

The Q	Assertion	Experiencing It	Avoiding It	Accepting It
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A Contemplation

Just who do you think you are?
So you think you're a somebody?
You are.
There's nobody like you.
Nobody knows anything of what you know—
 days at 8 when you were doctor,
 at 12 when Chris Murphy shone beside you
 in the school play like pure bright grace,
 at 18 when you began trying to stay
 18 for 20 years,
 at 21 or 28 when from you there
 sprouted new me's,
 at 55 when, an orphan displaced,
 you wandered out to foreign places
 looking for your question--
 the shining gem.
You are all wonderment.
It will take you from you,
should you surrender.
And you do.

The Question

Do you suffer the question of God?¹

By *the question of God* I do not mean not any particular question but rather an abiding wonderment about God that usually shows in many different kinds of questions. What follows are some of those questions.

Does the word "God" suggest to you something more than a belief held by certain religious types of people that you can take or leave? Is it more

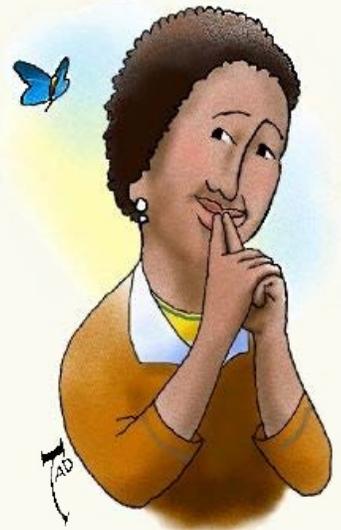
than a philosophical puzzle to you? Does a sense of God enter into how you live, how you nourish your friendships, how you spend leisure time, how you love, while at the same time leaving you unsure of yourself and perplexed about the world?

Or, if the word "God" drags in too much heavy baggage for you, consider these questions: After sizing up a situation in order to make a decision, do you sometimes experience a sort of inner revelation that is both contrary to what seems logical yet clearer about what you should do? Or after being warned not to confide in a certain woman, have you ever experienced a clear and strong inspiration to confide in her? Have you ever discovered in yourself a surprising fortitude when the odds against you seem overwhelming? Have you ever found yourself being drawn by love into commitments that you could never explain to anyone else? Despite what you think about the job of living well, do you actually let being in love take you to places you'd rather not go, yet feel a deep hope that it's at these places that you will find your deepest joy and peace?

If not, if questions like these do not ring true for you, then consider that our culture may have effectively prevented you from facing issues that billions of good women and men throughout history regard as central to the deepest desires of the human heart.

To explain what I mean, I will begin with a bold assertion, namely, that the question of God cannot be avoided by a fully authentic person. I'm not speaking of any particular belief about God, but only the prior *questions* connected to anyone's belief about God. Nor am I speaking of *the word* "God." I want to avoid any associations that spring to mind when reading "God" as far as possible (though this is not completely possible). Nor am I speaking of any one clearly-formulated question about the supernatural, such as the question whether or not God exists.

Rather, I'm speaking of what comes before our questions and leads up to them. I'm speaking of the experiences of wonderment about the simple fact that we exist and didn't have to exist; wonderment about the simple fact that we are always making efforts, not any particular effort but that we cannot help but keep on trying something or other; wonderment about the simple fact that everybody is like this—made for something, headed somewhere, but not knowing for what or toward what; wonderment about the simple fact that we die with only childhood images of our destiny.



Next I will describe several of the ways in which these wonderments appear first as *symbolic* of something beyond, or above, or within: hunches about something higher than our nature, something supernatural. By *symbolic* I do not mean intellectual activity; I mean a presence in consciousness of images laced with feelings.² In short, you too may have experienced supernatural wonderments that affect your imagination and feelings without necessarily elevating them the level of clearly-formulated intellectual questions.

