
God and Self: The Function of Religious Claims

Marcia Cavell, with a response by Kai Nielsen

I. God and Self / *Marcia Cavell*

Perhaps it is not that we no longer believe in God because we have come to see in the last couple of hundred years that the arguments for his existence do not work, but that we preoccupy ourselves with arguments when we have little sense of what it is to talk about God in the first place. Or so I think many theologians and people who “believe in” God would say. I intend here to put into secular language some aspects of that claim.

Reading superficially through much of the work done in recent years by philosophers of religion is convincing proof that God is not dead, for the simple reason that he *could* never have existed. Atheism, as Michael Scriven has so well argued in *Primary Philosophy*, is the only option available to the rational man. The first part of this essay will be a very brief elaboration of this position and will amount, essentially, to a summary of the arguments of others.

A closer look, however, reveals that the impossibility of God’s existence—that is, the vacuity of statements such as “There is a God”—depends on construing “God” as the name of a particular being. This is suggested by many of the works to which I alluded above. And it is made explicit by Bernard Williams, among others, in a seemingly devastating attack on the meaningfulness of talk about God when he remarks, in passing, that “the difficulty seems to follow not from the eternality of God by itself, but from the conjunction of this with his perfection as a personal being.”¹ My second and principal point will be to show that while “God” cannot be the name of a particular being if “he” is to be an appropriate object of the religious attitude, this is not the end, but the beginning, of religious belief, and therefore of philosophical inquiry into religious belief. I want to suggest that while

¹ Bernard Williams, “Tertullian’s Paradox,” reprinted in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A. G. Flew and A. MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan Co., 1955), p. 203.

“God”—as the mystics have always claimed—is untranslatable in a way that would be compatible with the attitude people express in saying that they have faith, or believe, in God, whole propositions such as, “There is a God,” or “God is within us,” or “I believe in God,” are translatable, and are, I believe, statements which acknowledge and commit one to a certain kind of relationship between one’s self and the whole of one’s world. And—third—I shall say something about the question, “If God is not a Being, why do we talk about him as if he were?”

1. If “God” were the name of a Being, then everything we predicated of that Being—his goodness, his wisdom, his power—should be contingent only.² But surely any being who was the appropriate object—not of love only, but of worship and adoration; not of respect only, but of awe (the particular pairs of words here are unimportant; it matters only that we have some way of distinguishing the sacred from the profane, and the response appropriate to each)—could not just happen to be good. His nature must be such that he could not be evil. In him, being and value coalesce. He is the *ens realissimum*.

But to say that God is *necessarily* good is to say that in speaking of God we are speaking of a concept which may or may not refer to an actual entity. My uncle happens to be a very funny man. This is the way that part of the world which is my uncle goes. It could have gone differently. Unless, of course, by “uncle” I am not referring to the person who gave me a fake diamond ring for my eighteenth birthday but to the sort of person who might do that sort of thing.

Yes, the believer answers, but God is distinct from other beings in that not only his attributes but his very existence is necessary. He is both concept and reality. God is eternal, not long enduring but without duration. God did not happen into existence. His existence is inescapable.

There is no need here to rehearse the battle that has been waged around the ontological argument. It is sufficient to point out that the argument cuts two ways: To say that God must exist is also to admit that God cannot “exist” in the usual sense. For neither propositions about his nature, nor about his “reality,” can be contingent; and the logic of “existence” seems to be bound to particularity in space and

² See C. B. Martin’s *Religious Belief* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1959), particularly pp. 33–64. Martin argues that the cause of much contradiction in religion arises from the attempt to use “God” both as a proper name and as a descriptive term.

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time—to be subject to questions like, “Where is it?” “How long has it been there?” “Who made it?” “Where did it come from?” “How big is it?” etc., all of which are fundamentally inappropriate to God. “God is far and he is near, he is within all and he is outside all,” say the Upanishads. God is the uncaused cause, etc.

The point can also be put in this way: The things we say about God—that he is infinite, that he is beyond the universe, everywhere at once, incorporeal but all powerful, and so on, may be simply empty of meaning, as the atheist argues. But whatever meaning they do have would certainly seem to be incompatible with talking about God on the analogy of particulars of any kind. To reply that God is a Being—but a very special sort of Being—makes as much sense as saying that circles are a special sort of square, or better, that bodies are a special sort of mind.

It is important to say about God, furthermore, that we do not just happen to be related to him, as I happen to be sitting at my desk right now, to have been born in Chicago, and to have a sister named Joan. We are inescapably related to him. We can turn our backs on him, deny him, blaspheme against him. But Hindu and Buddhist, Jew and Christian, agree in saying that he is “within our hearts” whether we acknowledge his presence there or not.

What this suggests is that once we know what “God” means, it can no longer be a matter of indifference to us whether there “is” a God or not, in the way that whether there is life on other planets might be; any more than it would be a matter of indifference to me that salvation—not salvation in someone else’s terms, but in my own—lies close at hand. And where it is a matter of indifference to someone whether there “is” a God or not, we find that what he means by “God” would not be an appropriate object of *religious* belief, awe, or love. Would a being, for example, with an IQ 100 times superior to ours and 100 times as strong, who in some way did create the solar system, etc., be one upon whom our salvation, not our existence only, depends? Would he be the right object of our “ultimate concern”; deserving not our fear, or not our fear only, but also our love; and not our love only, but our devotion; and not quite the devotion that we give to someone out of need? What we can mean by “God” is constrained by what we can mean by “the religious attitude,” and by its urgent caution against the worship of false gods:

