The Natural Phenomenon of Religious Faith and Human 'Depth of Meaning' Engagement: Paul Tillich’s Faith Dynamics Recast in terms of a 'Non-Reductive' Contemporary Critical Theory of Religion

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Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................. 1

Chapter One: Conceptual Framework and Methodological Considerations ............... 5

Chapter Two: Tillich’s Dynamic, Non-Reductive, All-Encompassing Faith ................. 14
  a. Tillich on the Nature and Dynamics of Faith .................................. 18
  b. Situating Tillich’s Understanding of Faith in Terms of His System ........... 22

Chapter Three: A Critical Integrative Analysis of Religious Faith in Terms of a
Contemporary Critical Theory of Religion ......................................... 29
  a. Georges Bataille and the Reduction of the Infinite ............................... 35
  c. Pascal Boyer and the Aggregate Relevance of Cognitive Inference Systems . 49

Chapter Four: Recasting Tillich’s Understanding of Faith .................................. 63

Conclusion: Test Case, Summary and Implications ...................................... 70

Bibliography ................................................................. 77
Abstract

This thesis explores religious faith from an integrated interdisciplinary standpoint that draws heavily on Georges Bataille’s religious theory, Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical framework (as distilled through the lens of Slavoj Žižek), and Pascal Boyer’s evolutionary model of cognitive inference systems, in order to recast Paul Tillich’s faith dynamics in terms of a contemporary critical theory of religion. Focusing on Tillich’s understanding of faith as engaging with a depth of meaning, a hypothesis is presented that casts religious faith as a complex natural human phenomenon that functions as a species of generative human ‘depth of meaning’ engagement within particular hermeneutical frameworks with a focus on the ‘Other’ (transcendence / the infinite) that were born from the communal symbolic-linguistic system of meaning making that arose with human evolutionary development as a by-product of several cognitive inference systems and as a result of a lost intimacy with immanence. This hypothesis is explicated throughout the thesis in defence of a non-religious analysis of religious faith which is non-reductive and which avoids caricature. Tillich’s understanding of faith as the central phenomenon in the personal life of human beings is recast as one form of human ‘depth of meaning’ engagement, with religious faith understood as providing a mechanism for accepting a certain intra-systematic coherence and a volitional (trust) commitment to an intra-systematic being (God) or principle deemed extra-systematic but inscribed within the particular symbolic universe in which the interpretive framework operates. The historical dialectical hypothesis developed throughout the thesis is tested against contemporary manifestations of religious faith, particularly of a violent geo-political nature, and various implications are drawn out that demonstrate the fecundity and importance of the hypothesis, particularly in terms of a point of departure for further research.
INTRODUCTION

One of the most pressing needs of our time is a critical, dynamic and non-reductive understanding of religion and the faith that animates religious believers throughout the world. Given the contemporary geo-political ascendency of religion, particularly in militant and fundamentalist monotheistic forms, such analysis is more than an academic or theoretical concern. The ‘return of religion,’ as some theorists describe the contemporary situation, requires sustained and rigorous analysis that refuses reductive caricature, allowing for a dynamic and comprehensive assessment of the nature of religion and the place it occupies in contemporary public and private life.¹ This thesis is offered as an entry-point into analysing the contemporary phenomenon of religion (or, the ‘religious’) by way of a hypothesis concerning religious faith that brings together two areas of discourse, that of philosophical theology (specifically Paul Tillich’s understanding of faith) and critical theory (which specifically draws from the work of Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan and Pascal Boyer). This union will prove fecund, enabling a robust and coherent hypothesis regarding religious faith to be drawn that occludes the charge of reduction so often associated with non-religious analyses of religion. It will also provide the conceptual framework for further research into this crucial and perilous component of contemporary life that could prove the cause of global catastrophe.

¹ In reference to the ‘return of religion/s’ or the ‘return of religious,’ see Derrida’s famous Capri lecture, ‘Faith and Knowledge: Two Sources of Religion at the Limits of Reason Alone’ in Jacques Derrida & Gianni Vattimo (eds.), Religion (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1-78, esp. 1-5. For a more popular treatment of the phenomenon, especially in terms of the resurgence of ‘conservative’ and ‘militant’ or ‘fundamentalist’ expressions of monotheism, see Gilles Kepel, The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World (Malden: Polity Press, 1994) and Karen Armstrong’s The Battle for God (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001). Armstrong speaks for many commentators on the contemporary religious scene when she states that ‘one of the most startling developments of the late 20th century has been the emergence within every major religious tradition of a militant piety known as ‘fundamentalism’… this religious resurgence has taken many observers by surprise (Karen Armstrong, The Battle for God, ix).’
Approaching religious faith from an integrated interdisciplinary standpoint and utilising a dialectical method, my hypothesis is that religious faith is a complex natural human phenomenon that can be understood as a species of generative human ‘depth of meaning’ engagement that subsists within particular hermeneutical frameworks with a focus on the ‘Other’ (transcendence / the infinite). These frameworks were born of a communal symbolic-linguistic system of ‘meaning making’ that arose with human evolutionary development so that religious faith can be understood as a by-product of the aggregate relevance of several cognitive inference systems and as a result of a lost intimacy with immanence. Such faith, I argue, provides a mechanism for accepting a certain intra-systematic coherence and a volitional (trust) commitment to an intra-systematic being (God) or principle deemed extra-systematic but inscribed within the particular symbolic universe in which the interpretive framework operates.

In order to explicate this thesis, I will present four sections (chapters) which build upon each other to provide a logical and coherent ‘unpacking’ of my hypothesis regarding religious faith. The first chapter will provide the conceptual framework for the thesis, noting several important methodological considerations that flow from it. The second chapter will provide an analysis of one major Christian theologian’s (Paul Tillich’s) understanding of faith, particularly in terms of a close reading of Tillich’s *Dynamics of Faith* and the place that faith occupies in his philosophical and theological system. The third chapter will provide an analysis of religious faith from the standpoint of a contemporary critical theory of religion. This chapter (which is the central chapter of the thesis) will provide the material support for the hypothesis of the thesis by recourse to (a) Georges Bataille’s theory of religion
and his understanding of the reduction of the ‘Infinite’, (b) Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory and the symbolic world of the big ‘Other,’ and (c) Pascal Boyer’s evolutionary anthropological model of the mind and the aggregate relevance of cognitive inference systems. To my knowledge, these insights have not been brought together before in terms of a comprehensive hypothesis in relation to religious faith. But each of these theorists provides vital support for a thesis of the nature employed here. Bataille’s religious theory explicitly traces the human desire for lost intimacy and the production of the infinite as a ‘reductive’ category of human thought. Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory (particularly as presented by the Slovenian school of which Slavoj Žižek is the most notable member) provides a means of understanding the linguistic and symbolic structure of religious faith, particularly in reference to the Symbolic order and the psychoanalytical goal of recognising the ‘nonexistence’ of the big ‘Other.’ Pascal Boyer provides a model of the mind that affords a non-reductive explanation of religion and religious faith in terms of natural evolutionary processes that have produced inference systems which, when taken together, generate the possibility of religious faith as an unintentional by-product. The insights of these three theorists provide crucial support for an integrated understanding of religious faith that is both non-reductive and non-religious, with the explicit aim of avoiding the charge of reducing religious faith to a mere caricature. Instead, it will be suggested that religious faith is a species of human depth of meaning engagement, a complex natural phenomenon that provides a centre and purpose for millions of human beings throughout the world. The fourth—and final chapter—will recast Tillich’s understanding of faith (as the central phenomenon in the personal life of human beings) as one form of human ‘depth of meaning’ engagement, bringing Tillich’s understanding of faith into contact with the material from the third
chapter (which provides a contemporary critical theory of religious faith) that places Tillich’s faith dynamics into the larger framework of human ‘meaning making,’ of which religious faith is one form. The thesis will conclude with a ‘test case’ (in the form of applying the hypothesis to the religious faith of persons engaged in suicidal terrorism), a brief summary of the major points of the argument presented throughout the thesis, and an indication of the implications that can be drawn from my particular hypothesis regarding religious faith, with a final emphasis on the fecundity and importance of this hypothesis for future research.
One of the major questions which underlies this thesis concerns what kind of analysis is capable of delivering a theory of religion that can meet the challenge of the contemporary period, a theory that can situate religion in the larger socio-cultural world of human evolution, thought, praxis and being? This is a rather large and imposing question and beyond the scope of this particular thesis but it forms the basic agenda of which this thesis is a part, namely to analyse religion as a complex and dynamic socio-cultural phenomenon (and problematic) that evinces anthropological, sociological, psychoanalytical, political, philosophical and biological (evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology) features. In other words, my larger agenda is to submit religion to an integrated analysis, drawing on many contemporary fields of human engagement, in order to better understand what religion entails and why human beings ‘inhabit’ particular religious worlds and hold particular religious ideas. This thesis is offered as a preliminary exploration of religion by offering a provisional hypothesis in reference to one aspect of religious thought and praxis, namely religious faith, and in reference to a specific set of provenances (areas of discourse) accessed by a critical theory of religion.

While many adherents to what are often labelled ‘religions’ in both the ancient and contemporary period would consider the concepts of ‘believing in’ or ‘having faith’ nonsensical, Christianity in particular—and ‘religions’ deriving from
the Semitic world in general—place a premium on faith.\textsuperscript{2} As many contemporary geo-political crises seem to revolve around—or at least be largely informed by—the thought and praxis of the three monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), an analysis of religious faith seems an appropriate point of departure for an analysis of contemporary religion. However, even this point of departure is too broad, requiring a rigorous and generous comparative theological and religious engagement. Therefore, in order to provide a subject matter that is manageable—particular enough to avoid over-generalisation and caricature and general enough to provide provisional ‘entry points’ to a general analysis of religion—the primary focal point for this thesis is religious faith as that faith is understood in terms of the Western Christian religious tradition. For central to any analysis of Christian theology and the Christian religion is an analysis of religious faith. Historically, Christian theologians have given primary consideration to the place that faith occupies in the Church and in the life of the believer, whether as a specific—and chief—theological virtue or as a basic human orientation toward the world. Faith, as a theological concept, can be traced throughout the history of Christian thought, developing in concert with the larger cultural, political, socio-economic and philosophical milieu in which Christian thinkers have lived.\textsuperscript{3} In recent times, this has entailed bringing the theological

\textsuperscript{2} For a brief discussion on the ‘peculiar’ Western concept of ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ in terms of other religious expressions, see Pascal Boyer, \textit{Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought} (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 9-10. For a brief exposition of faith as the interpretive element found in the religious experience of Semitic traditions, see John Hick, \textit{An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edn. (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 158-60. For the purposes of this thesis, note that ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ are concepts that derive primarily from the Abrahamic religious traditions, even if such concepts have been taken up by various ‘secular’ epistemological models. This needs to be kept in mind to avoid hegemonic and parochial definitions of religion that in turn occlude the rich diversity of global religious thought and praxis.

\textsuperscript{3} While an exhaustive historical—and genealogical—analysis of the concept would illuminate a contemporary understanding of faith, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to entertain such a detailed study. Although this is a major part of the methodological apparatus utilised throughout this thesis, the focus of this particular research will bring one particular understanding of faith (namely that of Paul Tillich) into dialogue with contemporary critical theory in order to present a proposal for the place that religious faith might occupy in terms of a socio-cultural/political phenomenon.
concept of faith into contact with many theoretical frameworks, such as existentialism, phenomenology, post-structuralism, and developmental psychology. It has also required reconsidering faith in terms of the contemporary religiously pluralistic context. In general, this has been done from the standpoint of faith itself, from within the Christian faith circle or at least from within the ‘religious’ circle. There have, of course, been several analyses of religious faith from outside the ‘circle of religious faith’ throughout the modern period, such as those of David Hume, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre. However, such analyses have generally been judged by Christian theologians and philosophers of religion as reductive accounts of faith that fail to penetrate to the dynamic and non-reductive essence of faith, focusing instead on one of religious faith’s many characteristics. It could even be argued that

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7 As the term ‘non-reductive’ is utilised frequently throughout the thesis, let me clarify its usage. By non-reductive, I signify an approach that does not reduce the subject matter to one particular aspect of that phenomenon or utilise one particular area of engagement to understand it (for example epistemology). Further, it is an approach that allows for both poles of the dialectic to be considered from a broader context. It is my contention that ‘secular’ analyses of faith are often deemed as ‘reductive’ by theologians. However, I have endeavoured to answer this charge by recasting the concept of the infinite (and by association, the unconditional and the ultimate) and understanding religious faith as one part of a larger whole (depth of human engagement).
one of the basic retorts to any non-religious analysis of religious faith is that such an
analysis is bound to fail because it has already reduced the phenomenon of faith to the
human dimension, failing to account for the dimension of the ‘more.’ However, what if a theory of religion were able to account for the ‘more’ in such a way as to
demonstrate that religious faith belongs to the human dimension, that the
‘transcendent’ dimension of theology is itself a reduction of human consciousness,
and that religious faith is a by-product of cognitive inference systems doing their
work for general non-religious reasons? What if it were suggested that religious faith
is a species of human depth of meaning engagement that has naturally evolved along
with human evolutionary development? In other words, rather than considering
religious faith as a privileged concept and then attempting to co-opt the insights of the
social sciences in such a way that preserves the centrality of religious faith, might it
not be more fecund to consider the full weight of contemporary critical thought as
such thought can be brought to bear on the concept of religious faith? This thesis is
given to this end, to an analysis of religious faith that considers such faith from the
standpoint of an integrative critical theory of religion that draws from the socio-

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8 For example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, in his magnum opus, Systematic Theology, claims that religion is
a constitutive part of human nature and that critics of religion such as Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and
Freud, while differing in the content of their criticisms, ‘see religion only in reduced form (152),’
denying the validity of religious truth claims and failing to account for the ‘infinite’ (thus bound to the
‘finite’ – a category logically located within the infinite that they deny). See Wolfhart Pannenberg,
Systematic Theology, vol.1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 119-171. The last point is
especially important for Pannenberg, who builds his doctrine of religion and the difference between
sacred and secular analyses of religion around the idea of the infinite. He claims that ‘religious
awareness stands in opposition to secular awareness only because the latter is not aware of the fact that
finite objects are conditioned by their being carved out of the infinite and defined by it (140).’ Later,
he explicitly links his doctrine of God to the idea of the ‘true Infinite,’ that is the ‘unity that transcends
the antithesis [of finite and infinite] (446),’ a unity which is provided by the incarnation of the Son. All
reality is circumscribed within this true Infinite, a thought that is ‘barred’ from ‘secular’ analyses
because of the failure of such analyses to understand the nature of reality and of human nature itself,
reducing reality instead to the ‘finite’ and thereby upholding the antithesis between the finite and the
infinite which only the incarnation can overcome (see 297-422). However, Pannenberg’s charge of
reduction only holds if the ‘infinite’ is considered a whole of which the finite is a part, which, while
seeming logically coherent, does not account for the rise of the very idea of the ‘infinite’ itself, a point
that will be taken up in reference to Bataille, Lacan and Boyer in the third chapter. Suffice it here to
note that Christian theologians tend to dismiss ‘secular’ analyses of religion on the basis of being
’reductive’ accounts. Pannenberg’s criticism is only one example of many classic and contemporary
‘voices’ that could be noted.
political religious theory of Georges Bataille, the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan, and the evolutionary anthropological ‘cognitive inference system’ research of Pascal Boyer. Religion in general and religious faith in particular is analysed as a cultural, social and psychological phenomenon that has developed along with the natural processes of human evolution. This enables a dialectical analysis which is capable of demonstrating how religious faith can be both monstrous and glorious, connecting to the very worst and the very best of human thought and praxis, accounting for both the faith of a suicide bomber and the faith of a mystic leader (as well as for the faith of ‘normative’ believers worldwide).  

To save confusion, by ‘dialectical,’ I am signifying the Marxist sense of a genuine historical and dialectical analysis of a phenomenon that also takes into account a ‘third’ term (thus avoiding dualism), namely the Lacanian ‘symbolic’ in Lacan’s psychoanalytical ISR (Imaginary / Symbolic / Real) triad. This will be explicated later in the third chapter of this thesis. Note here that the kind of critical theory of religion in view throughout this thesis resists simple dualistic appraisals by refusing to ‘play the game’ of traditional philosophical analysis, rejecting the co-ordinates that are generally given in terms of the available choices for human thought and praxis. In terms of the subject matter at hand, religious faith is both monstrous and glorious in that it is both a mechanism for uncritical deference to a hegemonic / ideological demand and a species of human depth of meaning engagement – and sometimes at the same time. For example, a suicide bomber (to use a contemporary example) can take action on a monstrous demand on the basis of religious faith while at the same time accessing a generative and enabling depth of meaning (both personally and communally). In fact the absurdity of the demand only makes it more desirable. This is, at base, the Kierkegaardian ‘suspension of the ethical’ in the contemporary geo-political situation. I will return to this phenomenon in the concluding section of this thesis but for a recent article that traces the link between radical Islamist philosopher Sayyid Qutb and Kierkegaard’s understanding of faith, see Stephen Gallagher, ‘The Suicide Bomber and the Leap of Faith,’ *Free Inquiry* 26.1 (Dec 2005/Jan 2006): 34-7. As for the ‘dialectical’ method that I borrow, it is more indebted to psychoanalysis than Marxism, although historically it derives from Marx (who utilised Hegel’s post-Kantian idealism that saw contradictions as fecund collisions of ideas from which a synthesis could be formed). However, in as far as this thesis is concerned, I am not interested in the way that various social systems contradict each other historically to produce a more progressive humanity (Marxism). By ‘dialectical,’ I mean an approach to the analysis of a phenomenon (in this case ‘religious faith’) that fully follows the contradictions of that phenomenon, refusing to allow either ‘pole’ to collapse into the other. More specifically, I am following Žižek’s utilisation of such methodology by the introduction of the Lacanian ‘third term’ (see chapter three). To further specify this ‘dialectic,’ the third term opens a gap between the poles of the dialectic so that the dialectic is seen parallactically (that is, a ‘parallax gap’ appears, the insurmountable and irreducible gap which posits a limit to the field of reality and which is perceptible in the shift between two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral ground is possible). More accurately, it is not two perspectives as much as a perspective and that which eludes it, with the other perspective ‘filling out’ the void which the first perspective obscured. However, as this thesis is at Master’s level, I will not explicate this methodology any further but simply note its use (which will be further demonstrated in chapter three) and point the interested reader to Žižek’s magnum opus, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).
One of the difficulties with approaching the question of faith in this way is that it might seem to leave little room for the vitality of religious faith praxis enjoyed by millions throughout the world or the dynamics of faith itself. However, by expressing religious faith as one species of human ‘depth of meaning’ engagement, it should be clear that religious faith is of central importance to many people’s human ‘becoming,’ particularly in terms of human beings who extract great depth of meaning by means of such faith. At issue in this thesis is the claim that religious faith is itself a necessary means of accessing depth of meaning, the genus rather than a species of a larger whole. It is my argument that religious faith, while accessing depth of meaning for human beings who ‘believe in God,’ can be accounted for in such a way that retains this important function of religious faith yet situates it within a larger framework that explains its evolutionary, psychological, linguistic and socio-political foundations. My thesis then is that religious faith is a form of human engagement with depth of meaning, that faith functions in such a way as to access depth of meaning. However, this meaning has no purchase on the way the world is structured outside of the circle of religious faith itself. It provides a mechanism for accepting a certain intra-systematic coherence and even a volitional (trust) commitment to an intra-systematic being (God) or principle deemed extra-systematic. However, this being or principle is inscribed within a symbolic universe that can itself be analysed apart from a faith commitment to the system. As noted in the introduction, in order to provide support for this hypothesis, I will draw on the religious theory of Georges Bataille, the psychoanalytical thought of Jacques Lacan (as distilled through the lens of Slavoj Žižek), and the evolutionary anthropology of Pascal Boyer. As all three theorists approach religion in an explicitly non-reductive manner and from a non-
religious frame of reference, their thought provides a generous resource for the purposes of this thesis.

