

“Slipping”

A paper presented to the Boston Theological Society, November, 2010
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PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The paper beginning a few pages below is the second chapter in a new book manuscript, *Effing the Ineffable: Unconventional Essays in Religious Philosophy*. The book aims to illustrate the seven types of religious philosophy described in another book entitled *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion*. To set the context for the chapter below, therefore, I present the contextual material from *Religious Philosophy* that describes the seven styles of religious philosophy.

RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY

Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010)

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Chapter 2. Tasks, Contexts, and Traditions of Religious Philosophy

2.1. Tasks of Religious Philosophy

Summary: Religious philosophy involves investigation (in the sense of multidisciplinary comparative inquiry) into every kind and degree of religious phenomena. The breadth of religious philosophy derives from the diverse topics it covers (from ideas to practices, from metaphysics to ethics, and from the concrete to the generic), from the diverse styles of its inquiries (phenomenological, comparative, historical, analytical, literary, theoretical, and evaluative), and from the diverse disciplines in relation to which these inquiries unfold (natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and professional crafts such as law, medicine, and politics).

2.1.1. Breadth of Phenomena

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2.1.2. Styles of Inquiry

Another way to measure the scope of religious philosophy is to consider the styles of inquiry relevant to understanding such diverse aspects of religion. Of course, human beings narrate sacred stories, which focus devotion in life-changing ways. We can compose religious music, which brings insight to the religiously sensitive. Even simple actions can express understanding of religious matters. My interest here, however, is specifically in gaining understanding through inquiry, and it is solely this interest rather than neglect or depreciation of alternative ways of creating religious understanding that explains the limitation of focus in what follows. At least the following styles of religious-philosophical inquiry are relevant:

- **Phenomenological:** When religious philosophy turns its attention to religious phenomena (for example, mystical experience), careful description that strives for objectivity—in the sense of registering what is important about the phenomena at the right places in the description of it—is the starting point for inquiry.
- **Comparative:** When religious philosophy organizes resources from multiple religious traditions simultaneously (for example, compiling religious ideas of ultimate realities), it must work comparatively—tracking similarities and differences, and being alert to and taking responsibility for the categories guiding comparison.
- **Historical:** When religious philosophy needs to trace the development of an idea across eras and its causal connections across traditions (for example, the idea of fate), it must work historically—drawing attention to episodes of change, periods of continuity, and patterns of influence in relation to particular contexts and pressures.
- **Analytical:** When religious philosophy seeks to identify the important features of a religious idea or argument (for example, arguments for the existence of a divine being), it must work analytically—drawing out key concepts, logical moves, and implications.
- **Literary:** When religious philosophy seeks to indicate rather than theorize about what makes a religious phenomenon important (for example, the futility of resisting finitude and death), it must embrace the freedom and grace of literary testimony—portraying significance in ways that capture the imagination, produce insight, and nurture understanding nontheoretically.
- **Theoretical:** When religious philosophy seeks a comprehensive understanding of an aspect of religion (for example, religious art), it must construct multidisciplinary philosophical theories that cover the relevant phenomena, meaningfully connect to neighboring phenomena (for example, in the way that art connects to cognitive-emotional capacities for aesthetic appreciation), and strive for coherence and elegance.
- **Evaluative:** When religious philosophy seeks to evaluate answers to the big questions of religion (for example, the meaning of life), it must assemble competing

constructive theories pertinent to the big question and try to detect the superior candidate(s) through arguments about both the premises of competitor theories and criteria used to claim theoretical superiority.

In the first three of these styles, religious philosophy overlaps with phenomenology of religion, comparative religion, and history of religion, respectively. In the last four cases, religious philosophy exhibits a complex array of overlaps with philosophy, theology, and literature. What distinguishes religious philosophy's approach to a religious phenomenon from allied approaches with shared territory?

2.1.3. Overlaps and Distinctiveness

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2.1.4. Passivity and Audaciousness

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2.2. Contexts of Religious Philosophy

Summary: Each of the seven styles of religious philosophy—phenomenological, comparative, historical, analytical, literary, theoretical, and evaluative—takes shape under the influence of distinctive conceptual frameworks and socio-historical circumstances. Within any given style of religious philosophy, no single conceptual framework appears to have a decisive advantage over the others in all contexts of inquiry. But certain specialized tasks within religious philosophy are better suited to some conceptual frameworks than others. The role of context in determining framework superiority suggests that the various conceptual frameworks have developed in the presence of distinguishable interests and purposes. These interests and corresponding contexts and frameworks of inquiry remain perpetually relevant within religious philosophy. Rather than being defeaters of human reason, interests and contexts and frameworks function as power sources for conducting rational inquiry in all fields, including religious philosophy.

