

The Ontology of Religiosity: The Oceanic Feeling and the Value of the Lived Experience

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Abstract

Religious experience is as variegated as religion itself, each with a body of precepts, attitudes, and sentiments that lend purpose and structure to individual and collective fulfillment. While the phenomena of religious experience vary in conceptual belief, practice, locution, duration, and intensity, the question and meaning of religiosity becomes a central concern in the authentic pursuit of spiritual growth. The intention of this article is to highlight through constructive dialogue the nature of religiosity from both theistic and non-theistic perspectives. Special emphasis will be placed on the role of subjective feeling as the ontological basis for religious experience. Whether predicated in theistic convention or renunciation, I will attempt to show that the value of the lived experience fur-

ther becomes the phenomenological criterion underlying religious meaning.



The question of religiosity is a lived existential crusade. While the meaning of religion eludes unified consensus,¹ religiosity generally signifies experience that may be associated with certain tenets of belief, faith, or dogma, or may stand independent of any systemic religious creed. Whether grounded in devotion or secularism, religiosity is directed toward the lived experience, and more specifically the *quality* of the lived experience. In the tradition of William James and John Dewey, I would like to locate religiosity in the realm of experience that may or may not be affiliated with theism. This will bring us to examine whether religiosity grounded in belief has a distinct ontology from religiosity rooted in experience. Can one live a religious life based on the quality of the lived experience without the commitment to religious decree? Furthermore, are there any decisive advantages to religiosity without theism?

It becomes our central task throughout this article to explore the ground, scope, and limits to the religious experience irrespective of professed religious authority. If the nature of religiosity ultimately rests on the lived experience, then qualitative experiential manifestations become the phenomenological standard that separates religious sensation from belief. While belief may contribute to and in some cases even enhance religiosity, it is not a necessary condition for spiritual transcendence. Contrarily, I will argue that the lived experience alone may be both a necessary and sufficient condition for leading a spiritual life. In piety and disbelief, the quality of the lived experience becomes the cornerstone in defining the phenomenology of religious sentiment.

The Ontology of Religious Experience

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey situates religiosity within "the quality of experience" that promotes a "common faith of

mankind" grounded in positive "ideal ends" and values "that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race."² James comprehensively outlines the elements of religiosity in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* where he surveys the course of human experience that encompasses the religious, spiritual, transcendental, mystical, psychological, theological, and philosophical dimensions of religiosity that may or may not be tied to traditional monotheism.³ The value of both of these works focuses on the primacy of the lived religious experience and its impact on the spiritual reality of the individual and our collective multicultural societies at large. Following certain pragmatic trends, James and Dewey emphasize the total "value" of religious experience and its existential "fruits" or "usefulness" to personal fulfillment including the cultivation of human ideals. James ultimately "defend[s] feeling at the expense of reason" and locates the value of religiosity in the overall lived quality of one's life.⁴ He further tells us, "I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products." If feeling is the locus of religiosity, then the quality of the lived religious experience is ultimately grounded in the personal *subjectivity* of one's emotional life. Religious subjectivity may or may not be a part of greater shared feelings of transcendence with others or adhere to communal practices that are familiar pillars of organized worship, but regardless of one's subjective persuasion, feeling is a necessary condition for religious experience.

If feeling is ultimately the deeper source of religiosity, then we can make an ontological distinction between sensation and belief. As many philosophers contend, the internal organization of feeling precedes conscious thought and remains at the basis of our lived existential encounters. Hegel, for example, comprehensively shows that a subjective sentient ground is the necessary foundation of objective rational consciousness.⁵ The intellect or rational judgement governing belief is a developmental achievement: consciousness is the manifestation of archaic psychic structure having its origin in the corporeal life of feeling. Because feeling is the ontological ground of subjective spirit (*Geist*), the higher cognitive functions governing conceptual thought and religious belief become epigenetic manifesta-

tions. Feeling is never abandoned as such, only dialectically incorporated into higher mental processes. This is why Hegel says that the spiritual reality of religious sentiment resonates within the feeling soul (*die fühlende Seele*).⁶

Feeling maintains an ontological priority in religious experience. What is common to all religious experience is the feelings or sensations it produces irrespective of belief, and it is precisely this experience that we can identify as a religious moment. Thus the ontological distinction between feeling and conceptuality is realized as a phenomenological one: while mediated belief may or may not augment religious feeling, the *feeling itself* is the proper locus of religious sentiment. Although feeling is ontologically bound to religiosity, the judged quality of the lived experience becomes the phenomenological touchstone of religious subjectivity. Therefore, the essence of religious experience is an *act* of feeling, the animating force—*spiritus*—of the lived encounter.

