

Hungers of the Heart is for those who are turned off by organized religion but want to deepen personal spirituality. It deals with the search for meaning, satisfying relationships, a more just society, and connection with the Sacred. In a conversational style free of religious jargon, the author maps a spirituality that is rooted in reason and contemporary knowledge, as well as being grounded in the authentic core of the great world religious traditions.

Hungers of the Heart: Spirituality and Religion for the 21st Century

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Hungers of the Heart



Spirituality and Religion for the 21st Century

Richard G. Watts

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Chapter 1

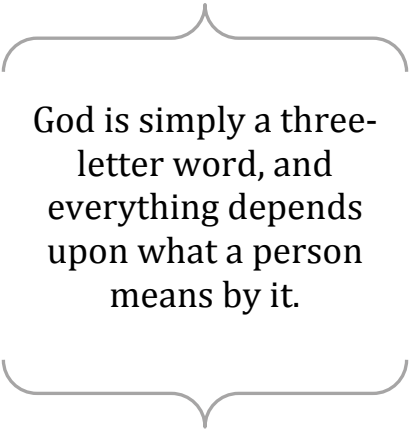
Our Hunger to Be “At Home” in the Cosmos

One of the deep hungers of the human heart is to feel “at home” and welcome in the universe we so briefly inhabit. As one seeker recently put it, “As my forties lengthened, I inexplicably became ravenous for wisdom and meaning. ...We are adrift in galaxies of mere information, distracted by the relentless drone of the e-hive, and I ached for the oxygen of understanding, which is always in short supply. ...Simply put, something deep and beyond articulation moved in my soul.” Many call that “something deep and beyond articulation” a hunger for God, as in the oft-remembered prayer of the fifth century Christian saint, Augustine: “Our hearts are always restless, until they rest in You.”

But, of course, “God” is simply a three-letter word, and everything depends upon what a person means by it. As we listen to God-talk in our culture, we hear a bewildering variety of contexts for that small word. Consider a few examples:

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- A major league baseball player, his batting average mired around .200, says that he'll hit his 30 homers and drive in 100 runs when the "Good Man above [who] controls everything" lets him do so.
- An NFL starter cancels his retirement in order to play one more season because "God persuaded me to come back, and I always listen to what God says."
- A newspaper article on rising gasoline prices notes several contributing factors: war, the habits of drivers, and "an act of God," which turns out to be "an unusually cold winter."
- A 28-year-old woman, who didn't like to use condoms, awaiting test results after intimacy with her HIV-positive lover, opines that "if God is going to take me, He's going to take me anyway."
- A Member of Congress is overheard by *The Wall Street Journal* after Hurricane Katrina had devastated New Orleans:



God is simply a three-letter word, and everything depends upon what a person means by it.

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“We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”

- And others interpreted Katrina as God’s judgment wreaked upon the city because of the “sin of shedding blood through abortion” or “25,000 homosexuals [who] were going to be celebrating sin in the streets.”

If we stitch all these conversation scraps together, what kind of God do we get? Apparently, a Super Power somewhere “above” who controls the weather, watches over the consequences of sex, plays a leading role in setting prices at the gas pump, and has a particular passion for professional sports. How much sense does that make to you?

But, of course, the question of God goes much deeper than off-hand comments we might be tempted to chalk off to egotism, ignorance or bigotry.

There’s no escaping the fact that for several hundred years there’s been a slow chipping away at the sense of God’s reality, much of it because of the steady advance of scientific knowledge. Whereas once upon a time we might have prayed to

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a Supreme Being for a good corn crop or better weather, we're more likely nowadays to seed the clouds and scatter fertilizer. When many of us living today were terrified in childhood by the epidemic of polio, it was Salk's vaccine rather than Divine intervention that ended the scourge. Despite a \$27 million "Creation Science Museum" in Kentucky that portrays children gamboling with dinosaurs in the Garden of Eden, we turn to biology and geology, not *Genesis*, for a factual account of our origins.¹ It's no wonder that skepticism grows, nicely captured in a child's Sunday School letter to God:

Dear God,

Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are, you'd better do something quick.

