

## HISTORY AND RELIGION IN THE MODERN AGE

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### ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to clarify the relationship between history and religion in the modern age. It proceeds in three steps. First, it draws attention to the radical asymmetry between first-person and third-person statements that Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* rescued from the metaphysical exile to which it had been condemned by Descartes's definition of the self as a thing. Second, it argues that religion is designed to alleviate the peculiarly human kind of suffering arising from this asymmetry. Third, it maintains that history relies on the same means as religion in order to achieve the same results. The turn to historical evidence performed by historians and their readers is more than just a path to knowledge. It is a religious ritual designed to make participants at home in their natural and social environments. Quite like the ritual representation of the death and resurrection of Christ in the Mass, the historical representation of the past underwrites the faith in human liberty and the hope in redemption from suffering. It helps human beings to find their bearings in the modern age without having to go to pre-industrial churches and pray in old agrarian ways. History does not conflict with the historical religions merely because it reveals them to have been founded on beliefs that cannot be supported by the evidence. History conflicts with the historical religions because it is a rival religion.

### I

What I mean by "history" and "the modern age" is not particularly difficult to say. "By history I mean knowledge of the past, as well as the technique by which such knowledge is produced and the activity required to that end, especially in the forms developed by professionally trained historians."<sup>1</sup> By "the modern age" I mean the period in which the two most popular forms of human society hitherto—small-scale societies of hunters and gatherers, and large-scale agroliterate societies with a complex division of labor, cities, and a hierarchical social and political organization usually benefiting a small ruling elite of warriors, clerks, and merchants at the expense of the majority of the population—were replaced by the kind of society in which we are currently living: industrialized, urbanized, egalitarian at least in name, with compulsory education for all, and vastly more populous than before.<sup>2</sup> It is convenient that the study of history as I understand the term, invented by early modern humanists, based on the critical study of primary

1. Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), xiii.

2. Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword, and Book: The Structure of Human History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, ed. R. I. Moore (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

evidence, and perfected by professional historians in the nineteenth century, constitutes one of the characteristic features of the modern age.<sup>3</sup>

What I mean by “religion” is harder to explain. On the one hand, religion is one of the most durable pieces of intellectual equipment—if such it may be termed—on which human beings have relied during their long history but, on the other hand, it has not (yet) been revised to suit our condition in the modern age. Religion is old. Indeed, by all accounts religion may well be the oldest symbolic system—if that be a reasonable name for it—our species has produced. But the modern age has only recently begun, and it is not clear which ways of life and thought human beings will follow in the future, or if those ways will eventually turn out to be as stable as the agricultural societies that occupied much of the globe for the last several thousand years, much less the hunting and gathering ways followed for millennia by our species before then. Religion brought by shamans, monks, and clerics to villages and palaces is familiar. Religion in a modern metropolis seems somehow out of place. Given the disparity between the antiquity of religion and the novelty of the modern age, it is hardly surprising that there is much confusion.

In order to avoid increasing the confusion let me first say what I do not mean by “religion.” I do not mean any of the particular historical, institutional, and especially not the confessional varieties of religion that commonly receive most attention. I do not mean Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism, animism, shamanism, polytheism, or any other of the hundreds and thousands of cults, churches, congregations, and sects that have had their various followings throughout the ages. I shall refer to these as “churches” or “historical religions.” For reasons I shall try to clarify below, I believe that none of the churches are sufficiently capacious to allow us to account for religion in the modern age. Moreover, lumping all of them together under an all-purpose conceptual umbrella like “traditional religion” or “faith-based organizations” without distinguishing them from religion plain and simple can only increase the confusion.

## II

In order to explain what I do mean by “religion,” I would like to take my cue from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. More precisely, I would like to take my cue from one of the most basic points that he consistently stressed and for which he offered an explanation that involved a radical break from familiar habits of thought. By focusing on this point, I hope to be able to show that history, far from being opposed to religion, is one of the forms religion has taken in the modern age.<sup>4</sup>

3. Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

4. The following account is based on Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953); Gordon P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations*, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1980–1996); and Ernst Tugendhat, *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die sprachanalytische Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), available in

Wittgenstein viewed the function of philosophy as distinguishing between sense and nonsense. Examples of what Wittgenstein considered nonsense are sentences like “It is five o’clock on the sun,” “It is red and green all over,” “The standard meter is one meter long,” “I know that I am in pain,” “Colors are sensations in the brain,” and “I cannot know what you feel.”<sup>5</sup> These sentences are in good grammatical order, and some of them lie close to the heart of modern philosophy. This is especially true of the conviction that one person cannot know what another person feels, a staple of modern science and philosophy since Descartes. It is shared by empiricists, idealists, and Kantians alike. Conversely, it is widely believed that the knowledge I have of my own feelings, and especially of my own state of mind, is in some fundamental sense more reliable than whatever knowledge I can have of the external world. Wittgenstein maintained that this is nonsense. It is neither true nor false. But it is deeply misleading. To believe that my knowledge of myself is more reliable than my knowledge of the world but is inaccessible to others is to confuse the language in which we speak with the reality about which we speak.

