CHAPTER 1

Theology as Anthropology, Anthropology as Theology

1.1 The Inescapable Quest for the Divine

What is more pitiful than a human being? Compared to other mammals, we are born only halfway through our gestation period – the huge size of our craniums makes that necessary. No other mammal is so immature at birth: we are born as mere embryos.[1] Unlike other animals, we are born without any natural weapons or reliable survival instincts – unshod, unarmed, unclothed, and unready. Like other biological organisms, we are vulnerable to a thousand different dangers. Compared to the immensity of a mountain – let alone the cosmos – we are miniscule; compared to the longevity of the earth, we are utterly ephemeral. A single microbe can kill us by the millions; cockroaches will probably outlive us.

And yet, we can comprehend the infinite expanse of time and space: we travel in thought back to the beginning of the cosmos and forward to the end; we take the measure of the whole universe. We are rapidly discovering the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology – enabling us to produce artificial matter and someday even life itself. We have conquered the earth and explored the solar system. We have the capacity to destroy all life on earth or to bring life to other planets. We remain tiny, short-lived organisms but with godlike powers.

Because of this staggering contrast between our pathetic fragility and our terrifying power, our lives are haunted by anxiety. Although all animals and plants die, we call only human beings "mortal" – a word we use not

[1] "Human babies are born as embryos, and embryos they remain for about the first nine months of life." Stephen Jay Gould, *Ever since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: Norton, 1977), 72. On the prolonged immaturity of human beings compared to other animals, see my book, *Your Whole Life: Beyond Childhood and Adulthood* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), chapter 5.

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only as a description but also as a protest. We feel secure only in the recesses of our own powers of thought – once we exit our inner citadel, we are at the mercy of other people and our own manifold weaknesses. Even the citadel of our intellect can be besieged and destroyed by disease or accident. It is not the fact of our many weaknesses that makes us anxious – it is the perceived incongruity and even injustice of them.

As creatures who can imagine immortality, why should we accept being mortal? The first quality we ascribe to our gods is immortality: indeed, for the Greeks, the title "immortals" is used synonymously with "gods," just as "mortals" always means "humans." That the gods are immortal gives us hope for our own immortality. From ancient Egyptian embalmment to contemporary cryogenics, the quest to become like god has usually meant the quest to escape our fragile mortality. Only certain Greek philosophers aim at deification within the confines of human mortality.

Even more revealing is the fact that the most popular gods of ancient Greek and biblical religion are the gods who survive the descent into the underworld – that is, who die and are reborn.[2] The idea of a god who can die may seem theologically incoherent, but it makes perfect sense anthropologically. Heracles was the most popular hero of the ancient world because he managed to both descend into Hades and ascend to Mount Olympus. What a symbol of hope!

Our pervasive anxiety and the sense that we deserve better lead us to imagine that we are better or can be better than the mere rational animals we seem to be. We like to fantasize that we are gods, dispensers of life and death, exercising unlimited power over ourselves and others. By hoarding goods, we feel secure from want; by looking down on other people, we feel taller; and ultimately, by killing, we feel more alive. Like schoolyard bullies, our existential insecurity leads us to pride and arrogance.

The mismatch between our human frailty and our divine imagination explains why we not only rise far above all other animals in knowledge and virtue but also sink far below all other animals in vice and cruelty. The more godlike we become, the more satanic as well – at least, that is the premise of much science fiction. By aspiring to utopia we end up in dystopia: only a creature who tries to make heaven can create a living hell. Our transcendence of mere animal nature is as evident in the nobility of our arts and sciences as in the horrors of our crimes. Human beings have always understood themselves in relation to both animals and gods because

[2] For the Greeks, the most popular gods were Persephone and Dionysus; for biblical religion, Jesus the Christ.

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we are like both.[3] Grasping human nature will require both biology and theology, since we are animals who reach toward god.

Human beings have always been deeply puzzling to themselves.[4] The chorus in Sophocles's *Antigone* sings: "Wonders are many, but none is more wonderful than man."[5] Plato described the human soul as a "middle being," suspended between matter and mind, time and eternity.[6] Aristotle wonders how human beings manage to be both the best of all animals and the worst.[7] We are more than rational animals; we are metaphysical animals.[8] How can one explain why human beings have a natural desire for the supernatural? Although everything we do must be determined by natural causes, we somehow know that we are free to act against our own natural impulses. For example, we not only share with every other animal an instinct for self-preservation but also possess a uniquely human power of willful self-destruction.[9] We are born of this earth but are preparing to leave it; bound to this fragile body but planning a bionic or robotic future. Today, many philosophers are puzzled by how a mere physical brain could give rise to consciousness, let alone self-consciousness. Many linguists are puzzled by how human language could emerge so suddenly from quite primitive forms of animal communication.[10]

[3] The Greeks often compared humans to both animals and gods; see K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 74–81.

[4] "Man has always been his own most vexing problem." Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 1. According to Karl Rahner, "the human person is *homo mysticus*." See Harvey D. Egan, "Theology and Spirituality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13–28, at 19. Rahner speaks of "the essence of the human being as that incomprehensible entity in which the whole of reality comes to consciousness." Quoted in Anton Losinger, *The Anthropological Turn: The Human Orientation of the Theology of Karl Rahner*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 24.

[5] Sophocles, *Antigone*, line 332.

[6] *Timaeus* 35a. See W. Norris Clarke, "Living on the Edge: The Human Person as 'Frontier Being' and Microcosm," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 36/2 (June 1996): 183–199, at 183.

[7] *Politics* 1253a 32–36.

[8] "Man is a metaphysician (*capax entis*) only because he is already implicitly a theologian (*capax dei*)." Karl Rahner, in Thomas Sheehan's *Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations* (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 56–57.

[9] Many existentialist writers, from Dostoevsky to Sartre, present characters who describe suicide as the ultimate act of human freedom – freedom from submission either to nature or to God. Human beings are never more godlike, they say, than when they kill themselves. As Dostoevsky's Kirillov says, "It is my duty to shoot myself because the fullest point of my self-will is – for me to kill myself." See *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), III, 6 (617).

[10] For current debates surrounding the puzzle of the sudden evolutionary emergence of human language, see Robert Berwick and Noam Chomsky, *Why Only Us* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

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To do justice to the complexity of human nature, we must avoid both the Scylla of naturalism and the Charybdis of supernaturalism. We degrade human dignity by seeing ourselves as merely clever animals, but we invite hubris by pretending that we are gods.[11] We often oscillate between a biological debasement of human greatness and a self-deifying hubris. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal saw the need to contradict human self-assessment: "If he exalt himself, I humble him; if he humble himself, I exalt him; and I always contradict him, till he understands that he is an incomprehensible monster."[12] By "monster," Pascal means that a human being is a bizarre hybrid of animal and angel.[13]

While we sometimes reduce human life to the level of other animals, we also elevate human beings into gods. Indeed, thanks to modern technology, human beings are now said to have the potential to produce new species, guide their own evolution, colonize space, and aspire to immortality. According to contemporary humanists, there is no limit on the possibilities for human self-deification. With the rise of "transhumanism" – the project of creating posthuman species – the quest to become god has only just begun in earnest.[14] We will never be content to remain clever apes.