Many might identify with a *New Yorker* cartoon showing a parishioner shaking hands with his minister after a Sunday

¹ But in contrast to fundamentalist attacks on evolutionary biology, progressive Christians are actually celebrating Darwin's birthday each year, as a way of affirming the compatibility of science and religion. Some 13,000 clergy have signed a letter to that effect, and in February, 2010, 861 congregations in all 50 states and 13 countries celebrated Evolution Weekend.

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service, saying, “Oh, I know He works in mysterious ways, but if I worked that mysteriously I’d get fired.”

But it’s not simply science that has chipped away at the traditional image of God; biblical scholarship has played an equally important role. Scholars of the Bible have made it clear that it was not handed down from on high, but coalesced over more than a thousand years. The Bible is, in fact, not really *a* book, but a *library* of books. Although it contains some of the earliest historical writings, it also contains myth, legend, parable, short story, poetry, essay, letters, and so forth; and any “science” is the science of the times and places in which it was written. In the book of *Isaiah* we read that God is “he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers....” If you read those words literally, you must imagine a being who is closer to earth than you are when you take a commuter flight—you can’t see people at all at 15,000 feet! And unless we are going to try to perceive the world as our forebears did in the first century, or fifth, or fifteenth, we’re going to have to think critically about what we read in the Bible (or any other ancient sacred literature) rather than receive it as Divine revelation.

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Is it really true that there is a God who dwells in Heaven, records the sins and virtues of his subjects, rewards the faithful with eternal life and the wicked with Hell, answers prayers, and intervenes every now and again to change the course of history through miraculous deeds? Did he really open a path through the sea for Moses, send down fire for Elijah, raise Jesus from the dead, and set a day for final Judgment? It is not sacrilegious, but simply intelligent, to question such inherited ideas. Let's face it: for increasing numbers of people, these old beliefs are like antique furniture kept in the attic—still cherished, gazed at nostalgically from time to time, but never brought downstairs, because they would clash with the new furniture.

And so it is not an atheist critic of religion, but a Christian theologian, Gordon Kaufman, who raises the critical question: “The central and most problematical issue for Christian faith and theology is to find a way to make intelligible once again our talk about God, or else give it up.”

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Two Cheers for Skepticism

There's a story of Wonderland's Alice meeting the White Queen, who told her that she was 101 years, five months and a day old.

"I can't believe *that!*" said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again; draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said. "One *can't* believe impossible things."

"I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Unfortunately, that's the view that many people hold of religion—that it's a matter of trying to believe "six impossible things before breakfast." The spiritual life is not about trying to

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believe the unbelievable. In fact, a vital aspect of spirituality is bringing a skeptical intelligence to our evaluation of religious claims.

For example, in recent years the *Chicago Tribune* featured two reports of “religious” findings in the metropolitan region. One of them told of an appearance of the Virgin Mary. Crowds gathered in a Kennedy Expressway underpass, where a salt stain from a leaky crack, according to believers, formed an image of the Blessed Mother. Flowers, candles, and family photos formed an altar to what some dubbed “Our Lady of the Underpass.” In the other story, a Muslim man described finding in his backyard a piece of bark in which insects had inscribed the name *Muhammad* in Arabic—“guidance from God, of course,” he said. Such stories, rather like the periodic sightings of the image of Jesus in cloud formations, seem to proliferate in times of social stress. Is it a sin to hear them skeptically, especially when the “evidence” offered seems clear only to those predisposed to find it so?

A vocal critic of religion, Daniel Dennett, writes of “the gauze curtains of soft-focus veneration through which we traditionally

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inspect religion” and of “a traditional exemption from certain sorts of analysis and criticism.” Certainly, he and other such critics are right to complain that too often religious views—however outrageous they may seem—are regarded as immune to public challenge. But why should they be? After all, two of the most important questions we can ask in this life are, *What do you mean?* and *How do you know?* And those questions are as fairly raised about religious assertions as they are about assertions in politics, economics, or any other area of human concern. The late astronomer and popularizer of science, Carl Sagan, was right: “Skeptical scrutiny is the means, in both science and religion, by which deep insights can be winnowed from deep nonsense.”

