

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Traditional Religion and the Disconfirming Other*

Our investigation shall consider what responses are open to a traditional believer when met with the challenge of the disconfirming Other. But just who counts as a “traditional believer?” As with our stipulative definitions of religion and spirituality, we shall focus upon one particular type of believer in our investigation. He or she is the believer who does genuinely believe, that is, who does not underestimate the element of belief in religion and the truth claims that necessarily accompany what we call belief. This is obviously not to suppose that the cognitive dimension of spirituality is the only one that matters. It does not negate the importance of features such as ritual and ethical behavior; it does not treat these other components as mere epiphenomena.

Our “traditional believer,” then, is a person who takes seriously the intellectual tenets of one of the great world religions and understands those tenets in a relatively orthodox manner. If we take a Christian as our example – since Christianity is by far the largest religion in America, it is Christians who will most often confront the problem of disconfirmation – this Christian is a someone who, at least before he or she is challenged by spiritual pluralism, is comfortable reciting the Apostle’s Creed, for instance. Another way to express the matter is to say that our “ideal type” here is represented by the believer who has seriously entered into Anselm’s laudable enterprise of “faith seeking understanding.” Hence, our exemplary believer will be particularly alert to the problem of

cognitive dissonance, that is, to points at which his or her religious beliefs seem to be contradicted by other plausible truth claims. Surely there are such believers. Indeed, if the intellectually astute believer described here does not in fact connect with any actual practitioners, then Christianity in particular, given its theological and doctrinal emphases, is in serious trouble. Of course, even these believers do not approach Christianity with a disinterested collection of philosophical abstractions about God. Although they are focused upon the cognitive dimensions of Christian beliefs, they connect the beliefs at issue here with their ultimate concern, and they are convinced that the deity whom they believe exists is to be unconditionally trusted, a way of relating to God that can appropriately be designated “faith.”

But perhaps the whole project that I intend to undertake here – the examination of the different sorts of responses religious persons make to the realization that their beliefs are contradicted by the beliefs found in other religions – is fatally flawed because it places so much emphasis on having sufficient proof for one’s beliefs. Aren’t there many things that we believe that we cannot prove? As a matter of fact, we usually do not believe things unless we at least know how we could go about proving them, even if we do not have proof in hand at the moment. Suppose I tell you that I have loaned my good friend Frank a large sum of money, even though he would not tell me what he needed the money for. Do I have proof that Frank is trustworthy? Most likely, I do not possess indisputable proof, proof beyond any possibility of doubt. But I have the record of trustworthiness that Frank has displayed in all of his dealings with me up to this point. And if I really wanted to prove his trustworthiness, I could have him tracked by a private detective and find out what he intends to do with the money that I have lent him.

But this challenge, namely, that we ought not to expect the religious person to have proof for his or her beliefs, falters not only because we most often do in fact have something approaching proof for our beliefs – I might well take Frank’s long record of trustworthiness as proof beyond a reasonable doubt – and because

we know exactly how proof could be attained. It falters too because it trades on a false comparison. It compares beliefs we have for which we may not possess immediate ironclad proof with beliefs we hold that are confronted with strong evidence against them. The challenge of the disconfirming Other is about being faced with apparent disproof, and that is a significantly different situation from simply believing without incontrovertible proof.

However, the astute reader may offer another objection to the whole project that is at issue here. He or she may say that I am trading on just one notion of truth, a fairly narrowly scientific notion of truth. But aren't there many forms of truth? For example, doesn't an artful production of *Macbeth* communicate truth, at least to the most receptive members of its audience, and isn't that truth something other than the sort of truth associated with the natural sciences? We must answer both of these questions in the affirmative. But it is also important to note that religious belief, while it certainly appeals to various notions of truth, does have a large investment in something closely akin to scientific truth. For instance, belief that there is a supernatural consciousness that freely created the universe is a proposition, and it is closer in form to the claim that the Earth orbits the sun than it is to T.S. Eliot's poetic expression of the claim that modernity is a spiritual wasteland.

Having noted this kinship of religious truth claims with scientific ones, however, it is also important to note that we shall have occasion in our investigation to take other, non-scientific kinds of truth very seriously indeed. The modification strategies discussed in detail in Chapters Three and Four will certainly take us beyond any one, narrow definition of truth. For example, we shall take seriously Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn's claim that the Christian notion of the Kingdom of God can in some sense be made consonant with the goal of the Buddhist spiritual quest, and this will require stretching the notion of truth beyond its narrowly scientific sense.

It is well to admit at the outset that the intellectually oriented, probing Christian lay person upon whom we are focusing is in the minority in most Christian churches. This is probably more the

result of the larger culture in which American Christianity finds itself, a culture that has, not without reason, often been dubbed “anti-intellectual,” than it is the result of any purely intra-Christian dynamic. The fact remains, however, that the problems that will be at the center of our investigation throughout this book may be consciously a problem for only a minority of believers. But to be simply unaware of the problem does not mean that the problem is of no consequence to the tradition in which one participates.