2.2.1. The Role of Contexts

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2.2.2. Contexts and the Styles of Religious Philosophy

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2.3. Traditions of Religious Philosophy

Summary: Religious philosophy historically has relied on a variety of distinguishable conceptual frameworks for structure and guidance. Most of these conceptual frameworks have developed into substantial traditions of debate in their own right, often with parallels across cultures. All such traditions improve the prospects for advancing debate in religious philosophy by stabilizing specialized terminology for carefully refined concepts and by encoding the enabling wisdom of past experience in the constraints of traditional philosophic practice. These conceptual frameworks have special fields of application and are not universally useful. Moreover, they have produced insights that are not completely consistent, from which it follows that religious

philosophers should proceed carefully in order to avoid misjudging the strength of philosophical arguments.

2.3.1. Marshalling Corrective Resources in Traditions

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2.3.2. The Stodginess of Philosophical Traditions

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**EFFING THE INEFFABLE:
UNCONVENTIONAL ESSAYS IN RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY**

(A book illustrating the various styles of religious philosophy)

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ZOOMING IN ON THE PREFACE

Preface

The primary aim of this book is to present philosophical insights into the profoundly spiritual character of human life. The secondary aim is to show that serious religious philosophy need not be tedious; it has a colorful side. Those who plow the trenches of religious philosophy know that this is partly why they love what they do, yet even they can forget from time to time.

Each chapter of the book is a self-standing philosophical essay on an existentially potent aspect of life that is loaded with spiritual significance, regardless of the religious context imagined.

These are the sorts of issues that drive religious questioning and inspire commitment to a spiritual outlook on life and sometimes even to a particular religious community. They are features of human life widely shared across cultures and eras, even though the treatment they receive here betrays (and benefits from) the author's training as a western religious philosopher reaching out to other religious and philosophical wisdom traditions. Most importantly, these essays show that there is room for emotion and for fun even in demanding religious philosophy.

Styles of inquiry in religious philosophy include the phenomenological, the comparative, the historical, the analytical, the theoretical, the literary, and the evaluative, as described in my *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (State University of New York Press, 2010). Most of these styles are illustrated in the chapters of this book, sometimes combined in a single chapter. This serves as a reminder that religious philosophy is not stylistically monochrome. Indeed, religious philosophy needs to work in different styles and from different interpretative angles in order to develop a satisfying philosophical portrayal of the religious potency of the half-hidden depths of the human condition and of the natural environment within which we emerge.

In the scientific study of the world of nature, the relative simplicity of the subject matter allows a strong case to be made for a "best" interpretation at any given stage of scientific progress. This is not true in the philosophical study of the human condition. Human life is dense with meanings to the point of bursting apart at the seams. This superfluity of significance calls for creative and interactive engagement from numerous angles in order to surface the tangle of meanings. A unified philosophical account of the single best meaning in human life would be a disappointing empirical disaster in a way that the one best scientific account of protein expression from DNA would not be. Thus, there is reason to embrace the varied styles of religious philosophy even as we continue to expect that philosophical argumentation will sometimes eliminate certain interpretations as deficient, thereby drawing our attention to the superior interpretations.

Some of these chapters derive from essays previously published in previous publications, acknowledged below, as I have worked my way across some of the varied terrain of religious philosophy. Others have not been published before.

Chapter 1 on "Loneliness" is a literary and philosophical exploration of the Epic of Gilgamesh. It explores the theme of loneliness as it bears on religious perceptions of ultimacy, arguing that the ability to experience unmediated and undeflected loneliness is a kind of virtue that we can both cultivate and encounter in the depth structures of reality. It is not everyone's spiritual cup of tea, perhaps, but it is an authentic alternative available for spiritual exploration. This derives from "In Praise of Loneliness," in Leroy Rouner, ed., *Loneliness*, Institute for Philosophy and Religion Series (University of Notre Dame Press: 1998): 15-39, and before that from a 1996 lecture in the Institute series.

Chapter 2 on "Slipping" exhibits religious philosophy in the analytical and comparative modes, using an informal kind of literary criticism as the main tool. The essay shows how the narrative device of a vanishingly small slip recurs in mythic narratives of several traditions and is used to deal with the problem of evil without attributing undue responsibility to any of the involved parties. A version of this was published as "Slipping into Horror," in *Soundings: An*

Interdisciplinary Journal 84/1-2 (Spring/Summer, 2001): 143-55, and derives from a 1996 lecture on the same topic at the American Academy of Religion annual meeting in New Orleans.

Chapter 3 on “Speaking” discusses techniques that spontaneously emerge within religious discourse systems for managing consonance and dissonance among religious symbols, and for trying to express what seems virtually inexpressible. This work is primarily religious philosophy in the analytical mode with nods in the direction of the comparative and theoretical styles. This derives from work first presented as “Strategic Mechanisms within Religious Symbol Systems” at a 1997 LAUD Symposium conference in the University of Duisburg, Germany, and subsequently published in Lieven Boeve and Kurt Feysaerts, eds., *Metaphor and God-talk* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), Religions and Discourse series, James Francis, Gen. Ed., vol. 2: 273-291.

