Skepticism and Belief: A Reply to Benoît Garceau

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1.

I am grateful to Professor Garceau for his thoughtful and gracious characterization and critique of my account of religion.[1] As will become apparent, as I proceed, there is much in his account, both methodological and substantive, that I think is fundamentally mistaken, but, that notwithstanding, I very much appreciate the tone and spirit in which his critique of my work was conducted. Benoît Garceau has carefully studied my views and has in an exemplary manner tried sympathetically to understand them to capture what divides reflective and informed religious believers and reflective and informed skeptics. It is, I believe, fair enough to say that the task of trying to ascertain what most fundamentally divides contemporary literate believers and skeptics is of fundamental significance in any attempt to come to grips with the contemporary significance of religion, though it does seem to me that this task is much more problematic than is usually thought. In responding here to Carceau's specific criticisms, I shall, in the general drift of my remarks, be trying to make some contribution to the clarification of that issue. Though I shall only be able to touch on a small corner of it, I shall be concerned to examine in what way, if at all, it is possible for there to be, as Garceau would put it, a dialogue between such believers and skeptics; and I shall be concerned, as well, somewhat more broadly, to ascertain what it would be like for us, not only to understand each other, but, if indeed such a thing is possible at all, what it would be like to move a step forward in the ancient but still ongoing and developing debate concern-

1 Benoît Garceau, "On Dining with the Meta-theological Skeptic: Comments on Nielsen's Position", in Mostafa Faghfoury, ed., *Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), 125-137.

Dialogue XXII (1983), 391-403

ing whether one should, all things considered, be, if one can, a believer, or a skeptic. It should be borne in mind that I am not, anymore than is Garceau, a neutral participant in this inquiry. However, as Noam Chomsky and C. Wright Mills have observed, to be impartial and objective is one thing, to be neutral is another. I strive for the former but not for the latter.

2.

Let me put an end to such edifying discourse and turn to Garceau's queries, criticisms, and alternative suggestions. I think it is important at the outset to recognize that Garceau writes in an idiom that is in many ways as foreign to me and I am confident that my idiom is, in certain respects, foreign to him. Thus, he sometimes puts points in ways that are not the ways I would put them. Indeed, sometimes I am not altogether confident that I have grasped what he means. Faced with this, I have often put what I take, perhaps mistakenly, to be his claims in an idiom which is more congenial to me and which seems to me to be clearer. But in doing this—in giving Garceau's remarks a reading—I run the risk of misinterpretation. But I shall run that risk in the hope of sharpening what is, I believe, centrally at issue.

Garceau does not, by his announced intent, try to contribute toward deciding the issue between belief and unbelief, but concerns himself with the logically prior issue of what are the conditions for, as he puts it, a dialogue, a fruitful conversation, between believers and skeptics. He seeks to articulate what he refers to as "rules" for such a dialogue. These "rules" are designed to enable us to sort out where agreement ends and disagreement begins between reflective and informed believers and skeptics. Garceau gives us three such "rules". (1) Whatever is publicly observable about religion must be open to the various canons of critical reason. (2) There is a duty on the part of those who engage in serious discussion of religious matters, skeptics as well as believers, to confess "the anthropological particularity of their reason". (3) We must recognize that the manifestations of religion are *inadequate* for understanding religious faith.[2]

I am less confident than is Garceau that the acceptance of such "rules" will enable us to isolate and perspiciously display the central issues involved in such agreement and disagreement. Moreover, these "rules" could hardly be either accepted or rejected without a determinate reading and these readings will themselves be various and will trigger some of the fundamental disputes between belief and unbelief. An examination of Garceau's gloss on these very rules will reveal that. Achieving a fruitful dialogue between belief and unbelief is not as unproblematic as Garceau gives to understand.

2 Ibid., 128-130.

3.