When the traditional believer is confronted with the disconfirming Other, modified versions of piety may emerge that serve to remove the apparent contradictions between his or her own convictions and those of the others encountered in America’s heterogeneous spiritual landscape. Our exploration of such creative modifications and the strategies that produce them will be reserved, however, for Chapters Three and Four. At issue in this first chapter is what results from the confrontation with the disconfirming Other when one is not willing to go the distance required to produce a modified belief system that can remove the contradictions that pluralism brings to the fore. One opts instead for avoidance tactics. In Chapter Two, we shall analyze what might be deemed a half-way house between avoidance tactics and strategic modifications of belief, namely, fundamentalist belief.

In order to understand the relevance of modification strategies and avoidance tactics alike, we must first investigate just what can result from the believer’s confrontation with the disconfirming Other. It turns out that there are at least three important results of this confrontation. First, it becomes apparent that the extraordinarily important concept of divine revelation cannot do the job that it is asked to do because, when confronted with the disconfirming Other, my conviction that something from my tradition is an instance of divine revelation is itself called into question. Second, the believer is forced into fideism. That is, he or she is forced to make a blind leap of faith and essentially to abandon the project of faith seeking understanding. And, third, the believer is left with a narrative about the relationship of the sacred and the profane that is characterized by a distinctive sort of bifurcation or fracture: whereas the profane is

ordinarily parasitic on the sacred with which it is contrasted, now the profane seems to lose even this negative connection with the sacred.

Having considered these three results of the collision of one's beliefs with the very different beliefs of others, we will be in a position to move on to consider three avoidance reactions to the disconfirmation dilemma. These avoidance tactics should not be confused with the aforementioned strategic modifications to one's belief system: the latter attempt to alter one's beliefs so as to avoid disconfirmation, while the former are essentially attempts to evade the issue. The three avoidance tactics are the compartmentalization of one's worldview, the decision to see matters of religious belief as essentially immune to logic, and self-deception about the disconfirming implications of pluralism.

We begin, then, with the manner in which a robust pluralism renders the concept of divine revelation impotent, at least when the concept of revelation stands in its traditional, unmodified form. The great Abrahamic religions are all thoroughly tied up with the notion of revelation. Because God transcends the finite sphere in which we exist and to which our minds are proportioned, we can know very little about God, so the thinking goes, if we are left to our own devices. God is in heaven, and we are on earth. Any significant knowledge of God – whether of his ways or of the more specific details of what he expects of human beings – depends on God deigning to come down to humanity in order to show himself. The paradigmatic instance of this in the Jewish tradition is God's revelation of the Torah, his divine "teaching," to Moses on Mount Sinai. While the tablets of the Law provide the most tangible example of God's revelation, the Torah continues to unfold in the form of the oral law, the tradition of commentary upon which is enshrined in the texts known as the Mishnah and the Talmud.

Christianity inherits the Jewish concept of God revealing himself, and it takes up the idea of revelation in at least a threefold fashion. The ultimate revelation for Christians is the person of Jesus the Christ, God become man. But the Christ event is testified to in the New Testament which, along with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, thus becomes a source of divine revelation in its own

right. And in Roman Catholic Christianity, the ongoing teaching tradition communicated through the leadership of the Church, the *Magisterium* (from the Latin for “teacher”), is a third source of divine revelation.

Islam, the third of the three Abrahamic traditions, offers what is perhaps the most straightforward theology of divine revelation: Allah has revealed himself via word-for-word dictation to the prophet Muhammad, a revelation mediated through an angel, recited by Muhammad upon its reception, and recorded in the Muslim scripture, the Quran.

But it is not only the Abrahamic traditions that depend upon the notion of divine revelation. The classic Hindu sacred text the *Baghavat Gita* (the “Song of God”) contains revelatory insights provided by the god Krishna. The more philosophically dense collection known as the *Upanishads* does not in fact rest its claim to authority upon divine revelation, but, as we shall see below, the tradition that it was supernaturally intuited by special “seers” ends up raising some of the same difficulties in a spiritually plural world as do more straightforward claims to revelation.

As is so often the case, Buddhism seems to be the odd-tradition-out among the major religions. Because the Buddha has no apparent interest in the concept of a God, divine revelation is not on the Buddhist agenda. However, there are elements of the Mahayana branch of Buddhism in particular, such as stories of the Buddha wordlessly communicating a truth beyond ordinary concepts to a particularly adept disciple, that, as with the *Upanishads*, will end up confronting the Buddhist with some of the same difficulties that arise in other traditions when one faces the disconfirming Other.

