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SET SAIL

**A FUNDAMENTALIST FACES FACTS
ABOUT GOD, NATURE, AND HUMANITY**

CHUCK BRYANT

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Foreword

A. “In terms of those questions”

I had a question about the Hebrew exodus from Egyptian slavery. The simple question has substantial ramifications for the religion in which I grew up. I’d mulled it over for years with no satisfactory resolution. Then I met Liz Nieman. Liz takes her Judaism seriously in both academic and practical affairs. For years she’s kept up substantial regular study of Torah on her own and with Rabbis. She participated actively in two synagogues. She stays informed and thinks intelligently. So I sought her input.

The issue: Modern Israel’s national history has roots in the Exodus tale of freedom from Egypt, maybe *ca.* the 16th to the 13th century BCE,¹ maybe under Ramses II (data don’t always match, and scholars dispute details). But given the plainly metaphorical nature of the Exodus plagues account, I didn’t understand why the Pharaoh would voluntarily release such a conveniently enslaved work force. Many other aspects of the Exodus saga also begged for corroboration; some archaeological data support the possibility of a literal emigration, but I simply could not accept such a landmark story—the ten plagues—as literal history. Thus my question for Liz: Where does history end, and legend begin, for Judaism and the nation of Israel?

While Liz researched materials for my review, she e-mailed me a brief reply, including this remark:

Apparently one of the reasons I had trouble quickly formulating an answer to your original question is because I have not been raised and taught to think in terms of those questions but rather to look at how G–d’s presence is manifest in the world.

But my church background **did** train me to think “in terms of those questions.” And I began to ask “those questions” as I found many flaws in my heritage of a literal anthropomorphic God who inspired (“breathed”) the very words of the Bible to men who wrote them down and passed them along to us. Conservative Christianity taught me to take the Bible as CNN’s papyrus website of factual and flawless history. This premise applied particularly to the view that Jesus fulfilled predictions of the Hebrew Messiah (“anointed one,” equal to the Greek term anglicized *Christ*).

I took my traditions and my Bible study seriously. No brag, just fact: during college and somewhat even during senior high I could quote from memory, locate, cross-reference, and discuss more scripture and related concepts than most adults I knew. But that very study also uncovered many problems with my own Christian principles, and eventually as well my western, linear, literalist premises of the dichotomies of right vs. wrong, truth vs. error, good vs. evil, God vs. Satan, theism vs. atheism. Somewhere along the way I applied my question to its theological counterpart: where does history end, and legend begin, for *Christianity*? And what does that imply for theism today, especially any beliefs based on the Bible?

This paper sketches my search for answers to “those questions.”

First, we need to establish some basic dynamics and definitions. Though this outlines my attempt to get the big picture on “spiritual” things—God, religion, faith, etc.—we first need to delve into a little neuroscience. It all comes together later.

B. Technical Foundations

B. 1. Three Brains Are Better Than One

Our most powerful mental habits have deep roots in older parts of the brain. They address our most fundamental survival and social concerns. They embody the most ancient manifestations of who-we-are.

The human brain involves many interacting, interrelated parts. For our purposes of considering brain function (not literal anatomy) it’ll help to think of it as if we had three specialized brains.²

¹ I prefer the conventions of “BCE”(Before Common Era) and “CE” (Common Era) for their neutrality as contrasted with BC and AD.

² For more detail on this functional view, see Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996 (also www.edge.org/3rd_culture/ledoux/ledoux_p2.html [8/24/02], www.childtraumaacademy.com/amazing_brain/lesson02/page01.html [8/23/02]). Daniel Goleman provides a good partial summary in Chapter Two of *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995). Carl Sagan discusses related brain anatomy and general function in Chapter Three of *The Dragons of Eden* (New York: Ballantine, 1977). Paul MacLean, a longtime pioneer in this field, posits a literal triune brain: protoreptilian, paleomammalian, and neomammalian (Paul MacLean, *The Triune Brain in Evolution*. New York: Plenum Press, 1990).

1. As our oldest structure we find the brain stem, which some call the REPTILIAN BRAIN. Emerging probably a few hundred million years ago, it still dominates the simplest animals and many radio talk show hosts. It runs pretty much on autopilot, regulating vital functions such as heartbeat, respiration, metabolism, etc., and probably chocolate-seeking.

2. Next we have the EMOTIONAL BRAIN, which began emerging probably over 100 million years ago. In practical terms, this system processes the dynamics central to our discussion.

This conglomerate offers life much of its color, fragrance, rhythm, and sensuality. In concert with technical knowledge and skills linked to the neocortices, its vitality can unleash creative expressions of art, literature, drama, sculpture, oratory, music, dance—anything that displays and expresses our human spirit and passions; that evokes and addresses questions of our identity and purpose, the meaning of life, exploring what we dread and what we desire. Beyond these more obvious illuminations, some of us more cerebral, rigid types could enjoy life a lot more if we'd just lighten up, do something spontaneous, and let the emotional brain strut its stuff once in a while. *Go with the flow. Use the force, Luke. Comonbaby, comonbaby, do the Conga.*

3. At the most recent and sophisticated end we find the NEOCORTEX, which emerged and matured probably over the last few tens of millions of years, though not yet in some elected or appointed officials. These highest brain systems give us the potential for the most deliberate, conscious control of our actions, if we do the work properly.

B. 2. Rational and Non-Rational

1. We often behave according to **rational** standards. That simply means we base our decisions on, or at least keep them consistent with, objective principles and processes. We anticipate outcomes; we assess benefits and risks; we go with what seems most likely to achieve the greatest good. We may have missed a key point or relied on some bad data, but still reasoned well and made a sensible choice based on what we trusted as true.

The neocortex serves as the mega-multitasker of rationality. It juggles most processes that we generally consider “intelligence”: information, language, math, insight. It coordinates conscious thought, deliberation, anticipation, problem-solving, and long-term planning; a strategy for the hunt, stockpiling for the winter, securing or improving shelter. It evaluates concrete sensory perception. It also handles some abstract and not strictly rational thought processes such as aspiration, reflection, and introspection. It also creates arbitrary categories to help us organize our thoughts and beliefs; in so doing it may aim to apply judgments such as true/false. When we learn to apply our neocortical skills well with accurate and relevant information, our decisions usually prove more reliable and productive.

2. When we operate on **non-rational** standards, our ideas or acts do *not* center on an objective, empirical basis; they come through indoctrination or coercion, by habit, or instinctively and impulsively.

A significant detail on two non-rational phenomena: We need to distinguish **emotions** and **feelings**, terms most of us use interchangeably. I'll use the terms as reflected in much leading research:

- An **emotion** refers to certain automatic physiological responses, instinctive and unlearned.
- A **feeling** refers to our ideas and expressions related to those experiences, representing an integration of our conscious learning, perception, interpretation, and evaluation. As in “I *felt* scared/thrilled/relieved/upset/ecstatic/distraught/welcomed,” etc., the “feeling” actually entails little more than a *learned cognitive label* that we apply to *automatic emotional, biological responses*. This distinction will become more important later.

Our emotional brain develops and begins operating before the higher cortical functions such as verbal memory and logic. As a result we perceive its functions as reflexive, even animalistic.

I emphasize that all such non-rational dynamics act *independently* of and *neutral* to rationality, not necessarily contrary to it. Actions and habits rooted in non-rational processes may turn out as well as rational. But to whatever extent that non-rational decisions may more likely overlook some crucial information, their results may reflect more coincidence than intent.

Outcomes aside, many specific choices and beliefs emerge from an array of complex patterns and routines that we *don't* “think” about. Some of these we may safely indulge; some we should watch carefully; some we should deliberately try to change.

Green light: Many non-rational dynamics can work to our benefit and help good things happen. A personal sense of comfort and safety established in childhood may sustain optimism and trust under distressing circumstances. Enduring gratitude or hopefulness may override problems and misfortune. We may do things unselfishly for others out of compassion, commitment, or altruism. Even an unpleasant emotion such as what we call fear can do us good, helping protect us by avoiding danger or changing risky behavior.

These may involve rational factors as well, but the emotional component usually *drives* the action.

Yellow light: Other non-rational idiosyncrasies go against our everyday better judgment: any less-than-healthy indulgence, some odd mental fixation or superstition, a lapse of integrity under pressure. Many kind, gentle persons make some very selfish demands—kindly and gently. Many decent folks simply must have everything in a certain place and just so. Some very intelligent people believe in some utterly irrational and superstitious ideas.

Red light: More seriously, some of us repeatedly engage in counterproductive behavior; an excellent employee may under stress blurt out sarcastic, career-ending comments to a supervisor. Attitudes and behaviors may prove even more destructive, even though more insidiously: good people fall prey to nagging doubts over their competence or even personal worth. Some adults, mature in most other ways, still rely on and even seek approval from parents, teachers, clergy, any perceived authority figure considered somehow superior to themselves. People stay in dead-end relationships, even enduring emotional abuse and violence. If parents neglect feeding and nurturing their child, or even if they scream at, beat, and sexually abuse their child, the child builds a basic life view on this experience. Many abused children, having no other major frame of reference, report perceiving this as normal—“All parents do this. All kids get hit at home.” Abused children may not consciously seek out such relationships as teens and adults, but somehow many of them end up in much the same. Despite serious consequences, we may remain stuck in our ruts, because it matches what we expect out of life—not logically or cognitively, but subjectively, experientially, emotionally.