Another outspoken critic of religion, Christopher Hitchens, writes, “We do not rely solely upon science and reason, because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors, but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason.” That would seem to be an honoring of skeptical inquiry that any seriously spiritual person could agree with. Doubt, rather like a bulldozer that clears an empty lot of old, dead tree limbs and scattered Coke bottles, so that something new and useful can be

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built in their place, is an essential first step toward mature spirituality.

But of course, the skepticism that is often expressed about religion goes much deeper than sightings of the Virgin Mary or insects inscribing the name of Muhammad on a branch. For ages, human beings have asked the tough skeptical questions, especially this one: what happens to the idea of a good God in a world that includes not only beauty and love, but tsunamis and suffering?

Some of us grew up singing in Church a favorite hymn, *All Things Bright and Beautiful*. The words go like this:

*All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all.*

*Each little flower that opens,
Each little bird that sings,
God made their glowing colors,*

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He made their tiny wings.

*The purple-headed mountain,
The river running by,
The sunset and the morning,
That brightens up the sky.*

*The cold wind in the winter,
The pleasant summer sun,
The ripe fruits in the garden,
God made them, every one.*

While most of us rejoice in the beauty and wonder of nature celebrated in the hymn, we're also aware of another side to the world we inhabit. That other side is expressed in a *Monty Python's Flying Circus* parody.

*All things dull and ugly,
All creatures short and squat,
All things rude and nasty,
The Lord God made the lot;*

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*Each little snake that poisons,
Each little wasp that stings,
He made their brutish venom,
He made their horrid wings.*

We may wince even as we laugh at such a potent critique of our often too sentimental view of God, nature, and our life. When we watch cats toy with mice or killer whales toss baby seals before making lunch of them, we probably aren't moved to add a new verse about God's "wise and wonderful" works. Our Victorian forebears, dedicated to the idea that Nature was full of evidence of God's design, tried hard to read moral lessons into even the most (humanly speaking) ghastly evolutionary outcomes. They were troubled, for example, by the Ichneumon wasp, which lays its eggs on or inside of a hapless host—a grasshopper or cricket, perhaps—leaving its larvae to munch on the often paralyzed victim, organ by organ, until it finally dies. Even Darwin was horrified by what evolution had wrought, but some Christian moralists managed to celebrate the gruesomeness as evidence of the wasp mother's love and wise provision for her unborn offspring.

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But if we are to have a mature and authentic religion, we shall have to let go of sentimentality and take into account the ugliness and the terror of life, as well as its wonder and beauty.

But why just *two* cheers for skepticism?

Because our skepticism doesn't go deep enough. We need to be skeptical not only about the claims of religion, but also about the critique of it, for both reason and science are inadequate to satisfy the hungers of the heart. Consider, for example, that the bankers, regulators, and Federal Reserve overseers who led us into national financial disaster were among "the best and the brightest." Or that the engineers of BP, skilled at drawing up oil from the depths of the sea, presided over an ecological catastrophe. Reason and science do not save humans from either greed or foolishness. Reason can easily become the rationalization of bad behavior, and science can be turned to purposes which are detrimental to human life. We need to be as skeptical of overblown hymns to science and reason as we are of those to religion.

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A noted scientist and Nobel laureate in Physics, Steven Weinberg, has argued that “the world needs to wake up from its long nightmare of religious belief.” Yet he is also the man who famously wrote, in a 1977 book entitled *The First Three Minutes*, that “the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.” *Comprehensible* is a scientific judgment, but *pointless* is a spiritual judgment. What gives the scientist special standing to pronounce on the meaningfulness of our existence? Most of us intuitively experience life as having meaning and worth. Finding words adequate to express such

Reason and science
do not save humans
from either greed or
foolishness.

intuition may be difficult, but
we trust it. And that trust in our
experience of life’s
meaningfulness lies at the root
of religion.

