

The Importance of Religion

*Meaning and Action in Our
Strange World*

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Introduction: Religion and the Human Condition

That religion is of fundamental public concern cannot be doubted as we move into the twenty-first century, central to global politics, cultural or identity politics, ethics, and the socio-economic processes of late modernity, as well as to the contested claims made in its name. Religions own vast tracts of land, have access to great resources which impact upon billions of the world's population, and 15 percent of the habitable surface of the earth is regarded as sacred.¹ Yet never has religion been so misunderstood. Never has there been a time when the understanding of religions has been more important and never has there been a greater need for such knowledge and critical inquiry to advise public debate which so often lacks informed perspectives. Some disparage religion as irrational, making claims about the world that simply cannot be substantiated in the light of modern scientific knowledge. On this view, religion is a series of propositions about the world akin to scientific theories, but erroneous propositions which have hampered, and still hamper, human progress and true knowledge and understanding. On this view, religions can be explained in terms of evolutionary psychology and are superstitions that we need to jettison. Apologists for religion react to the critique of the new atheism defending it on rational grounds, that its claims are indeed compatible with modern knowledge and scientific thinking. We only need to look around bookshops to see the proliferation of these kinds of works.

Yet both critique and apologetic have fundamentally misunderstood the nature and importance of religion in people's lives. This book is an attempt to understand religions and their attraction both in the adherent's view and in the context of the human sciences. Religions cannot be reduced to a series of claims about the nature of the world because they fulfill a much deeper,

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existential function that drives human beings not only to answer or come to terms with the great, disruptive events of life such as birth and particularly death, but also compels us to go beyond ourselves and to transcend our limitations. Even the Buddha understood this when he declared that the test of religious teachings is whether or not they worked to relieve human dissatisfaction; a man with an arrow in his side should remove the arrow and not inquire about who shot it and to which family he belonged.² Religions are primarily ways of life rather than theories about the origin of the world (indeed, Buddhism and Hinduism think the world has no origin, a view even entertained by Aquinas³). Religions are not scientific propositions⁴ but encounters with mystery and expressions of human needs that form ways of life, ways of acting, ways of responding to the strange world in which we find ourselves.

Religions are ways of being in the world which make strong claims and demands upon people and while they are concerned with socialization they primarily function to address questions of ultimate meaning at a bodily and temporal level in which human beings make sense of their experience. In other words, religions are responses to the human encounter with what is beyond us, to the encounter with mystery, paradox, and the overwhelming force and wonder of there being anything at all. Religions cannot be reduced simply to beliefs or propositions about the world but are visceral responses to the human condition and expressions of what might be called the will to meaning. Some of the claims of religion sound absurd to modern ears but religions continue to hold great power over billions of people who cannot simply be dismissed as irrational or deluded. Even if, as some claim, the churches in the United Kingdom and other European countries are emptying, it is far from clear that this signals the end of religion worldwide or a total disenchantment. (T.S. Eliot once observed that “(w)ithout religion the whole human race would die . . . solely of boredom.”)⁵

A strong secularization thesis developed in the sociology of religion⁶ has proven not to be the case in the global context, with the rise of literalist understandings of religions (“fundamentalisms”) and a new “recomposition of the religious field,” to use Richard Roberts apposite phrase, in “spirituality” and religious pluralism.⁷ Religions are expressions in action of human need and human striving to go beyond ourselves. This will to meaning and impulse towards transcendence we might call “the religious imperative” or “religious impulse,” which rather more poetically Douglas Hedley describes as a “longing of the soul.”⁸ The phrase “will to meaning” was first coined by Viktor Frankl to denote the primary motivation in human life, an idea that he worked out in the desperate conditions of the concentration camp, that the will to meaning and its associated hope is the one thing that kept people alive.⁹ While I take Charles Taylor’s point that the concern with meaning itself is a modern one,¹⁰ the deeply human concern for locating

ourselves in relation to the world is not. It could be argued that human beings are fundamentally meaning-seeking creatures who try to make sense of the strange world not simply propositionally through philosophy (at least a modern view of philosophy) but through the body and action in religions; above all in ritual action, spiritual exercises, and in moral action.

In this book I therefore intend to show (a) that religions are forms of culture within which people live meaningful lives, (b) they fill the strange world with meaning though mediating the human encounter with mystery, and (c) there are political and social ramifications of these cultural forms. I intend to achieve these ends by developing the claim that religion accomplishes its mediating function primarily through kinds of action: ethical, ritual, and spiritual. I shall defer discussion of action until Chapter 1, but we need to foreshadow this key idea that religions endow meaning through action, through focusing on the world in collective, shared action, and in the personal responsibility of moral judgment followed by act.

Religion is linked to human meaning and need and above all to the encounter of something beyond us that cannot be contained within the usual human categories of knowledge. But even if this is the case, we have witnessed a gradual ebbing away of traditional religion, mostly in Europe, over the last two hundred years. In the nineteenth century Mathew Arnold wrote his famous poem about faith receding like the sea on Dover Beach, his only hope lying in human love. More dramatically, the German philosopher Nietzsche declared the death of God and so the end of religion through the voice of the madman in the market place declaring that God is dead and we have killed him.

These nineteenth-century voices articulated a skepticism about religion and supernatural agency that was to rise like a torrent in the twentieth century. The nineteenth century saw the development of the empirical sciences, particularly evolutionary science, faith in the power of reason and the value of individual self-assertion, which eroded traditional Christianity and the belief in God and Church. With the advance of secularism in the twentieth century and the growth (and, one might add, demise) of the secular ideologies of Fascism and Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe, religion, it seemed, was doomed to history. But while it is certainly true that church attendance in many countries in Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, is at an all time low, it is far from the case that religion has been assigned to a phase in humanity's past that we are now able to happily go beyond. Anyone who saw the terrible news coverage of planes crashing into the twin towers, or witnessed the event itself, can have little doubt about the negative force of religion in contemporary politics. A popular French magazine even declared that a "new clericalism" is threatening the world.¹¹

For Nietzsche, that God is dead was not a regret but a liberating event that allowed humanity to go beyond irrational restriction and inhibition to

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explore new ways of being in the world (albeit a new kind of irrationalism) and a new kind of morality without transcendence. Freud was to echo the view that turning away from religion was inevitable as humanity grows out of its childhood, withdraws projection, and faces up to the reality of life.¹² Kristeva develops this idea that the symbolic realm, identified with the dominance of the Father in Theology, needs to be disrupted with the assertion of unconscious power of semiosis in order to achieve balance and health; we have to perform a kind of parricide or sacrifice,¹³ although Kristeva herself recognizes the value of religion in upholding human freedom and creating meaning (although at the cost of repressing the other and the repression of sexuality).¹⁴ The death of God was precisely supposed to free us from the kinds of violent irrationalism that had been perpetrated in the name of religion. Yet religions have not died out and have continued, as John Bowker has persistently highlighted, to be implicated and directly involved in many violent disputes, in Kosovo and the Balkans, Northern Ireland, China, Palestine, Kashmir, Tibet, Sudan, and Dafur to name but a few.¹⁵

For most religions, life is understood to be a journey to a better place for both individuals and communities; a journey guided (or constrained) by stories, prohibitions, and injunctions revealed in texts and expressed in religious laws. Sometimes this journey is conceptualized as a solitary, inner quest of the mystic, sometimes as a journey of an entire community or people. With the erosion of traditional Christianity in the West, other cultural expressions have taken over these needs for orientation – we have secular marriages and funerals for example – and meaning is constructed in other ways through art, environmental concerns, science, or politics. But religions generally claim that the meaning of human life must be understood in a much broader context and that the journey of this life leads towards an end-state that, at least for some if not for all, is a kind of completion or fulfillment. Such a completion is conceptualized in a number of ways in different religions, in collective terms as a vision of a utopian society, a heaven on earth as in some Christianity, a return to a spiritual home beyond the world as in some kinds of Hinduism, an awakening or realization in the here and now of a timeless truth, a transcendent or sublime power, the unnameable or reality limit, as in the idea of enlightenment in Buddhism. We shall encounter some of these concepts in the course of this study.

Religion is not only a force in cultural and global politics; it remains important in more subtle ways in contemporary culture. Often replaced by the more amorphous term “spirituality,” religious ideas have not gone away from the secularized West; and the idea that human beings can change, improve, or access higher, non-material powers, to enhance their life is clearly still with us. This is because religion – and I shall turn to the vexed question of the usefulness of the category presently – addresses issues of fundamental human concern about being born, living, and dying, and

religions are about the human encounter with the depth of the universe. Indeed, only religions address these concerns in a systematic way and only religions have provided structures for communities to negotiate the difficult transitions into and out of life and have provided forms of mediation or processes in which we can deal with, and attempt to understand, what we might call “mystery” or “transcendence” or “the invisible.”

