

Chapter One

“I believe . . .”

This is a book on questions of religious faith. If one has no faith, is there any reason why one should be interested?

Leave aside for the moment the question of why one may have faith: There are good reasons why many people go through life, often very successfully, without faith. It is more difficult to see how one could fail to be *interested* in the matter. Religious faith, in whatever form, always involves one fundamental assumption – namely, that there is a reality beyond the reality of ordinary, everyday life, and that this deeper reality is benign. Put differently, religious faith implies that there is a destiny beyond the death and destruction which, as we know, awaits not only ourselves but everyone and everything we care about in this world, the human race and the planet on which its history is played out, and (if modern physics is correct) the entire universe. One can reasonably say that one does not believe in such a transcendent destiny; it is less reasonable to say that one is not interested in it. Religion implies that reality ultimately makes sense in human terms. It is the most audacious thought that human beings have ever had. It may be an illusion; even so, it is a very *interesting* one.

Most of the time, in the course of ordinary living, we assume that reality is what it appears to be – the physical, psychological, and social structures that provide the parameters of our actions. The philosopher Alfred Schutz called this “the world-taken-for-granted.” There are exceptional individuals who question this taken-for-grantedness by way of intellectual reflection, individuals like Socrates or Einstein; they are quite rare. For most people ordinary reality is put in question by something that happens to interrupt the flow of ordinary living. Often what happens

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is something bad – illness, bereavement, loss of social status, or some other individual or collective calamity. But the taken-for-grantedness of everyday reality can also be put in question by some very good things: an intense aesthetic experience, or falling in love, or being awed by the birth of one's first child. Either way, suddenly, it becomes clear that there is more to reality than one had previously assumed. Minimally, this is what is meant by experiences of transcendence. Such experiences are not yet religious – atheists and agnostics too become ill, get to be parents, become intoxicated by music or by love. But one could call these experiences "pre-religious": By relativizing ordinary reality they open up the possibility of a reality – or, perhaps, of many realities – that are usually hidden. One takes the step from a pre-religious to a religious perception of transcendence when one believes that the reality that lies beyond ordinary experience means well by us. Again, one need not believe this. But it is certainly *interesting* to consider the possibility.

I used to know a psychoanalyst who was a very orthodox Freudian. We had a number of conversations about religion. He found it hard to understand that an intelligent person (he generously allowed that I was such a person) could be religious. He, so he said, had been a convinced atheist as far back as he could remember, and he was sure that religion was nothing but a comforting illusion. I asked him once whether he ever had any doubts about this conviction of his. He said no, he never had any doubts. Then he hesitated and said, actually yes: He had moments of doubt about his atheism every time he listened to the choral portion of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the chorale based on Schiller's "Ode to Joy." Thornton Wilder, in his novel *The Ides of March*, puts a similar thought into the mouth of Julius Caesar. Wilder's Caesar says that he never believed in the gods (he only performed the religious rituals demanded of a public official in Rome because he thought them to be politically useful). But Caesar too admitted to occasional doubts about his atheism. This happened in some moments in the midst of battle or of some important political actions when he had the feeling that a greater power was guiding him. It also happened during the so-called epileptic aura, the acute sense of ecstasy which typically occurs just before a grand-mal attack.

On the other hand, if one has faith, why should one ask questions about it?

There are people who have faith without feeling the need to reflect about it. Sometimes one refers to this kind of faith as "child-like," but it is not necessarily something that one should look down upon. These are often people who have grown up in a social environment in which their particular faith is taken for granted, or they have had a powerful experience

which confirmed their faith and which retains its power in their memory. Or perhaps the capacity for unquestioning faith is simply a part of a certain personality type; in religious terms one could then say that such faith is a gift. The value one ascribes to reflection will determine whether one envies such people or thinks that they are missing something important. Be this as it may, most human beings (and by no means only intellectuals) feel constrained to reflect about their experiences and beliefs, if only to relate different experiences and beliefs to each other in such a way that they make overall sense. If reflection becomes systematic, one can describe this activity as theorizing. Obviously any aspect of human experience and belief can become an object of reflection. Religion is no exception. The simplest definition of *theology* is to say that it is systematic reflection about faith.

