



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Howard Wettstein

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Religious Experience*

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*For my teachers, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein
and Rabbi Moshe Chait, z"l,
and for Rabbi Mickey Rosen, z"l,
from whom I learned so much.*

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*The Significance of
Religious Experience*

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1

Introduction

Recent times have seen the advent of a new atheism. A number of writers have weighed in—philosophers, scientists, literary people—individuals with little sympathy for traditional Judeo-Christian-Muslim religion with what they see as its metaphysical and epistemological pretensions. Even worse, from their point of view, are ethical pretensions that stand in contrast with a highly spotty ethical history. I share many of their concerns, and yet I count myself among the practitioners of traditional religion. My return to Jewish religious life some twenty years ago was a response to a hunger for meaning, one to which life in the academy was, while not irrelevant, not quite adequate.

Since that time I have been on something of a mission, to understand what to make of religion—its truth, its mythological dimension, its monumental ethical successes, and equally monumental failures—and of the fact that while my orientation in philosophy is naturalistic, I find myself powerfully drawn to religious life. The essays in this book represent my attempt to come to terms with the matter.

My inspiration and direction in this project derive from multiple and very different sources, some philosophical, some religious, others somewhere in between. On the philosophical side, there is the sense that philosophy should have something to say about the large issues in human life. Religion—more generally the domain of the sacred—is a prime candidate, one that did not receive much attention during the heyday of analytic philosophy.

A second factor, at once a kind of constraint on how to think about religion (and everything else), is the naturalism of which I

spoke. The term “naturalism” nowadays brings to mind various trends—reductionist, eliminativist—that are not hospitable to religion. My kind of naturalism is quite different. One needs to return to the American naturalists of the first half of the twentieth century to get the flavor of what I have in mind, to philosophers like James, Dewey, and Santayana—thinkers who took religion seriously as a central human concern. Historically, my naturalism resonates with that of Aristotle, hardly a reductionist or eliminativist, and Spinoza.

Of the American naturalists, George Santayana played a particularly important role for me. Santayana writes about religion, most directly in *Reason in Religion*, in a way that is difficult to characterize. Not a supernaturalist, he is hardly a conventional believer, indeed an atheist in that term’s most precise (metaphysical) meaning. At the same time, he appreciates religious life so deeply that he appears to inhabit its fringes.¹ God himself is perhaps puzzled about where exactly to locate Santayana—so I have thought only half-jokingly: an almost-insider of independent spirit or an appreciative outsider.

An even more profound philosophic influence was Ludwig Wittgenstein,² himself deeply reverent of religious tradition but never quite able to make personal contact. I avoided Wittgenstein’s work for years, a reaction to his seemingly indulgent writing and the cliché-ridden discourse of many of his followers—too much easy talk of language games, meaning as use, forms of life. Some thirty years ago, however, I forced myself to engage with Wittgenstein’s work, primarily as a challenge to my developing views in the philosophy of language. I had the impression—I came to see it as a misimpression—that Wittgenstein represented a radical alternative to the orientation I found so attractive. Alternative or not, it quickly became clear that I was in the presence of rare philosophical depth. Clearly I had much to learn here. And my thinking about language—more generally about philosophy and beyond—has never been the same. In *The Magic Prism*,³ I sought to bring Wittgenstein to bear on the late twentieth century debate in the philosophy of language. In the present context, Wittgenstein makes occasional appearances. But

¹With Catholic roots, Santayana is of a very different sensibility than Dewey, whose roots are Protestant. Dewey had no use for religious institutions, with their “historical accretions.” See his *A Common Faith*, (Yale University Press, 1934).

²Philosophical compatibility, like friendship, is hardly transitive. Indeed, it is almost amusing, or in the borderland between amusing and painful, to imagine Santayana and Wittgenstein in dialog. I am profoundly grateful to Wittgenstein’s writings for what feels like a deepening my understanding of philosophical things generally.

³Oxford University Press, 2004.

throughout this book, I am trying to think through religious commitment in a way that reflects what I have learned from him.