One particular piece of nonsense that follows from such confusion is the belief in the existence of an autonomous self. The grounds for this belief are commonplace. They consist of an irreducible asymmetry in the grammatical forms we use to talk about the mental state of a given speaker. We can talk about such a mental state in the first-person singular or the third-person singular. The choice of the correct person in which to talk about the state in question depends on whose state it is. But even if the state is the same, the differences between statements made in the first person and the third person are significant. From this simple fact we tend to infer that the first person differs “really” from the third person. But the inference is illegitimate, and its consequences are neither true nor false but nonsense, because the difference is a matter of grammar, not a matter of reality.<sup>6</sup> It merely looks like a difference between two people; in fact it is a difference between two grammatical forms.<sup>7</sup>

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English as *Traditional and Analytical Philosophy: Lectures on the Philosophy of Language*, transl. P. A. Gerner (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

5. G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein, Meaning and Understanding: Essays on the Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 281.

6. It is important to rule out three sources of possible confusion. First, the asymmetry in question applies to statements about mental states, e.g., “I am happy” versus “he is happy,” but not necessarily to other kinds of statements, e.g., “I am an American citizen” versus “he is an American citizen.” Second, the asymmetry applies only to statements in the present indicative. Matters are very different with statements in the past or future tense. Third, the difference between first-person and third-person statements must not be confused with the many different ways in which it can be expressed in a given language. Otherwise languages that do not use nouns, pronouns, and predicates might be imagined not to exhibit the asymmetry in question, which would be a fallacy. What is required for the asymmetry to exist is not that people speak English, but that they distinguish statements a speaker makes about himself or herself as the speaker from statements a speaker makes about anything else.

7. I use “grammar” as Wittgenstein did, combining in one concept what is usually divided into logic, on the one hand, and language, on the other. In his view logic could not be distinguished from language as if it consisted of immutable laws of thought that exist separately from changeable linguistic expressions, much less as form differs from content. One of his central insights was that the relationship between logic and language is much closer than is commonly realized.

Imagine that Peter is happy. Peter can then say “I am happy,” and someone else can say “Peter is happy.” Both of these sentences deal with Peter’s mental state, and both of them say exactly the same thing about this mental state, namely, that it is properly described as “happy.” But even though they say one and the same thing, there is a crucial difference between them: Peter does not need to make any observations in order to be able to say “I am happy.” He merely needs to *be* happy. Nor does he need any criterion to justify his saying “I am happy.” It therefore makes no sense (is nonsense) to ask Peter, “What entitles you to claim that you are happy?” or “How do you know that you are happy?” The only proper answer to these questions is to repeat what Peter has already said, namely, “What entitles me to say that I am happy is just this, that I am happy.” There is no underlying ground or reason that Peter can or needs to offer beyond the statement he has already made.<sup>8</sup> His statement “I am happy” is neither founded on an observation nor does it allow for a criterion of verification. It looks like a statement founded on observation. But it is not. It rather is an expression of the state of mind in which Peter finds himself. It is Peter’s avowal of his happiness.

Matters are quite different with a statement made by someone other than Peter that “Peter is happy.” The person making this statement must have observed Peter or learned about him in some other way. Otherwise the person has no grounds on which to make the statement. It makes sense to ask this person “What are the grounds on which you claim that Peter is happy?” And it also makes sense to answer by saying things like “I can tell because he is smiling broadly,” or “He just won the lottery,” or “He told me so.” Here there are underlying reasons to support the claim that “Peter is happy” and criteria with which to justify the claim. Without such reasons the statement that “Peter is happy” lacks a proper foundation.

This asymmetry creates much room for misunderstanding. The statements “I am happy” and “Peter is happy” refer to the same state of affairs. On its face it seems only plausible to assume that they must be founded on the same reason or reasons. It does not seem plausible that only one of them requires reasons and the other one does not. It seems all the less so in that on the linguistic surface both have the same form: a subject modified by a predicate. The difference in grammatical person seems to be superficial, casting the underlying facts in slightly different forms, depending on who is stating them. The logical implications of the asymmetry between first-person and third-person statements are therefore easy to ignore in favor of the myth that there “must be” some underlying reason—an observation, an inference, a deduction, or whatever—that justifies both the first-person avowal and the third-person statement, and that this underlying reason is the same for both. Once the myth has taken root that reason can straddle the difference between the grammatical persons, it seems to follow that all of us are bound by reason in the same way, and that none of us are entitled to make any statements about ourselves without being able to offer some reason with which to justify those

8. Wittgenstein made the same basic point especially forcefully in response to the question how anyone can know how to act according to a pattern: “How can he *know* how he is to continue the pattern by himself—whatever instruction you give him?—Well, how do I know?—If that means ‘Have I reasons?’ the answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons.” Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 211.

statements. The converse holds as well. The absence of a reason for our avowals can be mistaken for the certainty of a reason behind an indubitable truth. Hence statements like “I *know* that I am happy,” or “I *know* what I know,” or “You have no right to doubt what I *know* with indubitable certainty” can be used as dogmatic weapons with which to bludgeon criticism and dissent into submission.

The asymmetry between first-person and third-person statements about mental states can thus be grounds for two related confusions that point in opposite directions, depending on which side of the asymmetry is privileged at the expense of the other. If the first-person statement is privileged as though it were a reason rather than an avowal, we are liable to end up in the solipsism of the autonomous self existing in separation from the rest of the world, utterly certain of the reasons by which it “really” knows itself and everything about itself, but wondering how it can know anything else, especially what anyone else is feeling. At the extreme, the certainty of such metaphysical self-knowledge by the subject, and the value consequently placed on its self-same “identity,” can easily become a (groundless) reason for annihilating whatever is not like itself, including the selves of others. This is subjectivity run amok.