The word "theology" comes out of Christian usage and people in other traditions (such as Judaism or the religions of India) do not like to use it (often because they associate it with an overly cerebral approach to religion or because they want to distance themselves from the repressive dogmatism which, unfortunately, has been a recurring habit among Christians). However, in the simple sense in which theology has just been defined it will necessarily occur in every religious tradition, from the most sophisticated to the most primitive. A Jew might not want to attach the label "theology" to the highly sophisticated theorizing permeating the Talmudic literature, but in the aforementioned sense it is a specific sort of theologizing that goes on there (even though, with its rootage in practical considerations of religious law, it is different in character from the evolution of Christian doctrine). The same goes for the monumental theoretical edifices constructed in the course of Hindu and Buddhist history. But even in so-called primal religions – that is, traditions without sacred texts or bodies of learned religious functionaries – some sort of theorizing goes on. Thus mythology – the stories about gods and other supernatural beings – is also a very distinctive type of theoretical reflection. In other words, theology occurs whenever there is a systematic attempt to reflect about faith. For anyone who identifies with a particular tradition this reflection will be some sort of dialogue between this tradition and the individual's experience of faith. Needless to say, the present book is just such an exercise.

Scholars will differ as to the date at which full-blown theological systems first appeared in the development of Christianity – certainly no later than the time when the early Church Fathers felt it necessary to spell out their beliefs in the confrontation with Hellenistic philosophy. But there is theology – or, more precisely, a number of theologies – already in the New Testament, and not only in the letters of the Apostle Paul and the Johannine texts. Even in the Synoptic Gospels, which tell

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the story of the life of Jesus, there are theological considerations that shape the telling of the story (for example, in relating events to prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures). Thus theology has been a very important feature of Christian history from the beginning. Over the centuries this process of reflection had to take account of different theoretical interlocutors: rabbinical authorities, Greek philosophers, teachers of Gnosticism and other esoteric doctrines, the powerful rival of Islamic thought, more recently the manifold theoretical expressions of modernity.

In a general way, therefore, doing theology today is not fundamentally different from what it was at any time since the early Christians had to make sense of the events around the life of Jesus. Nevertheless, there is something distinctive about the modern situation, and it is useful to recognize this: Modernity progressively undermines the social environments which support taken-for-grantedness, in religion as in everything else that people believe. This is not the place to elaborate on this important phenomenon, but the basic reason for it can be stated quite simply: People take their beliefs for granted to the extent that everyone around them does the same. Put differently, beliefs appear to be self-evident if there is a more or less unified social consensus about them. Modernity, through some of its most basic processes (such as mass migration, mass communication, urbanization), undermines this sort of consensus. The individual is increasingly confronted with many different beliefs, values, and lifestyles, and is therefore forced *to choose* between them. Choice requires at least rudimentary reflection. Religious choice, then, requires at least rudimentary theologizing.

To use a philosophical term, modernity *problematizes*. There is an old American joke (admittedly not a very good one) that nicely illustrates what is meant by this term. A soldier returns from the war. He used to be a great talker, but now he just sits and does not speak. His family is worried about him, and everything is done to make him comfortable. At the dinner table his mother gives him the food he likes best and, because she knows that he likes to put a lot of salt on his food, she places a large salt shaker next to his seat. One day she forgets, and the salt shaker is at the other end of the table. The soldier looks around, then says: "Will someone please pass the goddam salt shaker." Everyone is very happy – the returned warrior seems to have overcome the trauma that must have caused his long silence. The mother passes the salt shaker to him and says: "Son, I'm so happy that you are speaking to us again. Why didn't you speak before?" He answers: "There was no problem before."

A sociologist can say that modernity problematizes beliefs because of the high degree of *pluralism* it creates in the social environment of modern people: Where there is a plurality of beliefs, and where the individual is therefore compelled to make choices between them, a higher

degree of reflectiveness becomes unavoidable. This fact has far-reaching consequences in every area of human life. Among other things, it means that religious certainty is harder to come by. In a sense then, every reflective person, if concerned with religion at all, must become a sort of theologian. And this has yet another consequence: More than ever before, theology today should not be left to the professional theologians (even leaving aside the regrettable fact that very frequently the latter talk only to each other). Minimally, there should be a dialogue between professional theologians and others who lack such credentials. Obviously again, this book is an expression of this view.

But why should one have faith in the first place?

The verb "should" is often understood in a moral sense, as when one says, for example, that one should help people who are in trouble or that one should respect the dignity of every person. The same implication is often found in religious language: Thus one is told, in sermons or other religious pronouncements, that one *should* have faith, conversely that lack of faith (or unbelief) is a moral failure, a sin against God. This is not a very plausible proposition. If God exists, He has not made it very easy to believe in Him – the world is full of terrible things that, on the contrary, make it easy *not* to believe in Him (or at least not to believe that He is benign). What is more, assuming that God is as omniscient as He is supposed to be, He knows this, and therefore will not hold it against us if we do not manage to have faith. The verb "should" in the above question, then, is to be understood, not as a moral injunction, but simply as a request for an explanation: Are there good reasons to have faith?