One impediment to the emergence of actual questions lies in the onslaughts of cultural forces that distract and inhibit. So I will point out several ways our culture blocks these questions. After all, cultural pressure may well be the reason why perhaps you, and certainly many others, have yet to deal with them. I will conclude with some observations on how anyone who agrees with our assertion, that to be authentic means letting ordinary wonderments blossom as questions about God, can actually let the questions blossom.

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Assertion

The question of God cannot be avoided by a fully authentic person.

To understand this assertion, I should explain what I mean by *question* and by *authentic*.

Question

A question is an expression of wonder. Something attracts us, bothers us, intrigues us, or scares us. Our wonder is not yet a question. But as symbolic—an image laced with feelings—it moves us toward a question. We may formulate our question with words like *what, where, when, who, why, how, what for, truly, really, should I, should we, with whom, and for whom*. Indeed, we often grope for the right words to formulate what bothers us. To test the adequacy of our formulations, we always consult our prior experience of wonder—being attracted, bothered, intrigued, or scared. Our own wonder is the test whether our formulation of a question hits the nail on the head.

The event of wonder and its expression in a question are spiritual events. By "spiritual," I do not mean experiences that only holy people have. Nor by "wonder" and "question" do I mean events that can be explained by a chemical analysis of the brain. The brain is physical; the mind is spiritual. Our brains reside between our ears while our minds dwell on understanding and knowledge, which are entirely non-material.³ All

learning is a matter of asking and answering questions with our minds, not pouring information into a brain.

Authentic

To be authentic is to be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love. These are all spiritual events. Moreover, these five events occur quite naturally in us as we grow up. They each take us beyond ourselves, as it were. They open us up to horizons of possibilities, order, truth, goodness, and love, respectively. It may be difficult to explain just how these movements of our spirituality occur, but they are easily noticed. Indeed, human consciousness itself is a moving polyphony of these five kinds of events. When none occur, we are literally unconscious.

We fail in authenticity insofar as we avoid any of these five kinds of spiritual events—respectively: being oblivious, stupid, myth-minded, irresponsible, or self-absorbed. We are wounded in spirit.

So our assertion means that the question of God is taken seriously by anyone who values being attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love—that is, being authentic. Concretely, the effort to put the question of God into words requires both a personal effort to be authentic and the cultural circumstances that support the effort.

People can avoid the question, but only by dodging their natural wonderments about the source of their own desires and of the chronic disasters of history.

People may be poignantly conscious of the question yet assume that because no one can be sure about any answer they settle for living their lives according to the wits and will they happen to have.

People can be burned by their religion. Or disenchanted. They see nothing but trouble and myth there. Fair enough. But the source of this problem lies in fallible humans. Religious leaders are not immune from temptation. They also may lack the education that gives them perspectives on faith that not only align with the faith of the founding communities but also take into account historical developments in science, scholarship, and cultural upheavals.

People may be impeded in their efforts to be fully authentic by unavoidable cultural circumstances. Atheistic or materialistic cultures suppress the question among great masses of people. Unauthentic parents give little guidance to their children about the inner work of being fully authentic, leaving them with only a faint awareness of things that bother their self-awareness and about how best to live.

Experiencing the Question

Even though we assert that the question of God cannot be avoided by anyone being fully authentic, there is no single best way to formulate the question. This is because it originates at the level of everyone's unformulated but symbol-borne wonder about what is absolutely ultimate. Our formulated questions can never express the entire content of our wonder. Our wonder can rise to the level of expressed questions along at least five quite different branches.

We can wonder (1) about the way history determines our possibilities while we, in turn, make history by our choices; (2) about the human *nature* we share with everyone else; (3) about the meaning of our *personal* existence; (4) about the role of *the arts* in our lives; and (5) about how to live out a *religious commitment*. If we look more closely at each of these five branches, we will more clearly see the different sorts of questions about God. Again, keep in mind that by "God" I am only using a familiar term which, in fact, has been distorted in every conceivable way. The very reason I want to focus on the questions, and not on popular images or various religious teachings, is to help us find meaning for ourselves in this otherwise amorphous word, "God."