In order to ensure that the ensuing portrayal of faith is not reductive or static, it is necessary to do more than build a hypothesis upon the basis of various insights of theorists who explicitly aim at such a portrayal. It is also necessary to provide a robust and non-reductive analysis of faith from the perspective of the ‘religious circle’ itself. This will ensure that the resultant analysis is actually connected to the Christian theological tradition rather than floating abstractly apart from it. It will also ensure that the analysis does not fall into the pitfall of reductive caricature by providing a particular ‘theological’ understanding of faith as a counter-point to my own hypothesis. I will begin, therefore, with a close reading of one of the modern Christian classics on faith, Paul Tillich’s *Dynamics of Faith*. For while there are other portrayals of religious faith, few are as comprehensive as that of Tillich, particularly in terms of suggesting faith’s absolute centrality to human existence. Tillich’s understanding of faith will be set within the larger context of his systematic philosophical and theological thought before being recast in terms of the hypothesis being explored in this thesis, namely in terms of a contemporary critical theory of religious faith as a species of human depth of meaning engagement. This should provide the necessary ‘corrective’ to approaching religious faith without recourse to how theologians themselves understand such faith.

Another potential methodological difficulty requires addressing. A major problem with approaching the question of faith in the manner in which it is under investigation in this thesis is that it might seem to provide a comprehensive,
complete and all-encompassing analysis. However, while I intend to provide a ‘cartography’ of religious faith, such a cartography will be an exercise in theoretical map-making that will remain open to the ‘discoveries’ of others, a provisional hypothesis which sets down some cartographical landmarks and draws connections between them. Georges Bataille, in his *Theory of Religion*, stresses from the beginning of his treatise that ‘a philosophy is never a house; it is a construction site.’\(^{10}\)

In other words, every work of human thought is necessarily mobile and fluid, interconnected with a whole network of thought that has preceded it, is contemporary with it and will proceed from it. It is not the final depository of truth or the final word on the subject. Any philosophical analysis may be—and should be—a ‘coherent sum’ but it will always be the coherent sum of an individual rather than ‘indissoluble humankind.’ It must, then, take note of the work that has laid the foundation for the present endeavour and remain open to developments in human thought that may impact upon it and follow from it or even against it. In order to do so, it should acknowledge where it is situated and the particular influences—where known—that inform it. Arguably, it must draw from a range of disciplines in order to provide a holistic appraisal of its subject matter that accounts for its depth, thus avoiding reductive caricatures. This thesis is presented in the sense of a Bataillean ‘construction site,’ attempting to provide a coherent argument that acknowledges its fluidity and revisability in the light of future analyses and that draws from a number of disciplines in order to suggest what a contemporary analysis of religious faith might look like. To ‘tweak’ the metaphor a little more, this thesis is presented as a topographical analysis of religious faith in the name of a critical ‘cartographical’ theory of religion, delineating some of the major features of religious faith and

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drawing attention to their structural relationships, particularly in terms of faith’s anthropological, psychological and socio-political foundations. This thesis is explicitly exploratory and provisional but it is also intended as rigorous and coherent. It expresses my own thought in reference to religious faith, supported by the thought of others. It is a ‘work in progress’ rather than a steadfast and polished edifice.
CHAPTER TWO:

_Tillich’s Dynamic, Non-Reductive, All-Encompassing Faith_

In the opening lines to his religious classic, _Dynamics of Faith_, Tillich notes the problematic associated with any analysis of faith during his time:

There is hardly a word in the religious language, both theological and popular, which is subject to more misunderstandings, distortions and questionable definitions than the word “faith.” . . . It confuses, misleads, creates alternately skepticism and fanaticism, intellectual resistance and emotional surrender, rejection of genuine religion and subjection to substitutes.\(^\text{11}\)

For this reason, Tillich suggests that one might give in to the ‘temptation’ to drop the word completely if a substitute could be found to express the reality to which this term points. For the ‘time being’ Tillich sets out to reinterpret and reinvigorate the term, opening his readers to the vitality and power of that which underscores it. Tillich’s goal is to recover the dynamics of faith for his own generation and save the term ‘faith’ from its many distortions, particularly of an epistemological nature. For Tillich, faith is ultimate concern, an ambiguous term that he would make unambiguous throughout the pages of his book. Sharply differentiating faith from ‘belief,’ Tillich resists any identification of faith with epistemological concerns, locating faith in the realm of ontology rather than epistemology and presenting it as a centred act of one’s whole personality in reference to ultimate concern. Faith, then, is not simply one aspect of human experience, thought or practice; it is the central phenomenon of human life, underwriting all human activity. In the closing remarks of _Dynamics of Faith_, Tillich stresses the centrality of this chief phenomenon of all human phenomena:

faith is not a phenomenon beside others, but the central phenomenon in man’s personal life. . . . If faith is understood as what it centrally is, ultimate concern,
it cannot be undercut by modern science or any kind of philosophy. And it cannot be discredited by its superstitions or authoritarian distortions within and outside churches, sects and movements. Faith stands upon itself and justifies itself against those who attack it, because they can attack it only in the name of another faith. It is the triumph of the dynamics of faith that any denial of faith is itself an expression of faith, of an ultimate concern.12

Faith is thus inscribed within a system that admits no exclusion. Faith is considered *sui generis* and cannot be considered as part of a greater whole. In fact, as will be seen, it answers to the universality of *Being* in terms of human access to what Tillich calls the ‘New Being.’ Tillich presents a view of faith that is non-reductive, dynamic and ultimate, a perfect counter-point to the critical theory that will be employed in the next chapter, particularly in terms of dealing with the charge of reductive analyses of religion and religious faith. In this chapter, I will outline the understanding of faith with which Tillich worked and locate it within his theological and philosophical system, setting the scene for recasting Tillich’s analysis in terms of a contemporary critical theory of religion in anticipation of the third and fourth chapters.

Before explicating Tillich’s understanding of faith, it is necessary to underscore one major difficulty in terminology that must be clarified from the beginning. Throughout this thesis, I am offering a hypothesis in relation to *religious* faith, that is, to the faith of persons who identify themselves as religious and who are oriented toward the world in terms of a religious framework / world view, ‘inhabiting’ a set of beliefs and practices in relation to a deity or principle which is considered ultimate. It is the phenomenon of *religious* faith that is the object of analysis. Tillich, for his part, defines faith in more general terms, relating to both religious and non-religious concerns in reference to ultimacy. However, Tillich writes from a particular theological and philosophical tradition in which faith plays a decisive role. He may

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be re-interpreting faith in terms of his own philosophical theology—particularly in terms of Being\(^1\), essence and meaning—but the term itself is taken from the Christian religious tradition and then expanded to human activity of both religious and non-religious kinds. As such, Tillich presents an understanding of faith that is both explicitly philosophical and theological. Although he attempts to present a definition of faith that transcends religious parameters, his system is itself philosophical / theological and his understanding of faith subsists within that system. Tillich’s definition must be seen as a definition that arises from within the circle of religious faith—specifically the Christian faith—itself, which is then expanded in order to present a truly all-encompassing definition related to Being. For Being is explicitly religious for Tillich because Tillich equates Being with God, understanding God as the power of being over non-being.\(^1^4\) Further, Tillich understands religion and faith in similar terms. For Tillich, faith is the ‘state of being ultimately concerned’\(^1^5\) and religion is ‘ultimate concern,’ being the ‘substance, the ground, and the depth of man’s spiritual life,’ and granting us ‘the experience of the Holy.’\(^1^6\) In other words,

\(^1^3\) For Tillich, God must be considered the ground of being—or more specifically—the ground of the ontological structure of Being. He distinguishes between god and God much in the same way that Heidegger (or Kierkegaard in his existentialist appropriation of Heidegger) distinguishes between being and Being, that is ‘god’ is the concrete concern and ‘God’ the ultimate concern that transcends this concreteness. Thus Tillich is interested in ontology and Being as original and fundamental to ‘actually existing’ beings / objects so that Being is the ontologically guaranteeing condition for all beings. See, Tillich, Systematic Theology, Volume 1, Part II: ‘Being and God’ (163-210).

\(^1^4\) This rather ‘generalising’ statement should be understood as offering a basic ‘orientation’ to the way that Tillich understands God. His thought is more nuanced than any simple equation of God with Being (but he does understand God in these terms, especially when contrasting the idea of God as a being with Being-Itself) and also demonstrates significant development throughout his career from an initial focus on the ‘unconditioned’ (as a result of his debt to the philosophical Idealism of Friedrich W. J. Schelling) to a focus on Being, Being-Itself and ‘Depth of Being’ (demonstrating an influence which he himself attributes to a meeting with Martin Heidegger). For Tillich’s own ‘narration’ of this development, see his ‘Autobiographical Reflections’ in Charles W. Kegley & Robert W. Bretall (eds.), The Theology of Paul Tillich (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 3-21. I am indebted to Ruwan Palapathwala for drawing my attention to this development in Tillich’s thought.

\(^1^5\) Tillich, Dynamics of Faith, 1.

\(^1^6\) Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 8-9. In connection with culture, Tillich describes religion as the ‘depth dimension of culture (‘Reply,’ 337),’ a functional definition of religious faith with a focus on the way human beings extract depth of meaning through
faith and religion are co-extensive terms for Tillich, both relating to ultimate concern, which itself relates to *Being*, which Tillich understands as God (even if this God is the ‘God beyond god’ of Tillich’s *The Courage to Be* or God cast as *Being* rather than a being throughout Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*). It is feasible, then, to understand Tillich’s use of faith in the more specialised sense of ‘religious faith,’ the sense that is under consideration in this thesis. For the sake of fairness, in the following presentation I will outline Tillich’s understanding of faith in his own terminological framework. It needs to be stressed that this framework is situated within Tillich’s own systematic thought, a system that is inherently religious. Tillich speaks about faith from ‘within the circle of faith’ and this needs to be recognised in order to adequately critique his thought.

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17 As Tillich’s thought in reference to God and *Being* is central to this claim, I note the following quotation from Tillich’s *Systematic Theology* as an indication of the strength of the connection that Tillich draws between these terms: ‘The being of God is *Being*-itself . . . The being of God cannot be understood as the existence of a being alongside others or above others. If God is a being, he is subject to the categories of finitude, especially to space and substance. Even if he is called the ‘highest being’ in the sense of the ‘most perfect’ and the ‘most powerful’ being, the situation is not changed (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 235).’ This connection is also explicated in Tillich, *Ultimate Concern: Dialogues with Students*, ed. D. Mackenzie Brown (London: SCM, 1965), especially 2, 43-9, 166-74, where Tillich speaks of God as *Being*-Itself or ‘Ground of Being’ in sharp contrast to any definition of God as a being.

18 This is not to suggest that Tillich’s thought cannot be recast beyond his own system or beyond his Christian logocentrism. For example, Ruwan Palapathwala makes a persuasive case for considering Tillich’s thought ‘beyond Christ and system,’ particularly in terms of religious pluralism. See Ruwan Palapathwala, ‘Beyond Christ and System: Paul Tillich and Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century,’ Raymond F. Bulam & Frederick J. Parrella (eds.), *Religion in the New Millennium: Theology in the Spirit of Paul Tillich* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2001), 205-19. The point of this thesis, however, is that Tillich’s understanding of faith is located within a particular system and that this location is itself problematic for an understanding of faith because it remains wedded to a particular religious (Christian) framework.

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As noted above, Tillich considers faith to be the ‘state’ or ‘condition’ of being ‘ultimately concerned.’ This is an ambiguous statement and requires substantial unpacking. By ‘ultimate concern,’ Tillich understands a concern that demands total surrender by virtue of its ultimacy (or unconditionality), the content of which is irrelevant in terms of the formal definition. What matters is faith (ultimate concern) itself rather than the particular content of that faith. This is because Tillich understands faith as a centred act of the total personality, as an act of the personality ‘as a whole,’ with all functions of humanity’s being united in the act of faith. The ultimate concern for human beings—that to which the whole personality is geared—is the concern that is unconditional, that is, the concern for the infinite. The subjective meaning of faith resides in it being the centred act of the total personality; the objective meaning of faith resides in it being the infinite or unconditional concern toward which the human act is directed. This is why Tillich utilises the term ‘ultimate concern’ because it is able to unite both the subjective and objective axes of faith in one concept. It is also why Tillich speaks of the dynamics of faith because as

19 Tillich notes that ‘the content matters infinitely for the life of the believer, but it does not matter for the formal definition of faith. And this is the first step we have to make in order to understand the dynamics of faith (Dynamics of Faith, 4).’
20 See Tillich, Dynamics of Faith, 4-9.
21 Like Pannenberg (see footnote 7), although in a different manner, Tillich considers the infinite as a category in which the finite subsists. Tillich claims that ‘the human heart seeks the infinite because that is where the finite wants to rest. In the infinite it sees its own fulfilment (Dynamics of Faith, 15).’ Tillich links this to the idea of the Holy, which transcends the world in its subject-object orientation (see Dynamics of Faith, 14-18). For Tillich, human beings are never without an ultimate concern because the nature of Being is such that the finite nature of the world craves the infinite. However, there is another way of conceiving of the infinite that occludes such a religiously slanted analysis, a way that will be explicated in the third chapter of this thesis. Note here that Tillich’s understanding of faith is inextricably linked with his philosophical framework in relation to the infinite, a link that will be made plain in the next sub-section (b). For Tillich, faith is ultimate concern, that is, concern for the unconditional / infinite.
22 See Tillich, Dynamics of Faith, 10-11.
an act of the total personality toward the infinite it involves the dynamics of personal life. As Tillich notes in his systematics, ‘faith is an act of the total personality, including practical, theoretical and emotional elements.’ These dynamics include the concept of doubt, which for Tillich is evidence of the finite being concerned with that which is infinite, ultimate concern being expressed in ultimate risk and ultimate courage. Faith as ‘ultimate concern’ concerns human existence in the world and the way that such existence is oriented toward that which transcends it, that which concerns it ultimately, that which is unconditional and infinite. It involves every aspect of the personality. So defined, faith is absolutely central to human being in the world. Whether it is affirmed or denied, all human beings partake in it for all human beings are oriented toward ultimate concerns.

To further clarify Tillich’s definition of faith, it is helpful to distinguish it from the various misinterpretations and distortions of faith as Tillich conceived them. Tillich devotes a section in Dynamics of Faith to this end, entitled ‘What Faith is Not,’ clarifying what he understands by faith by noting three kinds of ‘distortions’ to which people often unwittingly fall prey: the intellectualistic, the voluntaristic, and the emotionalistic. One of Tillich’s aims in Dynamics of Faith is to disabuse people of interpretations of faith which distort what he considers to be the true meaning of faith, that is, faith as ‘ultimate concern.’ If faith is considered as a total act of the human personality in reference to ultimate concern then any definition that identifies


24 See Tillich, Dynamics of Faith, 18-25, esp. 20. Also see Paul Tillich, The Courage to Be (London: Collins Fontana, 1952), 167-183, where Tillich explicitly links the concept of ‘Courage’ to humanity’s existential life, noting that the consequence of faith as ultimate concern is to take absolute doubt into itself, transcending the theistic concept of God and opening to Being itself, i.e. the ‘God beyond God.’

25 Tillich, Dynamics of Faith, 35-46.
faith with one aspect of the human personality is liable to distort its meaning. Thus an identification of faith with the intellect distorts faith by collapsing it into belief, an identification of faith with the will distorts faith by collapsing it into the ‘will to believe,’ and an identification of faith with the emotions distorts faith by collapsing it into feeling. In terms of the intellect, Tillich considers belief to be ‘an act of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence,’\textsuperscript{26} or even ‘the acceptance of statements without evidence.’\textsuperscript{27} While this may be the most prevalent understanding of faith in the contemporary Western world, Tillich argues that if faith is considered an epistemological problem it is impossible to account for the other elements of faith that constitute its dynamic nature. This distortion of the meaning of faith relegates faith to little more than an epistemological error that can be overcome by means of rational argument and empirical evidence. However, even a cursory historical or contemporary survey of faith communities reveals a phenomenon that while exhibiting certain epistemological facets is far more than an epistemological concern. Tillich is correct to resist such a reduction in the meaning of faith.\textsuperscript{28} Following from the intellectualistic distortion, the voluntaristic distortion which Tillich notes identifies faith with the will, attempting to make up the ‘lack’ of evidence for faith by an act of volition. This act may be demanded of human beings in the sense of subjection to a sacred text or given to human beings in the sense of a divine grace imparted to the believer so that the believer can believe. However, this opens faith to the charge of arbitrariness (why believe this particular text? accept this particular text).

\textsuperscript{26} Tillich, \textit{Dynamics of Faith}, 36.

\textsuperscript{27} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, vol. 2, 47.

