

RICHARD
HOLLOWAY
Looking in
the Distance
The Human Search for Meaning



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Preface

Negative Capability: that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

*Letter of John Keats to George and
Tom Keats (No.45)*

In 1999 I wrote a book called *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics*. As the title suggests, the book had two aims. I set out to argue against the claim that, without religion, people would soon give up on ethics; that without God there could be no human goodness. And I sketched an outline of what a purely secular or godless ethic would look like. I tried to find good human responses to a number of contemporary ethical challenges. The book was well reviewed in most of the secular newspapers and criticised by most of the religious press. It was praised by some philosophers and attacked by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey.

This new book is a companion volume. It attempts to do for human spirituality what *Godless Morality* tried to do for ethics. Spirituality is a notoriously difficult word to define. The word covers the inner life of human beings, all that is left when you have fed and sheltered them, and that's just about everything that is important to them. Spirituality, like morality, has been the traditional preserve of religion. Indeed, it has a whole subsection of theology to itself, covering subjects such as prayer, silence and self-discipline. But for many people today religion is no longer a way of life that is possible for them. They may or may not 'believe' in God, but they are no longer comfortable in any of the traditional religions. This enormous group of people has been described as 'the Church alumni association' or 'the Church in exile'. However, there is something faintly patronising in those descriptions. For many people in our secular society, religion has never held any attraction for them. They have not left the Church for the simple reason that they were never in it. And they do

not cease to be interested in spirituality or the inner life of the human community just because they are not members of any of the religions on offer in our society. They are fascinated by the human passion for trying to understand the universe; and they admire the way science tries to look unflinchingly at the reality of things. They revel in the richness of human art and, through its various forms, they experience moments of grace and transcendence. They are increasingly fascinated by the complexities of the human psyche as revealed by the psychological study of human nature; and they are aware of the long human search for wholeness and healing. In short, there is a rich and diverse range of human spiritualities in the world, and countless people follow them without reference to religion or any necessary sense of God. I have written this book for that great company, because I now find myself within it.

The book is in four movements. The first three loosely cover some of the philosophical, psychological and ethical elements of human spirituality. The fourth is about endings, the ending of traditions and the ending of human life itself in death. Reading it over, I can see that this is a very personal book. For better or for worse, it is one man's account of what he has seen after a lifetime spent looking in the distance.

I

LOOKING

STILL LOOKING

*All religions will pass, but this will remain: simply sitting in a chair and looking in
the distance.*

VASILII ROZANOV

For years I have been haunted by that aphorism from Vasilii Rozanov. Indeed, I could claim to have lived its meaning in my own life. I was drawn into religion as a small boy from the back streets of an industrial town in the west of Scotland. The religion I encountered there was of the high romantic variety, heavy with incense and laden with mystery. I had no clear sense about what it meant except that it suggested heroic adventure, an endless quest after an object flying from desire. Years later I recognised myself in A.S.J. Tessimond's poem 'Portrait of a Romantic':

He is in love with the land that is always over
The next hill and the next, with the bird that is never
Caught, with the room beyond the looking glass.

He likes the half-hid, the half-heard, the half-lit,
The man in the fog, the road without an ending,
Stray pieces of torn words to piece together.

He is well aware that man is always lonely,
Listening for an echo of his cry, crying for the moon,
Making the moon his mirror, weeping in the night.

He often dives in the deep-sea undertow
Of the dark and dreaming mind. He turns at corners,
Twists on his heel to trap his following shadow.

He is haunted by the face behind the face.
He searches for last frontiers and lost doors.

He tries to climb the wall around the world.¹

I gave my life to that search. I became a priest, then a bishop, then a primate. Now, forty years and many battles later, it has passed and I am left sitting in the chair looking in the distance.

What remains is the innate compulsion to go on asking the unanswerable question of life's meaning. And it is the fact of its unanswerability that makes the question so compelling. We find ourselves as conscious beings in an apparently unconscious universe and wonder what it means. We know quite a lot about *how* we came about, but there is no satisfactory explanation as to *why* we came about. I know, of course, that many confident explanations have been given to the question Why? The shorthand term for one of these explanatory systems is 'a religion', complete with indefinite article, though the really confident ones always claim the most definite of definite articles for themselves: theirs is *the* Religion, the really true set of answers to life's questions. Many people find one or other of these answer systems satisfactory. They don't like living uncertain lives with the big question permanently unanswered, so they go for closure by opting into one of the religions. Then they can get on with building up the rest of their lives with that big hole in the foundations filled in. If you can manage that arrangement there is much to be said for it. Apart from anything else, it can bring distinct psychological advantages. I remember reading years ago about a well-being scale that claimed there was a distinct correlation between faith and psychological health. This may be why Nietzsche thought that religion evolved to help us fight depression:

The main concern of all great religions has been to fight a certain weariness and heaviness grown to epidemic proportions . . . This dominating sense of displeasure is combated by means that reduce the feeling of life in general to its lowest point. If possible, will and desire are abolished altogether . . . The result, expressed in moral-psychological terms, is 'selflessness', 'sanctification'; in physiological terms: hypnotization – the attempt to win for man an approximation to what in certain animals is hibernation, in many tropical plants estivation, the minimum metabolism at which life will still subsist without really entering consciousness. An astonishing amount of human energy has been expended to this end.²

Nietzsche seems to be referring to one side of religion here, its use as a suppressant of or antidote to the nagging discontent that characterises the human species in highly developed societies. Buddhism is probably the most successful exponent of this kind of practical religion: it has little doctrinal superstructure, but it is rich in methods of self-suppression that help to purge us of those incessant desires that bite at us like wolves. Most religions retain elements of this kind of therapeutic self-culture, but many of them, particularly in the West, have also developed along heavily theoretical

lines. Rather than concentrating on inculcating in their followers methods for coping with the pressures of the world, they set out to explain its meaning and origin. The trouble with the explanatory side of religion is that its theoretical usefulness is invariably of limited duration and is inevitably overtaken by the emergence of new knowledge. That is why for many people religions work for a time, then go on to lose their plausibility. The Sufi Master and poet Hafiz observed that:

