

Chapter Six

The option of faith and prayer

In this chapter, I will explore what the option to believe entails; this includes its struggles. A concomitant of faith is prayer: there is no doubt that for faith to stay alive and operative the believer, the person who has chosen to believe in “God,” must pray, that is, he or she must devote some time, enough, to keep alive the faith and cleanse it of the dust and accretions, which are like adulterations, which it necessarily accumulates with time and human activity.

Let me clarify certain things at the outset. I am speaking about “faith in God” as the belief that there is a higher Being who created us and who “watches over us” benignly, mysteriously guiding us and desiring our “salvation.” When God will act and how is beyond our knowledge, but having faith, in the sense we are using it, means believing that God will eventually, or at least in the end, act so as to reveal to us that we were created for a purpose which can be fulfilled and which when fulfilled will finally make us “happy.” This revelation, which can come only in grades, or by fits and starts, or perhaps only after we die, will make clear why it is that we have, were given, brains which, besides enabling us to physically survive, caused us so much grief: our brain was the necessary instrument with which to enjoy the persons and things of creation, especially when we love them, and ultimately, to know and love and enjoy God. This, it seems to me, is the essence of religious faith, the *sine qua non* elements of faith in God.

There are of course other kinds of faith. One can believe in oneself, either because of an assessment of one’s qualities or as a positive attitude which empowers one to live better and “succeed.” When dependent on one’s qualities, we can see that this kind of faith can falter, when these qualities diminish or are revealed to be insufficient for “success.” Then “faith in oneself” becomes a stubborn, or hardy approach to reality that enables perseverance, no mean thing, but let it be recognized that this too is *faith*, faith in a human being, in a person, oneself, and while it may have the advantage of focusing on a real, palpable being as opposed to an unseen, dubious “God,” it seems to me that it circumscribes itself from the beginning to the power of beings that are often revealed to be very weak. This kind of faith can indeed be inspiring and can and has accomplished great things, often much greater and better than what those who have religious

faith do and have done, but it seems to me to be a harder and more doubtful path than religious faith. For some, it may be the best option, or the only one, when religious faith is impossible, but I think the potentialities of religious faith are greater and more easily available. I understand that greater availability is not an argument for its being better, but having greater potential is. This is what I want to explore.

Secondly, religious faith has to be in “God,” almost by definition, since “religion” has to do with relating or being connected to one or more deities. But the notion that there are multiple gods clashes with any sophisticated idea of God: by definition God, the supreme Being, cannot have competitors, which is what there being multiple deities would entail. Here the idea of the Trinity is beyond the scope of our task as conceived, except to say that Trinitarian Christians and theologians, and even sympathetic Jews, insist that the Christian God, a trinity of three “persons” in a single deity, is not a multiple of deities, that is, a polytheistic concept, but a monotheistic one. Perhaps one way to get quickly around this issue is to, for argument’s sake, simply (or simplistically) say that the one God of the Christians manifests himself in three different ways, and that the notion of “person” when discussing this God is more in the sense of the Greek *prosopon*, the mask used by actors in the theatre, than in the sense of independent, separate beings. But to say more would unnecessarily complicate things for purposes of this inquiry.

Thirdly, the God of faith is benign, “all-good.” He is a favorable being who desires our good. This in itself is of course an empowering thing, to believe there is someone powerful on your side. Religious faith believes in the goodness of this Being, who is outside of ourselves and can act upon us and in the world in some way to our benefit. Religious faith has of course to deal with the issue of theodicy, which was discussed in chapter three above: how benign can this God be who allows such injustice and suffering? His only excuse could be impotence. But faith of course gets around this, by believing that for reasons unknown to us, and that we cannot get bogged down or “stuck on” (it would destroy or severely weaken faith, thwart its momentum, so to speak), there is a “higher plan” that will eventually be revealed, that will show it was all for the good.

Then doubt, of course, creeps in: is this all wishful thinking, positive thinking, self-help thoughts? Here I would posit that faith, at a minimum, must believe that we are not tempted beyond our capacity, that is, that the “medicine” of suffering is calculated (by God) to be for our good and that it will not destroy us. The patient may complain of the pain or unpleasant taste, but

she trusts that she is in good hands with this doctor, who at times may seem mad or incompetent. Here we see the difference between religious faith and faith in a human: clearly the human doctor may in fact be incompetent or careless or lazy or less than well-intentioned, but any God worthy of his salt is not, though this is accepted only through faith.