For better or worse, the gut often wins out over the mind, non-rational over rational. We can overcome or at least cope with any negative dynamics, but success requires deliberate, continued effort.

I emphasize that in various degrees, everyone grapples with some non-rational practices and premises. These gradually settle into durable patterns through:

- ✓ Neurological or genetic predisposition, perhaps linked to nutrition and infection, even prenatally;
- ✓ Interactions with family, close friends, authority figures, institutions, and culture overall;
- ✓ Major life experiences, from nurturing, stimulation, and comfort, to oppression, neglect, hostility, trauma or other abuse;
- ✓ Messages that become our own internal self-talk, whether positive and empowering, or negative and disabling;
- ✓ [E] all of the above. Biology, neurology, genealogy, psychology, sociology, ecology—whatever the sources, these compulsions run strong, far beneath the rational surface. The actions somehow match up with something about what each of us expects out of life, from idealist to fatalist and all points between.

Computers do their work algorithmically and precisely according to “if x then y .” We can’t always do that. We’re based on carbon, not silicon. Each moment we generate and respond to a constantly shifting collage of needs, values, and impulses. Clearly stated and firmly held principles—religious beliefs as a prime example—can certainly guide our conduct, but even some of those may prove inconsistent with or contradictory to each other; some serve our best interests and some defeat them. We may even admit we can neither justify nor explain them. But the beat goes on. And on. And on.

Non-rational comes as part of the package of who-we-are. And I emphasize: this applies to good people, intelligent people. Your family. Your friends. You. Me. All *Homo sapiens*, by nature, DO manifest **some forms** of non-rationality,³ generally as a function of the emotional brain.

The amygdala serves as the storehouse of emotional memory—gut responses that can may go far back before conscious rational deliberation. An infant vividly experiences pleasure, anxiety, fear, relief,

³ None of this implies in any way that we should condone any foolishly risky, inhuman, vicious, repugnant, or destructive act. This provides no stepping stone to moral excuses; apart from verifiable physiological dysfunction, we hold every person accountable for every action. Even with purely organic conditions, one may still bear legal accountability for causing damage or injury; e.g., an epileptic seizure causing a motor vehicle crash.

etc., but the infant brain has no verbal ability to grasp, categorize, and store those data for later conscious recall. These primitive memories consist of powerful, raw *sensations* for which we simply don't have words, perhaps not even visual memory. Such declarative (or explicit) memory begins forming later, elsewhere in the brain.⁴

Many declarative memories fade with time; emotional memories seem to endure much better. Yet to rational, conscious perception, the amygdala's emotional memories may remain concealed. Our ability to recall and express them explicitly still functions subject to the emotional brain's permission. If we can identify them at all they may seem vague at best, maybe baseless by rational standards. Whatever evokes the emotional response, we tend to interpret the present as the past, experiencing strong visceral responses even if we literally don't consciously know why.

Correspondingly, an appeal to the emotional brain addresses mostly gut impressions, images, and perceptions related to our deepest, most basic wants and needs. To the extent that we buy in emotionally, we'll do what it takes to get what we want: we become the four-year old screaming in the checkout line. Non-rational trumps rational, emotional trumps cognitive.

Absent any emotional agenda, we can instantly swap out wrong cognitive data for right ("Oh, the capital is Montpelier, not Burlington"). But if we bundle even a simple point of misinformation with an emotional context, it may prove invulnerable to reason. Perhaps one simply has too much pride to admit, say, forgetting the time of the party, or misreading the map. When it comes down to endorsing linear, rational truth, or upholding personal, subjective values and beliefs that leave you "feeling good about yourself," guess which typically wins.

Facts can't just switch on and off the effects of deeply-seated emotional messages. Consider the difference in cooking with gas and electricity. Turn off a gas eye and the heat stops instantly (Montpelier/Burlington). But turn off an electric element at its highest heat, and for several minutes it can still burn you. It needs time to cool. Similarly, the prefrontal cortex can apply relevant corrective input and *help* cool off an emotionally laden issue. But it takes time, according to how deeply the idea affects one's life. We need maybe a few moments after having seen something startling; we may need weeks, months, or years of therapeutic learning and reconditioning to overcome superstitious fear, deeply ingrained prejudice or dogmatism, or trauma.

Even if we recognize, say, a racial prejudice as toxic, just hearing sermons on equality won't fix us. Change may more likely begin if we meet someone of that race or religion and find that we *like* him. If this dissonance helps us realize that we *want* to enjoy the company of those "others," we can deliberately change behaviors, and consciously build a different viewpoint. Yet even though we may learn to live according to better principles, the emotional vestiges may still keep us from feeling as open as we'd like.

All things considered, emotion drives a vital part of our identity as human beings, custom-blended with each person's inimitably unique blend of biological, social, and other environmental influences. All these fundamentally non-rational impulses have gravitas because they lie deeply ingrained in our neural physiology and its attendant history. This primal *dynamic* itself we should not dismiss as a failing, a weakness, a childish habit to grow out of and abandon. Like neural synapses and autoimmune responses and mitosis and REM sleep, emotion simply does what it does; it's neither right nor wrong. The instinctive, automatic dynamics of the emotional brain have just as much value and significance for human life and dignity as do the higher conscious neocortical processes.

Yet in order to facilitate the best informed and responsible choices, we need to make sure that we don't stop with animal instincts and emotions. We benefit from deliberately developing our uniquely human capacity for rational analysis, letting it temper the passions and separate reason from mere opinion or even deep conviction (which may consist of nonsense). Critical thinking and insight allow and compel us to judge our choices, or our instinctual, habitual, or compulsive responses, as either help or

⁴ Emotional memory also differs from working (or short-term) memory, which functions much like computer RAM (probably mostly from the prefrontal cortex), and procedural memory of habits and shortcuts (probably mostly from the cerebellum).

hindrance, morally good or bad, respectable or despicable. Without these informed judgments we could not have brought about even the simplest forms of civilization. Nor can we continue maturing individually and as humanity, without a clearer understanding and respect for **all** these dynamics.

All these dynamics relate directly to the ultimate basis for supernaturalism, spirituality, and religion.

C. Practical Applications

C. 1. Externals and Internals⁵

Religion integrates an array of non-rational impressions, relationships, values, practices, and self-assessments that seldom respond neatly to rational persuasion. I don't think religion's lack of an objective foundation requires modern thinking people to dismiss it outright, but in order to assess it properly we must distinguish the primal religious *impulse*, the *internal* stirrings of primal and genuine faith, from the arbitrary *external forms* of our institutions, doctrines, and rituals that structure and express that faith.

Emotion may override cognition; feelings may overwhelm facts. Blind faith in theism often effectively equates God, religion, and external authority, as demonstrated by many students in the Earth Science class I took at Harding University (a Christian school). The professor had us discuss and evaluate beliefs and assumptions related to the premises of theism, atheism, and science, and how each has affected human history. Some worthwhile insights came up. But most students jumbled world views clumsily and erroneously. Almost all statements on atheism consisted of predictably negative, shallow, and often false assertions. Many equated some aspects of science with atheism. Predictably, most students had only good things to say about theism. Some even equated theism with Christianity. Some people grew increasingly annoyed whenever anyone would confront the fallacies or counter any theistic cliché. They seemed confused or especially irritated to hear their criticisms of atheism applied validly to theism as well. Most people seemed to see their church heritage as right and everything else as wrong, or at least less right. These failed to distinguish God from their personal faith; they did not show any understanding that much theism, including Christianity, has also given the world horrendous evil.

Given the youthful inexperience in the room, we almost expect such naive reliance on simplistic beliefs. But many adults never grow much past this level. Anyone who maintains this spiritual color-blindness will have serious difficulty honestly considering the substantial problems with and failures of traditional theism. One who sees no difference between an individual's internal experience of God, and religion's external expressions thereof, can give no *proper* honor to God, nor to nature, nor humanity.

Anyone carefully applying average intellectual abilities—say, middle school level—can understand scripture and faith as fully as anyone needs to (though maturity comes only with experience and reflection) and decide things for herself. No one need rely on any external "authority." Any reasonably intelligent and caring person *operating free of dogmatic indoctrination* can cultivate and maintain his own individual, mature faith. Any open-minded, thoughtful believer may also recognize the practical limits and the logical flaws of scripture, tradition, and religious practice; any diligent seeker can at least start thinking about what to accept and what to reject, and how best to apply what remains.

If nothing else, this section may help some readers better understand some of the reasons why others have "turned away" from traditional faith.

As several key terms may mean very different things to individual readers, I need to clarify some definitions and connotations that I have in mind as I use them.

- *God* (capital G) I use to refer to the conventional western concept of a personal, anthropomorphic deity, usually the Biblical Yahweh (a.k.a. Lord, Jehovah, Elohim, Adonai, El, Allah). Lower case g *god* represents the generic for any presumed deity. Simply for convenience and minimal distraction, I'll stick to the masculine reference (apologies to goddess devotees).

- *Spirituality* or anything *spiritual* usually relates to one's belief in, attitude toward, and response to supernatural (spirit) entities or essence. Later for my own view I use the term more broadly.