1. Our Historicity

We are historical beings. Almost everything we know and cherish is an inheritance. Sadly, our inheritance is not pure wealth. We can hardly help but wonder about the fact that our history is laced with both evil and good. There is hatred, greed, and pride; and there is love, generosity, and self-honesty. Our awareness becomes acute when we realize that it is this ragged history that imposes on us all sorts of assumptions about how to live, and that most people, ourselves included, have little more than vague inklings whether certain inherited assumptions actually bias us toward evil.

This condition seems permanent. Children are necessarily self-absorbed; they cry when they feel sick or threatened. Teens are necessarily group-absorbed, as they venture forth from the family to form bonds of their choosing. The young in general must be pressured to study hard because they are little aware yet of how important deep analyses and understanding of history are to living a well-rounded life in society. A significant percent of all adults have yet to gain mastery over their psyches. Likewise, a significant percent have yet to even allow into mind questions whether they are meant by a Creator and are beckoned to yield

to the Creator's love-driven efforts to lead them into the wide-open field of universal love.

So history itself leads us to wonder: Are we fated to just do our best, without much hope that hatred, greed, and pride can be gradually reduced? Is it unreasonable to believe that love, generosity, and self-honesty might actually emerge as solid foundations for human community? Are we forced to get along without any help from a power higher than human? To put it bluntly, is the human race self-sufficient? Or is there readily available a vision and a power beyond humanity to overcome these wounds in our history? Are people's doubts about God, mine included, to be resolved by mistrust? Or by trust?

2. Our Nature

We can also wonder about the fact that our desires to be authentic seem completely natural. I'm thinking of the spontaneous impulses we all have to notice events (being attentive), to make sense of what we notice (being intelligent), to distinguish between what is true and what is just wishful thinking (being reasonable), to do what seems objectively better (being responsible), and to bond with others (being in love). Just because we don't follow these impulses perfectly doesn't mean we don't experience them. The effort to follow them is exactly what it means to pursue authenticity for ourselves. Moreover, when we reflect on how each impulse arises naturally in us, we can notice that the question of God can arise out of each impulse as well.

Our impulse to *be attentive* is driven by a natural capacity to envision *possibilities*. Experiences can alarm us; they can also invite us toward exploration. It is an awareness—practically a thirst—that some kind of meaning or value is possible in our circumstances. We see this whenever we are captured by the beautiful. Beauty is the allure of the possible. We are "arrested" by the smell of a rose, the sound of a clarinet, the sight of a thundercloud. Artists, the good ones, aim to cause in us, the same arresting event they first experienced, whether in the tangible world around them or in their imagination. They hope to lift our wonder *beyond* the physical, sensory dimensions of their artistic creations to some *possibility* that is simultaneously hidden yet inviting to the spirit. Beauty ignites our wonder, which we may express in a question such as, "Is our desire for the ultimately beautiful doomed to be forever frustrated or might it be completely fulfilled?"

Our impulse to *be intelligent* depends on an assumption that the universe is *intelligible*. Notice the difference: *Intelligence* is a property of a knower, and *intelligible* is a property of what is known. Scientists are intelligently committed to discovering the

intelligibility in things. If certain data do not fit a law of physics, physicists don't dismiss them as having no explanation: they seek a more comprehensive explanation. People everywhere seek explanations. We assume that the workings of things can be understood. We expect the universe to be intelligible despite the fact that our intelligence can make only tentative and revisable advances toward fully adequate explanations. Furthermore, our intelligence not only discovers intelligibility in the things and events of the universe; it also puts it there. When we plant gardens, draw up budgets, design posters, organize groups, and so on, we depend on our intelligence to put an intelligible order into the otherwise unrelated materials we're assembling. This raises the question of a divine creator. The universe itself is intelligible. So we naturally wonder whether the intelligibility of the universe springs from an intelligence. (By the way, the "proof" of God's existence by the "Argument from Intelligent Design" does not change minds. But the Argument does justify the question.)