If the third-person statement is privileged, it is objectivity that runs amok. In this case first-person speakers are denied the right to make statements that cannot be supported by “objective” reasons, such as first-person avowals. Instead they will be forced to conform to the convictions held by third-person speakers—what Heidegger called the anonymous *man* (in German), as in “One knows that so and so,” “One does not do such and such,” or “It is a well-known fact that *p*” when used to silence a first-person speaker who happens not to know *p* or to doubt its truth. Ostensibly such statements are founded on reason, tradition, or custom. In reality they often arise from the irrational fear that first-person avowals could invalidate the reasons on which third-person statements rest.

Wittgenstein relied on philosophical analysis to remove the confusion that arises when reasons are demanded where none can be given and when avowals are mistaken for reasons.<sup>9</sup> He insisted that the truth of first-person statements is categorially distinct from the truth of third-person statements; that avowals of first-person experiences differ far more deeply from descriptions of the world than the distinctions between “subject” and “object” or “internal” and “external” allow us to recognize; and that superficial similarities among the linguistic expressions we use for avowals and descriptions lead us to create conceptions of truth that are both fundamentally flawed and almost universally believed. This was an extraordinary breakthrough. It demonstrated how badly the modern understanding of what a human being is has been misconceived ever since Descartes established a symmetrical relationship between “subjects” and “objects” by referring to

9. A particularly clear statement of the distinction in question occurs in the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 222: “The criteria for the truth of the *confession* that I thought such-and-such are not the criteria for a true *description* of a process. And the importance of the true confession does not reside in its being a correct and certain report of a process. It resides rather in the special consequences which can be drawn from a confession whose truth is guaranteed by the special criteria of *truthfulness*.” The distinction Wittgenstein draws between *confessions* (truthfulness) and *descriptions* (truth) helps to grasp the bearing of his views on a practice in which confessions figure as prominently as they do in religion.

both of them as “things,” differing from each other only in that a subject is a “thinking thing” (*res cogitans*) and an object an “extended thing” (*res extensa*), but fundamentally alike in that both are things (*res*).

But Wittgenstein could of course not abolish the reasons that constantly tempt us to ignore the asymmetry between avowals and descriptions, much less the asymmetry itself. His views are not even accepted outside certain circles in philosophy. Few people would agree that first-person statements about mental states such as “I am happy” or “I am in pain” or “I am angry” are neither founded on observation nor in need of a criterion of justification. Most people are convinced that they must first examine their own mental state in order to be able to conclude that “I am happy.” And even more people would probably agree with Descartes that self-observation yields a particularly reliable kind of knowledge. It may be interesting to speculate what would happen if people learned to distinguish self-evident grammatical truths from statements of fact and got rid of the metaphysical myths that arise from uncritical projections of grammatical forms onto reality. But it is unlikely that they will.

### III

I have now reached a point at which I can say what I mean by “religion.” Religion I take to be a human practice designed not to solve, but to contain the problems arising from the asymmetry between first-person and third-person statements.<sup>10</sup> Like philosophy, religion does not concern itself with the difference between truth and falsity in the manner of the sciences, but rather seeks to prevent the damage done by confusing features of grammar with features of reality. In that sense, religion is quite like philosophy. But the similarity is limited to the problem on which they are both focused. Religion and philosophy differ sharply from each other in the means they use to deal with the problem. Philosophy seeks to abolish the problem by clarifying the confusion from which it arises. Religion accepts the problem as given, but seeks to neutralize its effects. Philosophy rests on the assumption that reason can overcome the temptation to mistake a grammatical asymmetry for a real asymmetry. Religion rests on the assumption that reason can never catch up with the temptation, because the temptation is coeval with

10. By calling the practice “human,” I do not mean to imply that human beings created it. I merely mean that religion is something human beings do in fact practice. I make no argument about the origins of this practice, if only because no such argument is possible until after the concept of religion has been clarified. And by calling the practice “designed to contain the problems arising from the asymmetry between first-person and third-person statements,” I do not mean to imply that human beings intentionally designed religion for this purpose. I merely mean that it is in fact suited to this purpose because of the kind of practice that it is. It might be objected that, in this case, I should not call it “designed” at all, because being “designed” implies intentional action as opposed to purely physical events or objects. I would like to call it “designed” nonetheless, for two reasons. One is that religion is a matter of signs and symbols, not of physical events. The other is that the concept of “intentional action” and its relationship to our concepts of physical events or objects is precisely what is at issue here. It would be inappropriate to rule out *a priori* the possibility that religion might be “designed” even though it has not been intentionally designed at all. I am grateful to Ivor Davidson for prompting me to offer this clarification.

language and clarification can only begin once the temptation has already taken effect.<sup>11</sup>

Religion draws on two main means in order to achieve its purpose. One is dogma, the other ritual. By dogma I mean statements designed to counter the grammatical asymmetry between first-person and third-person statements. By ritual I mean practices designed to confirm that, in spite of the grammatical asymmetry, human beings inhabit one and the same universe.

