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a concealed GOD

❧ Introduction

It is said that during World War II, inside Auschwitz, a group of religious Jews who had experienced the horrors committed in the concentration camp decided to put God on trial. There were counsels for the prosecution and the defense, a judge and a jury. When it was time to pronounce judgment there was total unanimity: God was found guilty. Court adjourned, with the announcement that it was time for evening prayers.

—based on a text by Elie Wiesel

SKEPTICS REFER TO GOD as a creation of humankind. They hold that people require a father figure, a conscience, a source of solace, and a pledge of eternal life in order to function. They refer to the work of scientists, who have now solved many of the riddles of existence that could previously only be explained by invoking an unknown force in the universe, as proof that the term “God” no longer fills a function. We are, skeptics say, alone in an immense universe that once upon a time and quite by chance gave rise to the preconditions for the origin of life. This may be true.

On the other hand, it may be the case that there is a concealed force in the universe; a force that can be experienced but cannot be described. Could it be that our existence—our lives and our deaths—have some higher meaning, and that this “Other” is neither accessible to our senses nor to scientific methods? Could religions be correct in their dogged persistence that the divine exists?

Religions may be right, but about what? There are many more notions about the meaning of the word “God” than there are religions on our earth. Since we are unable to describe God in words, imagery, myths, and symbols have been developed to give us some sense of what the divine

represents. In this way, God may be compared with natural phenomena such as the sun or the heavens, or with representations in our world, such as a judge or a father. Other descriptions of the divine include the Great Mother (in the shape of the earth), the mother of us all. Originally, these symbols and myths were used as attempts to describe that which defies description. Over time, these figures of speech have come to have lives of their own. Symbols and myths, the original functions of which were to disseminate emotional insights and make the divine comprehensible to the mind, have been transformed into absolute truths. Some of these have come to dominate entire religions.

And so today, if we compare descriptions of the divine in different religions they appear more or less contradictory. Some religions assert that God can appear in the guise of a human being, others assure us that the divine could not possibly take on human shape. According to some religions, God has personal attributes, while according to others the divine can have no human characteristics. These differences have led many religions to claim that theirs is the *only* true knowledge of the divine, that only they have the right to the truth. For this and several other reasons the “truths” of religions seem both antithetical and irrational to many contemporary human beings.

Many of us find it more and more difficult to keep our bearings among the many rites and traditions of religious institutions as we grow increasingly skeptical of an idea of God that cannot be reconciled with reason. Thus, over time, fewer and fewer people in the Western world have come to practice a religion. Many deny the existence of a God, or see questions about God as unanswerable. Others believe in God, but describe their faith as outside any established religion; the New Age movement is one such expression. Others turn to Eastern religions that offer other varieties of spiritual searching. Sometimes the term “God” is deprived of its spiritual dimension altogether, and used as a representation of human characteristics, such as “our inner strength” or “an inner moral code.”

In our societies, religion as a means of coming into contact with the divine is a weaker force today than in the past, and at the same time religions are becoming stultified around their symbols and descriptions of a “humanoid” God. More and more people experience a sense of disorientation and emptiness in an existence no longer rooted in the great mysteries. Lama Anagarika Govinda, a Buddhist writer, has said that even

the deepest statements of religion are worthless if they cannot be re-experienced. Although one might imagine that it is the political power, external ornamentation, number of believers, social network, or laws of religions that determine their significance, in the long run the value and strength of religions are determined more by their inner truth and their ability to disseminate this message to the hearts of individual human beings.

Must we abandon our faith in God if we have rejected the gray-bearded father figure of our childhoods? Must we abstain from belief in God because we perceive the irreconcilable aspects of different religions? Possibly not. Perhaps we can behave as scientists do when they have run a series of experiments only to obtain contradictory results. They ask themselves whether there might not be a unifying, logical, overarching conclusion that binds all the results together and leads to the most probable explanation. If we apply this question to the divine, we may phrase it as follows: *What unites the apparently antithetical systems of thought that characterize religions?*

The answer may be formulated in many ways, but it always appears to contain one common denominator. What unites all religions is that they refer to an indescribable force they claim to be the basis of existence and the inner core of faith, a force we all carry with us at the depths of our being. It has many different names and designations. I have chosen to call this force “a concealed God.”

This book explores the questions of whether there is a concealed God and whether this concept of God links different religions together. Has belief in God been transformed into an insoluble paradox now that scientific progress has solved mysteries previous generations could only explain by referring to the divine? Has our newly accumulated knowledge about humankind, our world, and our universe made the concept of God superfluous? Or is the existence of a concealed God both real and reconcilable with all the knowledge about human beings and nature we have attained over the last few centuries?

If we believe there is in fact a concealed God that links different religions together, then we find ourselves faced with another question. If an indescribable, concealed God is the central theme of the various religions, how can we ever arrive at and understand this concept of God? Is it possible to make manifest that which is concealed?