Our impulse to *be reasonable* depends on an assumption that nothing in our ordinary experience had to be; everything is conditioned by something else. But here we are. A universe. Did the Big Bang "just happen" or did it happen because of something else? Even if physicists discover that something else led to the Big Bang, we'd still ask why that something else exists. Eventually we can wonder whether everything "just happened" or else depends on some awesome reality which depends on nothing for its own existence, something absolutely independent, something that is not created by anything but that independently created this universe as a totally dependent reality.

Our impulse to *be responsible* makes us consider whether our actions are worthwhile. But does *worthwhile* mean just personal preference or perhaps a personally beneficial outcome? Or is there an objective meaning to "worthwhile" that our preferences do not necessarily recognize and are not justified solely by outcomes beneficial to us? There is plenty of evidence that we naturally assume the existence of an objective moral order, an order we did not invent—indeed, an order that sometimes contradicts our personal preference and often requires sacrificing personal payoff for the sake of a larger good. We praise goodness and condemn evil. We seek to be truly better persons and to save our children from corruption. So we can wonder about morality itself: Does human concern about the truly better and worse have a source beyond us that is profoundly moral by nature? Is the goodness of noble women and men completely reducible to the fact that we

humans admire them? Or do we admire them because there is a supra-human, conscientious source of an objective moral order that is the stirring source not only of their nobility but also our admiration?

Our impulse to *be in love* leads us to realize that love makes us who we are—both the love we receive and the love we give. When, say, a woman's beloved husband dies, it's no surprise to hear her say that her love for him has not died. But it is a cause of wonder if she were to add, "and his love for me has not died either." Not that love is easy. Yet our very efforts to stay in love are solid evidence of a wonder whether our desire to stay in love is profoundly trustworthy and will somehow remain no matter what end lies in store for each of us and our planet as well. We can legitimately wonder whether our love is perhaps itself a gift of a divine lover, and a gift that will bring us to a being in love beyond our wildest dreams, both through and beyond our deaths. We can consider the awesome, unimaginable possibility that this gift—our being in love—is God in person dwelling as love in our hearts. I say *unimaginable* because the reality is beyond all human description and comprehension. But it is not beyond our human capacity to say true or false, yes or no. It may simply be true that it is God as love who dwells in us as the love with which we love. Our love of self, family, friends, and all neighbors may in plain fact be an act of God with us, in us, and through us.

3. Our Personal Concerns

We also wonder about our personal existence. This can happen in many ways:

Is life obvious to you or deeply mysterious?

Are you aware of a kind of constant suffering, as if looking for something you lack or lost but don't know what?

Do you wonder whether you are here just by chance?

Are you an accidental quirk of biology or are you meant?

Is a *person* an obvious thing or something deeply mysterious?

Do you recall, as a teenager, acting as though it really made no difference what you did, but now, as an adult, there actually is an objective and irrevocable difference in everything you do?

Do you not only remember a deceased loved one but still feel a living connection to him or her?

Since all memory of any one of us will vanish from the earth, in what sense do your accomplishments mean something?

Since some energy in our souls/spirits fuels all our efforts, do you trust this mysterious core of your being?

Is there something permanent about you?

Is death the worst thing that can happen to you?

Do you experience an unexplainable joy in helping others?

Do you know where you are going?

We could express these questions in words like *purpose*, *meaning*, and *destiny*. But these are concepts. They "abstract" from vivid experience in a way that can muffle our wonder. To let our wonder emerge, and to live in acute awareness of the question despite the absence of clear answers is to accept the question of God.

4. The Arts

By "the arts" I mean any aesthetic expression—such as music, painting, poetry, architecture, dance, and drama. I also mean the everyday art of living by which each person decides what to wear, straightens the living room, speaks in engaging tones, walks with a dignified gait, and frequently checks the face in the mirror.