Plainly we shall be following the natural trends of unreflective speech if we say that religious attitudes presume *superiority* in their objects. . . . To feel

religiously is . . . to presume surpassing greatness in some object. . . . But then we advance further, and ask whether it isn't wholly anomalous to worship anything *limited* in any thinkable manner. For all limited superiorities are tainted with an obvious relativity . . . and here we are led on irresistibly to demand that our religious object should have an unsurpassable supremacy along all avenues, that it should tower infinitely above all other objects. . . . We also ask that it shouldn't stand surrounded by a world of *alien* objects, which owe it no allegiance, or set limits to its influence. The proper object of religious reverence must in some manner be all comprehensive.³

To say that there is a God is not to speak about something *in* the world, for then that something would be finite, limited, and unrelated to us, except in contingent ways. Nor can it be to speak about something "beyond" the world, for the same reasons, and yet another: in that case knowledge of and about God would be not only difficult, but impossible, and that we should be concerned with such a "Being" would be incomprehensible. "If . . . all talk about God were talk only about God, and all talk about the world talk only about the world, how could it be that God was the God of the Christian believer (how could it be that Brahman was the God of the Hindu, etc.) who is a toiler in the world of men? Would not the views about the nature of God retire more and more away from the world of men. . . . And if that happened, it would not be of much concern whether he were there or not."⁴ Statements about God must at the same time be statements about the world, where "at the same time" means not that God happens to have a certain relationship to the world, but that the very meaning of talk about God can only be explicated by reference to the world.

Conceivably, "God" is simply an empty word: there can be no Being appropriate to the religious attitude, and that attitude is always misplaced. But on the other hand, perhaps we have been mistaken in our understanding of "God" in the first place. At this point we should recall how insistently the great religious teachers have warned us that this is so easily the case: that we look for God in the wrong place, with the wrong eyes, outside ourselves rather than within, in things and in space, rather than as Spirit. What reconciles the atheist with his disbelief—his understanding that God is *no thing* and *no where*—provides for the man who will come to religious belief his first religious insight.

³ J. N. Findlay, "Can God's Existence Be Disproved?" in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p. 51.

⁴ Williams, p. 202.

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Testing the enlightenment of Nagasena, the famous Hindu sage, King Milinda asks him: "Where does wisdom dwell?"

"Nowhere, O king."

"Then, Sir, there is no such thing as wisdom."

"Where does the wind dwell, O king?"

"Not anywhere, Sir."

"So there is no such thing as wind."

"Well answered, Nagasena."⁵

2. Construing the traditional arguments for the existence of God as guides of a certain sort, rather than as proofs, shows us, perhaps, how to begin to think about God. I shall deal briefly only with two, the ontological and the teleological, though I think that the "cosmological argument" can be "saved" in a comparable way.

The ontological argument, I suggest, is not a failure at all, but a very convincing proof that God is not an extraordinary Being, for—as has been said—no Being could be extraordinary enough. In other words, the "argument" shows us that to think about God as a Being is *not yet* to think religiously. (I say "not yet," for it may well be a necessary preparation. Perhaps thinking of religious belief as something which develops or unfolds in the course of spiritual growth, rather than as something one simply does or does not have, will allow us to take account of the fact that one person's religion may be idolatry to another. Throughout this discussion I will call attention to the fact that religious "belief" is part of, or shorthand for, a dramatic process as indicated by the word "conversion,"—and that to speak of it as static, as one is bound to do when considering religious utterances as assertions, misses its essential nature.) It functions rather as paradoxes do, to show us that we have made a "category mistake," and to startle and puzzle us toward a new kind of recognition. In any case, it can hardly be criticized as an invalid argument, since it does not pretend to be an argument to begin with. To put it in the form of premises and conclusion distorts its essential point that, presumably, the very act of entertaining the idea of God may itself provide religious revelation. (I say "may" because insight cannot be deduced; it can only be provoked.) This is what I take to be the force of the insistence that "God" is the one conception of which existence is a part. I do not wish to push the analogy, because the religious traditions in question are certainly very different; but I think there *is* an analogy to be drawn

⁵ *The Questions of King Milinda*, trans. from the Pali by T. W. Rhys Davids (New York: Dover Publications), p. 120.

between the function of "God" in the ontological "argument" and the function of a sound in a Zen *koan*: both help us to break the bonds of thought and hence of alienation (for what I can think about I can doubt and am distant from) and to reach a state beyond doubt and hence beyond knowledge, in a certain sense: what I have been seeking is revealed as inescapable, as having been here—like the happiness in my own backyard—all along; as one with, not other than, the act of thought by means of which I sought to reach it.

The failure of the teleological argument also depends on construing it, wrongly, as an "argument" (though I should say that this is of course how it will be construed when taken out of the context of the religious life of which it is a part and in which it is to be understood). There is a move we are to make, but as with the ontological argument, it is not the move from premises to conclusion. In particular, we are not to conclude that there is a Being who designed the universe, whatever that could mean. This is not to deny that some theologians and believers have used the argument to try to establish this; but in so doing they were, I think it can be argued, untrue to the spirit of their own faith. In any case, there are many others who have taken it in quite another way.