Religious experience is intimately acquainted with freedom: it is not confined to the dictates of belief, reason, or ideology. Dewey avouches that “the religious aspect of experience will be free to develop freely on its own account.”⁷ This points to the transformative power of religiosity as a process of becoming. As a result, religious experience is not subject to a fixed set of universal truths, ritualistic conduct, or bound to a preestablished mode of being, but rather it is a teleological and dynamic burgeoning process.

Feeling as a necessary ontological condition of religiosity becomes an indissoluble dimension of holistic paradigms. James argues that the religious experience elicits a total reaction upon life.

Religion . . . is a man's total reaction upon life. . . To get at them you must go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree everyone possesses.⁸

The life of feeling is that primordial region of the psyche that is most sensitive to the religious encounter. Belief or reason

socially constructed, epistemologically dubious, or so radically subjective that the merits and limitations simply boil down to a crass relativism.

Having said this, the advantages of non-theistic religiosity are numerous. Following James and Dewey, non-theistic religiosity allows for a quality and enjoyment of life that extricates itself from many impenetrable religious canons, rigid prescriptions, absolute standards for conduct, and meaningless rituals that many intelligent people simply can't buy. This flexibility in belief allows for a more personal and subjectively meaningful spirituality to develop and flourish without putting restrictions on the ground, scope, and aims of living a religious life. Not only does one escape the austere dogma and at times the fanaticism that is attached to certain organized religions, but one also does not have to practice a pre-established set of doctrines and rituals, hold specific allegiance to a certain belief system, or refrain from certain conduct that is conceived by some religions to be evil, sinful, or unnatural. In short, one is spared from the inflexible orthodoxy that may be construed as unintelligent or irrational, psychologically infantile or neurotic, oppressive, and/or destructive to the quality of one's way of being. From this standpoint, non-theistic religiosity enjoys a greater sense of liberty.

One of the most fortuitous aspects to non-theistic religiosity is that one does not have to defend a specific type of metaphysics. A critique of theistic metaphysical presuppositions would fill volumes, hence I will only mention a few here. Some philosophical problems theists have are maintaining conceptions of a deity as a coherent unity. Anthony Flew summarizes this nicely:

[T]here is the problem of doing justice to the limitless nature of God without falling either into pantheism, or denial of human freedom, or the belief that all concepts borrowed from the finite world—including that of personality—are hopelessly inadequate and misleading if applied to God. On the other hand, there is the difficulty of doing justice to the independence of creation, without thinking of God simply as a First Cause, who after the initial creative act leaves

the world entirely to the operation of the laws of nature. Furthermore, there is the problem of reconciling the benevolence and omnipotence of the creator with the presence of evil in creation. And, of course, even if the conception proves internally coherent, there is the question of our grounds for claiming that anything actually exists corresponding to it.¹¹

While a theist will attempt to show through rational means and faith that these positions can be defended, the added advantage for the non-theist is that the burden of proof is on the theist. Furthermore, by situating religiosity in the realm of experience, belief may be suspended for the non-theist, while belief is essential for the theist. Thus the ontological and epistemological assertions posited by theism is circumvented with non-theistic religiosity. While non-theists have their own unique set of metaphysical and epistemological conundrums to solve, these are dislocated from the intractable doctrine of organized belief.

Further advantages that fall within the realm of personal liberty is the freedom to define one's own belief system and to create meaningful experiences, practices, habits, or rituals that are commensurate with one's own lifestyle. This gives the non-theist the flexibility to potentially have more of a variety of religious beliefs and experiences or to omit, modify, refine, or incorporate pre-existing beliefs and practices such as certain rituals or shared values without having to accept every element as sacrosanct. In this sense, moral codes and standards for personal or social behavior are not necessarily viewed to be ordained by scripture, rather they are constructed by human institutions, social matrices, intersubjective negotiations, or personal preferences.