The
Great Religions are the
Ships
Poets the life
Boats.
Every sane person I know has jumped
Overboard . . .³

That may be why Rozanov does not say that religion will pass, but that religions, in the plural, will pass. We may abandon particular ships, preferring the intimacy of the life-boat or the exhilaration of swimming in the sea to the routinisation of life on one of the great explanation-tankers of organised religion. But even if we choose to go overboard and swim alone, we have not necessarily abandoned the religious quest; not if we think of it as the name we give to humanity's preoccupation with its own meaning or lack of meaning. There are any number of metaphors we can use to capture this insistent concern we have about ourselves. Hafiz used the image of swimming alone in the sea, others talk about life as a search for the great unknown, Rozanov described it as looking in the distance. Following the Rozanov metaphor, I want to do a bit of distance gazing. I want to sit in the chair and describe some of the conflicting things I have seen. I shall not attempt to weave them into an explanatory package, to make them continuous with each other. That would not be honest to my own experience of the mystery of life, which has been disjunctive and contradictory rather than seamless; so I shall leave things jagged and disconnected, just as I saw them.

But before I settle myself in the chair to start describing what I see, let me affix a health warning. Religion, even without the definite or indefinite article in front of it, is dangerously volatile stuff. The root of the difficulty lies in the nature of the claims religions make about matters that are beyond any verification. This uncertainty, which lies at the heart of all religious systems, famously produces compensating protestations of absolute certainty about matters that are intrinsically unknowable. This is what gives such a dangerous edge to religious conflict. It is why Montaigne dryly observed that it was rating our conjectures highly to burn people alive for them. Another mordant observer of the excessive self-importance of religious systems was the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. I spent an afternoon with him in Jerusalem just

before his death a few years ago. Amichai described himself as an atheist, but he was a wise and wonderfully tolerant observer of the religious madness of his own city of Jerusalem. He wrote a poem called 'Jerusalem Ecology', the first stanza of which I'd like to recite as a prophylactic against religious poisoning.

The air above Jerusalem is saturated with prayers and dreams
Like the air above industrial towns
it's hard to breathe.⁴

Having paid close attention to that health warning, let me now settle into the chair and describe some of the things I see in the distance. I propose to thread onto a string of narrative some beads of quotation, mainly from poets, who best capture the essence of the human experience at those vulnerable moments when we are most open to the mystery of our own existence. The first one I call 'looking into the abyss'.

Looking into the abyss

It's three o'clock in the morning and I can't sleep, which is probably why I'm in that chair, not in bed. I've made a pot of dark roast coffee to clear my head and help me think, because I have been invaded by a terrible sense of ultimate meaninglessness. I have been engulfed by the void, made to look into the abyss of emptiness that life seems to be stretched upon. Everything I once thought to be steady and enduring has disappeared into the ceaseless flux of a universe without meaning. The mood is probably best expressed by Philip Larkin's 'Aubade' – dawn:

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
Till then I see what's really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now . . .

What unnerves Larkin is not the thought of a wasted life, the quite natural remorse many of us appropriately feel as we look back on our lives:

–The good not done, the love not given, time
Torn off unused –

No, what frightens him is extinction, complete nothingness, non-being. He is overcome by a sense of

. . . the total emptiness for ever,

The sure extinction that we travel to
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
Not to be anywhere,
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

This is a special way of being afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die,
And specious stuff that says No rational being
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing
That this is what we fear – no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come round.
And so it stays just on the edge of vision,
A small, unfocused blur, a standing chill
That slows each impulse down to indecision.

Most things may never happen: this one will . . . ⁵

As far as I am concerned, Larkin has captured the mood all right, but not exactly the object of the anxiety. My blues in the wee small hours are not caused by apprehension at the prospect of my own death and extinction, though I hope my number will not be called any time soon. No, my mood is more universal than that. It is a puzzled revulsion at the pointless plenitude of Being, and dismay at the way this planet has manufactured trillions of life forms only to cast them indifferently aside, like an out-of-control assembly line in an old Charlie Chaplin movie. My mood of nihilistic despair is amplified by the thought that most of these lives have known enormous pain and the human ones considerable sorrow, if only at the end when life itself slowly undermines them before withdrawing completely. The mood of early morning loss comes from a sense of bafflement at the massive indifference of the universe. We try to care about one another, but life itself, the life that impels its indifferent way through time and space, does not seem to care about anything; it simply is. Even that does not quite capture the mood, because to say that the life force that activates the universe 'is' gives it a sense of stability, when, in fact, we experience it as constant change; it is not so much Being, as Passing, as something endlessly in the process of becoming something else. There are times when the cosmic indifference of life is as disorienting as being lost in a dense wood or as frightening as falling overboard into the sea at night with no one to know we have gone.

The strange thing is that this void, this Nothing or No one, gave us birth, and it is impossible not to be emotionally involved with a parent, however absent and

indifferent. There's a poem that captures this ambiguity better than the straightforward despair of Larkin's 'Aubade'. I am thinking of 'Psalm' by Paul Celan. Celan was a poet of the abyss, a victim of the brutal indifference of history. His parents were lost in the Nazi death camps and he himself, like other Holocaust survivors, committed suicide. He wrote a wrenching series of poems called *Die Niemandrose*, 'The No one's Rose'. This is one of them:

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
no one conjures our dust.
No one.

Praised be your name, no one.
For your sake
we shall flower.
Towards
you.

A nothing
we were, are, shall
remain, flowering:
the nothing—, the
no-one's-rose.