While religions are undoubtedly sources of grave concern for the future of humanity in many of their more literalist modes, they are also sources of great inspiration that death is not the end of hope, that humans can live in a better world, and that religions can provide models for peaceful cohabitation which recognize the human need for group identity while at the same time reaching out to others. Religions clearly have a function in terms of identity politics, the various tribes to which we all belong, but they must also be understood in terms of broader questions about shared human meaning and salvation or redemption from evil. While we must be cautious about generalization, as the religious field is so diverse and complex, we might say that religions provide a particular kind of orientation or route through the world and see human life in terms of a much bigger, cosmic picture. Religions provide fundamental resources for the formation of human lives in response to the strange world in which we find ourselves, claim to promote human flourishing, and emphasize the importance of finding wisdom, as David Ford has highlighted.¹⁶

But what prototypically differentiates religions from other kinds of meaning-seeking activity is a kind of narrative that incorporates theories of salvation or soteriology, that at the end of life or a series of lives, or at the end of time, all will be made complete, whole and healed, and that in life we encounter a limit to our understanding, a transcendence which can overpower us and which cannot be adequately articulated. Indeed, a soteriological dimension arguably marks out religions from other forms of culture that serve the same function of providing life with meaning, such as art or politics. There can, of course, be overlap between religions as soteriology and political ideologies that seek human perfection through history. It is also the case that many religions are concerned not so much with salvation as with worldly prosperity (magical protection of the family, predictions of death, the destruction of enemies, obtaining wealth, and so on). But nevertheless soteriology is an important, theologically articulated, ideal in religions that seek completion to human life.

The nature of this completion has been highly contested and a source of passion and violence from the Inquisition to forced conversions in Islam and Christianity, alongside the more sober reflections of theologians and philosophers. Often within religions we find great conflict and tension over these issues – whether a sense of the sublime or mysticism should take precedence over law, for example, or whether connection between human beings and a higher power needs to be mediated through hierarchical, social institutions

such as the church. The basic point that I wish to make is that religions are somatic responses to human need in real space and time, responses to our strange world, and sources for the construction of human meaning that we might call expressions of the will to meaning.

These meanings are formed in ways of life, spiritual practices, and in the stories we tell each other. While for the majority world, religion is less of a choice and more of a way of being brought up, in the West there is generally voluntary election to a particular religion. Religions are ways in which the human encounter with mystery, transcendence, or what we might call the invisible, are mediated. The mediation of this encounter is also an orientation within subjectivity towards a power beyond us that marks a limit to our comprehension: mystery, the invisible, the transcendent, the sublime, the unnameable, or even the impossible. But we are racing ahead of ourselves here and the terms we choose and those we exclude will have different resonances and implications.

Mediating Our Strange World

There is a constellation of ideas at the heart of this study, namely the strange world, mediation, and action that will become clearer as the argument unfolds. But first we need to say something more about “our strange world.” There is an intuitive sense that most of us share that the world is strange, a place where we are not at home. Let us probe this idea a little further before proceeding. Many thinkers have highlighted this: the philosopher Heidegger spoke of our being “thrown” into the world and philosophy’s task to understand this thrownness, and Freud spoke of the uncanny.

In his perspicacious essay “The Uncanny” (“Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen”) Freud observes a phenomenon of how the familiar or “homely” (*heimlich*) can become unfamiliar or “uncanny” (*unheimlich*), as if the familiar were strange as “when one is lost in a forest in high altitudes.”¹⁷ A range of experiences falls within the remit of the uncanny in both real life and in literature; the familiar can become strange and what we are accustomed to suddenly take on a new, unfamiliar appearance. Freud gives us an account from personal experience how in a town in Italy he wandered from the piazza and found himself in the red light district. He tried to leave this particular street but found himself returned to it on three occasions before he finally, and thankfully, made his way out. Streets that would normally prove no difficulty became strange to him and tinged with anxiety.¹⁸ One of the features of Freud’s experience was repetition; involuntary repetition “which surrounds with an uncanny atmosphere which would otherwise be innocent enough, and forces upon us the idea of something fateful and unescapable where otherwise we should have spoken

of change only.”¹⁹ The unconscious provides a repetition-compulsion that is perceived to be uncanny.

Freud links these experiences to the childhood condition in which the child does not differentiate between his or her thoughts and reality; Freud called this the “omnipotence of thought,” which he associates with an animistic conception of the universe as being populated by spirits and “by the narcissistic overestimation of subjective mental processes.”²⁰ This overestimation of subjective thinking – that thought can affect reality – is furthermore linked to the development of the human species as a whole: “It would seem,” writes Freud, “as though each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to that animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has traversed . . . without preserving certain traces of it which can be re-activated.”²¹ The uncanny is a reactivation of this animistic mental activity: a resurgence of an earlier phase of our development.

I would not wish to argue for the problematic association of individual with species development, but I do believe that Freud is on to something when he identifies a subjective dimension to our sense of the uncanny that corresponds to an external situation. The uncanny – that might embrace such experiences as *déjà vu*, meaningful coincidence, a significance to existence almost, but never quite, grasped – is a dimension of human life that contains subjectivity but always an externality. The strangeness of the world is linked to the idea of the uncanny but while we might accept Freud’s description, we do not need to take on board his explanation. Indeed, the strange world resists explanation (as we will see in Chapter 8) but is saturated with meaning and can be experienced as the eruption of transcendence, to use Schutz’s phrase, into everyday life.²²

I have used Freud here not to agree with his etiology of the uncanny, but to highlight something about the strangeness of the world. The uncanny is a way of articulating the mystery of the world. Otto senses something of this in his conception of the holy (*das Heilige*) but for our purposes, Otto’s is an insufficiently social concept to convey the full sense of strangeness and he wishes to restrict the sense of the holy to “the sphere of religion.”²³ Freud’s uncanny points to something more everyday and mundane that I would wish to emphasize in the strangeness of the world. The strange world is not different from the world, from the “lifeworld,” of our social and cultural interactions that is perceived from a different angle as unfamiliar, mysterious, or uncanny. The sense of our strange world is thus linked in modernity to a sense of alienation although in a pre-modern context, the obverse of this is a sense of wonder and enchantment.

This strange world is always culturally mediated. We experience the world through cultures and systems of signs and symbols that link us to each other, to the past, and to the future. By mediation, then, we mean the symbolic systems that necessarily form our encounter with the world (in other words,

culture); this is a process, the means whereby human beings encounter the world, which translates that encounter into meaning and allows us to make sense of experience. Others have made a not dissimilar observation; Csordas, for example, speaks of religion as developing from a primordial sense of otherness or alterity as “the phenomenological kernel of religion.”²⁴ While a detailed and nuanced understanding of cultural process will be dealt with more extensively in later chapters (particularly in Chapters 1, 2, and 4), we need to say something about this at the outset. Cultural process can be understood in terms of “translation,” in phenomenological jargon the translation of intentional objects or *noema*, that is, the objects of knowledge, into the process of intentionality, the *noesis*, that is, the processes of knowing. It can also be understood in terms of signification and representation: the sign system that forms a culture translates the human encounter with mystery into socially sanctioned, acceptable, and understandable forms (such as a university course or a church service or even a sporting event). But above all, mediation must be understood in terms of action: religions process the human encounter with mystery through ritual and ethical action. It is through action, particularly religious action, that people encounter and come to terms with mystery, the uncanny, the strange.

The strangeness of the world especially takes focus in the extreme situations of life, notably death and bereavement but also love, where religions come into their own as resources for mediating these encounters and allowing us to deal with life in suitably expressive ways. Mediation is thus linked to the idea of symbol as a cultural form that points to a reality beyond itself while at the same time participating in that reality, which is a uniquely religious understanding.²⁵ For example, the Eucharist in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity is a symbol in this sense of participating in the reality to which it points (that is, the body and blood of Christ). Similarly, in Hinduism a mantra is understood as the sound-body of the god: a symbol that both points to something beyond it and participates in that reality to which it points. We can, of course, have failed process when the symbol system does not adequately deal with the strangeness of the world, as we find in late modernity. This alienation is well articulated in the opening of Camus’s *L’étranger*, when Meursault’s mother has died and he is alienated from her death and from the process of her funeral; cultural process has here failed. It is not that mediation makes the strange world familiar, but rather that the unfamiliar is given meaning through cultural process.

Theories of Religion

There are many theories of religion linked to definitions. Recent debate can perhaps be encapsulated in three statements within which different theories

can be located, namely religion is politics by other means, religion is nothing but the genes, and religion is a cultural response to life. These tend to be mutually exclusive but not necessarily so. The first two claims are forms of reductionism: a cultural reductionism, on the one hand, that says that the analysis of religion shows that it is really only about power in human relationships, and an eliminative or materialist reductionism, on the other, that says that religion is really part of a cultural mechanism to ensure the successful transmission of the genes through the generations.²⁶ Both of these positions generally take the view that the claims of religions are false. A third view, that religion is an encounter with and response to life, or we might say the strangeness of the world, claims that religions cannot be fully understood in terms of the two reductionisms.