Humanistic commitments and the development of virtuous habits may be advocated, cultivated, and pursued for their own sake as positive ends or for the practical benefits of human happiness and social accord. Within this framework, human fellowship and community promotes love, kindness, compassion, generosity, and ethical character that many theists claim to also possess, but without the belief that it has been ordered by God. That makes freedom and responsibility a human (not divine) concern where individuals are judged by them-

selves and others. Sin or evil is a natural consequence of human activity and is to be judged according to human convention. The use of natural substances as well as sexual relations become a matter of personal preference subject to the laws of society and do not carry the stringent demands of abstinence that come with some forms of religious admonitions. Absolute universal doctrines or prescriptions may or may not be accepted or pursued by non-theists, for these standards become self-defined or are constituted through interpersonal relations. Furthermore, a non-theist can hold absolute universal prescriptions based on ethical and social reasons alone without the appeal to an ultimate authority. One can develop a way of religious being that allows for all the psychological benefits theists claim to have from their faith, while promoting humanistic valuation practices that embrace alternative lifestyles, tolerance, acceptance, and respect for human differences, cultural and racial plurality, gender/sex role neutrality, and egalitarian ideals.

Another boon to non-theistic religiosity may be extended from Freud. While Freud specifically equates religion with pathology, religiosity as experience *as such* is exempt from most of his criticisms. However, his contribution to understanding the unconscious origins of monotheism (and specifically Christianity) go unsurpassed. While I will later show there are many psychological advantages to theism that rival non-theist religiosity, we must first see how these structured belief systems affecting religious experience may be psychologically baneful. Freud pulls no punches on his analysis of religion. He is, however, much more concerned with the tenets of religion than on the sources of religious experience, feeling, and sentiment. This, I believe, he respects much more than is typically credited by his commentators.¹² From *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud lambastes religious ideologies as a

system of doctrines and promises which on the one hand explains to him the riddles of this world with enviable completeness, and, on the other, assures him that a careful Providence will watch over his life and will compensate him in a future existence for any frustrations that he suffers here. The common man

cannot imagine this Providence otherwise than in the figure of an enormously exalted father . . . The whole thing is so patently infantile, so foreign to reality, that to anyone with a friendly attitude to humanity it is painful to think that the great majority of mortals will never be able to rise above this view of life (p. 74).

For Freud, the belief in God and future salvation is an illusion and is the source of much human suffering and perpetuated ignorance. Much of his analysis is outlined in his controversial 1927 publication, *The Future of an Illusion*.¹³ The Oedipalization of God as the projected father in the sky is undoubtedly his unique insight to the familiar tenets of Judeo-Christian doctrine that reify God as a masculine figure denoted by the personal pronoun "He." This is beyond the mere anthropomorphic hypostatization of God who possesses human attributes with a specific male gender, but to a view of God as a projected image of a personal authority figure that is one's own father who assumes all the characteristics of an Absolute Superego that is both comforting and menacing. Hence, moral conscience, ideal perfection, and compassion, as well as critical judgment, shame, punishment, and guilt are projected attributes believed to belong to God.¹⁴

The thrust of Freud's arguments are further echoed in the works of Dewey and James. Taken to the extreme, organized religion enslaves people in superstition and ignorance and only through its renunciation can humankind truly be liberated. Theistic religion turns people and society into fearful, neurotic, submissive beings who suffer extra guilt and mental agony based on conflicted childhood dependency yearnings that have not been appropriately sublimated. Freud argues that we need to dispense with such illusions because it limits the possibility of personal growth of a mature and fully functioning adult within society. Furthermore, society is truncated by perpetuating such infantilism that serves to imprison people in futility and naivete which affects people's overall adjustment and social productivity.