Chapter 4 on “Symmetry” is an analysis of two idealized interpretations of the ultimate ontological basis of nature that traditional metaphysical analyses have not emphasized. The symmetric view pictures ultimate reality as morally neutral while replete with valuational possibilities, fundamentally indeterminate while abysmally fecund, and in balance with created reality. The asymmetric view is opposed on each of these characteristics. The contrast between symmetry and asymmetry derives from the meaning of symmetry breaking in the mathematical analysis of the early universe within fundamental physics. This analogy is surprisingly useful for conceiving a dynamic process of symmetry breaking in ontology that indicates how symmetric and asymmetric perspectives on nature’s ontological ground can be causally and historically related to one another. This material has not been previously published.

Chapter 5 on “Dreaming” is religious philosophy in a decidedly comparative and evaluative mode, arguing that it is exceptionally difficult for human beings to feel attracted to and properly to appreciate the theoretical virtues of theories of ultimacy that keep anthropomorphic modeling impulses in check; such theoretical discipline interferes with human dreaming. The chapter derives from a keynote lecture presented to a mini-conference on “Models of God” at the 2007 San Francisco meeting of the American Philosophical Association, subsequently published as “Behind, Between, and Beyond Anthropomorphic Models of Ultimate Reality,” *Philosophia* 35/3-4 (2007): 407-425.

Chapter 6 on “Suffering” shows how comparative and theoretical styles of religious philosophy can be bent to an evaluative end. The essay uses the reality of suffering in nature as a source of selective pressure on ideas of ultimate reality. This approach is quite contrary to those theological strategies that defend or elaborate an existing idea of ultimacy and rather seeks to see which of a wide range of ultimacy theories can best handle the selective pressure. The chapter is based on “Incongruous Goodness, Perilous Beauty, Disconcerting Truth: Ultimate Reality and Suffering In Nature,” which appeared in Robert J. Russell, Nancey Murphy, and William R. Stoeger, eds., *Suffering and Cosmology: Scientific Perspectives on Suffering in Nature* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory and Berkeley: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 2006): 267-294, which itself derived from work presented at a 2005 research conference on the theme of natural evil in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, sponsored by the Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and Natural Sciences.

Chapter 7 on “Undersides” concerns the distinction between the brightly lit top sides of religious traditions that nurture and reform civilizational projects, and their shady hidden undersides that power the deconstruction of the social construction of reality. In particular, the chapter focuses on the way liberal theology hints at the dark and fecund undersides of religion but perpetually fails to follow through in its articulation of this place of shady silence because of its implacable and commendable commitment to institutional maintenance. The irony here is familiar in other chapters of this book: speech about ineffable ultimacy always interferes with fully engaging ultimacy. This chapter derives from “The Ambiguous Heritage and Perpetual Promise of Liberal Theology,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* (2010).

Chapter 8 on “Intensity” is a description of key qualities of intense experiences, and illustrates religious philosophy in the phenomenological mode. Intensity is very likely an evolutionarily basic dimension of human experience and thus a primal aspect of religious behavior and belief. Unfortunately, the presence and roles of intensity are often masked by the proprietary ritual and doctrinal organization of religious life and thus intensity receives less attention than it should. Based on an essay written in the mid-1990s and presented to the Boston Theological Society, a version of this piece has been published in *Religious and Spiritual Experiences* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Chapter 9 on “Bliss” illustrates religious philosophy at the junction of literary, phenomenological, and comparative modes. It aims to show how moral categorizations shade off into irrelevance in the blissful state, and on this basis to argue that theistic conceptions of ultimacy are improperly enslaved by anthropomorphic instincts when they conceive of being in the divine presence as bliss and yet do not conceive God as beyond good and evil. This material has not been published before.

The intellectual point of these essays is fundamentally conceptual and illuminative, rather than historical or analytical. That is, they are about existential insights rather than scholarly intricacies. Thus, I have tried to keep the scholarly apparatus to a minimum. For example, if I mention a figure and intend to refer to a body of work by that figure, I do not cite a sampling of works. Footnotes are brief and few. The essays draw on large blocks of interpretative tradition stabilized within existing literature on the themes I discuss. While this can make them challenging in places for undergraduate beginners in religious philosophy, the themes themselves are easy to grasp in a preliminary way. Minimizing a laborious apparatus hopefully will remove an obstacle in the way of understanding for readers with less experience, and increase the accessibility of the text for all readers.

With the same concerns in mind, I have tried to make the prose style as transparent as the subject matter allows. It is never easy to combine systematic argumentation with elegant and lucid prose, at least not for me, inclined as I am to tediously detailed arguments. Nevertheless, I have made a concerted effort to eliminate such features, focusing instead on larger-scale inferences, in keeping with the overall point of the volume.