What is called modern secular humanism emerged as a movement for the deification of humanity.[15] According to the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, the essence of all religion is to first posit an opposition between the human and the divine and then to transcend that opposition. All religions first dig a chasm between gods and men only to then build bridges over that chasm. Deification, then, is a necessary part of every

[11] Abraham Joshua Heschel rejects definitions of human beings as rational animals: "Zoomorphic conceptions of man are as proper as anthropomorphic conceptions of God." See his *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 23. "Without the longing for eternity, human life becomes less serious .... Those who dismiss the idea of eternity as a childish dream demean our lives. They make them less than human." Anthony T. Kronman, *Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 1073.

[12] Here Pascal is himself playing the role of God, who promises to exalt those who humble themselves and to humble those who exalt themselves; see Matthew 23:12.

[13] "It is dangerous to make man see too clearly his equality with the brutes without showing him his greatness. It is also dangerous to make him see his greatness too clearly, apart from his vileness." Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: Dutton Books, 1958), nos. 418 and 420.

[14] As M. David Litwa shows, "Atheism hardly makes deification irrelevant." See his *Desiring Divinity: Self-Deification in Early Jewish and Christian Mythmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 147.

[15] "Humanism" is the creation of nineteenth-century atheism. Renaissance philologists sometimes called themselves "humanists," but they had no doctrine called "humanism."

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religion.[16] Judaism created a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between God and human beings; Christianity resolved that opposition by claiming that God became human in the person of Christ Jesus. Hegel's students went on to argue that the opposition of God and man could not be fully transcended until humanity itself is identified as divine. And so Auguste Comte and Ludwig Feuerbach began to create a religion of humanity.[17] Feuerbach rejected the biblical claim that God created man in his own image; instead, said Feuerbach, man created God in his own image. In other words, theology is best understood as anthropology.[18] These pioneering humanists sought not to humanize God but to divinize man. They argued that the best way to kill the biblical God was to replace him with the religion of humanity. All of the powers once attributed to God, such as omniscience, omnipotence, and justice, are now properly attributed to the human race.[19] Once freed from the constraints of biblical religion, they claimed, the human race will build a divine paradise here on earth.

The idea that human beings create gods in their own image and likeness goes back to the ancient Greek philosopher Xenophanes.[20] What is new with Feuerbach is the claim that humanity itself is divine: Feuerbach reduces theology to anthropology in order to exalt anthropology into

[16] "God has shown himself to be reconciled with the world, that even the human is not something alien to him, but rather that his otherness, this self-distinguishing, finitude as it is expressed, is a moment in God himself, although, to be sure, it is a disappearing moment." Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, quoted in George van Kooten, "Bleeding Blood, Not Ichor – Christ the '*Gottmensch*,'" in *Über Gott: Festschrift für Reinhard Feldmeier zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Jan Dochhorn et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 631–671, at 663.

[17] In 1842, Auguste Comte completed the publication of his *Cours de philosophie positive*, and Ludwig Feuerbach published *Das Wesen des Christentums*. Soon after, Emile Saisset wrote: "Herr Feuerbach in Berlin, like Monsieur Comte in Paris, offers Christian Europe a new god to worship – the human race." See Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, trans. Edith M. Riley (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books), 77. William Blake was the prophet of atheist humanism: "Thou art a Man: God is no more / Thy own Humanity learn to adore." From "The Everlasting Gospel," lines 146–147.

[18] "Theology is anthropology, that is, in the object of religion, which we call *Theos* in Greek and *Gott* in German, nothing but the essence of man is expressed." Ludwig Feuerbach, quoted by Karl Barth, "Introductory Essay," *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper Brothers, 1957), x–xxxii, at xv.

[19] On the religion of humanity: "Man has his highest being, his God, in himself; not in himself as an individual, but in his essential nature, his species . . .. Man feels nothing toward God which he does not also feel towards man. *Homo homini deus est*." Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, appendix, sec. 1 (281). "All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature" (14). "Not only divine omniscience but also divine omnipresence has realized itself in man." Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Manfred H. Vogel (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1986), 17.

[20] Aristotle, for example, says that we project not only human shapes but also our own ways of life on the gods, at *Politics* 1252b 25–27.

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theology. We need only to reclaim the divine powers that we have alienated by creating gods.[21] Feuerbach's project of divinizing human beings was pursued, in very different ways, by Max Stirner, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Nietzsche.[22] This kind of secular humanism is less atheist than autotheist.[23] Dostoevsky was the first novelist to notice how modern atheism led to the ideal of self-deification.[24]

Atheists need god as much as do theists. If god did not exist, we would have to invent him. The best evidence for the inescapability of the idea of god is found in the writings of Feuerbach and Jean-Paul Sartre. Feuerbach pioneered modern atheism by arguing that god is nothing more than a projection of human ideals, and that by creating gods, we alienate ourselves from our own ideals. Feuerbach claimed to reduce all theological concepts to anthropological concepts; but by divinizing humanity, Feuerbach only demonstrated the necessity of theology to any anthropology. The question is not whether we project our own ideals onto the gods – of course we do – the question is why we have those ideals in the first place. What is puzzling is not that we project ideals of perfect knowledge, perfect goodness, and perfect beauty onto divine beings; the puzzle is why a mere animal seeking survival would pursue those perfections at all.

Feuerbach describes humanity as "supernatural" and "infinite" and "divine" without ever explaining how a biological species could be divine.[25] Feuerbach was right that theology is always anthropological, but he failed to see that anthropology must also be theological. Rather than effect "the dissolution of theology into anthropology," Feuerbach's

[21] "I, on the contrary, while reducing theology to anthropology, exalt anthropology into theology, very much as Christianity, while lowering God into man, made man into God." Feuerbach, "Preface to the Second Edition," *The Essence of Christianity*, xxxiii–xliv, at xxxviii.

[22] Max Stirner developed a philosophy of egoism based on the premise that each individual person is, for himself, god: "*ego mihi deus*." See Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 10. But Marx adopted the religion of humanity from Comte and Feuerbach: "The Credo of Prometheus ... is that of philosophy, its battle cry against all the celestial and terrestrial gods, which do not recognize human self-consciousness as the supreme divinity." Friedrich Nietzsche followed Stirner by asking, in the wake of having "murdered" the biblical God: "Shall we not have to become gods ourselves simply in order to seem worthy of it?" For Marx, see Rémi Brague, *The Kingdom of Man: Genesis and Failure of the Modern Project*, trans. Paul Seaton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 136; for Nietzsche, see Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 56.

[23] The Young Hegelians were described as "atheists who were their own gods" (*gottlose Selbstgötter*). Charles Péguy argued that modern man is less atheist than "autotheist." See Brague, *The Kingdom of Man*, 137.

[24] As his character Kirillov says: "If there is no God, then I am God." Kirillov goes on to explain: "To recognize that there is no God, and not to recognize at the same time that you have become God, is an absurdity." See Dostoevsky, *Demons*, III, 6 (617 and 619).