Freud passes a value judgment that society would be better off accepting discernible truths based on scientific fact and abnegate illusory desires, superstitious paranoia, or neu-

rotic dispositions that are the deposit of childhood wish-fulfillment. Dogmatic religion leads to maladjustment where self-needs are sacrificed under the guise of abstinence and purity, fear, and the denial of the normal enjoyment of the senses. Where James shows the fruits of religion as saintly advantages that provide compensation for corporeal afflictions, social poverty, and suffering, Freud would locate the source of such suffering within civilization itself and religious obsession. Confession may be a purge, but it is a purge of one's own guilt, not sin. This leads to fanaticism, religious obsessionality, melancholia, or what James calls "a sick soul." Freud appeals to reason and science; and since all rational attempts to define God into existence through philosophical theatrics can never provide empirical "proof," God is either rendered impotent through the shadowy and impersonal attribution of abstract principles which people employ in order to redefine to salvage a concept of God, or is merely cast into the psychological waste basket with the side-benefit that it makes some people "feel good." But antiseptic science may never take the place of religion; it neither inspires values nor enduring aesthetic works of art, literature, or architecture.

The focus on "feeling" that James underscores and on the value of the lived religious experience itself has a great many advantages that are universally shared among theists and non-theists alike which are worthy to pursue. For James, as well as Aristotle and Mill, the pursuit of happiness is paramount to human welfare and is thus an inextricable part of the religious experience. It is rather ironic that Freud, who claimed that mental health was the ability to work, love, and play, did not fully appreciate the significance of religion and particularly monotheism which he held in contempt. In fact, Freud commits a genetic or naturalistic fallacy: just because one can trace the origin of religious belief to the unconscious configurations of childhood contingencies does not mean that God does not exist, nor that religion stymies viable humanistic commitments. While Freud saw the pursuit of holism as an infantile artifact in the service of repetition compulsion,¹⁵ the holistic value of religious experience resonates within human desire. What compels people to look beyond the confines of their personal exis-

tence to transpersonal or even supernatural principles may correspond to a calling that is beyond psychological analysis. The masses will never rise above this mode of thinking not because they are incapable of transcending illusion, but because organized religion produces exalted human emotion, an experience Freud did not fully appreciate.

Religious experiences that accompany theism have at least as much intrinsic worth as does non-theistic religiosity based on the simple fact that the quality of the lived experience and the spiritual, transcendental, or exultant feelings that accompany them is grounded in subjectivity. "Truth is Subjectivity."¹⁶ For Hegel¹⁷ and Kierkegaard,¹⁸ religious self-consciousness is the most revered human ideal. It is no wonder that so many religious theists report just the opposite story that Freud warns us against. Faith or belief in God fulfills spiritual well-being which helps people actualize their possibilities. For most of the world population, theism contributes to feelings of love, hope, comfort, compassion, understanding, collective validation, solace, forgiveness, and aids in the cultivation of an ethical and virtuous life. While the non-theist may claim these experiences can be garnered through other means without the dogma, it does nothing to negate the value of theistic experience.

The Oceanic Feeling

Not only is feeling an ontological constituent of religiosity, it further becomes the pivotal attribute underlying the phenomenology of spiritual value. The quality of the lived experience becomes the overarching criterion for religious satisfaction. Religious feeling may enjoy many possible enduring forms with varying degrees of meaning and intensity; but is there a certain type of feeling that supersedes others? This leads us to focus upon a particular aspect of religiosity that is at the heart of religious sentiment. It is what Freud called "the oceanic feeling," named after his friend Romain Rolland's appeal for him to understand the true source of religious conviction. Freud states:

It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation

of 'eternity,' a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, 'oceanic.' This feeling, he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems. . . One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion.¹⁹

live
experience

The oceanic feeling is an emotionally aesthetic event one may rightfully call sublime—so subjective and arcane that it is beyond which words can define. What distinguishes the oceanic feeling from belief is the felt nature of the lived experience: the oceanic feeling is "unbounded" while belief is bound—bound to set ideation belonging to doctrine. Here we may further highlight the ontology of religiosity as feeling phenomenologically realized as unbounded experience.

Because such a sensation is so epistemologically private, its realized meaning resists universal consensus or understanding. This unbounded experience may be tied to natural phenomena such as an awe inspiring sunset, music so moving that it makes you weep, or the beauty and mutual recognition of falling in love—all leading to an elevation of consciousness that transcends the parameters of self-interest. The oceanic feeling may be said to be spiritual, based on the elevation of consciousness alone, a feeling that evokes the deepest sense of personal satisfaction. When understood for its total worth, the oceanic feeling becomes an aesthetic expression of the soul potentially associated with the nature of the moral—the ultimate goodness that underlies the structure of the universe. I simply prefer to call this the beauty of *wonder*.