The point of the teleological argument, I suggest, is to locate the unbeliever, or more likely, he who desires to believe, in immediate relation with something in his world which will easily impress him as ordered—a watch, a painting, a sequence of events (perhaps one which seemed to him at one time not to be a sequence at all, but unrelated and "without point"—and to bring that order fully into his awareness. The so-called first premise, "There is design in the universe," is summary for a dramatic process which would be different in detail for each person and which might take a long time to accomplish. It is hoped that he will admire the order or the grace which he finds and be surprised and pleased by it. He might then come to consider what kind of a thing order is. One of the many conventional objections against the teleological argument, construed in the conventional way, is that even if we could accept the premises (*a*) that the universe as we experience it has order, (*b*) that order requires an orderer, and (*c*) that the only principle of order with which we are familiar is mind, we could only conclude that the ordering mind is our own. But this is no criticism of the argument; it is part of its point: To say that the universe is ordered is to say something about how we experience it, or more important, *might* experience it. And it is also to say something about

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how it may be experienced by others, if they are prepared to look at it in the suggested way. (As Dewey said about knowledge, the perception of order “is not a distortion or perversion which confers upon its subject-matter traits which do not belong to it, but is an act which confers upon non-cognitive materials traits which *did* not belong to it.”)⁶ Read in this way the teleological argument is not concerned with an order in the universe yet unexplored by science, but in the universe as we may come to experience it. Similarly, Ninian Smart argues that “the essence of the Argument from Design is not its exhibition of teleology in the universe, but its aesthetic appraisal of the world as a single mysterious work.”⁷ It is parallel, Smart suggests, to the Upanishadic assertion that “Brahman is all this,” which also must be uttered in the right circumstances: “Indeed, it is required that the Brahman student should undergo quite severe ascetic and moral training before he is considered suitable for instruction in spiritual matters. . . . The assertion . . . that Brahman is all this, made under appropriate circumstances, provides an example to show the truth of the general claim that Brahman is all this: the world is, so to speak, a series of panoramas.”⁸

“There is a Designer!” then, signifies not so much the conclusion of a logical process as of a psychological one. The argument is an indication of what it is like to have a certain kind of hope and to have that hope fulfilled.

The clue to how statements about “God” should be translated lies in the fact about the logic of “God” mentioned earlier; that whatever “God” means it seems that our relations to “him” cannot be contingent. (The existence of God can never be a theoretical question only.) To say that I believe in God is always to assert that there is a relationship which I acknowledge between myself and something else. The questions now are: (a) “A relationship between myself and what?” and (b) “What is the nature of this relationship?” I should say at the outset of this section that the answers I suggest will be at best schematic; for I will be focusing on what is common to the major religious doctrines and not on what distinguishes them from each other, and on certain strains—I believe predominant—in these traditions to the exclusion of others with which we may be more familiar.

⁶ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, reprinted in *Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics*, ed. F. A. Tillman and S. M. Cahn (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 345.

⁷ Ninian Smart, *Reasons and Faiths* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

The answer to the first question, "To what is it that I am related?" has been suggested already: that to which one acknowledges a relationship in professing belief in God is simply "his" world. God is not the second member in a two-way relationship; but rather, to say "I believe in God" is to say that I hold a certain attitude which is religious toward *everything* to which I am inescapably related; namely, the world as I experience it.⁹

When I describe my experience, I seem to imply that there are two things: a subject or source of consciousness, and a field of objects which are its content. But neither that subject, nor those objects, is explicable apart from the experience or act of consciousness described, or at least implied, by what I say. And so Hume calls the self a "bundle of perceptions"; Sartre speaks of it as a "néant"—the "nothing" implied by the something which is the content of any act of consciousness; and Buddhism denies the existence of a self altogether. The self as consciousness seems to "exist" only in a tension between two nonobservable entities, world (noumenal) and subject, to which the act of consciousness points; which suggests that to talk about the world (phenomenal) is to talk about one's self in a certain way, and vice versa. The logic of "God" and of "self" are parallel, in that both seem to point to entities of which we cannot be aware, yet which are implicit in everything of which we are aware. In Hindu thought, God and the self, Brahman and Atman, are one. The Knower, that which is conscious of pleasure and pain, the passage of time, disturbances of all sorts, is itself undisturbed and undisturbable, the still point at the center of flux. To realize this simple self, consciousness without object, is the goal of the Hindu's endeavor. But for Buddhist, Jew, and Christian, God cannot be said to be *simply* the self, for several reasons:

⁹ The relationships between the concepts of "world," "self," and "God" are explored by W. H. Poteat in his articles "Birth, Suicide and the Doctrine of Creation" and "'I Will Die': An Analysis" (both in *Religion and Understanding* [New York: Macmillan Co., 1970]). "World," Poteat writes, "can be used . . . as an idea of Transcendental Reason, and as such functions as a regulative principle. . . . The world may also be thought of as that which can be exhaustively catalogued by a, practically speaking, infinite number of straightforward subject-predicate sentences in a language system which we will . . . imagine as having no use of first personal pronouns. . . . In contrast with this, and as our third use of the concept 'world,' let us imagine what we could speak of in a language in which there *are* first personal pronouns. What differences would immediately appear? First, the world would be *of* and *for* someone. . . . It is quite meaningful, using 'world' in sense three, to say that my suicide is an act of destroying my world" ("Birth, Suicide and the Doctrine of Creation," p. 133). It would follow also that in this third sense of 'world' I am, in a way, its author.

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first, that there is no simple self; and second, that as I argued earlier, for someone to say that there is a God or that he believes in God is not to assert the existence of a special sort of entity, but to acknowledge one's self bound in a special sort of relationship. (There is a third reason, which I will discuss shortly, and that is that love of God and love of self, understood in the usual way, point us in opposite directions.)