This last view includes a number of theoretical orientations within phenomenology and anthropology. It is a claim that religion is a realm of human theory and practice distinct from other fundamental human activities such as politics and art but is intimately related to them. There is also a group of theorists whose work crosses boundaries between social science and religious studies or between cognition and theology. One such example is a stimulating book by Thomas Tweed, who locates religions in terms of crossings over and dwelling on the borders. Theories of religion are provisional, always from a perspective: "they are positioned representations of a changing terrain by an itinerant cartographer."²⁷ We glimpse religion from a particular viewpoint as we pass through. Tweed's emphasis on space (and his spatial metaphors of sighting) and the physical location of religion is important and a welcome balance to an overemphasis on history. Another example in the same spirit as Tweed is Kim Knott's work on the location of religion and the need to develop a spatial analysis of the everyday practices of religious people that draws on philosophers of space such as Lefebvre.²⁸ These works, like my own project, place emphasis on the body as our location in the world and the basis of spatial awareness.

Thirty or forty years ago there was a sense that religion was in decline and would inevitably die out with the rise of secularism, the development of science, and a general incredulity towards the claims of religions that were seen as eccentric irrationalities. While there has been a rapid decline in church attendance in some countries in Western Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, elsewhere in the world we have, on the contrary, an increase in religious activity and commitment of a kind that directly challenges secular modernity. The rise of a highly political Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity bear witness to this. But neither has religion disappeared from those most secularized nations, and the impulse to religion can be seen in a multiplicity of groups and ideas that affect mainstream forms of life, economics, and politics, from business employing "new age" management techniques to

public debates about euthanasia, the environment, animal experimentation, and genetic research.

Nor is it simply a question of choice between secular modernity and religious fundamentalism. Probably the vast majority of people wish to live materially comfortable lives in a technologically developed, global world while at the same time adhering to their religious traditions. Modernity and tradition are not necessarily at odds. As Tariq Ramadan has observed, traditions such as Islam contain within them the resources for their own transformation and adaptation to the conditions of modernity. While some within the Moslem world will see Ramadan as too westernized, his is an important voice and a view to be taken very seriously as demarcating a mode of religious being in the world which is not regressive or nostalgic.²⁹ As David Ford persistently points out, we live in a secular *and* religious society.³⁰ While religions cannot be separated from cultures, they nevertheless lay claim to life and present fundamental orientations to the world and responses to its strangeness.

Intellectuals in secular modernity, its contemporary “cultured despisers,” have perhaps been surprised at the persistence of religion and now recognize its importance, particularly in the wake of religiously inspired terrorism and the presence of religion in cultural and international politics. Whereas thirty years ago secular modernity might have thought religion to be nonsense, it is now considered by many to be *dangerous* nonsense. Religion is a political force in the modern world and some analysts would see it purely in these terms. On this view, the discourse of religion covers a discourse about power in a community and nation. The secularist critique of religion, which sees itself as an emancipatory critique that strives for social justice and human rights, is that once the conditions that give rise to religion are unveiled by criticism, then religion dissolves.

Behind this critique is the Marxist dictum that religion is ideology or false consciousness, the opiate of the people that keeps us deluded and imprisoned. Religion is ideology and therefore not true but useful in the interests of political power and control. To realize our freedom we need to give up this opium, to accept responsibility, and to stop being in thrall to some higher power expressed through hierarchical institutions. Some of the greatest human minds have thought this, particularly Marx and Freud. The secular modernist might think that religion is against the human good and once religion is dissolved through uncovering the conditions of its production, then we can move forward through reason to more realistic, and achievable, human goods. The counter position from the religious perspective is that, on the contrary, secular modernity leads to social breakdown, moral chaos, abjection, a fragmented sense of self, and human suffering.³¹ A religious worldview, by contrast, leads to human flourishing and the collective good of a people. I believe there is truth in both these claims and, as I will develop

later in the book, I would wish to argue for a religious humanism that recognizes the shortfalls of both tradition and modernity.

A second kind of reductionism has said that religion can be exclusively accounted for in terms of evolutionary biology, that genetics can explain why we are religious and that religious positions are simply errors and, often dangerous, errors. But the scientists are not united and while some are avowed atheists intent on debunking the “superstition” of religion, others are committed to a religious perspective. Indeed, a religious counter-argument might accept, for example, evolutionary biology but would reject this as an explanatory account of religion. Evolutionary biology might explain how living beings are in the world as they are or specify a particular range of constraints, but it does not explain why beings are in the world, the meaning of being in the world, or the mystery of life itself. Another aspect of this kind of explanation is brain science or cognition theory, which locates particular kinds of activity in particular areas of the brain and develops neurological accounts of certain kinds of human behavior. There is a burgeoning development of this kind of work in relation to religion, with many excellent scholars working in this field; the names Harvey Whitehouse, Lewis-Williams, and Pascal Boyer on cognition, Guthrie on projectionist theory, and Scott Atran on cognitive theory in anthropology come to mind.³² Yet it would be highly surprising if certain areas of the brain were not related to the development of the religious impulse and the development of religion as a set of skills. Inevitably there are cultural assumptions in cognitive work that some scholars regard as unjustified, such as Carrette’s well-formed critique that the cognitive science of religion is “embedded within a wider cultural environment of the knowledge economy.”³³

While the idea of religions as resources for the formation of human lives goes against the grain of some recent scholarship, it nevertheless seems to me that the data of religions require that we understand them in broadly existential terms. But such an existential understanding of religion does not mean that religion is set aside from specific cultures and societies. Indeed, there is no religion outside of culture and religions are inseparably connected to culture and particular languages. It is through language and culture that our somatic responses to the mystery and strangeness of the world take place; these somatic responses we call religions. As de Certeau observes, in emphasizing cultural, economic, and social factors, historians of religion have often overlooked religious and spiritual dimensions, hardly referring to religious literature as such, while theologians, conversely, hardly refer to cultural, economic, and social dimensions of religion.³⁴ This book therefore seeks to account for the importance of religion in terms of the human will to meaning and in terms of responses to our world, thereby locating religions within existential human concerns. Religions are best understood as ways of living, forms of culture, and kinds of skilful action that address the limits of

human life and express wonder along with a desire for meaning, wisdom, and transcendence. Theories of religion are always provisional, perspectival, and inevitably limited. It is not clear what kind of theory could explain the Hindu holy man Sadhu Ludhkan Baba (the “rolling” Baba), who rolled from Madhya Pradesh in the centre of India to Lahore in Pakistan in 2004. He wanted to convince the President of Pakistan to reach a permanent peace with India.³⁵

Religion and Religions

The reader will have noticed that sometimes I refer to “religion” and sometimes to “religions,” thereby apparently gliding over an issue about the very category “religion” and how it is defined. Are the many “religions,” species of the single genus “religion?” Can we speak about an essence of religion? Or is talk about “religions” simply a way of speaking about the diversity of human cultures? Must we restrict the category “religion,” which some argue arose between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, to a particular historical development in the history of the West linked to the development of the private realm in contrast to secular governance? Is religion a social construct or a natural category? Are there any more difficulties in defining or isolating “religion” from other spheres of human activity such as “art,” “music,” “politics,” or “economics?”³⁶ All of our European categories or abstractions are the product of secularization and what Derrida refers to as our “theologico-political heritage.”³⁷ Can we speak of religion in the singular or must we speak of religions? Indeed, can we only speak of religion in the singular because religion is only the product of western thinking? The general thrust of much scholarship has been in this direction although we would do well to remember, as Stroumsa shows, that religions in the plural was used as early as 1508 by Catholics to refer to systems of belief and behavior.³⁸ Wilfred Cantwell-Smith many years ago argued that the idea of religion was a European construction that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as “a concept of polemics and apologetics,”³⁹ an abstraction or reification of piety and faith. Others have followed this trend, skeptical of the category and its universal application.⁴⁰

There is a rich literature on these questions, and weighty volumes dedicated to the question of “religion” or “religions,”⁴¹ but it does seem to me that Douglas Hedley makes a valid point when he says that simply because there was no term for something does not mean that what it refers to did not exist; this is the “no name no thing” fallacy. In the medieval period, he notes, there was no term for architecture and the Enlightenment had no terms for linguistics or sociology.⁴² We might add that Panini “discovered” linguistics and Vico, in a sense, “discovered” culture although they had no

name for these sciences or areas of life in earlier periods, and that while the history of category formation is culture specific, this does not necessarily mean that categories are simply constructed rather than discovered or revealed through a discourse. It seems to me that it is no less difficult to differentiate “the political” or “the cultural” as categories of knowledge than “the religious.”⁴³