Artworks can lift our spirits. They can reveal a certain "plus" in things that science cannot explain. We let an artwork engage us because we expect that "there's more to this than meets the eye." These kinds of arts draw us out of our everyday concerns about things that need fixing, family issues, job concerns, and money. Instead they express and evoke feelings that draw us toward what is nobler and away from what is degrading.

Here's a poem that may help you experience this draw in yourself:

Like pond-bound fish under global vaults of air,
Speckled by beams from up beyond our sight,
Whence luster menaces yet entices,
What shall we make of the light?

Don't rush now. Let the images and words sink in.

If you rushed, you ignored a deep part of yourself.

Moreover, the arts have an intimate connection to being authentic persons. We noted how being authentic plays out at five distinct levels of self-transcendence: being attentive, intelligent, reasonable, responsible, and in love. Beauty energizes our self-transcendence up through all five levels by:

The allure of the possible	<i>Being attentive</i>
The harmony of the ordered	<i>Being intelligent</i>
The exquisite uniqueness of an event, a person, a community	<i>Being reasonable</i>
The splendor of goodness	<i>Being responsible</i>
And the liberating invitation to lead our lives by love.	<i>Being in love</i>

The point to notice here is that we humans resonate with the arts because we experience our own desire as a kind of invitation to see the world as far bigger and far more mysterious than our concepts could ever capture. There's more to *everything* than meets the eye.

So we may ask, What sort of "beyond" is inviting us to itself?

5. Our Religious Concerns

If you consider yourself religious, or even "spiritual but not religious," what sort of things do you wonder about?

Does it bother you that many people have no idea of how to talk about the really most important questions?

Are you disappointed in the way religion helps you live authentically?

Is this inner restlessness in you a desire to be holy?

Are you afraid of wanting to be holy?

Is the Creator of everything now, as always, coming to you in person?

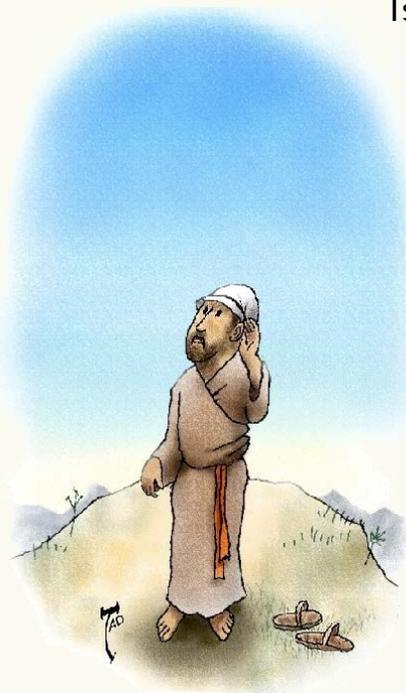
Does the loving Source of yourself seek to come in person to everyone?

Does this "God" come to us *as far as divinely possible*?

If you honor the precept, "Love your neighbor as yourself," might God love you as he loves his own self?

Is your own fulfillment a matter of letting God in you—God as love— love your neighbor *as far as humanly possible*?

Is it reasonable to seek a religion to share your love and beliefs with others?



Yes or No

There are two kinds of people who answer No to at least some of these questions. There are the *firm atheists*. By these I include not only *anti*-atheists who fight to eliminate religious belief everywhere but also the *a*-atheists for whom the secular world is all that concerns them. Then there are the *firm theists*. By these I include religious believers who feel so deeply confident that religion has given them the answers that they lose touch with the questions; their preaching is usually fruitless because hearers don't recognize the questions they face experience. Both the firm atheists and the firm theists avoid the question of God.

Those who answer Yes to some of these questions might still answer No to others. But to answer Yes to even one of these questions opens the heart to a horizon that is both alluring and frightening. What if the answer is Yes to them all? What if our human instincts to be authentic lead to a loving commitment to welcome an ultimate love from beyond life as we know it? What if that love in us threatens to lead us beyond our lives as we know them up along a path toward a life fully engaged yet frighteningly uncontrollable? What if our struggles to live out our faith are not evidence that we lack faith but of an authentic, divinely struggling love in our hearts? What to live without these concerns is to live in an illusion? What if to live with them is to live in reality?