The insight into the nature of this relationship is provided by the predicates used to describe God—or the analogous concept—in each religious tradition. That is, construing God as a Being of whom we can predicate various qualities affords us a glimpse of the qualities which will describe us or our experience when we have begun to relate to our world in a religious way. In the Christian tradition, for example, God is said to be infinitely loving, unbound by space and time, the author of our universe, and so on. To develop fully the relationship suggested by each of these predicates would be an enormous task. So I will only try to indicate the direction which such a development might take.

God is said to love us as we never love—or as we love only in fits and starts; both because God loves everyone, and because the very nature of his love is mysterious. He loves without reason: not even for what we have accomplished or for how good we have been, but “just because.” Hence, God's love is said to be boundless and creative; for in not being dependent on what or how we are, it can be generous and forgiving and so can help to bring about the person we may become. In these senses it is not contingent and may be said to be eternal.¹⁰

A significant point about such love is that it represents an ideal which seems to be implicit in the very concept of “love.” If in a mood of despondency or the need for reassurance my lover asks me why I love him, any answer such as “Because you're rich,” or even “Because you're so good to me” will most likely not reassure him at all. Strangely, only if I am tongue-tied will he be satisfied. Human love, like divine love, seems to be—in the sense suggested above—eternal and mysterious in ways that, nevertheless, what usually passes for human love seldom is. Love requires, then, a self-transcendence; to aspire to love is to aspire—one might say—toward God.

“God is not bound by space.” If we find some people worthy of love and not others; or if we love anything which can be fully described in spatial terms only—a yacht, a house, a body—and with the same kind of absolute commitment with which we are asked to love one another,

¹⁰ See D. Z. Phillips, “Faith, Skepticism and Religious Understanding” (in *Religion and Understanding*) for a further elaboration of this point.

we have not yet attained the Judeo-Christian attitude toward our world. "Nor is He bound by time" suggests a way of thinking about today other than in terms of tomorrow. Freed from anxieties about the future, one confronts the present as an Eternal Now.¹¹

3. But surely—it will have been objected some time ago—the God I am speaking of here has little to do with the God of organized religion. The ordinary worshiper clearly thinks of God as some sort of a Being, and it is this Being whom he worships, of whom he begs forgiveness, to whom he prays, makes offerings, and so on. Yes. But such activities, as the monks and mystics have always warned, flirt with the profane; and though they are part of the behavior which we call "religious," they do not necessarily express a religious attitude. But without getting into that very complicated question, I think that all that needs to be said here is that the religious writings of both East and West are ample evidence that many people who have claimed to have "seen" God, to "know" him, or to long for him, have not thought of "him" as a Being at all; and that the activity of prayer, for example, may be understood in this tradition as a kind of communion with one's self, or an attempt to get into a kind of communion with one's world, rather than with another Being. Though to speak of prayer as communion with one's self is open—for reasons which I hope will become clear shortly—to exactly the wrong interpretation.

Why, then, do we persist in speaking of God as a Being, an Other? I have already suggested one reason: that to think of God as a Being allows us to speak of an ideal of ourselves in relation to our worlds. But second, it is an essential aspect of the ideality of this relationship that to feel religiously about the whole of one's world—that is, to love God—is in a very important sense the opposite of self-love. Naturally, then, the religious man will express this by speaking of love of the Other. Herbert Fingarette suggests that

"the mystic (in speaking of 'selflessness,' 'loss of self,' etc.) is trying to distinguish between two important but different kinds of experience, both naturally expressed by the same introspective self-language. He wants us to achieve one kind of experience and to guide us away from another mode of experience which, as it happens, is expressed by the same sort of language. . . . The introspected self-conscious 'I' is not . . . a perception of one's own total person; it is some particular part, affect, idea, or action of the person as

¹¹ I am indebted here once again to Ninian Smart for his pointing out (in the chapter entitled "The Numinous and the Mystical") the parallels in Indian thought between the concepts of "nirvana," a state to be achieved, and "Brahman," the highest being.

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perceived by the person in a context where the dynamically dominant effect is some form of anxiety. . . . 'Consciousness of self' is not an awareness of some self-identical identity; it is rather, any consciousness colored by intrapsychic anxiety. . . . The language of self, in its ordinary use, expresses without distinction either of two profoundly different forms of subjective experience, the anxiety-generated and anxiety-free."¹²

Hence, the mystic must speak in paradox about his experience. For what should be described in one of these languages as "self-forgetfulness" will be more appropriately described in the other as a fullness of self. "The more ourselves we are, the less self is in us" (Meister Eckhart).

Self-love, in the sense that religion warns against, is the narrowing of one's concerns to *my* body, *my* possessions, *my* success or future. To put it metaphysically, it is the mistake of thinking that "self" does name some thing after all, and one identifiable in terms of a finite set of particular objects or people or states of mind. What is "deadly" about the Seven Deadly Sins is that the individual's self is constricted. He is narrowed to one set of desires; and worse, the quality and intensity of his desires are such that they are all consuming. If "loss of self" through love of another can be an extension of one's self, as it were, toward God, "loss of self" through being "possessed" is the closing of one's self toward self-extinction, or death. "The carnal attitude," Saint Paul wrote, "sees no further than natural things. But the spiritual attitude reaches out after things of the spirit. . . . The former attitude means, bluntly, death; the latter means life and inward peace."¹³

There is yet another reason, I think, for the fact that many people think of God as a personal or particular Being. The danger in any attempt, such as this, to understand religious belief is that it is bound to separate the metaphysical insights from the passion which is essential to religious experience. To be religious is not a matter of holding a particular belief or metaphysical view—or it is not merely that; it is also to see things, all things, and to respond to them in particular ways (with awe, dread, wonder, love, reverence, fear, humility, caring, and so on, in any one of a number of possible combinations). Religious belief is part of a dynamic process of suffering, recognition of suffering, quest, hope, and discipline. (It is for this reason, I think, that Zen Buddhism, like psychoanalysis, warns that intellectual understanding

¹² Herbert Fingarette, *The Self in Transformation* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 303–12.