Let me give some examples. Perhaps the most obvious dogma designed to counter the asymmetry in question is monotheism. Monotheism is the belief that the entire world and everything in it, including above all myself, comes from one and the same source. The belief that there is but one God, and that this God is responsible for everything that happens, restrains the temptation to believe that “I” am somehow not a part of the world because “I know that I exist” with a deceptive certainty quite unlike that of anything I happen to know about any other part of the world. If the asymmetry between self and other is a gulf that threatens to divide the world in two, monotheism is a dogma that denies the existence of the gulf.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity is a more elaborate statement of the same point. It is more elaborate in part because, for well-known historical reasons, Christianity was able to draw on the philosophical acumen of pagan Greeks who had for centuries struggled to untangle the relationship among speech, reason, things, and being, *logos*, *onta*, and *ousia*. The dogma of the Trinity is not a departure from monotheism. Rather, it asserts that the one God of monotheism consists of three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. God the Father correlates with third-person statements and the other—indeed, the totally other, what Luther called the *deus absconditus*, the hidden God. God is Father insofar as he is the creator of all things existing in the world. God the Son correlates with first-person statements and the self. God is Son insofar as he is the Word through whom all things have been created. So far from being hidden, the Son is the only person of the Trinity who can actually be known by human beings, namely, in the sense in which only first-person statements can be known, which is to say, avowed. He is therefore also the person through whom human beings achieve salvation, which is to say reconciliation with God the Father. And God is Holy Ghost insofar as he pervades all things; he mediates between the first and the third person. He is the Spirit whose possession allows human beings to go from grasping the meaning of the Word to grasping its presence in the created universe.

The doctrine of the Trinity at one and the same time accounts for the asymmetry in question (the asymmetry is rooted in the deity itself) and helps its followers to understand that the asymmetry is a matter of grammar (the deity itself is one). On

11. For an account of religion that is similar to mine by a contemporary philosopher, see Ernst Tugendhat, *Egozentrität und Mystik: Eine anthropologische Studie* (Munich: Beck, 2003). For three classic studies see Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, transl. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Macmillan, 1915); William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Modern Library, 1999); and Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, transl. Willard Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).

the one hand the asymmetry is eternal, but on the other hand it does not override the unity of God. Rather it consists of what Calvin called an incommunicable difference of qualities among the three persons—incommunicable for the obvious reason that the very possibility of communication presupposes a distinction of persons.<sup>12</sup> The Son is coeval with the Father, begotten, not created. It would be interesting, but is not necessary in the present context, to reflect on the significance of a statement such as “This is my body, this is my blood” for the asymmetry between self and other when the statement is made by a given speaker about a piece of bread and a cup of wine that are quite evidently neither his body nor his blood. It would be similarly interesting to consider the difference it makes if the speaker is the person who first said those words about his own body and blood or a priest who repeats those words during the celebration of Mass.

If monotheism and the dogma of the Trinity may be read as attempts to counter the temptation to turn a grammatical asymmetry into a feature of reality, the doctrine of original sin may be read as an attempt to explain the temptation and the suffering that it entails. In paradise, Adam and Eve are imagined to have been at one with God. Their unity with God was grounded in their obedience to him (note that etymologically speaking “obedience” refers to an emphatic kind of listening, which is to say the kind of listening that leads to action directly, without the kind of deliberation or reflection by which the listener might interpose himself—the “subject”—between the command and the action that follows from the command).<sup>13</sup> Adam and Eve followed God’s will not because they had no will of their own, but because their will was joined to God’s. They did not treat their will as a foundation on which to assert their autonomy. But even in paradise they evidently had the ability to speak, and because they had the ability to speak, they were exposed to the temptation to assert their autonomy by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Before they ate it, they did not have the kind of knowledge that opposes self against other, man against God, neighbor against neighbor, and the interest of one against the common good of all. When they did eat it, their eyes were opened, namely, to their own separate existence. Hence they saw that they were naked. Having confused the autonomy of grammar with their own autonomy, they were expelled from the garden in which no such autonomy exists, ashamed of their nakedness and condemned to live and die in exile. Exile, shame, and death are internally related to the character of their action—what Hobbes might have called a natural punishment. Death proved that the speaker who speaks in the first person does not exist forever, as opposed to the person in which that speaker speaks. It is a fitting punishment for a speaker who

12. “‘Person,’ therefore, I call a ‘subsistence’ in God’s essence, which, while related to the others, is distinguished by an incommunicable quality.” John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. 1, chap. 13, sec. 6, ed. John T. McNeill, transl. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:128.

13. In an interview with James Lipton immediately after winning Oscars for the 2004 movie *Million Dollar Baby*, Morgan Freeman, Hilary Swank, and Clint Eastwood agreed that listening is the foundation of acting. Acting in a movie is of course different from acting in life. But this is precisely the point of the dogma of original sin: because of original sin, human beings have lost their ability to listen as they should, and therefore to act as they should. Hence actors in theaters and on the screen can listen and act their part only to the degree that they shed the person they are in real life.

attributes the eternal life of the first person to himself. Original sin thus does not consist of any particular kind of human depravity. It rather consists of the generic human depravity (if such it deserves to be called) that confuses the autonomy of grammar with the autonomy of the self. Whether you call that mistake the sin of pride, as theologians do, or a grammatical mistake, as Wittgenstein did, is perhaps merely a matter of terminology.

Since the asymmetry between self and other originates in language, dogma is essential to religion. But dogma is not enough. It helps to remove the problem only if two conditions are fulfilled. First, it has to be believed. Dogma can of course be mouthed even if it is not believed. But mouthing it does nothing to alleviate the tension between the speaker and the world. Second, dogma must be held by a community of speakers. It is always possible for a single individual to believe certain religious dogmas. The history of religion is full of examples. But in that case religion, so far from alleviating the tension between first-person speakers and the world, magnifies it.

This is why religion requires ritual more urgently than dogma. By ritual I mean rule-governed practices designed to confirm a first-person speaker's knowledge that he or she is and does "the same" as everybody else.