Even if the implications of pluralism for the concept of divine revelation are seldom discussed in the theological literature, the concept of revelation is faced with a significant challenge, a challenge that might well be dubbed the Lockean paradox. The great eighteenth-century British philosopher John Locke recognized that, if it were unambiguously the case that I had access to divine revelation on some particular matter, I could rest assured that I

possessed the greatest certainty imaginable on that topic. But here is the problem: “Our assurance can be no greater than our knowledge is, that it *is* a revelation from God.”<sup>1</sup> The paradox, in other words, is that while divine revelation would always provide knowledge far superior and more secure than that available to finite, unaided human reason, human reason turns out to have the last word, for we must always make the human judgment that a particular claimant to revelatory status is in fact a revelation. Mere human reason always outruns claims to divine revelation; our own faculties necessarily stand in judgment over any and all alleged revelations.

Christian theologians, in particular, have been aware of this dilemma. That is why they have frequently maintained that the act of Christian faith, through which one accepts certain claims as revelatory, is not, in fact, simply a human achievement. Rather, Christian theology has often maintained that faith, and hence the acceptance of an alleged revelation as a revelation, is a gift empowered by God’s grace. In the words of *Dei filius*, issued by the First Vatican Council in 1870, faith is “a *supernatural* virtue by which, *with the inspiration and help of God’s grace*, we believe that what he has revealed is true.”<sup>2</sup>

But this all comes to naught when the mainline Christian, for instance, confronts the many different spiritual options in his or her society. If I am such a Christian, why do I believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnation of the second person of the divine Trinity? Because of revelation, of course. And I will add that my assurance that this is indeed a matter of divine revelation is provided not simply by my ability to produce reasonable arguments for its being so but through the illumination, the inner certainty, vouchsafed me by God’s Holy Spirit. But here is the rub: When I confront my Muslim neighbor, I learn that she believes something very different about God and God’s interaction with humanity. God is not triune, and God never did, and never could, become incarnate in a human being. The problem, of course, is that my Muslim acquaintance will claim to know this precisely on the basis of divine revelation, specifically, the revelation contained in the Holy Quran. It will do me little good to say, “But I know that my

belief is the one based on genuine revelation, since I possess the certainty gifted to me by the Holy Spirit,” for the Muslim will respond that her conviction that the Quran is divine revelation is equally certain, given that her conviction is not the products of her own reflection but, rather, is the work of Allah, all things being in His hands.

Claims to special faculties of knowledge, such as the examples provided above of the origin of the *Upanishads* or of wordless transmission of wisdom from the Buddha to a disciple, are in a precisely parallel situation to claims of divine revelation: persons from traditions different from my own will also claim to have special routes to knowledge, and the blatant contradictions between and among our competing claims will render the notion of special faculties of knowledge useless. When confronted with pluralism’s disconfirming Other, claims to special spiritual ways of knowing are shown to have no more weight than claims to divine revelation.

In short, claims to divine revelation and its analogues, whatever their plausibility when set forth solely within the boundaries of single communities of belief, become impotent when confronted by other revelatory claims coming from other spiritual communities. There are simply no independent criteria, external to both Christianity and Islam, for example, that allow us to adjudicate between the competing Christian and Muslim claims. And if we add Hindus and Jews to the conversation, we will end up with a yet more cacophonous, and ultimately pointless, shouting match. There is an extraordinary reversal of fortune here, for, in one fell swoop, what initially appeared to be the paradigm of objective knowledge, namely, divine revelation, suddenly seems to be a function of mere subjectivity. It turns out that claims of divine revelation, so apparently essential to the content of theists’ spiritual convictions, end up falling far short of their promise.

This fashion in which spiritual pluralism challenges the power of revelatory claims leads to the second result of the pluralistic confrontation mentioned above, namely, that the believer is reduced to fideism. The term “fideism,” from the Latin for faith, is a kind of “faith-ism.” It is the famous “blind leap of faith,” an apparently

willful decision to believe something when there is no rational evidence for the belief, but only the bare act of faith itself. There have been times in the history of Christianity, in particular, when fideism has been celebrated rather than condemned. But, ordinarily, these have been in settings in which the confrontation with other spiritual traditions was not in the offing; it was in these cases an intra-Christian dynamic at issue. In the nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard talked provocatively about faith as a “movement by virtue of the absurd.”<sup>3</sup> He juxtaposed the absurdity of faith with the uncontroversial deliverances of reason in an attempt to call forth authentic Christian faith out of a Christianity that had become no more than a taken-for-granted cultural inheritance. Kierkegaard did not, in other words, retreat to a blind leap into absurdity as a response to the challenge of what Muslims or Hindus believed, but, rather, in response to a moribund culture-Christianity. Even Karl Barth, the great Swiss Calvinist theologian, despite the fact that he was a twentieth-century figure and thus already lived in a world aware of religious pluralism, set forth his fideistic theology within a decidedly parochial context. Barth was, once again, pitting his version of fideism against a form of Christianity, one that he believed put far too much confidence in the ability of our human faculties to grasp the divine.