While politics, culture, and religion are categories that we vaguely understand, the precise definition of these terms is fraught with difficulty as each entails the others. While I do believe we can speak of “religion” in the singular, this does not mean that we can speak of it independently of these other categories. There is no uncontaminated essence of “religion,” and I do not intend to reify it. As Derrida observes, religion “is inseparable from the social nexus, from the political, the familial, ethnic, communitarian nexus, from the nation and from the people; from autochthony, from blood and soil, and from the ever more problematic relation to citizenship and the state.”⁴⁴

The category religion is an etic category developed within western intellectual tradition. The term “etic” is from “phonetic” and denotes an “outsider” discourse in the sense that phonetics is the science of the sound of words which is available to all, in contrast to “emic,” from “phonemic,” designating the semantic properties of words available only to those who speak the language. “The etic viewpoint,” writes the linguist Pike, who coined the distinction, “studies behaviour as from outside of a particular system, and as an essential initial approach to an alien system. The emic viewpoint results from studying behaviours as from inside the system.”⁴⁵ The etic description is constructed by the analyst, whereas “the emic structure of a particular system must . . . be discovered.”⁴⁶ Religion might be seen as a western emic category that has become an etic category with the development of scientific discourse. Thus an etic account and an emic account could have a surface similarity although the former examines data “in tacit reference to all parts of the earth” in contrast to the emic perspective which is orientated “to the particular function of those particular events in that particular culture . . .”⁴⁷

The actual word “religion” is from the Latin *religio* which has been derived from two Latin verbs, from *relegere*, “to re-read” (according to Cicero), and from *religare*, “to bind fast” (according to Lactantius), that is, binding the people to the state.⁴⁸ Thus in its very beginnings, religion was implicated with politics. At first, Christianity distanced itself from the category, St Paul associating religion with false paganism,⁴⁹ but in time it became an indigenous Christian self-description. After years of religious war in Europe, Locke advocated the relegation of religion to the private realm as distinct from governance restricted to the public realm, thereby instigating a separation of religion from politics, of the sacred from the secular, which is now regarded as quite normal in mainstream political discourse at least in Europe.

Peter Harrison has argued that “religion” originated with the Deists and developed during the Enlightenment from the Lutheran tradition.⁵⁰ Hegel in particular is important in the development of religion as a general category that incorporates within it other “religions” as an expression of the unfolding of the Spirit.⁵¹

Yet the history of the term does not demonstrate that it can only be restricted to a history of the West.⁵² Our use of the term beyond these boundaries will, of course, depend upon what we mean by it and how we define it. If we define religion as developing only by reference to the secular or only in terms of a *theos*, then this will exclude many other cultures and histories. If, however, we define religion more inclusively, then I do believe that the term highlights an important aspect of culture and of being human that might otherwise elude attention. While I take Frits Staal’s point (and Weber’s) that definitions come at the end of inquiry, I would like to articulate some general characteristics of the central term of this book, taking on board the fact that definitions are always preliminary.

There are other related terms, such as “sacred” and “holy,” which have direct analogues in other languages and which are, indeed, implicated in the history of “religion.” Emile Benveniste has studied terms for the “sacred” in Indo-European languages, observing that while there are no terms to designate religion itself, there are terms that are applied to gods and supernatural power such as Latin *sacer*, Greek *hieros*, Gothic *hails*, and so on. These terms, or rather sets of terms, point to the prehistoric period where a notion of the sacred has a double aspect: positive – “what is charged with divine presence” – and negative – “what is forbidden for me to contact.”⁵³ But both divine presence and prohibition are incorporated within the term “religion” and are also related to the idea of sacrifice. The “sacred man” (*homo sacer*) in Roman law, Benveniste tells us, was stained with a pollution that put him outside of society and contact with him was to be shunned,⁵⁴ a theme which formed the basis of Agamben’s thesis about sovereign power over the “bare life” of the individual.⁵⁵ This ambivalence of the sacred, the double aspect of sacredness as something set aside but also negatively powerful, is a dimension of religions that points to their processing of something transcendent to human communities.

Defining Religion

Religion is a vague term and this is to be welcomed, as vague terms in language have broader applicability. The criticism that religion has no applicability outside of the West (and the consequent absurd claim that, for example, there is no religion in South Asia) reflects a fundamental misunderstanding about category formation, naming, and the nature of vagueness

in language.⁵⁶ For example, the term “celt” and the adjective “celtic,” used to refer to old Welsh, Manx, Scottish, Cornish, and Brittanic cultures and languages, is an etic category not used by those cultures themselves, but which nevertheless denotes a range of historical development and related peoples in northern, particularly north-western Europe. “Celtic” is a term of analytic identity and is not an emic or insider category,⁵⁷ but is used to bring to light or discover emic understandings and categories. The category religion as an etic term functions in a similar way.

There are many definitions of religion which introductory texts list, some adequate, some prolix, some humorous. Some of these, particularly those of Marx, that religion is the opiate of the people, of Freud, that religion is an illusion and sublimation of our instinctual desires (like Marx, he called it a “narcotic”), and of Durkheim, that religion is a social glue that unites people who adhere to certain beliefs and practices into a single moral community, express theories of religion that are part of the broader projects of those thinkers (political, psychoanalytical, and sociological, respectively). Within the sociology of religion there has been a tradition of theorists (to be encountered in later chapters), who have emphasized how religions provide meaning in the face of a meaningless world.

But while religions only exist within cultures – within particular social systems, kinship structures, ways of speaking, ways of acting, cultural memories, kinds of art, and so on – it is also arguable that religions show us something about or point to a world outside of culture. There is a reality that human beings encounter which shows itself to us through religion. We need therefore to understand religions as cultural forms that mediate the human encounter with mystery. We could substitute “mystery” with a number of terms such as “the invisible,” “transcendence,” “the paradoxical,” or even “the impossible,” and the choice of terms is important as each entails a certain set of concepts. But we cannot substitute “mystery” with “God,” however empty that category might be understood, because God is a theological term specific to traditions, particularly what have been referred to as the “Abrahamic religions,” although this category itself might be disputed. Buddhism, for example, would not fall within this definition nor would the Chinese traditions of Confucius and Lao Tzu, yet these traditions arguably do mediate human encounters with mystery.⁵⁸

In brief, I wish to stress that from the practitioner’s standpoint, religions are not primarily abstract systems but lived realities experienced within subjectivity, within the body, within community, and in the messy cut and thrust of history and human life. Religions give us a sense of identity, a path to walk, and a place in the world from where to act. Religions are ways of life, ways of living in the body, which encounter and respond to the raw fact of being, to the human condition, concerned with the formation of transcendent or sublime meanings that offer explanations of, and sometimes solutions to,

suffering and death. They do this through ritual in which people act out the commands or injunctions of their sacred texts, they do this through narratives with which people identify the particularity of their lives, and they do this through inner practices of prayer, meditation, asceticism, and silence. All of these involve the development of skill, both behavioral skill and the skill of wisdom. We could argue that transcendence or the sublime accessed through inner practices is a structure fundamental to the workings of religions, and that if religions were not concerned with subjectivity and the truth of people's lives, they would cease to exist. It is hard to imagine a purely exterior or external religion concerned only with its own perpetuation through time and with adherence to law. Religions respond to human existential suffering, and bring death, that apparently meaningless event, into the realm of meaning. While this might be nothing new – even Marx and Freud thought that religion offered a satisfaction, albeit a false one, of human need – the explanation of religion in terms of science or political power often fails to grasp this fundamental point.

The cultural encounter with something beyond culture is mediated by the structures of tradition, primarily through text and ritual, and when religions fail to be relevant they die out. By “tradition” I mean kinds of knowledge handed down through the generations along with the practices that embody that knowledge; “transmission of practices,” to use Salvatore's phrase.⁵⁹ In the secular context of late modernity, the situation is made more complex by the proliferation of spiritual technologies divorced from tradition and linked to a consumerist *Zeitgeist*, on the one hand, and an increasing environmental awareness on the other. While it remains to be seen just how important to contemporary culture and historically significant this amorphous spirituality is, it would seem to be an important transformation of practices and ideas whose origins lie in the old religions. In what remains of the introduction we need to look at religions as responses to the human condition, at the related problem of the primacy of lived bodily experience in contrast to being born into a semiotic system or culture, and to the problem of what “mystery” denotes.

Can we, then, speak of religion? And in speaking of religion are we speaking *about* religion or *for* religion? Generally in speaking of religion I am speaking *about* religion, but when speaking about religion there is a boundary beyond which we cannot go and that boundary is not so much between the insider and outsider but between science and theology or even philosophy as the history of being. That is, if religion is restricted to an object of science – as implied by the “science of religion” – then a deeper understanding of it in terms of mystery and invisibility is out of reach. I do not wish to foreclose this possibility and Chapter 9 ventures into speaking about the ontological referent (the ontology of process) that supplies such meaning.