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Avoiding the Question

Besides this inner work of letting the full question of God come to light, there is an outer work of overcoming cultural pressures to avoid the question. Today, these pressures include a suspicion of religion, a rampant materialism, and an ethical relativism.

1. Suspicion of Religion

Religion simply has a bad reputation—not without reason. History shows that people often justify war and oppression by appeals to religion. In our own day, the veil of secrecy has been lifted on religious leaders guilty of pedophilia or embezzlement.

Also, not all governments provide public funds for religious teaching. Canada and Ireland do, but Russia and the United States do not. Youngsters in Russia and the United States who are not members of a worshipping community (or are members of a worshipping community that forbids questions) are less likely to let their wonder about the mystery of life rise to the level of questions about God. The reason is

simple: They seldom hear anyone talk about the mystery of life, of death, of love, of ultimate destiny. Or, if they do, they are taught that certain religious facts are so true as to need no wonder about their significance. There's no awe.

2. Materialism

All through history, religion has opposed the assumption that material reality is the only reality. For some, this assumption is a matter of principle—a clear-headed philosophical belief that there is no such thing as spiritual reality; with the philosopher Thomas Hobbes (d. 1679), they believe that everything is just "matter in motion." For others, the assumption may be embedded in commonsense assumptions such as that material goods bring happiness, that an economy is essentially about the production and maintenance of goods, and that the practical demands of ordinary life leave little time to deal things of the spirit.

Modern science tends to support this attitude. It is based on the principle that by exploring observable data, we can discover laws and probabilities that explain things about the world that prior to the 16th century had been considered as hidden in the mind of God and unknowable. Yet even people who understand scientific explanations are prone to assume that scientific knowledge is the *only* valid knowledge. They can assume that to know that something exists, we need physical evidence that can be measured. We see this among those physicists who are working on a "Theory of Everything." What they mean by a "thing" is restricted to what can be known either directly by observation or indirectly by observing changes in movement, temperature, mass, or position that support conclusions like, "There must be a planet circling that star" or "We will understand everything if we can just find the Higgs boson." So there's a pressure that if we want to know anything about God, including God's very existence, we need to *see* a vision, *hear* a message, *feel* a miraculous healing, or detect a subatomic "God" particle by *peering* through a microscope. And yet most intelligent adults suspect reports of visions, divine messages, miracles, and teensy grains of godness. In the absence of such evidence, many quietly decide that looking for God is fruitless.

3. Secularism

By *secularism*, I mean the bias against allowing questions of religion into mind. Like the biases of neurotic obsession, egotism, groupism, and commonsensism, secularism is a bias against a certain class of questions. Here, the questions regard not simply "God" but also questions about where we came from, why we are here, how capable we are to ensure the well-being of our race, whether our irrepressible hopes are not futile, and all the other questions we have considered in this lecture. In *A Secular*

Age, 4 Charles Taylor explains how this bias began to spread over Western civilization in the 1500s and continues today.

4. Ethical Relativism

Ethical relativism may, as a matter of principle, explicitly deny the very possibility of universal moral norms. We see it in people who claim that each culture's beliefs or value system are "right" within that culture, and that it is impossible to validly judge another culture's values externally or objectively. As such, there are no absolute moral norms, no "right/wrong" that applies to all cultures. Supporters of a "postmodern" ethics tend to reject universal norms on principle.

Ethical relativism can also show as an unexamined assumption that a culture's morality must be accepted as a fact rather than scrutinized as a problem. We see this in studies on the sociological and psychological dimensions of a culture's moral standards. Morality is presented as a cultural phenomenon without any further critique of that culture's morality. These kinds of behavioral studies have validity in themselves, but when students are exposed exclusively to socio-historical studies of phenomena, the importance of making their own judgments about what is better and worse in a culture tend to fade.