I allow that keeping this kind of faith, for most people, must involve the kind of alternation of trial and consolation discussed in chapter five above. God must pay dividends, or most of his stockholders will sell their shares. The fact, however, is that it seems the vast majority of his stockholders, that is, those who have bought his stock (have believed, as opposed to those who do not believe or turned away quickly), have stayed with it through good and bad markets.¹ The going can get very tough; even St. Paul, in the very chapter where he writes of the alternation between trial and consolation (2 Corinthians 1), says that in Asia he suffered a trial that was beyond his strength, so much so that he lost hope of staying alive (verse 8). He seems to be speaking about a mortal danger, but I think we can apply it to depression, too, to suicidal propensities. Here of course, unless one is clinically very depressed and unable to control his actions and is therefore not responsible for them, the element of choice enters in, and one dies by his own hand. Still, Paul lived to speak about this mortal danger which he of course overcame: he stayed alive, or God kept him alive (this he explicitly states in verse 10).

But many are not freed from death by God. Jesus has a paradoxical, perhaps even comical, saying in Luke 21:16, 18. He predicts that his disciples will be persecuted and even put to death, but that not a single hair of theirs will perish. So they die with a full head of hair, if they had one to begin with! But the idea is that of continuous divine protection, as paradoxical as it may be, a successful operation though the patient died. Here religious faith stretches into the next world, further stretching its belief, and the imagination of many. But such is religious faith, not limited to the things of this world, but to those of the afterlife which was already a concern for our earliest ancestors with their elaborate burial practices.

The essence of faith lies in this belief that in the end, whenever this may be –the end of a particularly painful period of suffering, or after one dies– God will make everything alright. This includes extreme situations and conditions. I recently saw a program about a bright young

¹ Jesus spoke about the various reactions to the message he preached message in the “parable of the sower,” a quite authentic recollection of his actual preaching (though the explanation added to it may not come from him directly). The “seed” of God’s Word spread by Jesus can fall along the way, to be snatched by birds, or on rocky soil, where it grows quickly (i.e., is immediately received with an ephemeral enthusiasm), or among weeds, where it is choked (by competing concerns), or it can, ideally, fall on good ground and grow strong and produce fruit; Mark 4:3-9.

Indian-American man who was paralyzed at seventeen in a tragic car accident but accepted being unable to walk as long as his sexual function was restored. He went on to become a physician and got a Ph.D. and is happy and successful. His is the typical story of a person who suffers a tragedy and overcomes it; he even said, contradicting the title of the TV show he was on, that what happened to him in that car accident which so changed his life forever was not the worst thing that ever happened to him, or the worst day his life. I don't know that any type of faith came into play in his situation; it seems that when a certain treatment restored his sexual function he considered his plight sufficiently improved to view the whole tragedy in a sufficiently favorable light to overcome any feeling of defeatism or self-pity or depression. It is like what happens with persons who are in a bad accident which leaves them damaged but alive; they are thankful to be alive in a way they were not before, even though "objectively" (physically) they are worse off than before and should be less grateful.

This may be an example of a basic "faith" in oneself and in the ultimate goodness of reality, of the universe, where if we have a positive attitude, things get better, well enough to enable us to go on and even thrive and be successful and happy. It does not require a belief on God. My argument here is that whatever mental or even spiritual tools are available and used by people who overcome adversity, religious faith can be an additional one, especially for people who do not have easy access to non-theistic mental and spiritual tools or who believe that the greatest "tool" of all is faith in a God who can do all things and will, at some point.

Here the nonbeliever may retort that this view in effect reiterates the position that religious faith is a crutch for the "physiologically and psychologically botched and bungled," as one of my professor, a Marxist, used to say. Or at least a tool for people who need it for lack of something better within themselves. But we must explore the implications of the fact that almost everyone turns to God in some form of prayer or invocation or cry for help in extreme circumstances. Is this just an atavistic, instinctive response, part of the archetypes we have inherited from long custom from our ancestors?

