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Intelligent people hold religious positions that appear low on intellectual content and high on emotional fulfillment. I agree that religious experience has a spiritual dimension beyond the mind’s capacity to adequately dissect it, but I am unable to set aside the use of the mind in understanding religious experience.

My early years were lived in a small Iowa town where 90% of the people believed and worshipped in the Dutch Calvinist tradition, divided only by lines drawn between the conservative and the more conservative. My father was President of the Reformed Church College in the town so it is not surprising that we were among the less conservative and most engaged in looking at issues from several perspectives. In our home I would say religion was user friendly. It was important, but not burdensome.

The most conservative were the enemy of my boyhood. Their rules for life never made much sense to me, and in arguing against them I had an early arena to test my mental skills against those who held the more conservative positions. I could be an intellectual religious rebel protected by a loving, benign home environment.

On one occasion when I was twelve or thirteen, my father and I were engaged in discussion prompted by my questioning nature. In 1921 and 22 he served as principal of a Christian high school in Vellore, India. As we talked he told me about a Hindu Brahmin friend with whom he debated the merits of the two religions. My father said his friend had inherited from his birth the Hindu understandings of God and life, and though that was not his inheritance, he had no difficulty believing his friend’s path was true and right.
Well, that was an “eye opener” for a boy entering adolescence whose life and religious experiences had not taken him that far.

I relate these personal events because I believe they reveal that life at an early age is the incubator for habits and mental processes that shape our search. Here are the conclusions I reached consciously and perhaps subconsciously, in what one of my friends called in the title of a book he wrote “The Search Eternal.”

First, my current belief always requires validation through intellectual thought and intuition. Second, I will never dismiss the term religion in my search for truth because it describes for me the intellectual and spiritual context in which that search always takes place. When I come to a belief conclusion I feel it is religious. Third, I take exception to many of the orthodox religions’ perceptions that have surrounded, but not controlled, my life. Yet, I am untroubled by most of their important symbols and some of their theology. I just have a different slant on them. Fourth, I am most comfortable living and thinking within the structure of the church. Worship and stimulating preaching tune my emotions and intellect, helping me to focus on the feelings and matters that are most important to me. And fifth, I am ready always to recognize insight that may add to or subtract from what I believe. However, this ambiguous state does not deter me from holding a concept of truth.

I am comfortable with the Christian stories, teachings and symbols as I search for and explain truth. Given my background, that is not unusual. Jesus marks a point of revelation and revolution in human understanding and he as a person and his message were the foundation of a movement that eventually permeated the Roman World. Never before were people told to love their enemies, to forgive those who persecute you, to love
your neighbor as yourself. Never had God’s love for individuals been expressed so comprehensively. In fact, God was defined as love. Loyalty and love broke the boundaries of tribe and family, and yet were the essence also of intimate relationships.

Divine love (agape as the Greeks called it) had always been and was never ending. Letting it be the force in your life is the closest a human can come to God, and understand the truth. Whether Jesus’ insight was the culmination of centuries of spiritual and intellectual search or one person’s brilliant moment doesn’t matter to me. My guess is that there were elements of both. Whatever happened, Jesus’ understanding of life and explanation of God is seen as divine revelation, and theologians have ascribed divinity to him because of it.

The story goes on and included Jesus’ death by crucifixion and resurrection from the dead. Because God let Jesus die, he and Jesus, now known as His son, made this sacrifice so human’s who are really the “bad guys” can be forgiven for being sinners and at death enter an eternal heavenly realm. For most Christians this story is essential fact. Belief in it is a matter for faith because factual evidence is scanty at best, and when scrutinized under the microscope of present scientific knowledge, it threatens faith itself.

The story believed as fact is a warranty for eternity. You believe it and you never lose your consciousness – only your body. One of my friends humorously told me, “When I die, I’ll be real angry if I’m not conscious.” The early 20th century comedian/commentator, W.C. Fields, was known for his agnosticism. Shortly before he died he was admitted to a hospital. On one occasion a nurse found him reading the Gideon Bible provided in his room. Knowing he was terminally ill, she said, “Oh, Mr. Fields, have you become a believer?” “No, my dear,” he replied “I’m just trying to find a
loophole.” Another friend of mine, a believer in the spirit within, has concluded that our spirits rejoin the spiritual force that is eternal and is replaying itself on earth and throughout the universe.