\textsuperscript{28} More will be made of the prevalence of this understanding of religious faith in the next chapter, particularly in terms of Sam Harris’ recent \textit{The End of Faith}, in which he presents faith as epistemological error and charges Tillich with ‘rarefying’ the concept of faith to an extent that vacates it of any sense of the ‘everyday’ expression of faith in religious communities. Note here that Tillich’s understanding of faith is explicitly non-reductive. His remonstration regarding intellectualistic distortions of faith is one of the most abidingly valuable insights of his treatise.
authority?) and coercion (with human beings ‘pre-determined’ to believe or subjected to demands to believe). The third distortion of faith that Tillich provides relates to the emotions and identifies faith with subjective feeling. But this does not account for the truth claims or commitments made by persons of faith. The truth claims may be wrong and the commitments misguided but reducing faith to the emotions deprives the analysis of any real depth in terms of how people ‘inhabit’ faith communities. As with the former two ‘distortions,’ it cannot account for the dynamic nature of faith as an act of the total personality in reference to ultimate concern. For Tillich, faith is neither belief nor ‘will to believe’ nor emotional subjectivity; it is a centred act of the total personality in reference to ultimate concern.

Much more could be added in reference to Tillich’s understanding of faith by means of further analysis of his *Dynamics of Faith*. However, enough has been presented to provide the basic contours of his position. It will prove more fecund to resist further detailed explication here and to situate Tillich’s faith dynamics within his larger philosophical and theological system, where the specifically religious framework for his understanding of faith will become evident. By doing so this rather brief section will be ‘thickened’ as the various elements of Tillich’s understanding of faith become evident. However, Tillich’s central concern dominates all of his work, namely that faith is man’s ultimate concern, involving every part of a man’s personality to the end that man engages existentially with depth of meaning.

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29 Tillich expands his definition throughout his *Dynamics of Faith* by exploring the symbolic nature of faith (ultimate concern requiring a symbolic expression because symbol is the only viable means of expressing the ultimate – see 47-62), the various types of faith (including the ontological and the moral – see 63-84), the truth of faith (including a discussion of reason, historical inquiry and philosophical questions – see 85-114) and the ‘life’ of faith (that is, the ‘living reality of faith’ and the way that courage, love and action express the integration of one’s personal and communal engagement with reality – see 115-147). Each of these sections deserves further analysis. However, given the space constraints of this minor thesis such analysis must await a further opportunity. Enough has been presented here to provide the basic tenor of what Tillich understood by faith in his own terms.
b. Situating Tillich’s Understanding of Faith in Terms of His System

Langdon Gilkey, in what is arguably one of the definitive studies on Tillich’s life and thought, expresses the kind of thinker that Tillich was as follows: ‘Here is a religious thinker who writes philosophically . . ; here is a philosopher dominated by religious interests.’ Tillich was a philosopher, a religious thinker, a theologian, and all three simultaneously. One of the most influential Christian theologians of the 20th Century, he desired to provide theological answers to the existential questions of contemporary life, specifically identifying a place where the existential estrangement of humanity is overcome in the ‘New Being’ that the incarnation of the Son of God supplies. His system is carefully and logically explicated in his three-volume Systematic Theology, which was published between 1951 and 1963 and comprises five parts: ‘Reason and Revelation,’ ‘Being and God,’ ‘Existence and the Christ,’ ‘Life and the Spirit,’ and ‘History and the Kingdom of God.’ Tillich was primarily concerned with ontology, the question of being(s) and Being-itself and the existential life of human beings in relation to Being. He assumed that the best category in which to think through the ontological / metaphysical unity that underlies all reality is that of ‘being.’


31 This is, of course, a point at which many contemporary thinkers, from Whitehead to Derrida, would necessary balk, Whitehead preferring ‘becoming’ to ‘being’ and Derrida preferring différence and that which is ‘other’ to being. Perhaps the most virulent opponent of Being-based philosophies of religion is Jean-Luc Marion, who explicitly attempts to overcome metaphysics, providing a post-metaphysical understanding of reality and ‘God,’ locating God in the realm of ‘love’ rather than Being in order to ‘outhink’ the ontological difference between being(s) and Being that Heidegger and Tillich (following Heidegger) rely on. For an example of this explicitly post-metaphysical philosophy of religion, see Jean-Luc Marion, Dieu sans l’être: Hors-texte, 2ème edition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France,
concerned with ultimate concerns, concerns that have to do with being and nonbeing, particularly with the structure of human being and the distortion of that structure (existential estrangement) that can be renewed through what Tillich termed the ‘New Being.’ For Tillich, faith is intimately connected with this New Being because faith is the ‘state of being grasped by an ultimate,’ a state that gives evidence of the reality of the New Being: ‘Faith is itself the immediate (not mediated by conclusions) evidence of the New Being within and under the conditions of existence.’ In fact, Tillich goes further to suggest that faith grants ‘access’ to the transcendent unity of all things: ‘faith is the state of being grasped by the transcendent unity of unambiguous life—it embodies love as the state of being taken into that transcendent unity.’ He offers a definition of faith in relation to this unity:

the basic definition of faith as the state of being grasped by the Spiritual Presence and through it by the transcendent union of unambiguous life.

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32 Tillich frequently refers to Being and ontological matters throughout his systematics, preferring the term ‘ontology’ to ‘metaphysics.’ His system ‘hangs’ on an ontological foundation, which provides the basis for his extensive reworking of various theological themes throughout his corpus. For a concise analysis of Tillich’s thought in reference to ontology, see Gilkey, *Gilkey on Tillich*, 23-33. Also see J. H. Randall, ‘The Ontology of Paul Tillich’ in Kegley & Bretall (eds.), *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, 132-61. In terms of terminological categorisation, Tillich prefers the term ‘essentialist’ rather than ‘ontologist’ when describing himself (see Tillich, *Ultimate Concern*, 56), that is, someone who seeks the essential structure of reality. Professor Christian Mostert teases out this categorisation in a paper presented on this theme to the Existentialist Society, Melbourne, in April 2003, entitled ‘Paul Tillich as Existentialist and More,’ which is still awaiting publication. But whatever term Tillich utilised it was the ontological questions that drove him in his theological and philosophical engagement.


faith in this sense is a Spiritual reality above its actualization in those who possess it.\footnote{36} In other words, the Spirit of God (Spiritual Presence) \textit{grasps} human beings, enabling them to overcome their existential estrangement by partaking of the New Being that is the ‘Christ’.\footnote{37}

Faith, for Tillich, is a spiritual reality accessed by true religion; religion is understood as ‘depth engagement’ with the spiritual life of humanity in humanity’s ultimate, infinite and unconditional concern.\footnote{38} However, how does this explicitly theological understanding of faith connect with the more formal definition given in \textit{Dynamics of Faith}? Tillich achieves this by distinguishing between the formal and material definitions of faith, the former given in \textit{Dynamics of Faith} and the latter given in \textit{Systematic Theology}, where he describes this particularly Christian material

\footnote{36} Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, vol. 2, 155.

\footnote{37} Note that the New Being, while equated with Christ, is not equated with the historical personage of Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, the Christ is an existential rather than historical reality. Tillich has little time for historical research into the life of Jesus of Nazareth. He is concerned primarily with the existential reality of the New Being, that is of the Christ, as human beings partake of this New Being and in so doing overcome their existential estrangement. See Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, vol. 2, 105-114, where he lampoons the search for the historical Jesus, particularly in terms of providing a foundation for Christian faith, and stresses the reality of the New Being which creates faith by ‘conquering existential estrangement and thereby making faith possible (114).’ One of the important conceptual ‘coinages’ that Tillich utilised is that of ‘Spiritual Presence,’ which he draws from the biblical (particularly Pauline) teaching on the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Christ. Tillich wanted to redefine theological and biblical symbols for the sake of the modern consciousness of human beings. This goal of redefinition is clearly manifest in Tillich’s doctrine of the Spiritual Presence. For Tillich, Spiritual Presence is the manifestation of the depth of \textit{Being-itself}, the dimension of life that unites the power of \textit{Being} to the actualisation of that power in the life of human beings. It is the power that grasps human beings in reference to ultimate concern, the aspect of \textit{Being-itself} (God) that unites all of reality in participation with \textit{Being-itself} (God). For Tillich’s own explication of the Spiritual Presence see Tillich, \textit{Systematic Theology}, vol. 3 (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1964), 106-59. For an analysis of Tillich’s Spiritual Presence in reference to its biblical roots, see John Charles Cooper, \textit{The “Spiritual Presence” in the Theology of Paul Tillich: Tillich’s Use of St. Paul} (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), especially 55-110, which discusses the doctrine in terms of its place within Tillich’s \textit{Systematic Theology}.

\footnote{38} This is how Tillich explains religion in \textit{Theology of Culture}, particularly in terms of religion ‘open[ing] up the depth of man’s spiritual life (9).’ See Tillich, \textit{Theology of Culture}, 3-51. In a sense, Tillich utilises the terms ‘faith’ and ‘religion’ interchangeably (as noted earlier in the body of the thesis). For example, he declares that ‘religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life (Paul Tillich, \textit{Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 4).’ This is very close to Tillich’s definition of faith.
definition as a ‘description’ that is universally valid: ‘Faith as the state of being opened by the Spiritual Presence to the transcendent unity of unambiguous life is a description which is universally valid despite its particular, Christian background.’

For Tillich, it is universally valid because, like the formal definition, it defines a relation between human beings and Being-itself and because its particularity answers to the theological understanding of Christ as the fulfilment of all forms of faith, the New Being available in Christ providing the answer to universal human estrangement from Being. In other words, all religious and non-religious engagement with ultimate concerns finds its fulfilment and zenith in the New Being as that New Being is manifest in Jesus Christ. As these aspects of Tillich’s thought firmly establish where faith is situated in Tillich’s system, I quote a lengthy passage from the second volume of his Systematic Theology to lend support to the above assertions and illustrate how Tillich understands faith in terms of his system:

Faith must be defined both formally and materially. The formal definition is valid for every kind of faith in all religions and cultures. Faith, formally or generally defined, is the state of being grasped by that toward which self-transcendence aspires, the ultimate in being and meaning. In a short formula, one can say that faith is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern. The term “ultimate concern” unties a subjective and an objective meaning: somebody is concerned about something he considers of concern. In this formal sense of faith as ultimate concern, every human being has faith. Nobody can escape the essential relation of the conditional spirit to something unconditional in the direction of which it is self-transcendent in unity with all life. However unworthy the ultimate concern’s concrete content may be, no one can stifle such concern completely. This formal concept of faith is basic and universal. It refuses the idea that world history is the battlefield between faith and un-faith (if it is permissible to coin this word in order to avoid the misleading term “unbelief”). There is no un-faith in the sense of something antithetical to faith, but throughout all history and, above all, in the history of religion, there have been faiths with unworthy contents. They invest something preliminary, finite, and conditional with the dignity of the ultimate, infinite, and unconditional. The continuing struggle through all of history is waged between a faith directed to ultimate reality and a faith directed toward preliminary realities claiming ultimacy. This leads us to the material concept of faith as formulated before. Faith is the state of being grasped by the

39 Tillich, Systematic Theology, vol. 2, 139.
Spiritual Presence and opened to the transcendent unity of unambiguous life. In relation to the Christological assertion, one could say that faith is the state of being grasped by the New Being as it is manifest in Jesus Christ. In this definition of faith, the formal and universal concept of faith has become material and particular; it is Christian. However, Christianity claims that this particular definition of faith expresses the fulfilment toward which all forms of faith are driven.⁴⁰

Note that, for Tillich, there are different kinds of faith but every human being has faith, every human being experiences the ‘state’ of being grasped by an ultimate concern. This ‘state’ finds its material definition in the Christian religion in terms of Spiritual Presence and the New Being (manifest in the Christ) and ‘fulfils’ other religious and non-religious expressions of faith. In other words, whatever the content of one’s faith (whether it is conditional and preliminary or unconditional and ultimate), faith as ultimate concern is a universal human state (or condition) in reference to one’s being as that being is related to Being-itself. Faith is an existential human reality that admits no exclusions. It is constitutive with what it means to be human. It is a religious concept. However, as Tillich considers all human beings to be religious (in the general sense he outlines throughout his work), it is also a universal concept.

The terminology that Tillich utilises throughout his system might lead one to suggest that Tillich adopts an existentialist philosophy. His concern with matters of human existence and despair (estrangement) are existentialist concerns. While this may be valid in the general sense in which Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel are considered existentialists, if existentialism is defined more narrowly, in the now famous Sartrean aphorism, ‘existence precedes essence,’ it is difficult to maintain this view. In fact, Tillich considers Sartre’s statement—which he words ‘the

essence of man is his existence’—as ‘illuminat[ing] the whole existentialist scene, . . .
the most despairing and courageous sentence in all Existentialist literature.’ For
Sartre, there is no essential nature to human beings; human beings create their nature
throughout their existence. But for Tillich, who is better understood as an
‘essentialist’ than an ‘existentialist,’ the point is to heal the ‘gap’ between essence and
existence, a gap that produces existential angst and despair. This is why the concept
of the New Being is so important for Tillich, this power of Being-itself that
overcomes existential estrangement from Being. For Tillich, ‘New Being is essential
being under the conditions of existence, conquering the gap between essence and
existence.’ Faith, in Tillichean garb, is the bridge or access point whereby human
beings partake of the fruits of this triumph. As human beings are grasped by ultimate
concern they partake of the New Being and move from despair to affirmation, from
existential estrangement to participation with Being-itself. No wonder Tillich
considers faith the ‘central phenomenon in man’s personal life.’ Linked as it is to
the concept of Being-itself, how could faith be anything else?

While more could be added concerning Tillich’s understanding of faith
and the place that this understanding occupies within his system, this chapter has
provided enough details to safeguard the following analysis from reductive caricature
by concerning itself with religious faith as that faith is understood from within the
‘religious circle,’ specifically as it is understood by a prominent Christian theologian.
Faith, for Tillich, is ultimate concern. This is a dynamic, expansive (non-reductive),
all-encompassing definition that provides an answer to the nature of human life in

43 Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 146.
reference to *Being*, ultimacy, the ‘infinite,’ and depth of human meaning. More will be said concerning this understanding in the fourth chapter of this thesis after my hypothesis has been established in the next chapter. I will then be able to recast Tillich’s understanding in terms of a contemporary critical theory of religion in general and in terms of my specific hypothesis regarding religious faith in particular.
CHAPTER THREE:

A Critical Integrative Analysis of Religious Faith

in Terms of a Contemporary Critical Theory of Religion

In a recent analysis of religious faith in the contemporary geo-political situation, Sam Harris argues for the dissolution of faith (and religion for that matter) in favour of a reasonable and secular society which values the spiritual experiences to which the world religions attest but rejects the beliefs that have attached themselves to such experiences.\textsuperscript{44} In order to argue his case, Harris presents religious faith as 'belief in, and life orientation toward, certain historical and metaphysical propositions,' as 'simply unjustified belief in matters of ultimate concern.'\textsuperscript{45} Dismissing Tillich as ‘rarefying’ the original import of the term ‘faith’ by divorcing it from belief, Harris’ analysis is aimed at what he calls the ‘ordinary, scriptural sense’ of faith, that is, the ‘“faith” that has animated believers for millennia.’\textsuperscript{46} Harris has a point in seeking to understand faith from the standpoint of faith communities, attempting to understand religious faith as persons of religious faith understand it. However, by locating faith in the epistemological arena, Harris makes the same mistake that he accuses Tillich of making, namely of rarefying the concept. For while Tillich removes the concept from any connection with ‘belief,’ Harris removes the concept from any connection with anything other than epistemology. In Tillichean terms, Harris presents a distorted picture of faith along intellectualistic lines. But this is noted by Harris himself, who adopts the very definition that Tillich labels the ‘most

\textsuperscript{44} Sam Harris, \textit{The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason} (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005).

\textsuperscript{45} Harris, \textit{End of Faith}, 65.

\textsuperscript{46} Harris, \textit{End of Faith}, 64-5.
common misinterpretation of faith,’ namely faith as an ‘act of knowledge with a low degree of evidence.’ For Harris, religious faith is little more than epistemological error. By applying an analytical approach to religion, Harris sets out to demonstrate the irrationality of faith, which he sharply distinguishes from reason. This is the kind of analysis that deserves the charge of being a reductive caricature of faith. Harris’ analysis treads the well-worn path of pitting faith against reason and inscribing the entire debate in epistemological categories. However, Harris’ analysis does raise the question of rarefication (in the sense of providing so nuanced an understanding of a concept that it bears little relation to the actual phenomenon as that phenomenon exists within living communities), particularly in terms of the understanding and practice of faith among faith communities. It also raises the issue of the place of ‘belief’ in analysing religious faith, particularly the manner in which belief seems to occupy the place of a ‘general’ understanding of faith from which more nuanced treatments (such as Tillich’s) can differentiate themselves. Whatever the value in considering these particular points, the larger question as to the complex nature of

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47 Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 36.

48 In fact, this is precisely the charge that Bessler-Northcutt makes against Harris. See Joe Bessler-Northcutt, ‘Religion: Mend it, Don’t End it – A Critique of *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris,’ *The Fourth R* 18.6(2005):11-22.

49 Harris sees no positive aspect of religious faith, seeing it as demonic and irrational, casting it as the primary reason for humanity’s current geo-political Armageddon. While I would concur with the basic thrust of his agenda for a post-religious humanity, there is more to religious faith than Harris seems to understand, particularly in its more sophisticated and nuanced expressions. Harris’ understanding of faith is simplistic, reductive and in the end clouds the real issue. He seems to be fighting the wrong battle (an analytical / epistemological battle) in order to achieve the valid aim of producing a reasonable and post-religious society in which religious faith-claims do not intrude into geo-political life. But reducing faith to an epistemological problem is not the way to do so. Of course, Harris is not the only one to treat faith as primarily an epistemological issue. Christian theologians have done likewise by arguing for ‘warranted belief.’ This is especially the case among a group of contemporary Christian theologians that have been dubbed ‘reformed epistemologists,’ who set out to demonstrate that epistemology is a ‘friend’ rather than a ‘foe’ to religious belief. See Nicholas Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga (eds.), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), Alvin Plantinga, ‘Reformed Epistemology’ in Philip Quinn & Charles Taliaferro (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Malden: Blackwell, 1997) and Nicholas Wolterstorff, ‘Epistemology of Religion’ in John Greco & Ernest Sosa (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 303-24.
faith requires that Harris’ analysis be deemed reductive.\textsuperscript{50} Harris seems locked into a Cartesian framework, seeing philosophy as a meta-discipline that debunks spurious claims to knowledge, presenting the mind as a general explanation machine that brings various pieces of epistemological evidence to the bar of reason before judging such evidence valid or invalid. Unfortunately for Harris, this particular view of philosophy (as primarily epistemology) and of the mind (as epistemological judge and jury) has been largely discredited and discarded by contemporary theorists.\textsuperscript{51} As such, religious faith must be analysed from a broader perspective.