Abraham Joshua Heschel⁴ served as a kind of mentor-in-print. Heschel's work sits between philosophy, poetry, and religious literature; he is perhaps best thought of as a philosophical poet of the religious life. During my first sojourn in religious life during my twenties, I was too rigidly analytical to appreciate Heschel, or indeed to read poetry. Upon reaching an age accessible to my Jungian shadow, poetry opened up to me. It was as if I was graced with a new form of perception, as if suddenly I had taste buds in my fingertips. And with poetry came Heschel. He too makes occasional appearances in the chapters here. But his spirit pervades.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the role of religious literature per se: the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, and the subsequent tradition of commentary. From this oceanic corpus, I have learned more than I can say. Most important for the development of the view I articulate here is the Talmudic era interpretive tradition of *Midrash/Aggadah*, commentary that ranges from speculative filling in of missing pieces in the biblical narrative to parable, homily, even humor.⁵

Biblical narrative, parable, and the like, along with *Midrash/Aggadah*, are, in the Jewish context, as close as one gets to theology—until the Middle Ages with its full-blown philosophical theology. And this earlier “theology” is largely literary in genre, much closer to the arts than to the doctrinal theology of the medievals. The stark contrast between the earlier and later modes of theology came as a shock to me; they represent very different approaches. Indeed I'm inclined to think that they fail to engage a single theological project. They appear to emerge from distinct religious sensibilities.

I turn now to the essays that constitute this book. “Man Thinks, God Laughs,” chapter 2, is an autobiographical entry point into the philosophical work of the volume. The domain of the personal and that of the philosophical are, for me, much closer than one might suppose. The chapter is a brief exploration of how my work in

⁴See especially his *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976).

⁵These two genres share the characterization in the text. Collections of *Midrash* are organized as commentaries on the biblical texts that they elucidate. *Aggadah* appear interspersed with legal materials in the Talmud. They are often not keyed to any particular biblical text but take up theological issues connected with the legal discussions or with the general project of the Talmudic tractate in which they appear.

philosophy conspired with a variety of human factors to induce a second look at religious life, abandoned many years earlier.

"Awe and the Religious Life," chapter 3, emerged from my transition from a Santayana-like appreciation of religion to residence inside traditional religious life. My reentry has required some refurbishing of the living quarters. It has been a labor of love—not without its rough spots—to see how I am to make sense for myself of a religious outlook that is conventionally understood in ways with which I cannot connect. The ordinary religious idioms, expressive of a distinctive way to approach life, have great appeal for me. The question has been what those idioms come to. And if they come to something quite different than ordinarily assumed, what happens to their initial, straightforward appeal? (Answer: It remains. But that is a long story.)

One point of difference concerns the contrast between my naturalism, already mentioned, and the more conventional supernaturalism. And then there is my emphasis on the earlier literary theology that I have mentioned, something I want to champion, and the contrasting philosophical style of theology that has become virtually normative.

The latter approach places doctrinal belief at the very heart of a religious outlook. And yet the Hebrew Bible knows of no concept like our concept of belief.⁶ If belief is not focal, what is? Standing in awe of heaven, in awe of God are the relevant biblical idioms. Affective matters, like awe and also love, constitute pillars of the relationship between people and God, pillars of religious life.⁷

Such affective matters, as opposed to metaphysical beliefs, are basic to the sort of religious way to which I am drawn. And when I speak of things like awe and love, I mean to speak not of mere feelings but of attitudes realized in the life of the agent. One who loves and stands in awe of God is one whose life exemplifies such ways, albeit imperfectly. Nor should one suppose that such modes of living—I have referred to them as affective—do not have a cognitive dimension. One does not simply feel awe or behave in an awe-inspired fashion. One stands in awe of God.

⁶See especially chapters 2 and 7. But the point is discussed and emphasized throughout the volume.

⁷It occurs to me now, as opposed to what I say in the essays collected here, that it is probably best to say that the Bible has no expression for "religious outlook," since in the biblical purview, God is about as controversial as the weather. In the biblical imagination, awe and love are best thought of as focal in religious life, that is, in the sort of life appropriate to a world in which one stands, willy-nilly, in a relation to God.

Philosophy of religion in the twentieth and twenty-first century has not attended much to concepts like awe, love, and gratitude, though things seem to be changing in this regard.⁸ The primary philosophical focus has been religious metaphysics and epistemology.⁹ In Chapter 3, I begin my project of exploring these relatively neglected attitudes along with the distinctive conception of human flourishing that makes them focal. My focus is awe, itself a surprising constellation of humility and elevation (how do these go together?). I had hoped to write about love next, but the topic proved too difficult. It is a topic on which I am at work as I finish this volume.

Though the focus here is awe, there is also a kind of undercurrent obsession with the role of metaphysics. In this essay, I do not reject the metaphysical project as wrongheaded; I argue that religious life is viable in the absence of settled metaphysical beliefs. I do so by directing attention to other domains of human reflection and knowledge in which we get along quite well in the absence of clarity about what is in some sense fundamental.

Mathematics constitutes a striking example. Who is going to question the integrity of mathematics just because its epistemological and metaphysical underpinnings are less than entirely understood? Imagine the folly of first trying to solidify the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of mathematics, this as a preliminary to and justification for mathematical practice.