The Argument

In the broad context of the positions I have just outlined, the aim of this book is to present a general account of religion as mediating the human encounter with mystery or the invisible, as a human quest for meaning, and as an impulse towards transcendence. Another way of expressing this in more phenomenological language is that religions speak from the world, from the real, or that the world shows itself through religions. That is, religions while clearly within culture, give voice to or express a reality outside of or larger than culture; we might designate this by the necessarily vague terms “the world,” or “the real,” or “mystery,” or “the invisible” that point to a pre-cognitive ontology necessitated by phenomenological description. Religions mediate the encounter with mystery particularly by developing practices rooted in the body and through language. This encounter takes the forms of action (or doing) and speech (or meaning), and shows us the world.

- 1 Action is of two kinds, religious practices or the *habitus* comprising ritual performance (collective and personal) and moral action (political and personal).
- 2 This encounter takes the form of speech, which comprises speech acts (illocutionary acts such as promising) and locutionary statements (such as narratives, doctrines, and cultural knowledge).
- 3 Lastly this encounter shows us the world, which is the real (the material world and the socio-political world or culture) and the invisible (which comprises metaphysics).

Body and language are intimately connected in encountering the world in religiously important ways. These different categories are part of a single process. They can be represented diagrammatically (see Figure 1).

Alienation and the Human Condition

The phrase “human condition” has been in existence from at least the nineteenth century, although the phrase “la condition humaine” seems to have been popularized in post-war France by Sartre⁶⁰ and, especially, by Malraux’s *La condition humaine* (1946). If by this we mean the brute facts⁶¹ of human life – that we are born, that we die, that we are subject to disease, that we seek to make our lives meaningful in the face of the apparent indifference of an impersonal universe – then this human truth has been found throughout history in all continents from Homer’s *Odyssey*, to the great, rambling, tragic epic of the *Mahabharata*. The sense of human suffering is attested in all literatures and the recognition of human limitation

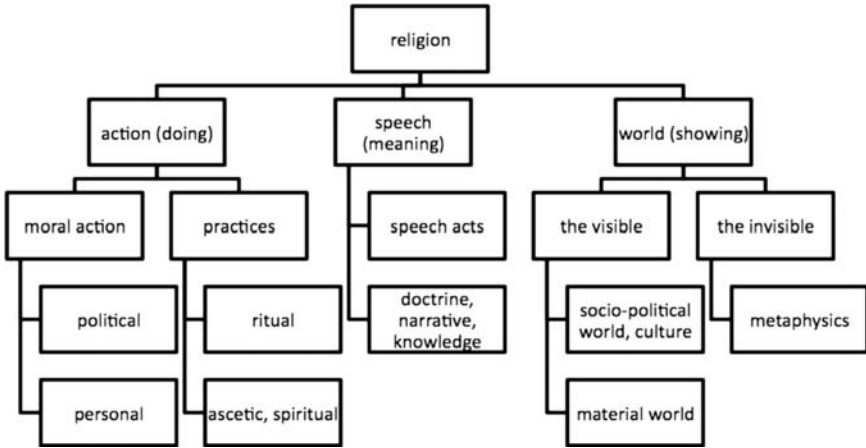


Figure 1 Religion as concerned with action, speech, and world

and suffering has been recognized across cultures and histories. But it is with modernity that there has developed a strong sense not simply of human suffering but that this suffering is linked to alienation or a sense of the strangeness of the world.

With the rise of modernism in the arts over the last hundred and fifty years, the parameters of the human condition have been keenly outlined by painters, sculptors, poets, and novelists, especially in the context of the terrible historical events of the twentieth century. Indeed, it could be argued that a sense of the strangeness of the world is a characteristic of modernity and that alienation or estrangement, the sense that humans are separated from the world, has its origins in Hegel and develops through Feuerbach and Marx, on the one hand, and through Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, on the other, into the existentialism of the twentieth century. While alienation means different things to these thinkers – for Hegel it is the self-alienation of Spirit from itself, for Feuerbach and Marx it is human nature as self-alienation, for the existentialists a sense of the absurdity of human life – we can identify here a trajectory of reflection characteristic of modernity. As Kierkegaard remarks in *Repetition*:

One sticks one's finger into the ground to tell what country one is in; I stick my finger into the world – it has no smell. Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? What is the meaning of that word? Who tricked me into this whole thing and leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed of these rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks as if I had been bought from a peddling shanghaier of human being? How did I get involved in this big enterprise called

actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn't it a matter of choice? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager – I have something to say about this. Is there no manager? To whom shall I make my complaint?⁶²

There is a certain despair for Kierkegaard at the heart of the human condition that no act of will on our part can rescue us from the failure of our life to access the infinite.

While Kierkegaard's response to these issues is a Christian one that we need a "leap of faith" to rescue us from "sin," there are others who have responded to such questions nihilistically; that there is no meaning in the world. Indeed, there is a late modern view that philosophy itself is an atheism, in Simon Critchley's terms "a mood of unease" from which philosophy "begins its anxious and aporetic dialectics, its tail-biting paradoxes . . .".⁶³

While the languages are specific and the related concepts distinct, there is a sense in this historical trajectory that the human condition is characterized by alienation from the world and from ourselves, a sense borne witness to in literature from Kafka, to Beckett, to Camus. With the death of God values become non-universal and culture-specific, and historicism wins out over universalism. There is a profound sense in which human beings in modernity and late modernity are not at home, are not at ease, and for whom the world is strange. Not only philosophy but literature might be seen as responses to human alienation from the world and from ourselves. Beckett, that supreme modernist master of the humorous absurd, captured the spirit of what appears to be a futile life and utter pointlessness in a meaningless universe and the tragic pathos of the human struggle – "can there be misery loftier than mine?"⁶⁴ asks Ham rhetorically in *Endgame*. Thus Beckett can say that "at the end of my work there is nothing but dust . . .".

Some might argue that late modernity is not even characterized by Ham's lofty ennui, but rather by a cultural indifference to questions of meaning and truth in favor of a vapid conformism in which consumerism and a kind of hedonism is the highest ideal. But while there may be some truth in this, western cultural productions clearly demonstrate that humans in late modernity are fundamentally concerned with questions of meaning and purpose; tendencies towards social fragmentation in the West combined with ecological concern serve to highlight these questions rather than occlude them and serve to demonstrate human alienation and helplessness in the face of immense global climate and environmental changes.

But is this sense of alienation and of the strangeness of the world unique to a particular history in the West? Partly "yes" and partly "no." "Yes," in the sense that never before have societies been in the grip of ideologies in which meaning is understood to be wholly a human construction; "no," in the sense that the human condition – which is actually shared by all creatures – of being born, suffering, and dying is universal. There is a sense of human suffering, of

discontent, and of philosophical unease due to our ignorance articulated in all philosophical speculation. The Buddha clearly understood the sense of unease and the human predicament expressed in the first truth of the noble one⁶⁵ that “all is suffering” or “discontent” (*dukkha*), an idea at the beginning of other systems of Indian philosophy. Homer clearly understands human restlessness and the desire to find “home” in the wanderings of Odysseus. Indeed, the very existence of religions is response to the existential human condition of being born, living, and dying. This is not only a romantic conception of religions but born witness to throughout history.

In speaking about the human condition are we thereby committed to some idea of a common or essential human nature? This is a widely debated topic and the idea of a common human nature, derivative largely from Christianity, has come under attack, especially in postmodernity and the “death of man,” but even much earlier. Sartre criticizes the idea on the grounds that since there is no God to conceive it, there is no essence to “man,” no human nature, and “man” makes himself from nothing and is what he does (“il sera tel qu’il se sera fait”).⁶⁶ We are condemned to be free: free to choose ourselves and to create ourselves in a world without absolute values. No longer seduced by the “perpetual end called God,” as de Certeau says, we are nevertheless caught in a movement of “perpetual departure.”⁶⁷ As there is no common or universal essence found in all human beings, Sartre claims, the universality of the human condition lies in its being a *condition*; a historical situation that sets the limits to our existence and which varies in different societies and temporal locations.

While we may disagree with Sartre’s rejection of an essential human nature, his emphasis on historical situation along with our locatability in particular times and places is apposite and important. Fictional and historical stories of human suffering along with the realization of human dignity and redemption are found throughout history and in all religions. In Judaism we have an acute sense of human vulnerability from the early books of the Hebrew Bible – one immediately thinks of *Job* – to post-holocaust theology. In Christianity we think of the pathos of the fall and the hope of healing the broken human condition through Christ. In many Hindu traditions, as with Buddhism, we begin with a sense of suffering and dissatisfaction, and in Islam we think of Muhammad’s wrestling with the burden of the revelation placed upon him and of a wayward human nature that needs to be controlled through law. While often being the cause of suffering, religions also offer resources for dealing with suffering and the oppressive power of one group of people over another. Religions can be sources of both personal and political liberation. We witness this in the selfless compassion of Etty Hilesium in Westerbork camp before her murder in Auschwitz, drawing courage from her Judaism⁶⁸ or, in the same war, the courage of the theologian Bonhoeffer facing the violence of his death with a Christian composure.