There is an obvious sense in which nobody and nothing is ever the same as anyone or anything else. Every point in the universal grid of space and time is different from every other point. No single person can do the same thing twice, much less be the same as anyone else. This is the sense in which Heraclitus observed that we can never step into the same river twice. But rituals differ from points in the spatio-temporal universe in that someone who follows a rule does the same thing as another person following the same rule. A person who adds 2 to 5 does exactly "the same thing" as a person who adds 9 to 13, namely, adds one number to another. The thing that both of them do is of course not the same in the sense that Heraclitus intended: the additions are made by different people, concern different numbers, and happen at different points in space and time. The additions are the same only in the sense that they accord with one and the same rule, namely, the rule that governs addition. Without reference to a rule, it is impossible for people to do anything that is "the same" as anything else at all, because everything flows in Heraclitus's river. Accord with a rule is the only way in which identity can be established.<sup>14</sup>

Rituals therefore play a crucial role in religion. When a given group of people acts according to one and the same ritual and does so in a manner explicitly designed to draw the attention of its members to the regularity of the action, the members of the group can tell that they are following the same rule. Participation in a ritual teaches the participants that, at least on this occasion and in regard to this particular performance, they are doing the same thing. Ritual rides over the border between self and other. Hence ritual is more effective than dogma as a means to reduce the tension between the speaker and the world. When dogma is divorced from ritual, it leaves the believer isolated or in opposition to the community of

14. For details see G. P. Baker and P. M. S. Hacker, "Following Rules, Mastery of Techniques and Practices," in *An Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 2: *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar, and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 154-181.

which he is a member. But ritual functions without dogma. Ritual is to dogma as poetry is to prose. It can become meaningless. But it cannot be divorced from the knowledge of “doing the same.”

Experience suggests that the rituals most effectively designed to teach participants that they are members of one and the same community involve the rhythmic (regular, rule-governed) repetition of certain physical movements. Singing and dancing are good examples. Singing and dancing are distinct from dogma in that they do not necessarily involve any assertions. This is of course not to say that songs contain no words, or that it is impossible to dance according to the rhythms of a set of verses. Quite the contrary: the rhythmic repetition of words such as the Tibetan mantra “Om mani padme hum” or the Catholic “Hail Mary, full of grace,” with or without melody, can be regarded as a particularly effective form of ritual. But it is to say that in ritual the emphasis is not on the truth of whatever words happen to be pronounced. The expression “song and dance” can therefore be used in a derogatory sense for a ritual performance that fails to convince its audience by arguments. The point of singing and dancing is that they are rule-governed activities. Regardless of whether the collective movement involves the pronunciation of words, or whether the words are pronounced by the whole congregation, band, or tribe, or by individual leaders to whom the tribe responds in patterns of call-and-response, those who engage in the movement can be certain that they are doing “the same” as everybody else who is doing it with them.

By reference to a rule rituals therefore supersede the autonomy of a first-person speaker. Rituals vary in many ways. They can be a matter of minutes, hours, days, months, years, or periods of years. Some rituals work better than others. Song and dance can result in states of transport and outright trances in which the participants lose consciousness. Quadrennial elections for the presidency of the United States of America, soldiers marching in step, and boarding the train for the daily commute to work in the morning rarely have that effect. Rhythmic activities do not necessarily function as rituals unless they are designated for that purpose; breathing and chewing might be a case in point. But all forms of rhythmic activity have the potential to integrate the individual into the community. When all together say, “I believe that God is risen from the dead,” then all are doing the same thing and know that they are doing it. This kind of knowledge can be a powerful solvent of the boundary dividing self from other.

A number of interesting questions arise at this point. Is the asymmetry between “I” and “the world” a novelty that appeared at a certain point in time or has it been with *homo sapiens* ever since *homo sapiens* acquired the ability to speak? Does it have different degrees of intensity depending on the language in which it is expressed? When does the use of ritual to integrate human beings into the world turn into the abuse of ritual to deny their humanity? How does the ability to speak differ from the ability to gesture that chimpanzees and other higher primates have? May the seasonal activities of other species be regarded as ritual activities? Is there any room for the asymmetry between “I” and “the world” in tribal societies? In which sense could polytheism be thought to lower the tension between the speaker and the world? Was Jaspers’s identification of an axial time in world

history a moment at which human beings first began to feel the effects of the asymmetry between “I” and “the world”? Was monotheism the first response to a problem that had previously not existed? Or does it merely mark the beginning of a new act in a drama that began in paleolithic caves? Is it legitimate to claim that shamanism, animism, and polytheism serve the same basic purpose as Judaism, Catholicism, and Islam? Or is this an illegitimate and possibly blasphemous mingling of things as different from each other as fish and fowl?

This is not the place to pursue such questions. Let me simply state my opinion that the tension between the first person and the third person is a fundamental fact of human life in all of its varieties, and that all forms of religion—polytheism as well as monotheism, animism no less than ancestor worship, Catholicism as much as Judaism, Buddhism as much as Islam—are designed to relieve the suffering this tension can cause. The rituals and dogmas differ. But whether it is the one God, the sacred mountain, the navel of the universe, the four-sided mandala, or the snake circling around the primeval ocean to eat its own tail, there is so far as I can tell no religion that does not seek to establish some kind of universal unity by means of ritual and dogma, nor is there any religion in which that unity does not embrace both the social and the physical world. Language puts speakers at odds with the world. Religion evens the odds.