My attitude to religion and religious practice has similarities to the case of mathematics. I am entirely confident about them. This is not to say that religion is for everyone, or that I cannot understand those to whom it does not speak. And my confidence is in part predicated on my leaving open the foundations, if that is what they are. Of course, intellectual responsibility mandates that I say much more about my claim to confidence—about why and how religion makes sense. This is the burden of the entire volume, and I address it directly in chapter 7.

To say that we should not start with metaphysical questions or, even more radically as I am now inclined to suppose, that the usual supernaturalist religious metaphysics provides a misleading picture of what the game is all about, is not to diminish the central role

⁸There are exceptions, e.g., the work of Eleonore Stump, who has devoted a great deal of attention to love and related affective matters. See, e.g., her APA presidential address and her recent masterful (and heavy) volume, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹Another focus has been theodicy, the critique of which is central to my project. See chapters 8 and 9.

of God in religious life. (Compare mathematics: the centrality of numbers, sets, and the like does not depend upon a person's metaphysical views, or lack of them.) At the heart of religious life are awe and love for God.¹⁰

"Terra Firma," chapter 4, aims at clarifying my sort of philosophical naturalism, distinct from other views known by that name. Indeed, "religious naturalism," my overall outlook in this book, will seem to many an oxymoron. In chapter 4, I illustrate my kind of naturalism with examples from epistemology, the philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of religion. The focus of the chapter is what I see as Wittgenstein's kindred naturalism, specifically as exhibited in his treatment of our talk of pain.

Central to Wittgenstein's way in philosophy is a wariness about philosophers' handling of noun phrases. We learn as children that nouns refer to—I can almost hear the words—"persons, places, and things." It can seem a harmless philosophical rendering of this grammatical truism that the use of noun phrases entails "ontological commitment" to their referents. Talk of souls would then presumably involve commitment to the supernatural; talk of abstract things like meanings, numbers, and propositions would entail commitment to a realm of nonnatural abstracta; and talk of pain would involve a commitment to mental states or events.

One of Wittgenstein's strategies was to explore the natural history, the evolution, of the sorts of phrases in question: nouns like "soul," "meaning," "number," and "pain." Understanding this evolution and clarifying what these phrases are doing for us, supposes Wittgenstein, may well render the usual metaphysical posits less attractive, even otiose. Needless to say, the matter is subtle and complex and deserves extensive exploration. My aim in chapter 4 is the exploration of one suggestive case of the general phenomenon, the case of pain vocabulary.

Chapter 5, "Theological Impressionism," returns to religion *per se* and represents what was for me an important step, trying to sort out the nature and relative centrality of, and the relation between, religious imagery and religious belief. The title of the chapter reflects the fact that the primary religious works—the Hebrew Bible, Talmudic literature—speak of God impressionistically. Their mode of description is as remote from definition as poetry is from mathematics.

¹⁰And not only toward God; the sort of religious outlook I am drawn to makes central awe, love, and (related attitudes like) gratitude toward one's fellows, toward the universe, toward life.

The contrast is with the classical picture of religion from medieval times to the present: religious life as living atop a system of refined doctrine.

My anti-doctrinal outlook is (for only some readers) less shocking in the context of a Jewish religious sensibility than with others because of the centrality of practice in Jewish religious life. Still, religious practice without religious thought would yield a mere shadow of that life. In denying philosophized doctrine a central place, I thus have much work to do articulating the role of religious thought on my approach. "Theological Impressionism" constitutes a beginning.

Chapters 6 and 7, "Against Theology" and "The Significance of Religious Experience," represent my most recent treatments of the philosophic fundamentals implicated in religious commitment. Chapter 6 begins with a look at the history of theology. Think of the Israelite religious tradition, as represented by the *Tanach* (the Hebrew Bible), as having progeny: first Rabbinic Judaism, then Christianity, and then Islam.

In the beginning—in *Tanach*—the dominant forms of talk about God were poetry, poetically infused narrative, parable, and the like. When talk of God¹¹ undergoes something of a genre transformation, from literary to philosophical, God's *properties* and His *perfections* (omniscience, omnipotence, ethical perfection, and so forth) along with doctrinal propositions take center stage. In *Tanach*, and dominantly in the oral tradition reported in Talmudic literature,¹² God's *roles* are central: creator, judge, ruler, teacher, even lover, friend, and the like. That roles are emphasized as opposed to properties highlights the contrast between the literary and philosophical. And when God's properties are mentioned in the earlier tradition, they are typically ethical properties anthropomorphically characterized: long suffering, quick to forgive, and the like. The philosophical turn is evident first in late Christianity,¹³ then in Islam, and then in Jewish tradition¹⁴ for those living in Islamic civilization.