The oceanic feeling was captured by James very nicely in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and thus can apply to practically anyone who is either "saintly," following the testimony of belief, or who pursues mystical, spiritual, or aesthetic experiences detached from dogma. Freud himself admits, "I cannot discover this 'oceanic' feeling in myself. It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings."²⁰ But it is precisely this feeling that constitutes the religious experience. Freud goes on

to dismiss the feeling as a regression to the symbiotic stage of object relations development where the ego boundaries of the infant are not yet individuated and thus are merged with the undifferentiated unity of the mother-child matrix. On his psychogenic account, this feeling is rendered a deposit of desire, a need to remain tied to the maternal union experienced as the limitless "bond with the universe." Yet he says "there is nothing strange in such a phenomenon, whether in the mental field or elsewhere" for "in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish—that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, regression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light."²¹ While an argument can be made that one should not hold onto such primordial desires, for the mark of a mature ego is one that relinquishes the need for the fulfillment of such a wish, the *feeling* is nevertheless important here. Even if we grant Freud the presumption that the oceanic feeling is merely an unconscious artifact, it nevertheless serves spiritual needs—the reality of the inner world.

While the oceanic feeling may be experienced by the non-theist, it may be argued that it is not as easily facilitated as it is in organized rituals or structured religious ceremonies. Furthermore, non-theist religiosity is divorced from a personal sense of connection to a personal being. While Freud is content to disregard this notion as childish and irrational, many theists see this as an indispensable aspect to their faith. The oceanic feeling is for many the true source of a personal connection with a personal being. Let me contrast this for a moment with an atheist.

While there are different forms of atheism, for our purposes let us say that an atheist does not believe in God and believes that no such God exists or could exist. Therefore, any personal relation to an absolute personal being is exempt from experience. Although an atheist may have oceanic feelings tied to love, nature, mysticism, peak experiences, music, etc., s/he will not feel a bond with an entity nor develop a personal relationship. This added dimension enriches theistic religiosity: the quality of the lived feeling alone is given more value because it is personalized. Of course, our atheistic friend may

point out that s/he doesn't need or want to have such a relationship, or will claim that *all* religious experience is ultimately personal, so the distinction evaporates, or that individual subjectivity cannot be logically compared to another's subjectivity, for it is self-defined. Yet the value of personal relatedness underscores the significance of human attachment, a value we may rightly call love.

Religiosity With Theism

For more than four billion people, the reality of God's existence is a presupposed fact. This widespread phenomenon has deep historical currents giving testimony to the power of human desire. But desire for God is not merely a wish. For the majority of the world population, belief in God is a profound need. The reasons for this are largely psychological but there are also social, ethical, and pragmatic issues to consider. A person of traditional faith has solace, hope, and spiritual promise in salvation. The thought of eternal peace and personal immortality is a very powerful comfort. Consolation in belief motivates religious practices. The argument from reward, providence, and scripture provides immense psychological benefits, adds structure to peoples' lives, and fulfills needs that people claim they cannot fulfill through non-theist religious practices. Belief and faith give many people a sense of purpose and meaning, without which life would be unbearable, pointless, or absurd.

Religious non-theists, however, claim to have purpose and meaning without God and argue that by accepting the fact that one only has a finite time to live, it sparks a degree of existential anxiety to fulfill personal possibilities and to live life, not to embrace some fantasy that stifles human development and creativity or wastes precious mental energy on barren wishes that may cause extra suffering. Life acquires more value because it is this-worldly, and therefore must be appreciated and actualized. Furthermore, one can believe in a certain form of immortality that is realized through deeds that are performed during one's lifetime which live on through the lives of others. Nevertheless, theistic religious experience embodies a

certain quality of *feeling*, and it is precisely this feeling produced by belief that reinforces theistic practices. Theist beliefs are affirmative; therefore they provide a *sense* of subjective certainty, while the agnostic has to live in ambivalence and uncertainty and the atheist in negation.