[25] On the "supernatural human mind," see Feuerbach, "Preface to the Second Edition," *The Essence of Christianity*, xli. "The absolute to man is his own nature" (5).

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own anthropology rests on an implicit theology.[26] Theology and anthropology are inseparable – and neither can be reduced to the other – because "God and man are paradigms of each other."[27] No knowledge of gods without reference to humanity – but equally, no knowledge of humanity without reference to divinity.[28]

That anthropology rests on theology is also evident in the conundrums of the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre begins by claiming that man has no nature but only a history: "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." Human beings are not bound by any limits; indeed, to set a limit is already to have transcended it. Human beings, said Sartre, are essentially "self-surpassing."[29] Although Sartre denies that human beings have a nature, he then proceeds to define human nature as the desire to be god: "To be a man is to reach towards being God. Or, if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God."[30] For Sartre, human nature is defined not by our animal biology but by our aspirations for the divine. Sartre concedes that although he does not believe in God, he cannot explain the world without God.[31] He even confesses that he refuses to see himself as the product of mere biological evolution; he sees himself as coming from God.[32]

How do we take the measure of human aspiration and achievement? How do we distinguish what is better from what is worse? The ancient Greek Sophist Protagoras claimed that "man is the measure of all things."

[26] On the "dissolution of theology into anthropology," see Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, 5.

[27] "Dicunt enim, inter se invicem esse paradigmata Deum et hominem." See John Scottus Eriugena in *Patrologia Latina* 122.1220a; and Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena: A Study of Idealism in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 161–162.

[28] "By his God thou knowest the man and by the man his God; the two are identical." Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 12. But Feuerbach has only shown that theology and anthropology are inseparable, not that man and God are identical.

[29] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, trans. Philip Mairet, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Meridian, 1989), www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm.

[30] "Etre homme, c'est tendre à être Dieu; ou, si l'on préfère, l'homme est fondamentalement désir d'être Dieu." J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), 587.

[31] "Even if one does not believe in God, there are elements of the idea of God that remain in us and that cause us to see the world with some divine aspects." Sartre, quoted in Simone de Beauvior, *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 438. Simone de Beauvoir's conversations with Sartre were tape-recorded in 1974.

[32] "I don't see myself as so much dust that has appeared in the world, but as a being that was expected, prefigured, called forth. In short, as a being that could, it seems, come only from a creator; and this idea of a creating hand that created me refers me back to God." Sartre, quoted in *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, 438.

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But it makes no sense to say that humanity could be the measure of itself. As a matter of logic, nothing can be the measure of itself. Plato was right when he attacked Protagoras by arguing that not man but god is the measure of all things.[33] As Hegel showed in his critique of Kant, it is logically impossible to define a limit without being able to see beyond that limit. Without some notion of god, we could not define the limits of the human.[34] Alexander Pope seems to channel Protagoras by saying: "Know then thyself; presume not God to scan / The proper study of mankind is man." But Pope is wrong: the proper study of mankind is god. Even the affirmation of human limits rests upon a comparison with the divine.[35]

From Plato to Sartre, human nature is described as theotropic: we perfect our humanity by reaching toward god.[36] Theologian Karl Rahner imagines a future in which we have lost any interest in the ultimate questions about the origin and destiny of the cosmos. Perhaps we become focused on questions that can be answered. Would such a future creature still be human?[37] Rahner is grateful for atheists, who keep the idea of God alive by rejecting it. The death of god would mark the death of man.[38] Even if we were not created by God, we become human by our questions about the gods. What makes us human, says Rahner, is "the permanent openness of our finite being to the living God of infinite, eternal life."[39]

[33] "Not man, but god is the measure of all things." *Laws* 716c. Plato rejects the idea that man is the measure of god, at *Theaetetus* 162c.

[34] God functions in human thought as the ultimate measure: "The ultimate measure cannot itself be measured. The limit by which everything is 'defined' cannot itself be defined by a still more ultimate limit. The infinite expanse which can and does encompass everything cannot itself be encompassed." Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 63.

[35] "Greek humanism, in the form which it takes in Plato's *paideia*, is centred upon God." Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 3, trans. Gilbert Highet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), 262.

[36] Many Christian theologians, of course, also define human nature as theocentric: "When he lives theocentrically he realizes himself by reaching out into infinity; he attains his true fulfillment by extending into eternity." Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*, trans. Norman Russell (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 42.

[37] "Man would have forgotten the totality and its ground ... he would have ceased being a man. He would have regressed to the level of a clever animal ... we can only say that man exists when this living being in reflection, in words and in freedom places the totality of the world and of existence before himself in question." Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 48.

[38] "Man really exists as man only when he uses the word 'God' at least as a question .... The absolute death of the word 'God' ... would be the signal, no longer heard by anyone, that man himself had died .... The word 'God' still survives even in and through the protest against it." Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 49.

[39] Rahner, quoted by Harvey D. Egan, "Theology and Spirituality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, 13–28, at 22.

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Like Sartre, Rahner sees human beings as essentially unfinished works in progress; because our future is so open-ended, man is essentially undefinable.[40] According to Rahner, to be human is not to desire to be God but rather to desire to know the truth about God.

Here we see a contrast between philosophical theology and biblical theology. This book will be focused on the human striving toward god because that striving is central to any philosophical anthropology. The Bible, by contrast, is focused on God's turn toward humanity, as our creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Philosophy tells us a lot about human love for the divine, while the Bible tells us about God's love for humans. In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, philosophical theology is "man's search for God," while biblical theology is "God's search for man." As an exercise in philosophical anthropology, this book will focus on human theotropism rather than on divine anthropotropism.[41] Of course, the two are fully compatible: perhaps we always reach for a god because we were created with a desire for God.

The longing to return home is a longing like no other. In every human culture, there resides the idea of a time when humans were either themselves gods or lived with the gods. In Plato's myth, our divine souls fell from the stars down to earthly mortality. In the biblical myth, we once walked with God in Paradise but were then expelled. The whole of the Bible is the story of how Paradise lost can become Paradise regained. The memory of our original divine happiness, immortality, and virtue haunts human life and prevents us from ever feeling fully at home: Who can remain content, as Yeats put it, in "Sailing to Byzantium," to be "fastened to a dying animal"? The haunting memory of paradise explains our strange desires, now made plausible with modern technology, to escape from the earth, from our bodies, and from death.

We want to return home because, as Emerson said: "A man is a god in ruins" – ruins reminding us of our former and rightful glory.[42] Plato tells the story of how human souls were created with the ingredients left over from the production of the cosmic soul: we are made of divine stuff but of a lower quality – a deteriorated god.[43] Although some of us rather like

[40] Rahner tells us not to forget that the essence of man "is to be unbounded (thus, in a sense, to be undefinable)." See Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Press, 1961), 184.

[41] On the contrast between theotropic and anthropotropic religion, even within the Bible, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 438–443.

[42] See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), chapter 8, 45–46.

[43] Plato, *Timaeus* 41d.