In contrast to Harris, religious faith will not be considered an epistemological aberration in this thesis. In contrast to Tillich, neither will it be considered the central phenomenon of human personal and communal life. Both thinkers analyse faith in an ‘all or nothing’ manner, lacking the dialectical and ‘integrationist’ sensitivity necessary to account for the complexity of the

\textsuperscript{50} Due to space constraints I cannot take up the challenge of situating belief in relation to faith within the limits of this thesis. However, this is not to suggest that the epistemological concerns that Harris raises are not worthy of exploration. I am not suggesting that religious faith does not partake of epistemological concerns. Clearly, religious believers make epistemological claims on the basis of their religious faith. However, there is much more to religious faith than epistemological concerns. The point of this thesis is to present a non-reductive analysis of religious faith as a complex natural human phenomenon. As such, I will leave the epistemological aspect of religious faith to one side, focusing instead on the nature of the phenomenon itself. Had Harris presented his argument in terms of an analysis of one aspect of religious faith, he could have avoided the charge of presenting a reductive caricature. Unfortunately, his book refuses to admit the complex nature of religion and religious faith, reducing the phenomenon to the epistemological level. On this basis, his work must be judged reductive (and possibly even misguided).

\textsuperscript{51} The material on this question is vast. Practically the whole of what is often termed ‘continental philosophy’ has challenged the Cartesian model, particularly from the stance of hermeneutics and phenomenology (such as Heidegger’s \textit{Being and Time} and Merleau-Ponty’s \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}) and semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism and postmodernism (such as practically the entire corpus of thinkers such as Saussure, Barthes, Althusser, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, Deleuze, Benjamin, Blanchot, Baudrillard, Foucault, and Derrida). For a treatise that explicitly takes up the question of philosophy-as-epistemology and the mind as a Cartesian theatre, see Richard Rorty’s influential, \textit{Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). For a recent treatise on the problem of mind, see Daniel C. Dennett’s \textit{Consciousness Explained} (London: Allen Lane / The Penguin Press, 1992). How this is related to the question at hand will be developed in section (c) of this chapter.
phenomenon. \(^{52}\) Rather than approaching faith as either a ‘demon’\(^{53}\) to be exorcised from the human consciousness or an ‘angel’ to be encouraged at any cost, religious faith will be considered as both demonic and angelic simultaneously by means of the dialectical method. For as contemporary events suggest, religious faith is monstrous in its base contemporary from, providing the impulse and structural mechanism whereby particular hermeneutical frameworks, which have powerful cultural significance, are rendered operable in the devastating praxis of a ‘suicide bomber’ or ‘suicidal terrorist.’\(^{54}\) It needs to be recognised that such persons do not necessarily lack for intellectual or psychological maturity, emotional health, or logical or ‘narrative’ coherence. Personal religious faith can (and has) lead to a geo-political situation in which human beings are threatened with self-extinction.\(^{55}\) Harris is

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\(^{52}\) It should be noted that Tillich does attempt to account for this by differentiating between the content of faith and faith itself. The point here, however, is that Tillich understands faith as ultimate concern, as the central human phenomenon in reference to humanity’s existential life, and thus in a truly all-encompassing sense. But a dialectical analysis allows for both a positive and negative manifestation of a phenomenon (in terms of revealing its ‘essence’). In other words, it is not just the content of faith that can be monstrous, the very mechanism of faith ensures monstrous action, particularly given the affinity between the sacred and violence (which will be demonstrated below).

\(^{53}\) Harris, *End of Faith*, 226.

\(^{54}\) Dealing with the contemporary phenomenon of suicide bombers is highly problematic. Either the phenomenon is labelled a religious phenomenon (arising solely in terms of religion) or a political phenomenon (arising solely as a result of social and economic privation or political oppression). The problem is complicated by lack of access to the suicide bomber him or herself (but suicide notes or videos allow some insight into the reasons for the action), although the hermeneutical framework in which the act takes place (and in which the community interprets the act) is available for analysis. The phenomenon is complex and exhibits both religious and political justification. Some analysts have resisted the religious element of the phenomenon because of ‘suicidal terrorism’ that has a ‘secular’ political objective. For example, see R. A. Pape, ‘The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,’ *American Political Science Review* 97.3(2003):20-32, where the ‘Tamil Tigers’ are described as ‘secular.’ Also see his recent book-length treatment, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (Random House, 2005). But the larger framework from which such people operate seems to be better expressed as a mixture of religious and secular concerns. See, for example, the research of Mia Bloom in her *Dying To Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). The motivation may not be religious but the belief system that supports it clearly is (in the case of the Tamil Tigers this system is Hindu). As I will suggest below (in section (a)), the religious and the political are inextricably joined. But the point for this thesis is that there are acts of suicidal terrorism that are explicitly religious and those acts require a definition of religious faith that is subtle enough to account for them. Hence the dialectical method employed throughout.

\(^{55}\) This point is well documented throughout Harris’s *The End of Faith*, even if Harris does seem to have a penchant for sensationalising the data. Note that this refers to the Christian faith of U.S. President George W. Bush and the faith-based decisions of international policy with which his government engages as much as the Muslim faith of Palestinians or Iraqis or the Jewish faith of
justified then to call for an end to such faith. However, there is more to be said about religious faith than its contemporary demonic expression. For while it is monstrous, it is also and at the same time, glorious. For this same religious faith enables persons to engage with a depth of meaning unavailable for them (in that they inhabit particular religious hermeneutical frameworks) through other means. Faith can enrich and ennoble and nourish, just as it can destroy and debase and disfigure. It is here that the dialectic must be employed. Too often, religious faith is treated as either demonic or glorious, rarely as both, and almost never as both at the same time. It is the very worst of human tendencies and yet carries with it the very best; it is a harbinger of our doom as well as a means of generative personal ‘meaning making’. But it is also a historical construct, a way of being in reference to the world that has risen along with human evolutionary development. Although it will probably remain a major human phenomenon for the foreseeable future, it is not a way of being that will necessarily continue into the future. This is because it is (a) a socio-cultural response to the difference between human beings and other animals in a search for a lost intimacy that reveals itself in the rise of a consciousness that considers the infinite and the holy as ‘real’ (b) a product of the very means of the creation of the symbolic and linguistic worlds human beings inhabit (particularly in reference to the Other) and (c) a by-product of several inference systems that the human mind employs for other means. Each of these points will be substantially explicated below. Religious faith is a human phenomenon that exhibits both positive and negative characteristics. It cannot be sufficiently understood if either of these characteristics is denied (or ignored).


56 Tillich could be utilised here as a case in point. His understanding of faith as ultimate concern explicitly accesses the depths of human spiritual life (as noted in the second chapter of this thesis). The functional aspect of his definition (in terms of depth of meaning engagement) is entirely valid. Human beings access depth of meaning by means of religious faith.
Given the information that has been provided in the above paragraphs, the basic contours of my provisional hypothesis in relation to the understanding of religious faith can begin to be articulated and supported. The framework has now been set in which to place the thesis that I introduced in the introduction. As I noted there, I will approach religious faith from an integrated interdisciplinary standpoint and from a dialectical method. The reason for this approach and standpoint should now be evident. It provides a means of analysing the phenomenon of religious faith in a non-reductive manner that allows for its complexity and variegated expression (of both monstrous and glorious kinds). It also allows for religious faith to be considered as a complex natural human phenomenon rather than inscribing it within theological categories. In terms of functionality, religious faith can be understood as a species of generative human depth engagement (a point which has been made on the basis of Tillich’s understanding of faith in relation to depth of meaning). I will demonstrate below that this engagement subsists within particular hermeneutical frameworks with a focus on the ‘Other’ (transcendence / the infinite), that such frameworks were born of a communal symbolic-linguistic system of meaning making that arose with human evolutionary development, and that religious faith be understood as a by-product of several cognitive inference systems and as a result of a lost intimacy with immanence. This will be demonstrated by recourse to (a) Georges Bataille’s theory of religion and his understanding of the reduction of the ‘Infinite’, (b) Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory and his understanding of the symbolic world of the big ‘Other,’ and (c) Pascal Boyer’s evolutionary anthropological model of the mind and the aggregate relevance of cognitive inference systems. Taken together these various insights provide support for an integrated understanding of faith that is both non-reductive and non-religious, with the aim of avoiding the charge of reducing religious
faith to a mere caricature. It will be suggested that religious faith is a species of human depth of meaning engagement, a complex natural phenomenon that provides a mechanism for accepting a certain intra-systematic coherence and a volitional (trust) commitment to an intra-systematic being (God) or principle deemed extra-systematic but inscribed within the particular symbolic universe in which the interpretive framework operates.\textsuperscript{57}

d. Georges Bataille and the Reduction of the Infinite

Georges Bataille, in his \textit{Theory of Religion}, provides an account of how the infinite became so central to human consciousness. Situating religion as the ‘search for a lost intimacy’ that appeared when human consciousness emerged in relation to the development of the profane world and the distinction between human beings and other animals, Bataille sets out to provide a general economy\textsuperscript{58} of the relation between humanity and this intimacy. Bataille explicates the rise of this intimacy by discussing the immanence of animality, the ‘shattering’ of the world of objects (things), and the place of sacrifice and the sacred in attempting to recover the

\textsuperscript{57} As noted in the introductory section of the thesis, my hypothesis relates to understanding religious faith as part of a particular symbolic order (which will be explicated in this section by means of Lacan). As such ‘God’ can be understood as an ‘intra-systematic being or principle’ (that is, as part of that symbolic order – or more accurately – a ‘part’ that was created with the symbolic order as an ‘excess’ and ‘void’). However, from the standpoint of those subsisting within the symbolic order / hermeneutical framework (way of viewing reality) this ‘God’ is deemed extra-systematic (that is, ‘God’ is considered to be outside of the system). By means of a recourse to psychoanalytical theory, I will argue that ‘God’ be considered as ‘intra-systematic,’ that is ‘God’ be understood inscribed within the particular symbolic universe in which the interpretive framework operates.

\textsuperscript{58} The term ‘general economy’ is a technical term in Bataille’s work, describing a theory based on excess and exuberance rather than scarcity and utility. For the purposes of this thesis, I simply note that religion is understood in terms of this relation, a relation between humanity and the desire for intimacy (immanence) that must be understood in terms of excess, void (and above all it as against utility), neatly expressed as an expenditure without return (See Bataille, \textit{The Accursed Share}, Vol 1: \textit{An Essay on General Economy} (New York: Zone Books, 1991)).
intimacy. He extends this analysis to the modern military order and the way in which violence is ‘turned outward,’ thus challenging the ethical foundations upon which modern economic thought (that is, capitalist thought) is built. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on ‘Part One’ of Bataille’s *Theory of Religion*, specifically the way in which the infinite is cast as a reduction of the human. But it should be remembered that this is part of a rather incisive critique of capitalism that draws the connections between human religious and economic activities.\(^{59}\)

The basic thesis that Bataille champions is that the world of the sacred—the world of God, sacrifice, and the longing for a return to, or participation in, the immanence of *Being*—is a construct that arose with the genesis of human consciousness (even if it has been given different philosophical garb throughout

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\(^{59}\) Bataille’s *Theory of Religion* is in the tradition of Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Both approach their subject matter in terms of contemporary political and economic theory and both utilise sociological tools in order to attempt to understand the beliefs, values, meanings and attitudes underlying human behaviour. Bataille is perhaps more properly indebted to Emile Durkheim, in the sense of considering the social and moral order of human beings and the objective physical ‘status’ of human beings within social and moral systems. But his concern with the economic activities of human life places him closer to Weber in terms of overall content if not methodology. As these matters are not technically germane to the argument of this thesis, I will not labour the point except to stress that Bataille’s religious theory subsists in a larger corpus of work and methodology that influences what Bataille analyses and why he does so in the manner he does. This is important to note because although the space constraints of this thesis prohibit an analysis of the larger framework of Bataille, Lacan, Boyer, and the other theorists I draw from, such frameworks are worthy of investigation in order to *fully* argue for my own hypothesis in relation to religious faith. In other words, space constraints prohibit a critique of the particular theorists (and their larger frameworks) that I employ as support for my hypothesis. There are points at which each theorist makes claims that are contested by other theorists in the respective academic disciplines. But to include such contestation (and possible counter argument) here would require a prohibitive amount of space and require research of a doctoral and post-doctoral nature. My hypothesis must then remain vulnerable to future research of a more comprehensive nature that accounts for the larger questions implicit in each of the theoretical frameworks employed in support throughout this thesis. As I noted in the introduction, this thesis is offered as a ‘construction site’ rather than a completed edifice, as a provisional and preliminary cartography of religious faith that draws connections between yet-to-be completely defined features. This is nowhere more evident that in the lack of sustained critique of the theorists I employ in support of my hypothesis. However, such lack is impossible to avoid given the constraints of a minor master’s thesis and signals the beginning of a research project rather than the lack of success of this one. I should note that my current doctoral research (PhD in Critical Theory at Monash University) is on the thought of Georges Bataille, particularly as a potential ‘corrective’ for the religious sensitivity in much post-structuralist thought, and that this research will examine the larger questions that cannot be examined here.
human history). Categories such as the ‘more’ and the ‘infinite,’ while proper philosophical categories, are better understood as ‘products’ of early human evolutionary history, which relates primarily to the loss of intimacy with the world of animality from which we distinguished ourselves in the rise of consciousness. For Bataille, this animality relates primarily to the immanence between the ‘eater’ and the ‘eaten,’ the ‘eaten’ not given as an object to the ‘eater.’ This immanence between animals prior to human consciousness is inscrutable and unfathomable to human beings because the world of animality is one of absolute immanence and immediacy, of being in the world in a continuity of immanence that is like ‘water in water.’ In human evolutionary terms, human beings developed consciousness when tools were designated as ‘objects,’ as what Bataille terms ‘interruptions in the indistinct continuity.’

Tools are not a part of the world of animality but become part of human evolutionary development when the tool is ‘thought’ as a middle term, that is, when the tool is conceived as an object, as that which is adapted for an intended result other than the existence of the tool itself. That is, the tool is developed with an end in view (it is for something other than just ‘being’ a tool – it has a function, a utility). It has value only in the end to which it is utilised and the way in which it is adapted to an end. Once posited, the tool becomes an exteriority to the immanence of animality (something alien to the subject, which now comes into view), it becomes ‘part’ of the world and a break occurs within the undifferentiated continuity the is animality (immanence). The ‘value’ of the tool is defined in terms of its utility, in terms of the end for which the tool is given. It becomes ‘other’ (perhaps the first non-I) to what is now thematised as the ‘subject.’ The ‘transcendence’ of the tool is thus confusedly ascribed to its nature and, by extension, transcendence becomes part of the conceptual

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apparatus of human consciousness, extended to the world itself. The world is thus conceived as a thing, the tool being the ‘middle term’ between the human subject and the object that is the world. This thing is a reduction of the world in which the world is considered other than the subject. Such a reduction opens the possibility of the world being given the same kinds of characteristics that human beings conceive of possessing as things themselves, that is, ‘the form of isolated individuality and creative power.’ In other words, this thing is conceived as capable of action, thought and even voice. At some point in the rise of consciousness, a ‘supreme being’ is conceived as a distinct thing (other than human beings). But rather than understanding the positing of this ‘being’ as evidence of a kind of ‘first consciousness’ of God (later understood as Being-itself), that is, as a ‘gain’ for human beings, it is more accurately a ‘weakening’ of the immanence of animality from which the consciousness of human beings evolved. The category of the ‘sacred’ thus refers to the loss of this immanence, to the loss of a sense of continuity with the world of animality. Religion is the desire for a return to this intimacy with the continuity of immanence. The divine world is one of immanence but the profane world is a world of things and objects distinct from one another and lacking the intimacy of immanence. Sacrifice attempts to return objects (things) to the divine world of immanence by destroying the ‘thingness’ of that which is sacrificed, that is, by destroying the utility of the object by means of sacrifice. But the tragedy of all of this is that the divine world of immanence is lost to human consciousness not because it is

61 Heidegger is probably the best example of a theorist who explicitly demonstrates that the world is not a separate object from human beings who ‘inhabit’ the world. Bataille is providing anthropological and sociological support for this philosophical ‘discovery’ that opposes the idea of the Cartesian theatre. He is explicating the way in which the subject / object dualism was introduced in evolutionary terms and particularly the way in which the idea of ‘transcendence’ was born.


63 In the next sub-section (b), I will suggest a way of accounting for this rise in the psychoanalytical category of the big ‘Other’ as this category rose in terms of the symbolic / linguistic world which human beings created and now inhabit.
a reality apart from such consciousness but because this consciousness arose by rejecting the immanence of animality in the positing of tools in terms of utility and objects in terms of things. The intimacy that has been lost cannot be found again because the rise of consciousness required its loss in the first place.

The divine, the sacred, the infinite unconditional realm, is one that emerged from the impoverishment and reduction of reality to things and objects, a reduction that was necessary for the rise of human consciousness. Thus, there is no divine world apart from this world; it is a product of the very mechanism that produced human consciousness, the very mechanism that entailed the withdrawal from the world of animality. Bataille offers the following summation of his thought:

Man is the being that has lost, and even rejected, that which he obscurely is, a vague intimacy. Consciousness could not have become clear in the course of time if it had not turned away from its awkward contents, but clear consciousness is itself looking for what it has itself lost, and what it must lose again as it draws near to it. Of course what it has lost is not outside it; consciousness turns away from the obscure intimacy of consciousness itself. Religion, whose essence is the search for lost intimacy, comes down to the effort of clear consciousness which wants to be a complete self-consciousness: but this effort is futile, since consciousness of intimacy is possible only at a level where consciousness is no longer an operation whose outcome implies duration, that is, at the level where clarity, which is the effect of the operation, is no longer given.  