In elucidating his first rule—that the public manifestations of religion be open to the scrutiny of critical reason—Garceau claims that while religious discourse constitutes a public manifestation of religion, and so is open to critical scrutiny, "the religious person may claim, and rightly so, that one does not understand what he means unless one is a participant in his faith".[3] This claim seems to be false and, as I shall try to show, importantly so. In discussing what I call, not untendentiously, Wittgensteinian fideism, and particularly Winch's and Phillip's articulations of it, I have repeatedly stressed that to gain an understanding of *first-order* religious discourse one must have either a participant's *or* a participant-like grasp of the discourse in question.[4] (A "participant-like grasp" is analogous to the grasp a skilled speaker of a language, he is not a native speaker of, has of that language.) Evans-Pritchard learned the language of both the Neuer and the Azande, including their religious discourse, and he came to understand their religious and magical belief-systems and their religious and magical practices so well that he could have participated in their religious and witchcraft practices. Yet he gained all this understanding without becoming a participant or even being tempted to become a participant. He understood Azande Witchcraft practices very well indeed, but his mind was firmly shut concerning the very possibility of there really being witches. Moreover, and returning to our own culture, up to the present time at least, many, perhaps most, skeptics were once believers. Many, perhaps most of them, know the discourse like they know their mother tongue. Consider a priest who loses his faith. He, at least for a few years after the loss of his faith, still knows how to preach a sermon or hear a confession. He would not, if he were at all a typical fellow, do these things, but that would be for moral reasons or reasons of intellectual integrity. It is not that he would not understand the God-talk he once used as a participant. It is absurd to say of a deeply religious person, who after terrible struggle of soul comes to lose his faith, that, at the very moment he loses his faith, he also loses his understanding of that faith. It is a *reductio* of D. Z. Phillip's position that he is forced, in order to keep the consistency of his position, to say just that.[5] Such a manoeuvre is in reality a move of desperation to try to preserve faith from critical scrutiny. It is not clear that Garceau wants to do that, given the way that claim is embedded in his discussion. But he does make the above false claim—a claim which would seem at least to entail such an absurdity—and, being false, it cannot, at least in a legitimation-sense, protect belief from what James Joyce called "the wolves of disbelief".

3 Ibid., 128.

4 See my "Wittgensteinian Fideism" and my "Religion and Groundless Believing" in *Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada* and my *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

5 D. Z. Phillips, "Belief and Loss of Belief", *Sophia* 9 (1970), 1-7.

4.

It is evident that Garceau takes it to be important that we distinguish between religious faith and its manifestations. We can, and should, he stresses, regard the *manifestations* of religious faith as open to critical scrutiny. "There is", as he puts it, "no manifestation of religion which is sacred to reason". But with his third rule, he also tells us, as we have seen, "that the manifestations of religion are an inadequate means for understanding religious faith".[6] So *manifestations* of religious faith are open to the scrutiny of reason, but it appears at least that religious faith itself is not, on Garceau's account, open to such scrutiny and possible rejection. The religious participant, on such an account, can and should acknowledge the inadequacy of all manifestations of his faith. But his faith itself, given in his essentially inward-looking participant's grasp, remains totally untouched and, or so the claim seems, to be untouchable. (This presumably is not only, or perhaps even at all, a psychological observation but a remark about validation-requests.)

With the undermining of the claim that one must be a participant in the believer's faith to understand it, or really to understand it, such a claim appears at least to be arbitrary. Religious faith, as well as the more or less inadequate manifestations of religious faith, should also be open to the critical scrutiny of inquiry. To try to set up the kind of roadblock Garceau attempts, just arbitrarily inhibits the dialogue between belief and unbelief. Garceau has not shown that religion in general or Christianity in particular possesses some secret or sacred niche not open to human skeptical probing. He has not shown that skeptic and believer alike have or should have a shared sound methodological maxim: treat the manifestations of faith in a rigorously critical manner but leave faith itself alone, as a purely personal matter for subscription and commitment, untrammeled by the probing of critical reason.

5.