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ruins, many people find them to be an invitation to rebuild and to restore. The history of technology shows that human beings are determined to reclaim the divine powers we think are rightfully ours.

1.2 Ambivalence about Becoming Divine

What is the most terrifying sentence in the English language? According to Oscar Wilde, the answer is: "I had a very interesting dream last night."[44] I disagree. I think the most terrifying sentence is: "I want to become like god." Nothing is more outrageous and arrogant – or more admirable and heroic – than the desire to become like god. A very fine line separates an admirable striving for the highest ideals from the preposterous ambition to become divine. Psychiatric hospitals are full of people who claim to be god.[45]

Is there a fundamental difference between wanting to become *like* god and wanting to *be* god? Becoming *like* god is a matter of degree: one can approach divine attributes more or less closely. If gods are all-powerful and all-knowing, then becoming like god means growing in power and knowledge. Actually becoming god, however, seems like a transformation in kind: one can become god only by replacing one's human nature with a divine nature. Wanting to become like god thus appears to be much more reasonable than wanting to become god. Human beings arguably can become more powerful and knowledgeable, but we cannot possibly acquire a different nature.

Still, the contrast is less stark than it at first seems: differences in degree can become differences in kind. If I seek to become like god I might well seek to become so much like god as to be indiscernible from god – and, according to some philosophers, to be indiscernible from god is to be identical to god.[46] To say, "I want to become like god" without qualification can be just a polite way of saying, "I want to become god." The real question is: Why would you want to become divine in the first place?

A long tradition of wisdom, as old as religion itself, insists on the necessity of accepting our human limitations. We should fully acknowledge that we are not gods, that we are weak, fallible, and mortal. Flying too high led Icarus to disaster. Human beings should strive to become fully

[44] See Zoë Heller, "Why We Sleep, and Why We Often Can't," in the *New Yorker*, 3 December 2018, at www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/10/why-we-sleep-and-why-we-often-cant.

[45] See Milton Rokeach's classic study of mental patients, *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1964) and the discussion of this book in M. David Litwa's *Desiring Divinity*, 1–2.

[46] According to Leibniz's famous principle of "the identity of indiscernibles."

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human; we are not suited by our nature for things divine. Science fiction going back to *Frankenstein* warns us not to "play god." What could be more prideful than wanting to be like god? And pride goeth before a fall.

Our religious traditions have often reinforced this prudent humility by claiming that the gods are jealous of their divinity and will punish anyone who arrogantly transgresses the boundaries allotted to humans. Look what happened to Adam and to Prometheus when they violated the boundary between human and divine. Adam was a man and Prometheus a god, but both took knowledge reserved for the gods and gave it to humans – and both suffered divine punishment. In both Athens and Jerusalem, gods are determined to keep humans in their place.

An equally long tradition of human wisdom, stretching from Plato to Jean-Paul Sartre, argues for the importance of seeking to become, if not a god, as much like a god as possible. Although it sounds wise to strive for purely human excellence, nothing could be more shortsighted. There are no fixed limits on human nature: our desires and aspirations are infinite. We are essentially unfinished creatures whose only limits are the limits of our imagination. To set any putative limit on human achievement is already to have transcended it. Nothing is more human than to run faster, climb higher, explore farther than was before thought possible. What would humans have achieved had our reach not exceeded our grasp? To attain anything worth achieving is to strive for the impossible – like the man from La Mancha.[47] Boundaries are meant to be transgressed; rules are meant to be broken. Nothing can satisfy human aspiration short of becoming god.[48] To paraphrase Bernard Shaw: the reasonable person strives to be fully human; the unreasonable person strives to be divine. Therefore, all progress is due to the unreasonable person.

Note that whether it makes sense to seek to become like god usually depends on what we take god to be. If we think that god is jealous of his divinity and wishes to protect his prerogatives – either for his own good or for our good – then it is prudent to accept the limits of our humanity. But if we think that god wants us to share divine wisdom and virtue, then we might feel obliged to become like god. As we shall see, those thinkers who endorse the human aspiration to become like god do so on the explicit

[47] "Unless a man aspire to the impossible, the possible that he achieves will be scarcely worth the trouble of achieving. It behooves us to aspire to the impossible, to the absolute and infinite perfection." Miguel de Unamuno, *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. Crawforth Flitch (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1954), 282.

[48] In his "Andrea del Sarto," Robert Browning notes the role of divinity in human striving: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?"

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grounds that god is not jealous of his divinity, while those thinkers who reject the aspiration to become like god usually fear divine retribution. Although Promethean defiance is always possible, most human beings will seek to become like god only if they are already convinced that god invites them to do so. Here, we see a nice illustration of our theme that we cannot know what it means to be human without also knowing what it means to be divine. To be human in relation to a jealous god is quite different from being human in relation to a generous god.

This ambivalence about whether to accept human limits or to aim for the divine cuts across many familiar divisions in our culture. Above all, we must avoid the mistake of thinking that religious believers strive to become like their god while nonbelievers affirm the modest limitations of their humanity. I noted above that many secular humanists embrace the infinite aspirations of a deified humanity, while many religious humanists encourage us to embrace our finitude. Many religious believers – especially Muslims and Jews – affirm the unbridgeable chasm between humanity and divinity. They reject as blasphemous any human attempt to become like God.[49] Christians tend to be more open to the ideal of divinization on the premise that in Jesus, God became man so that men might become like God. Nonetheless, many Christians (especially Protestants) reject the whole idea of divinization as prideful if not satanic.

What about the contrast between Greek paganism and the Abrahamic religions – that is, between Athens and Jerusalem? Does not Athens stand for moderate humanism and Jerusalem for the immoderate quest for the divine? Yes, Athens is the birthplace of humanism – but also the home of many religious cults as well as philosophical schools devoted to the ideal of becoming godlike. If anything, Athens is more enthusiastic about divinization than is Jerusalem. The ambivalence about the quest for divinity cuts across any divide between Athens and Jerusalem. What is at stake in this conflict is nothing less than what it means to be human.

If we are ambivalent about becoming godlike, we have a similar ambivalence about the quest to become righteous, which, for many, is one key divine attribute. The quest to become fully righteous is part of what it means in a biblical culture to become like God. Yet nothing is less righteous than to be self-righteous. Similarly, to be described by others as holy is very high praise, but to claim to be holy is profane in the

[49] Martin Buber attacks the idea of deification: "Union that was no union . . . *I* and *Thou* perish in the feeling of a unity that does not and cannot exist." *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 87.

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extreme. In general, to become virtuous unselfconsciously is supremely admirable, but to devote yourself to the goal of always being virtuous is to be a prig.