This is certainly a rational option. But in this inquiry into God and religious faith, and prayer, I want to explore the phenomenon of believing that God is guiding all things, as a concrete image of how "the universe is on our side," as Paolo Coelho has written, in regards to when we (really) want something. This appears, at least at first blush, to be a blatant example of mere positive thinking: who can prove this, or even believe it, when everything seems to be

going wrong? The universe would seem to be an impersonal entity, not on anyone's "side." It has its laws and they can be harsh. Our mental efforts and training and faith can often seem to violate natural law; an example would be those who walk on coal unharmed, or who can hold their breath for a long time, or slow their breathing down to what seems impossible, as some Hindu yogis do. But wanting something, even the fulfillment of your deepest desires, is no guarantee that you will get it. And after you realize you will not get it, you then, in faith, decide that it was not meant for you after all and that something better is in store for you, which the "universe" will somehow provide. It is more reasonable to assume that the universe does not provide anything in particular for you or anybody, but that whatever happens is accepted by the person with this *belief*, "stoically" (the Stoics believed that everything that happened was as it should, that in this sense the world was "perfect"), and that this kind of positive-thinking, which is also basically being resigned to the facts, is a viable way to move on from setbacks and even tragedies.

Religious faith "colors" this impersonal, faceless universe with all the mythology about God. Mythology here is used in the sense not of fables which are not to be taken literally, but as stories which present a view of reality and of history which conveys, in a manner calculated to instruct, explain and inspire, how God has worked in the world and in people's lives, and thus, at least indirectly, what God is like. The first chapter of Genesis would thus convey the notion that God is the creator, more in the sense of ordering what was chaotic than specifically *ab nihilo*, from nothing. If we switched to a scientific mode, it would be to contemplate the Big Bang: out of some infinitesimal bit of almost infinitely compact matter, there was an explosion which resulted, over billions of years, in the universe we have today, expanding as it may be, with all the glory of the galaxies and planets and stars and the planet earth with its flora and fauna, as utterly fascinating microscopically and sub-atomically as it is when we gaze through ever-more powerful telescopes and other detection tools into far-off space. To posit a Someone responsible for all this, and working so hidden behind all the scenes, is a unique tool to inspire and give confidence: it is the belief in a God who has done this amazing thing, and who out of nothing, or if we prefer, out of nearly nothing (even this is a mystery, and perhaps part of the self-effacingness of God), launched such an unbelievable series of events and developments with such astounding results.

Religious faith in this sense is parallel to what happens in Roman Catholicism, and atheism is parallel in this way to Protestantism. In Roman Catholicism, the life of the worshipper

is full of images, sounds and smells, rituals and strange languages (at least when the Mass was in Latin) and elaborate attire. In other words, all the senses are bombarded and involved, the body participates as well as the mind, all in the service of the soul. The danger, of course, is to focus too much on the external, on the physical, to the neglect of the spiritual, and thus to venture into superstition and even oppression, as being in control of the rituals and of the organization of the church, when things are so elaborate, necessarily falls into the hands of specialists and super-specialists, who then wield too much power. The pendulum swung with the Protestant revolt, which emphasized the Word, study of it and preaching, over images and rituals which could and did make the believer go astray, and be subject to abuse. But the danger is to throw the baby out with the bath water, and one can see that there is a tension between the advantages of maximalist and minimalist approaches to Christianity. Nevertheless, many are perfectly satisfied with their Protestant faith and way of worshipping, just as many atheists are fine with their philosophy which excludes God. The argument being made here is that Catholicism offers many tools, with the danger that they can be misused, just as religious can and has been misused. But used correctly, more is probably better than less.

Buddhism is also a parallel to Catholicism and Protestantism. Buddhism is a reaction to Hinduism's elaborate belief system (thought in any case to not solve the fundamental problem of suffering), and also to the oppressive and exclusive caste system. Buddhism is a way of thinking and living that can do without God, although it is based on the story of a man who achieved enlightenment and solved the problem of suffering and, in this way, provided a path of "salvation" for his followers. But when you get past a small number of true believers wise enough to follow the original form, you get into a mass religion, and most people need images and the idea of a divine being, and thus many "Buddhists" believe in God or in Buddha as a divine being.