¹³ From the Letter to the Corinthians at Rome, 8.1 in *Letters to Young Churches*, trans. J. B. Phillips (New York: Macmillan Co., 1957), p. 17.

may impede, rather than provide, insight: not because there lacks a coherent metaphysical theory which is its intellectual aspect, but because thought divorced from feeling is one of the wounds it wishes to heal.) The belief, therefore, may itself undergo change. There is a fairly clear distinction in every religion between the “popular” and the “esoteric,” between the worship of the “householder” and that of the monk. But often people are led from the first way of thinking about God to a way which is less concrete, from image to symbol, from a conception of God which localizes him on earth or in heaven to one which finds him everywhere. The first serves as preparation for the other.

And finally, that religious experience which is more numinous than mystical, more awed than meditative, will naturally express itself in terms of that which is other than “all this,” *beyond*, and extraordinary; as that which relates the self to the world through love will address the world as “Thou.” Both, then, though for somewhat different reasons, will be apt to speak of *a* God.

This way of talking about what it means to believe in God requires a reconsideration of what we mean by “faith.” For to have faith in God cannot mean to believe, in the absence of reason, that such a Being exists, both because, as I hope to have shown, this—some of the time anyway—is not what “God” means; and also because religious belief is more fundamentally a kind of attitude, acknowledgment or commitment. The usual emphasis on faith as an alternative to reason (and therefore, of course, an irrational alternative) again misses the nature of religious experience.

Perhaps, as Tillich has suggested, to have faith is to have hope about something with which one is ultimately concerned. Atheism, on the other hand, would be the position that such a hope will not, or cannot, be fulfilled. Sartre’s account of the self, for example, is *almost* a religious account, and the experience of anguish and dread which he describes as the appropriate response to insight into the nature of the self is almost a religious experience. But whereas the religious man begins with the sense of pain and separateness and goes on to affirm the possibility of wholeness, Sartre maintains that the sense of wholeness always arises from bad faith. Love is impossible and there is no honest exit from self-consciousness. What Sartre calls “bad faith” is in a way the believer’s faith: the hope that one will come to experience his world in the kind of integral way indicated by the particular religious doctrine which he accepts.

II. A Comment on “God and Self” / *Kai Nielsen*

Marcia Cavell is surely right in contending that “to be religious is not a matter of holding a particular belief or metaphysical view—or it is not merely that; it is also to see things, all things, and to respond to them in particular ways (with awe, dread, wonder, love, reverence, fear, humility, caring, and so on, in any one of a number of possible combinations). Religious belief is part of a dynamic process of suffering, recognition of suffering, quest, hope, and discipline.” And in this context, she drives home the point that “the existence of God can never be a theoretical question only.” To believe in God “is always to assert that there is a relationship which I acknowledge between myself and something else.” Religious belief is never the mere having of an opinion or thinking that something is the case: rather “religious belief is more fundamentally a kind of attitude, acknowledgment, or commitment.”

This stress, given the way most philosophers who concern themselves with religion usually talk, seems to me fundamentally right minded and important, but unlike some others who take this tack Cavell also acknowledges that religions make cognitive truth-claims of a strange metaphysical or cosmological sort. In the first part of her “God and Self” she argues that traditional Jewish and Christian theism involves an incoherent concept of God. That is to say, there is incoherence in the very concept of God as a transcendent being (an infinite individual) and sustaining transcendent Cause distinct from the world and in no way dependent on the world. She contends (agreeing here with Tillich) that if this is our notion of God, then atheism is the only reasonable option. Such a God—that is the God of “sophisticated traditional theism”—could never have existed. I have argued in detail the same point myself, so here again there is no basic disagreement between us, and indeed many theologians (e.g., Tillich, Robinson, Ogden, and MacQuarrie) have come to that position as well.¹

However, she does not rest content with atheism but attempts to show that there is, in contrast to theism, another and central strand of religious thought—including Jewish and Christian thought—which does not fall prey to what she regards as the devastating skeptical criticisms directed against traditional theism. She rightly points out in this connection that “there is a fairly clear distinction in every religion

¹ Kai Nielsen, “In Defense of Atheism,” in *Perspectives in Education, Religion and the Arts*, ed. Howard Kiefer and Milton Munitz (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1970); and in Kai Nielsen, *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1971).

between the 'popular' and the 'esoteric,' between the worship of the 'householder' and that of the monk." (We must not forget that what may be idolatry and/or superstition to one man will be genuine religious belief to another.) It is not enough for the skeptical critic of religion to show, say with respect to Judaism or Christianity, that the popular conceptions of God are either incoherent or commit believers to plainly false beliefs, that critic must show that these considerations hold for the "esoteric" conceptions of the monks as well.

Cavell tries to sketch in a philosophically sophisticated way what some of these beliefs are. I want to probe them for coherence, intelligibility, and truth and make a first move toward consideration of whether such a cluster of beliefs provides (a) a coherent view of the world and our place in it, and (b) provides a superior alternative to an atheistic humanism. In trying to give a perspicuous representation of a concept of God in which "God" is neither a name nor a truncated description of an extraordinary personal being, Cavell attempts to give us readings of "There is a God," "God is within us," or "I believe in God" which are coherent and religiously attractive. That is, they would give a religiously sensitive and philosophically sophisticated person a conception of God that (1) would not be a scandal to the intellect and (2) would give him a conception of something which is worthy of worship. Her claim is that such bits of god-talk are "statements which acknowledge and commit one to a certain kind of relationship between one's self and the whole of one's world." Taken by itself, this is simply a dark saying, and we need to see the elucidation that Cavell gives it.