In biblical religion, self-divinization has the same relation to genuine divinization as self-righteousness to genuine righteousness. Many of us admire people who become godlike just so long as they never set out to do so. In many religious traditions, the gods will reward virtuous human beings by giving them a share of divinity, ranging from making heroes into gods (such as Heracles) to granting the gifts of holiness on earth and eternal life in heaven. To be divinized by the gods is the supreme reward of virtue; to attempt to divinize oneself is the supreme sacrilege and blasphemy. For the Greek philosophers, man is by nature an animal who seeks to become divine; for Christians, man is an animal by nature capable of being divinized by God.[50] In the Bible, even the Son of God is praised for not attempting to exploit his divinity.[51]

And yet, we often cannot resist admiring those humans who do not wait to receive a divine blessing but who storm the heavens by their own indominable pluck, like Jacob wrestling with God or the Aloadae twins invading Mount Olympus.[52] The Greek hero, Bellerophon, attempted to ride Pegasus right into the abode of the Olympians – only to be thrown by his winged mount.[53] Although both biblical and Greek myths condemn human pride or hubris, biblical and Greek stories often operate on the assumption that the gods help those who help themselves.[54] So we are ambivalent even about self-divinization.

Perhaps our ambivalence stems from the different motives people have for becoming divine. There are as many reasons to seek to become divine as there are attributes of the gods. What has attracted most people to the divine is, of course, divine power and divine immortality. Who would not

[50] Saint Gregory of Nazianzus defined man as a *zōon theoumenon*, a living animal being deified (*Oration* 38), quoted in Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, 12.

[51] Paul says of Jesus: "Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." Philippians 2:6.

[52] The Aloadae twins were the giants Otus and Ephialtes, see Homer, *Iliad* 5.385 and *Odyssey* 11.305.

[53] Pindar, *Olympian* 13.83–93; *Isthmian* 7.44–47.

[54] Although an overwhelming majority of Americans believe that "God helps those who help themselves" is a quote from the Bible, it is not. Still, the biblical story of Jacob certainly rests upon this maxim. The ancient Greek maxim was "Fortune does not help those who lose heart." See Dover, *Greek Popular Morality*, 259. In the Bible and in Greek mythology, we also find the dark converse of this maxim, when God "hardens the heart" of sinners or when the gods inflict *atē* (blindness or delusion) on the minds of those guilty of hubris. The dark maxim reads: "God destroys those who first destroy themselves." On *atē* in Homer ("Eldest daughter of Zeus is Ate who blinds all"), see *Iliad* 9.504–512, 19.91, 19.126–136.

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want to hurl a thunderbolt and smite one's enemies? And, unlike other animals, human beings suffer from a lifelong anxiety about illness and death. Becoming divine promises us a share in divine immortality. Most of us envy divine power and immortality, which might lead us to seek to become godlike. Envy of the gods is human, all too human, and just as common among the nonreligious as among the religious.

There have always been a few people, however, who have admired the gods for their virtues. Some gods have been exemplars of justice, wisdom, courage, and holiness. So, one reason to become like god is to share, not in divine power or immortality but in divine virtue, even at the cost of one's life, as in the cases of Socrates and Jesus. According to the Greek historian Plutarch, most people's motivations for becoming divine are nonrational. Devoting oneself to power is foolish, he says, since power is subject to the caprice of fortune. As for immortality, that, says Plutarch, is not consistent with human nature. The only rational motive for wanting to be like god is to become virtuous, since virtue is within our power and consistent with our nature. And, yet, sadly, this is the least common motive.[55] Many modern thinkers agree with Plutarch that most people want to be god for the sake of sharing in divine power and immortality.[56]

Many people admire the quest for divine virtue but disparage the quest for divine power or immortality. Perhaps this partly explains our ambivalence about the whole idea of divinization. What is the value of becoming immortal if we lack the wisdom to make good use of it?[57] Plato warns us of the danger of misusing even divine invisibility.[58] But even the quest for perfect virtue has often been condemned, especially by Christians, for being prideful and arrogant. Instead of pretending that we can make ourselves perfectly virtuous, Christians say that we should beg forgiveness for our sins. In this view, the quest for godlike virtue is no more within our human power than is the quest for immortality.

How does the quest to become like god relate to mysticism? Mystics are people who begin as ordinary votaries of a particular religion but who dedicate themselves passionately to a transcendent or ecstatic experience of

[55] See Plutarch, *Life of Aristeides*, sec. 6.

[56] Ludwig Feuerbach writes: "Humanity thinks and believes in a God only because he wants to be God himself but, against his will, is not God." Bertrand Russell agrees: "Every man would like to be God, if it were possible; some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility." See Litwa, *Desiring Divinity*, 137 and 204n.

[57] "If there exists the knowledge of how to make men immortal, but without the knowledge of how to use this immortality, there seems to be no value in it." *Euthydemus* 289b.

[58] With his ring of invisibility, Gyges is described as "equal to a god," at *Republic* 360c.

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ultimate or divine reality. Mystics are the Olympic athletes of the spiritual life: they train body and soul ruthlessly in the pursuit of transcendent or ecstatic experience. There are no unaffiliated mystics: all mystics are Orphic, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, or Islamic mystics.[59] Because mystics belong to particular religious traditions, mystical experiences reflect the variety of those traditions.[60] Many mystics in the Platonic and biblical traditions describe the highest stages of mysticism as a kind of deification. But only those in the biblical traditions describe deification as intimacy with a divine person.[61] The quest to become like god has philosophical, religious, and mystical modes of ascent. Just as most religious believers are ambivalent at best about the quest to become like god, so they are also ambivalent about mysticism.[62]

1.3 Philosophy as Religion

The human aspiration to become divine is a theme found everywhere in human culture, including mythology, literature, visual art, theology, and mysticism. In this book, I will develop a focused comparison between Socratic philosophy and the Bible. We often sharply contrast philosophical reason with religious faith, but the actual relation of philosophy to religion is much more puzzling. Philosophy turns out to pursue religious goals of wisdom, virtue, and transcendence – but with its own distinctive methods. Philosophy is the pursuit of salvation by logical means.

What unites philosophy and religion is that both address questions of ultimate human concern – in Kant's words, what can we know, what ought we to do, and what may we hope for? That is why the aspiration to become like god is shared by both philosophical and religious thinkers.

[59] See Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion: As Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1923).

[60] "Because interpretations are incorporated into mystical experiences, there are varieties of them." Philip C. Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine: An Investigation of the Study of Mysticism in World Religions* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 185.

[61] "We have said that the mystic . . . tends to describe the consummation of his quest in the language of *deification*." Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (London: Metheun & Co., 1930), 418. In the early Christian theologian Dionysius, we see a blending of Platonic and Christian ideas of deification: "Theosis is the attaining of likeness to God and union with him so far as is possible." Quoted in Daria Spezzano, *The Glory of God's Grace: Deification according to St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2015), 6.

[62] Mysticism tends to undermine sectarian religious identity. John Henry Newman is said to have complained that "mysticism begins in the mists and ends in schism." R. G. Collingwood similarly noted: "Mysticism is the crown of religion and its deadliest enemy; the great mystics are at once saints and heresiarchs." *Speculum Mentis: Or, the Map of Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 127.