Ethical relativism, of course, denies or ignores even the question of whether there is a personal, divine source and destiny of everything. That would involve admitting that universal moral norms may exist in a universal creator who is the source of all goodness.

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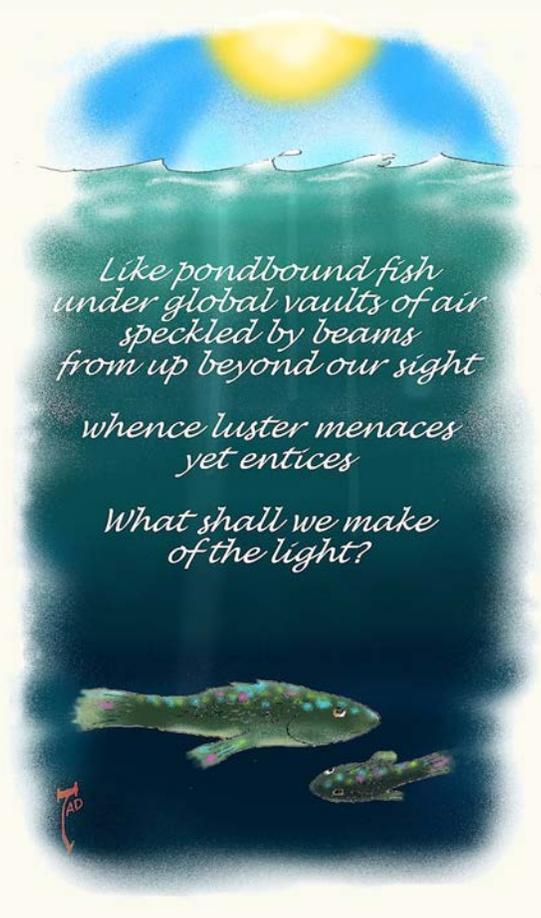
Accepting the Question

To "accept the question of God" is a matter of taking one's wonder seriously. It does not mean accepting any particular formulation of the question. Still less does it mean any particular answer about "God." What it does mean is getting used to living in wonder, becoming familiar with being disturbed, accepting an awareness of the unknown in our bodies, minds and hearts, and noticing the symbols of transcendence in our consciousness. These symbols in consciousness stir our imagination and feelings. They move us toward what is beyond our simple nature. Negatively, this requires acting against the impulses to wallow in fantasy. Positively, it requires standing strong in wonder. It also requires withholding commitment to any answers that promise mental security only by eliminating the very wonder that produced the questions that produced the answers. It means living between ignorance and certitude. It means living as never complete. It means living in hope.

Specifically, this means recognizing that while religious people can be weak and sinful, they can also be noble and strong. It means recognizing that for anything to *be*, it doesn't have to be *somewhere*. (Where is your love?)

Practically speaking, because wonder is borne by symbols in our consciousness, one powerful means to keep wonder alive is through the arts. By images we envision the unknown realms, and by feelings we desire to enter them. We sustain our ultimate hopes through the familiar media of painting, music, sculpture, dance, poetry, and drama; we also tap into our wonder when certain architecture, gardens, and wild places lift our spirits to levels that we cannot explain in words. This is why almost all religions rely on images, music, ritual movement, and architecture, as well as on the fellow feeling of worshipping together, to tap the deeply planted desires within that invite all comers to an encroaching, welcoming beyond.

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- 1** The focus on the question of God comes from the work of Bernard Lonergan. See his *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), pp. 101-03, 116, 342.
- 2** This definition of symbol as essentially a presence in consciousness also comes from Bernard Lonergan. See *Method in Theology*, 64-70.
- 3** A chemist who assumes she's using her brain to understand a chemical reaction might wonder whether there's something more than just chemical reactions in her brain doing the understanding.
- 4** Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).