But we need not be too jeremiad in our assessment of the function of religions. In some ways it is a truism that religions are responses to the human condition, but it is pertinent that we share being born and dying, that we share grief and sorrow, and that we share hope for ourselves and for our families in this or in some other life. All religions respond to our need to make sense of our lives, suggest ways of living them, and offer ways of transcending our worldly life where that is seen to be a supreme good.

Taking from Sartre the emphasis on the historical location and temporality of life, we might say that in mediating the encounter with mystery, religions create moral communities and values – and we might add, virtues – that guide people’s lives. Religions offer responses to the human condition and, while these responses vary a great deal, they share strong narrative bases that form communities. Such narratives – the story of the Exodus, the story of Jesus, the story of Krishna – give shape to religious communities and provide moral resources that allow human beings to function creatively.

But not only religions, secular ideologies can do this too and we think of Mao’s long march or Lenin’s return to St Petersburg. Such stories are accompanied by significantly divergent doctrines and practices. What Moosa has called the “grammars of religion,” the “network of ideas and meanings,”⁶⁹ differ widely from Buddhism to Judaism and there can be contesting grammars (often many) within a single religion. Even the so-called “Abrahamic religions,” Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are quite distinct. As Rémi Brague has shown, Judaism as it emerged in the common era was not connected with a sovereign state whereas Islam and Christianity were; Christianity separated itself from the political from its inception in contrast to Islam which inseparably bound itself to the political; and the idea of God distinct from the Trinity emerged in Islam only towards the end of the seventh century.⁷⁰ But the grammars of religion are set within a narrative context and the stories a community tells about itself along with its injunctive doctrines provide moral frameworks that guide or dictate people’s lives from their sexual and dietary behavior to their philosophical attitudes. In providing stories to live by religions help form moral persons, and people are formed through community in conformity to the structures of tradition. At their best religions offer freedom from “the destructive bondage that the worship of the creature brings,”⁷¹ to use Nicholas Lash’s phrase, and at their worst they nurture that bondage and limitation. Indeed, we are all too familiar with the ways in which religions can be dysfunctional and restrictive of human flourishing, from priest child abuse to stoning women for adultery.

In being responses to human need and to the human condition, religions are thereby fundamentally concerned with subjectivity. I shall develop this idea in due course but for now we can say that subjectivity is formed in tradition-specific ways; through religious practices and the development of

virtue, subjectivity conforms to tradition and is thereby transformed. By subjectivity I do not mean a western individuality but a kind of inwardness that is formed within community and set within a web of relationships. Such subjectivity is *will* expressed as narrative unity, constrained by the larger narrative of tradition. If by common human nature we mean a unity of the self provided by narrative, a recognition that we are temporally bound beings limited by birth and death, then this is basic not only to a description of human beings but to religions as responses to our needs.

Religious subjectivity is not the Cartesian subjectivity of the isolated individual, but rather is formed in community, in intersubjectivity. Sartre makes this point well in contrasting the dualism of Cartesian subjectivity with existential subjectivity, which is the discovery of others as a condition of my own existence.⁷² If we qualify this by characterizing subjectivity as the narrative unity of the self then we have the basis for a religious subjectivity in which the person, through action, internalizes tradition and constructs him or herself as a religious person. This is generally done through mimesis, through copying the master, and has been the main structure for conveying religions through the generations. The language of construction implies the freedom to act, but we must remember that for many religious persons, the freedom or even desire to act otherwise is limited through the historical conditions in which we find ourselves. In earlier centuries people's choices were far more limited than our own.

Given the existential character of religious subjectivity, we see that the body is so important in understanding religions, a point recognized by John Bowker, who characterizes religion as "somatic exploration."⁷³ Through the body, which of course includes the brain, religions provide pathways to understanding the world. "(R)eligions," Bowker writes, "should be conceived as route finding activities, mapping the general paths along which human beings can trace their way from birth to death and through death ...".⁷⁴ The aporias, the serious perplexities about the world which offer no way out – an *a-poria* means "no pathway" – are offered resolution by religions.

If religions address fundamental human needs and express the will to meaning, they are rooted in the body and bodily experience rather than being simply ideologies. Yet the meaning of the body is found in relation to a whole set of signs or semiotic system which forms culture. We are born into a semiotic system and yet there is also the experience of the body that resists assimilation into systems of language and signs. This is a difficult issue but one that has implications for our understanding of religion. If there is an experience of the body prior to language and sign – the primacy of perception, in Merleau-Ponty's terms – in which there is a somatic encounter with transcendence or the sublime, then religion might be understood not as a construction but as a natural category.

If, on the other hand, the body is understood as being primarily part of a semiotic system formed through culture, then religion can be seen as a cultural construction, a human rather than a natural category.

This issue relates to methodology and the question of how we best understand religions, in terms of phenomenology or in terms of semiotics? But we do not need to choose between the lived body as the basis of experience and semiotic system, as it is both the case that we inherit a system of signs and that our encounter with the world is primarily somatic.

The Primacy of Perception and the System of Signs

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea of a detached self or transcendental ego, distinct from the world and the Augustinian subjectivity proposed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, who even quotes Augustine at the end of *Cartesian Meditations* that “truth dwells in the inner man” (*in interiore homine habitat veritas*).⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty writes:

Truth does not ‘dwell’ only in ‘the inner man’, or rather, there is no inner man: man is within the world; it is in the world that he knows himself . . . I find not a home of intrinsic truth, but a subject dedicated (*voué*) to the world.⁷⁶

In place of Husserl’s consciousness, Merleau-Ponty attempts to unveil a pre-theoretical layer of human experience upon which other theoretical formulations, particularly scientific ones, are based. Phenomenology is a reflection on this pre-theoretical experience and an attempt to see the world anew and to recognize and expound the importance of perception. The body is central to this enterprise, being the vantage point of perception and perceived world, and giving us access to a world. “The world is not what I think,” writes Merleau-Ponty, “it is not in words, but what I live through, I am open to a world, I communicate indubitably with it . . .”. We are presented with the world’s “facticity,” with the “worldliness of the world,” its *Weltlichkeit*.⁷⁷ To encounter this worldliness in our bodies, through our perception, is simultaneously to encounter meaning. We are therefore “condemned to meaning” by virtue of being here at all.⁷⁸ This account of meaning is something that is prior to sociality and language; it is a sense of presence and completion inherent in our experience of the world itself.

We are born into a given, human world: the world we inhabit and expand into is meaningful prior to our personal experience of it. This meaningful world has generally been called “culture” in anthropology or the “lifeworld” in phenomenology.⁷⁹ And yet while culture gives us language, the body, symbolic action, morality, and all ways of dealing with each other and with

the world, the world itself, the horizon of time, and the very amazement of being here at all, are never exhausted by cultural accounts and always resists closure. It is in this sense that we are condemned to meaning; meaning is part of the very structure of the world.

The great questions of life are not and cannot be answered by science (such as the classic Leibnizian/Heideggerian question why is there something rather than nothing?), and we must understand religions primarily in terms of responses to these fundamental, existential questions that have confronted human beings throughout history and are arguably integral to the kind of beings we are. We can put this even more strongly by saying that religions are not merely responses to questions but responses to the *encounter* with the problems posed through the human experience of being here. Merleau-Ponty speaks about wonder in the introductory sections of his text. There is a wonder at the heart of the world, at its inexplicability, and at the very fact of wonder itself.⁸⁰ And I think this is surely what Merleau-Ponty is getting at when he refers to a pre-linguistic layer of experience. This is fundamental to religions. Religions are concerned with the body as the locus of encounter with mystery, the invisible, or transcendence, through well-winnowed practices of prayer, fasting, breathing, meditation, and silence, and to understand religions we need to understand the ways in which they inhabit human subjectivity through bodily and community modes of being in the world.

There is therefore not necessarily a contradiction between human experience of the primacy of the body and the experience of world as a system of signs or, one could say, a culture, although culture is a further elaboration or objectification built upon the lived-body. Religions can certainly be understood in terms of systems of signs but the existential ground of religions lies in the bodily encounter with the world, with the invisible that pervades the world, and in the complex relationship between bodily being (that embodiment prior to language) and the elaborate systems that are religious traditions at the interface of the visible with the invisible. The meaning of religion is intimately connected to the meaning of the body and the meaning of being in the world.