In looking for a clue as to how we are to read statements about God, Cavell points to what she takes to be the fact that our relations to God can never be contingent. This is so, she avers, because our interest in God is not just theoretical, for to "say that I believe in God is always to assert that there is a relationship which I acknowledge between myself and something else." But this very acknowledgment involves a commitment and thus something which is noncontingent. But if God is not a supernatural entity or a transcendent being or any kind of being at all, *what* is it that we stand in a relation to and *what* is the nature of that relationship? Cavell tells us that to talk about God is to talk about the world—that is man's relationship to his world—in a certain way. The proper reading for "I believe in God" is "I hold a certain attitude, which is religious toward *everything* to which I am inescapably related; namely, the world as I experience it."

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Here it is difficult for me to believe that Cavell means just what she says. For, if she does, then we would have to say that an atheist believed in God if he had attitudes toward the world (proposition attitudes apart) which were identical with those of Christians. (Think here of someone like Santayana.) But such conversion by stipulative redefinition is surely illegitimate.

It could be countered that Cavell is not talking about the plain man's beliefs but about the beliefs of the religiously sophisticated and that there, as Kierkegaard and Bultmann have stressed, the difference between a certain kind of religiously sensitive atheist and a religious believer is not at all clear. But this is not how these atheists see it and it is not how the vast majority of "esoteric believers" see it themselves. While they realized that a Feuerbach, Eliot, or Santayana might say penetrating and significant things about religion and have a genuine feel for religious ways of life, they did not believe that they believed in God, for to believe in God is *not only* to have a certain attitude toward that which one is inescapably related; it is also to think that it is true there is a transcendent, wholly other reality. Cavell has confused a necessary condition for belief in God with a sufficient condition.

It is probably false that Cavell's reading of "believe in God" is even a characterization of a central strand of Jewish or Christian belief, but let us all the same, for the sake of the discussion, assume that it is *a correct* characterization of what is involved in belief in God in some such central strand of Judaism and/or Christianity. Even so, is it a helpful stipulation which enlightens us about belief in God? On the credit side, it does stress how commitment goes with religious belief, and it does not, at least in any obvious way, involve any incoherent concepts in its characterization of religious beliefs. But, crucially, on the debit side (or so it seems to me) it blurs any distinction between a religiously sensitive skepticism and religious belief. And this is a distinction we would want to keep to be clear about religious truth-claims and to be clear what kind of commitment goes with a religious way of life. Kierkegaard realized that in order to understand what religious belief is it is sometimes well to go to the man who rejects religion. But he still did not confuse him with the believer. He recognized that there was a distinction between belief and unbelief, even though the believer could be beset by doubt and perplexity.

Moreover, even in the esoteric traditions of Christianity, there are evident difficulties in explaining "the *what*" in "What is this God that is being talked about, believed in, or disbelieved in?" when "God" is

construed as referring to the world as the believer experiences it. And even if, following Kierkegaard, we stress “the how” of belief and not “the what,” we still cannot in the last analysis escape the question of what it is that we believe in when we believe in God. If the answer to “the what” is an illusion, then no matter with what integrity one believes, one is still caught up in a myth, and indeed no “saving myth” at that, for it is, as an illusion, something one is not justified in believing. And there are, as well, difficulties in trying to make religious sense of this talk, for, as Ninian Smart (to whom Cavell is indebted) remarks, even in esoteric traditions of Christianity such systems of salvation have integral to them a concept of God as Transcendent: as a self-existent utterly independent and unlimited reality. But, given Cavell’s conceptualization, God could—or so it would seem—have none of these features. If God is the world as experienced by the believer, God, by definition, could not be transcendent to the world and God could not be an independent, utterly unlimited, self-existent reality, for without men having experiences there would be no God. One is tempted to say that given Cavell’s conceptualization of God, the proper thing to say is that man created God, not God man. Obviously, however, she would not want to say anything that crude; on her conceptualization “creator” itself in its religious linguistic environment would have an esoteric meaning. Yet all the same it surely looks as if she were so committed, if we are to make anything at all out of what she is saying here. If she is not so committed, it would be instructive to know why not.

Cavell might reply that to argue in the way I have is to neglect her earlier argument that God could not be transcendent to the world for (1) this would itself limit God and (2) make all knowledge of God impossible so that God would in reality be incomprehensible. Both her conceptions, she could continue, and the more traditional conception, are unsatisfactory—after all religion is difficult and God is a mystery—but at least her conception is not incomprehensible and it does enable man to make some sense out of his quest for God and some religious sense out of his tangled life. Moreover, it might be added, in speaking of God’s transcendence it is not necessary to construe “transcendence” as “beyond the world” or “beyond all experience”; one could instead construe it as Marcel does, as “that in experience which goes beyond the partial perspectives of the various scientific points of view.” In speaking of transcendence we are speaking of “wholeness which we have the regard to ourselves, our world and the

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system of intentions which enables us to give meaning to our being in the world.”²

There is force in such a reply. But before I return to the argument I want to continue Cavell’s elucidation of a kind of esoteric God-talk. And when this is completed, it might be said, it will become evident that the above reply is indeed adequate.