It may well be the case that within the sort of intra-Christian conflicts fought by Kierkegaard and Barth, fideism can be shown to have certain advantages *as a spiritual practice*. But fideism surely proves useless when we step outside the confines of the Christian community and attempt to use it *as a theoretical tool to defend our beliefs when they are challenged by the disconfirming Other*. In the latter instance, as could have been anticipated from our discussion of the Lockean revelation paradox, the retreat to fideism can issue in little more than a shouting match among devotees of different spiritual perspectives.

The third result of the confrontation of unmodified mainline belief with the disconfirming Other is a special sort of bifurcation of the sacred and the profane. Students of religion have often noted how various cultures through time have divided the world into the

sacred and the profane realms. The sacred, of course, is that dimension of reality infused with meaning derived from beyond the merely finite. It is the focus of the spiritual quest for participation and self-transcendence. The concept of the “profane” – the word comes from the Latin expression for “outside the doors of the temple” – helps to delimit the sacred; it is its counterpoint. But as with all binary concepts, it would be a misunderstanding to suppose that the sacred and the profane are somehow completely separate from one another, for they necessarily derive their meanings from one another. They are parasitic upon each other.

Although Plato’s *Republic* is not ordinarily taken as a religious or spiritual document in the narrow senses of the term, this parasitism can be illustrated by his famous allegory of the cave. Plato contrasts the transcendent realm of the Forms, the ultimate source of what is, with the world of mere appearances in which we find ourselves here below. While he typically thinks in the abstractions of the philosopher rather than in the more emotionally-charged categories of the preacher, Plato’s story provides a particularly clear metaphor for how the sacred or Real is related to the merely profane. The allegory of the cave depicts prisoners chained in a cave, facing its back wall. They are not allowed to see the figures that move back and forth in the outside world in front of the cave, but only the shadows that those figures cast on the wall. Our immediate experience of the world is analogous to the prisoners seeing mere shadows, for that immediate experience does not acquaint us with the Real, the Forms, but only with deficient imitations of those Forms. Hence, the Platonic allegory presents us with a division between the Real, knowledge of which requires something beyond our ordinary habits of perception, and the everyday world that we mistakenly suppose to be the Real. It is legitimate to equate this distinction with that of the sacred and the profane, not only in that the Forms are transcendent, but also insofar as knowledge of the Forms and liberation from bondage to the merely apparent is necessary for our existential fulfillment or “salvation” as human beings.

What is particularly helpful for our purposes about Plato’s allegory, as already suggested, is that it so clearly illustrates the

manner in which the binary concepts of the sacred and the profane are not simple opposites but are parasitic upon one another. The images cast on the cave wall are indeed mere images, not the Real, but they are nonetheless images of what is in fact the Real. If the figures walking past the cave entrance were different, the shadows cast on the wall would be different too. One's particular notion of the sacred should dictate one's experience of the profane.

We can get a second view of this interdependence of sacred and profane by turning to what Mircea Eliade, probably the most famous expositor of the sacred-profane distinction, dubbed the *axis mundi*.<sup>4</sup> The *axis mundi* is literally the pole at the center of the world. Eliade's claim is that a vast number of spiritual traditions employ versions of *axis mundi* symbolism: they have images of a vertical structure that provides a passageway between the earth and the heavens, between the profane and the sacred. The Hebrew Bible story of Jacob's ladder, a ladder on which angels can move back and forth between heaven and earth, is one example. The Christian cross is an *axis mundi* symbol too, in that it is a pole – ancient Christian devotional language refers to it as the “tree,” echoing the Tree of Life found in the Garden of Eden – on which Christ was crucified. The crucifixion purchases salvation, that is, access to heaven. That there are such passageways between the realms of the sacred and the profane illustrates once more that the sacred and profane are not traditionally conceived as simple opposites of one another such that never the twain shall meet. The profane is dependent upon the sacred, and what it means to live within the profane realm is determined by the nature of the sacred which stands over against it.

It turns out, then, that while the concept of the profane might initially suggest the mere absence of the sacred, the profane has ordinarily been a function of the sacred. And this means that different notions of the sacred should produce different notions of the profane. Note how dissimilar a pious American Methodist's perception of the profane normally is from the perception of an advocate of Iranian theocracy. The former will most likely perceive the distinction between sacred and profane as more pronounced than the latter. The Iranian theocrat does not deny that one can

distinguish between the sort of relationship with Allah attained in the midst of prayer, on the one hand, and the implications of that relationship in a court of law, on the other hand. But to the extent that he or she maintains that the laws of the land should be a function of Shariah, that is, Muslim legal prescriptions derived directly from the Quran and Muslim tradition, the divide between sacred and profane will be seen as a smooth transition rather than an easily discernable break. The Muslim theocrat's expectation that the profane will reflect the sacred in a relatively direct fashion will be similar to the expectation of a citizen of Christendom in Europe's Middle Ages, where the Church could authoritatively pronounce even on economic matters, for instance, by prohibiting the charging of interest on loans.