We need to be skeptical when
critics of religion, in the name of reason, become irrational. For
example, Christopher Hitchens’ recent book, *God is Not Great*,
has as the subtitle *Religion Poisons Everything*. At one point in
the book, Hitchens expresses his respect and admiration for
Martin Luther King, Jr., whose work on behalf of social justice

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he greatly values. Yet because he is convinced that “religion poisons everything,” he cannot accept the spiritual basis of King’s ministry. And so he concludes that “in no real as opposed to nominal sense, then, was he a Christian.” Further, writing of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the prominent Protestant theologian who was part of the plot against Hitler, he argues that his religious belief had “mutated into an admirable, but nebulous, humanism.” So here we have a critic of religion telling us that two of the most influential figures in twentieth century Christianity were really not Christians at all. That is simply intellectually dishonest, and detracts from the sensible criticisms that Hitchens elsewhere offers.

A wiser response is offered by another atheist critic of religion, Sam Harris:

“The fact that we must rely on certain intuitions to answer ethical questions does not in the least suggest that there is anything insubstantial, ambiguous, or culturally contingent about ethical truth. ...The Golden Rule really does capture many of our intuitions here. We treat those we

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love more or less the way we would like to be treated ourselves. ...Hate, envy, spite, disgust, shame—these are not sources of happiness, personally or socially. Love and compassion are.”

With such words (despite his hostility to fundamentalist versions of religion) Harris moves very close to what great religious leaders like Jesus and the Buddha have always taught: there is a sacred dimension to human experience that nourishes just and compassionate behavior. That dimension of human experience cannot be chalked off to mere superstition.

And so, only “two cheers” for skepticism, because finally we need to be skeptical of our skepticism. We must avoid an easy cynicism that misses what is authentic in religious experience. A Christian missionary once said, “My critics are the unpaid watchmen of my soul.” And so we need to listen to the critics of religion, but not take them with absolute seriousness; for beyond our skepticism lies a truth which, if only fragmentary and partially understood, nonetheless can provide the basis for a meaningful life.

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The Recovery of Reverence

Let's take a journey, in imagination, from Earth to the ends of the universe.

We will have to travel at the speed of light, which is about 11 million miles per minute. At that rate, in less than two seconds we will pass the moon, and in a mere five hours we will escape our solar system. At this incredible speed, 186,000 miles per second, it will take us about four years before we pass the nearest star. As we race through our Milky Way galaxy, we will pass a star about every five years. It will take us about 80,000 years to get all the way across our galaxy, with its 100 billion stars or so. Hoping for enough rest areas along the way, we must travel another 2 million years before we reach the next galaxy, Andromeda. Proving that scientists *do* have a sense of humor, Andromeda is one of what is called our "local group" of seventeen galaxies. If we want to reach the largest group known to us, Hercules (which contains some 10,000 galaxies) we must journey on for another 300 million years. (Recently, the Hubble telescope made a new, freshly mind-boggling discovery: in a very tiny dark and "empty" slice of space, about equal to a

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single grain of sand held out at arm's length, it found some 1,500 more galaxies, each with 100 billion stars or so, that had never been seen before. That one sighting by Hubble caused astronomers to multiply by five their estimate of the size of the universe.) Enough travel for you?

As we shake our heads in awe at what we now know of the universe, we may well identify with our ancestor whose sense of wonder is memorialized in Scripture:


“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established; what
are human beings, that you are mindful of them?
Mortals, that you care for them?” (*Psalms* 8)

We earlier mentioned the scientist Carl Sagan, who never tired of talking of those “billions and billions” of stars and galaxies, or of calling you and me “star stuff” because the atoms that make us up—the iron in our blood, the calcium in our bones, the carbon in our brains—were manufactured in giant red stars thousands of light years away in space and billions of years ago in time. “Whenever I think about any of these discoveries,”


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Sagan wrote, “I feel a tingle of exhilaration. My heart races. I can’t help it... Nearly every scientist has experienced in a moment of discovery or sudden understanding a reverential astonishment.” In *The Varieties of Scientific Experience*, he wrote: “The word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin for ‘binding together,’ to connect that which has been sundered apart. It’s a very interesting concept. And in this sense of seeking the deepest interrelations among things that superficially appear to be sundered, the objectives of religion and science, I believe, are identical or very nearly so.”

Reverential astonishment. In those words of Sagan, science and spirituality embrace. No wonder the Catholic scientist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin could write, “Whatever may be said, our century is religious—probably more religious than any other. How could it fail to be so, with such vast horizons opening and such problems to be solved? The only thing is that our age has not yet got the God it can adore.”