There is, in other words, no way to return to the world of immanence from which human consciousness arose. The lost intimacy with ‘reality,’ the gap between beings and Being-itself, the very idea of ‘transcendence’ and of the infinite, are results of the evolution of human consciousness. The duality of concepts such as ‘finite / infinite’ and ‘conditional / unconditional’ arise as part of the early development of human consciousness. The concepts do not relate to ontological ‘realms,’ they do not describe the way things are apart from the human consciousness that gave rise to

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64 Bataille, Theory of Religion, 57.
them. The ‘more,’ the ‘transcendent Other,’ the ‘God beyond god,’ the ‘infinite’ are all constructs that answer to the desire for a return to the world of lost intimacy that gave birth to human consciousness. But this is not a world apart from our own; it is a ‘construct’ that was produced in early human evolutionary development.

Religious faith, then, is not a means of overcoming the gap between beings and Being-itself, of granting access to an intimacy with all things (at least in the sense of an ontological rather than symbolic manner, that is, in the sense that this is how things actually are). Neither is it simply epistemological error. It is, among other things, a product of the evolution of human consciousness, whereby human beings extract meaning from the world in an attempt to recover the lost intimacy that they feel (existential estrangement) in relation to the immanence of animality. Religious faith serves a vital purpose in the creation of meaning to overcome the sense of loss that the rise of human consciousness entailed. It does not, however, relate to an ontological breach between human beings and Being-itself because Being-itself is a ‘product’ of the rise of human consciousness in the first place, a product which is manifest in both religious and political thought. There is an ‘unthought’ at work in all of this as the pre-history of human evolutionary development can not be ‘thought’ because it is prior to consciousness and is forever barred to human analysis. But even this ‘unthought’ is part of the symbolic and linguistic worlds that human beings inhabit; worlds that themselves emerge at the point of human consciousness.

65 Space constraints forbid an analysis of Bataille’s thesis that the ‘sacred’ lies at the heart of both religion and political (especially militaristic) violence (with sacrifice understood as initially attempting to breach the gap between the profane and sacred realms—in order to attempt a return to the intimacy of animality—and then ‘turned outward’ to give birth to the military war machine). But this connection is important to note given the contemporary phenomenon of religious violence, which is itself inextricably linked to political motivation. The contemporary situation ‘confirms’ his theory because the religious and the political have a common root. Therefore, any attempt to ‘explain away’ religiously motivated violence (particularly violence which is the result of religious faith) as political and economic misses the point that all three areas are intertwined to begin with.
It is to the rise of this structural linguistic and symbolic framework that requires another frame of reference, namely the psychoanalytical framework of Jacques Lacan, to which I will now turn. In terms of this thesis, the major point to be extracted from the above engagement with Bataille is that analysing religious faith as a natural phenomenon is not a reductive enterprise because the theological (and the very idea of the infinite) is itself a reduction that accompanies the evolutionary development of human consciousness.

e. Jacques Lacan and the Symbolic World of the big ‘Other’

As noted in the first section, Tillich sharply distinguishes between faith and belief in order to clarify what faith entails. Tillich understands belief as an epistemological act with a low degree of evidence, a theoretical judgment concerning propositions and evidence. Faith, in contrast, for Tillich, is an existential act that demands commitment, a ‘state’ of being in relation to an ultimate ontological concern rather than an ‘opinion’ of mind in relation to knowledge.66 Because of this distinction, Tillich claims that one can have true faith and false beliefs.67 In On Belief, Slavoj Žižek also makes a distinction between belief and faith but on behalf of a Lacanian psychoanalytical analysis of belief rather than a religiously generated philosophical understanding of faith.68 For the psychoanalytical understanding of faith primarily concerns its symbolic function. In declaring that one has ‘faith in’ another (person, deity, principle, etc.), one is declaring that there exists a symbolic

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66 See Tillich, Dynamics of Faith, 35-41.
'contract,' a commitment that is not necessarily a part of any belief (understood here as accepting the ‘facts’ about someone or something apart from making any kind of commitment to them). For example, the ancient Jews believed in many gods but had faith in one god, Yahweh. They accepted the existence of many entities but only entered into a committed ‘relationship’ with Yahweh. So, in a simple formula, we could say that they believed in X (various deities) without having faith in X (various deities). Lacan reversed this formula to express the way in which human beings inhabit the symbolic order. We can have faith in X without believing in X. In other words, human beings can feel bound to a symbolic order (X) without believing (or even necessarily knowing) about it. But this commitment to what Lacan terms the big ‘Other’ is the cause of various ‘complaints’ that require psychoanalytical treatment. In fact, the treatment of the patient can be said to be ‘over’ only when the patient accepts the non-existence of the big ‘Other.’

69 The ‘symbolic’ is a central category for Lacan, particularly in terms of the way he understands the psychological space that human beings inhabit. Lacan posits three categories, known as his ISR (Imaginary / Symbolic /Real) triad, in order to provide a structure for understanding this space. In simple terms, the Imaginary is the Order of the ego, particularly the way in which an ego is formed in early childhood and continues to influence adults as adults strive for wholeness and unity; the Symbolic is the Order of society, the framework in which human beings construct their world, a framework which is bound together by the signifying chain wherein language is said to ‘carve up the world;’ and the Real is the Order that cannot be directly known, the world before it is ‘carved up by language.’ But to complicate matters, the Real functions in two ways, as that which precedes the Symbolic and as that which remains after the human Symbolic framework is established. In terms of this thesis, I am focusing on the latter aspect. For an explication of this triad, particularly how the Real and the Symbolic Order relates to the Christian religion, see Žižek, On Belief, 79-89, especially his delineation on page 82.

70 For Žižek’s explication of this idea see his On Belief, 109-110.

71 See Slavoj Žižek, The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 169-70. Note that this is one (influential – and I think valuably fecund) reading of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory. Žižek is one of the major figures of the ‘Slovenian Lacanian School’ which applies Lacanian categories to cultural, philosophical and political reflection. But there are other ‘readings,’ such as the approach of the Anglo-Saxon engagement with Lacan (the ‘literature-cinema-feminist triangle’ of Screen magazine and m/f journal), which draws close affinities between Lacan and post-structuralism, an approach which is in sharp contrast to the demarcation between these fields in the Slovenian school (see Žižek’s statement to this effect in Slavoj Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology (London: Verso, 1989), 7). There are also other approaches, such as the work of Louis Althusser (Marxist structuralist reading of Lacan) and the distinction between the ‘old school’ Lacanians (who focussed on the Symbolic) and the younger generation (who focus on the Real). The point here is that Lacan is interpreted in differing ways among those who follow him. The approach to
faith because the religious symbolic order is bound to the big ‘Other’ of ‘God,’ with religious adherents considering God to be a being outside of the order (in the case of standard approaches to God as the ‘highest being’) or Being-itself (in the case of Tillich and those who follow him). But the very idea of ‘God’ is a product of the means by which the symbolic order arose. The symbolic and linguistic structure that underlies religious faith may require faith in (commitment to) an X but when this

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Lacan that I am taking in this thesis follows Žižek’s reading. For a brief introduction to the various ‘readings’ of Lacan, see Ernesto Laclau’s preface to Žižek’s The Sublime Object of Ideology, ix-xv.

72 Freud argued that religion was ‘the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity.’ Sigmund Freud, The Future of an Illusion in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, edited by James Strachey et al (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 2:43. Religious faith, as participating in this universal neurosis, requires treatment in reference to the big ‘Other’ of the symbolic order. However, the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion is not as inimical as this statement might suggest. As Andrew Skorma notes in the editorial accompanying a volume of umbr(a) on the matter, ‘the socially-sedimented nature of belief is not met with a strictly hostile, atheistic rejection. . . Although emerging in the form of a critique of all religious sacralization, what Freud unfurrowed was the grain of truth behind religion’s zealous repressions. . . The theoretical labor of psychoanalysis, then, with respect to religion, consistently turns around this point, which is nothing more than a questioning of the Other. . . God is only significant for analysis if it remains as a guarantee of our own indefiniteness, as a signer that preserves a space for an absence while at the same time foreclosing any possibility of our ever obtaining it (‘The Object of Religion,’ umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious (2005):5-7).’ Religion, then, serves an important pedagogical function that psychoanalytical theory mines in reference to the ‘birth’ of the modern subject, collectives and ‘history,’ enabling a critique of our modern condition. In terms of this thesis, religious faith can be seen in a similar light, as demonstrating the way that human beings extract meaning from the world in such a way as to reveal the place of the ‘void’ that is ‘left over’ from the creation of the symbolic order.

73 In very basic terms, the symbolic order was established by means of a certain linguistic ‘digging into’ reality in order to provide a set of signifiers that would eventually comprise an ‘order.’ But this digging into reality also produces an ‘excess’ that resists symbolisation and appears as a void in the symbolic order itself, the Real becoming the driving force that gives rise to the symbolic order. Žižek comments on this aspect of Lacan’s thought, stressing the place of the Real in reference to the symbolic, which is analogous to my thesis in reference to God (or the ‘more’ or the ‘infinite) being part of human thought rather than external to it: ‘. . . the Real is not external to the Symbolic: the Real is the Symbolic itself in the modality of the non-All, lacking an external Limit/Exception. In this precise sense, the line of separation between the Symbolic and the Real is not only a symbolic gesture par excellence, but the very founding gesture of the Symbolic and to step into the Real does not entail abandoning language . . . but, on the contrary, dropping the very allusion to some external point of reference which eludes the Symbolic. . . In short, the Unnameable is strictly inherent to language. . . It is not that we need words to designate objects, to symbolize reality, and that then, in surplus, there is some excess of reality, a traumatic core that resists symbolization—this obscurantist theme of the unnameable Core of Higher Reality that eludes the grasp of language is to be thoroughly rejected; not because of a naïve belief that everything can be nominated, grasped by our reason, but because of the fact that the Unnameable is an effect of language. We have reality before our eyes well before language, and what language does, in its most fundamental gesture, is—as Lacan put it—the very opposite of designating reality: it digs a hole in it, it opens up visible/present reality toward the dimension of the immaterial/unseen (Žižek, The Puppet and the Dwarf, 69-70).’ This is Žižek’s answer to critics who would claim that there is really little difference between the Real and the Symbolic, particularly in terms of the distinction being itself inscribed within the Symbolic. See the full discussion in Žižek’s The Puppet and the Dwarf, 67-73.
X is recognised as non-existent the adherent can be freed from that which bound her (symbolically). Drawing a distinction between faith and belief can aid an analysis of religious faith because the focal point of commitment toward an ultimate concern (big ‘Other’) can be distinguished from the various propositional statements that accompany such commitments. The point of this critique is that religious faith itself (rather than belief) can be shown to inhabit a symbolic world of which the very idea of God (the big ‘Other’) arises from the creation of the symbolic order itself. It is a human construct (or technically that which is left over from the process of symbolisation) not an extra-systematic reality, and certainly not reality itself. Religious faith draws deeply into this symbolic order, extracting a depth of meaning that enriches the life of its adherents but it does not connect with a reality apart from the symbolic world in which it subsists. In terms of psychoanalytical treatment, religious faith can be said to present a barrier to wellbeing in the sense of a patient being bound to centre of gravity that does not exist in reality. But at the same time it is the source of generating meaning that enriches the lives of those who partake of it. Again, there is a dialectic at play, a dialectic that remains benign under certain circumstances but that can produce monstrous results in others, particularly when linked to religio-political terrorism.\(^\text{74}\)

Bataille presents a picture of how human consciousness arose in relation to the intimacy of immanence associated with animality. Lacan can be seen to ‘further’ this idea in terms of psychoanalytical theory, providing a psychological

\(^{74}\) I will return to the matter of suicidal terrorism in the conclusion and simply note it here as a contemporary phenomenon that could be addressed by psychoanalytical theory in reference to a critical theory of religion. It is not raised in order to generate an emotional acceptance of the theory or to ‘sex up’ the case for a critical theory of religion. But it is an example of how religious faith can generate and support ideological commitment of a monstrous kind, functioning as a mechanism for uncritical deference to a hegemonic / ideological demand.
framework for the rise of the symbolic order. This is important in terms of this thesis because it demonstrates a means by which the religious order is established in psychoanalytical terms, which provides additional support to the socio-political analysis provided by Bataille. In a sense, it presents a second ‘piece to the puzzle’ of the complex phenomenon of religious faith, another basis upon which to draw the contours of the cartography of religious faith in a particular manner. Space constraints forbid a comprehensive presentation and support of Lacanian psychoanalysis in reference to religion here. However, I offer the following ‘compact’ account of what happens in the psychoanalytic process and why. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, at noted above, the treatment is said to be over when the patient is able to accept the non-existence of the big ‘Other.’ The patient, finally dropping the ‘reality’ of that which bound her, is delivered from her malady in order to live in a space that is no longer drawn into the event horizon of that ‘reality.’ Put in slightly different language, the force of that reality, now that the reality is shown to be illusory, no longer provokes a certain mental ‘swerve of the Real’ but is shown to be the product rather than the cause of certain human mental processes. The patient—through her relationship with the analyst—locates the real ‘Thing’ to which she was responding and which had been producing her illness. Once this ‘real’ ceases to function as part of the patient’s interpretive framework, the patient is ‘healed’ and the particular ‘Thing’ that had functioned as the Real no longer binds the patient and is cursorily discarded. She can now make a truly free choice.

75 The idea of the ‘swerve of the Real’ will be briefly explicated later in this paragraph. But for Žižek’s insightful treatment of it, see Žižek, The Puppet and the Dwarf, 59-91.

76 For Lacan, the ego is formed within a pre-existing symbolic order and one becomes a subject (an ‘I’) by being subjected to this order. The unconscious is that excess which resists symbolization. It is formed along with the ego during the early stages of human development, particularly with the embedding of human beings within a pre-existing linguistic matrix (that is, the seat of both the conscious and unconscious lies in a linguistic-symbolic development). This means that the subject is constituted by the symbolic order and considers that order to be reality itself when in fact it is a
the concept of the ‘Thing’ that functions as the Real. In religious faith, this relates primary to the referent of faith (God), which is an essential and constitutive aspect of it. Even in Tillich’s faith as ultimate concern, faith is directed to an ‘Other’ (a ‘more,’ the infinite) that is understood as ‘real,’ even if that ‘Other’ is the concept of Being-itself (of which all beings are a part) and that reality is the existential gap between beings and Being. Faith for Tillich (as noted in the first section) is a ‘state of being grasped by that toward which self-transcendence aspires,’ opening humanity to the ‘transcendent unity of unambiguous life.’

There is—even in Tillich’s understanding of faith—an ‘excess’ that is not part of the symbolic network itself, a transcendent ‘excess’ that faith is geared toward, even if this ‘excess’ is seen as incorporating all things including the symbolic order. This ‘excess’ is of particular importance to Lacan, who posited what he called three ‘modalities’ of the Real to come to terms with the ‘excess’ or ‘Other,’ that reinscribed them into the evolution of human consciousness, including the rise of the conscious and the unconscious (hence connecting this analysis with Bataille).

For Lacan, there is an ‘excess’ that resists symbolisation but not because it is somehow outside of language and thought. The excess (what Lacan refers to as the ‘Real’) is that which is left over from the symbolisation process and which appears as a void in the Symbolic order. This void, culturally constructed matrix. This includes the religious ‘order of things.’ However, there is a way to break out of the ‘gravitational field’ of the symbolic order. The way lies in what Žižek, following Lacan, calls an authentic act or a ‘truly free choice’ that exposes the order as a ‘ruse’ and undermines its power by refusing to make a choice in terms of pre-given co-ordinates, transcending those co-ordinates and redefining the situation that one inhabits. In other words, the truly free choice is to change the set of co-ordinates itself. For a brief discussion of the Lacanian ‘truly free choice’ see Žižek, On Belief, 112-27. For a discussion of how this ‘choice’ indicates a revolution in ethics, what Žižek calls an ‘ethics of the Real’ (and particularly how this relates to Derrida’s tout autre, which has recently been interpreted in terms of the ‘return of the religious’ by thinkers such as John D. Caputo) see Slavoj Žižek, Interrogating the Real (London: Continuum, 2005),152-60, 345-48. For a brief introduction to the thought of Lacan and Žižek in terms of how their theory relates to religion, see William E. Deal & Timothy K. Beal, Theory for Religious Studies (New York: Routledge, 2004), esp. 117-21 (on Lacan) and 165-8 (on Žižek).


78 See footnote 69 for a brief explication of these modalities and how they relate to the ‘Other.’
which includes Tillich’s concept of the ‘God beyond god,’ the God beyond human thinking about God, is a product of human symbolic-linguistic development. Lacan’s ‘Real’ functions in much the same way as Einstein’s law of general relativity, specifically the way Einstein began with a theory of special relativity and then ‘tweaked’ it (by way of reversal of one major concept) to enable a theory of general relativity. The ‘excess’ of the Real, then, is not ‘another Centre, a “deeper,” “truer” focal point or “black hole” around which symbolic formations fluctuate; rather, it is the obstacle on account of which every Centre is always displaced.’

So just as the curvature of space-time is not caused by matter, matter being the effect of the curvature itself (Einstein’s conceptual shift from special to general relativity), the ‘excess’—or ‘more’—does not lie outside of our symbolic network but is an effect of the very process by which symbolisation transpires. And it is here that the notion of a ‘swerve’ operates. Because just as the existence of black holes is detected by the way in which light swerves around them, the existence of the big ‘Other’ is detected by the way that the mind is caught in the swerve of the Real. Once the Real is acknowledged as that which distorts reality, it can be seen not as that which causes the curve of mental space but as the effect of the breaks in symbolic space itself. Once we shift our perspective in an analogous move to Einstein, the excess (or ‘more’) can be seen for what it is, the effect of symbolisation. Once this is accepted, the big ‘Other’ can be acknowledged as such (as an effect, that is, as ontologically

79 This is why I alluded to a ‘swerve of the Real’ in explicating how a patient might be healed. Žižek comments on this in terms of a Hegelian reversal (that is a move from Kant to Hegel): ‘The logic of this [Hegelian] reversal is ultimately the same as the passage from the special to the general theory of relativity in Einstein. While the special theory already introduces the notion of curved space, it conceives of this curvature as the effect of matter . . . With the passage to the general theory, the causality is reversed: far from causing the curvature of space, matter is the effect. In the same way the Lacanian Real—the Thing—is not so much the inert presence that “curves” the symbolic space (introducing gaps and inconsistencies in it), but, rather, the effect of these gaps and inconsistencies (Žižek, The Puppet and the Dwarf, 66).’