But the seemingly logical expectation that the profane realm will possess distinctive characteristics based upon the distinctive perception of the sacred with which it is juxtaposed is confounded in pluralistic America. American pluralism resulted in the constitutional separation of church and state, which produced an unprecedentedly wide divide between sacred and profane. The width of that divide is only expanded by the highly rationalized structure of the American capitalist economy and its accompanying political and legal systems. This structure dictates how we shall behave in the profane realm, *regardless of our individual perceptions of the sacred*. Furthermore, the wide gap between the sacred and the profane created by the constitutional separation of church and state and its exacerbation by these additional structural features of our society is further increased as American pluralism is enhanced. If I am a twenty-first century American evangelical Christian, I must live in a society alongside Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and New Agers, as well as with other Christians of a non-evangelical, liberal persuasion. The demands of practical interaction among all these different believers in the profane sphere, an interaction that demands that we all follow essentially the same rules of behavior, homogenizes the profane.

While different groups may still evaluate the profane differently – one sort of believer may attempt to be “in the world but not of it,”

while another sort will be perfectly comfortable in the profane world – the actual structure of the profane world will be largely the same for all. Of course, we ought not to underestimate the importance of these different evaluative judgments of the profane. This is, after all, in large measure, what the notorious “culture wars” of recent years have been all about. Evangelical Christians want the Ten Commandments posted in American courthouses, while members of more liberal religious or spiritual groups frequently do not. But the fact that such culture wars have taken on particular saliency in recent decades only testifies to the way in which the increasingly pluralistic character of American society pushes us closer to a homogenization of the profane, a homogenization that representatives of the “religious right” are convinced leaves out some essential beliefs and values. In the nineteenth century, hardly anyone interpreted the constitutional separation of church and state as dictating that it would be inappropriate to place a nativity scene, a Christian symbol, on the town green at Christmastime. Now that Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews have a say in things that they did not have previously (not to mention the increasing significance of skeptical, non-religious voices), that nativity scene is regarded as unconstitutional. As pluralism continues apace, the profane’s ability to reflect a particular brand of sacrality diminishes.

Let us return to the traditional notion of the sacred and the profane. As binary concepts, the sacred and the profane will always suggest a bifurcation: the profane is that dimension outside of the sacred, as the sacred is that which transcends, is of more value than, or is more real than the profane. But the bifurcation in the narrative of the sacred and the profane found in traditional societies, such as those discussed by Eliade, is a highly qualified bifurcation or fracture: the profane is indeed what the sacred is not, but it is nonetheless the particular sort of profane space that it is as a function of the particular sort of sacred that stands beyond it. What we have found in twenty-first century America, with its robust spiritual pluralism, is a different sort of bifurcation, a peculiar sort of fracture that separates the sacred and the

profane. For now the profane is merely the non-sacred in an entirely general sense, rather than that which stands over against a specific image of sacrality.

A concrete example of this peculiar bifurcation is provided by the common morality we find in the profane sphere today. As the new breed of scientist-critics of religion, such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, has pointed out, the moral standards actually practiced in American society (as well as in a sister society such as Britain), even by self-professed “Bible-believing Christians,” does not really derive from the Christian Bible, at least not in any direct fashion.<sup>5</sup> Rather, even the fundamentalist Christian draws upon the common secular morality, what we can call here the morality of the largely homogeneous profane sphere.

Consider, as but one example, America’s near-obsession with “family values” as the desideratum of our moral demeanor.<sup>6</sup> While it is true that one of the Ten Commandments orders us to “Honor thy father and thy mother,” the larger set of family values so dear to evangelical Christians, values that are given lip service by the vast majority of Americans of all spiritual stripes, are not to be found in what is for Christians the most authoritative content of the Scriptures, namely, the teachings of Jesus. In one Gospel story, Jesus calls a man to be his disciple. Out of proper respect for his father, who has just died, the man asks to be allowed to bury his father first, before he travels away with Jesus. But Jesus will have none of it. “Let the dead bury their own dead” is his harsh reply (Matthew 8:22 and Luke 9:60). When Jesus is in a crowded room teaching and he is told that his mother and brothers are outside and wish to see him, Jesus dismissively replies that his real mother and brothers are those that follow him; blood takes a back seat to ideology (Matthew 19:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21). Perhaps most dramatically of all, Jesus actually goes so far as to say that his followers ought to “hate” their mothers and fathers in comparison to their love for him (Luke 14:26). Try putting that version of family values on the Family Channel and getting a positive response from its targeted demographic!

There are innumerable spiritual communities available for us to join, but when it comes to our everyday behavior, our interactions with others in the profane sphere, our actions are less often a reflection of the vision of the sacred set forth in the spiritual community with which we identify, and more often part of a well-nigh common American value system, even if, as with all value systems, not all members of the society end up actually practicing what they acknowledge as the common ideal. The source of our moral values in contemporary American society is, in other words, one example of the way in which the profane sphere, the everyday world which persons of different spiritual persuasions occupy in common, is not a shadow cast by our idiosyncratic visions of the sacred. Instead the profane sphere is almost impervious to particular notions of the sacred.