The philosopher of religion, Garceau tells us, "is confronted with three layers of reality": (1) "that which is lived by religious persons and which is not directly accessible to public observation, *the religious experience*", (2) "The *manifestations* of this experience, the expressions of what is lived: cult, dogmas, theology, etc. ...", and (3) "the durable traces of these manifestations or the *documents* which constitute the usual source of the analysts".[7]

The first "layer of reality", Garceau maintains, is, in an important sense, fuller and more basic than the other two layers. It is the layer which gives us, in Garceau's words, a "dimension of private, non-

6 Garceau, "On Dining with the Meta-theological Skeptic", 130.
7 Ibid.

published experience", a dimension that is "not manifest and remains secret".[8] This is something that would allegedly remain even if it were possible to know the "totality of the manifestations of a religious group or of a religious person".[9]

It seems to me that Garceau goes badly astray here, missing, at a point where not missing it would be very important, the significance of Wittgenstein's work from *The Blue Book* onwards. We might very well add that he misses, as well, the thrust of Quine's work and that of Sellars and the brilliant and sustained onslaught on the Cartesian-Kantian tradition in Richard Rorty. Private non-published experience could, and should, readily be acknowledged even by the most non-privileged-access philosopher, but it provides no epistemological or logical impediment to a critical and public scrutiny. It is trivially true that there is a sense in which I cannot have your experience and you cannot have mine but we can have the same experiences and there is nothing inherently private or privileged about our experiences such that only the experiencer can know whether he has had them, what they are like, and what their import is. They can be made manifest and thus there is no logical impediment to scrutinizing them in the usual critical way. They are not essentially and intractably secret or private. And they are not a source of incorrigible or indubitable knowledge that others cannot have. There is, that is, nothing here that cannot be manifested (be made manifest) and so the "first layer of reality" is in no philosophically interesting or significant way privileged or basic; it does not provide a basis, or a ground in experience for the believer that cannot be known by anyone (if he would but take the trouble) in an ordinary propositional way. There is no essentially privileged access here, for there is nothing that is not manifestable and expressible in a "public language".[10]

However, it would appear at least to be the case that Garceau wants, and thinks he has found, something not manifestable, something essentially secret, private, and inexpressible, or at least not adequately expressible, that gives some, to wit at least some of the faithful, some direct, essentially private, inexpressible, or at least not adequately expressible, religious knowledge or veridical religious experience, i.e., religious experience which has *noetic* qualities. But, as William Alston, Ronald Hepburn, and C. B. Martin have powerfully argued, it is very, very unlikely that there is, or even can be, any such essentially private religious experience or any religious experience at all which could claim to be a source of "religious truth" not expressible propositionally in a

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953); George Pitcher, ed., *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 231-383; Anthony Kenny, *Wittgenstein* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 178-202; and Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

"religious language", in principle, at least, available to anyone.[11] There is no doubt that sometimes we have feelings that we find difficult, perhaps impossible, clearly to articulate. Feelings of being ill at ease or of being depressed without knowing quite why are paradigms, as is a sense that you either can or cannot really communicate with certain people even when it is not at all a matter of literally not speaking the same language. But these feelings are not *essentially* and intractably private; we have no "private language" or privileged access here and the same is true of religious experience. Moreover, where some experience of ours approaches something that might, not implausibly, be thought to be self-authenticating (say, that something tastes pleasant), it becomes less plausible to believe that we have anything, counting as self-authenticating *knowledge*, which could make objective knowledge claims, could be a source of objective truth about some non-psychological reality external to ourselves. The closer we get to a model for self-authenticating experience of God, the closer we get to construing God on a model of a purely psychological reality.[12] But, if religious experience cannot be a source of objective truth, there is little point in appealing to it in trying to articulate a dialogue between belief and unbelief. It does not provide us with a protective shield for the claims of faith and we have no good reason for believing that it is a private domain untouchable by critical inquiry. We have no reason to believe that there is anything here that is not subject to critical rational scrutiny.

6.