- The term *faith* I use most often to indicate one's active involvement with or expression of spiritual beliefs and dynamics. *Faith* does sometimes refer to a belief system.

- Two related terms we sometimes jumble together: (1) A *myth* offers a traditional, fictitious tale offered usually to explain a belief, custom, or various phenomena, perhaps to help us understand and cope with things beyond our understanding and control. (2) Here the term *legend* indicates a tale that usually exaggerates or fabricates events which, unlike myths, may have basis in actual or at least

⁵ This format I first heard put forth most thoroughly by James Woodroof in a series of sermons for the College Church of Christ, Searcy, Arkansas. Mr. Woodroof applied the format differently.

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plausible historic figures;⁷ e.g., tales of King Arthur and his knights, Mason Weems' fictitious "I cannot tell a lie" tale of a young George Washington chopping down the cherry tree.⁸

- Having already made references to *religion* we need to focus that term before going any further. Some dictionary entries do reflect the commonly understood European "church" model. Absent a deliberate and persistent effort to the contrary, we tend to see our own upbringing and perspective as the "normal" means of religious expression. We tend to brush aside other beliefs and practices as variations or aberrations of **our true** religion.

Let's expand our understanding to reflect religion's broader role in the world. Religion may blend teachings, moral codes, emotional experiences, aesthetics, and acts usually related to belief in or reverence for any venerable entity (deity, spirit, ancestor, political leader) or a social order. Religion codifies spiritual values; religion structures expressions of faith.

- Occasionally we'll speak of Christianity in terms of *High Church* and *Low Church*. High Church, such as traditional Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Eastern Orthodox, commonly entails a heavy, solemn atmosphere. It calls for submission to ecclesiastical authority, emphasizes sacraments, and commonly centers on an unchanging liturgy or a set cycle of services, with an extensive calendar of formal observances. High Church also usually indicates formal and rigid distinctions between clergy and laity; specific liturgical or classical music; incense; formal ritualized confessions; congregational participation in worship mainly or only through scripted programs. "Low church" I use here to refer to most other Protestant and nondenominational fellowships in general. (I don't find the term at all condescending, and I grew up in *very* "low church.") It implies a more casual and effusive feel, more evangelical than sacramental; relies more on local authority, even on the basis of independent congregations; allows or expects more lively congregational participation and interaction, even spontaneously; encourages more informal confessions shared in dyads, small groups, or congregational settings; may incorporate more contemporary music; has an atmosphere of praise that may still let people get *down* with it and maybe even shake your holy booty.⁹

- We commonly associate *fundamentalist* religion with fervently evangelical groups, usually Low Church, and a belief in scriptures as literally, verbally inspired by God. Those connotations often hold true, but I suggest that more central to fundamentalism lies the dogmatic attitude of "My view of God, scripture, and doctrine is absolutely right,"¹⁰ especially among believers who trust "authorities" for answers. Fundamentalists often insist, "This isn't *my* idea. I'm telling you **exactly** what *the Bible* (or other presumed authority) says and that's all I'll accept." Fundamentalism in practice, no matter how diplomatically it may present itself, no matter how elegant its appearance, denies or at least discounts the validity of all other views. It tries to force everything into black and white, ignoring or denying all the complex hues, shades, and tints that make up the real world.

Fundamentalism may thrive as vigorously among the most solemn, orthodox, formalized, ritualized belief systems as it does among the most rowdy, informal, down-home Bible-banging group. Fundamentalist subgroups exist within the many sects of Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam—certainly every faith I've encountered. (I generally use *literalist* when the issue relates specifically to interpreting scripture, and *fundamentalist* for broader applications or views.)

I now see myself as recovering from this outlook as my own heritage. Breaking free from this mindset can be as difficult as what many persons go through to break free from abuse of various drugs, sexual indulgence, gambling, and other compulsive or addictive behaviors.

- *Conservative* indicates an emphasis on upholding current positions or practices, defending and

⁷ "Legendary" may also describe actual remarkable ability or great achievement, e.g., Mozart's compositional abilities, the design and labor required to build the pyramids, historic accounts of explorers and discoverers.

⁸ A related term not used here: a *fable* gives us an entertaining morality tale, such as those we attribute to Aesop.

⁹ Don't take these extreme illustrations as literal or absolute opposites. All sorts of mixtures emerge inbetween. Find more formal elaboration at, e.g., www.newadvent.org/cathen/09399a.htm, www.geocities.com/anglicelt/whatdoterms.html (8/15/02).

Too complicated? Try this—*high church:Presidential Inauguration::low church:backyard barbecue*.

¹⁰ A larger, freer spirituality embraces all persons and faiths, including fundamentalists, and yet rejects dogmatism and self-righteousness. Some fundamentalists call this paradox hypocritical but this shows only that they fail to understand it; the rigid black-and-white viewpoint that typifies fundamentalism simply doesn't apprehend or allow such flexibility.

maintaining—conserving—the status quo. (That often holds true as well in secular politics, but otherwise my use of this term in this paper relates exclusively to religious issues. Political implications, if any, come only indirectly.) Conservatives in my experience espouse either a literalist or a fairly strict interpretation of scripture. Even so, conservatives show more flexibility and open-mindedness than fundamentalists.

Section I of this work consists mainly of how I came to recognize the drastic and pervasive flaws I found dominating most fundamentalist or conservative beliefs, positions, and implications. Any such statements, however severe, generally do **not** speak derisively of the *persons* who hold to those beliefs.

- Religion commonly entails terms such as *worship service, ritual, tradition, sacrament, liturgy, ceremony*, etc. reflecting formal practices on an individual or corporate level, High or Low, in a western sense. These may include acts as simple as an individual's private, impromptu blessing before a meal, or as complex as a strictly-choreographed protocol for a Japanese tea ceremony or the High Holy Days.

Most traditional corporate religious practices include some forms of such elements. In routine daily, weekly, or other regularly scheduled worship settings, most participants commonly engage in group singing, chanting, reciting, reading, and/or responses. These and other practices may take the believers in drastically different emotional directions:

- ✓ At one extreme (more often among Low Church): lively music, dancing, ecstatic utterances, screaming and yelling, and intense emotional appeals may whip the faithful into a divine frenzy, hysterics, and even physical danger; envision Pentecostal tongue speaking and handling poisonous snakes.
- ✓ At the other extreme (more often among High Church): processions for clergy or the *hakafah* for the Torah scrolls, liturgy in a putative sacred language, removing shoes for prayer and the various movements during Islamic *salā t*, bowing or kneeling, the lighting of incense or candles, and other routines may subjectively establish a distinctly solemn and reverent tone. Many worshippers find great comfort in precisely the unchanging, repetitive nature of such acts and agendas, and their continuity across generations.

High Church and various mystic traditions may minimize or exclude discussion and interaction to let the very “not-thinking” of highly ritualized acts and chants enhance contemplation. An immersion in solitude and deep silence may evoke not only subjective responses of deep serenity and spiritual intimacy, but also objectively measurable changes in metabolism and brain activity, including trance.¹¹ (Some mystics, to my knowledge more commonly among Asian traditions, exercise phenomenal control over even their vital functions, at the reptilian level.)

However alien these extremes may seem to each other, the aesthetic and visceral experiences in their own right may help engage many who profess the faith.

The roles of simple dedication and discipline add another context for genuinely valuing routines and rituals of whatever sort in both corporate and individual life. Frenetic, tranquil, or anywhere in between, shared worship helps unite the faith community. Even many secular people find comfort, support, and social continuity in rituals, sacred vows, and established traditions to mark major life transitions (birth, “initiation” into the faith, coming of age, marriage, death, burial, and mourning). Also in facing everyday personal or social duress, and particularly in times of crisis and uncertainty, people seek something reliable and consistent. The stability of worship services, customs, and fellowship provides such an anchor. (Recall the immediate upsurge in attendance at houses of worship after September Eleven; recall also how it died down as people adjusted to the stress.)

So let me expressly emphasize that I do **not** flatly reject, oppose, nor even look down on the conventional understanding of *religion, worship service, liturgy, ritual, tradition, sacrament, and ceremony*. Even in the more rigid settings dictated by a strictly doctrinaire ruling individual or council, I **respect** the subjective value in various disciplines of private and public worship. Particularly in our increasingly fragmented and individualistic society, I see a need for more meaningful public participatory events and routines to bond individuals and communities. Formal religious systems and procedures can help meet

¹¹ For more discussion see Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. New York: Ballantine, 2001, pp. 88–90.

this need even better if we have a clearer, fresher, more thorough understanding of what religion truly represents, and *should* represent in the 21st century.

Regardless, too much religious practice **externalizes** these dynamics, treating theological ideas, actions, items or places as holy within themselves. I will frequently use these terms expressly to indicate such externalized religion. To explain this more thoroughly I'll now offer a brief overview of some of the origins of religion. In later sections I'll also cite numerous historic examples, and some of my own experiences, to demonstrate (1) the gross failures of dictating any limited, doctrinaire, dogmatic, fundamentalist sketch of God, and (2) the shallowness—and horrors—that may result when religious persons trust in, settle for, and defend any institution's externals as Holy. Accordingly, any persons who live out ostentatious and authoritarian dynamics, who treat religion as an end in itself, I call *religionists*.