We have considered three important results of the confrontation of mainline religion with the disconfirming Other, namely, the effective dissolution of the power of revelatory claims to back beliefs, the retreat into fideism, and an exaggerated bifurcation of the relationship of the sacred and the profane. This prepares us to move on to an exploration of three avoidance tactics employed by practitioners of traditional religion, responses that evade the challenge to modify one's beliefs so as to ward off pluralistic disconfirmation.

Of course, before we begin our investigation of these avoidance reactions, it must be acknowledged that some believers will not get even this far: not only will they refuse the opportunity to modify their beliefs in the face of the pluralistic challenge, they will not even engage in avoidance tactics. Instead, they will simply not confront the pluralistic challenge at all, perhaps because they have never thought through the implications of the fact that others' faiths have the same degree of evidential support as their own. The observation that there are undoubtedly some religious persons who are blissfully unaware of the challenge of the disconfirming Other, coupled with the fact that such persons are irrelevant to our whole investigation, forces us to recall the stipulation made above that we are dealing not with all believers, but with those who take the project of faith

seeking understanding seriously. But, once again, those particular believers are not only a very real portion of the total population of believers, they are also the sorts of believers that religious traditions would most like to have.

Putting aside those traditional believers, then, who somehow avoid thinking about their neighbors' spiritual beliefs at all, we come upon three avoidance tactics employed in the face of the disconfirming Other. It is essential to be clear about what it is possible to claim about such tactics and what is beyond the reach of our investigation. It should be obvious that a philosophical analysis such as the one we are undertaking here, which does indeed draw upon the psychology of religion in addition to the philosophy of religion and theology, nonetheless cannot claim perfect access to the psyches of individual believers.

What is at issue for us, in any case, is a more theoretical undertaking: we begin with the uncontroversial fact that there are persons who hold what we are calling traditional beliefs, there being a host of traditional communities, from forms of Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism, for example, to equally traditional forms of Islam. We subsequently note that, if particular mainline beliefs go largely unmodified, they sometimes stand in stark contradiction to the beliefs held fast by members of other spiritual persuasions. For instance, Roman Catholic Christians hold that Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnation of the second person of the divine Trinity, while Sunni Muslims hold that the very notion of the Trinity is sacrilege, in that it compromises monotheism, and that the incarnation of the divine is equally unthinkable, in that it idolatrously reduces God or Allah to finite dimensions. We note, furthermore, that some Roman Catholics are quite aware of the contradiction between their own convictions and those of their Muslim fellow-citizens, and that they are equally aware of their inability to show that their beliefs rest on grounds that are more secure than the grounds upon which Muslim faith rests. We then take the straightforward step of looking for known, relatively uncontroversial psychological devices that can plausibly account for even an intellectually astute person's ability to live with such

contradiction. The first avoidance tactic that we shall consider is compartmentalization, since it is in many ways the simplest of the three. Next we shall explore the self-conscious dismissal of logic in matters of spiritual belief. Finally, we shall investigate the tactic of self-deception, which can reasonably be regarded as the most psychologically complex of the three.

It is a truism, a chestnut of folk psychology, that human beings are able to compartmentalize what they believe. That is, they have the ability to hold both conviction “a” and conviction “b,” even when “a” and “b” contradict one another, and they accomplish this feat by seeing to it that the contradictory convictions are never brought face to face. It is, in other words, as if there were separate compartments within the human psyche that, like the watertight compartments of a ship, can be safely sealed off from one another. Thus, I may firmly believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnation of God but also recognize not only that Muslims handily reject this claim but also that I have absolutely no reason to suppose that my convictions are more securely founded than the Muslim counter-convictions. But I will compartmentalize the belief from the recognition, so that the two never confront one another.

As it turns out, we have a bit more to support the notion that human beings engage in compartmentalization than mere folk psychology. Contemporary neuroscience provides evidence that compartmentalization is indeed a common phenomenon. Rita Carter, who has written widely on contemporary brain research, shows in her book *Multiplicity* how the human brain switches back and forth between different ways of seeing and thinking when it encounters two contradictory possibilities so that it can embrace both of them. A concrete example is provided by certain visual “illusions.” Take, for example, the line drawing, so often reproduced in psychology textbooks, that can be seen either as symmetrical facial profiles lined up nose to nose or as a vase. Most of us are also familiar with the figure that can be seen as either a duck or a rabbit. The salient point here is that our brains will allow us to interpret the figure in question in contradictory ways, *but that it cannot embrace those contrary ways of seeing at one and the same moment*: “your brain

will allow you to see only one at a time . . . it just can't 'do' both patterns simultaneously."<sup>7</sup>