Cavell argues that it is essential that we come to see that “the logic of ‘God’ and of ‘self’ are parallel, in that both seem to point to entities of which we cannot be aware, yet which are implicit in everything of which we are aware.” There is a point to the Hindu claim that God and the self, Brahman and Atman are one. The self, Cavell in effect avers, remains a puzzling and mysterious motion. It, she tells us “as consciousness seems to ‘exist’ only in a tension between two nonobservable entities, world (noumenal) and subject, to which the act of consciousness points; which suggests that to talk about the world (phenomenal) is to talk about one’s self in a certain way, and vice versa.”

Here we have something which is as incomprehensibly metaphysical as anything Cavell finds in the more traditional God-talk. But there is no need here for such a metaphysical jungle or for talk of “the self” at all. Against our philosophical puzzlement, Ryle, Hampshire, and Williams, among others, have reminded us of the ordinary and quite adequate ways in which, for most purposes at least, we do and can talk of persons, agents, and of oneself and others. There is no need to posit such a term of art as “the self” and wonder about its relation to the world. Hampshire has made it evident in his *Thought and Action* both how easy it is to get into a Cartesian metaphysical stance and also how gratuitous and philosophically empty such talk is—as if we ourselves were not in the world. We can see, given Cavell’s conception of “the self” and God, how we could construe “God is within us.” But such a conceptualization not only makes “God” incoherent but “us” as well.

Cavell articulates well our sense of the importance of religion and something of the function it plays in our lives. She gives us—bracketing the question of whether we can make sense of her conception of what “God” refers to and her conception of “the self”—a good understanding of what it could mean to say that God is infinitely loving and unbounded by space and time. But, like Ninian Smart, she also recognizes that religions do have metaphysical conceptions and do make

² Peter Slater, “Current Trends in Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” *Anviksiki* 1 (August-December 1968): 155.

what are at least putative cosmological truth-claims to be true or even probably true, or false or even probably false. But to do this is crucial, if we are to make sense of our religions.

It is with this line of reasoning that we can meet my unanswered objection to my own argument. Cavell's articulation of an esoteric strand of religious belief in effect shows these conceptions to be as incomprehensible as the traditional conceptions. It is indeed true that any conception of God, if it is adequate to what we are talking about, must bring out the notion that God is mysterious. But with both traditional theism and with Cavell's conception of "God" and "the self" more than mysteriousness enters, for with them we have incomprehensibility as well and no conception at all of what it would be like for the alleged statements "There is a God," "God is within us," or "God created man in his image and likeness" to be either true or false.

As she remarks in her "Visions of a New Religion," "Despite differences on other grounds, the major religions have always been united in the conviction that what we take to be reality—the body, physical possessions, all the things with which we falsely and hopelessly try to identify ourselves—is illusion; that we mistake the sum of our universe for its substance; and that when we become 'blind' to this world, considered as possession and limitation, we will begin to 'see.'"³ These are extraordinary claims but they indeed are claims made by our religions. But for these claims to have substance—for the very talk here of "illusion" to have meaning—there must be some understanding of what it would be like for the fundamental claims of religion to be true. It is just in this crucial task that Cavell, like so many others, fails us.

III. A Reply to Kai Nielsen / *Marcia Cavell*

It seems to me that in general what Kai Nielsen's very sympathetic reading asks me to do is to distinguish between, as he puts it, a religiously sensitive atheist and a religious believer; for according to my argument, he objects, an atheist who "had attitudes toward the world identical with those of a Christian would have to be said to believe in God." This strikes me, though, not so much as a criticism of my account as a way of stating the problem with which it attempts to deal: If someone really did have attitudes toward the world identical

³ Marcia Cavell, "Visions of a New Religion," *Saturday Review*, December 19, 1970, p. 13.

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with those of a Christian—a condition as difficult to discover as to describe—is it clear what he would be asserting or denying in calling himself an atheist? And if we accept the distinction between “propositional attitudes” and “attitudes toward the world,” where do we put metaphysics and ethics? Yet it is in claims about the nature of “ultimate reality” and about value that one finds an essential part of the answer to the question, “What is it in which the religious person believes?”

To be a Christian involves more, obviously, than believing in the fellowship of men and the power of love. What more depends on the kind of Christian one is. But I would think that—unless we are speaking of “popular religion”—a metaphysic and a commitment which are religious always conceive of the real and the valuable as fundamentally spiritual. By this I do not imply necessarily a belief that spirit and body are different entities; but a view of man which finds him not reducible to his body, and of what constitutes the good for man which is in some measure renunciatory, at least of a kind of self-preoccupation and of a weighting of the satisfaction of “animal” needs as any more than that. Furthermore, a religious metaphysic and a religious commitment are always two sides of the same coin. While the notion of a hierarchy of realities may be puzzling, that there are hierarchies of values many of us take for granted. Sometimes in religious literature “the ultimately real” simply means the ultimately valuable. But in every case the notions implicate each other.

These attitudes begin to suggest a belief in that “transcendent, wholly other reality” which Nielsen rightly maintains is an essential part of belief in God. The question is what is meant by “transcendent”? But I think it means at least, though also much more than, this: that reality is not exhausted by the data of sense experience, as crudely conceived (e.g., as yielding knowledge of the body only and not of mind, or of fact and not of value), and that knowing it is more difficult than knowing the phenomenal world, though it may be thought to proceed upon such knowledge.