Social or group cohesion is a ubiquitous feature of faith. The sense of a collectively shared belief system is validating and inclusive, promoting relational satisfaction and unity. Theists enjoy shared collective meaning which may be difficult for non-theists to acquire. Some non-theists, however, simply don't want or need spiritual community, while others find fellowship in other organizations that are more flexible with membership or where they eliminate doctrine, such as with Unitarian Universalists. Their only criteria is to promote human fellowship and compassion and to pursue the good in the service of humanism. But whether they belong to an organization or not, non-theists may still claim to have a collectively shared value system based on humanistic principles alone. No theist would hardly deny that we should all pursue the good, no matter where the source or motivation comes from.

The emphasis on the different social functions of religion have been exemplified by Émile Durkheim's work and elaborated by a number of contemporary scholars. Religion provides (i) support and reconciliation; (ii) offers a transcendental relationship that promotes security; (iii) sacralizes values and norms of society; (iv) provides standards for critically evaluating established norms; (v) facilitates identity functions; (vi) and aids in the passage through the life cycle.²²

Organized theism obviously has a pragmatic value. Whether it facilitates spiritual enlightenment or avails those to cope with suffering, it helps organize a great majority of our societies and cultures. This is useful. Because there is a certain range of agreement among religious groups on their belief systems, codes of conduct, and moral prescriptions, it facilitates a greater collective community and can promote good character and habits. Much of society is conditioned in their beliefs due to the facticity of being born into a specific religion or cultural heritage. St. Thomas Aquinas believes the average person is entitled to have faith even if s/he doesn't fully under-

stand all the reasons behind it. Pragmatically, the average person does not have the time nor the mental ability to conduct the arduous and poignant process of establishing rational justifications for belief in God. Most people in this world are either not capable of advanced intellectual thought to think through or rationalize their faith or they are psychologically vulnerable and need a ready-made set of principles and "truths" to live their lives by because they provide explanation, security, comfort, guidance, and meaning. And as James states, not only do we have the will to believe, we have the "right."

The non-theist may argue against many of these claims. The argument from common consent is an appeal to authority and should not be taken at face value but analyzed and exposed for its faulty presumptions. Faith or genuine belief should be a struggle to achieve and not merely accepted blindly due to a slothful intellect. Even for Kierkegaard, Truth is not to be found in "the crowd." The argument from reward and providence places too much emphasis on the fantasy world of the supernatural and neglects the rewards of living in the present. Even a theist who attends to promoting the rewards of living in the present may be charged with not living it correctly because one is still fixated on an ultimate end that is dubious. If we were to focus exclusively on present rewards, we would have more time and energy to give to others and ourselves, making this a better world through promoting and actualizing viable humanistic commitments, not perpetuating false consciousness.

Nevertheless, there is an holistic expression to religion that has deep historical and cultural justifications. While I cannot do justice to them here, let me say the strength they offer is an integrated view of life, viz. psychological, social, spiritual, moral, and aesthetic satisfaction. Having faith as assent to divine authority has established many ethical and social codes of justice that we still practice today in dominant society.²³ By following ethical principles established as absolute truths by God, people don't have to struggle over deciding what is the right way of life: it is simply up to them to follow divine law.

Of course, one does not have to believe in God in order to be ethical or promote or pursue social justice, and it is beyond the scope of this project to point to all the reasons why

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the argument from morality has serious limitations. In fact, Kai Nielsen cogently shows the epistemological pitfalls to this claim and concludes that even if we could establish that a theistic God does exist, it does not mean we should follow his injunctions without serious critique.²⁴ We would still be morally obligated to establish and justify our own moral criteria.

The non-theist can easily appeal to other reasons to seek the good without having to obey standards that may be confining, oppressive, unnatural, or unreasonable. In fact, many religious enactments and customs have been judged to be immoral and unjust, such as St. Augustine's condemnation of unbaptized babies. This may be as banal as the current preoccupation with sexual prohibitions, birth control, and abortion to the insidious subjugation of women to the sexist power structures of androcentrism. For example, women are completely covered in most Muslim countries, many beaten if they fail to wear burqua, and some are oppressed to the point that clitorectomies are performed under the distorted rubric of religious decree. The same prejudicial and culturally imperialistic advances may be said for Christian missionary work that dismantles cultural beliefs and practices under the guise of salvation.