Our spiritual search
is about letting go of
gods that are too
small.



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That's what our spiritual search is about: letting go of gods that are too small, finding a God we can adore. Once we abandon childish images, we have a chance to grow into a more mature spirituality, one that begins in simple reverence. Having faced the skeptical questions that life in all its ambiguity poses for us, we are left—if we are open to our world—with awe and wonder. This new reverence is not bowing before a celestial Monarch, an “Almighty God, King of the universe.” Nor does it imply a “wormy” view of ourselves, as expressed in a traditional prayer of confession: “There is no health in us...miserable offenders.” The reverence we experience is amazement before the wonder and mystery of life, and gratitude that we are, however briefly, part of it. And this sense of awe and wonder is the cornerstone of all authentic religion.

Unfortunately, much in current culture conspires to dull our sense of wonder, to leave us oblivious. Our separation from the natural world, our excessive busyness, our multitasking, our alienation from other people, dull us to the amazingness of existence. Sensitive commentators outside the religious community often speak eloquently about this “lostness.” Douglas Adams, for example, author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide*

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to the Universe, writes, “The fact that we live at the bottom of a deep gravity well on the surface of a gas-covered planet going around a nuclear fireball 90 million miles away and think this to be normal is obviously some indication of how skewed our perspective tends to be.” A stage director in New York City, Brian Kulick, writes, “To me the core of theater and religion is the same: how do you stay in a perpetual state of wonder?” As Albert Einstein put it, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.”

But you, surely, are not as good as dead. Odds are, you have experienced reverential astonishment in the ordinary round of your own life. You may have found it in the experience of wildness in the natural world, or like the Psalmist looking up at the stars at night. You may have known it in the kiss of a lover, or while holding a newborn baby, during a healing conversation, in exuberant exercise or play, or while listening to a Mozart horn concerto. There is no limit to what may elicit our sense of reverence. If you want to grow as a spiritual person,

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begin by simply trusting such experiences, which move us beyond our skeptical questions to deep intuition about the meaningfulness of life.

The composer Aaron Copland once suggested that “the whole problem can be stated quite simply by asking, ‘Is there a meaning to music?’ My answer would be, ‘Yes.’ And ‘Can you state in so many words what the meaning is?’ My answer to that would be, ‘No.’” But just as the meaningfulness of music—or art, love, beauty—is obvious to us even though we get tongue-tied trying to explain it, so is our trust in the meaningfulness of life, which is what *faith* means. Faith is not about believing certain doctrines—Virgin Birth, atonement, whatever; it is a trusting confidence about our place in the cosmos. Religion, it has been wisely said, *is not a way of looking at certain things, but a certain way of looking at all things*. Religion—or spirituality—is a focused attitude of trust that moves us to an ethical lifestyle that becomes our “thank-you note” for the gift of being here.

Of course, the reverence of which we speak does not depend upon the traditional image of a Supreme Being who is

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somewhere “out there” sorting through prayers and working the levers of human history. The former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, left behind a journal of spiritual reflections after his death, in which he reflected, “God does not die on the day we cease to believe in a personal deity...but we die on the day that our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.”

That discovery, of wonder beyond all reason, is at the heart of the spiritual life.

We Are the Tradition

Diana Athill, a respected British literary figure, in her eighties wrote a delightful memoir *Somewhere Towards the End* in which, though an unbeliever, she expressed her appreciation of the tradition in which she grew up.

“So we, the irreligious, live within social structures built by the religious. And however critical or resentful we may be of parts of them,

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no honest atheist would deny that insofar as the saner aspects of religion hold in a society, that society is the better for it. We take a good nibble of our brother's cake before throwing it away.

Right behaviour, to me, is the behaviour taught me by my Christian family: one should do unto one's neighbour as one would like him to do unto one, should turn the other cheek, should not pass on the other side of those in trouble, should be gentle to children, should avoid obsession with material possessions. I have accepted a great deal of Christ's teaching, partly because it was given me in childhood by people I loved and partly because it continues to make sense, and the nearer people come to observing it the better I like them (not that they come—or ever have come—very near it, and nor have I). So my piece of my brother's cake is a substantial chunk....”