There is a venerable tradition in Christian thought proposing proofs for the existence of God. The high point of this tradition can be found in medieval scholasticism, when Thomas Aquinas and other Christian philosophers put forth elegant, closely argued proofs of this kind. One can still learn from these arguments, but, at least since their critique by Immanuel Kant, it has become very difficult to accept them as the proofs they purport to be. But one does not have to be a student of Kant, or for that matter a philosopher of any persuasion, to realize that faith cannot be demonstrated like a mathematical theorem or even supported in probabilistic terms like a scientific hypothesis. If it could, it would not be faith: One believes that which one does not *know*. Unbelief is the unwillingness to step beyond what one knows with certainty or even with a reasonable degree of probability. This is not a moral failing; on the contrary, it may be a morally admirable attitude of intellectual integrity. By no means is it implied here that *faith* is a moral failing or a lack of intellectual integrity (as has been said by many critics of religion, who have

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seen it as a cowardly flight from the harsh realities of life, as in Marx's characterization of religion as an "opiate"). Still, one should be able to explain why one is willing to make that step into the unknown which constitutes the act of faith.

Of course, as has been suggested before, the question does not appear in its sharpest form as long as faith is taken for granted in the individual's social environment (although in all periods of history there have been breakdowns of taken-for-grantedness as a result of either individual or collective events). The question has become very sharp in modern times. Thus it makes sense that, close to the beginning of modern history, Pascal made his famous statement about faith as a wager. We cannot know whether faith is true or not, but it is reasonable to bet that it is: If it turns out to be true, we will be gloriously vindicated; if it turns out to be untrue, we will have lost nothing (indeed, we will not be around to draw a conclusion). This probably suggests an overly intellectual understanding of faith, as if it involved the verification of a hypothesis (actually, Pascal held a much more nuanced view). But the term "wager" is helpful. Faith is indeed a sort of wager. Put simply, when one decides to have faith, one bets on the ultimate goodness of the world; conversely, one bets that annihilation is not the ultimate fate of everything one holds dear in the world.

Luther used a play of words, in Latin, when he described faith (*fides*) as trust (*fiducia*). Luther, unlike Pascal, only stood on the threshold of a modern sense of reality, and the trust he had in mind was not so much in the existence of God (which, it seems, he never doubted) but in God's grace. But we can take on his wordplay in a sharper, more modern sense: Faith is trust in the goodness of the world. In our experience there are many indications that the world is a meaningless chamber of horrors and that all human aspirations will end in an abyss of nothingness. But there are also signals of another destiny, a destiny in which one could invest hope – in the wonders of the universe and in the magnificent possibilities of the human condition. I think that my Freudian friend had something like this in mind when he mentioned Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Let me put it this way: *Faith is to bet on the ultimate validity of joy.*

Probably the most cited Biblical passage dealing with faith is from the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews, which begins with the eloquent sentence: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." There then follows a long list of Biblical characters who acted out of faith, and the Christian community to which the letter is addressed is urged to follow their example. A little later in the chapter it is said that "whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him," yet for most if

not all the characters listed – such as Noah, Abraham, and Moses – the question was not whether God exists, but rather whether to have faith in what God told them to do. That is, God spoke to them, and their faith was a response to this divine address. With all due respect for this New Testament text, one must regretfully conclude that it is not terribly helpful to the contemporary individual who hovers between belief and unbelief (and, insofar as such individuals existed in earlier times, the text would not be very helpful to them either) – quite apart from the tension that exists between “faith” on the one hand and two other nouns in the text, namely “assurance” and “conviction”: If I’m convinced, why do I need to have faith? Perhaps the author of the text intended this tension, as expressing a central paradox of faith. But this paradox can only be appreciated from within the act of faith; it is not helpful to anyone who is still contemplating the act, who asks whether one should have faith in the first place.

But that is the question that is being discussed here. It is the question of all those who find themselves in a situation where God has *not* spoken – or, if it seems that He may have spoken, one cannot really be sure about this. Put differently, the problem for faith in this situation is the profound fact of *God’s silence*. I think that this silence ought to be taken with utmost seriousness, in which case the question of faith must be addressed in ways other than the one suggested by the aforementioned text.