With
our pistil soul-bright,
our stamen heaven-ravaged,
our corolla red
with the crimson word which we sang
over, O over
the thorn.⁶

The thorn wound over which we sing is perplexity at our own being, which we cling to as the mysterious gift it is; but who is there to praise for the gift?

Sensing an absence

Who is there to praise for the gift of life? It is now six o'clock in the morning and the city is beginning to wake up. I brew more coffee and get back into the chair. The mood has changed. Celan has softened Larkin's bleak nihilism and restored a sense of latency to the scene, a sense of something undisclosed, something absent that might once have been present. Wistfulness rather than despair is the mood now. I call this

six-o'clock-in-the-morning mood 'sensing an absence'. And it is God who is absent. The sense of the absence of God is strong in Europe at the moment. I am not talking on behalf of confident secularists for whom God has never been present. For them the universe has been thoroughly disenchanted, even disinfected, purged of any residue of that disturbing presence. And I am obviously not talking about confident believers for whom God is still on tap. No, I am talking about those who find themselves living in the No Man's Land between the opposing forces of confident unbelief and confident belief. Those of us who are living Out There in the place where God is absent are deafened by the clash of claim and counter claim, as the rival explanations are fired over our heads. It is important to say that Out There is not a place of neutral agnosticism. It is a place of committed unknowing. Those of us in this place of unknowing believe that the war of opposing interpretations is pointless, because the mystery of the meaning of Being can be neither demonstrated nor destroyed by explanation, it is a wound that has to be endured. And R.S. Thomas is our poet:

Why no! I never thought other than
That God is the great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place where we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find.
He keeps the interstices
In our knowledge, the darkness
Between stars.
His are the echoes
We follow, the foot prints he has
Just left.⁷

It is because we love the honest poverty of the state of unknowing that those of us who are Out There also believe in the moral importance of atheism. But for us atheism is not a straightforward noun, a fixed state of final explanation. It is a verbal noun, *atheising*, a dynamic process that constantly tries to rid the mind of conceptual idols because it understands the cruelty of idols and their need for constant warfare. Of course, atheism itself can become a conceptual idol, a fixed position as belligerent as theism, which is why evangelical atheists and evangelical theists could be said to deserve each other. 'God' is the term we have devised to signify, however hypothetically, the ultimate causal agent of a universe whose existence remains stubbornly unexplained. But the secret history of humanity's relationship with God is a story of abandonment – our abandonment of God and God's abandonment of us, leaving only the echoes of previous attempts at explaining the mystery. This constant work of separating ourselves from earlier understandings of God is morally essential

if we are not to trap ourselves in a cave worshipping projections of our own shadows. This is the truth behind the eastern imperative: 'If you meet the Buddha on the road kill him.' It is the truth that lies behind the Hebrew fear of idolatry, which is the substitution of a knowable object for the unknowable mystery of God.

Living in this state of unknowing about the ultimate meaning or unmeaning of things is so arduous and painful that it is entirely understandable that we constantly create theoretical objects for ourselves onto which we project a fictitious reality in order to rescue us from uncertainty. The classic text on the subject is from the Book of Exodus, at the beginning of chapter 32:

And the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. And Aaron said unto them, Break off the golden earrings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me. And all the people brake off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron. And he received them at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.

Like the Israelites who were frustrated by Moses' long absence, we do not enjoy the state of waiting. For most people, waiting is the prelude to something else, it is never a state of mind in its own right. We are always waiting *for* something, which we anticipate patiently or impatiently. For those of us who are living in the absence of God, waiting is not anticipatory; waiting is its own meaning, it is a permanent state of unknowing. But this way of being is counterintuitive to our normal needs and desires. We want answers, explanations, portable idols. This is the attraction of all explanatory systems. It accounts, for instance, for the current appeal of a Christian education course called Alpha, which gives briskly confident answers to all of life's puzzling questions.

If we could stop the flow of human knowledge and experience, and if Being itself were not in a constant state of passing or becoming, these systems might attain a satisfying perfection, a resolution which is very attractive to the religious temperament. That is why some religious communities completely opt out of the flow of history and locate themselves, as they might put it, *in* but not *of* the world, so that their perfectly realised religious system is protected from the erosions of time. Amish Christians and Hasidic Jews are examples of communities that have chosen to enclose themselves in a time capsule rather than trust themselves to the unpredictable torrents of change. But those religious communities that decide to take their chance in history are constantly overtaken by the incessant flux of events. Most of the big religions that are active today have been around for millennia. Many of their explanatory claims were forged in ancient societies, which were very different from our own. To take an

obvious example, they all tend to accord to women a status of fixed subordination to men. There may have been good reasons why the subordination of women was appropriate when it was originally religiously codified, but it makes little sense in developed societies today.

Dramatic examples of the painful tensions that ancient religious traditions can create for contemporary human beings are provided by stories in the recent news, from Iran, England and the USA. In June 2003 the newspapers told us that the Audrey Hepburn look was all the rage among young women in Iran. They liked to wear chic headscarves wrapped under the chin and trendy shades. They enjoyed sitting at sidewalk cafés, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, just like Audrey Hepburn in her first big movie break, *Roman Holiday*, in 1953. The Islamic clerics who run the country denounced and vainly tried to forbid this unseemly behaviour in young women because it was clearly in defiance of traditional Islamic practice.