Given the reading that Garceau gives to it we should also not accept his third "rule", i.e., the "rule" that "the manifestations of religion are an *inadequate* means for the understanding of religious faith".[13] We should not accept it because he has not given us a conceptualization of a "first layer of reality" that will provide us with a coherent account of a distinction—a distinction which is proper enough in ordinary contexts—between a thing and its manifestations. The human sciences, he tells us, study "the concrete man" and the concrete man is something which is not to be identified with "the totality of his manifestations". There is, Garceau stresses, something more to the concrete human person than can ever be detected by noting people's observable manifestations. There is something about the human person that scientific empiricism can never adequately grasp.

Garceau tries to put that distinction to work in the following context. He believes that my analysis of God-talk is too exclusively concerned

11 William Alston, "Ineffability", *Philosophical Review* 65 (1956), 506-522; Ronald Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox* (London: Watts, 1958), 24-59; and C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959), 64-94.

12 Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox*, and Martin, *Religious Belief*.

13 Garceau, "On Dining with the Meta-theological Skeptic", 131.

with the fundamental utterances of religious belief-systems such as "God exists", or "God created the world", "God is Love", and the like and not enough concerned with the language of religious faith "used spontaneously by the religious person".[14] The thing is, he claims to avoid reducing "religious faith to holding a set of beliefs". The language of religious faith is not like the language of physics. Rather it, essentially and paradigmatically, involves the expression, often the stumbling and inadequate expression, of the experience of faith, of the believer. But it is this very experience that has its own distinctive nature and cannot be understood, Garceau claims, in terms of a scientific empiricism but must be grasped directly by the believer. But here we are back to all the difficulties discussed above.

7.

It is not, as Garceau has it, that I refuse categorically to permit any appeal to the existence of faith or to the experience of God in the dialogue between belief and skepticism. I certainly acknowledge religious experience as an experience that some people have and I do not deny that for some it is an important experience in orienting their lives. What I do deny is that it is some kind of essentially private experience which gives us some self-authenticating knowledge of God or a direct access to his presence not monitorable by intersubjective empirical knowledge. And I do deny that such experience provides us any evidential or inferential grounds for the belief that God exists and I also deny that, where God is construed non-anthropomorphically as an Infinite Individual transcendent to the World, that it makes any sense at all to say we have experienced or become aware of God or felt the presence of God. If God is infinite and transcendent to the world, we plainly can have no experience of him. We cannot, as Hepburn and Martin have powerfully argued, see him or in any way apprehend him or encounter him or stand in his presence.[15] We have only Ersatz-metaphors here which we cannot cash in.

It is mere arm-waving to say that I dogmatically forbid the believer "to refer to what he does indeed claim to know by experience".[16] I do not have any particular doctrine of experience which limits it to sense experience or makes any claim about what our experiences must be. I rather ask what, if anything, it could possibly mean to make claims about how it is possible to have an experience (any kind of experience at all) of that which is transcendent to the world or how it would be possible, if indeed it is possible, literally to have an experience or in any way encounter that which is infinite. It sounds very much to me as if it were the case that *the believer is claiming to have experienced that which is*

14 Ibid.
15 Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox*, and Martin, *Religious Belief*.
16 Garceau, "On Dining with the Meta-theological Skeptic".

beyond experience and that, of course, makes no sense. And this would be true for whatever reading, narrow or non-narrow, we give to "experience". And I do not forbid the believer to refer to what he claims to know by experience, but I do ask him (a) to explain carefully what he means since it appears at least that his claim is contradictory, and (b) I refuse, given its contradictory appearance, to accept his claim at face value just as I would refuse to accept at face value someone's claim to have squared a circle or to have neurotic dandelions. But there is nothing dogmatic in that response. Again, and most essentially, it is simply not true that I deny the reality of religious experience. It is an evident *psychological* reality, but I do question its *noetic* status. Moreover, that questioning is perfectly in accordance with the very canons of conversation between belief and unbelief that Garceau lays down.

8.