80 Žižek, The Puppet and the Dwarf, 67.
‘non-existent’) and human beings are released from the swerve of the Real that binds them. Religion, then, can be understood as the cause of the idea of God rather than God being understood as the reality to which religion responds. Again, this is non-reductive in that the theological is shown to be a reductive category of thought (caught in the swerve of the Real of the religious ‘infinite’).

Given the above, religious faith can be expressed as the mechanism by which a commitment is made toward a deity or principle (an ‘ultimate concern’) deemed to be an ‘excess’ to the system but which in fact arises from the genesis of the symbolic order itself and is inscribed within the particular symbolic universe from which the interpretive framework operates as a ‘void’ in that system. But how does the human mind accept a nonexistent big ‘Other,’ particularly if religious belief is not to be considered a form of epistemological error? Throughout this thesis I have stressed that religious faith is a complex phenomenon that cannot be adequately analysed apart from a ‘non-reductive’ approach. Religious faith, therefore, must not be reduced to the epistemological arena. The psychoanalytical theory given above is not given to subvert this claim. On the contrary, psychoanalytical thought provides a means of explaining why human beings orient their lives toward certain practices and believe certain things. The nonexistence of the big ‘Other’ is not an epistemological but a socio-cultural psychoanalytical matter, although it does partake of epistemological elements. The point of this analysis is that the rise of the symbolic / linguistic order helps to explain why religious faith functions in the manner that it does. However, what mechanism can be suggested for the reason human minds work in this way and not another? What can help to explain the existence of religious ideas and why they are so prevalent in so many cultures and contexts throughout human
history? To answer these questions and provide a final area of support for this thesis, I turn to Pascal Boyer’s anthropological analysis of the evolution of religious thought, particularly in terms of his consideration of the way in which natural inference systems create religious faith as a by-product while engaged with their respective ‘non-religious’ purposes.

f. Pascal Boyer and the Aggregate Relevance of Cognitive Inference Systems

Pascal Boyer’s explanation of religion is a little different from that of most anthropologists throughout the modern period. Eschewing any ‘single origin’ theory, Boyer approaches his subject matter from a different angle, attempting to ‘explain’ religion not by locating a historical origin but by exploring how religious concepts are created and eliminated in terms of cognitive science. Rather than searching for a single reason why religion developed at a particular time in human evolutionary history (with current religious forms seen as a diversification from that origin), the questions of origins is ‘turned on its head’ to consider current forms of religion and religious thought as a reduction of the ‘very many’ to the ‘many fewer’:

If religion is reassuring, why does it create so much of the anxiety that it cures? If it explains the world, why does it do it with such baroque complication? Why does it have these common, recurrent themes rather than a great variety of irrefutable ideas? Why is it so closely connected to morality, whereas it cannot really create morality? . . We cannot hope to explain religion if we just fantasise about the way human minds work. We cannot just decide that religion fulfils some particular intellectual or emotional needs, when there is no real evidence for these needs. . . We cannot just ignore the anthropological evidence about different religions and the psychological evidence about mental processes. . . The main problem with our spontaneous explanation of religion lies in the very assumption that we can explain the origin of religion by selecting one particular problem or idea or feeling and deriving the variety of things we now call religion from that unique point. . . But we can approach the question from another angle. Indeed we can and
should turn the whole “origin” explanation upside down, as it were, and realize that the many forms of religion we know are not the outcome of a historical diversification but of a constant reduction. Anthropologists explain the origins of many cultural phenomena, including religion, not by going from the One to the Many but going from the Very Many to the Many Fewer, the many variants that our minds constantly produce and the many fewer variants that can be actually transmitted to other people and become stable in a human group. To explain religion we must explain how human minds, constantly faced with lots of potential “religious stuff,” constantly reduce it to much less stuff. . . The process [of how religious concepts are created and constantly eliminated] goes on, completely unnoticed, in parts of our mind that conscious introspection will not reach. This cannot be observed or explained without the experimental resources of cognitive science.81

Boyer’s basic thesis is that many variants of religious ideas are constantly being created and discarded within individual human minds and that this process has been going on throughout human evolutionary history. He explains how this occurs by recourse to what he terms ‘cognitive inference systems’ (independent mental systems that were tailored by natural selection because of their ability to solve problems in our early evolutionary history, that is, mental adaptations crucial for human social life) and ‘aggregate relevance’ (successful activation of a variety of mental systems that allows various ideas—in this case, religious ideas—to survive). Religious ideas are born in individual human minds but transmitted to others by means of cultural memes (units of culture such as values, narratives, and concepts that become replicated in

81 Pascal Boyer, Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 31-3. Boyer considers several ‘origin scenarios’ and demonstrates why they fail to explain why there is a phenomenon such as religion and why religion is as it is in the contemporary period. These scenarios include seeing religion as (1) providing explanations (to puzzling phenomena, to puzzling experiences, to the order of things, to evil and suffering), (2) providing comfort (to make mortality less unbearable and the world more comfortable), (3) providing social order (holding society together and supporting morality), (4) a cognitive illusion (people being superstitious and willing to believe the irrefutable). For Boyer, each of these scenarios fails to account for religion. Rather than seeing religion as an explanation, he hypothesises that ‘religious concepts are probably influenced by the way the brain’s inference systems produce explanations without our being aware of it (18).’ Rather than seeing religion as an emotional ‘crutch,’ he hypothesises that ‘our emotional programs are an aspect of our evolutionary heritage, which may explain how they affect religious concepts (22).’ Rather than seeing religion as the ‘glue’ that holds society morally together, he hypothesises that ‘the study of the social mind can show us why people have particular expectations about social life and morality and how these expectations are connected to their supernatural concepts (27).’ Rather than seeing religion as the ‘sleep of reason,’ he hypothesises that ‘we should understand what makes human minds so selective in what supernatural claims they find plausible (31).’
other people’s minds much in the same way that a gene replicates itself in a physical system) and cultural epidemics (particular representations that are diffused within a group much like the way different people ‘catch’ a disease; human minds work by means of inferential processes that are susceptible to certain kinds of ideas, ‘catching’ various components of publicly accessible cultural material). To put it simply, the human brain, through the natural process of ‘selection’ developed in such a way that manifests itself as religion in certain circumstances.

At the centre of Boyer’s explanation is the matter of the aggregate relevance of various inference systems, which requires some explication in order to understand the full import of his research. In classical philosophy (and some schools

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83 Another slightly different explication of this idea is provided by biologist Richard Dawkins who considers religion as the product of natural systems of the brain that once aided human evolutionary development (and had nothing to do with religion) but now manifest as religion. His slightly polemical analogy of the tendency of moths to fly into candle flames is worth reproducing here: ‘It’s tempting to label that [moths flying into candle flames] suicidal behavior in moths, and ask what on earth is the Darwinian advantage of suicidal behaviour in moths? If you put it like that, clearly there isn’t any. But if you say instead, ‘What is the Darwinian survival value of having the kind of brain which under some circumstances leads moths to fly into candle flames?’ Then you’re getting somewhere, because then you can say ‘Well in the world where moths evolved, there weren’t any candle flames. The only lights you would see if you were a night-flying moth would be things like the moon and the stars, and they are an optical infinity, which means that their rays are coming parallel. And if you have a rule of thumb in your brain that says, “Steer a steady angle of say 30 degrees to the rays of the moon”, that is a very useful thing to do, because that keeps you going in a dead straight line. That rule of thumb is then misapplied to candles, which are not an optical infinity, where the rays are radiating outwards. And if you follow the same rule of thumb, of keeping an angle of 30 degrees to the candle’s rays, then you’ll simply spiral into the candle and burn yourself.’ So it’s wrong to ask ‘Why do moths fly into candle flames?’ The right question is ‘Why do they have the kind of brain which in the wild state made them do something which in the human-dominated state where there are candles, makes them fly into candle flames? Now in the case of religion, I think that there was something built into the human brain by natural selection, which was once useful and which now manifests itself under civilized conditions as religion, but which used not to be religion when it first arose, and when it was useful (Richard Dawkins, ‘In a Sense Humans Have Emancipated Themselves from Natural Selection’ in Joan Bakewell, Belief (London: Duckworth, 2005), 211-2).’ See also Richard Dawkins, A Devil’s Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003) and The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987).
of contemporary analytical philosophy) the brain is considered as a ‘general explanation machine,’ the mind working like a single ‘let’s-review-the-facts-and-get-an-explanation” device.’

But Boyer presents the case that the mind comprises of many specialised explanatory devices that work independently of each other, each adapted to particular kinds of events. He terms these devices ‘inference systems.’ These systems operate at an unconscious level as a bundle of complicated systems solving complex problems that are not designed to provide a single conscious ‘answer’ but are interpreted as such by running together the various inferences that each judged different aspects of a matter independently and disconnectedly. The brain is not like a judge that gathers information together and then judges the validity of such information, making epistemological judgements in one conscious activity:

Mental systems do not present their evidence in front of a mental judge or jury. They decide the case even before it is presented to any other system. Indeed many mental systems do not even bother to present a coherent and unified brief. They just send bits of evidence to other systems, presenting them as fact rather than in the form of an argued brief.

Beliefs, in this model, are seen as ‘explanations’ or attempts at justifying the intuitions that human beings have as a result of the work of various inference systems. In as sense, they are interpretations of such intuitions. However, while such interpretations may be compatible with the decision of each inference system, the interpretations (general explanations) themselves were not handled as specific questions by any of the inference systems involved. So human beings can be said to

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86 Boyer gives an example of how this works by considering the intuitions adults have regarding children, namely that children are less competent than adults (‘adults minus some capacities’). This interpretation of adult intuitions regarding children gives an explanation for the way adults treat children. It is a way of making sense of adult behaviour. Several inference systems are involved in this process. The ‘moral emotional system’ yields a ‘representation’ that the child is not moved by moral intuitions. The ‘verbal communication system’ yields the ‘representation’ that the child does not understand what is said. The ‘intuitive psychology system’ yields the ‘representation’ that a child does not foresee the possible negative results of certain actions (such as stroking the head of a strange large
believe certain ideas because these ideas are compatible with the results of various mental inference systems that never handled the questions to which the ideas arose as interpretations (or ‘answers’). It should be noted here that the research into these inference systems is vast with support for this approach widespread, coming from different social-scientific fields.\textsuperscript{87} Boyer’s theory is a well-supported scientific analysis of the psychological bases of religious faith that is part of a new generation of interdisciplinary research in reference to religion. It has become part of the platform for many research projects in anthropology and the social sciences.\textsuperscript{88}

Boyer’s analysis of inference systems relates to religious concepts because such concepts are ‘built’ by interpretations of intuitions that are provided by inference systems engaged in activities of a general (non-religious) kind. Boyer’s claim is that:

dog). While each of these systems may support the interpretation that children are immature, each does so for different reasons in dealing with different situations. None of these systems actually handled the question as to whether children are like adults with underdeveloped capacities. It takes an interpretation (a belief) of one’s own actions to bring the systems together even though the systems are not concerned with the question that the interpretation asks. Boyer states: ‘what makes us assent to a general statement such as “Children are underdeveloped versions of adults” is not that we really perform a general assessment of the evidence but rather that various mental systems, out of sight as it were, produce intuitions compatible with that general statement (314).’ For Boyer’s full explication see, Religion Explained, 306-14.

\textsuperscript{87} Boyer notes four areas of research that have greatly enhanced our knowledge of inference systems and how they work: (1) experimental studies of normal adult subjects regarding specialised principles that produce certain intuitions about their environment, (2) cognitive developmental studies on children and the way such systems appear in early infancy, (3) brain imagery techniques (tracking blood flow or electrical or magnetic activity in the brain) that identify which aspects of the brain system are operable during different kinds of tasks, (4) neuropsychological findings regarding cognitive pathologies that impair certain inference systems and leave others intact. For Boyer’s detailed explication of how the mind works, including some evidence from the abovementioned fields of study, see Religion Explained, 93-135.

\textsuperscript{88} It is also part of the platform that philosopher Daniel Dennett provides for his recent Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon (New York: Viking Adult, 2006). Unfortunately, this volume was published this month (February 2006) and arrived after this thesis was written. But it lends further support to my hypothesis in that Dennett presents a cogent argument for religion as a natural phenomenon, drawing out the philosophical implications of a Darwinian explication of religion that he hinted at in the latter sections of his Darwin’s Dangerous Idea (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995). See especially his section on faith, entitled ‘Belief in belief,’ 200-246.
we can explain religion by describing how each of these various capacities gets recruited, how they contribute to the features of religion that we find in so many different cultures. We do not need to assume that there is a special way of functioning that occurs only when processing religious thoughts. . . [T]he processes that create “belief” are the same in religion and everyday matters.89

But what are these capacities, these inference systems at work in religious belief? While a comprehensive explication of how each system works is well beyond the scope of this thesis, Boyer illustrates how several systems work together in relation to beliefs about ancestors or deities which will serve as an example for the purposes of my own argument:

Since people’s thoughts about ancestors are focused on a variety of different situations, it is not surprising that many different systems are involved. The intuitive psychology system treats ancestors (or God) as intentional agents, the exchange system treats them as exchange partners, the moral system treats them as potential witnesses to moral action, the person-file system treats them as distinct individuals. This means that quite a lot of mental work is going on, producing specific inferences about ancestors, without ever requiring explicit general statements to the effect that, for example, “there really are invisible ancestors around,” “they are dead people,” “they have powers,” etc. Naturally, most of the inferences I have mentioned are compatible with these general assumptions. But none of the systems involved was busy deciding whether the general statements were true or not. Indeed, none of these systems is designed to handle such abstract questions. For instance, when people offer a pig and expect protection in return, the intuition that this behavior is appropriate is supported by their social exchange system, which says only this: if there is an exchange partner and if that partner does receive a benefit, then you can expect the partner to send some benefits back to you. But that system is not in charge of deciding whether the partners are really around or not. When you see that other people are sacrificing pigs to get protection, this activates your social exchange system because that is the most relevant way to make sense of what they are doing.90

Thus, several inference systems deliver intuitions that ‘make sense’ in terms of a general assumption / interpretation that can be applied to human action. This means that an idea such as the existence of a deity can be ‘distributed’ among different inference systems without the mind ever entertaining whether or not such a deity exists. Our contemporary situation, where religious beliefs are objects of debate, is a

89 Boyer, Religion Explained, 311.
90 Boyer, Religion Explained, 314.
special kind of culture that raises the question as to the existence of God. But such a question would not normally be entertained throughout the majority of cultures that have evolved throughout the history of humanity. But even in this culture, questions as to the validity of belief in or existence of God do not automatically disrupt the interpretations of intuitions because the idea of God, being spread across many inference systems, may seem the best way of explaining one’s environment. In other words, people do not have faith in God or believe certain propositions to be true because they have cogent and coherent arguments for God’s existence, they have faith in God because the idea of God makes sense in terms of an interpretation of the intuitions that arise from the work of a whole host of inference systems engaged in other tasks. But when this distribution among many systems begins to weaken, because of a lack of occasions where claims regarding God could be used to provide

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91 This is a point that is often overlooked when considering pre-Enlightenment treatises on God. The question as to the existence of God was not one that could be asked within such cultures because ‘God’ (or deities) functioned as a necessary and essential component of the hermeneutical framework employed to interpret experience, a framework that was produced by the work of several inference systems in reference to cultural and social practices that related to God. This hermeneutical framework began to crumble due to the Enlightenment in the West. It should be remembered that in the ancient economy the word ‘atheist’ referred to a person who did not worship the ‘god’ of the culture in which that person lived. Christians, for example, were labelled atheists by the Roman government because of their lack of worship of Caesar and the ‘gods’ of the Roman / Greek pantheon. The ‘cultural politics’ of pre-Enlightenment societies was simply not conducive to secular and post-theistic interpretations of reality. Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, for example, interpret the contemporary Western culture as ‘postreligious’ in *The Future of Religion*, edited by Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Zabala, in introducing this work, stresses that the future lies in a process of continued secularisation: ‘If the task of philosophy after the death of God—hence after the deconstruction of metaphysics—is a labor of stitching things back together, of reassembly, then secularization is the appropriate way of bearing witness to the attachment of modern European civilization to its own religious past . . . Contrary to the view of a good deal of contemporary theology, the death of God is something post-Christian rather than anti-Christian; by now we are living in the post-Christian time of the death of God, in which secularisation has become the norm for all theological discourse (2).’ The point for this thesis is that cultural politics is of vital importance to why the question of the existence of God is ‘live’ in the contemporary post-Enlightenment ‘western’ world and to disregard the distinction between pre-Enlightenment and post-enlightenment portrayals of God is to misunderstand the assumptions and hermeneutical frameworks employed in different historical epochs. For more on the significance of ‘cultural politics,’ see Richard Rorty, ‘Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God’ in *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, edited by Nancy K. Frankenberry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 53-77.
interpretations for such occasions, the general interpretation is placed under stress.92

This is why the cultural production of religious ideas subsists within communities of faith, whereby persons who inhabit such communities are engaged in many activities that support the aggregate relevance of many inference systems that are transmitted in turn to future generations.93 It is surely a truisim that 'people generally adhere to the specific religious commitments of their community and ignore other variants as

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92 As Atran and Norenzayan demonstrate, it is through ritual and communal praxis rather than theoretical argumentation that faith is validated. As the following quote illustrates, Atran and Norenzayan follow a similar argument to Boyer in terms of explaining religion in naturalistic terms, providing a slightly more nuanced understanding of the relationship between religion and evolutionary development: 'Religion is not an evolutionary adaptation, but a recurring by-product of the complex evolutionary landscape that sets cognitive, emotional and material conditions for ordinary human interactions. The conceptual foundations of religion are intuitively given by task-specific panhuman cognitive domains, including folkmechanics, folkbiology, folkpsychology. Core religious beliefs minimally violate ordinary intuitions about the world, with its inescapable problems. This enables people to imagine minimally impossible supernatural worlds that solve existential problems, including death and deception. Because religious beliefs cannot be deductively or inductively validated, validation occurs only by ritually addressing the very emotions motivating religion. Cross-cultural experimental evidence encourages these claims ('Religions Evolutionary Landscape,’ 713).’ See Scott Atran and Ara Norenzayan, ‘Religion’s Evolutionary Landscape: Counterintuition, Commitment, Compassion, Communion,’ Behavioral and Brain Sciences 27/6(2004): 713-730. See also Scott Atran’s In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). As Atran and Norenzayan indicate above, validation comes through ritual not argument, through the distribution of the idea of God across many aspects of religious praxis. Could this insight also be the reason why Blaise Pascal’s famous ‘wager’ (fragment 233) has been effective in terms of religious conversion? In his Pensées, Pascal declares to his imaginary partner: ‘. . . You want to find faith and you do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound as you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile (Pascal, Pensées (Harmondsworth: Penguin,1966),152-3).’ For Pascal, by acting as if one has faith one is prepared for faith itself. This is remarkably close to the thesis of the aggregate relevance of cognitive inference systems that by partaking in various rituals and practices where ‘God’ is named, it makes it more likely that a person will have faith in God.