Clerics, of whatever persuasion, are rarely happy with social and cultural change. The difficulty they always face when they confront a challenge to established social relations is what to do about the sacred scriptures upon which their particular system is based, particularly if the new developments promote change in the status of women and the understanding of human sexuality. Another example of this tension, expressed this time through Christianity, was the row that broke out in England and the USA in the summer of 2003 over the proposed appointment of two gay men as Anglican bishops. Traditionalists noisily opposed the appointments on the grounds that the Bible condemned homosexual relationships, while supporters pointed out that the writers of the Bible did not have our contemporary understanding of homosexuality. The bullying tactics of the traditionalists prevailed in England and, after several weeks when he was rarely off the front pages of the world's newspapers, the priest in question was forced to withdraw. In the USA, however, the Church authorities confirmed the election of a gay man as a bishop, and he was subsequently ordained, though the row that surrounds his appointment is likely to continue indefinitely within the Anglican Church.

The Bible and the Koran were written thousands of years ago, so they naturally reflect the human arrangements and understandings of their time. This is why the flux of history is tough on clerics who believe that everything in their scriptures is permanently commanded, including male dominance and homophobia, because it means they have to apply first-or seventh-century customs to twenty-first-century men and women, who, not surprisingly, don't much care for them.

It is the idea of God behind these ancient ways of organising society that is the main source of difficulty, because God is always claimed as the basis for the enduring authority of the systems that are under siege. Traditional religions have a picture of God as a superhuman person, possessing absolute power over us, who inhabits a heavenly realm that is separated from the earth, but is in regular contact with it, the way NASA communicates with its space stations. Many people find the NASA model

for God, as a supernatural engineering and maintenance agency, very difficult to hold today. Religion used to claim with considerable cogency that, given the intricacy of our nature and the way we are precisely adapted to the universe, a great external intelligence had to have designed it all. It was expressed by William Paley in the famous 'lost watch' argument in 1802. If you found a watch when you were out walking and marvelled at the perfect intricacy of its design, you would correctly deduce that it had been created by a watchmaker. So it was with the universe itself, the argument went. The idea of God the Designer offered an explanation for the way species seemed to be so miraculously adapted to the world in which they found themselves. That explanation worked for centuries, until Darwin came along with an alternative account that was truer to the facts and therefore more satisfying. He showed that we were not the result of a straightforward piece of planned engineering, but of an unimaginably long and painful process of trial and error through which successful species gradually adapted themselves to their environment. The process was hit-and-miss and intrinsically wasteful, completely unlike the precisely designed economy of the religious explanation. According to Martin Rees, 'fewer than ten percent of all the species that ever swam, crawled, or flew are still on Earth today'.⁸ Richard Dawkins called one of his books *The Blind Watchmaker* to make a similar point.

Apart from a few defiant creationists, most people in the West today have abandoned the old argument from design. What is now left of the explanatory use of God to account for the organised intricacies of planet earth has retreated to one of the last frontiers of human knowledge, which is the human mind. Religious explainers now try to tell us that the mind inhabits the brain, but is not reducible to it. This is sometimes called the Ghost in the Machine theory: the idea that our bodies, though they are physical mechanisms, are inhabited by an invisible spiritual reality called mind or soul, exactly in the way that God is understood to inhabit and direct the universe. This is a development of Plato's idea that fundamental reality is spiritual and immaterial, but that it assumes the form or appearance of matter in actual entities, the way the Invisible Man in the old movie would sometimes wrap himself in bandages and pop a pipe in his mouth so that people could locate his presence. The significant thing about the appearances was that they were mere shadows of heavenly realities and had no enduring life of their own; only the spiritual had enduring life. Applied to individual humans, this gave us the idea that our bodies are temporary habitations for our souls, and when the body dies the soul returns to its immortal state.

What gave this theory such a long run was the experience of our own consciousness. We seemed to ourselves to be more than material realities. Our mind was an invisible power that transcended our bodies, so it was easy to believe that it had an independent and separate existence that would outlast its house of clay. By extension, God was understood as the Super Mind or Spirit that activated the created

universe but was independent of it. As is the way of these things, this theory, the last frontier of defensive religion, quickly becomes the next frontier of science, and Antonio Damasio, a leading neuroscientist, is one of its explorers. In his book *Looking for Spinoza*,⁹ Damasio explores the mind/brain question from a philosophical as well as a scientific angle. He offers an account of the way evolution has endowed us with a complex neural system that enables us to regulate our life in a way that maximises well-being and minimises pain. He tells us that those neural reactions of pain or pleasure we call ‘feelings’ were built from simple responses to external events that promoted the survival of the organism. Feelings are brain states, whether of fear or compassion, that prompt us to respond to our environment in ways that will be conducive to our own safety and flourishing. The mind is not some sort of self-existent ghost that temporarily inhabits our flesh; it is a way of describing how the brain expresses our bodies. But, as I have already pointed out, because of the way we experience ourselves as somehow transcending our bodies, it is easy to understand how we were led to posit the idea of a self that existed independently of its physical container. That assumption about ourselves is strengthened by the fact that the gift of memory enables us to recognise patterns in our experiences, thereby giving us some level of control over our instinctive responses to the pressures that beset us. And by enabling us to unify our own remembered history, however inaccurately, the experience of memory lends force to the tendency to abstract ourselves from the brain that has so intelligently organised our experiences for us. The tragic disproof of the claim that there is a fundamental essence in us that is independent of the body is clearly demonstrated in cases where assaults to the physical brain change or utterly destroy the personality or selfhood of the person, long before their body as a whole has died. We could apply to these tragic people some of the words from Larkin I have already quoted – ‘nothing to think with, Nothing to love or link with’.