¹¹This is as opposed to "talk to God" (as in prayer), a very different matter. Jewish liturgy retains much of the poetic and narrative character of *Tanach*.

¹²This tendency is continued in the early New Testament. The omni-properties seem unknown in much of *Tanach*.

¹³Philo was an early Jewish philosophically minded thinker, but his approach failed to have much sway among the Rabbis.

¹⁴I avoid the term "Judaism" whenever I can. It is the "ism" suffix that irks. I suggested in a talk on the subject in Jerusalem that we speak instead of *Cosa Nostra* ("our thing"), but my suggestion has not yet taken root.

This genre transformation is hardly a matter merely of style. Its enormous importance is related to the coming (and lasting) dominance of doctrine—theoretical propositions about the universe, now seen as being at the heart of religion—and to our very way of thinking about religious people as “believers.” Its influence extends to how we conceive religious practice. Maimonides, at his most philosophically bold, surprisingly seems to attribute limited value to the ordinary modes of Jewish religious life: prayer, rituals, Talmudic learning.¹⁵ The arch religious moment, he suggests, is one spent in solitary and specifically philosophic reflection on divinity. Wittgenstein warned that philosophers tend to reinterpret subject matters in ways amenable to philosophical treatment. The transformation I have been exploring seems a paradigm.

If one uses the term “theology” for the earlier reflections on divinity, theology becomes a literary frame for religious practice, a way to emphasize and enhance the moral and spiritual significance of religious life, a way to add to the power of that life to edify and transform. This is a dramatically different enterprise than philosophical theology with its theoretical aim of providing a metaphysical underpinning. What emerge from philosophical theology (and persist to this day) are what have always seemed to me heroic epistemological constructions, these by way of shoring up, justifying, rationalizing the metaphysical commitments.

The local aim of chapter 7, “The Significance of Religious Experience,” is a critique of William James’s argument for the existence of God from individual religious experience. As developed by a number of twentieth-century philosophers of religion, James’s argument constitutes one of the latest attempts to supply epistemic foundations. I am as skeptical of this modern proof for God’s existence as I am of the traditional ones.¹⁶

A more general and perhaps important aim of this chapter is an exploration of the power and significance of religious experience. If such “gifts to the spirit” (James) fail to provide the makings of a demonstration of God’s existence, what do they provide? What are we to make of the striking and powerful experiences reported by so many, representing different traditions and outlooks? Here, the

¹⁵ See the last chapters of his *Guide For the Perplexed*.

¹⁶ This is not to deny that the various arguments for God’s existence appeal to genuine and important features of experience that are by no means irrelevant to the power and meaning of religion, like the order and beauty of the universe, the character of religious experience, and the like.

thought of the mystic, St. Teresa of Avila, as articulated by Rowan Williams, proves helpful.

The chapter concludes with a still more general concern: how does one make sense of religious commitment? Some twentieth-century analytic philosophers of religion have tried to square the circle, to emphasize belief in supernaturalist metaphysics and argue that somehow, such belief is as plain as common sense. One way has been to emphasize the power of skepticism. Swinburne argues, for example, that skepticism about common sense is so powerful that the principles one needs to defeat it are sufficient to justify religious belief. Such an approach seems doubly dubious because it grants skepticism such power and denies the intuitive gap between belief in the supernatural and common sense.

James, although he has a hand in encouraging such thinking, emphasizes religious experience. Following this side of James's thought, even deemphasizing religious belief, I want to think about making sense not of a theoretical position but of a form of life, in some sense more plain and intuitive than in Wittgenstein's use of that expression.

There is, however, a strong connection here to Wittgenstein. My approach parallels his more general reflections on "making sense" (and the transition in thought that he recommends) in *On Certainty*. His focus is the concept of knowledge; his aim, to set the concept of *knowing* at a distance from skeptical concerns, their defeat, and the like. Details aside, his aim is twofold (at least). First, to show that certain philosophical projects are off the mark, inappropriate—the project of defeating the skeptic, or that of providing a non-question begging intellectual justification of our ways. Second, to explore the naturalness of our ways in the world. I am trying to move our thinking about religion in a parallel direction.

The essays discussed so far focus on "first philosophy." It has seemed to both defenders and critics that religion requires substantial metaphysical and epistemological commitments. And I mean to be taking us in a very different direction. But there is another and very different sort of issue that that has seemed paramount, one that for many closes the books on traditional religion: the problem of evil, the threat from unjust suffering. Specifically, the sheer awfulness that is so much with us presents enormous difficulties for traditional ideas about God, specifically the constellation of His goodness, knowledge, and power.

This challenge is so plain and so powerful that one might well wonder what could count as a persuasive, cogent answer. From