93 What are the specific systems that relate to religion? Boyer offers the following concise delineation of systems operable in reference to religion, systems that explain why certain variants are found the world over and why other variants are so often discarded: ‘. . . all human minds carry the systems that produce the small selective advantage I described here. Among these systems are a set of intuitive ontological expectations, a propensity to direct attention to what is counterintuitive, a tendency to recall if it is inferentially rich, a system for detecting and overdetecting agency, a set of social mind systems that make the notion of well-informed agents particularly relevant, a set of moral intuitions that seem to have no clear justification in our own concepts, a set of social categories that pose the same problem. We are no longer surprised that religious concepts and behaviours have persisted for millennia, probably much longer, and display similar themes the world over. These concepts just happen to be optimal in the sense that they activate a variety of systems in a way that makes their transmission possible (Religion Explained, 328-9).’ For more support for these considerations, particularly for the various concepts that could be described as ‘optimal,’ including the manner in which peoples believe more than they consciously recognise, see Justin L. Barrett, ‘Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion,’ Trends in Cognitive Science 4.1(2000):29-34.
largely irrelevant. Boyer’s explanation of religion helps to situate this truism within a social-scientific framework. It also adds further support to my claim that the concept of the ‘more’ or the ‘infinite’ are human constructs that have developed along with our evolutionary history in relation to interpreting reality. As Boyer notes, such concepts are optimal in the sense that they tend to persist throughout a variety of conditions and cultures in relation to religion. They are optimal interpretations of intuitions that have been provided by disparate inference systems that when taken together could support the concept. Because of their centrality to the particular hermeneutical frameworks which subsist within communities of faith they tend to be transmitted from one generation to the next apart from any analytical examination. As concepts they function as part of the interpretive apparatus that maintains acceptance of the symbolic order as that order has been transmitted culturally to the next generation. So both social-psychological and cultural-anthropological forces help to maintain such concepts. This extends to the place such concepts occupy in the philosophies of religion and theologies of our contemporary era, including the place they occupy in attacks against non-religious interpretations of religion as reductive. They are part of the very symbolic and hermeneutical framework that produces them in the first place and have been ‘selected’ as optimal during our evolutionary development because of their ability to cohere with particular interpretations of intuitions that have arisen from the work of inference systems that handle the material of cultural production and cultural politics that are operable at the time. Religion is a natural phenomenon of which religious faith and the concepts that appear with such faith are natural by-products of the way human beings have evolved and continue to interact with the world in evolutionary terms.

94 Boyer, Religion Explained, 317.
The above analysis of religion from the standpoint of an anthropological cognitive science helps to situate religion squarely in the natural realm. It also provides an explanation of the mechanism at work in religious faith in terms of the ‘mind’ and why the mind works in such a way as to support the phenomenon of faith, particularly the way various inference systems lead to interpretations of reality supported by faith communities to which human beings commit themselves. However, Boyer is primarily interested in religious thought, in the content of particular beliefs and why certain beliefs are more prevalent than others. It is belief rather than faith that is primarily in view throughout the work. This does not negate the import of the work for this thesis because both faith (as commitment to an ultimate concern) and belief (as the content of various religious claims) subsist within the mind, as ‘by-products of the way concepts and inferences are doing their work for religion in much the same way as for other domains.’

Religious faith, then, is a consequence (an expression) of psychological and social forces. It is a historical manifestation and by-product of a whole complex of mental systems that have developed in our evolutionary history. With this mechanism in place, the socio-political theory of Georges Bataille and the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan can be incorporated into a single hypothesis regarding religious faith to suggest that religious faith is a species of depth of meaning engagement that arises from the evolution of human consciousness in relation to the lost intimacy of animality, drawing from the symbolic order in which it subsists as the mind creates and accepts such an order on the basis of the aggregate relevance of inference systems. This allows for a truly integrated hypothesis that answers to the socio-political, psychological, and anthropological basis of religious faith as a natural

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95 Boyer, Religion Explained, 330.
human phenomenon. It also allows for a non-reductive analysis in the manner demonstrated throughout this chapter. Thus, human beings, by means of religious faith, engage with a depth of meaning that is possible because of what religion entails in terms of (a) a socio-cultural response to a loss of intimacy with immanence in early human evolution, (b) subsisting within a particular symbolic and linguistic order with reference to an ‘excess’ deemed a transcendent ‘more,’ (c) that the ‘mind’ considers valid due to an interpretation of intuitions that have been supplied by the work of several disconnected inference systems designed for other means.

Throughout this thesis I have been endeavouring to provide a provisional contemporary ‘critical theory’ of religious faith (hence, the engagement with the social sciences, particularly the psychoanalytical and the socio-political). Critical theory was born by connecting the philosophical with the psychoanalytical thought of Freud and the socio-political thought of Marx, endeavouring to provide a critique of society that embraced the social sciences rather than casting them as inimical to the work of critical analysis. It has been in this sense that Bataille, Lacan and Boyer have been utilised throughout this section. For religious faith is a socio-cultural phenomenon and only by engaging with the various areas of critical

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96 This was originally done by members of the Frankfurt School, which set out shortly before World War 2 to engage in an interdisciplinary programme of research that would investigate the contradictions and pathologies of modernity, as indicated in what has become the seminal text of the Frankfurt School and of Critical Theory in general, Theodor W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997); originally published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (New York: Social Studies Association, 1944). But ‘critical theory’ has become an ‘umbrella term’ to signify a whole host of contemporary approaches to theory that seek to engage in a critical analysis of society from an interdisciplinary perspective which utilises the research of the social sciences. It is in this general sense of the term that this thesis is presented as a provisional hypothesis in relation to critical theory. In this thesis, it has been the areas of sociology and politics (Bataille), psychoanalysis (Lacan) and anthropology (Boyer) that have largely informed the contours of the hypothesis. There are other approaches that would need to be considered in order to provide a more robust critical theory, particularly a more solid Marxist analysis of religious faith in reference to the various structures of religion and an interaction with feminist theory, postcolonial theory and ecocriticism. It would also be fecund to develop the psychoanalytical argument further in terms of semiotics, post-structuralism and deconstruction. But as stressed in the introduction this is a provisional hypothesis, one that I intend to ‘think through’ with reference to the larger corpus of critical theory in the coming years.
theory can such a phenomenon begin to be adequately analysed. By connecting a positive functional definition of faith that arose from Tillich—faith as engaging with a depth of meaning—to the critical apparatus of critical theory (socio-political analysis of Bataille, psychoanalytical analysis of Lacan, and anthropological / cognitive scientific analysis of Boyer), it has been possible to recast the problematic of ‘secular’ analyses of religious faith as purportedly ‘reductive’ in terms of a wider frame of reference. I have demonstrated that it is possible to consider religious faith from a non-theological and non-religious standpoint and still provide a non-reductive analysis. In fact, it has been suggested that both the theological and the religious are themselves reductive human enterprises born from the early evolutionary history of humankind. This will, no doubt, not receive a particularly warm reception among many theologians and philosophers of religion. But even if the framework I have employed is not accepted, what must be accepted is that religious faith can be theorised in a non-religious manner that demonstrates how ‘God,’ the ‘more,’ the ‘infinite,’ ‘excess’ etcetera are reductive concepts. The charge of reductive caricature must then be resisted. If the infinite is not a whole of which the finite is a part then it is not reductive to consider religious faith in terms of finite human thought and praxis. The same holds for the ‘more,’ the ‘unconditional,’ the ‘ultimate,’ ‘excess,’ ‘the unnameable,’ ‘the void,’ and ‘God’. But having claimed that religion is reductive, I am not claiming that religious faith is invalid. On the contrary, religious faith is a valid means of accessing a depth of meaning. Tillich was correct in this assertion. But this access is only possible because of the genesis of religion as a search for lost intimacy of immanence (Bataille), the creation of a symbolic order that human beings inhabit (Lacan), and the aggregate relevance of cognitive inference systems that allow

97 I do hope, however, that it will enable a continuing conversation for all of us engaged with depth-of-meaning ☺
the mind to create, hold and transmit religious ideas. Religious faith does engage with depth of meaning. But, as suggested in this analysis, such meaning has no purchase on reality apart from the constructs and symbolic order that it inhabits. When human beings utilise their religious faith in a manner that attempts to deny this purchase and claim access to ontological certainty (the way things are) on the basis of their religious faith, such faith metastasises to a potentially dangerous mechanism which can be exploited to hegemonic ends, becoming a weapon in a world of geopolitical violence. This is not to argue that there is a necessary link between religious faith and acts of geopolitical or national violence but that the structure of religious faith – the mechanics of such faith when it extends beyond its intrasystematic framework – lends itself to hegemonic manipulation. This ‘claim of ontological certainty’ that arises from religious faith explains, in part, its dialectical nature and the kinds of manifestation (both demonic and angelic) that may arise from it. Religious faith ‘creates’ the most glorious pieces of art—bespeaking an engagement with aesthetics and the sublime—as well as the most despicable acts of violence—bespeaking an engagement with nihilism and the horrific. The point here being that (1) it is the same phenomenon which gives rise to both, and (2) it is one form of engagement with depth of meaning.

Religious faith is a valid human phenomenon that has the ability to result in generative encounters with depth of meaning. But it is not the only means of such engagement\(^\text{98}\) and at no point does the engagement of religious faith approach

\(^{98}\) I have purposely not explicated other means of engaging with depth of meaning because such explication is not necessary to my argument. However, in case it is thought that there are no other means of engagement, see Richard Norman, *On Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2004), especially 132-59, where Norman explicates the way human beings extract great depth of meaning from their lives (through the satisfaction of creative achievement, the excitement of discovery, the enjoyment of beauty in art and music, the companionship of family and friends, and the narrative ‘inhabiting’ of literature,
the way things are. For this reason, the ‘end’ of religious faith may be correctly anticipated as emancipatory for human beings (provided, that is, that other forms of depth of meaning engagement are utilised to expand human consciousness and that other ‘big Others’ don’t simply replace ‘God,’ with the mechanism of religious faith still intact but under a different name). Human ‘emancipation’ is, after all, the general goal of critical theory. But such emancipation will not be enabled by reductive critiques of religious faith that do little more than offer a caricature that draws solely from epistemological argument. It is hoped that this thesis has provided an analysis of religious faith that avoids this pitfall and allows for the dynamic and complex nature of religious faith as persons of such faith conduct their lives.

Religious faith may be a human phenomenon but it is a complex phenomenon. This thesis has endeavoured to provide a hypothesis that does justice to this complexity without reducing it to a single sphere of human existence. Religious faith is a socio-political, psychoanalytical, and anthropological phenomenon. It requires an integrated analysis in order to account for its various features. This chapter is offered as a provisional attempt at such an analysis.

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99 Horkheimer notes that a theory is critical if it seeks ‘to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them’ (Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 244).
CHAPTER FOUR:

Recasting Tillich’s Understanding of Faith

In chapter two, I presented Tillich’s understanding of faith and the place it occupies in his theological and philosophical system. As noted in that chapter, Tillich’s understanding of faith is dynamic, non-reductive and all-encompassing. He considers faith as absolutely central to human life, as a centred act of the total personality, as the ‘state’ of being grasped by ultimate concern, as participating in the overcoming of the gap between existence and essence (that is the New Being), as providing access to answering existentially the despair and angst (estrangement) of human existence. Religion, for Tillich, like faith, is also understood as ultimate concern, engaging with the depths of humanity’s spiritual life as human beings engage with ultimacy (otherwise termed the ‘unconditional’ or the ‘infinite’). In chapter three, I explicated my own hypothesis of religious faith, a hypothesis that was strikingly different from Tillich, particularly in terms of the framework in which it was set, a framework that drew from evolutionary anthropology, psychoanalytical thought and socio-political religious theory, situating religion as a natural socio-cultural phenomenon. I sought to explain religious faith in non-theological categories, deeming theology to be solely a creation of human thought (as an expression of the desire for lost intimacy) and religion to be solely a human phenomenon. Tillich would probably consider such an undertaking as ‘reductive.’ However, I have endeavoured to answer this charge by recasting the concept of the infinite (and by association, the unconditional and the ultimate) and by ensuring that my analysis does not relegate faith to a single aspect of the phenomenon, such as reducing it to the realm of epistemology. Like Tillich, I have
presented faith in terms of its functional engagement with depth of meaning. But unlike Tillich, I have avoided the term ‘spirituality.’ What Tillich affirms of faith can be incorporated into a larger framework once it is recognised that Tillich’s material definition of faith itself expresses engagement with a depth of meaning (but removing Tillich’s extra-systematic ontological referents) and that Tillich’s concern with the infinite can itself be explained in terms of humanity’s evolutionary development. This final chapter is offered as explicitly recasting Tillich’s understanding of faith in terms of a contemporary critical theory of religion and my hypothesis regarding religious faith that has been built upon the basis of it. In a sense, this recasting has already been provided in the previous chapters (at least in seminal form) but it is explicitly offered here as a means of summarising the primary elements of his understanding that when connected to a contemporary critical theory of religion produce the hypothesis of this thesis. I focus here on the two most obvious facets of his understanding: (a) recasting his ‘faith’ as ‘religious faith’ (that is, as a species of a larger whole) and (b) recasting his understanding of the ‘infinite’ as a reductive concept.

As noted in chapter two, Tillich considers faith as ultimate concern, as a human ‘state’ in reference to Being-itself. But this is a religious definition masquerading as a general definition, especially when it is remembered that Tillich considers Being-itself equivalent to God and ultimate concern as participation in New Being (manifest as Christ). The idea of participation in the unity of all things is an explicitly religious notion even if it is given philosophical parlance in reference to ontological categories in Tillich’s thought. So what Tillich refers to as ‘faith’ can be legitimately termed ‘religious faith’ given its place in his larger system. Such faith
can legitimately be considered as accessing a depth of meaning for those who partake of it. But if the idea of the infinite, the unconditional and the ultimate can be shown to subsist within a larger human sphere (see section on Bataille), this meaning has no purchase outside of the intra-systematic framework in which it subsists. Therefore it does not necessarily follow that the ‘ultimate concern’ refers to a reality apart from the system of which it is a part, ‘Being-itself’ (when expressed in terms of God) understood in this larger framework as a human construct that has developed along with human evolutionary life. In other words, religious faith engages with depth of meaning, a meaning that religious believers term ‘ultimate’ but which is in fact one species of human depth of meaning engagement rather than the genus of which all such engagement is a part. This reverses Tillich’s understanding, while allowing faith’s depth of meaning aspect to remain intact. Tillich’s understanding of faith is thus recast as a religious engagement with depth of meaning.

As noted in the introduction, the ‘infinite’ is a category of thought that theologians and philosophers of religion have employed in order to make a case for the reality of the dimension of the ‘more.’ Any theory of religion that does not account for this ‘more’ is judged by such theologians and philosophers of religion as ‘reductive,’ condemned to misunderstand religion by lack of access to anything other than a reduced form. Tillich, in his understanding of faith as ultimate concern, participates in a long tradition of Christian thought in relation to the idea of the infinite. In his popular work, The Courage to Be, he links his concept of faith to the idea of the infinite and again demonstrates faith’s religious character:

100 See footnote 7 for Pannenberg’s understanding of the infinite in relation to ‘secular’ construals of religion.
Being-itself transcends every finite being infinitely; God in the divine-human encounter transcends man unconditionally. Faith bridges this infinite gap by accepting the fact that in spite of it the power of being is present, that he who is separated is accepted. Faith accepts “in spite of”; and out of the “in spite of” of faith the “in spite of” of courage is born. Faith is not the theoretical affirmation of something uncertain, it is the existential acceptance of something transcending ordinary experience. Faith is not an opinion but a state. It is the state of being grasped by the power of being which transcends everything that is and in which everything that is participates. He who is grasped by this power is able to affirm himself because he knows that he is affirmed by the power of being-itself. In this point mystical experience and personal encounter are identical. In both of them faith is the basis of the courage to be.\textsuperscript{101}

Note that in the above quotation Tillich speaks of the infinite as a category in which the finite subsists. Faith bridges the gap between the finite and the infinite, between the conditional and the unconditional; it grants access to the transcendent and is primarily concerned with ultimacy. The assumption underlying these statements is that human beings desire\textsuperscript{102} an intimacy with the transcendent that has been lost, that human beings exist in existential estrangement from Being-itself and that religious faith can bridge this gap and access the infinite, the unconditional, and the ultimate.

The antecedent assumption to all of this is that overcoming the gap between finitude and infinity is an existential act in relation to an ontological reality. In other words, the nature of human beings is such that human beings are estranged from Being-itself. This is the way that things are. Given this assumption, it logically follows that the category of the finite subsists within the ontological category of the infinite and that existential life consists in living in the reality of the gap between the finite and the infinite and attempting to bridge the gap and ‘return’ to the intimate transcendent participation with Being-itself. This ontological ‘situating’ of the infinite as a

\textsuperscript{101} Tillich, \textit{The Courage to Be}, 167-8. Tillich also addresses the question of the infinite in an answer to students in his \textit{Ultimate Concern}, 49-50, equating the ‘infinite’ with the ‘unconditional’ and the ‘ultimate,’ and noting his debt to Kierkegaard and Kant in framing his understanding of the terms.