There could be many starting points for what one might perhaps call an argument from silence. I choose a very modern author, Simone Weil (1909–43), the idiosyncratic French philosopher whom Leslie Fiedler, an American admirer of hers, aptly described as a “saint in an age of alienation”: “At a time like the present, incredulity may be equivalent to the dark night of Saint John of the Cross if the unbeliever loves God, if he is like the child who does not know whether there is bread anywhere, but who cries out because he is hungry” (Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 211f). And a little earlier she writes: “The danger is not lest the soul should doubt whether there is any bread, but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry. It can only persuade itself of this by lying, for the reality of its hunger is not a belief, it is a certainty.”

Perhaps only a French philosopher could have written these lines! What we have here is a sort of Cartesian reduction to certainty from within the situation of unbelief, which is the silence in which God has not spoken. Only after this reduction has taken place, Weil suggests, can a journey of faith begin. Let me quickly say that to accept Weil’s starting point need not imply agreement with her description of the rest of the journey (a point to be taken up presently). But the starting point is helpful, at least for those who also find themselves in an “age of alienation.”

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Looking at Simone Weil's biography, one can easily see why Leslie Fiedler described her as he did. Offspring of an agnostic Jewish bourgeois family, she finished secondary school at age fifteen, was a brilliant graduate of the elite *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, and became a teacher of philosophy. She reflected the *Zeitgeist* to the extent of rebelling against her bourgeois background and defining herself as some sort of socialist, but even in this rebellion she took the most radical path possible. To be in solidarity with the working class, she started work in a factory, something she was singularly unsuited for. She went to Spain to join the Republican army during the Civil War, but had barely arrived there when she fell into a boiling cooking pot and had to be sent back to France. When the Germans occupied the north of France she became a refugee in the south, and worked on the farm belonging to her protector, evincing similar ineptitude. It was during this period that she became converted to Catholicism, but she refused to be baptized – not because of any loyalty to Judaism (which she never understood or was interested in understanding), but because she was offended by the in-group coziness of the Catholic community and felt that she had to remain in solidarity with all the outsiders, particularly all those who could not believe. She subsequently escaped to England, where she had a job with the Free French government set up there. She put herself on a diet corresponding, she thought, to the food ration available in occupied France, an act which probably contributed to her final illness. She died at the age of 34.

Awkward, stubborn, in perennial poor health, Simone Weil appears to us as a Quixotic figure, in some ways a modern incarnation of a classical Christian type, that of the holy fool. Perhaps it is just for this reason that she is paradigmatic of a thoroughly modern mind confronting faith – that is, confronting the silence of God. As the title of one collection of her writings aptly summarizes it, her basic stance was one of “waiting for God” – as she put it in a Greek phrase, *en hypomene* – “in patience” (the Greek word is stronger). It is in this stance that she finally claimed to have attained a kind of certainty. In other words, she did not stop at the minimal certainty pointed to in what I have called her Cartesian reduction. It seems to me, though, that Weil's starting point is also helpful for those who cannot replicate her entire journey.

Weil reduces the question of God to the point where the only indication of His presence is my suffering from His absence. It is, as it were, a point of double silence: The silence of God who does not speak, and my own silence in the face of His. Language cannot express either silence; both silences are speechless. The reference to John of the Cross shows that Weil was well aware of the fact that she was placing herself in a long tradition of Christian spirituality, most of it mystical in character – the so-called apophatic tradition (literally, the speechless tradition), which in

turn is related to the mode of theologizing known as the *via negativa*. The key proposition here is that God cannot be apprehended through human language or conceptual thought.

At the beginnings of this tradition stands a rather mysterious figure, that of the so-called Pseudo-Dionysius, also known as Dionysius the Areopagite. An author writing in Greek, probably in Syria around the year 500 CE, he took on the name of an individual reported in the New Testament as having been converted by the Apostle Paul in Athens (a common practice in classical antiquity, not meant to deceive but to indicate an identification with a tradition). Despite the uncertainties of his historical location and the highly controversial character of his thought (he was clearly influenced by Neo-Platonism and his Christian orthodoxy has been quite suspect), Dionysius has had an immense influence over centuries of Christian history. The opening lines of his *Mystical Theology* give a good idea of why he has been called the father of the apophatic tradition:

For this I pray; and Timothy, my friend, my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. (Colm Luibheid, trans., *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 135)