A third example with its parallels is provided by Judaism. The religion of the Israelites evolved from a patriarchal covenant with God and imageless religion into a religion dominated by priests with little ethics who basically fostered the superstition that God was bribable with animal sacrifices, which made up for evil acts. The eighth-century prophets railed against this and Israelite religion became very ethical, but there always remained that tension between priest and prophet, and between the two main schools which each represented, the Priestly and the Deuteronomic schools. We can trace their development to the time of Jesus, and see each school

represented respectively by the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees were priests, conservative and elitist and powerful, but their whole influence was limited to the temple, in the sense that they were only concerned with it, and with the power that kept them in their superior place (specifically, the Sadducees, and especially the high priest, closely collaborated with Rome, the colonial power).

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were not nearly as conservative. They had an expanded view of what God had revealed; specifically, God had not just revealed the Torah, the first five books of the Bible which were the only ones that the priests (the Sadducees) accepted (as was also the case with the Samaritans, although their Torah or Pentateuch was a bit different). No, God had also spoken to the Prophets, adding many books to the Bible, and as if this weren't enough, God had also revealed things to Moses on Mount Sinai that were never written, but passed down orally through the centuries through special individuals, in a kind of "apostolic succession," as Catholics would say, until finally this "tradition" (another concept shared by Catholics much more than Protestants) was written down in the Talmud. It is this "oral Torah" or oral divine revelation which allowed Judaism to be quite adaptable, and when the Romans finally destroyed the temple, the Sadducees lost all their power and disappeared from history, while the spiritual and religious successors of the Pharisees, the rabbis, took over Judaism and made it what it is today, a religion of study and ethical and ritual observance, but not of temple sacrifices of animals ruled by priests. Rabbis, like Protestant pastors, are not priests, but teachers. But Judaism has been able to develop an elaborate set of rituals for every possible event and circumstance which more than satisfies the human need to see and hear and touch and perhaps even smell, although this may be limited to what will take place in the restored temple when the messiah finally comes (which many Jews don't even expect any more).

So our inquiry continues with what is involved in having and keeping religious faith, and its concomitant which is prayer. Religious faith is centered on a relationship with God, whom the believer sees as "being there," even though mostly hidden. This is why faith has been said to be dark, or taking place, being practiced, in darkness. I am quite familiar with this, and it is not an easy thing. When I feel that a friend neglects me, especially one in which I have invested a lot emotionally, I am upset and can become angry, something I may express in a passive-aggressive way. And so it is with God, too; we relate to him in much the same way we relate to other persons.

But with God things are different. My father had a saying: “One cannot get mad at the butcher,” meaning one needs the butcher willy-nilly (he applied it to himself and his son), and even if one is mad, one ends up going back to him anyway. There comes a point when, after a period of my taking a distance from God and sulking over his neglect when I most need a sign of his love and power, that I need to turn to him. This means praying, and mysteriously, almost always when one prays earnestly enough one is comforted and rediscovers the hidden God.

God seems to be quietly there. It is like exercise: after not doing it for a while, one starts again slowly, but the benefits quickly manifest themselves. With God, a person like myself remembers many moments, many things, many places and experiences, many signs. It is then that I get a feel for what, or who, God is. Not really at our beck and call, or yes, but in his own way. In fact, when Moses asked God at the burning bush what his name was, God answered in three ways, but did not really give his name. The first answer, in the Book of Exodus 3:14, is *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, which is traditionally translated “I am who I am,” but can also be translated “I will be who I will be.” Next follows a simple “Tell the Israelites that *ehyeh* has sent me to you.” Here *ehyeh*, the Hebrew first person “qal” (a verbal form) imperfect (which can be a future, too) seems to be an allusion to God’s *being with* certain individuals, a kind of promise, as was made to Moses in Exodus 3:11-12, *ehyeh ‘immak*, “I will be with you,” repeated in other passages.² So rather than give his name (knowledge of which gave the one who knew it power over what could be named), God simply gives a verb of accompaniment as his identity, a promise to *be with* an individual he will protect in his mission or difficult task. The third answer God gives, the famous tetragrammaton (meaning four letters, for that is what it is in Hebrew, just four consonants) that many pronounce “Yahweh,” given as God’s name in Exodus 3:15 as “God’s name forever,” is also a lesser-known form of the verb “to be,” but it is unknown how it should be pronounced, and Israel only heard it once a year, from the lips of the high priest on Yom Kippur, if that. The hidden God does not even give his name. Devout Jews simply refer to him as *ha-shem*, “the name,” or substitute *adonai*, “my Lord,” for the tetragrammaton.