The Invisible and the Transcendent

If an account of religions as expressions of meaning is a first-level phenomenology, then a second-level phenomenology⁸¹ raises ontological questions and presents an exploration which is not an account of various theologies, nor is it an attempt at synthesizing various religious standpoints; it is rather a claim that religions share an orientation to the world that recognizes mystery, transcendence, the sublime, or the invisible and its impact upon the visible.

This impact or constraint, the way transcendence is found in the folds of the world, is imaged – and can only be imaged – through human imagination. Religions are structures or forms of culture that allow human beings through the imagination and through action, to enter into the invisible and to bring the invisible into conceptualization, often in conflicting ways. In this sense, returning to my original definition, religions are cultural forms that mediate the encounter with mystery.

The invisible is resistant to objectification and explanation or complete understanding. Yet while it resists explanation, we also see in religions the pliability or adaptability of the invisible to the structures of the visible, to the world. It is this pliability or adaptability that allows the kinds of exploration of reality that constitute religions. This exploration is always in the body and through the body, through the flesh acting within the religious imagination. Religions arguably conform to the structures of reality and mediate the interface of the visible with the invisible. This exploration of the real and access to the invisible is through ritual action and through ethically informed action. Arguably ritual is effective on people's lives because, over time, it has discovered the fault lines or modes of pliability of the visible in which the invisible is given expression. Thus the Orthodox divine liturgy has effects on people who perform it as does the practice of meditation. By "effect," I mean an influence on the flesh through the flesh in the form of action; through action religions impact on history.

The body sees and touches and simultaneously has the propensity to be seen and touched; it is "a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them,"⁸² says Merleau-Ponty. The body is both objective and phenomenal, part of the visible and yet constituting the visible within it, enfolded within the visible and enfolding the visible. This is the flesh of the visible in Merleau-Ponty's terms, which is the precondition of experience, the "wild being" or uncultivated being of the sensible. This visible that constitutes the world is the body in the world and the seer in the body. In Merleau-Ponty's words:

What we call a visible is . . . a quality pregnant with a texture, the surface of a depth, a cross-section upon a massive being, a grain or corpuscle born by a wave of Being. Since the total visible is always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it, there is access to it only through an experience which, like it, is wholly outside of itself.⁸³

Pervading or assumed by the visible is that which makes the visible possible, namely the invisible. This is closely related to the idea of transcendence which we can take in the Kantian sense of the condition of possibility of the world as well as in the sense of something that goes beyond the world (and so is recognized or imaged only in the imagination). Behind the "pellicle of

the visible” is a depth beneath the surface of things that they are dependent upon. But this invisible is not:

a *de facto* invisible, like an object hidden behind another, and not an absolute invisible which would have nothing to do with the visible. Rather it is the invisible *of* this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own interior possibility, the Being of its being.⁸⁴

The invisible is therefore inexhaustible and endlessly explorable through traditional religions and in new cultural forms in the future.

The Truths of Religion

There used to be a desire in the study of religions to remain at a descriptive level and not to venture into questions of truth. While this book does not wish to shy away from a phenomenological ontology as the presupposition of inquiry into the importance of religions, one of the problems that it cannot develop in a sustained way is that religions make often passionate claims to truth which are incompatible: for example, that the soul is repeatedly reincarnated in a physical body versus the claim that the soul goes to heaven or hell for all eternity, versus the claim that the person becomes one with the elements. While the book does examine the relation between religion and rationality, I do not intend to comment directly on the issue of the truth of particular religious claims, taking seriously the “first-level” phenomenological move of bracketing the question of being or truth behind appearances and leaving this question to the philosophy of religion.

But while I do not directly address the question, “what of conflicting truth claims?”, I would nevertheless wish to uphold a realist position for religions in general, by which I mean that religions are ways of life that inform us how to inhabit and act in the world, how to lead a good life, and teach us how to die well. Having made this comment about the suspension of examining truth claims, there is a case for a deeper phenomenological engagement, a phenomenological ontology (that, following Bowker, we might call a second-level phenomenology). Such a phenomenology seeks to raise ontological questions in relation to religions and their claims. Indeed “the real,” “the mystery,” or “the strange” is arguably what, in the end, is the ontological referent that supplies the meanings of religions.

This is a complex and potentially controversial claim that concerns the relationship between a phenomenological ontology and a theological reality.⁸⁵ Theological claims are specific to traditions and often, perhaps inevitably, in conflict: issues that are generally dealt with in the philosophy of religion. I do not argue for any theological position regarding the real. But I

do posit the notion of the real as a necessary constraint on a descriptive phenomenology. Religions bestow meaning for human communities not as illusions – although they do that too – but because they access the ontological referent that gives rise to those meanings. This is not to defend absurd empirical claims that religions have sometimes made in their histories, or to defend a particular theological language, but it is to claim a primacy to somatic experience and material causation that religions access. It is on the grounds of material causation that the real can be differentiated from the unreal, although this idea must inevitably remain vague: the real cannot be described with any fullness except through particular theological languages although it must be posited as being without content in terms of a phenomenological account. I develop this somewhat in Chapter 7, where I argue for an ontology of process which examines the ways religions appear in human history and consciousness. Through this we see the importance of religion in articulating the relationship between the invisible and the visible expressed through speech acts, through ritual acts, and through ethical acts.

Conclusion

By way of summary then we can reiterate the claim that religions are cultural forms that respond to the encounter with mystery that I have characterized as the invisible. We might also claim that religions offer transcendent solutions to the human experience of life. Because of the centrality of subjectivity and body in living within a religious tradition, the explanation of religion purely as a cultural construction is inadequate. There is an encounter with the world prior to culture and language that we can describe as somatic and which has importance for the way we understand religions.

So, if religions are non-propositional ways of responding to and articulating the human condition of being born, living, and dying, then we need to develop an account of religious action and to show how such action can be read in terms of shared human responses to mystery, the invisible, and the strangeness of the world in which we find ourselves. This response has often been dysfunctional in the history of religions – there are long histories of religious dysfunction from the Inquisition to Jains being impaled on stakes by a Shaiva king – and in late modernity we know these stories well. There is no need to retell the dysfunctional history of religions here. I hope to make our understanding more complex. In concentrating on the more positive side of religions as ways of choosing a good life, as forms of community, as meaning-giving systems, I do not wish to present an apology but rather an analysis. In the coming chapters we will see how religions are central to our understanding of the human experiment and how, while they all disagree over metaphysics, they need to be understood as kinds of action rooted in the

body, as kinds of narrative, kinds of injunction, and unique kinds of inwardness. Religions speak to us of human reality.

Notes

1. To quote the Alliance of Religion and Conservation (ARC) website: “The 11 faiths in ARC own seven percent of the habitable surface of the planet, and if they invested together, would be the world’s third largest identifiable block of holders of stocks and shares” (<http://www.arcworld.org/about.asp?pageID=2>; accessed June 7, 2010). In a conversation, Martin Palmer told me that the figure at the time of writing is now closer to 8%. Also see Joanne O’Brian and Martin Palmer (eds), *Atlas of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
2. Gombrich, Richard, “Religious Experience in Early Buddhism” (1997) BASR Occasional Papers.
3. Eagleton, Terry, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 6.
4. A point also made by Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1982), p. 165, by John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1–2, and by Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (2009). Eagleton, responding to the idea that because of science religion ceases to be an explanation, writes with reference to Christianity: “But Christianity was never meant to be an explanation of anything in the first place. It is rather like saying that thanks to the electric toaster we can forget about Chekov” (p. 7).
5. Eliot, T.S., “Thoughts After Lambeth,” p. 360 in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), pp. 353–77.
6. As Heelas and Woodhead point out, secularization theory contains within it a variety of positions. On the one hand there is the disappearance thesis that religions will simply fade away in the West, the differentiation thesis that pushes religion even further into a purely private realm, a de-intensification thesis that religion will remain in a weak form, and the coexistence theory that in some contexts religions grow and thrive. Heelas, Paul and Linda Woodhead, *Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretative Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 307–8. On a strong version of secularization, see Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularisation in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). For a nuanced discussion, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Belknap Press, 2007), pp. 223–45; David Martin, *On Secularisation: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).
7. Roberts, Richard, *Theology and Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 288. See also his *Religion and Social Theory* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming). On the contemporary religious field, see Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). But compare Steve Bruce. *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), who defends a

strong secularization thesis and claims New Age spirituality to have little impact on the wider social body.