Carter goes on to explain that "this inability to see things in two ways simultaneously [but to see things in contradictory ways in sequence] occurs throughout the brain, including areas concerned with thoughts and emotions."<sup>8</sup> This suggests, of course, that the brain can and will hold contradictory ideas (not just contradictory visual interpretations) and that it will accomplish this feat by temporally compartmentalizing, that is, by focusing its attention on one idea at one time and on an opposing idea at another, without allowing the two ideas to come face to face in the same moment.<sup>9</sup> Spiritual pluralism can reasonably be read as one possible driver of this phenomenon. As Carter points out, "For most of us the options presented to us [in contemporary society] are increasing [including spiritual options] – life is getting more, not less, complicated. Hence, we switch from one way of seeing things to another, one way of being to another."<sup>10</sup>

That this temporal compartmentalization is indeed an avoidance tactic employed to deal with the disconfirming Other becomes all the more plausible when we factor in the role of emotion in some kinds of temporal compartmentalizing. Spiritual beliefs often entail a large emotional investment, given that they are about matters of ultimate importance to us: they deal with the meaning of life, the implications of death, and the moral principles by which we believe that we ought to live. One is understandably loath to give up beliefs that are of such extraordinary existential significance. Hence, if compartmentalization can prevent these beliefs from being undermined by a confrontation with the disconfirming Other, it is reasonable to suppose that compartmentalization will be an attractive option indeed. Consider an actual example. There are numerous Christians who disavow Darwinian evolution because they believe that it contradicts the Book of Genesis. Yet those same Christians take it as a given that pharmaceutical companies need continually to develop new antibiotics as bacteria become resistant to older antibiotics. Penicillin cannot cure all of the ills that it once could. Yet this phenomenon is nothing other than Darwinian natural selection.

The second avoidance tactic on our agenda is the self-conscious abandonment of logic in matters spiritual and religious. Let us return once more to our hypothetical mainline Christian, an intellectually responsible practitioner who has grown up reciting the Apostle's Creed on Sunday morning. At some point, however, the increasingly pluralistic character of American spirituality and the ever-more effective communication of that pluralism via new forms of media lead our believer to confront the challenge of the disconfirming Other: Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists, not to mention Jews and even some other Christians, do not believe what I believe, and I cannot produce any better evidence for my convictions than they have for theirs. My beliefs are crucial to who I am. They constitute, in Paul Tillich's familiar phrase, my ultimate concern.<sup>11</sup> Yet the chances of my beliefs being the one set of correct beliefs among the sea of competitors are mathematically slim.

The believer who is put in this apparently untenable position may well decide to take a page, as it were, from Job. While Job is concerned about theodicy rather than pluralism – though Job's so-called friends, with their conflicting views, might be said to represent pluralism – the answer that he receives from God may appear to be equally applicable to a contemporary person of faith facing the disconfirming Other. God famously makes the point to Job that divine matters are simply beyond human comprehension. Where were humans when God laid the foundations of the world? Faith too is, in the end, a divine matter, consisting as it does of a claim to be in relationship with God and to know certain things about God. Thus, perhaps I, taking the part of our hypothetical traditional and intellectually astute believer, will acknowledge that, on the one hand, I am certain about my faith convictions, while, on the other hand, I cannot intellectually solve the challenge represented by the other believer. But I may go on to conclude that this is where I simply ought to abandon logic, thereby releasing myself from the responsibility of explaining why my own convictions ought to be taken as more secure than those of other believers. After all, divine matters are beyond the grasp of human

reason, and thus even the law of non-contradiction must sometimes be suspended when issues of faith are at stake.

It is worth noting that this willingness to abandon even the most basic canons of logical reasoning when it comes to matters spiritual is not without an impressive pedigree. The church father Tertullian is well known for glorying in believing in what appears to human reason as impossible. And centuries later, Martin Luther, never at a loss for the pithy phrase, referred to reason as the whore of the devil. If we desire a more contemporary example of the notion that, in matters of faith, logic does not always apply, we can look once more to the theology of Karl Barth.

This tactic of willfully transgressing the principles of logic may recall our earlier discussion of fideism, along with the incapacitation of revelation and the unprecedented disconnect between sacred and profane. But these were meant to be understood not as conscious tactics employed by a believer facing the disconfirming Other – that is what is at issue in the present case – but rather, as unavoidable logical implications of the dilemma of the disconfirming Other, the implications of which the believer might not even be conscious. One can take a blind leap of faith, after all, without ever reflecting upon the fact that it is blind. Hence, what separates our present discussion of the willful transgression of logic from our earlier discussion of fideism is that, despite the potential overlap between the two topics, we are thinking of the former as a self-conscious choice on the part of the believer.