#### IV

Now it is clear, I hope, why I did not begin this paper by paying attention to Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and so on. The reason is that the churches and confessions no longer help to remove the asymmetry in question. On the contrary, they reinforce it. They no longer qualify as religion in the sense I have tried to describe.<sup>15</sup> We still refer to them as “religion.” But we do so largely for historical reasons. They originate in practices that once fulfilled religious purposes for the populations whose churches they were. Today, they are losing that ability and may already have lost most of it. They can no longer be believed, and they fail to integrate their followers into their environment. What prevents us from recognizing this state of affairs is chiefly our failure to disentangle the historically grounded usage of “religion” for bodies of beliefs, practices, and institutions that once did reduce the tension between the speaker and the world from the usage of “religion” for a body of beliefs, practices, and institutions that can do so in the modern age.

There are two familiar reasons why the churches are no longer able to fulfill the purposes of religion as they once did. One is the increasing integration of

15. When I say that the churches and confessions “no longer qualify as religion in the sense I have tried to describe,” I am drawing a conceptual distinction. I do not wish to deny that people who regard themselves as Jews, Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, and so on can practice religion and do so in the synagogues, mosques, and churches in which they congregate. That would be an empirical assertion, and as an empirical assertion it would be demonstrably false. But I would insist that, to the degree that the religion they practice does in fact reconcile them with the world, it differs from the kind of religion that used to be practiced in the same places under the same name. It is this difference and the speed with which it is increasing that divides the members of the historical religions into progressives and conservatives, moderates and extremists, modernizers and fundamentalists.

the world. This does not merely expose members of one church increasingly frequently to members of other churches. Inter-confessional contacts are nothing new in the history of the world, much less inter-confessional conflicts. What is new is that members of different churches now encounter one another with increasing frequency as members of one and the same community. Their confessional allegiance no longer maps onto their community. Hence it cannot integrate them into their community. This creates dissonance.

The other reason is that modern science makes it increasingly difficult—if not downright impossible—to reconcile our knowledge of the world with the statements ritually repeated in the churches. In former times adherents of the historical religions had to make no special effort to believe. They were able to believe—effortlessly, as it were—what they were told to believe as a matter of religious faith. But science gave them unprecedented reasons to doubt the truth of what they were told. Today, belief in statements upheld by the historical religions—for example, that Christ rose from the dead or that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh—requires a kind of interpretive effort that was not needed in the past. It is therefore no longer the same kind of belief.

The point is not that the difficulty is insuperable.<sup>16</sup> Followers of historical religions are often perfectly capable of compartmentalizing their conflicting loyalties, such that with one half of their brain they assert as true in church what with the other half they deny as false at work. Those who cannot compartmentalize may try to stamp out scientific knowledge in order to allow their belief to prevail or, conversely, stamp out religion in order to worship at the altar of science. The point is that, as long as the historical religions do not change, the difficulty cannot be overcome without some exercise of force. But forced belief, regardless of whether it is self-imposed or imposed by others, cannot achieve the purpose of religion. Belief needs to be easy if it is to integrate the speaker into the world. A religion whose followers cannot be certain that their belief is held “everywhere, at all times, and by all,” as Saint Vincent put it succinctly in a classic statement of the Catholic faith, do not in fact have a religion.<sup>17</sup>

Under today’s circumstances, “religion” is therefore largely an empty name for beliefs that modern people cannot maintain without contorting their minds into strange figures and attending rituals in whose success they no longer have confidence. Such beliefs and practices serve far more effectively to put them at odds with the world and to make them enemies of one another than to integrate them into the social and physical universe they do in fact inhabit. Small wonder that they turn to drugs and then make war on the drugs to which they turn. Whether the opium is the kind to which Marx referred as opium of the people or the kind that is harvested on fields of poppies in Afghanistan makes little difference. Churches,

16. See *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science*, ed. David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

17. “In ipsa item Catholica Ecclesia magnopere curandum est ut id teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est. Hoc est etenim vere proprieque catholicum, quod ipsa vis nominis ratioque declarat, quae omnia fere universaliter comprehendit.” Vincentius Lirinensis, *Duo Commonitoria*, Patrologia latina (Paris: Migne, 1846), 50:640.

confessions, and denominations are places where we can find historical religion. But they are not the best places to find religion in the modern age.

V

That is one of two main claims this paper makes. The other is that neither religion nor the need for it are gone. They have merely gone out of the churches, or forced the churches to change beyond the recognition of their traditional adherents.<sup>18</sup> There are many aspects of the modern age in which we can find beliefs, practices, and institutions helping to reduce the tension between the speaker and the world by a mixture of ritual and dogma in precisely the same way that historical religions used to do in the past. History falls under this category.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, I believe that history is one of the most important forms religion has taken in the modern world.

History is commonly regarded as a form of knowledge, namely knowledge of the past.<sup>20</sup> And so, of course, it is. Indeed, it is knowledge that conflicts in some important ways with claims made by the historical religions, for example, about the life of Jesus, the origins of the Old Testament, the authorship of Moses, and so on.<sup>21</sup> This is neither an accident nor is it proof that history conflicts with religion. It proves rather that history conflicts with the historical religions. But this says nothing about the relationship between history and religion in the sense explained above. On the contrary, the conflict between history and the historical religions suggests that they are vying for control over the same terrain. That terrain consists of religion.