There is another element in the religious attitude which I have not mentioned and which goes some way toward explaining the “much more” that is involved in the notion of transcendence: it is the difference between the notion of therapy and salvation, growth and redemption. The religious vision is not just, as the psychoanalyst and the political reformer believe, that experience can be more of a whole, less pinched by anxiety and pain, more autonomous, than it now is, but the

difference will be categorical: there will be no gaps in the order that one can give to one's life, and one will be healed not only of neurotic suffering but all suffering (or guilt, or conflict, or alienation). In this sense, reality as perceived or apprehended by one in a state of grace will transcend that which is perceived by most of us. And so even the religious man's hope is not hope, in the usual sense, that things can be, will be, better than they are. What he hopes for is extraordinary: among other things, the forgiveness of all sins, that is, for a condition beyond the possibility of guilt; the defeat of time, and hence the permanent remission of all the ills of the body.

If someone did hold these attitudes, or something like them, and yet professed to be irreligious, I would be inclined to think that what he was rejecting was theism in the narrow sense, or religion as his parents practiced it, etc. People often discover things about the nature of their own attitudes that they had not known or had even denied: that they are materialists; or that despite appearances to the contrary they feel that they are fundamentally helpless or that the world is hostile; or that they are political conservatives where they had thought of themselves as radical. So, too, people sometimes discover that what they had been rejecting was not religion as such, or that their efforts at rejection had not been successful. And surely this need not be a matter—any more than it would be in the examples above—of “conversion by redefinition.” I do not mean that it would follow from any particular set of beliefs and attitudes that somebody was religious—the very idea of trying to squeeze religion into the confines of “necessary and sufficient conditions” seems absurd—but that whether or not someone is irreligious is also not always easily answered, and not necessarily by him.

About the “self,” my intention of course was not to render it incoherent—though perhaps I have done so—but to show that some ways of thinking about it, whether misguided or not, are very much like, and therefore perhaps give a clue to, some ways of thinking about God. In fact it does strike me that the experience of self-consciousness is not only psychologically uncomfortable but logically peculiar. And it does not seem to me that Ryle and Hampshire have given a satisfactory phenomenological analysis of the self as one thinks of it, or tries to think of it, in such an experience. Of course we are “in the world.” But we do not always feel as if we are; and when we do, it is in very different ways. And sometimes when the world is too much with us, it is because we are too much at its center, though that perception is

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shared alike by the religious and by many who are not, and can easily be put in less paradoxical ways.

As for truth-claims, I need only consider those religious strains which take salvation to be a condition achievable, theoretically any way and by some, in this life; for it is in our relationship to this life that I have tried to locate the meaning of "God" and of belief in God. Let me take here one religious view, that of orthodox Hinduism, as an example, though within it there are such considerable variations that what I say is accordingly subject to qualifications. In general, the Hindu claims that if one takes the necessary steps and prepares one's self in the proper ways, it is possible to gain a perspective on the world from which loss, pain, and death become simply unimportant; that it is possible to achieve—sometimes—a state of consciousness in which there is no awareness of an object as an object, and in which, at least as we ordinarily think about "thinking," there is no object at all. Since he realizes that consciousness is a state which seems to be defined by a relationship between a subject and an object, he willingly accepts the consequence and likens this state of "enlightenment" to a state of dreamless sleep, or to death. I think it is important here to note the obvious—that many people do claim to have had states of consciousness fundamentally different from those which we, and they, normally have. And while I share the skeptic's doubts about the special value of these states and of the interpretation which may be put upon them, I am prepared to believe that my own faculties of awareness may be limited in ways which make it difficult for me to understand the words of those who perhaps have been to very different places.

In terms of the Yogi's experience, the world as many of us experience it is illusory in at least two ways: first, because we think that it is the only way in which it can be experienced; and second, because we assume it to contain all possible goods. The illusions, then, have to do with our beliefs about the possibilities of experience and of value. It follows that the only person who would be in a position to verify these claims would be one who had prepared himself in the relevant ways. But this epistemological limitation is not peculiar to religion: anyone who claims that our experience is unnecessarily restricted, whether he is talking about how we hear or fail to hear a Schönberg composition, or of what we are or are not aware of in the realm of our own feelings, is making a claim which, if true, could not be known to be true by us now. That surely does not render it invalid or meaningless, for he is not claiming that it cannot be known by us in the future. His whole

point is that perhaps it can, provided we take the necessary steps. The music student who is assured that what now sounds to him like a buzzing confusion will no longer once he has learned some harmony and counterpoint, perhaps, and listened a lot more, is being given a prediction which he can verify. The psychoanalyst who suggests to someone that he may be motivated by unconscious feelings of guilt, or that he feels less at ease with himself than he thinks he does, is making an even more complicated prediction about how that person may come to feel and to act if he grows less defensive in various ways.

To return to the beginning, I am not sure how to distinguish between a religiously sensitive atheist and a religious believer, and I agree that it is a critical question for philosophy of religion. But I would want to begin to answer it in the following way: Where the believer hopes for a sense of total completion in his experience, the atheist believes that—as the voice of skepticism urges in Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion*—experiences are always particular, knowledge is always partial and fragmentary, the idea of a Whole is an idea which Reason pursues in its construction of order but is heuristically justified only. He is rationally committed to the idea that though there may always be a better, there will never be—in anything but a relative sense—the best. Yet for all that, he feels wistful. In the language of Freud, he regards religion as an illusion; though he himself feels the pull of those desires which he believes lead some people to it. About someone who not only hopes for perfection, the closed circle, the Absolute, but claims to have found it, the atheist would have to say, I think, that it was a misdescription of the experience: that underneath the feeling of union, of bliss, or of a perfection of order, there was another very different feeling. The atheist need not be so without hope as Sartre; but he will agree in thinking, perhaps, that the believer's claim to have found God would in the last analysis reveal itself as bad faith.