I realize that using these terms in any negative sense may annoy or even anger many people who cherish a particular system of faith. If I may adapt Thomas Paine's complaints over secular government to this context, these religionists "raise a formidable outcry in defence of custom."

For safety let's get more detail to put this in perspective.

How did religion itself come about? Fundamentalists believe God or gods revealed themselves to us in visions, laws, and customs; here we will take a more pragmatic approach. We may almost as well ask how art or music or dance came about. It all varied widely according to the clan, the region, the resources available, and what the people wanted to express or accomplish.

Most religions have some common elements or principles and yet may diverge drastically in particulars. Cultures and subcultures around the world use different modalities, venerate or otherwise interact with different entities, operate on different motivations and concerns, trust contrasting premises and assumptions, value different ideals, and certainly espouse an amazingly broad range of unique beliefs, superstitions, acts, and routines for worship and everyday life.

Let's glance briefly at the breadth of a few examples of religious traditions beyond the constraints of monotheism. Much religion overtly serves politics; Shinto continues to provoke controversy in Japan as it blends secular and spiritual aims. Roughly 20–30% of Japanese deny any belief in souls or spirits of the dead, but three fourths of them have either a Shinto or Buddhist altar in their home; almost half have both. Polytheistic Hindu traditions commonly emphasize following one's individual teacher. Similarly, Indonesian *agama* ("text") refers to any writings one uses as the basis for one's own traditions. The Wana of Sulawesi focus on attendance at shamanic rituals and they have no written texts outlining doctrines or beliefs. Many traditions outside the west evolved religious terminology to label their otherwise routine practices essentially to appease western missionaries. They may have relatively tangential concern with any god and much diligent concern with social custom and hierarchy, rituals for birth and death, handling of food, and aesthetics.¹²

Anthropologists, philosophers and theologians have written volumes on various theories of how these myriad systems evolved. Pascal Boyer details how most theories emphasize religion's role as an explanation of the world, or comfort, or promoting social order, or a cognitive illusion—and though elements of these do apply in many cases, he shows how none of those on its own can completely suffice.¹³ Too often we end up interpreting these effects as the cause.

We may gain limited perspective on the world of religion as a large globe gives us some perspective on the earth: we can accurately get the big picture, with most of the major features and a few visible details, yet the real world contains far more complexities than any model can represent. So I acknowledge outright that I offer this overview primarily as a backdrop for my own heritage, Biblical monotheism, and secondarily for the vastly more diverse realm of spiritual and supernatural experiences in general.

With these ample disclaimers and qualifiers thoroughly stated: At the most fundamental level, religion probably began with a profound sense of awe at life and nature. These vivid visceral perceptions accumulated as emotional memories even before we had language to articulate them. A vague impulse of what we call reverence and adoration merged with tremendous fear and dread as we learned the wrath

¹² John R. Bowen, *Religions in Practice: An Approach to the Anthropology of Religion*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002, Chapter One.

¹³ Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 2001, Chapter One.

of nature. We grunted at lightning and scampered for high ground to escape flash floods. We saw our families and foes swallowed in earthquakes, killed by beasts, engulfed in lava flows. Storms, droughts, and wildfires destroyed our food sources and our simple shelters. We attributed natural destruction to unseen greater powers; we likewise supposed that beneficent powers blessed us with safety and sustenance.

In all these we confronted and pondered our mortality. What happened when a kinsman fell asleep and did not awaken? We had to face something final. When Neandertals and perhaps earlier hominids made the most primitive burials, they ritualized one aspect of what we call religion. At this stage such acts manifested a profound, organic link to existence and identity. They made conscious efforts, even if expressed only in grunts and moans and howling, to grasp life and death.

As our languages and societies emerged and evolved, we further conceptualized these deep broodings and the powers that we conceptualized out-there. We cultivated customs from these roots. Some bands, tribes, and nations created their own objects of reverence, either as personalities we have known among us (ancestors, rulers, warriors, shamans) or deities we have not (Shiva, Yahweh, Baal), manufactured goods (idols, statues, crosses, etc.), or natural phenomena (sun, wind, sea). Some of the deities had universal rule; some had specific tasks. Over the generations we named them, developed their identities, weaved tales about them, and gradually built up traditions to honor them. Much of this we did largely out of pragmatism, seeking to order our societies, or out of fear, to build an imperfect but comforting sense of personal and tribal safety and strength.

We never saw the mystical entities in public, of course, but we refined our lore to place the spirits. In some cultures the gods dwelt in objects of nature such as trees, boulders, or oceans. Some cultures built shrines for them in the center of the village, or families assigned them to specific rooms of the house. Some peoples specified their presence in areas not readily accessible: in heaven, on high mountains, deep in the forest, at the bottom of the river, inside the volcano. We sometimes forbade individuals from even approaching sacred sites. We appointed altars and areas where we could appease the deities and offset their wrath by offering plant, animal, and human sacrifices, or carrying out other sacred rituals and ceremonies as we thought them up. (Many people around the world placate their deities still today. When the volcano Popocatepetl threatened the Mexican village of San Pedro Yancuitalpan in 1997, townspeople hiked up the mountainside with fruits, cooked fowl, and other gifts. At Hawai'i's Kilauea crater I found flowers and fresh fruits left for Pele.)

Culture and religion became a chicken/egg cycle: religion shaped the culture shaped the religion shaped... and it continues today. In some societies mystics, visionaries, and healers maintained the more organic, direct sense of the divine, whether within themselves or as representatives of the unseen deities. Some might manifest the holy anywhere. Others undertook intense solitary quests for spiritual refinement and renewal. Upon return they might share their visions and revelations.¹⁴

Some societies set up castes of clergy and laity, however formally or casually. Evidence of presumably divine or dæmonic influence varied for this recognition of mystic elitism. One group might bestow it arbitrarily on a genealogical basis; others might derive it from creativity, eloquence, apparent healing powers, triumphs in war, "spiritual gifts," simple charisma, or political connections. It might reflect mere eccentricities, or symptoms that today we recognize as mental illness. Any of these things might impress or simply frighten people, especially in superstitious societies—so they often assumed it must indicate some link to the Spirit World. Today most religious people accept some form of this enduring holy/common division as normative.

I consider this externalized authority a pivotal marker of not the maturing, but the *deterioration* of religion. Any formalized intermediary by definition puts more distance between the individual and the divine; an increasingly external and institutionalized system supplanted the personal, immediate, internal spiritual encounter. Hence religion became less organic, less human, less intimate, less meaningful.

As civilizations emerged and stabilized, many cultures further institutionalized their faith according to local norms and values. One tribe's medicine man offered sacrifices to animal deities; a people to the north observed taboos during the full moon; another clan danced to honor the sun, rain, and wind; the

¹⁴ Biblical scriptures such as Ex. 3:1–5, Isaiah 6:1–5, and Jer. 20:9 reflect this primal experience.

tribe across the river burned incense to venerate their ancestors, the chief, or the Wise Woman; they knew legends of a tribe, over the hills and far away, that sang and chanted to a mysterious unseen spirit who spoke to the people through fathers' dreams. In some cultures more than others, over generations people would adopt and adapt snippets of other faiths. This continues today, e.g., Catholicism mixed over generations with Mayan cultures has yielded a unique variety of superstitious beliefs and practices related to saints, ancestors, and "earth lords";¹⁵ aspects of Catholicism blended with Afro-Caribbean vodou yields Santeria.

Fearing that our gods might afflict, abandon, betray, or destroy us if we did not duly appease and honor them, we further externalized our faith with precious metals, stones, altars and buildings. More materialistic cultures began cramming their formerly transcendent deities into increasingly elaborate architecture and ceremonies. Classic Christian descriptions of a literal heaven echo ancient Israel's temple and ark in visions of opulence and excess.¹⁶ Still today many religious people routinely rely on earthly *material* wealth—mahogany, marble, gold, with fine fabrics and jewelry for leaders, and other exorbitant displays—to extol heavenly *immaterial* deities. As with the clergy/laity division, most religious persons evidently see neither irony nor absurdity in this.

Societies with a written language could develop and more consistently maintain increasingly complex and numerous traditions, codes, rituals, and tales. Written records might include variations or inconsistencies that emerged over generations and centuries of oral tradition.

Cultures evolved moral and aesthetic precepts. These morés often intermingled with the ancient vibrant myths of heroes and villains. Imaginative tales emerged, sometimes portraying gods and spirits as mega-humans, reflecting and amplifying the writers' and people's own tendencies for good and evil. Even the "good" gods displayed their carnal failings: they demand blood sacrifice; they threaten to revoke their supposedly eternal promises; they display jealousy, vanity, murderous rage.

Some faith systems gradually idealized and distilled the mixture into dichotomous good vs. evil, which in turn led to monotheism. In the Bible everything God says and does manifests pure holiness, at least in theory, at least for fundamentalists.

Whether we focus on a single exclusive deity, or each family's or tribe's ancestors, or the thousands of gods in countless traditions, pragmatically religion did accomplish much good, and still does. Many classic moral and social teachings have come to us largely through the world's multitude of faith systems. In most cultures many religious laws and moral codes did establish order and justice, however incomplete or otherwise flawed. Torah's overarching call for social and moral justice unites "the Law and the prophets together against the royal theology of the domination system."¹⁷ Hebrew traditions such as the Jubilee and limits on interest set standards above most of their neighbor nations; although Israelites accepted slavery, they regulated it and subjected it to at least some measure of justice, even benevolence. Secular sources attest to the early Christian fellowship's moral integrity and close-knit community.