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What is philosophy, anyway? A good place to start is with the observation that philosophy is the only academic discipline that will never define itself. There are almost as many definitions of philosophy as there are philosophers, and a whole branch of the discipline is devoted to this question: "metaphilosophy."[63]

Perhaps the least controversial definition was offered by the Catholic apologist G. K. Chesterton: "Philosophy is thought that has been thought through." In every field of inquiry, ideas are presupposed but not examined. What R. G. Collingwood calls "absolute presuppositions" are assumptions so basic that they cannot be themselves proven because they make possible all scientific inquiry. They are the lenses by which scholars and scientists see the world. In Collingwood's example, if you ask a pathologist, "Why do you assume that every disease has a cause?," the pathologist "will probably blow up right in your face, because you have put your finger on one of his absolute presuppositions, and people are apt to be ticklish in their absolute presuppositions."[64] Biology, like every other science, makes progress by taking some ideas for granted. Scientific thought, in Chesterton's expression, is not fully thought through. Only philosophers ask whether all things have causes and, by the way, what is a cause, anyway?

If by philosophy we mean the high tradition of speculative metaphysics, including Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Al-Farabi, Maimonides, Aquinas, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Sartre, then philosophy is best understood as a systematic and logically rigorous exploration of the basic presuppositions of religious thought – presuppositions such as personal immortality, freedom of the will, revelation, the existence and nature of god, and the like. The great philosophers have subjected these religious presuppositions to rigorous logical analysis and explication. Just as philosophical analysis of causation has tracked the evolving concepts of causes among physicists, so philosophical analyses of god have tracked the evolution of religion.

The great speculative philosophers combine the sweeping imaginative power of the major religious thinkers with the logical rigor of the major

[63] Philosophers have always debated the nature and justification of their activities, but the word "metaphilosophy" seems to be very recent, from a follower of the late Wittgenstein, Morris Lazerowitz: "The investigation of the nature of philosophy, with the central aim of arriving at a satisfactory explanation of the absence of uncontested philosophical claims and arguments." See his "A Note on Metaphilosophy," *Metaphilosophy* 1/1 (January 1970): 91. On Plato and the origins of metaphilosophy, see Charles L. Griswold Jr., "Plato's Metaphilosophy: Why Plato Wrote Dialogues," in *Platonic Writings / Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles L. Griswold Jr. (New York: Routledge, 1988): 143–167, at 144.

[64] See R. G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, ed. Rex Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 31.

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mathematicians. To study these great philosophical systems is to be at first overwhelmed by the sheer audacity of the attempt to bring the whole of reality into a unified perspective. These philosophers claim to see the universe, not from the limited perspective of mere mortals but from the perspective of eternity. No wonder they have often been accused of hubris, of claiming a wisdom possessed only by a god.

The great philosophical systems weirdly combine mysticism and logic, religious vision with scientific analysis. At least this was the view of the twentieth-century mathematician and logician Bertrand Russell, who is not usually regarded as a religious fanatic. According to Russell, metaphysics is the attempt to grasp the whole cosmos in thought, and the great metaphysicians managed to blend mystical insight with rigorous logic, making philosophy greater than either religion or science.[65] Mysticism is the quest for union with the divine; philosophy is the systematic and disciplined effort to see the world as god sees it and in this sense to share the mind of god. Jean-Paul Sartre complained bitterly that all the great philosophers before him believed in a god.[66]

If philosophy is the logical rigorous exploration of the presuppositions of religious thought, then what are those basic presuppositions? To answer this, I would have to define religion, about which there is no agreement. I will attempt to be modest and uncontroversial. The etymology of the word "religion," in its Latin root, is disputed but certainly makes no reference to anything supernatural.[67] When we say that someone practices yoga "religiously," we mean they practice yoga assiduously, conscientiously, and rigorously. Within Christianity, a "religious" vocation traditionally meant joining an order of monks, friars, or nuns, so that one's whole life would be unified around Christian ideals. A religious life is at least a disciplined life.

According to some philosophers, this task of unifying all the major pursuits in life around an ideal of the good is sufficient to make a doctrine religious, no matter how otherwise secular.[68] A religious life may or may not

[65] "The greatest men who have been philosophers have felt the need both of science and of mysticism: the attempt to harmonize the two was what made their life, and what always must, for all its arduous uncertainty make philosophy, to some minds, a greater thing than either science or religion." Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic, and Other Essays* (London: George Allan & Unwin, 1917), 1.

[66] "All the great philosophers have been believers more or less … a great atheist, truly atheist philosophy was something philosophy lacked." Sartre, quoted in *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*, 436.

[67] Ever since Cicero, scholars have debated whether the Latin noun *religio* stems from the verb *religare* "to bind or obligate" or the verb *relegere* "to go over again" (in thought, word, or deed).

[68] For the argument that religion essentially unifies a human life by giving it a focus but need not involve anything supernatural, see John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale

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be oriented to a god, but it cannot be a mere hobby or temporary fancy. The great philosophical systems are religious in the sense that they aspire to unify the pursuit of knowledge, virtue, and aesthetic experience – in short, the true, the good, and the beautiful. In our age of hyper-specialization, it seems ludicrous to attempt to pursue so many areas of inquiry. Why do the great philosophers attempt to theorize logic, nature, beauty, ethics, politics, and god? Are they merely attempting to cover all topics, to be encyclopedic? No, philosophy aspires to be comprehensive for practical, not merely theoretical, reasons. Since a complete human life includes thinking logically, understanding nature, appreciating beauty, acting ethically, being a good citizen, and knowing god, philosophy cannot lead us to live our lives well unless it shows us how to integrate all the major goods into a coherent whole.

The French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot argues that all the great ancient thinkers saw philosophy as a distinctive and unified way of life rather than a mere body of knowledge.[69] The first person to be called a "philosopher" was Pythagoras, and he is said to have founded a religious cult with its own diet, rituals, and god.[70] Socrates is a better-known exemplar of philosophy as a coherent, integrated way of life. Socrates's aim was never to teach a doctrine but always to turn around someone's life. Philosophy, for Socrates, was a divine mission literally to save souls.[71] Because the heroic virtues of Socrates were consistent with differing philosophical interpretations, he became the ideal sage not only for Platonism but also for Stoicism, Skepticism, and Cynicism. According to Hadot and other scholars, the various schools of ancient philosophy resembled different religious orders, each with its own characteristic customs, disciplines, and styles of living.[72] In this world of rival ancient

University Press, 1991); and Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[69] For the argument that the ancient schools of philosophy were each devoted to a distinctive way of life, see Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). About ancient philosophy, he says: "The real problem is therefore not the problem of knowing this or that, but of *being* in this or that way" (29). Plato describes philosophy as a way of living, at *Theaetetus* 174a.

[70] For the argument and evidence that Pythagoras (or, at least a Pythagorean) was the first person to be called *philosophos*, see Christopher Moore, *Calling Philosophers Names: On the Origin of a Discipline* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), chapters 2–4. David S. du Toit concurs: "*Dadurch wird Pythagoras zum ersten richtigen Philosophen gemacht.*" *Theios Anthropos* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1997), 237.

[71] Hadot describes Socratic philosophy as "a way of life, intended to ensure a good life and thereby the salvation of the soul." *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 65.