Our relationship with God is illustrated by what happened with Job, a monument to the Israelite and perhaps already Jewish faith (“Jews” being defined here as those who have gone

² To Isaac in Genesis 26:3, in a time of famine; to Jacob, when he must flee from his angry relative Laban, in Genesis 31:3; to Joshua, who must lead the conquest of the Promised Land, in Deuteronomy 31:23, repeated in the book of Joshua 1:5; 3:7; to Gideon, who must fight Israel’s enemies, in Judges 6:16. *ehyeh* seems to be God’s name in the Book of Hosea 1:9, but it also connotes that God will *not be with* the sinful Israelites.

through the conversion and new-people-building experience of the Babylonian Exile). Job (described as a non-Jew, from the wise country of Edom), is understandably extremely upset, suicidal, after having lost everything. He wants to sue God, put him on trial, the God he has served faithfully and blamelessly. Behind the scenes, the reader is told that it is Job who is being put to the test.

The test is whether Job will remain faithful to God or curse him and die, as his wife suggests.³ Job, as the author presents him, stops short of cursing God, but he seems to curse everything else, starting with the day he was born. Interestingly, the actual Hebrew verb “to curse,” *qalal*, used by Job in several places, has to do with being small or insignificant, or to pass swiftly, and can also mean “to demean.”⁴ It is as if the Book of Job is an exercise in venting against our sufferings and against the God who doesn’t stop them, and asking all the questions and voicing all the complaints to finally still have God there, irremovable, having to be dealt with willy-nilly, after which process we are left feeling very, very small.

When I wrote that belief in God pays dividends, I meant that I believe God has a way of making himself present that manifests his power and majesty, his guiding hand, even amidst our extreme darkness. I know that this indicates that I have been conditioned to think like this, to interpret my thoughts and feelings this way, but it seems to me that it is God who is there. I remember many times when I felt him, when I felt good, when I was on vacation in Rome, for example, and prayed in beautiful and meaningful places. I was feeling good because I was on vacation, in my favorite city Rome, in a beautiful place. I was in a special chapel that I knew a lot about, such as that of the Madonna della Strada, one of Rome’s favorite devotions, and I felt privileged, much more so than the tourists with their cameras who were there apparently oblivious of where they were, who were just admiring the artwork, or perhaps just covering

³ Job 2:9. The “original” Hebrew text (as transmitted to us) reads “bless God and die,” and some versions retain this, but most scholars believe that it originally it read “curse,” which is supported by Job’s response in the following verse. But as one commentator, Edwin M. Good, in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary* (James L. Mays, general editor; Society of Biblical Literature, 1988, 2000, revised edition), 372, notes, the Hebrew verb “bless” seems to have the opposite meaning at times in this book (as in Job 1:5, where originally we had the same Hebrew “bless” when clearly Job is concerned that his children may have cursed God, and also in 2:5). Edwin Good thinks the book may be deliberately ambiguous with this, and Karl Feyrabend, in his Hebrew-English dictionary (Langenscheidt) actually includes the meaning “curse” for the verb *barak*, which normally means “to bless.” So here too we may consider that there is a fine line between blessing (praising) and cursing (blaspheming against) God in our relationship with him, that is, when humans relate to God, in the end it may matter little whether we bless or curse him: all our actions are relatively insignificant when compared to the greatness of God.

⁴ See Job 3:1; 7:6; 9:25; 24:18, and especially 40:4, where Job confesses to God, whom he has now experienced as too great to be questioned, as being small, or of no account, a lightweight, as the Latin Vulgate describes how Job has spoken, using the adverb *leviter*, “lightly.”