Such theistic systems met a blend of basic pragmatic and rational needs (social cohesiveness, support, protection from invasion, survival) and non-rational (tribal/cultural pride and honor). Increasingly we invoked the names of our gods to help us find our own place—no longer manifest in nature or the sacred, but in the mundane, the immediate tangible world, to address secular politics, ideology, geographic borders, xenophobia, and homeland security. While providing concrete benefits, religion became ever less divine, ever more a mirror of its host culture.

As organic faith decayed, arbitrary regulations and customs evolved into the lifeless abstractions of theology. Religious administrators generated increasingly picky rules and privileges. As an example of the self-serving but fairly harmless end, only male priests may eat sacrificed meats; at the reprehensible end, theology and lore invoke God as a tool of fascism, military power, and sexual exploitation. This continues today.

Power-hungry leaders and warmongering clans too often hijacked religion for their own crassly

¹⁵ John M. Watanabe, *From Saints to Shibboleths: Image, Structure, and Identity in Maya Religious Syncretism*. In John R. Bowen (Ed.), *Religion in Culture and Society*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon (1998).

¹⁶ Revelation 21:9-21.

¹⁷ Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, p. 130.

materialistic, temporal ambitions cloaked in pious and eternal language. They appropriated theism as authority to invade and conquer other nations, and champion their own society, warriors, rulers, and deities as supreme. Demagogues often propagandized themselves as Good and the enemy as Evil. They claimed God as their political ally, declaring that the deity personally established their nation or gave them victory in war. Usually their national foes just as fervently declared that *their* immortal God(s) supported *them* and empowered *them* in mortal combat. Self-described “Godly” or “divine” nations might behave much like their mortal foes: they might spy on neighbors whose lands they coveted, terrorize other tribes or cultures, seize homes and lands and natural resources. This, too, continues today.

Yet many of us continue to rationalize and even sanctify our lusts, cruelty, warmongering, and vengefulness as perverse expressions of our gods’ will. Nations invoke their deities as they recycle attacks and retaliations over years, decades, and millennia. All such violence hails back to the savage, brutal mixture of religious fanaticism, delusion, and myth. Relying on external forms and dogmas, each side adamantly insists that it has the **true** God on its side. Too much theism fuels mayhem—still today.

Though much modern theism inspires benevolence and diligent work for peace and justice, formalized religion also brings a rigid codification of traditions and protocols. The genuine organic roots that bore our great ancient myths have withered. Some individuals do exalt God as creator; some delight in nature, adoring a sunset, a contemplative stroll in the forest, a meditation by the shore. Some hymns and traditions honor such experiences. Yet nature itself, the raw inspiration, now has very little or no substantial role in most formal assemblies of typical western religion. Ancient transcendent reverence for nature persists mainly in older indigenous traditions, by whatever name and cultural setting.

Mostly middle eastern and western religionists have fractured the primal essence into shards, carved it up into legalistic requirements and regulations, hammered it into creeds, and crammed it into boxes of worship services. Each group typically touts its hermeneutic and doctrinal menu as superior; some even claim that any disagreement with or failure to endorse their teaching constitutes a rejection of God Himself. Most people have grown accustomed to and complacent with the ready availability of external acts and agencies. Over centuries the superficialities have become the standard; many people equate religious effluvia with actual faith. In more severe cases our existential quest has deteriorated into a carnal system of power and control. Many believers understand and appreciate no other frame of reference for God.

Thus even some sincere believers feel little or no bona fide awe in their view of the divine. Our collections of churchified traditions, taboos, ceremonies, customs, creeds, and rituals give us only a copy of a copy of a copy: after dozens of generations of copies, each compounding prior contaminants, the final image appears obscured, distorted, only a crude sketch of the ancient vision.

Visualize two believers sitting side by side in the same worship service, doing and saying all the same things, and likewise participating in exactly the same worship actions on a private basis throughout the week. Let each of our fictitious persons represent one of two extremes.

(Two notes: [1] Only the individual reader can know his/her own place here. I simply describe what I’ve learned from observing, reading, and listening to believers in a variety of settings. [2] Variables operate independently. A believer may reject all superstitions yet rely heavily on rituals and ceremonies for social purposes and ease of expression. One may have a strong internal moral compass yet credit it to external commands and doctrines.)

- Believers at the extreme right end of the chart below rely on *no* external support: no authoritative leader, no scripture, no ritual, no doctrine, no sacred hero, no institution. Their moral and spiritual center resides within, rooted deep in their individual experiences and convictions. As they maintain their faith regardless of others’ choices or demands, and they aim to do right even without any external commandments, they reflect Camus’ dictum:

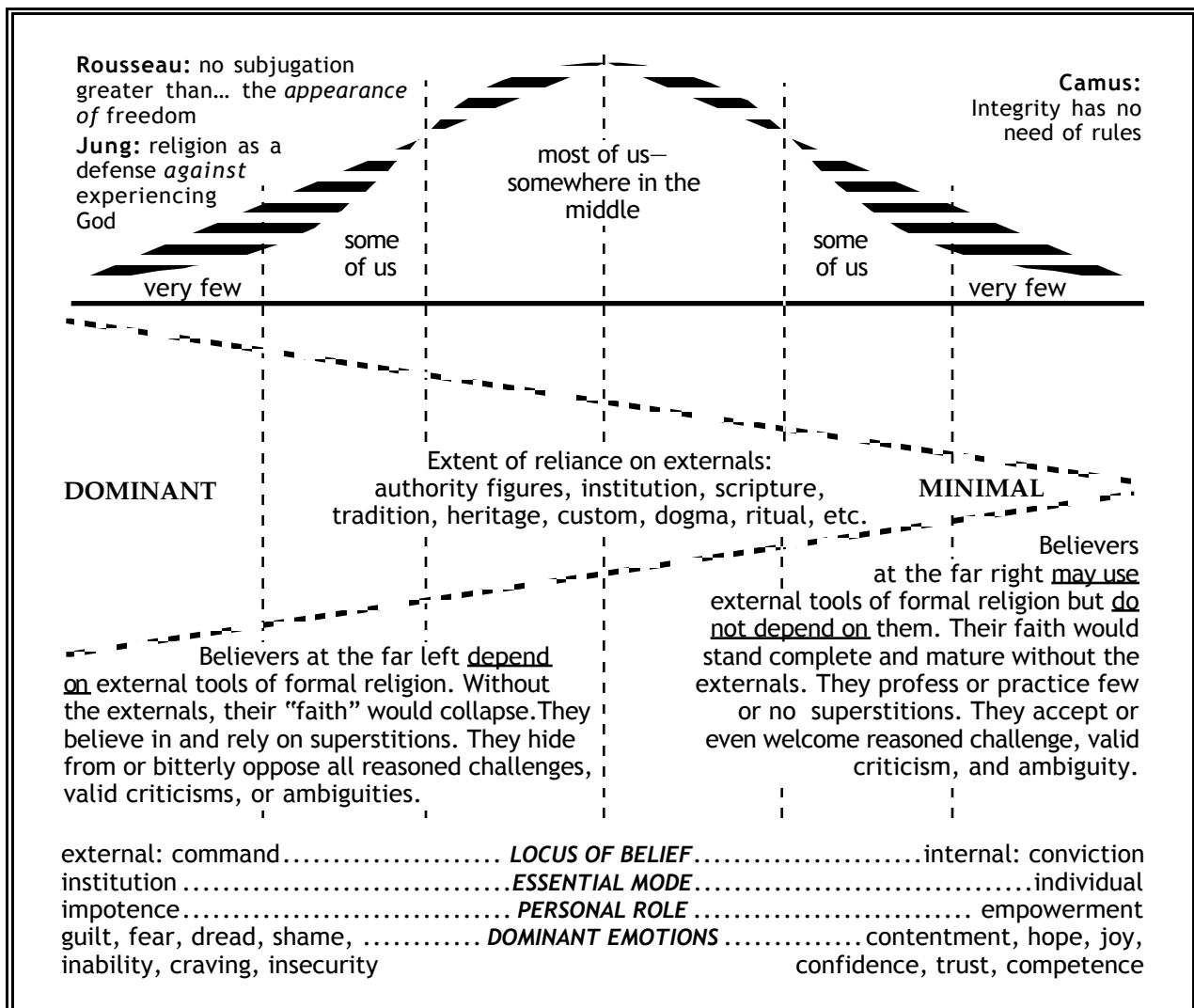
“Integrity has no need of rules.”

To whatever extent one matures an internalized faith, one’s means of worship may reflect

that fullness. A strong inner faith can confidently explore the grays of life, the ambiguities and paradoxes and open-ended questions. This faith reflects the believer's personal power and an emotional core of contentment, confidence, and hope.

These believers draw on cultural influences and covenant practices only to the extent that such externals sincerely reflect their personal encounter with the Holy. They may use superstitious words or acts for symbolic value or as part of community practice, but they do not generally take them literally. Thus they feel no threat from alternative religious vocabularies, authorities, or modes of expression. Their practices do not depend in any way on what any other person or group does or does not do. Thus these persons may freely use and endorse—or freely ignore—any sort of edicts, acts of worship, traditions, creeds, scripted ceremonies, etc. Remove the structure, the service, the Authority, the revealed Truth, and their faith stands still complete.