Compare this with a text almost a millennium later, from the fourteenth-century anonymous Middle English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

Though we cannot know him we can love him. By love he may be touched and embraced, never by thought . . . Let your loving desire, gracious and devout, step bravely and joyfully beyond it and reach out to pierce the darkness above. Yes, beat upon that thick *cloud of unknowing* with the dart of your loving desire and do not cease come what may. (William Johnston, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 54f)

John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic whom Weil refers to, stands in the same tradition with his famous metaphor of the "dark night of the soul." And indeed the same themes can be found in mystical traditions outside Christianity. There is the near-universal proposition that ultimate reality cannot be grasped by language or in concepts. The Upanishads (arguably the most splendid texts of classical Hinduism) expressed this in the formula *neti, neti* – "not this, not this" (that is, the ultimate reality is not this, nor that), and the same idea probably reached its most sophisticated expression in the Madhyamika philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism. Equally widespread is the proposition that the

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mystical journey begins in a darkness in which all being, including the being of the self, is abandoned. It finds different formulations in Jewish and Muslim mysticism, as well as in the great mystical schools of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. But if the journey begins in silent darkness, it also ends in another kind of speechlessness, when the self has attained union with the ultimate. Speech, language, and conceptual thought are, so to speak, intermediate stations on the journey between God's absence and His overpowering presence. I think it is correct to place Simone Weil, despite her Catholic beliefs, into this context of trans-cultural mysticism.

I have several difficulties with this. First of all, given the consensus on these themes in what may be called a mystical internationale, what remains here of the distinctive Biblical God? It is no wonder that so many of the great mystics in the monotheistic traditions – Judaism and Islam as well as Christianity – were tottering on the outer boundaries of these traditions (to the recurring dismay of the guardians of orthodoxy). More important, this mystical journey may begin in uncertainty, but it ends in certainty: But what if the uncertainty persists? And equally important, a crucial part of the journey is the abandonment of self: But what if one refuses to abandon it? The discovery of the autonomous self (which is synonymous with the discovery of freedom) is arguably the greatest achievement of Western civilization, from its twin roots in ancient Israel and ancient Greece. Is that discovery to be reclassified as a gigantic mistake? But if the human self is the most precious reality in the world, is the ultimate reality to be understood as somehow less than that? If there is any claim to moral achievement in Western history, it is in the recognition of the infinite value of every human being: Can I conceive of a God who negates this value? I think not.

For these reasons, then, I would rather not follow Weil to the endpoint of her thinking. I prefer to stay, at least for now, at the point to which she came with her aforementioned reduction, and to ask how one can proceed from there without embarking on the great mystical journey. I will use the first person singular – not with any autobiographical or confessional intent, but in order to make the account graphically clear.

I confront God's silence, I am determined to *bear* that silence, I refrain from trying to deny its reality by prematurely speaking into it. I too remain silent, and I wait – *en hypomene*. At the same time, I acknowledge that I find God's silence intolerable, even offensive. I refuse to deny *either* God's silence or my hunger for the silence to be broken. And then I find myself compelled to address – to speak into – that silence nevertheless. This, I suppose, could be called the primeval form of prayer – addressing the silent God, from whose absence I suffer. I'm not sure of the chronology of these two postures – the posture of my being silent and the posture

of breaking my silence; perhaps this is a sequence that repeats itself, or perhaps, paradoxically, the two postures are simultaneous.

And then I can begin to reflect, and I decide to reflect by looking at human reality without, for the moment, making any religious assumptions – that is, I will reflect *etsi Deus non daretur*, “as if God were not given.” I then find that prayer, in one form or another, is a universal human phenomenon. Possibly the most comprehensive study of prayer is the great work with that title by Friedrich Heiler (*Das Gebet*). One can read it with a mounting sense of depression. Over the ages human beings have spoken into the silence – in simple words, in elaborate ceremonies, chanting, singing, dancing, offering sacrifices, beating drums, and playing on every sort of musical instrument – an endless cacophony of yearning sound. Could it be that there never was an answer? Weil is right: There is no way of denying the hunger. Could it be that this hunger is all there is?

Weil and all the mystics agree that one can proceed from such uncertain prayer to a blissful sense of certainty. Let it be stipulated that this progression has been plausible to some individuals (perhaps those whom Max Weber called the “religious virtuosi”). Most human beings have not been so lucky, and, within the present argument, I must place myself in that underprivileged company. Perhaps, at some point in my life, I too might attain certainty. In the meantime, if I am honest, I must acknowledge my uncertainty. I must cultivate what perhaps might be called an “interim spirituality.” This further implies that I must reject the various alleged certainties that are on offer in my social situation, although, because of my hunger, they are very tempting.