In response to the universal, human striving to find the highest truth,

all religions have developed methods for pursuing the inner search by which we may attempt to establish contact with the divine. These paths are not easy to travel: they demand time, motivation, and hard work, but they are there, and the road maps have been preserved.

There is an endless supply of literature about the divine. Religions offer books and articles galore. Philosophy, psychology, and the natural sciences have also produced enormous quantities of material that may give us knowledge about religion, and about the question of whether there is a God. No human being could possibly read all that has been written about the divine in a single lifetime. The wide range of this discipline makes it difficult to see in its entirety and a challenge to interpret. The diversity of cultures, epochs, and languages poses an added problem, since misapprehensions and simplifications readily arise. Moreover, it is impossible to be perfectly objective in relation to a matter that is fundamentally subjective and indescribable. A written record is colored by the personal interpretations of the author and his or her sampling of the range of existing documentation.

For all these reasons, this book is no more than my personal attempt to summarize certain aspects of what unifies different religions' descriptions of the concealed God and the paths to the divine, as well as the question of whether this concept of God can be reconciled with scientific, rational thought. It spans a wide scope, and I hope for the reader's indulgence with regard to anything I may have neglected or misinterpreted.

Religious belief may have a value of its own and does not necessarily need to be subjected to rational analysis. In a culture dominated by reason, perhaps religious systems should be declared protected zones. Since religion has lost much of its clout in Western societies, however, it is interesting to note that people seem less and less inclined to accept a religion that does not seek support in reason. I myself was schooled in scientific thought, and therefore my ambition has been to allow reason to permeate my thinking and writing about things that cannot be proven, always aware of the fact that religious belief must, to some extent, be a matter of faith.

It has been my constant ambition to avoid complex explanations when answering questions about the natural sciences and I have attempted to do so in this book as well. At times I may have oversimplified, but perhaps when dealing with a subject that is fundamentally indescribable and beyond words, it is impossible not to do so.

Books need not necessarily be read from cover to cover. In this one, some sections may interest some readers, while others may find other parts attractive. One way of reading this book might be to begin with the final, more general, section—"A Concealed God?"—and then return to focus on other parts.

Why is the question of God important? As I see it, there are a few fundamental elements that make the existence of God a significant issue for humankind. The first is that religions, as a rule, describe the divine as the core of our existence. If there is a God, we are participants in a plan we cannot embrace using our everyday thought processes. Alternatively, if there is not a God, this is also of fundamental importance. Without a God, we are entirely in control of our own lives, human existence, and the destiny of our world.

Another reason is that many people today are not finding what they are looking for within the framework their religion has to offer. Many refrain from believing in the existence of a God when they can no longer make their adult intellects accept a simplified notion of the divine. The rationalist stance has come to replace belief in the divine, and a person with no spiritual context may feel lost and insecure, living in a world apparently without meaning or purpose.

The question is whether there might still be some truth, a notion of God at the center of all religions that could awaken our spirituality and the sense of mystery in us. This may be a feeling we need of a mystery we will never be able entirely to solve. It is related to a belief in the value of life and to a search that can provide our existence with direction and purpose.

There is one other important reason why the question of God is a central one. Developments in science and technology have been extraordinarily rapid over the last few centuries and there is no indication that this trend has peaked. Today, we have found cures for many of the diseases that formerly caused great suffering and many deaths. Most people in the Western world do not face starvation, and the standard of living has continued to rise. We work less and have more time to use as we please. In this light, the opportunities for happiness ought to be improving.

At the same time, developments in technology and the sciences have put our earth at great peril. Weapons of mass destruction, environmental degradation, and new epidemics may ultimately result in the extinction

of the human race. We all know what may happen, but for some strange reason we have not been able to bring the self-destructive forces to a halt. In pivotal times like ours, many people seek counsel and an ethical structure to hold onto. I wonder whether perhaps we can find the wisdom we so desperately need at the core of religion, in the force we refer to as God.

❧ *Part I*

On God and Religions

What Is a Religion?

THERE ARE MANY theories about the origins of religion. Some of the important initial functions of religions probably included helping human beings to seek what may be called the spiritual or the divine, revealing that which is beyond the world of the senses and trying to explain the mysteries of existence. Over time, religions have taken on more and more functions and as a result their structures have become increasingly complex. The various aspects of religion might be systematized as follows:

- ◆ rites, traditions, and myths;
- ◆ moral/ethical values;
- ◆ comfort and caring;
- ◆ social systems;
- ◆ spiritual (divine) content.

Considering these varied functions, as well as the fact that the different faiths are dissimilar in many respects, we can see there is no simple, single definition of “religion.” However, I offer this possible one: *A system of thought attempting to provide an understanding of that which cannot be experienced through the human senses and the rational mind.*

When we compare the religions of the world, we can see both differences and similarities. It is not only that their traditions and rituals vary; there are also major discrepancies with regard to how they treat notions like “the human soul,” “the afterlife,” and “the divine.” At the same time, it is no understatement to say that some of the similarities are very striking indeed.