Spirituality can mature and thrive *only* if it has roots deep in this individual level. Faith can grow only to the extent that each believer takes a deliberate, active role in shaping his principles according to everything he learns and experiences, including truths that contradict formal, external "authorities."



A meaningful faith community requires interdependence and involvement. It provides many benefits unavailable to the solitary believer. But the corporate level comes afterward, and only as each individual so chooses. Not all believers need or want the community.

- Religious persons toward the left end of the chart rely on externals: an authoritative person, scripture, ritual, doctrine, sacred heroes, an institution.

Believers at this extreme end do not think for themselves. Questions require clear-cut and undisputed ANSWERS in a proof-text, a tradition, a Creed. They need external commandments, orders, penance assigned, divine edicts from other persons. They avoid or resist any critiques or challenges, no matter how valid. They may shun even simple inquiries.

Their religious practice consists of little more than a shadow of familial, cultural, or ethnic custom and dogma. It merely parrots what the group expects them to affirm. These persons tend to honor their superstitious acts, incantations, tangible objects (beads, crosses, amulets) and myths as literal. Thus they perceive alternative religious vocabularies, authorities, or modes of expression as “doctrinal error” or even heresy. You may provoke anger if you remove their talismans or prod their prepackaged system, as they feel their emotional core: guilt, shame, insecurity, fear, dread. Without the artificial life support of the Institution, the Holy Cause, the Scriptures, the Wise Leader, the Answers, these individuals’ faith—having no muscle nor even skeleton of its own—collapses.

These people manifest Jung’s contention that such religion acts as a defense **against** the experience of God. Their spirits echo the dank truth noted by Rousseau (my italics):

**“There is no subjugation greater than that
which gives *the appearance of freedom.*”**

A religious community rightly provides a haven for persons seeking support, comfort, and guidance. I admire faith groups as they serve these needs. But such support should help seekers grow *beyond* the simplistic externals, the ABC’s, the training wheels of creed, the ignorance embodied in superstition,¹⁸ the codependency of Institutional Authority. True spirituality calls each believer to stand, walk, think, and speak independently in his own understanding of God.

I’d like to assume the best in all believers. But the fractured, divisive, and often evil practices of religion render such optimism naive at best.

Still, at least some faiths—or at least some branches—do explicitly encourage and challenge followers to read, study, and think independently. Some fellowships expressly welcome discussion and even disputes over various issues and interpretations, even taking God to task. Rather than impose a checklist of propositions and imperatives created by other fallible human beings, some faiths expect their members to take full responsibility for their own choices, perhaps *informed by* enduring principles of ancient scripture and commentary, with an *awareness of* and *respect for* traditions. (In particular several Jewish speakers and writers have greatly impressed me in these aspects.)

Some of these faiths do rely on formal rites and elaborate procedures (especially Orthodoxy and High Church) for personal and corporate worship. To whatever extent they cultivate independent study and thought, and stress each individual’s responsibility for his own spiritual maturing, they function toward the right-hand end of the chart, regardless of external appearance and practice.

Unfortunately these seem to comprise a minority. More of my experience listening to and reading testimonies of believers from many persuasions repeatedly confirms that too many institutional religions, at least in practice and often in express declaration, function toward the left end. Many discourage or forbid reasoned and intelligent debate. They proclaim their texts, traditions, and/or leaders as infallible, or at least resplendently wise, despite abundant errors of reason and morality. Some of most arrogant act like a controlling parent who never lets a child read, think, act, or grow; they insist that an individual *must* affirm every official belief and obey their edicts to know spiritual security. I hold that true believers *may* mature only *despite* such spiritual, intellectual, and emotional abuse. (I personally know believers who do mature spiritually but who remain active within such institutions for various reasons.)

Corollary: too many believers, like innocent children, accept this as normal. They assume that people of any faith can do no differently, as if this system did them good—because to the best of their knowledge

¹⁸ Cf. Hebrews 6:1–3 on moving “on to maturity.”

and experience, it does. Like a first grader whose mother feeds and clothes her but also beats her every so often, they grow up assuming that that's just the way it is, some things never change, and they have to accept it. The child fears that if she cries or complains or calls 911 or seeks help from anyone, her mother will beat her even worse, and will kick her out of the house. So the innocent child learns: never speak up, never question, never think, only submit. Emotionally trapped into relying on Authority, many of these believers even defend the system. They eventually teach their own children to continue the process, no matter how ostentatious, self-righteous, or dehumanizing the system may be.

Since external forms of liturgy, ritual, custom, tradition, etc. too often facilitate, or at least correlate positively with, this left-end mentality, I use these terms specifically to represent unthinking, anti-spiritual devotion to superficial forms, acts, objects, persons, and places, as if they themselves intrinsically manifested Holiness. This does *not* intrinsically target High Church or Orthodox traditions: though it may apply to rigorously detailed services for Easter in a centuries-old temple that today would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to build, it may apply equally to handling rattlesnakes and drinking strychnine in a backwoods Appalachian church, or to a cell group meeting in members' houses.

Crucial point: If reading this section leaves you uneasy or insulted, or if it leaves you recalling ancient sages or institutional dogmas or proof-texts in defense of traditions and teachings,¹⁹ consider what that response tells you about the nature of your faith (at the left end on the scale). But if your use of and affection for scripture, tradition, commentary, council, etc. consistently encourage you to think openly and act responsibly, trusting your personal spiritual insight and moral integrity, above any external authority—then my negative use of those words *does not apply to you or your personal faith*.

C. 2. Religion and the Emotional Brain

Most of us have memories of childhood experience with religious faith. We may recall it as exciting and fun and aesthetically pleasing, or boring and drab and scary and confusing, or usually some blend. I believe that these fundamental emotional orientations, our “gut feelings” usually from developmental years—separate from any intellectual or cognitive assessment of good–bad, true–false—have the greatest impact on how most adults relate to religion.²⁰

Some adults do consciously maintain or deliberately change religious affiliation for objective beliefs or pragmatic aspects, but most of these variables show themselves fairly adaptable. Anyone who *wants* to adopt or sustain any particular precept, form of worship, institution, or set of relationships, will find some sort of “rationalization,” plausible or otherwise, to warrant the profession of faith. Even if confronted with plain contradictions, logical flaws, or moral failures in the heritage, the believer will dodge, deny, or simply ignore them. This may apply even if the religion keeps one chained in a dungeon, regularly attending services and professing belief mainly out of fear. On a less dismal level, some believers earnestly insist, “I can't explain exactly why I believe, and, no, I don't know how to answer all these issues. I only *know that I do believe*, and that it means more to me than anything I can or can't explain logically.” The religion will wobble but it won't fall down. Though I respect such earnestness, all such faith affirms emotion over cognition, perception over evidence, visceral over rational.

This in itself makes no insult. This doesn't entitle anyone who dislikes or rejects religion to sneer, “Yeah, faith, it's all just emotional fluff. Just something people do to feel good, especially people who don't know how to think.” First, a key irony, which I'll pursue in more detail later: this caricatured disdain comes from the same emotional place as religious devotion. This dismissive stance typically reflects no more rationality, no more intellect, and no more objectivity than any homily, mantra, hymn, prayer, or ritual.

Though my views today differ radically from those I grew up believing, ultimately I see religion—at least in principle—deserving respectful consideration precisely because it **does** reflect a basic, profound part of our humanity, as a function of how we've evolved. Newberg, D'Aquili, and Rause posit that if God does exist in whatever form, ultimately he manifests himself in “the mangled neural pathways and

¹⁹ New Testament examples: Galatians 1:6–9; 1 Timothy 1:18–20, 4:1, 16, and 6:3–5, 20–21; 2 Timothy 2:16–18, 3:8–9, 3:14–17, 4:1–4; Titus 1:9–2:1, 3:10–11; 2 Peter 2:1–3; 2 John 9–11; Jude 17–19; Revelation 22:18–19.

²⁰ For an expansion on this point, see the Appendix, “Roots of Religion in Adult Practice.”

physiological structures of the brain.”²¹ Pascal Boyer concurs and more directly emphasizes our biological predisposition: “We do not have the cultural [religious] concepts we have because they make sense or are useful but because the way our brains are put together makes it very difficult not to build them”;²² “all this [religious conceptualization] is not so much *caused* as *made more likely* by the cognitive processes” he explores²³ (italics in original). As some staunch naturalists will assert much more eloquently late in this paper, **religion’s ancient roots and non-rational essence of religiosity testify not to its obsolescence, but to its continuing relevance.** Errors and abuses notwithstanding, our varied religions offer a range of culturally-shaped frameworks for addressing enduring human concerns.

As these deep urges call for personal and communal expression, religious institutions will endure and keep evolving. And I believe they should, though much of this book may seem to indicate otherwise. I aim to offer a perspective to *enhance* the valid and beneficial role that religion can play in the 21st century. Already I see much growth in many fairly conventional churches over recent decades; many have a much stronger emphasis on improving marriages and families; many have become more supportive of members who struggle with depression, addictive behaviors, divorce, and other issues that have long been ignored, unjustly maligned, or condemned (and remain oppressed in some groups). Some have become expressly open and affirming toward all sexual orientations. We can continue moving ahead with our core religious impulse more honestly and meaningfully if we candidly admit that just as a tribe’s foods, shelter, clothing, games, and arts all emerge as a function of local resources and norms, so also traditional religious tales, beliefs, and practices emerged and evolved as an interaction with the source culture’s local knowledge and tribal values.

