view an existence that is *only* tangible or *only* intangible is impossible because existence is dependent on experience and the singular characteristic of experience is that it consists of the tangible *and* the intangible inseparably tied together.

What this means to me is that my existence will never be in some realm that is purely intangible. It means I will never experience some ethereal, supernatural place that is void of tangible things. Nor will there someday be a universe where every sun has died out, where every star has grown cold, and where experience itself has crystallized into frozen oblivion. There can never be such a place, because without people to experience it, frozen oblivion just doesn't exist!

As I contemplate what my religion is and attempt to grasp the impact of its central premises, I realize how revolutionary it is. It takes the essential ingredient of both science and monotheism and puts them together. It acknowledges the essential of each and concludes that the essential of the one is meaningful only when it is regarded as inseparably connected to the essential of the other. Alone neither is meaningful and therefore neither is productive of knowledge. However, when the essential ingredient of the one is put together with that of

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the other the simple result is individual or personal experience upon which knowledge is based.

The only religion, in my view, that can be *demonstrated* to be true is *my* personal religion, but that demonstration is, of course, one that I can make to myself only. In other words, my personal religion is about things that are self-evident *to me*. It is about what I am essentially. It is revealed by what I know, and what I know is determined by what I experience.

The world I experience is my personal world. It is exclusively mine. No one can invade it or take it from me. I am the center of the world I experience and from that center all that matters emanates. Without me the world I experience simply would not exist. I believe that because my ability to experience is immutable it is self-existent; it isn't dependent on anything apart from itself. And as for future existences, if I am to have them they will, like this one, be the result of my experience. As I have said, the world that arises from my experience is my world. Therefore, I am neither a pilgrim nor a stranger in it. I do not sojourn in a foreign land, and I don't need to make my way *back* home. I *am* home. *This* is it. What I experience in the here and now *is* reality!