History is not only a form of knowledge. History is also a certain kind of activity, and this activity in turn rests on an elementary assumption. The activity consists of analyzing certain objects variously known as sources, documents, data, evidence, remainders, antiquities, monuments, and so on. For the sake of simplicity I shall refer to all of them as evidence. Historians analyze the evidence in order to produce representations of the past. The elementary assumption on which this activity rests is that there exists a definite link by which the (presently existing) evidence is tied to the particular time and place (in the past) about which historians would like to learn and which they seek to represent to their readers. It is this link that turns a present object into evidence for things that happened in the past. Without this link, history would be impossible. The question is, of course, what is it that allows historians to treat present objects as sources of information about the past?

18. For example, by abandoning Latin, ordaining women as priests, and endorsing homosexual marriage.

19. Science, psychoanalysis, and human rights can also be viewed in this way.

20. What follows is an abbreviated version of the argument I made in *The Limits of History*. Cf. Constantin Fasolt, Allan Megill, and Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "The Limits of History: An Exchange," *Historically Speaking* 6 (2005), 5-17.

21. For a lovely example from the American Southwest, see Peter Nabokov, *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 30-31, with details about a Navajo's encounter with archeological evidence concerning Folsom and Clovis arrowheads.

There must be more than one answer to this question. But for present purposes the most important answer is: the responsibility borne by past human agents for the evidence surviving into the present.<sup>22</sup> This responsibility is the foundation on which historians can use the evidence as a source of information about the circumstances of another time and place. To give a concrete example, as long as we can be sure that the letter to the Romans (an object existing at present in the world) was actually written by the Apostle Paul (an individual human agent in the past), we can use the letter to the Romans as a piece of evidence from which to gather information, not only about Saint Paul, but also about the circumstances of the time and place in which he wrote the letter. It is entirely conceivable that Saint Paul does not bear responsibility for the letter to the Romans. It could have been dictated to him by the Holy Ghost; it could be a forgery; it could have fallen from the clouds; it could be the effect of certain physical causes. None of these possibilities pose any insuperable logical difficulties. But they would not allow us to use the letter to the Romans as a piece of evidence for history. We can use it as evidence for the circumstances of Saint Paul's time and place only on the assumption that it was written by Saint Paul.

The study of history thus rests on the assumption that actions resulting in evidence can be traced to responsible agents. Three corollaries follow from this basic point. The first concerns the distinction between different historical contexts, especially between past and present. Because we can hold Saint Paul responsible for the letter to the Romans, we can treat the time and place at which he wrote the letter as the context in which he wrote it. This makes it possible for us to use the letter as information about that time and place. If we were to assign responsibility for the same letter to the Holy Ghost, the letter to the Romans could still be used as a source of information about some kind of context. But the context would not be restricted to the time and place of Saint Paul, and perhaps not to any particular time and place at all. It would more probably coincide with God's providential plan for the history of the world, embracing past, present, and future. Thus the historical distinction between past and present—between one context and another—is internally related to our assignment of responsibility for the evidence to certain agents located at particular points in time and space.

The second corollary concerns liberty. If history rests on the assumption that past agents bear responsibility for the evidence examined by the historian, those agents must have been free. Their freedom was of course not unlimited, and it most certainly did not exempt them from the laws of cause and effect. But it was real.<sup>23</sup> One can easily imagine situations in which it would not have been real.

22. Note that responsibility is not to be confused with intentionality.

23. For the distinction between this concept of freedom (where freedom is opposed to compulsion) and metaphysical freedom (where freedom is opposed to laws of cause and effect), see the lucid analysis by Tugendhat, *Vorlesungen*, 107-124, especially 110-111. Cf. Tugendhat's more detailed account in *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung: Sprachanalytische Interpretationen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), available in English as *Self-consciousness and Self-determination*, transl. Paul Stern (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986). See also the distinction between "necessity" and "compulsion" that Calvin, following Luther, draws in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. 2, chap. 3, sec. 5, and bk. 2, chap. 4, sec. 1 (1:294-296, 309-310), in order to clarify his concept of the will. "For who is such a fool," he writes at 1:334 in a closely related passage, "as to assert that God moves man just as we throw a stone? And nothing like this follows from our teaching."

Paul, for example, could have written the letter to the Romans under the influence of natural causes and nothing but natural causes, operating like a writing machine obeying electrical impulses; or perhaps his pen was moved by the hand of God and nothing but the hand of God. In that case Paul could not be held responsible for the letter, and the letter could not be used as evidence for his thought and action, much less the circumstances of his time and place. No history would be possible on such a foundation. The study of history is internally related to the conviction that human beings are free.

The third corollary concerns the reader of history. Historians cannot study the past without assigning responsibility for certain present objects to individual agents in the past and assuming that those agents were free to do as they did. Readers of history cannot read history *as* history without agreeing with those assumptions. The act of reading history *as* history—which is to say, as knowledge of the past that is founded on a systematic examination of the evidence, as opposed to legend, myth, historical novels, or political propaganda—entails agreement by the reader with the assertion that responsibility for their actions can be assigned to past agents and that those agents were free to act otherwise than they did.

Much of the pleasure of reading history derives precisely from these entailments. Readers of history are tacitly taught to believe that they, too, live in a particular context, namely the context of their own time and place, and that they, too, are free to act in one way rather than another and are responsible for their actions. In reading history, they do not merely gather information about the past. They also claim their own place as free agents in the world of space and time. It may well be one of the greatest pleasures of reading history that it teaches readers how to claim their liberty in the act of ritual reading without actually having to embark on a particular course of action and to accept responsibility for the consequences that might follow from their choice. In the act of reading history, readers reconcile their liberty with their existence in the world in the same way in which Adam reconciled his liberty with the will of God by listening to God's commands.