“must-see” territory in their trip. I felt closeness to God, as if I were an old friend, a familiar companion, one with whom I had “done a lot of things together.”

This brings hope to my life, hope in the midst of darkness, because as I write this I am in my third act in life without knowing how it will end. Losing my job and my identity with it as a person, as a teacher who made his living pursuing his vocation and passion, has set me adrift, has taken away almost any foothold in life, has made me worried and fearful and unable to relate to others, because I am no longer sure who I am. In this situation, God to me is like a *deus ex machina*, a god who enters the stage on a machine, as actors did in the Greek tragedies. This God can solve all problems; for God, “nothing is impossible,” as Jesus said in Mark 10:27. Here we may be approaching the crux of faith, the knot of the issue.

God enters in, or is recurred to, especially when all human hope is lost, even when one has lost faith in oneself, at least aside from what God can accomplish in one’s life. This hope in God can only exist if there is a track-record of “divine interventions;” call them past instances of significant dividends paid. Except that there is no guarantee of when or how these dividends will again be paid, or even if they will be, since what may finally happen to someone may not be seen as a dividend, but as a paltry crumb or even a bad break. And yet faith continues to believe and hope, as in Job’s famous exclamation in 13:15. The King James Version rendered it “Behold, though he slay me, yet I will trust in him,” but the verse actually reads “Behold, he’s going to kill me, (but) I will not wait, I will reproach him to his face.”⁵ But in the end, it is not God who backs down, but us humans.

Humans –specifically myself– who believe in God have developed this longstanding habit of turning to him and expressing (sometimes conjuring up) trust. God provides that outside “machine,” something outside of ourselves which is precisely what atheists and others think is a cop-out, an escape, a crutch or a sign of immaturity. How they deal with their difficulties is not my concern here; they might be successful or not. I tend to think they are more unhappy. Nietzsche thought that religious faith gave one peace and pleasure, but was in conflict with the love of truth.⁶ But “love of truth” may be just one or more philosopher’s *choice*, both as to what is loved and what is truth. Nietzsche is making the statement that he does not believe that

⁵ Cf. Edwin Good, *ibid.*, 376. Good urges that we not change the text to say something more hopeful or trusting, but to retain what it really says, which in effect is that Job will continue to trust “in the deity no matter what the deity does.”

⁶ Letter to His Sister, 1865. His relationship with her also alternated between conflict and reconciliation. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Nietzsche#cite_note-55

religion teaches truth, or “is true,” but that he himself does seek what is true, the truth, at the cost of foregoing “peace and pleasure.” This seems awfully close to the martyr attitude in religion: one testifies to the truth of his *belief* by sacrificing oneself, and with this, “proving” that one’s belief is true and right. But all one actually accomplishes is to manifest that he or she is a true believer, not that by virtue of sacrifice one’s belief is therefore true. Just consider the “suicide bombers”: they give their lives for what most people consider superstitious and evil beliefs.

I struggle to believe and trust. I get angry at the fact that God seems to be absent, playing coy and hard to get. I highly dislike this behavior in people I love. I recognize in myself this displeasure and do not conceal or disguise or repress it. Like Job and that old Jew, that *zayde* (grandfather) of Shpolle who put God on trial and found him guilty on two counts, I too complain out loud and reproach God.⁷ And yet I cannot shake him off, nor do I want to. Except that I often tell him that if he wants nothing to do with me, at least let me do as I wish, and specifically put an end to my life. I will settle for blankness, for nothingness, for obliteration; I do not seek or aspire to eternal bliss. But still I go on, and as long as I am carrying on, I find the “crutch” of God to be quite useful.

God has to do with the immense universe, as it were, out there and in here, that I stop to consider and contemplate. I am small, as Job himself came to realize, and fragile, even lost, these days. I find that turning to other forms of escape, if you will, are not satisfying or long-lasting. In this I share the experience of Ignatius of Loyola, as he lay convalescing in that castle and fantasizing about those damsels, or that lady, that he would perform amazing feats for. All he had to read were books about Christ, and he read them as if by force of circumstances, and these led to other fantasies about feats he could do for God. He discerned that one type of fantasy, the former, gave him pleasure while it lasted, but left him empty afterwards, whereas the second left a long-lasting pleasure. This was the basis for his conversion, which led to his embarking on the ascetic life, returning to school, becoming a priest and founding the Jesuits, a worldwide order which indeed performed amazing feats in science and religion throughout the whole world.