8. e.g. Hedley, Douglas, “The ‘Future’ of Religion,” in Julius Lipner (ed.), *Truth, Religious Dialogue and Dynamic Orthodoxy: Reflections on the Work of Brian Hebblethwaite* (UK: SCM Press, 2005), pp. 96–111.
9. Frankl, Viktor, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (London: Random House, 2004 (1959)), pp. 105–6.
10. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 308.
11. *Marianne* 2 (3/26/2010), “Les Nouvelles Guerres des Religions: comment les clericalismes menacent la planète.”
12. Freud, S., *The Future of an Illusion*, in *Civilization, Society and Religion, Group Psychology, Civilization and Its Discontents and Other Works*, trans. W.D. Robson-Scott (London: Penguin, 1985 (1928)), p. 227.
13. Kristeva, Julia, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 78–9.
14. Kristeva, Julia, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 211
15. Bowker, John (ed.), *Conflict and Reconciliation: The Contribution of Religions* (London: Key Publishing House, 2008), “Introduction,” pp. 9–10.
16. On the theme of wisdom, see Ford, David, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
17. Freud, S., “The Uncanny,” p. 390, in *Collected Papers* vol. IV, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), pp. 368–407.
18. Freud, “The Uncanny,” pp. 389–90.
19. Freud, “The Uncanny,” p. 390.
20. Freud, “The Uncanny,” p. 393.
21. Freud, “The Uncanny,” p. 394.
22. Schutz, Alfred, *On Phenomenology and Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 248.
23. Otto, R., *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 5.
24. Csordas, Thomas J., “Asymptote of the Ineffable: Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion,” p. 164. *Current Anthropology*, vol. 45 (2), 2004, pp. 163–85. Thanks to Hrvoje Cargonja for this reference.
25. On this view of symbol see Robert Cummings Neville, *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), p. x.
26. For a defense of reductionism see the work of Robert Segal, particularly *Explaining and Interpreting Religion, Essays on the Issue* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).
27. Tweed, Thomas A., *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 15.
28. Knott, Kim, *The Location of Religion: a Spatial Analysis* (London and Oakville: Equinox, 2005).
29. Ramadan, Tariq, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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30. Ford, David, *Shaping Theology: Engagements in a Religious and Secular World* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), p. 129.
31. Williams, Rowan, *Lost Icons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2003).
32. Whitehouse, Harvey, *Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek: Alta Missa, 2004); Lewis-Williams, David, *Conceiving God: The Cognitive Origin and Evolution of Religion* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010); Boyer, Pascal, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (London: Basic Books, 2001); Guthrie, S., *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). There is no room for a critical review of this work here, but for some of the general issues, see my *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 57–63.
33. Carrette, J., *Religions and Critical Psychology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 165.
34. de Certeau, Michel, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 32–3.
35. Cited by Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, pp. 127–8.
36. See the comments by Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, p. 30.
37. Derrida is citing Carl Schmitt, the German political philosopher who recognizes the secular origin of categories in his critique of the attempt to neutralize politics in his time. Derrida, J., “Faith and Knowledge,” p. 26, in J. Derrida and G. Vattimo (eds), *Religion* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 1–78.
38. Stroumsa, Guy G., *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 27.
39. Cantwell-Smith, Wilfred, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 43.
40. I cannot review or critique this literature here but would draw the reader’s attention to two engaging if polemical books by Fitzgerald who presents an argument for the construction of the concept of religion. Fitzgerald, T., *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Also see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005). This offers a good survey of the history of scholarship, but, as the author admits, offers no “particular programmatic scheme or a change of course in the way the study of religions is to be done” (p. 10). Other significant scholars share this skepticism particularly Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) who disclaims the universality of religion because “its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific” and because “definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (p. 29). Also see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “The Mystic East”* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Daniel Dubuisson, *L’Occident et la Religion: Mythes, science et idéologie* (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 1998); Frits Staal, *Rules Without Meaning* (New York: Frits Lang,

- 1989), pp.387–406; and from a completely different perspective Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of “Religion”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For a sober historical account, see Peter Harrison, “Religion” and the Religions in the English Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Guy Stroumsa presents a detailed historical survey of The category religion and the science of religion in his *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010). For a discussion of the category “religion” see Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 42–64. For a fuller bibliography, see Bianchi, Ugo (ed.), *The Notion of “Religion” in Comparative Research* (Rome: Bretschneider, 1994). For an engaging collection of essays reflecting on the concept of religion, see Vries, Hent de (ed.), *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
41. e.g. Bianchi, Ugo (ed.), *The Notion of “Religion” in Comparative Research: Selected Proceedings of the XVI AHR Congress* (Rome: Bretshneider, 1994). On the issues of defining religion, see Peter Clarke and Peter Byrne *Religion Defined and Explained* (London: Macmillan, 1993). For a lucid overview, see Keith Ward, *The Case for Religion* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), pp. 9–25.
 42. Hedley, Douglas, “The ‘Future’ of Religion,” p. 97, in Julius Lipner (ed.), *Truth, Religious Dialogue and Dynamic Orthodoxy Reflections on the works of Brian Hebblethwaite* (UK: SCM Press, 2005), 96–111.
 43. Tweed makes a similar point see *Crossing and Dwelling*, p. 30–1.
 44. Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” p. 4.
 45. Pike, Kenneth Lee, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Structure of Human Behavior* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1967), p. 37.
 46. Pike, *Language*, p. 38.
 47. Pike, *Language*, p. 41.
 48. Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology*, p. 44.
 49. Betz, Rudolf, “Christianity as Religion: Paul’s Attempt at Definition in Romans,” in Bianchi, *The Notion of “Religion”*, pp. 3–9.
 50. Harrison, P., *Religion and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
 51. For an engaging account of this, see Arvind-Pal D. Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, Indian, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 127–61.
 52. I do think the term “religion” can be used in a comparative context. For a rigorous and entertaining defense of comparativism, see Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 64–77.
 53. Beneveniste, Emile, *Indo-European Language and Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973 (1969)), p. 445.
 54. Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, p. 453.
 55. Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 8, 81–6. For Agamben, the sacred man who can be killed but not sacrificed has its analogues in modern politics. Here “bare life,” the realm of the original sacred man, is

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controlled by politics. This, for Agamben, displays a paradox at the heart of democracy, namely that it seeks happiness and freedom yet wants to control bare life.

56. For example, Masuzawa seems to be critical of the vagueness of the term “world religions” but arguably this is where its strength lies. Masuzawa, Tomoko, *The Invention of World Religions Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Theism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 1.
57. I am indebted to Oliver Davies for pointing out this parallel. See his “Celtic Christianity,” pp. 26–7, in Mark Atherton (ed.), *Celts and Christians: New Approaches to the Religious Traditions of Britain and Ireland* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), pp. 23–38.
58. As Philip Kennedy has observed, the idea of God is relatively recent in the history of the human species: “Naming the Divine: A History of the Concept of God” (Oxford, February 2011); see also his *God’s Career: The Evolution of a Deity* (forthcoming). See also Mark Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
59. Salvatore, A., *The Public Sphere: Liberal Modernity, Catholicism, Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 80.
60. Sartre, Jean-Paul, *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), pp. 59–60.
61. I take “brute fact” to be something which resists complete explanation. See G.E.M. Anscombe, “On Brute Facts,” *Analysis*, vol. 18, 1958, pp. 69–72.
62. Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling/ Repetition*, edited and translated with introduction and notes by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 200.
63. Critchley, Simon, *Very Little, Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 3.
64. Beckett, S., *Endgame* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 1.
65. I am indebted to Alexis Sanderson for his observation that *āryasatyāni* (noble truths) is a *tatpuruṣa* compound and so “the truth of the noble one” is a more accurate translation than “noble truth.”
66. Sartre, *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme*, p. 29.
67. de Certeau, Michel, *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1: *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 299.
68. Hillesum, Etty, *Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted Life the Diaries, 1941–1943 and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1996 (1981)), trans. Arnold J. Pomerans.
69. Moosa, Ebrahim, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 139.
70. Brague, Rémi, *The Law of God: the Philosophical History of an Idea*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), pp. 36–7.
71. Lash, Nicholas, *The Beginning and End of “Religion”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 21–2.
72. Sartre, *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme*, pp. 58–9.

73. Bowker, J., "Introduction," *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. xvii–xviii.
74. Bowker, John, *The Sense of God*, p. 82.
75. Husserl, E., *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer, 1950), p. 157.
76. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 11. My translation, guided by *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), p. xii.
77. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 17; *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xix.
78. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 20; *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xxiv.
79. On the links between phenomenology and anthropology, see Michael Jackson (ed.), *Things As They Are. New Directions in Phenomenological Anthropology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).
80. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p. 22. This is also akin to Csordas' "surprise." For an interesting discussion of this and a good account of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of embodiment as alterity or *écart*, "gap," "interval," "distance," see Csordas, "Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion," p. 171. See also the responses to Csordas' argument, particularly by Fiona Bowie (pp. 176–7), who argues that more stress needs to be placed on "the world" itself rather than the world as "a cipher for language and culture" (p. 177).
81. On this distinction, see John Bowker, *The Meanings of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 28–9. I discuss levels of phenomenology on pages 164–5.
82. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Visible and the Invisible* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 137.
83. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 136.
84. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 151.
85. I would like to thank one of the Wiley-Blackwell readers for highlighting the issue in this way.