I am pleased to acknowledge the original publishers of earlier versions of some of the chapters of this book, as noted above. I also take the opportunity here to express my gratitude to an unnamed host of conversation partners—colleagues, students, and authors ancient and contemporary—

who have helped form my thinking on the intellectually and spiritually precarious activity of speaking about ultimacy. This book is dedicated to my children, Sam and Ben. Both are spiritually perceptive, have unconventional religious outlooks, and don't know quite what to make of their father's affirmation of a God beyond the socially constructed Gods of religion and culture. They appreciate the critique of religion and culture implied in this view but they hesitate to embrace the spiritually positive aspects of it. My hope is that this book will help explain why I take this mystical theological outlook beyond critique to affirmation—albeit an affirmation that must always vainly attempt to eff the ineffable.

ZOOMING IN ON CHAPTER 2:

SLIPPING

Introduction

The underside of individual experience and social life is the nexus of events and behaviors that lead with horrific frequency to tragedy, depravity, oppression and cruelty, from tormented psyches to institutional corruption, from moral degradation to socially sanctioned exploitation.

Religious traditions and texts grapple practically and intellectually with this underside in varied ways—and they have a double effect. On the one hand, they express sensitivity to the evil and chaos of human life, and they cultivate communal empathy toward people who suffer as a result of it. On the other hand, these ritual, ethical and doctrinal exertions serve to inure religious communities to the harsher realities of life, either through eschatological escapism, habitual distancing, or systematic descriptions of life that render less important its underside.

There is something socially and psychologically useful about such distractions, of course, because the horror of life is hard to bear. The saints, sages and prophets of every culture may be able to look the underside of life in the eye and not wither in horror, but most people need to keep it out of sight as much as possible in order to function effectively. Cultural activities that foster insensitivity to the underside of life therefore serve a useful function for the individuals and societies they influence. This is part of the explanation for large-scale, social expressions of denial, including dangerous scapegoating mechanisms. But the insensitivities of denial, displaced rage, and vengeance also retard attempts to transform social conditions.

Ambiguous Undercurrents in Religious Narratives

Many religious texts sponsor religious thought about the underside of life. Each of the texts to be considered here has the underside of life in the background, while in the foreground a narrative addresses questions about it—questions about its origin, nature, and overcoming. Certain traditional lines of interpretation of each of these narratives lead to theoretical construals of the human condition that, in different respects, both cultivate empathy and inure communities to the horrific underside of human experience and social life.

The Story of Adam in the Qur'an

First, consider the Qur'anic material concerning Adam (see especially the presentations in II.27ff, VII.7ff, XV.26ff, and XX.115ff). Adam is created by Allah to be viceroy on earth, and given special knowledge not possessed by the angels. Allah thus enters into a primordial covenant with Adam. Allah demands that the angels prostrate themselves before Adam, and all do so except Iblis, who dissents out of pride. Iblis is cursed by Allah and banished, but permitted—and thus designated by Allah—to fill the role of the enemy of Adam and his offspring, the one who sets snares and tries to turn people away from the worship of Allah. Allah warns Adam and his wife about the enemy he has established for them, and permits them to eat from all but one of the trees in their garden home. Iblis convinces them to eat from the forbidden tree, however, so Adam breaks the primordial divine covenant of obedience to and love of Allah. Nevertheless, Allah relents and forgives the error. As originally intended, Allah establishes Adam and his progeny as viceroy on earth, both promising a pleasant habitation and warning of enmity among them. Allah also promises guidance so that they need not go astray again.

The story presents Allah as establishing human beings, unlike the angels, to be creatures blessed with special knowledge and responsibility for the earth, and to exist in moral tension by virtue of being under the divine command. Human beings have the peculiar perfection of being under the divine imperative to be perfect, even as the rest of creation actually *is* perfect. Humanity is not essentially flawed through being suspended in this moral tension, nor does the almost negligible mistake of Adam and his wife plunge humanity into a disastrous fallen state. Rather, Allah forgives them and the story of the establishment of the earth's viceroys continues, as does the divine imperative, the primordial covenant, and the promised guidance of Allah, expressed preeminently in the testimony of the blessed prophet and the Qur'an.

This story of failure hovers in the background of the portrayal of humanity in the Qur'an: the primordial covenant is always vulnerable to being broken by human inattention to the law. The misery of human life receives its final answer in the vision of Allah mercifully and justly making decisive judgment at an appointed future time. But the reasons why such misery is even possible find expression in the mysterious story of Adam's mistake. It was a tiny slip—a slip due mostly to the cunning and trickery of Iblis in his divinely appointed role as the opponent of humanity. The smallness and almost accidental character of Adam's mistake seem crucial to the narrative. A huge mistake would portray Adam as a miscreant, the primordial covenant as futile, and Allah's plans as easily derailed. And no mistake at all would make the misery of life seem arbitrary, and Allah's creation an exercise in cruelty. The mistake has to be a tiny slip to keep the narrative in balance.