\textsuperscript{102} Tillich explicitly makes this same connection: ‘The human heart \textit{seeks} the infinite because that is where the finite \textit{wants} to rest. In the infinite it sees its own fulfilment. This is the reason for the ecstatic attraction and fascination of everything in which ultimacy is manifest (Tillich, \textit{Dynamics of Faith}, 15, emphasis mine).’
category in which the finite subsists implies that religious faith accesses a transcendent dimension of reality that is other than—and ‘more’ than—the reality of ‘animal’ life that human beings inhabit, that there is a ‘more’ that secular analyses of religion are barred access from because of an unwillingness to acknowledge its reality. However, all of this itself subsists within a particular ontological framework of reality, a system of knowledge that completely and comprehensively ‘carves up’ reality into categories of thought that can then be applied to the situation at hand. Philosophies of religion that are indebted to systematic ‘totalising’ philosophies, from those of Plato and Aristotle in the ancient economy (Augustine’s *On the Trinity* and *City of God* and Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*) to the more recent philosophical systems of Hegel and Heidegger (Tillich, Pannenberg *et al*), cannot understand the ‘finite’ in any other way but as a reduction of the infinite. But if the ontological considerations are suspended long enough to consider the anthropological and historical origins of the concept of the infinite (which has been achieved in the previous chapter), it is possible to understand the infinite not as that in which the finite subsists but as a reductive construct that emerged in humanity’s infancy in order to account for the rise of consciousness and the perceived gap between human beings and other animals. Human beings may desire a lost intimacy (and couch this desire in terms of ultimacy and transcendence) but this desire does not automatically indicate an ontological reality. If it can be shown that this desire has naturally explainable roots and that the infinite is itself a ‘reduction’ and ‘impoverishment’ of human thought, then the edifice upon which theologians and philosophers of religion accuse non-religious accounts of religion as being reductive caricatures begins to crumble and the charge itself loses its validity. The previous chapter has demonstrated the possibility of understanding the infinite as a reduction of human consciousness that
occurred during the emergence of consciousness itself, as that which is ‘left over’ during the process of symbolisation (producing a void in the symbolic order) and as a result of the aggregate relevance of inference systems employed for other ends. Tillich’s ‘infinite’ is thus recast as a reduction of the human.

The reason for choosing Tillich’s understanding of faith for the purposes of this thesis is to provide a counter-point to my own provisional hypothesis, especially in terms of the all-encompassing nature of Tillich’s understanding of faith and its orientation toward the infinite. As noted in the introduction, a general retort to treating religion in general—and religious faith in particular—as a natural phenomenon is that it presents little more than a reductive caricature of the dynamic nature of the phenomenon itself. In the preceding analysis, I have been careful to avoid this charge by refusing to treat religion as a single-discipline phenomenon. Religious faith has been considered as a complex human phenomenon from an integrated standpoint. I admit that there has been a ‘reduction’ in the sense of omitting a theological understanding of religious faith from my working hypothesis. However, this is only a reduction from the standpoint of the theological circle itself. As I have suggested, the theological is itself a reduction of the human that can be fully accounted for in a non-theological manner.103 By counter-pointing Tillich’s

103 There are some theologians who acknowledge that theology needs to be accounted for in non-theological ways, such as Gordon Kaufman, who presents theology as a human work, specifically as imaginative construction. See Gordon D. Kaufman, The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981), especially 263-79. But this thesis is exploring a more radical proposal in terms of theology being presented not just as a human work of imaginative construction but as part of human religious expression, religion understood as a natural phenomenon that has evolved along with human anthropological development which relates to particular socio-cultural groups and hermeneutical frameworks. In other words, theology is not a response to an extra-systematic being or principle, ‘God’ understood in this thesis as a product of human evolutionary development and theology as an imaginative construction that subsists within a particular hermeneutical construct that bears no relation to extra-systematic reality. The theologian who perhaps comes closest to this position is Don Cupitt. See, for example, Don Cupitt, Is Nothing Sacred? The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion: Selected Essays (New York: Fordham University
understanding of faith to my own hypothesis, I have been able to diffuse the charge of reductive caricatures and utilise Tillich’s focus on depth of meaning as a point of juncture between them. Tillich’s understanding of faith has proved a fecund point of departure for my own hypothesis, particularly in terms of being able to recast it in a larger body of discourse.

Press, 2002). But even Cupitt is arguing from a philosophical-theological base (howbeit a ‘non-realist’ one) and does not adequately incorporate the kind of critical theory of religion that underwrites this thesis, opting for a non-realist humanistic religion of life rather than a post-Christian and post-religious consciousness.
CONCLUSION:

Test Case, Summary and Implications

In all three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—the biblical character of Abraham is considered the ‘father of faith’ and the narrative of Abraham’s trust in Yahweh concerning Isaac is considered central to religious life. While there are many interpretations of this narrative, the basic structure of the story indicates that the faith in view is not concerned with metaphysical or ontological verification as to the existence of God. On the contrary, the action that is narrated is one of trust in God and obedience to his demands. In the story,

104 For this reason, interfaith conferences are often held in the spirit of Abraham as a central point of reference for each faith. For example there are two annual interreligious conferences in Australia that utilise Abraham in their title: the ‘International Inter-Religion Abraham Conference’ (which held its fourth conference last year in Melbourne and was organised by the Australian Intercultural Society, the Catholic Interfaith Committee and Monash University’s Centre for Studies in Religion and Theology – see http://www.monash.edu/news/monashmemo/notes/20050518/abraham.html) and the ‘International Inter-Religious Abraham Conference (which held its fourth conference last year in Sydney and was organised by the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, the Affinity Intercultural Foundation, the Muslim Organisation for Dialogue, the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, the Sydney Catholic Archdiocese, the Uniting Church NSW Synod, and Sydney University’s Department of Religion) – see http://www.affinity.org.au/html/home/upcoming/4IIC/4IIC20-%20Poster%205.doc).

105 The narrative is found in the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures (Christian ‘Old’ Testament), ‘Genesis,’ chapter 22, verses 1-19. It has been a ‘favourite’ text among many Christian theologians and philosophers throughout the history of Christianity. One of the best known examples of this tendency is that of Søren Kierkegaard, a forerunner to modern existentialism (and the kind of ‘existentialist’ tradition with which Tillich is best connected). His meditation on Abraham’s sacrifice describes Abraham’s action as the ‘agile willingness of an obedient soldier’ and praises Abraham’s faith with the declaration, ‘Oh, this is great! No one was so great in faith as Abraham – who can comprehend him?’ See Kierkegaard, Meditations from Kierkegaard, edited by T. H. Croxall (London: James Nisbet & Co, 1955),112-3. Kierkegaard was so impressed by this act that he developed an entire ‘way of being’ around it, which he termed the ‘suspension of the ethical.’ Human beings can live their lives in the aesthetic realm or the ethical realm. But both of these realms are deficient. Only the realm opened by faith (in suspension of the ethical) is really ‘living’. In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard explains his doctrine in reference to the story of Abraham: ‘Now faith is just this paradox, that the single individual, though under the demands of the universal, is higher than the universal. . . As a single individual . . . he stands in absolute relation to the Absolute. The ethical is suspended. . . The story of Abraham contains just such a suspension of the ethical. Abraham acts on the strength of the absurd. . . In his action Abraham overstepped the ethical altogether. He had a higher aim outside it in relation to which he suspended it. . . [W]hy does Abraham do it? For God’s sake, and what is exactly the same, for his own. He does it for the sake of God because God demands this proof of his faith. He does it for his own sake in order to be able to produce the proof. . . [T]o live by faith means that one has an absolute duty to God and to God alone. . . This duty alone is absolute and for this reason the ethical, for the person of faith, is relegated to the relative. In fear and trembling, this is faith’s paradox – the
Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on an altar on Mt. Moriah. Abraham takes his son to the top of the mountain, binds him, and is just about to impale him with a knife when the ‘angel of the Lord’ stays his hand. On the basis of this act Abraham is blessed by God and promised a progeny surpassing the number of stars in the sky. By means of Abraham’s offspring all nations of the earth would be blessed. And yet as we begin a new millennium, it seems that Abraham’s offspring have often been the cause of curse rather than blessing, of violence and terror rather than peace and love in the geo-political realm. The Abrahamic story might then function as a template for contemporary expressions of religious faith, specifically as blind obedience to deity (and the hegemonic ideology that exploits such a deity) rather than any sense of an angelic ‘staying of the hand.’

The connection between religion and violence seems to be too often dismissed in contemporary political analysis. However, there has been a close affinity between the sacred and violence from the very emergence of human consciousness. As Terry Eagleton notes in his recent *Holy Terror*, ‘terror begins as a religious idea, as indeed much terrorism still is today; and religion is all about deeply ambivalent powers which both enrapture and annihilate.’

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106 This has been already noted in relation to Bataille’s religious theory, particularly in terms of the rise of the modern military order in which the violence of the sacrifice is turned outward (which comprises the second half of his *Theory of Religion* which was not fully developed in this thesis). See Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 65-111.

107 Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2. Eagleton’s book provides a penetrating critical / cultural analysis of the history of the connection between the sacred and terror,
context is one in which this insight seems to be born out. Whether one looks to the modern state of Israel, northern Ireland, France, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Indonesian, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, or many other places in the world, acts of terror are committed by persons who claim that they are acting on the basis of their faith in God. How can these claims be understood? It is disingenuous to

including a section on martyrdom and suicidal terrorism (89-114), which demonstrates the connection between a believer’s faith and a willingness to die. One quotation will suffice for the present purposes: ‘... martyrs have their affinities with suicide bombers as well as their differences. Both parties die in the name of life for others, not as an end in itself. ... The word ‘martyr’ means ‘witness’, and the martyr bears witness to his faith by choosing it over life. But since in his view that faith concerns an abundance of life all round, his action is the reverse of a necrophiliac. If it is unreasonable in the short term, it is reasonable in the long term. ... The opposite of the martyr in the fair-weather believer. The act signifies a hope for the future, bearing witness to a truth and justice beyond the present. By turning his body into a sign of the absence of these things, the martyr reminds us that the world is not yet fit for them, and thus helps to keep them alive. But whereas the martyr is prepared to stake his life on this, the suicide bomber is prepared to stake your life on it. Martyrs such as Rosa Luxemburg or Martin Luther King die so that others may live; suicide bombers die so that others may die so that others may live (99-100).’ When it is also noted that suicide bombers are considered martyrs in many parts of the Islamic world, the connection between these monstrous acts and religious faith becomes even more evident. There is more to such acts than religious faith but religious faith is the mechanism that enables such religio-political acts to transpire. Without the hope of paradise, the belief in an afterlife and the love for fellow believers who partake of the same hermeneutical construct (including the legitimacy of jihad to further religious goals), religious suicidal terrorism would be robbed not of the motives (which may include economic privation and political disenfranchisement / oppression) but of much of that which enables it to be considered a viable (even if ‘last-resort’) option in the first place.

I will not offer any support here (as there are copious examples in the daily papers) except to note one recent example from Palestine. In the Palestinian elections that were held in January (2006), one of the candidates elected to parliamentary office was Mariam Farhat. Nicknamed the ‘mother of martyrs’ she was elected because she had ‘sacrificed’ three of her children for Allah (specifically for the current ‘Jihad’) by means of encouraging them to engage in acts of violence (which they did) for the sake of their faith and their homeland. Whatever else this cultural phenomenon reveals (and it certainly suggests the failure of capitalism and American imperialism as well as the desperation legitimately felt by many people living in the Middle East), it suggests that at the very least there is a communal framework in play that acknowledges martyrdom and violence as an expression of faith and that coheres with a symbolic / linguistic network that operates within faith and family communities in contemporary Palestine. Whatever the reasons for such acts of violence (and they are certainly complex, exhibiting political, economic and religious justification), the interpretive framework in which a society elects to office a person on the basis of such ‘sacrifice’ is a framework that is funded by religious motifs and supported by the faith communities in which it subsists. There have been several reports, for example, of mothers ‘weeping with joy’ at the news that their child has been successful as a ‘suicide bomber.’ The young men (and occasionally women) who engage in these acts often leave video footage declaring their absolute commitment to Allah. Their faith gives their lives meaning, not only individually but socially as their family and society rejoice in their actions and add their lives to the collective cultural consciousness, which in turn ‘strengthens the faith’ of the other members of the community. For a report on the recent Hamas election win in Palestine, see Chris McGreal, ‘Hamas election victory sets new Middle East challenge,’ Guardian Weekly (5th February, 2006); http://www.guardian.co.uk/guardianweekly/story/0,1699719,00.html, and the CNN report shortly after the victory, ‘Many Israelis Despair at Hamas Win,’ CNN.com World (26th January, 2006); http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/01/26/israelis.despair/. For a report into the larger phenomenon of suicidal terrorism, particularly the religious motivation, see Jerusalem Post’s Itamar
explain away the faith component by recourse to economic privation and political oppression, however valid such aspects certainly are. The religious faith of these people is a significant element in the motivational forces that produce the particular acts under investigation. It is the mechanism that validates and enables persons who inhabit certain hermeneutical frameworks and faith communities to defer to hegemonic demands of sacrifice / violence in the name of the ‘sacred.’ At the same time—and among the same people—faith is a generative engagement with a depth of meaning that enriches the lives of religious believers.

Rather than considering religious faith as an ‘all or nothing’ affair, I have sought to consider the phenomenon in the complexity and seeming incomprehensibility that it evinces, providing a hypothesis that is capable of revealing the ‘inner workings’ of contemporary religious faith expression and praxis. The phenomenon of suicidal terrorism in the name of faith provides a test case for this (or any) hypothesis regarding religious faith. In order to test the hypothesis, the following questions must be answered in the affirmative: Can the hypothesis that has been explicated throughout this thesis provide a means of understanding the religious faith of faith communities that rejoice in acts of suicidal terror? Can it provide an explanation for the phenomenon of religious faith in general that can hold together both the religious faith of a suicidal terrorist and the religious faith of a mystical religious leader?109 Can it provide an explanation for the religious faith of ‘ordinary’


109 Although I have stressed the way in which religious faith might function in terms of suicidal terrorists, I have not explicated the way in which religious faith might function in terms of a religious ‘mystic’, primarily because the material on mysticism is too vast to be included in the terms of reference for this thesis. However, there is a sense in which an explanation for mystic religious faith has already been provided in recasting Tillich’s understanding of faith, which is itself compatible with expressions of mystical experience. For example, in The Mystic Heart, Wayne Teasdale explains faith
believers who will never engage in the violent acts of a ‘suicide bombers’ or experience the kind of ‘participation with reality’ that mystics claim to experience? In other words, can this hypothesis provide an explanation for religious faith in all of its forms in the contemporary era, particularly in the ‘West’ (which has been the focal point of the research)? To each of these questions, the answer is affirmative because my hypothesis explicitly deals with the function of religious faith in a dialectical manner that refuses reductive caricature and stresses the dynamic and complex nature of the phenomenon.

Throughout the course of this thesis I have stressed the non-reductive nature of my analysis. Whether it is deemed successful must be left to the judgment of others. But hopefully it will be acknowledged as an attempt to respond to the charge that is often made against non-religious analyses of religion, that by not including a theological analysis, the analysis can only be considered reductive. As I have shown, this is not necessarily true. If the ‘theological’ is itself shown to be reductive and the category of the ‘infinite’ itself shown to subsist within a particular framework and if the analysis is truly integrative and provisional, a charge of reductionism cannot be substantiated. The thesis has also had a positive aim, that of providing a hypothesis of religious faith that could function as an ‘entry point’ for further research on the nature of religion in the contemporary context. I have attempted to meet this aim by expressing faith in terms of a depth of meaning in terms of the mystic experience in terms that echo Tillich: ‘Faith is opening, accepting, and responding to Ultimate Reality. . . a capacity to trust the mystery of the ultimate (Wayne Teasdale, The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World’s Religions (Novato: New World, 1999), 213-4).’ In the terms of this thesis, the religious faith of a mystic could be explained as an encounter with depth of meaning to an extent that is not experienced by most believers. In other words, mystics penetrate more deeply into the ‘meaning’ that they understand to be at the heart of reality. Such faith is simply a more intense experience than that of most believers. Recast in terms of this thesis, such an experience can be explained as a penetration to the heart of the symbolic order itself. This is an insufficient explanation, as the phenomenon requires further analysis. But it is able to at least potentially account for such religious faith and that is enough in terms of the aims of this thesis.
engagement—a functional definition lifted from Tillich’s understanding of faith—and by recasting Tillich’s explicit understanding of faith in a larger context that treats faith as a species of depth of meaning engagement rather than the central phenomenon of human personal life. This has been accomplished by recourse to three areas of research: (1) Georges Bataille’s theory of religion and the sociological bases of religion as a desire for lost intimacy (the immanence of animality), (2) Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical theory in reference to the structural symbolic and linguistic order to which religious interpretations of reality subsist, and (3) Pascal Boyer’s anthropological-cognitive-scientific analysis of religion in terms of the aggregate relevance of inference systems. In summary, religious faith can be understood as a complex human phenomenon that is a species of generative human depth engagement within particular hermeneutical frameworks with a focus on the ‘Other’ (transcendence / the infinite) that were born from the communal symbolic-linguistic system of meaning making that arose with human evolutionary development as a by-product of several cognitive inference systems and as a result of a lost intimacy with immanence. Such faith provides a mechanism for accepting a certain intra-systematic coherence and a volitional (trust) commitment to an intra-systematic being (God) or principle deemed extra-systematic but inscribed within the particular symbolic universe in which the interpretive framework operates. Religious faith is, of course, more than this hypothesis can contain. But this hypothesis provides some of the major features that a contemporary cartography of faith must include and attempts to draw connections between such features. There is much that still needs to be addressed, including a host of other features that could be ‘drawn’ and other connections that could be made. However, this provisional hypothesis is offered as a ‘pencil sketch’ of the landscape that is religious faith in the contemporary context, a
landscape that may be one of the most rewarding and important areas of research in terms of contemporary geo-political and socio-cultural examination. It is a sketch that requires substantial ‘sharpening’ that further research could provide. But every research project requires a point of departure – and this thesis provides the cartographical ‘landmarks’ and connections between them to draw a map of the nature of the phenomenon of religious faith as such a potential beginning.

There are several implications that could be drawn from this analysis, such as the need for religion to withdraw from the public epistemic and political space, the need for theologians and philosophers of religion to cease making statements in reference to God as ontological facts (or at least to exercise restraint in expressing particular theological interpretations as true reflections of ‘reality’), the need for theologians and philosophers of religion to cease castigating non-religious analyses of religion as necessarily reductive, and the need for other forms of human depth of meaning engagement to be refined and presented in the public forum. However, the implications are secondary to the potential contribution of this hypothesis to the academic study of religion in yielding an entry point into the phenomenon of religion in the contemporary setting. By utilising this hypothesis, which opens religion to a non-reductive analysis that casts religion as a complex and dynamic natural human phenomenon, it may be possible to understand more thoroughly the nature of contemporary religious thought and praxis and the mechanism by which human beings become religious, remain religious, and cease to be religious. This is a worthy (and urgent) goal given the place that religion has occupied in human history and the ‘return of religion’ in the contemporary geopolitical context.
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83