Athill's gracious attitude toward a religious upbringing, much of which she now rejects, is a good guide to the way we might

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look at the Judeo-Christian tradition that most of us have inherited. We need not accept the whole of it in order to affirm its ethical and spiritual core.

Think, for example, of our contemporary approach to the Bible. We can be quite clear that it is not a divine hand-me-down, a compendium of God's own directions for our living. The Bible is, rather, the "family scrapbook" of a particular human community reflecting on its experience over a great period of time. The Greek title *ta biblia* actually means "the books." So, as we have noted, the Bible is not *a* book, but a whole library of books written over at least a thousand year period, and consisting of a variety of genres: history, parable, myth, legend, letters, sermons, proverbs, songs, short stories, and so forth. These disparate works must be read against the setting—historical, cultural, literary—of the times and places in which they were written. We get into big trouble when we try to interpret texts without context.

Nonetheless, we have similar questions to those which troubled our forebears in generations past: Where did the world come from? What is our place in it? What should we live for? Why is

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there suffering? What—if anything—lies beyond our death? Many of their answers are outmoded for us, having arisen in a universe vastly smaller than the one we now perceive. But we can respect our ancestors' questions and we can honor their search. We can, in the words of one wise observer, "Take from the altar of the past the fire, not the ashes."

Daniel Dennett, an academic critic of religion, particularly in its dogmatic forms, has written, "Just as the Latin minds of ancient Rome gave way to French and Italian and Spanish minds, Christian minds of today are quite unlike the minds of the earliest Christians. The major religions of today are as different from their ancestral versions as today's music is different from the music of ancient Greece and Rome." We should not be surprised that religions, like all else in human society, evolve and change over time. Yet we may discover what Harry Emerson Fosdick, a theologian of the last century, called "abiding truth in changing categories." Despite all of our differences from those who lived two or three thousand years ago, we share certain common experiences. We know, as they did, that we are dependent beings in a universe not of our making, which we experience as both nurturing and threatening.

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We sense, as they did, that the Other with whom (or which) we have to deal can be trusted. We share certain core convictions: that existence is good after all, not a cosmic joke; that we belong here (as “star stuff” to Sagan, “image of God” to the Bible); that compassion and love are our finest purpose. Such core intuitions are more than enough to provide us with a life agenda, whether we live in the first or the fifteenth or the twenty-first century.

So we are both heirs of an ancient tradition and bearers of it to those who come after us. Spiritual seeking did not begin with us, and it certainly will not end with us. We have a legacy to leave, and must not be afraid to imagine it afresh. We need not feel intimidated by those who claim exclusive ownership of the tradition, whose pamphlets offer “four steps in the plan of salvation” or for whom “atonement in the Blood” requires our assent. It is enough for us to witness to our fragmentary yet enlivening sense of the Sacred “in whom we live and move and have our being.”

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Meeting the Sacred in Stories

This Sacred Mystery has been recognized, in however varied forms, from time immemorial. To illustrate, take a look at four stories, from the Jewish, Christian and Hindu traditions, and from a contemporary writer. In doing so, understand that the language of religious tradition is often the language not of science or history, but of story. If we listen to these stories with a literalism that is peculiar to the modern age, we will miss much of their wisdom. Instead of asking, “Is this really true?”—meaning factually or scientifically accurate—listen for a deeper meaning. All of us recognize that a good novel may tell us more about our human journey than a psychology textbook. It is exactly in this sense that many religious tales have wisdom to offer us, if we only have ears to hear.

The Jewish story comes from the book of *Exodus*, a story of Moses in conversation with God. Moses is presented in the tradition as one who spoke with God face to face, as a man speaks with a friend. He is also the leader of a contentious group of migrants, and in the scene we are recounting he insists that his God (*Yahweh* was his name) show him his “glory,” (the

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luminous presence of the Deity) as assurance that he will accompany Moses on the journey. In reply, Yahweh says to Moses, “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I will make my goodness pass before you and I will pronounce before you my name, Yahweh. And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious. But you may not see my face.” Yahweh then, in the story, takes Moses and places him in a cleft in the cliff. As he passes by he covers Moses with his hand, and then when he is past he takes his hand away so that Moses may see his back, but, he says, “My face shall not be seen.” Can you imagine a clearer way to say that all human perception of God is partial, that the Sacred is beyond our ever fully knowing?