Garceau claims that if faith in God or belief in God is a problem for the believer, faith in man or belief in man is a problem for the skeptic. "What is this faith in man", he remarks, "which both the skeptic and the religious person may consider as their first and common article of faith"?[17] He takes faith in man to be "the conviction that a human being is not a given already-made, that what is possible in him is not, most often, actualised, and that he has to become this *possible* to be fully human".[18] It is here where very clearly Garceau's idiom (the *manner* but perhaps not the *matter*) stands in the way of what *I think* is over a moral conception, a substantial agreement between us. He talks of faith in man while I would balk at such talk, but that perhaps is a trivial verbal issue between us. More importantly, his articulation of that conviction makes the expression of a moral ideal also a strange and problematic metaphysical belief in a way it need not be. He notices, rightly, that I have articulated a moral ideal close to what he calls a "faith in man", but what he does not notice is that my conception does not entail, or in any way involve, the obscure metaphysical baggage that his conception does. The kind of conception I have of a good life, a truly human life, in a good society is that of a society in which human beings are free (have control over their own lives) and thus do live lives in which they are not being coerced by forces over which they have little or no control. It is a life in which people—standing in a condition of equality—clearly see what their situation is, have reasonable collective and individual control over that situation, and, in the light of that, have their own ends and reflectively act on those ends without external coercion and constraint undermining their life-plans.[19] They live in a kingdom of ends in which

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Kai Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1974); Kai Nielsen, *In Defense of Atheism* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1983); and Kai Nielsen, "A Rationale for Egalitarianism", *Social Research* 48/2 (Summer 1981), 260-276.

no man is treated merely as a means and in which human beings, with a drive for self-perfection and self-realization, regard man, as something to be surpassed. But in that drive no man is to be treated as a thing merely to be used for another man's purpose.

These, note, are moral ideals which are utterly neutral with respect to metaphysical or scientific mind-body identity theories. A mind-body identity theorist, an eliminative materialist, a functionalist or a behaviorist could as consistently and as wholeheartedly accept these ideals, and as consistently struggle to make them real, as could a dualist, an Aristotelian or an idealist.

Garceau tells us that "Faith in man is the conviction that man is not a thing". But such a remark needs disambiguation. Taken as an ethical comment, as "faith in man" would suggest, it is to be read "To have faith in man is to be resolved that no man is to be treated as a means only but is to be treated as something deserving of respect just because he is 'human' ". That is how I take it. It involves some ordinary perfectly empirically based recognitions above the capacities and powers of human beings but nothing metaphysical and nothing that is even remotely incompatible with materialism, though it does not, of course, require its acceptance or even its recognition. But—and here is why we need the disambiguation—there is another, though I think less plausible way of construing "Faith in man is the conviction that man is not a thing". That way of taking it makes it into a metaphysical doctrine asserting something like the following: "Faith in man is the conviction that man is either something more than or other than an intelligent physico-chemical mechanism in self-directed motion". It is a denial of the metaphysical theses of materialism. Since I am inclined toward some form of materialism, *in that very peculiar way*, I have no faith in man. But that is only in a very peculiar sense, far from its more ordinary senses, and it implies nothing even remotely like nihilism or indifferentism. Moreover, I see no need to, *in that sense*, have faith in man to make sense of our lives. In fact, I need take no position at all on such obscure metaphysical issues to have faith in man in the first and only humanly relevant sense. Rather, I need merely to resolve, and to act on that resolve, that (a) no person is to be treated as a means only, and (b) to maintain ideals of self-perfection. Garceau confuses metaphysics and ethics in a way that necessarily becloud and undermine the latter. My "Man is something to be surpassed" gives expression to a moral ideal. It is not an attempt to articulate an obscure metaphysical or ethico-metaphysical doctrine.

9.

Because he takes "Man is something to be surpassed" as a metaphysical statement referring to some peculiar "inner metaphysical truth" (a "truth" that cannot be empirically verified), Garceau thinks that some-

how to believe in man requires us to believe that man, in this metaphysical sense, is not a thing.