Nowadays many people are seeking inspiration, strength to deal with these extremely hard times and with the many problems contemporary people face in this world today. Many begin with the premise that established religion is bankrupt, that “salvation” (or a “solution”) must be found at least in the East, in what is not Western, if not simply inside yourself, or in a

⁷ Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (Pocket Books: New York, 1968), 5, already mentioned in chapter 3 on theodicy .

story such as found in Paolo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, which has sold sixty-five million copies, including the e-version which I bought and read. It seems to me that beginning or continuing one's quest for personal fulfillment or self-realization or the key to happiness and "success" (however defined) by rejecting more traditional forms of faith may or may not be a good thing; I have found that with time, I have grown to re-appreciate "oldies but goodies," especially movies, but other things as well. Oftentimes an actor or a musician who in his or her day was B-rated, by dint of simply lasting, becomes either rediscovered or is turned into iconic status; perhaps they had value after all, more than was thought, or their simply having been around for so long made them familiar and finally, in the end, really appreciated and admired. Whatever is the case, I think that it is more open-minded to examine traditional religion than to simply reject it, especially if one is ignorant about it or has only experienced a very poor or oppressive form of it.

This happens often with intelligent persons raised in very oppressive faiths, especially fundamentalist ones. Once they discover reason and freedom, they rightfully reject such forms of faith and, if anything, begin seeking to be "spiritual" rather than "religious." Paolo Coelho himself seems to reject this; he had his eye-opening religious experience doing one of the most traditional things religious people have ever come up with, the *camino de Santiago*, making the pilgrimage to the resting place of St. James in the northwest corner of Spain. To say St. Francis and St. Dominic, because they were "religious" were not "spiritual" can only be done in gross ignorance. I realize that those were different times, but were they that different as to be irrelevant? Religious institutions, like all human institutions, can and do renew themselves continuously.

My view of the Christian faith, which is the one I hold or struggle to keep, is that in the end, this faith is for the purpose of being with God. Here "God" is "surpassed" or "transcended" from being a concept that allows us to order our lives well or better into a Person in whom we humans can find our happiness, peace and "salvation," an answer ("the" answer) to all our yearnings. This of course involves divesting ourselves of all that is not God. That is, if one placed one's happiness or hope in one's good health, or fame or monetary success, this kind of faith in God –not to mention the vicissitudes of life, such as growing old or weak or sick, losing one's money or finding that it does not accomplish what was hoped, or losing whatever else "is not God"– strives instead to place one's happiness in being with God by being detached from all else that can become an "idol," much like the Buddha sought "salvation" or liberation from

suffering, Nirvana, ultimately, by accepting the validity of, or believing in, the Four Noble Truths and following the Eightfold Path.

In other words, everything that is beyond our capacity to control is placed in a second or even lower tier, if not eliminated, so that we can focus on what we determine is the one essential, which can be described as our path to “salvation.” Nirvana, which “literally means ‘blown out’, as in a candle,” is, in Indian religion,

moksha, liberation from the repeating cycle of birth, life and death. In Buddhism it refers to the imperturbable stillness of mind after the fires of desire, aversion, and delusion have been finally extinguished. In Hindu philosophy, it is the union with the divine ground of existence, Brahman, the Supreme Being and the [concomitant] experience of blissful egolessness.⁸

My purpose here is not to further compare Christianity and Buddhism or Hinduism, Buddhism usually considered to be atheistic whereas Hinduism is more poly- or pantheistic, although ultimately a type of personal dissolution or evanescence or return to the divine is yearned for and posited. My intent is to narrow down what “sophisticated” religions conceive of as “salvific” and worthy of a person’s full “devotion” or life-efforts: to seek a state where what is passing, ephemeral and grossly subject to change is surpassed by being intent only on what is “divine” or at least frees us from this ever-changing world which at last is simply illusion (the Hindus call it *maya*).