True spirituality has absolutely no need of our overwrought theological mazes, hierarchies of power, and hermeneutic models. These benefit no deity; they exist only for our subjective benefit, to help us channel our aspirations and reverence. We may make better use of our religious forms and fictions according to a medical analogy: We aim to understand and make the best possible, most appropriate use of more integrated, accurate medical information and resources. We can likewise better inform our faith. As we aim to expose and reject superstitious quackery in medicine, let’s do the same in our religious behavior, expectations, forms of expression, and institutions.

I find some honest, decent believers who would just rather not deal with this (“My faith’s not so much trouble, Chuck. I just love the Lord.”) Despite the work, I nonetheless believe that anyone who truly seeks a meaningful faith can confront these things, bring it all together, and create a mature, intelligent response.

C. 3. Personal Attitudes

An expansion on my church background will help clarify why I began to question and doubt my own literalist theism (I’ll quickly recap this in a different illustrative context in Chapter One, *Away O Soul*).

In my fundamentalist heritage one principle in particular has strongly influenced everything I learned as a child and pursued deliberately from my middle school years onward: study God’s Word diligently, aiming to understand his truth free from the bias of traditions, interpretations, and customs or creeds. Early in my spiritual pursuits that principle took its shape in key aims of the Church of Christ fellowship in which I grew up. I learned that the Bible came to us literally, verbally inspired by God. Given that premise, diligent members of Churches of Christ aim to follow New Testament teachings as simply and purely as possible. Standards such as “just Christians, nothing more,” and “speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent” typify their aims and intentions. I often heard Acts 17:11 cited to emphasize that we modern Christians, like the Bereans, should examine the scriptures regularly to ensure that what we believed and taught held true.

I still admire those principles.

²¹ Andrew Newberg, Eugene D’Aquili, and Vince Rause, *Why God Won’t Go Away*. New York: Ballantine, 2002, p. 53. The authors provide a well-balanced treatment of an effort to assess empirically the religious experience of “Absolute Unitary Being,” while duly acknowledging the limits of strict empiricism in such an assessment.

²² Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 164; cf. p. 135.

²³ Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 298. Cf. p. 161: “People do not invent gods and spirits; they receive information that leads them to build such concepts.”

My trust in an infallible Bible, and my dedication to the ideal of an unbiased, undenominational application of New Testament principles, took very deep roots in me. I passionately wanted to find and teach what objectively held true in scripture. By about eighth or ninth grade I decided I would go into preaching. From junior high through my freshman year in college I read the entire Bible three times, the New Testament a fourth time, plus substantial more topic-specific study for various lessons and sermons I prepared. Through this study I initially found many of my Church of Christ traditions, scriptural interpretations, and moral positions plausibly consistent with, or at least not overtly at odds with, what I found in the Bible.

With continuing scrutiny and growing knowledge I also found flaws in several of my moral and theological positions. My fervent devotion to the literalist premise moved me not just to read my Bible, but to dig into it. More and more often as I'd dig a little, I'd uncover more inconsistencies between scripture and my traditions. When I asked preachers and elders about these things I usually heard variations on this theme: "That doesn't matter. We've restored the *essential* teachings and practices."

The more I studied and thought, the more I wondered: out of all the possible ways to interpret any number of details in scripture, and given the inevitable influence of family and culture, how credibly could I affirm that Churches of Christ, and maybe a few isolated independent fellowships, had managed to complete the Comprehensive Christianity Checklist *perfectly*, and avoid falling into denominational "traditions of men"²⁴? I began realizing I couldn't consider this likely.

The more I tried to follow and apply the mindset of Biblical inerrancy consistently, the more problems I found. Even into my 20's I still revered the Bible as absolute literal truth, though the questions began cracking that shell. I kept comparing my positions against the scriptures. As a result I had to see my church heritage as just one more branch on the tree of Christian sects. As my scrutiny expanded to Christianity at large and then theism, my persistent questioning found fallacies and blind spots throughout traditional Christian faith.

As I dug still deeper, I more often found confused shrugs, trite clichés, nervous evasions, and stubborn denials—dynamics which in themselves provoked more of "those questions." Self-professed "defenders of the faith" who claimed to believe that "the truth shall set you free" seemed annoyed, resentful, hostile, often outright opposed to sincere, reasoned, valid inquiry. The more I saw that militant resistance, the more I had to ask why people clung to beliefs that a little careful thinking exposed as at least inadequate, and often obviously false.

The following statements may seem presumptuous at this point; I'll substantiate them later.

Now I understand: Most religion operates in not any intellectual capacity, not for cognitive or objective truth, but as emotional attachments (though religionists create incredibly intricate mazes of empty abstractions that they propagate *as* cognitive data and objective truth). To the extent that people are saturated with religious imagery and dogma in formative years, most maintain that emotional core as adults. Even if they drop the practice, the emotional outlook generally persists and shapes one's world view. Most religious persons who maintain their practice do so because it reflects what they want deep inside—emotionally, not rationally.

We could celebrate this if all formal religion embodied a fundamentally constructive force, and affirmed human worth and dignity. But too much religion—at least most Christianity, particularly its more heavily institutionalized forms—has propagated too much of the opposite, and still does.

Most of us have some of this at our emotional center. Too many of us actually guard our dogma's intellectual deficits and moral ignorance. We put our brains on hold, defending our personal or familial or cultural heritage. We may do so even if our theology shames us as intrinsically bad, even if our Religious Officials tell us we don't have the capacity to study scripture and meditate and understand Truth on our own, that we're such imbeciles we must rely on some Authority Figure to explain the simplest teachings, that we're personally worthless, morally retarded and fundamentally depraved.

These principles reflect too much formal religious doctrine, even some black-letter scripture; they come across in too much mainstream Christianity even among fellowships that long ago discarded some of the more rigid, formal declarations of faith. Such "religion" I emphatically deny and reject.

What proved lethal to my childhood trust in the Bible? Was it liberalism? Secularism? Atheism? None

²⁴ Mark 7:8.

of the above. My traditional faith gradually took another direction because I took my passionate and *uncompromising respect* for my indoctrination to its logical conclusions; I studied the Bible diligently and tried to believe it all as if it embodied absolute, perfect, literal Truth, as if it came from an absolute, perfect, and literal God.

Under that scrutiny, my fundamentalism finally cracked and collapsed. A richer, broader view of reality took over.

My childhood religious training left me terrified of eternal hell-fire as early as seven or eight years old. That emotional base of dread also fueled my adult drive to the *n*th degree to determine whether I could accept all the Biblical tales objectively as absolutely TRUE-OR-NOT— “in terms of those questions.” Thus my tone will show the strain as I struggle here to present two contrasting, intertwined, and equally valid attitudes: First, I genuinely respect anyone who pursues true peace, justice, and holiness actively and thoughtfully in any faith system, even the most bureaucratic and militant religious frameworks. Many people aim to live out their faith based on more positive values *unlike* the dogmatic, doctrinaire exploitations of guilt, fear, nationalism, and coercion. Some proponents of even the most power-drunk religious franchises do evidently struggle within the system to humanize those institutions, to awaken them socially and intellectually, to keep nudging them toward enlightenment. These persons tolerate religious hierarchy and tradition far better than I. Apart from whatever dogmas or superstitions they may promote, I deeply admire these individuals for their devotion and efforts.

Most directly in my experience, the positive values manifested themselves vividly in my former Miami-Dade church family. I moved to Miami specifically to associate with this fellowship. More than any other church I’d ever known, I found this a wonderful group of kind, caring, people-centered Christians, trying to make the world a little better. They maintained a fairly standard set of conservative mainstream Christian doctrines and traditions, but they didn’t exalt their institution. They didn’t beat others over the head with a red-letter King James Version. Much more typically they tried to give out what Jesus symbolically called cups of cold water²⁵—housing visitors, sharing meals, cutting hair, providing transportation, visiting the sick, listening to and supporting others in their struggles. They sincerely lived out spirituality in everyday acts of loving God and neighbor. (I’ve kept in touch with many members who’ve since left Miami. Most continue living this way wherever they go.)

Over more than 16 years with this church I discussed some of my long-standing concerns and changing views. I shared my growing struggles over whether I could even believe in God in the conventional sense as they apparently did. This God, as most of my church family saw him, literally spoke the cosmos into existence, created man from dirt and woman from his rib, sent a flood to destroy all nonaquatic life except that on Noah’s ark, tortured Pharaoh’s people with plagues, guided the Hebrew people through the wilderness, gave them manna and brought water from a rock, knocked down Jericho’s walls, and kept Jonah alive for three days inside a huge fish. They held that this God’s Holy Spirit impregnated Mary without sperm, so that she gave birth to Jesus; Jesus performed all the miracles as declared in the New Testament; roughly a day and a half after his crucifixion and burial, he rose from death; he will return to reward those who believe in and adore him as the holy Son of God.