The kind of needless and confusing twisting of a moral ideal into a metaphysical puzzle is revealed in the following passage:

> It is in this metaphysical experience of a value in man in which he has to become and which makes of him more than what he actually is and does, that the judgement of religious faith is anchored. This possibility in man of becoming a person is judged by the religious man as the possibility of being liberated from all things, including the thing that he is, this being actualised only in as much as he gives himself to a Presence that is in him the source of freedom. This is the experience of God that is inseparable from the quest of man. For the religious person, God is not an invention, but a discovery which he verifies through his own being, and especially the discovery that relating himself to the absolute source of freedom renders him more present to his fellow-men, more attentive to the value that each has to become. The skeptic who asks the believer: "Why do you believe in God?" should not be surprised, therefore, to hear him reply: "I believe in God *because* I believe in man".[20]

We can see from what we have argued above that the skeptic need not believe in God because he believes in man. He can believe in man without any religious convictions at all or even without any religious understanding. And he can very well press the believer for his grounds for believing in God *because* he believes in man. He need not, and indeed should not, at all think that in the requisite sense that man is a mere thing or only a "clever little animal", as T. S. Eliot put it, if there is no God. The atheist and the materialist can perfectly well believe in a Kantian kingdom of ends. There is no reason why that belief should not remain perfectly intact even if there is no God and even if there is no conception of God even as a heuristic ideal.

It should also be queried whether this so-called "metaphysical experience of a value in man" is a coherent conception. It is not clear whether it makes much sense to speak of "being liberated from all things". One can be liberated from certain external pressures, from certain superstitions and fears, from religious or political tyranny, from certain neuroses, from certain libidinal drives, from certain cravings (for drink, for power, for prestige). One can be liberated from a variety of particular things that in one way or another hedge one in or fetter one. But, though some religious people like to talk that way, it is not clear what it means to be liberated from all things or why such a condition, if we could even understand what it is, would constitute a liberation or be in any other way desirable. We (to a certain extent and in certain ways) liberate ourselves by altering certain things about ourselves or our environment (including our social environment) in accordance with some ideal of human perfection. But it is only something like that that could constitute for a person a liberation from "the thing that he is". But this neither requires nor needs any religious understanding at all. No clear sense has been given, let alone a justification for it, for claiming as Garceau does, that a human being could be fully liberated, "only in as

20 Garceau, "On Dining with the Meta-theological Skeptic".

much as he gives himself to a Presence that is the source of freedom".[21] We have, I repeat, been given no reason to believe that that is so. At best, it is a groundless claim and at worst incoherent. (Among other things it is difficult to understand what it could even *mean* to say that God is the source of freedom.)

Though we still do not know what it is like or even what it means to have the experience of *God*, we plainly, even waiving that, have no reason to believe that "the experience of God ... is inseparable from the quest for man".[22] Men, with no love of their fellow men and even without ideals of self-perfection, have had the overwhelming conviction that there is a God and men like Bakunin, Kropotkin, Gramsci or Russell have had a deeply embedded love for their fellow men while remaining utter skeptics about religion. We should not make the move that they then must really be believers. Respect for Garceau's first rule of discourse between belief and unbelief should prevent us from converting skeptics into believers by stipulative-redefinition.

We should also note in this context that it is unclear what could possibly be meant by "an absolute source of freedom" or what it means to say that God is that source. And again, questions of meaning aside, we have no reason to believe anything like this is true. The tides of ideology, or at least speculative metaphysics, are running very high here.

10.

The statement "God exists" is either publicly, intersubjectively verifiable (confirmable or infirmible) or it is not. Garceau seems at least to be denying that it is, when he is talking about what is directly or indirectly publicly observable. But later in his essay he appeals to some essentially private, or at least private to the domain of faith, "verification" which seems to me plainly illegitimate. To speak of the religious person, with his sense of liberation, verifying the existence of God "through his own being" is a cheat on a par with appealing to an essentially private self-authenticating experience. Again, no determinate sense has been given to the sentence that a person may "verify the existence of God through his own being" and, again setting aside questions of meaning, there is not the slightest reason to believe that such an utterance is true. Why should a liberation from our passions and prejudices together with an attainment of ideals of perfection give one any understanding of God at all or give one any knowledge of awareness of his Presence?