The third avoidance strategy to be considered is self-deception. Georges Roy boldly claims that “Despite appearances, many Western adults who’ve been exposed to standard science and sincerely claim to believe in God are self-deceived; at some level they believe the claim is false.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, according to Roy, there are “reasons to suppose that anyone subjected to a standard Anglo-European high school education knows at some level that standard theistic claims are false.”<sup>13</sup> If human beings can and do deceive themselves about the contradiction that Roy alleges between traditional theism and science – many would of course argue that no such contradiction exists – then it is to be presumed that they

can also deceive themselves about the disconfirming implications of the Other's religious and spiritual convictions.

The notion of self-deception, however, is certainly one of the most puzzling concepts in all of psychology. How can one possibly deceive oneself? The concept implies that I know something to be true but, at the same time, succeed in convincing myself that it is not true. But that is a contradiction in terms. Yet, few would deny that most of us are, from time to time, subject to something that we would be willing to call self-deception. Scientist Michael Gazzaniga puts it in straightforward terms:

We not only lie to each other, we lie to ourselves. From 100 percent of high school students who rank themselves as having a higher-than-average ability to get along with others (a mathematical impossibility) to 93 percent of college professors who rank themselves above average at their work, self-deception is at play.<sup>14</sup>

How can we make sense of the notion of self-deception, then? I suggest that in self-deception it is not the case that one is aware of the fact that what one believes (what one "knows" is true) is in fact false; that scenario is simply impossible to make sense of. Rather, in the case of self-deception, one recognizes that there is overwhelming evidence against what one believes. But given that belief is a matter of decision – I am not forced to believe in God, for instance, but decide to do so – there is no actual contradiction in my believing something even when I recognize that the evidence against that belief is overwhelming. The evidence that Frank is guilty of murder may be overwhelming, but the evidence may be misleading: Frank may in fact be innocent. The problem, however, is that if the only information to which I am privy is the overwhelming evidence of Frank's guilt and I have no good reason to believe that the evidence is misleading, my belief that Frank is innocent is an irrational belief. What is more, I know that the belief is irrational. This is, I think, what we mean by self-deception.

Human beings frequently engage in self-deception, understood in this fashion, in matters of health. There are numerous stories

about persons who convince themselves that the rapidly growing mass that they are aware of in some part of their body is perfectly harmless, even when that mass grows to the size of a grapefruit. They convince themselves that the mass is harmless even though they are quite aware of the fact that, in the vast majority of cases, a mass of that size is not in fact harmless and should be surgically removed as soon as possible. They choose to believe something contrary to the evidence. There is no actual logical contradiction in doing so, but this is precisely what we mean by self-deception. I believe what I want to believe, knowing full well that the belief flies in the face of the available evidence.

My analysis of what is involved in the phenomenon of self-deception bears some resemblance, on two counts, to aspects of Freudian theory, though it by no means necessitates adopting the entirety of the Freudian notion of the psyche. First of all, self-deception as I have described it sounds, on some counts, like Freud's notion of wish fulfillment as laid out in his famous attack upon religion in *The Future of an Illusion*.<sup>15</sup> I convince myself that the mass growing in my abdomen is thoroughly benign simply because I so badly want it to be benign. Freud claims that this is what happens with belief in God: the believer has no evidence that God exists but so badly desires to tap the advantages that accrue to belief in a cosmic father figure that he or she convinces himself or herself that that cosmic figure actually exists. My description of self-deception is a bit different, however, in that it requires not that I believe in the face of the lack of evidence but, rather, that I believe *against* the extraordinary *preponderance of evidence* that I do know exists.

Second, the self-deceiver's ability to believe the opposite of what the evidence supports suggests a potent ability to avoid thinking about the evidence and its implications, and this ability might be seen as akin to the notion of Freudian repression into the unconscious (though it has no necessary connection to the whole Freudian philosophy of instinctual drives and traumatic memories that are supposedly forced into the unconscious, most often via strong social prohibitions).

Can this sort of self-deception be described as “lying to oneself,” as Gazzaniga describes self-deception above? One might initially suppose that it cannot, given my rejection of the claim that self-deception is belief in something that one knows to be false. But Australian psychologist Dorothy Rowe echoes Gazzaniga’s language while adding an account of the existential issues at stake that brings her understanding of self-deception into proximity to my discussion of that phenomenon, with its emphasis on what we wish to believe:

We first experience the terror of being invalidated when we are small children, but by the time we are three or four we have learned a way of avoiding it: we have learned how to lie. From then on, whenever we glimpse the faintest possibility that our “selves” might be threatened with annihilation, we lie.

First of all, we lie to ourselves. Why? Because we fear that we do not have the strength and courage to face the truth of our situation. We even lie about lying, preferring to call our lies anything but a lie. We say: “He’s in denial.”<sup>16</sup>

In any case, if self-deception as it has been described here is not only possible but common, then it is fair to assume that many persons go on believing what they have always believed in matters of religion even though they are aware of the evidence – in this case the simple fact – that the array of competing, equally-well supported, positions taken by their neighbors renders the truth of their own religious convictions mathematically unlikely.