[72] "Ancient philosophy was also a way of life, an exercise in self-discipline, a process of self-transformation which expressed itself not only in the theories one propounded but also in the clothes one wore, the food one ate, and the way one behaved with regard to gods, animals, and

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schools of philosophy, each offering its own way of life, it is not surprising that Christianity was initially described as a philosophy, since it also offered a path to salvation. Conversion to a philosophical way of life was comparable to conversion to Christianity.[73]

Hadot is certainly right about the practical orientation of the great philosophers – ancient, medieval, and modern – who aspired not merely to change minds but to change lives. It is no accident that Spinoza calls his great metaphysical study of god and nature the *Ethics*. Philosophical inquiry into physics, cosmology, and logic was always in the service of the acquisition of the virtues, both moral and intellectual. The goal of philosophy was less the perfection of knowledge than the perfection of the knower. Plato says we cannot be certain that philosophy will save us – but believing in philosophy is well worth the risk.[74]

Religion means more than a life integrated around the pursuit of some ideal; a religious life is integrated around some transcendent or divine ideal. Hadot is unduly reticent about the ultimate goal of what he calls "philosophy as a way of life."[75] The reason why Socratic philosophy aims at the perfection of the moral and intellectual virtues is so that human beings might become like god – or at least as much like god as is humanly possible.[76] As we shall see, the very first thinkers who called themselves "philosophers" – Pythagoras and Empedocles – even claimed to be gods.[77]

Ever since the ancient Greek thinker Thales fell into a well because he was staring at the starry sky, thinkers who were later called philosophers have developed a reputation for being impractical bumblers who have their heads in the clouds rather than their feet on the ground. Philosophers have

other men." Glenn W. Most, "Philosophy and Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy*, ed. David Sedley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 300–322, at 305.

[73] On the description of Christianity as a philosophy by both Christians and pagans, see A. H. Armstrong and R. A. Markus, *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 149–152. On "conversion" to philosophy or to Christianity, see A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), chapter 11.

[74] "No sensible man would insist that these things [heaven and hell] are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief – or the risk is a noble one – that this, or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places," *Phaedo* 114d.

[75] Hadot focuses on the disciplines of the philosophical way of life rather than on the goal, on the means rather than on the end; but he does mention the Platonic goal of "becoming like god," *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 262.

[76] "The goal of the philosopher is to become as much like this god as a human possibly can: by devoting himself to the study of all that is divine." Most, "Philosophy and Religion," in *Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy*, 311.

[77] On the relation of being a *theios anēr* and being a philosopher, see du Toit, *Theios Anthropos*, 235–240.

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more often been the object of pity and ridicule than of fear or scorn.[78] But this reputation is unjust. Philosophers are Promethean heroes who storm the heavens to bring divine powers down to men. Pythagoras and Empedocles were accused by their contemporaries of seeking a wisdom reserved for the gods alone. As often happens to marginalized groups, those accused of being "philosophers" ended up proudly adopting the label for themselves.[79] The ancient Greeks were right to fear philosophical hubris and to worry about divine vengeance.

The quest to become divine helps to explain the curiously ascetic character of most philosophical ethics. Socrates insisted that we should care for our souls more than for our bodies. Plato's ideal philosophical rulers possess no private property and renounce family life: they live like soldiers in common barracks. Aristotle argues that the supreme pleasure in life is contemplation. The Stoics were famously stoic and advised us to escape the grip of the passions. Even the Epicureans, in theory devoted to pleasure, advocated an abstemious regime designed to avoid all pain: the pleasure of wine, they insisted, is not worth the hangover. There is something downright inhuman about much philosophical ethics, which may explain why so many of the great philosophers were unmarried and childless. The whole philosophical tradition, as Nietzsche observed, seems bent on the denial of the body and the suppression of mere life. All of this makes sense only if the goal is to cultivate what is most divine in ourselves – namely, our intellects. Philosophical asceticism served much the same function as Christian asceticism: to lead us away from our animal nature and toward our divine vocation.

Not every important philosopher explores the foundations of religious thought, but a surprising number of the giants do. Immanuel Kant, I have noted, concludes his *Critique of Pure Reason* by posing the fundamental questions his whole philosophy aims to answer: "What can I know? What should I do? And what may I hope?"[80] Clearly, these are the basic presuppositions of religious life and thought. Yes, there are many differences among various philosophers, but Western philosophy, from Plato

[78] For the story of Thales and the mockery he attracted, see Plato's *Theaetetus* 174a-b.

[79] "*Phil*-prefixed terms in the sixth and early fifth centuries BCE, at the time *philosophos* was coined, tend to be name-calling names. They tend to call out those so named for excessive activity related to a social practice referred to synecdochally by the word's second element; there is no evidence that the *phil-* prefix indicated the affection of 'love.'" Moore, *Calling Philosophers Names*, 6. According to Diogenes Laertius, Pythagoras preferred *philosophos* on the grounds that *sophos* was befitting only for a god; Diodorus concurs that *sophos* "does not in fact suit humans." Moore, *Calling Philosophers Names*, 18 and 69.

[80] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London: Macmillan, 1881), A 805 / B 833.

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and Aristotle to Nietzsche and Sartre, is unified by a common quest to measure human life according to a divine standard. Conceptions of god certainly vary but not the quest to become like god.

1.4 Athens and Jerusalem

What is called Western or European culture has always been an unstable compound of Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures. From Hellenism, we get our arts and sciences; from Hebraism, we get our dominant religions and moral ideals.[81] Yet over time, European arts and sciences have been shaped by Hebraism, just as biblical religion and morality have been shaped by Hellenism. Much of the dynamism and creativity of Western culture stems from the attempt to combine these radically different ancient cultures.

Comparing and contrasting Athens and Jerusalem has been a scholarly parlor game ever since the schools of ancient Alexandria. Because Greek and biblical cultures are so verbose and so internally complex, few generalizations about Athens and Jerusalem can withstand critical scrutiny. That has not stopped people who should know better from using Athens and Jerusalem as code words for all manner of ideological contrasts: reason vs. faith, universalism vs. particularism, Christianity vs. Judaism, philosophy vs. religion, Catholicism vs. Protestantism, skepticism vs. dogmatism, art vs. morality.[82] From Tertullian to Leo Strauss, rhetorical contrasts of Athens and Jerusalem have always reflected contemporary culture wars more than ancient cultures.[83]

[81] Just read Plato's and Aristotle's endorsements of infanticide to gauge the continuing salience of biblical morality in our culture.

[82] What Wayne A. Meeks says about the nineteenth-century theologian Ferdinand Christian Baur applies much more generally: "'Judaism' and 'Hellenism' here are obviously code words for complex sets of ideas masquerading as historical entities." See his "Judaism, Hellenism, and the Birth of Christianity," in *Paul beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001): 17–27, at 19.