11.

In the last section of his essay Garceau turns to what he calls my "poignant question": "*What* is it or *who* is it that is this being of infinite

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid

Love, Mercy, Power and Understanding of whom we stand in need?"[23] It is fair enough, I suppose, to say with a revered theological tradition that we cannot say what or who God is in his *essence*. A religiously adequate God would be a non-anthropomorphic God and he would also be, as tradition tells us, an incomprehensible mystery. Still, if God-talk is to make any sense at all, God cannot be so utterly mysterious that we cannot have an idea at all about who or what God is when we speak (try to speak) of or to him. We must have some understanding of what the word refers to; we must have some criteria of identity for our referring expression. But where God is conceived of in a religious appropriate non-anthropomorphic manner it is very unclear that we have, or can have, anything like the requisite understanding here. And Garceau in effect seems to concede that when he remarks that "No creed, no dogmatic formula, may pretend to answer" the question who or what is God nor can "any philosophical description".[24] And appealing again, in the way I have previously criticized, to religious experience, Garceau claims that "Words and representations can only be substitutes for a presence".[25] But an "infinite individual transcendent to the world" could not possibly be a presence even faintly adumbrated in experience.[26] And, it is no help at all, to say, as Garceau does, that "no one would think of denying God if those who believe in Him manifested Him as an unlimited space of light and love".[27] I say it is no help to say that because those who are at a loss to understand what "God" refers to or to whom "God" refers, where God is *not* conceived as a kind of cosmic Mickey Mouse, will not be aided at all if we substitute the strange word-string "an unlimited space of light and love" for "God". For we do not understand what that word-string means. There is nothing sufficiently intelligible here such that we can say what we are denying or what it is we are to take on trust.

To say, as Garceau does, that the "only way of showing who God is, is through being authentically human" also will not do, for we can very well have a tolerably acceptable idea of what it is to be authentically human, with tolerably unproblematic role models for that, without having the faintest idea of who or what "God" refers to.[28] Surely, "God" is not a term which simply stands for even the most unqualified form of agapeistic behaviour or anything like that specifying a more adequate picture of how to live. In understanding what it is to be authentically

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 It will not help to appeal to the analogical uses of terms here. If the stretching of meanings is only slight, we continue to have the problems of intelligibility. If it is extensive, then it is just clear that we are anymore saying anything very substantive that the skeptic need disagree with, though he might very well complain about the misleading jargon used.
27 Garceau, "On Dining with the Meta-theological Skeptic".
28 Ibid.

human, we get no idea at all what, if anything, is being said when believers talk about an eternal, infinite individual transcendent to the universe.

There is a conceptualization of God in which God is said to be "both within us and beyond us", the "within-beyond" as Garceau puts it.[29] It is the conceptualization used by Augustine in which God is conceived as "absolute interiority and absolute transcendence". And it is a conceptualization that Garceau, reflecting a powerful religious and theological tradition, regards as the least inadequate conceptualization of God. Still, it should be remarked that while the reflective religious consciousness is driven toward, perhaps inexorably driven toward, as Hägerström has argued, such a conceptualization, it nevertheless is incoherent.[30] Nothing can be both eternally absolutely transcendent and utterly within. And to say in response that this God as "within-beyond" is an Incomprehensible Paradox or an Utterly Incomprehensible Mystery is just an evasive way of saying we haven't the foggiest idea of what we are trying to say here. If God is really "beyond all that is conceivable by man", as Garceau avers, then it must be the case that we can make nothing of God-talk or of the experience, so called, of God.

29 Ibid.

30 Axel Hägerström, *Philosophy and Religion* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 224-259.