Damasio’s investigations force us to reappraise some of the most vexing philosophical problems that have haunted us since the emergence of consciousness. Are we controlled by a separate reality, whether it is God in the case of the universe or the mind in the case of ourselves, or are the structures of both the universe and the mind explicable in terms of themselves without reference to outside forces? Darwin gave us a way of understanding the evolution of life on earth without the necessity for an external agency to guide its development. Damasio offers us a parallel explanation of the mind that is hopeful as well as convincing. The fact that it is hopeful is interesting. One of the many charges that retreating religionists make about the explanatory advance of science is that, by reducing everything to biology, it leaves no ground for a satisfying spirituality or an authoritative ethic for humanity. However, scientists increasingly argue that nature itself provides the best basis for ethics because it prompts us to live prudently and to care for one another, as well as for the earth on which we live, if we want to survive and flourish. This is a theme that I shall develop in a later section of this book. Damasio even offers us a naturalistic account

of human spirituality. He writes:

I assimilate the notion of (the) spiritual to an intense experience of harmony, to the sense that the organism is functioning with the greatest possible perfection. The experience unfolds in association with the desire to act toward others with kindness and generosity. Thus to have a spiritual experience is to hold sustained feelings of a particular kind dominated by some variant of joy, however serene. The center of mass of the feelings I call spiritual is located at an intersection of experiences: Sheer beauty is one. The other is anticipation of actions conducted in 'a temper of peace' and with 'a preponderance of loving affections.' These experiences can reverberate and become self-sustaining for brief periods of time. Conceived in this manner, the spiritual is an index of the organizing scheme behind a life that is well balanced, well-tempered, and well-intended. One might venture that perhaps the spiritual is a partial revelation of the ongoing impulse behind life in some state of perfection. If feelings testify to the state of the life process, spiritual feelings dig beneath that testimony, deeper into the substance of living. They form the basis for an intuition of the life process.¹⁰

It is the life process, the encounter with Being itself, that is becoming the focus for human spirituality and ethics today. Traditional religious explanations for the mystery of life, which were entirely understandable in their time, projected the significance of life beyond itself to a supernatural self-existent reality that was believed to have called life into existence and upon whom life was permanently dependent. This binary theory of reality inevitably downgraded the significance of the world itself, because it was held to be a rival to its creator; and it projected the credit for humanity's best discoveries and insights onto this imagined distant authority. Christianity, without entirely understanding what it was doing, tried to balance the record by claiming that God in Christ had become immanent in the world, and had embedded himself in human nature. At the same time, it tried to retain the traditional idea that God was also entirely separated from and transcendent to the world. This is the basis for its claim that Jesus Christ was completely man and completely God at the same time. Contemporary secular spirituality finishes the process that was begun in Christian theology, by severing humanity from its dependence on a supposed external supernatural authority. We seem to be living through a time in which one part of humanity is beginning to claim autonomy or self-governance for itself and to acknowledge that meaning now has to be discovered in the life process itself. We may be no closer to understanding why there is a world, but we are now able to accept the fact that the world itself is the source of the values and meanings we prize most, not some hypothetical transcendent reality which did none of the work yet claims all the credit. One way to express this is to say that the spirit is now engendered by and encountered in the world in which we find ourselves. Rather than

positing an external force to account for our most cherished experiences, we begin to understand how they were generated within us in response to the life process itself. And it is through us that the universe has become aware of this. This is mystery enough to be going on with, without hanging on to ancient hypotheses that now create more problems for us than they solve.

Intrigued by the strangeness of it all

But after six uncomfortable hours in the chair, I need more than another coffee break; I need something to take my mind off the dizzy contemplation of the mystery of Being. By nine o'clock in the morning I am being stunned by the serious weirdness of the universe. I once asked a couple of distinguished scientists what was happening before the Big Bang. That, they said, was the \$64,000 question no one could answer, though it did not stop people from trying. The fact of the universe, of why there is something and not just nothing, is puzzling enough; what is even more baffling is that through us the universe is now asking questions about itself. One wit inverted that way of putting it, by saying that a physicist is the atom's way of thinking about atoms. We have not yet encountered other conscious agents in the universe capable of generating questions about their own meaning and the nature of the reality in which they find themselves, but given the vast scale of the universe it is likely that they are out there somewhere. Astronomers tell us that there may be as many as 140 billion galaxies in the visible universe. Bill Bryson offers an analogy to help us get our minds round that unimaginable number. He suggests that if galaxies were frozen peas there would be enough of them to fill the Royal Albert Hall.¹¹

Apart from its impossible vastness, the more we think about it, the more weird our knowledge of the universe and our place within it becomes. Our mathematicians, those prodigies who inhabit a sphere of pure reason, do their calculations and, years later, we discover that the discernible processes of the universe correspond exactly to their mental equations. That the human mind can put us in touch with the intricate structure of the universe is intriguing enough; the emergence of humanity itself is an even more tantalising story. The fact that after 15 billion years our planet became a home for self-conscious beings is worth meditating on, though I am not sure where it gets us. Scientists tell us that our emergence into conscious life is the consequence of certain finely tuned elements called anthropic balances. If the earth were a little closer to the sun it would be too hot for life and if it were a little further away it would be too cold. If the orbit of the earth were slightly different then life on earth would never have emerged. It is the precise balance of two great forces that creates the right conditions for life to exist. The expansive force of the Big Bang spreads the universe out, while the contractive force of gravity pulls it back together. If the gravitational force were too high, the universe would appear, but in a microsecond gravity would

pull everything back into a Big Crunch. If the expansion rate were too high, then the universe would stretch at such a rate that gravity would be unable to form the stars and galaxies from whose dust carbon-based life evolved. The chances of these conditions being precisely satisfied are as likely as those of shooting at a target an inch square on the other side of the universe and hitting it. These delicate adjustments do not only refer to the earliest instance, but to the continuing history of the world and its detailed processes.