The Christian story comes from the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.) It is, in fact, the *only* story before the last week of Jesus’ life that they all tell—and it shows up in six different versions! So obviously it is heavy with significance. The story is that Jesus is teaching a huge throng of people out in the “wilderness”—four or five thousand men (only *men* get numbered in that patriarchal society!) plus women and children, and the teaching goes on so long that everybody’s getting hungry and there’s no possible way to scrounge up enough food

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to feed them. So at Jesus' urging his close followers manage to come up with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, which Jesus blesses and tells them to distribute. Lo and behold!—not only do all in this throng of thousands eat till they're full, but they even collect baskets of leftovers!

Now, what are we to make of that story? Some say, "Well, of course it was a miracle!" Others rationalize, "No, it's just that once somebody offered to share his lunch, others brought theirs out also." In reality, there are multiple layers of meaning—more than we can unpack here. But the heart of it is this: anthropologists tell us that once you know what the eating rules are in a society—who is allowed to eat with whom—you can infer just about everything else about that society. And what we know for certain is that the rule-makers in Jesus' society were furious at the way he broke the rules—eating with "sinners" (the religiously nonobservant as well as flagrantly immoral), mixing social classes at the same table, associating with women and children, touching the sick and disfigured. That wilderness meal—whatever actually happened historically—symbolizes Jesus' practice of inviting all sorts and conditions of people to

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eat together in community, violating the most basic rules of purity and social separation.

If all of this sounds like a long ago fuss about obscure Jewish ritual rules, think back to the beginning of the civil rights movement in our own country. In the early 1960s our society was convulsed when some black young people dared to sit down at a “whites only” lunch counter. Some of them had ketchup poured over them and lighted cigarettes snuffed out on their necks—such was the rage over a challenge to eating customs. Here in modern, democratic America we had *laws* about who could eat with whom and, just as the anthropologists argued, the segregated lunch counter was a miniature model of our society as a whole. When young people, black and white, ate together or rode the same bus, they were challenging an entire system in the name of a different vision of how we should live together. And that is exactly what Jesus was doing—and what all those “eating and drinking” stories are about. He was replacing the segregated table with an inclusive table, a symbol of a whole new vision of society in which—as his follower Paul later put it—“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no

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longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

The story from the Hindu tradition concerns Krishna, who is thought of rather as many Christians think of Jesus—as one who is both a real historical figure and also God incarnate. Diana Eck, a student of Hindu thought, tells one much-loved story, of Krishna as cowherd calling a group of milkmaids to the forest in the middle of the night to dance a great circle dance. When they arrive, Krishna miraculously multiplies himself (another “miracle of multiplication!”) so as to be able to dance with each and every one of them. There is, in other words, plenty of Krishna to go around, an abundance of sacred presence. But as soon as the milkmaids become possessive, each one thinking that Krishna is dancing with her alone, he disappears. Now, what is that story about? Certainly it also could be read (as gospel stories often are) as a straightforward miracle story: Krishna, being God, can multiply himself at will. But surely you are able to hear that story as symbolic, a vivid way of saying that the sacred is available to each and all, but is lost to us when we suppose that God is our exclusive possession, unavailable to those “others.”

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The final story, much briefer, is told by the novelist David Foster Wallace. “There are,” he says, “these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish go swimming on for a bit, until eventually one of them looks over at the other and asks, ‘What the hell is water?’”

In these symbolic stories, we are reminded that God can never fully be perceived, dreams of community in which “otherness” disappears, can never be the private possession of any individual, and—rather than being a separate Being “out there somewhere”—is the Context of all existence, the Ocean in which we swim.

Hungers of the Heart is for those who are turned off by organized religion but want to deepen personal spirituality. It deals with the search for meaning, satisfying relationships, a more just society, and connection with the Sacred. In a conversational style free of religious jargon, the author maps a spirituality that is rooted in reason and contemporary knowledge, as well as being grounded in the authentic core of the great world religious traditions.

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