[83] Ever since the ancient Christian theologian Tertullian (c. AD 200) asked, "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?," many theologians and philosophers have answered, "Not much." Tertullian continued in a vein that sounds strikingly contemporary: "Or what concord is there between the Academy and the Church?" Tertullian's contrast between Athens and Jerusalem thus reflected the institutional conflict of his own day between the pagan Academy and the Christian Church. Because of the cultural divide today between universities and churches, many people assume, with Tertullian, that Athens and Jerusalem have little in common. For Tertullian's skeptical question *Quid Athenae Hierosolymis?*, see his "On Prescription Against Heretics" in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), chapter 7, p. 246. For Lev Shestov, Athens and Jerusalem are as opposed as reason and arbitrary will: "to find God one must tear oneself away from the seductions of reason . . . and go to another source of truth. In Scripture this source bears the enigmatic name 'faith,' which is that dimension of thought where truth abandons itself fearlessly and joyously to the entire disposition of

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Despite the egregious abuses of this contrast, we cannot avoid comparing Hebraism and Hellenism if we seek to understand our own culture and civilization. And although Athens and Jerusalem have been intertwined ever since the conquests of Alexander the Great, Hellenism and Hebraism did arise independently, and each retained distinctive features. We need a way to focus the comparison of Athens and Jerusalem, so that it might shed more light than heat.

All productive disagreements rest on deep foundations of agreement. For all their differences, both the Socratic philosophers and the Bible tell us to seek to become as much like god as is humanly possible. The quest for deification is what unites Athens and Jerusalem; the different paths toward god are what divide them.[84] Focusing on deification permits us a more disciplined and illuminating comparison of Socratic Greek philosophy and biblical religion.

A growing body of recent scholarship is now exploding many traditional oppositions.[85] Greek culture, including philosophy, turns out to be less "rational" than we once thought. The brilliantly white marble temples and statues of the Acropolis, symbols of the clarity of Greek rationality, are now known to have been garishly painted and ornamented by the ancient Athenians. In the same way, the gleaming monuments of Greek philosophical reason – the works of Plato and even parts of Aristotle – are now

the Creator: 'Thy will be done!'" *Athens and Jerusalem*, ed. Ramona Fotiade, trans. Bernard Martin (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 1966), 67–68. Leo Strauss wrote: "A genuine philosopher can never be a genuine convert to Judaism or any revealed religion." According to one of his students, Strauss embraced a "Socratic undogmatic atheism." See Werner J. Dannhauser, "Athens and Jerusalem or Jerusalem and Athens?" in *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited*, ed. David Novak (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996): 155–171, at 166. Note Dannhauser's assumption that Socrates, like Strauss, was an atheist.

[84] Says Matthew Arnold: "The final aim of both Hellenism and Hebraism, as of all great spiritual disciplines, is no doubt the same: man's perfection or salvation . . . that final end and aim is 'that we might be partakers of the divine nature'" (2 Peter 1:4). As for how to reach God, Arnold sees similarities and differences: "The very language which they both of them use in schooling us to reach this aim is often identical . . .. Still, they pursue this aim by very different courses." *Culture and Anarchy: Rethinking the Western Tradition* [144–145], ed. Samuel Lipman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 87–88.

[85] See Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957). On Tertullian's statements, Cochrane says "they may be accepted as an overstatement rather than a misstatement of the Christian position" (224). See Jaroslav Pelikan, *What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); and *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993). In his *Jerusalem and Athens: The Congruity of Talmudic and Classical Philosophy* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), Jacob Neusner argues for parallels (not influence) between Greek philosophical reasoning and Talmudic argument, as does Jacob Howland in his *Plato and the Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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seen to be garishly colored by "irrational" Dionysian mystery cults.[86] At the same time, biblical scholarship is increasingly revealing the philosophical dimensions of the Bible and the pervasive influence of Greek philosophy on ancient Judaism and Christianity.[87] The Bible is full of speculation about the nature of God, human beings, and the cosmos; it is much more than a historical chronicle or a code of laws.[88] Greek philosophy has its own articles of faith, and the Bible expresses plenty of skeptical doubt. Greek philosophy is now looking much more religious just as the Bible is now looking much more philosophical.

In the wake of the Enlightenment, scholars often described Greek religion as "irrational" and Greek philosophy as "rational."[89] E. R. Dodds's classic book, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, brilliantly documents the pervasive influence of religion on Greek science and philosophy. Less brilliant is Dodds's complacent assumption that religion is essentially irrational. Like other modes of thought, religious thought is a mix of the rational, the nonrational, and the anti-rational. Surely the experience of the twentieth century demonstrates that the purely secular ideologies of class, nation, and race are as anti-rational as any religious dogma. Human beings are credulous animals, but not all creeds are religious.

The triumph of biblical religion in the world makes it very difficult for us to understand ancient Greek religion, which, with its colorful pantheon,

[86] The ancient Neoplatonist, Olympiodorus, already said, "Plato paraphrases Orpheus everywhere"; see Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 130. Modern pioneers in the study of the religious dimension of Greek philosophy include F. M. Cornford, "Plato and Orpheus," *The Classical Review* 17/9 (December 1903): 433–445; Jeanne Croissant, *Aristote et les Mystères* (Paris: Librarie E. Droz, 1932); and E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951). Croissant argues that Aristotle's discussions of enthusiasm (*Eudemian Ethics* 1225a 27–32) and of musical catharsis (*Politics* 1341b 32–1342b 17; *Poetics* 1449b 27) reflect Bacchic rituals, as interpreted by Pythagoras and Plato. Trond Berg Eriksen says that Aristotle's praise for "the contemplation of god" (*Eudemian Ethics* 1249b 17) reflects "the language of the mysteries." See *Bios Theoretikos: Notes on Aristotle's* Ethica Nicomachea *X, 6–8* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976), 88.

[87] That the Greek books of the Old Testament, John's Gospel, and the letters of Paul reflect Greek philosophical ideas has long been known. For the startling new argument that even the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels preaches Greek philosophy, see Runar M. Thorsteinsson, *Jesus as Philosopher: The Moral Sage in the Synoptic Gospels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[88] Biblical theology includes natural theology, as is glaringly obvious in the Noachite Covenant between God and humanity (Genesis 9) and Paul's address to the Athenians (Acts 17). See James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991, Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[89] For evidence of the widespread assumption among classical scholars that religion is irrational and philosophy is rational – epitomized by the title of E. R. Dodds's great book – see Shaul Tor, *Mortal and Divine in Early Greek Epistemology: A Study of Hesiod, Xenophanes, and Parmenides* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 10–19.

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strikes us at first as bizarre. By contrast, ancient Greek philosophy seems at first quite like contemporary philosophy – if we focus on doctrinal claims and arguments. We shall discover that both first impressions are misleading: Greek religion is more philosophical than we thought, while Greek philosophy is more religious.[90]

[90] "Though philosophy means death to the old gods, it is itself religion." Werner Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*, trans. Edward S. Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947), 72. "It is the discontinuity between ancient and modern religion that makes it difficult for us to understand ancient religion, but it is the very continuity between ancient and modern philosophy that poses traps for understanding ancient philosophy, for . . . the ways in which philosophy was practiced in antiquity shared many of the most prominent features of religion." Most, "Philosophy and Religion," in *Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Philosophy*, 301.

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