The notion that ethical prescriptions are commandments from God also promotes fear of punishment and suffering. Some non-theists' contempt for theist doctrine is because it is largely grounded in fear rather than love or faith in the Good. If one worships God because one fears "Him," then one's faith is ingenuine. One should court the Good because it is simply the right thing to do—the *sine qua non* of human excellence. But the Ideal of the Good joins theists and non-theists alike. Dewey emphasizes the value of the community that transcends all religious, cultural, gender, and socio-politico-economic barriers:

The things in civilization we most prize are not ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Our's is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more

widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it. . . Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant.²⁵

From this standpoint, one's religiosity does not stand in isolation from the common values we all share or aspire toward. This is the shared meaning of humanism, an ideal worthy of worship.

The Wonder of Worship

One of the most salient aspects of theism is the employment of ritual. Ritual provides an aesthetic, emotive, and majestic dimension to religiosity that the non-theist will have to either invent from scratch, modify, redefine, or abandon all together. Many argue that religiosity is enhanced with ritual performance that intensifies the oceanic feeling and spiritual transcendence. Non-theists can still enjoy transcendental spiritual experiences and perform their own rituals, but they do not have the elegant architectural structures, songs, chants, prayer, myths, legends, narratives, stories, symbolism, or imagery that provides a sense of tangibility and identification with a larger collective unity. These are means that facilitate and *sustain* the religiously lived experience. When people gather in synagogue, church, or mosque for prayer and song, a radiant group dynamic is generated creating intense emotional elevation. This process itself is cathartic, producing a high that broaches the sublime. Such emotion is not easily duplicated through other means; when a congregation generates this kind of energy, it seems to transcend beyond the immediacy to reach the ears of God. This is the wonder of worship, the awe-inspiring sensation that intensifies the quality of the lived experience. Worship touches our inner being, for the ideals we most cherish are the subject of celebration and rejoicing.

Since the majority of people empirically report exalted spiritual feeling through ritual, it may be argued that sacral rites and observances are superior instrumental (if not therapeutic) means to living a more happy and fulfilled life. While the superiority of ritual is questionable in producing the relig-

ious experience, and that many variables must be taken into account regarding the determination of personal happiness, ritualization enhances the quality of spiritual reality. Non-theists may deny the need for ritual, claim to get it elsewhere, or create their own rituals, symbols, or narratives; yet with the integration of emotional intensity, belief, aesthetics, and valuation practices, ritual contributes to spiritual holism. Organized worship reinforces spiritual continuity and the values that define our shared humanity—ideals of compassion, peace, and love—the true nature of what it means to be human.

Life as Art

Nothing can deny the reality of the interior—the life of feeling—something secret, something sacred. Feeling is the ontological basis of religiosity and thus is the necessary condition for all religious experience. Because the order of feeling maintains an ontological priority, it may well be a sufficient condition for leading a religious life. In all qualitative variations of religiosity, the value of the lived feeling becomes the essence of spiritual fulfillment.

Dewey reminds us that experience is aesthetic;²⁶ life is art and one must live it artfully. The aesthetics of living is enhanced with the religious encounter, an experience we may duly call beautiful—oceanic. The quest for spiritual fulfillment is a process that enjoys many adventures of change, veering from the mundane into the sublime. And for James, “Religion . . . is the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”²⁷ Religion cannot stand for a single principle, and because we all have “differing susceptibilities of emotional excitement, [with] different impulses and inhibitions,” religiosity is relegated to the domain of subjectivity.²⁸ Whether bathed in belief or feeling, in the end the personal subjective quality of the lived experience becomes the fundamental phenomenal criterion for judging religious sentiment.

One's religiosity is an extremely personal enterprise. Ultimately we must decide whether the subjective value of our

own religiosity is justified, and for this we will have to appeal to the overall quality of our lives. The answer may be *prima facie*, available to the *bona fide* associations of each individual; but sated or not, the question of religiosity existentially means for a response. The real question is: Does religiosity enhance the quality of your living? How about others? Does it bring you overall fulfillment and well-being—the *eudaimonia* of which Aristotle spoke? This is Aristotle's word for happiness attained when individuals fully realize their lived potential expressed through all their inherent capacities. This striving for self-actualization is the essence of what it means to be human.

Religious experience may be shared by others or it may be solely idiosyncratic; yet nevertheless, the assessment of personal happiness is at bottom personal—the reality of the life within. Whether we choose to cultivate religiosity with or without doctrine or whether we choose to observe nothing at all—is for us all to decide. If the most important aspect to religiosity is the quality of the lived experience, then what really matters is finding our own way.