What of the possibility for Adam to slip in this way at all? The story explains this by means of the divine designation of Adam to be like the rest of his race: suspended in moral tension. There is a principle of plenitude hovering in the narrative here. Allah fills every niche of being in creation. The angels are perfect, but sense no moral tension; other creatures are not capable of sensing this moral tension. But human beings are the ones who enter into a primordial covenant with Allah to strive after perfection. Allah, who “disdaineth not even to coin the similitude of a

gnat” (II.26¹), out of the divinely transcendent wisdom, fills heaven and earth with every possible kind of creature. When the angels questioned Allah about his intention to make creatures of this kind, creatures that would shed blood and cause a multitude of miseries, Allah simply replied that “Surely I know that which ye know not” (II.30). Even Iblis fulfills a designated role in the divinely ordained economy of beings. Thus, in accordance with this principle of plenitude, every ontological-moral possibility is realized in creation. It follows that the slip of Adam and his wife is explained first with reference to their lack of wisdom in listening to Iblis, second with reference to Iblis’s role as the enemy of humanity, third with reference to Adam’s constitution as suspended in moral tension through being under the divine command, fourth with reference to the principle of plenitude, and finally with reference to the transcendent divine will that is beyond all human reckoning.

On the one hand, the overwhelming character of divine transcendence potentially fosters insensitivity to the horrors of life through being the explanation for them that ultimately lies deeply beneath every preliminary explanation. Such horrors fade into insignificance, and so out of human concern, in the light of divine glory and, furthermore, what can be done about them when their possibility springs from the transcendent divine will? Yet, on the other hand, the divine command directs our attention to the horrors of life and demands that we overcome them, through not making things worse, and through helping to ease burdens where we can. The Qur’anic context for these narratives stimulates empathy toward those upon whom the dark underside of life casts its dangerous, patient eye through its emphatic affirmation of the goodness and mercy of Allah, and its careful stipulations about personal holiness and social propriety.

This narrative has four features that are typical of the others I will mention more briefly in a moment. First, the story encourages recognition of the underside of life and empathy toward victims in some respects, and fosters insensitivity in other respects. Second, the narrative turns on a slip that is momentous in significance yet vanishingly small in magnitude. Third, the smallness of the slip—its almost accidental character—plays a crucial role in the narrative by blocking the assignment of total blame to any of the characters in the story. And fourth, there is a theological rationalization for the slip; in this case, though alternatives in Islamic thought exist, I have mentioned the one that takes the form of a blame-deflecting principle of plenitude.

The Fall of Adam and Eve in the Torah

As a second example, consider the garden story of Genesis (Genesis 2-3), and especially interpretation of it offered by the second century CE, anti-Jewish, arch-heretic Marcion (which we can reconstruct through Tertullian’s *Against Marcion*²). Much like the Qur’anic version, we have an apparently arbitrary decree—“you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (2:17a³)—violated by a curious, innocent pair. In the Genesis version, however, the consequences seem totally out of proportion to their juvenile adventure. It is the command and not the eating that awakens the knowledge of good and evil, which makes the creator-God seem

¹ *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, an explanatory translation by Marmaduke Pickthall (New York: Dorset Press [year of publication not given]).

² Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, “Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian” (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951).

³ *Holy Bible, New International Version* (New York International Bible Society, 1978).

most unjust in the narrative. Yet clearly the creator-God's hands are tied, so to speak, for the human creatures have moved into a metaphysical space of knowing freedom. Accordingly, he spells out the consequences of their action in the form of curses, tries to put a good face on it all by showing them how to make clothes, and tosses them out of the garden.

Consciousness of the underside of life and empathy toward its victims are encouraged in this narrative both by the aura of divine command and concern, and by the picturesque contrast between "before" and "after" that is elaborated as the story proceeds. Insensitivity to the underside of life is fostered by the apparently inexplicable arbitrariness of the divine command, and the suggestion of carelessness about the horrific consequences for humanity. And once again, as in the Qur'anic narrative, there is a slip underneath all of this: Adam and Eve err almost trivially—and yet portentously—having been tricked by Satan. It is not really the creator-God's fault, it is not really Satan's fault, and it is not really the fault of the human creatures either, but it happens nonetheless. Trying to cope with this slip forces disproportionateness into the narrative.

Marcion apparently sensed the problem with this story, and put his own spin on it, for his own reasons. Beginning from a dualistic distinction between a creator God and a savior God, Marcion seems to have regarded the matter-oriented creator-God's command not to eat as unjust, and made of the serpent a hero, the symbol of a spiritually oriented savior-God who resists the fickle arbitrariness of the creator-God, and who leads the duped human beings into salvation precisely through their knowledge. Marcion resolved the ambiguity surrounding the causal heritage of the slip by bluntly and dualistically blaming the creator-God, whom he understood to be the God of the Old Testament, the God obsessed with laws, and opposed to the God of Christianity, the God of Jesus Christ, the God of grace and love.⁴ This is one way to characterize his heretical impulse. Though it is not much celebrated as a point of doctrinal debate, the gradually emerging mainstream of the Christian tradition seems early on to have been committed to maintaining descriptions of this primordial slip that are neutral as regards the cause of the slip—it is neither wholly God's fault nor wholly the fault of humanity. This is one way to understand the importance within Christianity of the doctrine of original sin: its accusation of human vulnerability to sin serves also to exculpate them from responsibility.