Thus in the end, I realize that all the things I ask of God, everything that I expect from him and complain about when I don’t get, represent so many distractions from what is really essential and makes everything else relative; “absolute,” one might say. The faith provides a “solution” to “everything”: we were put on this earth to know God, a hidden being who can be found only in darkness, as Solomon said, and especially in the “darkness” of the desert of exile, of desolation and emptiness and suffering, of having nothing to hold on to except God: this works best for finding God, although different levels of suffering or life experiences can be so many paths to God. But most saints suffered greatly, including Jesus, and the Buddha, too, went on his search for “salvation,” for transcendence –what others would call God– because of the distress of suffering, whether his own or that which he saw and experienced.

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nirvana>

So faith, especially Christian faith, in the end offers this “solution”: do not hold on to anything transient, because it cannot be held on to for very long, and even while possessed may not provide what was hoped. Hold on only to God, which St. Paul said nothing can separate us from.⁹ The alternations of consolation and desolation, of tribulation and reward, of sweet and sour, are meant to enable us to hold on as we are also purified (as metals are purified in the crucible; this is a classic biblical image) from “dross,” whatever makes them less “beautiful” than what they can be.¹⁰

One may retort that this is wishful thinking and escapism, but it is a “last resort,” if it is anything else, in a bad situation. One’s bad situation is not normally due to having faith; faith seldom, when rightly understood and practiced (this will be discussed further in the next chapter), causes more suffering. Faith alleviates the suffering that already exists. Perhaps one might renounce this faith as an “untruth” in favor of “the truth,” like Nietzsche, but even he recognized that it brought peace and pleasure. Did the bold Nietzsche fare better without faith, which his rough contemporary Karl Marx called “the opium of the people?” Towards the end of his life, he had a mental breakdown, and seems to have died an unhappy man. He had trouble sleeping, and took “huge doses of [real] opium” to try to get some sleep!¹¹

The only real way to “contact God” is through prayer. “Prayer” here is not primarily asking God for help, but being with God, consciously, being *empty* of distractions (and “worldly attachments”) in order to be intent on God, what the ancients called *vacare Deo*. Faith here rises above all the doubts and complaints, all the thoughts and ideas, as human things we are called upon to leave behind in order to really experience God. The Hindu holy men know this. The conviction that God is there, or at least the *decision* (of or in faith) that He is, and that we can and should be with him, because this is why God created us, in or by and through prayer, is ultimately all that counts for the believer. This dark decision of faith, the believer believes (and experiences) gives more light than all the thoughts and ideas about God, and “metaphysically” surpasses (“meta-physics” is what lies beyond the physical, natural world) our own very limited personal experience, as set forth in the previous chapter.

⁹ Romans 8:31-39.

¹⁰ See especially the Book of Wisdom 3:1-6 (called also “the Wisdom of Solomon,” and found in enlarged editions of the Bible, such as Catholic ones, and the New Oxford Annotated); First Letter of Peter 1:6-9. See also the Book of Daniel 11:35, and Malachi 3:2-3.

¹¹ He took “huge doses of opium;” Curtis Cate, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 2005), 389, quoted in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Nietzsche

I will end with a wonderful quote from an appropriately entitled spiritual classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, by an anonymous (he, too, is nameless!) medieval English author. I read this book many years ago, but found this quote in an excerpt from James Carroll's new book *Christ Actually: The Son of God for the Secular Age*.¹²

By love he [God] can be grasped and held, but by thought, neither grasped nor held. And therefore, though it may be good at times to think specifically of the kindness and excellence of God, and though this may be a light and a part of contemplation, all the same, in the work of contemplation itself, it must be cast down and covered with a cloud of forgetting. And you must step above it stoutly but deftly, with a devout and delightful stirring of love, and struggle to pierce that darkness above you; and beat on that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love, and do not give up, whatever happens.

¹² The excerpt was published by the Harvard Divinity School Bulletin, Summer/Autumn edition 2014, pages 46-52, with permission of Carroll's publisher Viking, Penguin Group (USA), copyright 2014. Carroll took the quote from *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, trans. A.C. Spearling (Penguin, 2001), 27-28.