Notes

1. It is a daunting task to arrive at a universally accepted definition of religion, for it is contingent upon what source you consult. Such definitions may be circumscribed to traditional gospel and customs that accompany any organized form of world religion, or it may be as unconventional as 'nationalism' to the broadest definition as 'a way of being.' Theologians emphasize social relations, group organization, cultural rituals, and communal activity, psychologists emphasize individual, intrapsychic, emotional, and unconscious aspects of personal experience, and philosophers emphasize metaphysical speculation, ethics, valuation, and the role and constitution of the lived experience. There are popular definitions, substantive definitions, functional definitions, symbolic definitions, empirical definitions, contextual definitions, hermeneutical definitions, political definitions, systemic definitions, pragmatic definitions, operational definitions, heuristic definitions, and theoretical or conceptual definitions. [For a review, see B. Spilka, R. Hood, & R. Gorsuch, *The Psychology of Religion* (NJ: Prentice Hall, 1985); M. Banton, *Anthropological*

- Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London: Tavistock, 1966); and K. Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (CA: Wadsworth, 1990)]. After delving through the barrage of opinion, one is likely to agree with Yinger that "any definition of religion is likely to be satisfactory only to its author." Cf. J.M. Yinger, "Pluralism, Religion, and Secularism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 1967, 6, p. 18.
2. John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 3, 87.
 3. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1902).
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 422.
 5. Hegel systematically spells this out in the *Philosophy of Spirit* (*Die Philosophie des Geistes*), which is the third part of his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, M.J. Petry (Ed.), Hegel's *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, Vol. 1: Introductions; Vol. 2: Anthropology; and Vol. 3: Phenomenology and Psychology, (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1978).
 6. *Die Philosophie des Geistes*, sec. 403.
 7. *A Common Faith*, p. 2.
 8. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 35.
 9. Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Princeton: Nostrand, 1962); particularly chapters 6-7.
 10. Cf. Shlomo Biderman, "Religion without God in Indian Philosophy," *Religious Atheism?* (1981, Belgium: E. Story-Scientia) pp. 127-128.
 11. Antony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's, 1979), pp. 351-352.
 12. Freud specifically says so at the top of p. 74 (sec. II) of *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*Standard Edition*, Vol. 21, London: Hogarth Press, 1930).
 13. Cf. *Standard Edition*, Vol. 21, pp. 3-56.
 14. See *The Ego and the Id* (*Standard Edition*, Vol. 19, 1923) pp. 3-66. What is not often known among Freud's works is that not only is God seen as the Oedipal father, but also the devil. Cf. "A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis," (*Standard Edition*, Vol. 19, 1923 [1922]); see sec. III, "The Devil as a Father Substitute," pp. 83-92.
 15. See Volney Gay's discussion in "Against Wholeness: The Ego's Complicity in Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 1979, 48 (4), 539-555.
 16. Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson & Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton Uni-

- versity Press, 1969).
17. See Hegel's Chapter, (CC.) Religion, in his discussion of Absolute Spirit; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1807/1977).
 18. While Kierkegaard contributed many works on religiosity, religious self-consciousness as an advanced stage of human development is summarized nicely in the *Stages on Life's Way*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940).
 19. Civilization and its Discontents, op. Cit., p. 64.
 20. Ibid., p. 65.
 21. Ibid., p. 68-69.
 22. Cf. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1915/1965); also see Thomas O'Dea & Janet O'Dea Aviad, *The Sociology of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983).
 23. An example of how religious belief is institutionalized in the United States, a country that prints "In God We Trust" on its currency, is evinced by the fact that all selected jurors are asked to swear over the Bible in a court of law.
 24. Nielsen argues, "(if indeed it is a fact) that God has commanded, willed, or ordained something cannot, in the very nature of the case, be a fundamental criterion for claiming that whatever is commanded, willed or ordained ought to be done." Cf. *Ethics Without God* (Bungay, Suffolk: Pemerton Books, 1973), p. 3.
 25. *A Common Faith*, op. Cit., p. 87.
 26. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934/1958), pp. 3-19.
 27. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, op. Cit., pp. 31-32.
 28. Ibid., p. 256.