Once again, therefore, we see the four characteristics of this family of narratives. First, both empathy and insensitivity toward the underside of life are cultivated in different respects. Second, the narrative turns on a minuscule slip. Third, the slip's smallness plays an essential role in the narrative by blocking decisive assignment of blame. And fourth, there is a theological rationalization for the slip that, in the case of most Christian commentators (though not Marcion), took the form of a doctrine of the fall. It is important here to note in passing that Jewish theological rationalizations of the slip are generally quite different from Christian ones, and rather varied among themselves.

The Last Judgment in the Apocalypse

Consider now the account of the Last Judgment and associated events in the New Testament book of Revelation. I will not retell the story, but rather leap all the way to the conclusion that it,

⁴ Tertullian frequently attacks Marcion's two-Gods thesis and his assignment of the good-God role to the savior God (who is the God of Jesus), in contrast to the creator God (who is the legalistic God of the Jewish religion). See, for example, *Against Marcion*, Book 1, chs. 2-7.

too, exhibits the four characteristic features of the narratives I am examining. First, empathy toward the underside of life and its victims is cultivated through the vividness and detail of the divine engagement in human affairs that the story presents, and through the testimony to the deadly seriousness of divine command. Insensitivity is fostered by the seemingly unavoidable, escapist dimensions of apocalyptic expectation, and by the apparent futility of all efforts to improve human society. Second, there is a narrative slip in the form of the trigger for final consummation. Third, the vanishingly smallness of this narrative slip, notwithstanding its enormous consequences, is essential for blocking wholesale narrative blaming of the characters for the gruesome horrors of the apocalyptic intervention; the trigger has something to do with worsening conditions of human life, something to do with the timetable of evil beings, and something to do with inscrutable divine will. Fourth, theological rationalizations for the slip and its consequences exist in various forms. One kind focuses on the conjunction of two affirmations: the thoroughness of potential divine control of both the grand sweep and intimate details of history and nature, and the apparently indefinite deferral of final, decisive exercise of that control. A tension is established between power and restraint that reinforces the cultivation of empathy and activism, on the one hand, and withdrawal and insensitivity, on the other.

The Fateful Swim in the Epic of Gilgamesh

Small slips make a difference elsewhere, too. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*,⁵ after a long series of adventures, the hero of the story, Gilgamesh, is told about a plant that is the secret of everlasting life. Gilgamesh finds the plant and begins the journey home. Along the way, he takes a relaxing swim only to have the plant stolen by a water serpent. No matter what human beings do, it seems, they cannot get out from under the burden imposed upon them by the gods. This wonderful adventure sponsors empathy for the tragedy of life through its detailed accounts of human suffering and struggle and by means of narrative encouragement of our identification with the hero. Yet fate is always darkly hovering, and the futility of resistance saps courage and determination and fosters passive acceptance of, or indifference to, the underside of life. The narrative slip takes the form of the loss of the special plant, and the smallness of the slip emphasizes the untraceable inevitability of fate. The rationalization for the slip is suggested in the story clearly enough: though the power of the gods can be resisted by human ingenuity and determination temporarily, the gods always find a way to interfere in human affairs so as to protect their own interests. Put differently, the rationalization for the slip consists in the way the power of human beings—which itself is unaccountably hard to understand in view of the power of the gods—suddenly and inexplicably gives way to the intrusion of fate.

Gautama's Discovery of Sickness, Decrepitude, and Death

Finally, recall that it is a small slip in the form of inexplicable encounters with strangers that allows Gautama to encounter sickness, decrepitude, death, and then the possibility of the

⁵ “The Epic of Gilgamesh” in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 2 vols., 3rd ed. with supplement (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), vol. I, pp. 72-99. See especially tablet XI, lines 257-291 (vol. I, p. 98).

monastic life.⁶ His father was scrupulous in his efforts to shield Gautama from such knowledge. He wanted his son to be a great ruler but, according to a wise seer who spoke to the King on the occasion of the child's birth, Gautama was to be a great spiritual adventurer (I.54ff). Because of this, and out of love for his son, Gautama's father spared no expense in surrounding his son with all the pleasures of the ruler's life, thereby hoping to prevent him from learning about that alternative future (II.25, III.3-6, and so on). Even so, seemingly miraculously—by the intervention of the gods according to Aśvaghosha's version of the story—Gautama had those life-changing encounters (III.26-62), and he was driven to seek enlightenment.