I eventually concluded that I could accept **and honor** such tales for their devotional, or metaphorical value, as legends or myths, but not as altogether historic and factual. To use Marcus Borg’s phrase, I grew to take the Bible seriously but not literally.²⁶

Today I find a more symbolic spirituality much more valid and meaningful than the traditional supernatural view I grew up believing in. I see the emotional dynamics of faith embodying values and purposes different than, but not inferior to, reason; therefore squabbling over the stories’ objective truth or even practicality misses the central point of what they can *mean* to us, and more importantly, more practically, what we *do* in response to those meanings. Even if I disagree objectively with believers’ fundamentalist premises, I genuinely support what they do to render those doctrines practical for good in the world: when they provide comfort and encouragement for each other in everyday struggles, when they work for peace, when they help strengthen families, when they strive for impartial justice, when

²⁵ Matthew 10:42.

²⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.

they feed hungry children or teach illiterate adults to read, when they shelter battered spouses, when they help build better neighborhoods, when they teach imprisoned people social and vocational skills, when they protect and preserve the natural environment, when they help people overcome addictive behaviors, when they promote mutual understanding and respect among all different religious or ethnic groups.

Unfortunately, this acceptance can't emerge until later in this paper. To reach this I had to endure passing through the second extreme, the negative. Given how deeply I'd devoted myself to my religious traditions and beliefs, some of these struggles with the uncertainties, unknowns, and unknowables pushed me through much of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' stages of grieving as my faith gradually deteriorated. As I saw my religious heritage slowly unraveling under rational scrutiny, I felt betrayed. I tried to deny and rationalize away mounting evidence; I grew bitter and angry as I kept finding more and more of my theistic beliefs false, or at least grossly overstated; I grew severely depressed (more on this below). The fifth stage—acceptance—comes only toward the end of this study.

As some of this bitterness and frustration comes out it may offend some readers. To put it in perspective I offer this analogy: Suppose you find extensive undeniable evidence that your ancestors took an active leading role in the Salem witch hunts, or burned crosses as a member of the Ku Klux Klan, or provided critical U.S. intelligence to al Qaeda and even helped plan the attacks of September Eleven. How would you—how *should* you—respond to that knowledge? No matter how you feel otherwise about your family line, I submit that you *as a moral person* should unhesitatingly CONDEMN the acts perpetrated, the ideology that spawned them, and whatever ignorance and evil your forebears taught. Parentage or other heritage does not justify any person or tribe or institution. To whatever degree you place your family, your culture, or your faith beyond moral accountability, *you* promote the evil.

Some neo-Nazis today praise Adolf Hitler as a great man, passionately devoted to his principles and his nation, who boldly set out to advance his nation by annihilating their vile, worthless enemies. Should we tolerate this sewage? Absolutely not. Nor should we tolerate any individual or group's efforts to honor their own tribal, national, and/or theological history—or modern peers—who have likewise sought to annihilate their enemies (or at least force a "conversion," often effectively annihilating a culture), particularly those who claimed the name of God as their justification.

How can any decent person defend any evil committed by one's religious or ethnic ancestry? Because emotionally potent concepts of "my religion," "my nation," and "my people" operate not primarily from the rational, cognitive, objective mind, but from the nonrational, affective, subjective: the emotional brain. Any question or unpleasant reality may evoke tremendously powerful responses to the extent one perceives one's pure faith or dogma as linked inextricably with the divine, the meaning of creation, eternal life—spiritual survival, in effect. Typically this perceived attack triggers emotional memories and responses via the thalamus and the amygdala; that gut reaction often overrides even the most well-constructed presentation of relevant data. When we perceive an insult or criticism of something so near and dear to us, we have trouble evaluating it honestly and rationally. Like someone hearing of a loved one's death, we may shift into denial, to block out the truth. Thus the hearer may well respond not with any informed moral reasoning, but with a purely emotional knee-jerk: "I have to defend the faith of my fathers, no matter what. I can't face any information that in any way challenges or discredits my beliefs and my ancestors. No matter how valid the data, I'll shut it all out."

This biological/behavioral reality does not cast as ignorant, selfish, or pompous anyone who demonstrates it. People whom we'd otherwise consider mature, sensible, caring, and compassionate may succumb to these primitive drives of the emotional brain. Remember, these more ancient emotional dynamics have much more pull than our more recently-developed cognitive skills. But no other sentient being has the potential as humans do to let other truths shape our emotions. We bear the responsibility to live up to our capacity for not only feeling, but also thinking.

Keep this in mind as we study the scriptures and history.

I'll approach the institutionalization of religion as I would a discussion of, say, America's own exploitation of slavery. I can understand how slavery happened; I can see how guilty parties rationalized their evil as normal and proper; I can understand how others at least tolerated it. But none of us should hesitate to condemn *those actions* of our ancestors and their cultures—or the legends of their exploits.

Likewise I can understand how formal religion evolved and functioned. Given the limits of our

knowledge (which has grown greatly, especially in the last century), and our moral maturity (which apparently hasn't overall), I can even see how the most contemptible acts, committed supposedly with God's imprimatur, seemed right or filled a pragmatically necessary role at certain stages. But pragmatic and social needs, or veneration of genealogy, cannot justify tales of abuses and evils, real or fabricated.

As we assess the realities of how religion has evolved, I hope more people will revisit the premises, assumptions, and practices of theism and faith. Until quite recently, religious persons could simply dodge or deny the crimes and horrors perpetrated in the name of God and tribe. They didn't have to face a reality check from intelligent inquiry. No longer can we allow this. No more hiding behind God-talk. Religion that would claim relevance and validity today must exemplify the utmost openness, honesty, and transparency. Any belief system that dodges, clouds, suppresses, or deflects truth, especially while purporting to honor and proclaim a divine will, deserves *no* respect from me.

If you gloss over or deny these things because you think exposing the slimy underbelly of our cultural institutions somehow incriminates US: (1) These things indict us *only to the degree* that we try to rationalize those in the past, and that we tolerate or promote them in the present. (2) Why should any decent person feel guilt over renouncing destructive facets of superstition, propaganda, prudishness, ignorance, social manipulation, and lust for power? No reason—only destructive emotion, most likely guilt or fear, artificially linked to some sense of right or good, but at its core reflecting theological, cultural, and/or ethnic brainwashing.

Accordingly, I vigorously reject certain dynamics of scriptural interpretation and application which rely on a hollow appeal to external authority (“This person says that teaching A is true, and that I must do Z. So I will believe in A and do Z.”), or empty circular reasoning (“The scripture and our tradition say scripture and our tradition are true. So I believe in the scripture and our tradition. And the scripture and tradition say...”).

Emotional links do tend to endure despite confrontations with reason. Denial can fight off reality for a long time, even after burial and great mourning. If you begin suspecting or realizing that you do in fact cling to some inaccurate, anachronistic, decaying, or dead belief, I can only encourage you: *Try to let it go.*

Or at least relax your grip.

I'll present separate blocks of thought as if they had emerged sequentially.

Part I: God. Chapter I surveys some pervasive problems that led me to question religion in general, especially in its reliance on external forms. Chapter II intensifies my distress as I found more and more flaws in supernaturalist principles and practices. First I look at general considerations, and then I detail many that I began seeing more objectively in my own, and sometimes others', typical beliefs and practices. Chapter III addresses many technical difficulties with my literalist approach to the Biblical source documents.

Most responses to many scriptures in this section reflect not my attitude today, but what I experienced as a fundamentalist who began confronting them during senior high and college. I offer these statements because other devout seekers who also struggle with similar frustrations deserve to know that their anger manifests an *accurate* and *proper* response to the evil and ignorance bound up in too many religious precepts and practices. They deserve to know that in these cases they often do recognize some valid and crucial truths that too many other believers just ignore, or deliberately suppress. My sometimes caustic remarks may make it hard for some readers to remember that I'll finally return to defend and promote not only spirituality and faith, but also even formal religion (in a more mature form).

If in this section you find any rhetoric offensive, please examine more closely the scriptures at hand. Try to read them objectively, as if they came from some isolated foreign tribe found only on some small island you've never heard of. See them for what they actually say, not for what you wish they said.

Part II: Nature. Chapter IV surveys some objective concerns—specifically, the inadequacies of “Christian Evidences”—that further challenged my trust in supernaturalism while my interest in empiricism grew. As some people carelessly and wrongly assume that empiricism and unbelief must go hand in hand, Chapter V separates atheism from the purported link to science and nature. Chapter VI shows that neither theism nor atheism can empirically claim any greater measure of truth.

Part III: Humanity. This section begins by reflecting how the tension built as I kept trying to find the balance in all this. In Chapter VII I broach the early form of what will become my defining framework.

Chapter VIII reconsiders the enduring good in theistic systems despite their failings. Chapter IX brings the dissonance to a peak. Finally Chapter X lays out the resolution and integration of my current position, concluding with an emphasis on what we can do to enhance and advance the positive changes already underway.

In assessing much of the technical data of these issues, I can only relate what I've learned. Often one credible authority says the data point east and another says the same data point west. I can evaluate some aspects of their arguments, but not always in depth. For this reason I sometimes rely heavily on quotes from experts.

I welcome objective data and rational interpretations (but not merely ideological assertions or assumptions) that may help clarify anything I've misrepresented.