This extraordinary fine tuning appears to be necessary at every stage of world development. So it is no surprise that religious thinkers point to these anthropic balances as new and compelling evidence for an element of cosmic design. We have already seen that one of the traditional arguments for God was the argument from the appearance of design in nature to the existence of a transcendent designer. We have also been cautioned by the way science has consistently overtaken these hypotheses that posited the existence of an external creation agency and shown us how the life process explains itself from within. That will almost certainly happen with the fine tuning of the universe and the anthropic balances, as well. Scientists already offer a number of ways of explaining them without reference to an external engineer, including the possibility of multiple universes in time/space. Martin Rees believes that there may be an infinite number of universes and that we simply exist in one that combines things in a way that enables us to exist. He offers the analogy of a clothing store: 'If there is a large stock of clothing, you're not surprised to find a suit that fits. If there are many universes, each governed by a differing set of numbers, there will be one where there is a particular set of numbers suitable to life. We are in that one.'¹²

But what about the fact of the existence of the life process itself? If we take it simply as it is in itself without reference to any supernatural originating agency, what kind of reality is the huge, many-sided fact of Being? If what we already know about the universe is anything to go by, the answer may not be to our liking. That's certainly what the poet Robinson Jeffers suggests in his poem 'The Great Explosion':

The universe expands and contracts like a great heart.
It is expanding, the farthest nebulae
Rush with the speed of light into empty space.
It will contract, the immense navies of stars and
galaxies, dust-clouds and nebulae
Are recalled home, they crush against each other
in one harbor, they stick in one lump
And then explode it, nothing can hold them
down; there is no way to express that explosion; all that exists
Roars into flame, the tortured fragments rush away
from each other into all the sky, new universes

Jewel the black breast of night; and far off the
outer nebulae like charging spearmen again
Invade emptiness.

No wonder we are so fascinated with fire-works
And our huge bombs: it is a kind of homesickness
perhaps for the howling fire-blast that we were born from.
But the whole sum of the energies
That made and contained the giant atom survives. It
will gather again and pile up, the power and the glory –
And no doubt it will burst again; diastole and systole:
the whole universe beats like a heart.
Peace in our time was never one of God's promises;
but back and forth, die and live, burn and be damned,
The great heart beating, pumping into our arteries
His terrible life.

He is beautiful beyond belief.
And we, God's apes – or tragic children – share in the beauty.
We see it above our torment, that's what life's for.
He is no God of love, no justice of a little city like
Dante's Florence, no anthropoid God
Making commandments: this is the God who does
not care and will never cease. Look at the seas there
Flashing against this rock in the darkness – look at the
tide-stream stars – and the fall of nations – and dawn.
Wandering with wet white feet down the Carmel
Valley to meet the sea. These are real and we see their beauty.
The great explosion is probably only a metaphor – I
know not – of faceless violence, the root of all things.¹³

Anger at the cruelty of it all

The spectacle is certainly magnificent and draws forth awe from us, as we contemplate the implacable momentum of the life-power that surges indifferently through the universe. This was certainly why Nietzsche admired the raw honesty of the warrior aristocrat before the Church weakened his tough ethic with Christian pity. 'The essential characteristic of a good and healthy aristocracy is . . . that it accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of untold human beings who, *for its sake*, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments.'¹⁴

There is a terrible honesty in that. It is the raw unconscious honesty of the lion who trails the herd of antelope and picks off the wounded straggler with beautiful ferocity. It is possible to admire the fierce symmetry of the balance between species in nature and to understand why, for example, the orphaned baby elephant has to be ignored by the rest of the herd and left to die. The species cannot afford to care for the individual, only for its own survival. But one's heart winces at the sight, and feels that it should not be this way among humans. There is something in us that seems to be emotionally reluctant to abandon the stragglers who limp behind the human herd. That is why we respect and occasionally support those who work to help the wretched humans of the earth and to succour the wounded who cannot keep up with the pace of the strong.

The interesting thing to notice here is that the great champions of those who are reduced to slaves or instruments of the strong are probably more motivated by anger than by pity. This is a mysterious phenomenon: a universe born in violence and driven by remorseless power gives birth to beings who are made angry by the very law of life, by the structure of the universe that gave them life. That's why my next mood, my noonday mood, is best described as 'anger at the cruelty of it all'. For me, the best model of this anger is Jesus; not the divinised Christ who was coopted by the powerful to sit in distant splendour above the chancel arch in vast cathedrals, but the human Jesus, the angry prophet of Nazareth. Over the years I have been as guilty as any preacher of making him in my own image or of doctoring him to suit my own needs. But once we abandon the salvation scheme that sees him as a divine figure sent to rescue us from God's wrath at our God-inflicted sinfulness, we get him back in a way we may not really want. He becomes the fiercest exemplar of the Hebrew tradition of the prophets, that group of men who were angered by the way the powerful drove their chariot wheels over the wretched of the earth. This is high anger at the very order of things, but it is particularly aimed at those upon whom the arbitrary indifference of the universe may be said to have smiled, yet who take their good fortune as evidence of their own virtue or rightful place in the scheme of things:

Woe unto you that are rich! For ye have received your consolation. Woe unto ye that are full! For ye shall hunger. Woe unto ye that laugh now! For ye shall mourn and weep.¹⁵

These words were uttered by Jesus at a time when the distance between the rich man and the destitute peasant was no vaster than the gulf which now exists between a Californian billionaire and the child of a crack addict in one of the LA ghettos. Jesus knew that the poor were always going to be with us, but he despised the religious theorists who offered divine justification for the insensate cruelty of it all. He seems to have had some respect for the Romans who governed his country, probably because they did not try to offer any kind of theological justification for their imperial ascendancy. Their confidence lay in their own power, which they delighted in

exercising. The powerful of our era lack the blunt honesty of the Nietzschean warrior who roared like a lion and rejoiced in his strength for its own sake. The powerful today try to make a virtue of their arbitrary good fortune, justify it by theory, *explain* it. And religion has consistently offered its services as the Great Explainer in Chief. This accounts for Jesus' anger at religion, seen at its most torrential when he drove the moneychangers out of the temple, because they were symbols of the way religion was used to deepen the misery of the poor by exploiting their piety for gain:

And Jesus went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves; and would not suffer that any man should carry any vessel through the temple. And he taught them saying, Is it not written, My house shall be called the house of prayer? But ye have made it a den of thieves.¹⁶

Jesus belonged to that tiny group of men and women in history who instinctively ally themselves with the victims of power. Their spiritual psychology is explained very simply in a novel about one of the worst political crimes of the twentieth century, the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Gil Courtemanche, in *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*, puts these words into the mouth of Gentile about her lover Bernard Valcourt, a Canadian journalist:

I know exactly why I love you. You live like an animal guided by instinct. As if your eyes are closed and your ears are blocked, but there's a secret compass inside you that always directs you to the small and forgotten, or impossible loves, like ours. You know you can't do anything, that your being here won't change a thing, but you keep going anyway.¹⁷

People like Bernard are not able to do much about the way the small and forgotten are constantly crushed by the powerful, apart from occasionally snatching a victim from the advance of the juggernaut. But they are able to bear witness against the ugly cruelty of power and the people it corrupts. They become recording angels whose words stand defiantly against the evils they protest. In the dangerous work of being the voices of the universe's victims they frequently end up as victims themselves, but their death then becomes part of their testimony and it is remembered long after their persecutors are forgotten.

While it is true that many of these prophetic figures emerge from religion, the defiant side of religion is invariably compromised by its own collusion with power and its compulsive need to explain why things are the way they are. Institutional religion has not only developed theories to justify political power and social privilege as specifically ordained by God, it has even sought to justify the pain of non-human creation, usually along the lines that God knows best how to run a universe and who are we to challenge his methods? It is precisely at this point that many people hand

back the ticket, leap overboard from religion and take to the empty sea. This was what Darwin did, oppressed by what he called the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horridly cruel works of nature. In a frequently quoted letter to Asa Gray, written in 1860, Darwin says:

I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living body of caterpillars.¹⁸

He was referring to the fact that these enterprising wasps sting their prey not to kill but to paralyse them, so their larvae can feed on fresh (live) meat.

But theoretical religion is probably at its most repellent when it tries to explain the arbitrary suffering that suffuses human history, particularly when it justifies God's role in it all, usually as the helpless architect of human freedom. This is why some of the most principled and compassionate people in history have proclaimed that if there is behind the universe that which we call God, an almighty originating authority, then no human being should attempt to justify its ways or have anything to do with it. Instead, like Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's great novel, they should simply return the entrance ticket and try to dissociate themselves from such a cosmic abuser of power:

Tell me honestly, I challenge you – answer me: imagine that you are charged with building the edifice of human destiny, whose ultimate aim is to bring people happiness, to give them peace and contentment at last, but that in order to achieve this it is essential and unavoidable to torture just one little speck of creation, that same little child beating her breasts with her little fists, and imagine that this edifice has to be erected on her unexpiated tears. Would you agree to be the architect under these conditions?¹⁹

Ivan Karamazov's anger was provoked by the torture of a single child, yet what is that compared with the monumental sorrow of all the lost and blighted children of history, not to mention the humdrum miseries of ordinary mildly afflicted humans? Alas, rather than remain silent in the face of such overwhelming sorrow, the Church has blitzed humanity with explanations for suffering. I was inoculated against them as a young curate when, for the first time, I conducted a child's funeral. It was a bleak day in early February and we buried him in a cemetery streaked with dirty snow on a hillside in Lanarkshire. The father, wearing his Sunday suit, carried the little white coffin in his arms, and we threw earth on to it and I spoke words into the wind. Afterwards I tried to comfort the young mother, who was tight with grief and anger, by attempting a consoling explanation of her loss. She turned on me fiercely and thrust me away from her. She did not want her honest anger polluted by my religious explanations. How could she not be consumed with raging grief at the death of her

only son?

That kind of anger is still the most honest response to the victims of the indifferent power of the universe. And yet the emergence of that anger is itself a mystery. How did a universe, born of explosive power, give birth to this angry pity for the victims of that same power? There is no answer to the question. It is part of the mystery of unknowing that wounds us. But, though there is no answer, we should not leave the matter there: we should let our anger beget a compassion that goes against the cruel grain of the universe. It is well expressed in a poem by Sylvia Townsend Warner called 'Road, 1940':

Why do I carry, she said,
This child that is no child of mine?
Through the heat of the day it did nothing but fidget and whine.
Now it snuffles under the dew and the cold star-shine,
And lies across my heart heavy as lead,
Heavy as the dead.

Why did I lift it, she said,
Out of its cradle in the wheel-tracks?
On the dusty road burdens have melted like wax,
Soldiers have thrown down their rifles, misers slipped their packs;
Yes, and the woman who left it there has sped
With a lighter tread?

Though I should save it, she said,
What have I saved for the world's use?
If it grow to hero it will die or let loose
Death, or to hireling, nature already is too profuse
Of such, who hope and are disinherited,
Plough, and are not fed.