In the situation in which we find ourselves in the modern world there is a multitude of such offers, not all of them religious. In the Christian context, there are three principal offers of certainty – by way of the institutional Church, of the Bible, and of spiritual experience. I am promised certainty if I throw myself into the welcoming arms of the Church. In principle, this could be any church, though it is the Roman Catholic Church that makes this offer in the most magnificent manner: The infallible Church provides me with an invulnerable certainty. Most Protestants do not think of their churches in this way. The great Protestant offer of certainty is by way of an inerrant Bible: If I cling to the text, my own spirituality can attain a sort of inerrancy. And cutting across all confessional boundaries is the offer of certainty by means of an inner experience – from the great ecstasies of the mystics to the conversion experiences of “born again” Protestantism (one may think here of the rich hymnody of the Methodist tradition and of American revivalism – “I know that my redeemer liveth”) to the ecstasies of Pentecostalism, which is arguably the most dynamic religious movement in the world

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today. It seems to me that each of these alleged “methods” toward certainty, while they could always be questioned, have been particularly put in question by modern critical thought – the Church by both history and the social sciences, the Bible by modern critical scholarship, and subjective ecstasies of all kinds by the findings of psychology: The Church is demonstrably fallible, the Bible is full of errors, and my ecstasies are highly vulnerable to psychological inquiry. If I am to have faith, that faith must not be based on what, if I am honest, I am constrained to call false or at least doubtful certainties. I think that this proposition touches on the deepest level of what the Reformers meant by saying that we are saved by faith alone – *sola fide*. Be this as it may, as I contemplate the act of faith, I do so while I still wait for God to break His silence.

However, even if God has not spoken to me in the way in which, supposedly, he spoke to Abraham or Moses, I can find in human reality certain intimations of his speech, signals (unclear though they are) of His hidden presence. These signals are not “proofs,” but they are indications that, *if* I have faith, I can relate that faith to a number of powerful human realities. I have previously mentioned the experience of joy – that joy, mightily expressed in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, which seeks eternity. There are other signals – the human propensity to order, which appears to correlate with an order in the universe beyond humankind (a man locked up in an attic can do mathematics and, as he looks out from his attic, he finds that the universe is mathematically ordered), the immensely suggestive experiences of play and humor (especially the experience of the comic as a metaphor of redemption), the irrepressible human propensity to hope (which implies a rejection of the finality of death), the certainty of some moral judgments (which imply a moral order beyond the relativities of human history), and, last but not least, the experiences of beauty (I would propose that the landscape of, say, Lake Como is an argument for the existence of God). I have long argued that one could construct an “inductive theology” that would begin with an analysis of these “signals of transcendence” (which could also be called glimpses of the presence of God in human reality). But that is another story.

These considerations do not lead to the temple of faith in a direct, incontrovertible manner. But they place me in a sort of antechamber of that temple. It is in that antechamber that I confront the traditions that claim to be revelatory of God, including that tradition that spans Sinai and Calvary. Augustine had an interesting formulation in this connection: *Nullus quippe credit aliquid, nisi prius cogitaverit esse credendum* – “no one indeed believes anything, unless he previously knew it to be believable.” In other words, there is a movement from the *credendum* to a *credo* – reflection as an antecedent of the act of faith. Barring direct experi-

ences such as the mystics rightly or wrongly claim, this *credo* comes out of my response to a particular story that is communicated to me by other human beings, some living, some long dead. The story comes to me as a sort of rumor of God. I hear the story and, in an act of faith, I respond to it by saying "yes!"

As far as Christian faith is concerned, this story comes to me through the tradition that begins in ancient Israel, a tradition I may encounter by reading the relevant texts or by hearing it through the spoken words of preachers or other interlocutors. I will say "yes!" to it insofar as it connects with the rest of my experience of reality, though that connection will never be beyond any possible doubt. Eric Voegelin, in *Order and History*, his work on the philosophy of history, made the rather strange statement that Israel discovered God. Looked at in empirical terms, that is a startling but accurate statement. In the perspective of faith, however, it is evident that this discovery could not have occurred unless God had allowed Himself to be so discovered. This implies that God chose to reveal Himself, not everywhere, but in particular places and at particular times. One can then say, however hesitantly, that God's silence has not been absolute.