It may seem to be a serious objection that according to historians themselves historical agents are determined by the circumstances under which they act. Some historians even believe in strict historical determinism. So far from being an objection, however, the belief that historical circumstances limit the agent's liberty is crucial to history's ability to integrate the speaker into the world. It is essential for the religious function of history that it affirm in one and the same ritual both the liberty the individual has from the perspective of the first person and the circumstances by which that individual is determined as a part of the world from the perspective of the third person. Whether the speaker's determination by circumstances is thought to be partial or complete is an important question, but one that need not preoccupy us here because it concerns the speaker only from the perspective of the third person, not as capable of saying "I"—and especially not as capable of producing objects that historians can use as evidence for that person's history. Suffice it to say that any conception of liberty that is not grounded in the ability to speak, deliberate, and choose among different courses of action is

likely to end up in metaphysical myths exempting human beings from causal determination instead of reconciling them with its reality.<sup>24</sup> As long as history continues to rely on evidence from the past in order to determine what human beings did and how they lived in the specific context of their time and place, it will assert the liberty of individuals from the first-person point of view.

History thus serves as a religious ritual. It is far more than just a form of knowledge. It is a rule-governed activity with a particular significance for the ability of human beings to find their bearings in the modern age without having to go to pre-industrial churches and pray in old agrarian ways. History establishes that something is the same for all who participate in the ritual turn to the evidence, regardless of whether they participate as readers or writers, authors or critics, researchers buried in the archives or popularizers on TV. The study of history establishes agreement with the assumptions on which history is based: that, in spite of being limited by the conditions of their time and place, people are free to choose among competing possibilities of action and can be held responsible for what they choose to do.

Every act of writing and reading history is, as it were, accompanied by tacit affirmations of this creed: "I believe that human beings are free individuals with the ability to shape their own fate and with responsibility for the consequences." The ritual affirmation of this belief is constitutive of religion in the modern age. It enshrines one of the modern articles of faith. The modern faith is easy to believe—as easy as it needs to be in order to fulfill its religious purpose. It turns participants into the members of a church, but one that differs from the churches upheld by the historical religions. Historical religions put first-person speakers at ease with their neighbors and the world by revealing the sacred will of God. History puts them at ease by revealing the sacred will of human beings. History does not conflict with the historical religions because it reveals historical religions to have been founded on beliefs that cannot be supported by the evidence. History conflicts with the historical religions because it *is* religion, a rival religion.

## VI

It may be useful to conclude by comparing the ritual in which historians engage their readers with another historically successful ritual that medieval priests performed for their flock in the Mass. Both rituals rely on representations of the past in order to relieve the tension between the liberty of the individual as a first-person speaker and the determination of the same individual by external circumstances from the third-person perspective. Both turn participants into the members of a church. Historians do so by studying the evidence in order to gather information about the past. In giving their readers knowledge of the past, they reinforce the belief that all human beings, past, present, and future, are free to act and are responsible for their actions, but at the same time determined by the circumstances of their time and place. Belief in the individual's freedom and hope in the individual's redemption from the suffering caused by the tension

24. See preceding note.

between liberty and circumstance—regardless of whether that suffering is due to social forces, dysfunctional parents, political oppression, natural causes, or any other factor—occupy the same central position in historical discourse as they do in the historical religions. They are no less constitutive of membership in modern society than faith in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ was of membership in the medieval church.<sup>25</sup>

History fulfills its religious purpose by engaging the members of modern society in ritual invocations of the evidence. Medieval priests achieved a similar result by engaging the laity in the ritual of the Mass. They elevated the host in order to represent the sacrifice by which Christ procured salvation for his followers. In so doing they represented a historical event and reminded their audience of its significance. But they did more than that. They also reinforced agreement with the belief that Christ, as God, was free, indeed, omnipotent—and yet at the same time was a human being subject to death. By transforming the bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ and allowing the members of their flock to eat the flesh while reserving the blood for themselves, priests transformed their reenactment of a past event (the death of Christ on the cross) into a means of present salvation. They mediated the tension between self and other (liberty and circumstance) and integrated their followers into the community.

The public performance of the Mass was an appropriate ritual for a society most of whose members were not capable of performing ritual readings in private. In the modern world most people are capable of reading. Hence readers and writers of history are better suited than priests and their flocks to the religious needs of modern people. Historians who turn to evidence in order to furnish knowledge about the human past and teach it to their readers therefore do more than improve our intellectual condition. They practice religion in the modern age.

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25. As Jacob Burckhardt put it with characteristic insight, “Unser Ausgangspunkt ist der vom einzigen bleibenden und für uns möglichen Zentrum, vom duldenden, strebenden und handelnden Menschen, wie er ist und immer war und sein wird; daher unsere Betrachtung gewissermassen pathologisch sein wird” (Our starting point is the sole enduring center from which it is possible for us to start: the suffering, striving, and acting human being, as it is and always was and will be; so that our perspective will be, so to speak, pathological). *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, ed. Rudolf Marx (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1969), 5-6. The English translation of this book, *Reflections on History*, transl. M. D. Hottinger (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1973), 34, is atrociously misleading in speaking of “man” as “the one eternal center of all things.” Cf. the argument made by Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 12-14, that modern civilization places a significance on the avoidance of suffering that, in spite of its secular appearance, has religious roots and manifests itself most characteristically in “the affirmation of ordinary life” on which he focuses in part three, 211-302.