But since I've carried it, she said,
So far I might as well carry it still.
If we ever should come to kindness someone will
Pity me perhaps as the mother of a child so ill,
Grant me even to lie down on a bed;
Give me at least bread.²⁰

The sudden, inexplicable kindness of strangers is the best thing in the universe and it is uniquely human. It is a break in the order of nature that tells us, with cold ruthlessness, that in times of terror and calamity each of us is bound to save ourselves

and leave the world's wounded to perish. Yet, throughout our history, there have always been those who have made these defiant challenges against the pitiless order of things. Never many, of course, but enough to disturb and influence the rest of us and rouse us occasionally to action. The French novelist Albert Camus understood our reluctance to get involved, but he also knew that, in the end, some people do act. At the end of his novel *The Plague*, we hear him meditating:

Dr Rieux resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favour of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done to them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise. None the less, he knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. It could be only the record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaught, despite their personal afflictions, by all who, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.²¹

Camus' Dr Rieux was not motivated by religion in his work of healing. But to be fair to Christianity, the religion I know best, down the ages it has produced countless people who have followed the way of Jesus in serving the poor and trying to heal the world. Christians are still to be found in the worst places on earth, trying to make a difference to the lives of the wretched. It is in its work of organised care for others, whatever its theological basis, that Christianity is at its most compelling. Secular spirituality is at a disadvantage here. Because it is diffused throughout society rather than separately organised within it, it is more difficult to get it engaged in systematic and coordinated methods to change society. The problem is not that there is a lack of purely secular bodies dedicated to human welfare and the mending of the world; it is that there is no obvious agency that can gather the godless together to motivate them for the work. There is, of course, a host of agencies in the form of campaigning organisations and highly committed individuals, but the godless don't gather together once a week to be ethically challenged and spiritually uplifted. There have been attempts in the past by secular enthusiasts to copy the methods of the great religions and apply them to purely worldly purposes, but they were never very successful and have declined more dramatically than the Churches whose techniques they sought to copy. If the medium is the message, then it may be that secular spirituality will make a virtue of its diffused state, since it reflects humanity in its current situation, where community is increasingly something that is chosen rather than something that is given. Nevertheless, there are unifying instruments available to the committed that constitute a virtual community, such as the Internet, which was extensively used in mobilising opposition to the Iraq War, and which can be used to gather the new

spiritual diaspora together on a functional basis whenever it is needed. Another increasingly significant gathering point for the human community is provided by music, which offers to its disciples not only moments of grace and transcendence but also opportunities for protesting against the excesses of the powerful. So it could be argued that the lack of any single organising authority is itself an important mark of contemporary human spirituality; and that the specific occasionality of its coming together is one of its most important strengths.

Encountering presence in absence

The day is wearing on. It is late and a kind of peace has come over me. It is the peace that comes from accepting a duty, but before I try to define it I have to describe the almost final mood of the day. I call it ‘encountering presence in absence’. I can no more explain it than I can account for the experience of the abyss. All I can say is that, as well as moments of deep emptiness, the mystery of Being affords us fleeting moments of encounter with what feels like a kind of presence. To be more exact: it feels like the presence of the great absence in our lives that leaves only echoes or footprints. We have to be careful not to turn these moments into religious objects, to reify them into explanatory idols. They are, anyway, beyond description. It is impossible to find verbal equivalents for them, to catch them in words. Poetry comes closest to communicating the mystery of the experience. I want to quote a poem about one of these encounters. It came to that remarkable woman Simone Weil, who refused ever to board any of the ships of religion that ply their wares on the oceans of human sorrow and uncertainty. It is by Edward Hirsch and it is called ‘Simone Weil in Assisi’:

She disliked the miracles in the gospels.
She never believed in the mystery of contact
here below, between a human being and God
She despised popular tales of apparitions.

But that afternoon in Assisi she wandered
through the abominable Santa Maria degli Angeli
and happened upon a little marvel of Romanesque
purity where St Francis liked to pray.
She was there a short time when something absolute
and omnivorous, something she neither believed
nor disbelieved, something she understood – but what
was it? – forced her to her knees.²²

I have had one or two moments like that in my life. Because of my religious

background, I was always tempted to interpret them as evidence for the official claims of Christianity. Now I am happy just to let them be. They are as much a part of the human experience of the mystery of Being as the experience of nothingness and the abyss. We do not need to posit any supernatural agency to account for them. They are intrinsic to the life process and can be explained in natural terms. Nevertheless, they come to us as sheer gift, as an encounter with the graciousness of Being, as a kind of exultation in the pure fact of living. It is their very ordinariness that makes them significant. At the very least they help us stop trying to explain life and they prompt us to start living it with a bit more passion and gratitude. I'll end this movement with a description of one I had that comes very low down the Richter scale of mystical experience. Nevertheless, the commonplace experience I am going to recount was a moment of grace.

It was well after ten on a late June evening. I was driving back to Edinburgh from North Berwick, which is about twenty miles east of the city on the edge of the North Sea. It was one of those clear-as-day nights we get in Scotland in midsummer, when it never really gets dark. I could see across the Firth of Forth to Fife and the mountains of Perthshire beyond. I had the car window right down so that I could smell the poppy-studded hayfields lining the road. On the car radio Holst's *Planets* was being broadcast in a concert and they'd just got to the Jupiter theme. Suddenly, my right arm was out of the window and I was shouting 'Yes' to no one. I felt that if my life had contained only that moment, the brief visit of a mayfly, my time would have been justified. Early in the morning I had asked myself who there was to praise for the mystery of Being. Here I was at the end of the day simply giving thanks to the perfumed Scottish night, saying 'Yes' to the absence that felt like a presence. It was enough.

A kind of defiance

It is at moments like that that I find myself confronted by a certain gracious latency in creation, a sense of something not yet disclosed. Is there something in the life process itself that is trying to express itself through the dark mirror of human consciousness? Obviously, there is no way of answering that question, but there is a way of responding to it. We could choose to live as though the best meaning and purpose we can find for our own lives is the very meaning and purpose of the universe itself. We could pay the universe a compliment it probably does not deserve by living as though its purpose were love, as one tradition in Christianity says it is. And if the universe, in the end, were to prove us wrong, who cares? Our lives, then, would have been an act of defiance of indifferent power, and power is always worth defying. Even though we experience God as absent, we should continue to live as though he were present in love. That's why I love the old Castilian romantic, Miguel De Unamuno. In his great book *The Tragic Sense of Life* he quotes these words: 'Man is perishing. That may be;

and if it is nothingness that awaits us let us so act that it will be an unjust fate.'²³

Notes - I: Looking

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