The narrative slip in this case is the invisibly small cracks in the shield built around the young boy's consciousness, and the events that somehow managed to penetrate those cracks and trigger a cascading chain of transformations. The slip must be small to express the fact that the causes of the raising of consciousness are finally untraceable, just as we are never able to say just what it is that really causes us to wake from sleeping. In due course this yields among some Buddhists to philosophical descriptions of the nature of consciousness, of the ultimate unreality of the dependently co-arising world. At the most fundamental level the slip expresses the simple inevitability of enlightenment when it occurs, and the impossibility of waking up without in some sense already having woken up. The slip from sleep to waking is necessary and momentous in significance, yet it is untraceable and therefore uncontrollable and unavoidable.

This story encourages empathy toward the underside of life through its poignant account of the contrast between Gautama's life of comfort and the suffering strangers, and through the narrative tension surrounding the very possibility of those encounters. It also fosters insensitivity toward the underside of life through its suggestion of the unreality of the world and the need to escape from its delusions. The rationalizations of the slip in subsequent Buddhist thought reinforce this dual effect.

Slipping and the Underside of Life

The Narrative Mechanism

The metaphor of a “slip”—a near-accidental mistake, of apparent unimportance in itself, but with tragic or far-reaching consequences—expresses a conceptual pattern that is essential to the integrity of each narrative I have discussed. Of course, this slip is developed differently in each narrative. But the conceptual pattern is recognizably similar, and it is intelligible as a strategy for accounting for the underside of life without taking the religiously perilous paths of “over-blaming” either the mysterious context for human life, or human beings themselves.

Note *how* small this slip is: it must be infinitesimally small, because it *must not function as a causal explanation*, lest the narrative leave traces of cause that give grounds either for ascribing responsibility for the horrors of life to the ground and horizon of our lives, or for assigning to human beings more blame for their misery than is just. Yet we cannot blame the mysterious

⁶ This story is related in a number of places, but most famously and popularly in the *Buddha-carita* of Aśvaghosha, tr. by E.B. Cowell in *Buddhist Mahayana Texts*, vol. 49 of *Sacred Books of the East*, Max Müller, Gen. Ed. (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1884; reprint ed. 1990). See especially books I-V, pp. 1-61.

ground of our lives without unfaithfulness, nor can we blame ourselves unduly without self-betrayal. The vanishing smallness of the slip thus serves to deflect the possibility of one-sided blame. It is a non-explanatory explanation.

Narratives are ideally suited to express the non-explanatory explanations that are slips because the capacities of dynamism and indirection possessed by stories are better than the relatively stable terms of theory for suggesting natural *trajectories* of thought. It is these trajectories that lead the imagination gradually through the series of approximations necessary for expressing vanishingly small things of great significance. By contrast, theories are better than stories at detecting bias and making corrections in the processes of world-making in which stories play such a key role. Thus, while this essay began with a discussion of slips in stories, it ends by asking more theoretically-framed questions about how such stories influence religious attitudes toward the underside of life, which is a big part of world-making for every society.

I have argued that each of these narratives fosters the double attitude of sensitivity toward the underside of life in some respects and insensitivity in others. I have also given examples of the way that the notion of a slip and its attendant rationalizations reinforce this dual process of simultaneously intensifying empathy and decreasing sensitivity. Now, in closing, I wish to argue three further points. First, the dual character of this process is essential for social stability. Second, the importance of narrative slips derives in part from the efficiency with which they foster this dual process; this is the reason that narrative slips appear in stories from many parts and periods of the world, and the reason why stories embodying narrative slips play such an important role in religious world-making. Third, in our time, religion is not only a crucial institution for supporting the dual process of increasing empathy and decreasing sensitivity in society at large, it is also the most efficient means of cultivating the maturity needed to face the underside of life without the aid of denial or transference psychological mechanisms.

The Interests of Social Stability

It is difficult to make generalizations about societies because they vary greatly, but plausible generalizations are possible, especially if we limit their scope to modern societies. In this case, I think it can safely be said that societies cannot afford to let empathy become too pronounced because the underside of life is too painful and the corporate consequences of individual psychic needs for self-protection extremely dangerous. Release mechanisms are necessary when awareness of tragedy and horror are high, as the phenomena of lynching, witch-hunts and racial prejudice illustrate (though they illustrate other social dynamics as well). The limited cultivation of insensitivity toward the underside of life and its unfortunate victims serves preemptively to reduce the need for social release mechanisms.

By the same token, modern societies cannot afford to let insensitivity become too pronounced. The hellish expressions of suffering and exploitation typically have a socio-economic and often also a racial cast, and too much insensitivity amplifies class and racial tensions potentially to the point of forcing revolutionary impulses into the open. Social chaos seems to follow whenever empathy and insensitivity become unbalanced.

Now, it is one thing to speak pragmatically of the interests of social stability, and it is quite another to speak of what is good and true and beautiful. Insensitivity to the underside of human life and its hapless victims, while understandable in both its psychological and social expressions, is still morally repugnant. It is a sign of human depravity every bit as much as is the violence we visit upon each other. It is also an indication of the inescapably frustrating and corrupt character of human social organization. Before I speak further about the dubious moral status of a balance between empathy and insensitivity, however, it is necessary to clarify the role of narrative slips in the maintenance of social stability.