I believe that the crucifixion story is a symbol for a deep and redeeming reality. No matter how horrible and painful an extremity a person brings upon himself, or is inflicted upon him even to death, there is the reservoir, the essence of love which gives hope from God, which resurrects a broken, dying spirit, so that it can live again. There is nothing that can separate us from that love if we are aware of it and take it. So I believe in the love that comes from God. I believe that God is love. If I can let that love flow through me all my weaknesses and failures will be ameliorated, and my relationships will provide daily witness to its richness and transforming power. I believe that love existed before earth’s creation and the evolution of our planet and our lives. It existed in dimensions that we have not experienced nor understand, yet, we understand what it can do and what happens when it is absent. We are aware that it escapes us at times, and rescues us when we let it have its way. Are we saved by it? I think so – day by day as we live our lives. If this great love that passes understanding redeems my life, it gives me assurance that I can carry into death. The Christian story takes me beyond the facts, whatever they are, to the truth that I perceive in it.

I have faith that the power of love can do what scriptures claim for it and my faith is more than blind belief. It is based on centuries of evidence and my own personal experiences and observations. Emanating from faith is hope that love will win in my life, and win in enough lives to save the world. So faith and hope and love abide, but love is the substance of God.
There is another belief that I hold. The human race should always be open to revelation. Most revelation comes from factual understanding of former mysteries explained through scientific research. By whatever means we discover, we should embrace the process and incorporate the results. Duncan Littlefair was an advocate for religion reinventing itself. He thought it was a matter of time and when the right time comes many of the tenets of the old religion will crumble when confronted by overwhelming and undeniable evidence. When you contemplate earliest human history and see where we as a species are, you observe on the continuum the development of religions, scientific discoveries, and political systems that have all led to different understandings of reality. Though there is a proclivity to certainty, the species has never stopped change, though it has been slow at times. We can assume, however, that the process called change will continue, bringing with it good and evil. The species has never perfected itself, though there were advocates of liberal religion in the late 19th and into the 20th centuries who thought it could be done. World War II put to rest that theory, and Christian thought even amongst liberals now centers on antidotes to evil, overcoming evil, rather than its eradication from human life.

What are the kinds of discoveries incorporated in change that are likely to alter our view of reality? One of the most interesting to me is the string theory in mathematics formulated in the late 19th century, worked on for awhile by Einstein, and taken up by mathematicians later in the 20th century. It has its advocates and detractors, but essentially it works towards the proof that more than three dimensions exist. I am sure that prehistoric people didn’t know what a dimension was, though they lived in the same
three we do and understand. What would happen to our understanding of beginnings and endings if we knew another dimension or more existed?

Have you read about black holes in our universe? They swallow up burned out stars and other matter. Where does all the matter go? What does it all mean? If we find other creatures, conscious like ourselves, in the universe, will their beliefs and understanding have an effect on ours? As we probe the human body finding out what specific genes do, will that change our beliefs?

In time, knowledge will take us beyond our present conflicts over stem cell research, abortion, and gay rights. We may not live to see these vexatious issues resolved, but I believe they will be replaced with conflicts we do not see clearly in our time.

Using our minds, we probe the universe and also the world of particles and quarks. Our adventure takes us outward and inward. Our minds allow us to speculate on theories and offer the possibility of proving those theories. The mind can perceive potentialities it cannot understand, and relentlessly pursue the understanding. What we know about the universe in which we live and the body we inhabit compared to what was known five thousand years ago demonstrates what can happen as the human species’ journey continues. What comprises religious thought today compared to the beliefs of the distant past leads me to conclude that there will be new understandings.

Paul in I Corinthians 13 perceives that even perfection can come and with it full understanding. But the reality of his perception is possible only if love is understood and envelopes all. Wherever the human mind leads, what discoveries are made, whatever beliefs result, the residue of evil will be present, and only the pre existing power of love can overcome it. The discoveries, however, will provide the species knowledge about
realities, and bring along with them their share of suffering. Only the spirit of love, living in and through people, can bring them from seeing dimly to a full understanding of what they mean.

Will we, can we fully understand? Is perfection a possibility? I think it’s the unreachable goal, yet we understand the goal. When we are no longer here there will be more to know and understand. From that knowledge will come beliefs unavailable to us, so how can we fully understand? That question is hard for me to answer, but it stokes my interest in the string theory and other probes into the discovery of more dimensions to the reality of life.

I have presented to you two theological concepts, the first my belief in love, agape, as the essence of God, pre-existing the creation of the planet and the evolution of life, and available to us as the only and true fulfillment of life. Faith in love brings me closest to certainty. The second belief is in the capacity of the mind as an instrument of revelation. Uncovering and proving new realities, the open and honest mind can lead to new beliefs or new affirmations for old ones. Using the mind as a theological channel carries with it some uncertainties and ambiguities. To deal with the uncertainties, I will paraphrase the closing of a John Keats poem, Ode on a Grecian Urn. Keats wrote:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.” My paraphrase, “Love is truth, truth is love – that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.” It may not be all you know, but it is the only understanding that will allow you to live the best life and die in peace.