The Role of Slips and their Rationalizations in World-Making

One of the reasons sensitivity to the underside of life is so difficult is that it is extremely painful and alienating to be a victim. Another reason is that there is so often little to be done to help. Open-ended empathy that leads not to action but to silence is agonizing in its own peculiar way. In view of the intransigent and complex character of suffering in modern societies, therefore, it is no wonder that empathy is difficult to achieve. It follows that sensitivity and empathy are least painful and most widespread when rationales for action, emotional postures, and social policies are self-evident. This is the case precisely when there is a clear object of blame for the myriad forms of suffering that so dominate the underside of life, be it God, the devil, nature, human weakness, a conscienceless villain, a class of powerful people, a race—anything specific enough to allow the determination of a strategy the implementation of which promises to improve the conditions of life.

All of this means that empathy unchecked by sturdy social analyses very often produces fanatics who find strategies for action shockingly easy to determine. In much of pre-World War II Europe, a kind of nationalistic, mutual empathy for each others' struggling lives led a significant portion of Europeans in many nations to believe that the Jews stood in the way of the realization of their national, economic and personal goals, and this in turn permitted the most fanatical of them to formulate and implement a staggeringly simple strategy for dealing with their problem. A man develops a profound empathic connection to the unborn babies aborted by doctors in the United States and determines that the natural strategy is to murder one of the doctors. Any amount of human heartedness or sound social analysis would have voided both strategies, but fanaticism has no time for such abstract virtues; the confidence forged by empathy seems self-confirming, even to the point of delusion.

Similar stories could be told about insensitivity to the underside of life. Here, too, blaming is important, but the emphasis is not on blaming a particular party—that leads to action—but on exculpating oneself from blame, and so from involvement. The audible beating in the next apartment that never gets reported is the fault of a vague “somebody else,” and so the problem of everyone or anyone else but me.

Empathy and insensitivity are dangerous reactions to the underside of life because of the ease with which they are transmuted into fanaticism and passive negligence, respectively. When stories with the narrative slips to which I have drawn attention play dominant roles in world-making, however, a natural muting of these extreme possibilities occurs. That is because these narrative slips are non-explanatory explanations that leave no causal traces and so block both the

easy assignment of blame and the facile exculpation of oneself from responsibility for the horrors of the underside of life. We slip into horror together, and everyone and everything is involved.

The Dangers and Virtues of Contemporary Religious Institutions

While narrative slips have their virtues, therefore, many stories play into the world-making construction of interpretations of the underside of life. Religious narratives engaging this dark underside using the narrative device of a slip might have the potential to check fanaticism and negligence, but they are very often in our own time not influential enough to do so. Here, then, are two invaluable social virtues of contemporary religious institutions: to the extent that they model their proclamations after critical reinterpretations of their own ancient wisdom—a crucial caveat—they offer a non-explanatory explanation for the underside of life that has the socially beneficial dual effect of increasing empathy and decreasing sensitivity in different respects, and thus they throw soothing oil on the chaotic waters of social life by inhibiting the dangerously extreme manifestations of empathy and insensitivity. World-making guided by ancient stories about the underside of life turning on slips are some of the traditional ways to secure these virtues, and I think they remain important for that purpose today.

By the same token, the dangers of such world-making stories are plain: narratives about the underside of life that are subtly ambiguous with regard to identifying the final cause of the problem tend also to make people under their sway sympathetic but slow to act, kind hearted but morally lukewarm, all good-natured constancy but no courageous convictions—easy targets, then, for a Kierkegaard or a Nietzsche. Moreover, by becoming so effective at supporting ordinary social processes, religious institutions usually become thoroughly entangled in them to the point that they get in the way of the very transformations for which they stand, and become corrupt—easy targets, it would seem, for a Voltaire or a Marx.

There is more to be said, however, and here at last we move away from pragmatic social considerations. Lukewarm, passionless goodness marks out both the socially ideal peon and the spiritual weakling; these are the characteristics of souls lacking a maturely developed capacity to face the horror of life without something to blame, without a vent for their frustration and fear, without a way to assure themselves that they are not responsible. But religious institutions at their best have a dynamic character that transforms souls. In fact, religious practice helps people engage more and more of reality in ever richer and more significant ways by means of complex and powerful systems of symbols. The crafting of the soul that these practices permit has been a common and effective way of cultivating the maturity needed to look the monstrous underside of life in the eye without panicking, to empathize with victims of absurd brutality without becoming fanatical, to transform our own turgid traditions, and courageously to devise and implement the complex strategies needed to address even the most intractable agonies of the human condition. The saints and sages of all traditions are our models for such efforts. In spite of their moral ambiguity as institutions, religious groups continue to produce many such remarkable people. It is with their inspiration, and not hopelessly, that we slip, to suffer and to change, into horror.