Lost Faith and Wandering Souls

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A Psychology of Disillusionment, Mourning, and the Return of Hope

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For all of us, that we might find community.

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Preface

I DIDN'T THINK I could lose my faith for a second time. I had been through it once before, and thought I knew the pitfalls and how to keep things moving in a constructive direction. I thought I could make it work. But it is such a complicated business.

The first time it happened, I was in college, which might sound like a cliché, a common occurrence in young adulthood. The thing is, a garden variety wanderlust is not supposed to have an element of hurt. It is supposed to give you a break, an open and free space to gain perspective and help you better appreciate the beauty and power of your religion. It is supposed to help you find ownership. What it is not supposed to do is leave you feeling like you've been sheltered, living in a world unto itself, cut off from so much goodness to discover. For me, this time of exploration only made me want to distance myself from something that was holding me back rather than letting me go.

As a psychology student at a large state university in Virginia, like so many of us, I was given an opportunity to look at life more analytically. I was learning about the motivations behind our behaviors, that our brains could play tricks on us in ways the rational mind cannot immediately perceive. It was all obvious stuff once you began to look at it clearly in a classroom setting. Not satisfied with the strictly clinical and experimental side of psychology, I also started taking classes in religion and philosophy, eventually adding a religion minor to my psychology major. I was reading and discussing biblical criticism, sociological theories of religion, a survey in theology, and philosophy. I found it exhilarating, enlivening.

I cannot pinpoint the moment I started feeling sad, feeling the hurt, but I do remember the experience while taking a walk on my university campus. I can only say that I was reflecting on what I was learning in my classes, and had the thought that things were not adding up with life outside classes. For one thing, why wasn't I ever able to think this freely and expansively when growing up? Why wasn't there an attitude of open handedness when it came to the beliefs and identities of the Christianity in which I was raised?

To put it bluntly, I felt as though I was sold a bill a goods that was no longer of the same value. Much of what I was raised to think, feel, and believe seemed so unexamined, so fraught with inconsistency, and so cliché, speaking of cliché. I could not yet put a lot of words and ideas around it, but the feeling was overwhelming. Although I was thinking about the beliefs of the religion of my family and community, the feeling was not directed at anyone, and there was no single memory or traumatic episode (though that's true for others). It was a more diffuse yet palpable sadness in my chest and gut that the religious community that had sold me that bill of goods had prevented me from discovering so much goodness in life.

The undergraduate studies, meanwhile, remained exciting. As I continued, I got it stuck in my head that after my bachelor's degree, I wanted to study both psychology and religion at the same time. I did not necessarily want to be a pastor like my father and grandfather, but I also knew I didn't want to become a cookie cutter clinical psychologist. I wanted to go to a graduate school that would allow me to read and study deeply both psychological theory and knowledge about religion.

To make a long story short, the result of that graduate work produced this book. I do not remember at what point I decided to study the loss of faith, but that's what happened. My graduate work in psychology and religion allowed me to make sense of issues of identity, religion, individual development, social structure, with attention to matters of power seen through issues of race, class, and gender. I wanted to take that analytical work of making sense of my faith crisis as far as I could.

To put it one way, what you will read in the pages that follow is a way of looking at religion that wasn't afforded by my upbringing. Simple as that. What follows draws in some theoretical ideas, but none of this is supposed to be cut off from common sense that anyone might have, fancy degrees or not. This work is no more than an elaboration of common sense, or call it reason, or science. It is simply a participant-observer mindset about faith. You participate in religion, and to some degree you also bring your analytical point of view along for the ride.

With my prolonged period of study and no small amount of distance from religion, I eventually started to see a path where I could get my faith mojo back, to be as much a participant as an observer. My confidence and common sense about church and belief was up, the way you feel physically when you have started exercising again. I felt that I pretty much owned my journey, not letting anyone or anything tell me I wasn't legitimate or on track. I found fresh interest and felt impervious to the sometimes negative aspects of religious life in the US. Little did I know.

For the second faith loss go around, the trouble started somewhere when my wife and I had begun attending a church in Michigan where we had just moved due to a job in evangelical Christian book publishing. After a good experience at a Methodist Church in New Jersey, we wanted something close to our home, something in which our then tenth grader could find a spiritual cohort and see kids who were neighbors or friends at school. I also thought that I had to engage in an evangelical church if I was to be a publisher at a well-known evangelical company.

After a few years, our daughter headed off to a college two-hours away, and my wife and I were on our own at the church. We had made some good acquaintances there, and some of my co-workers attended the same church. Yet even after some years, it still seemed a slow process for us to feel connected. Annoyingly, for example, we kept getting asked if we were new. That was strange, as we attended regularly and were involved in activities outside the main church service.

We had good success feeling connected at our previous church, knowing that it did not happen overnight. We knew it would take time, even when you do not quite feel like going every Sunday. In the case of this new church, however, we really, really did not feel like it. Each ensuing Sunday morning we struggled to get the gumption to go, even though the church was an easy five-minute drive. I could recount the various reasons we felt that way but suffice it to say that at times we felt that the people at that church had little interest or ability in establishing personal relationships, which always struck us as surprising given their emphasis on evangelizing. The place felt fake.

Our leaving this church was a bigger issue than any one political stance or theological belief. Nevertheless, all our departure needed was what mental health counselors would call a precipitating event.

The former pastor of the church, the pastor who had started the church some decades earlier, who along with his wife and children had given his best years, kicked him out, kicked them all out. Simple as that. The pastor's son, who was gay, asked him if he would officiate at his wedding (somewhere else), and he of course said yes. As a result, the denomination of which this church was a part, and of which this pastor was no unknown figure, revoked his ordination and asked him to never preach again.

Now Lisa and I did not know this pastor well, but we did have a chance to meet him a few times and have dinner together. He was one of those people that seemed wise, gentle, and passionate. His work in that church and his contribution to that denomination would be difficult to quantify. He'd given his life to this work, and they publicly rebuked and rejected not only him and his wife, but by extension they rejected his son, who was spiritually raised in that church. This is a stage of life when one is supposed to be reflecting on years of good work, actualizing your wisdom, and perhaps mentoring others and giving back to those currently doing the work. So what that denomination and that church did was psychologically egregious behavior, immoral behavior. No equivocation, no further qualification, no more unexamined biblical arguments or arguments

from tradition. Whatever happened to common sense? You simply cannot build a community of faith and let good people work there, live lives there, grow up there, and then ex-communicate them and turn them into pariahs. It was just too much for my wife and me.

One Sunday morning, just as it would be time to start preparing for church, we talked it through and decided not to go. Our desire just wasn't there, none whatsoever, and it was time to honor that. Something was wrong, more wrong than simply saying it just wasn't a good fit. Marriage, for example, may not always seem a great fit, but you hang in there, and perhaps you find love despite yourself. But for some marriages, the problem is not that it's not a great fit. Many casual observers might say that this church was friendly and gracious and giving in many ways, but we felt that as an organization, our church was acting in a toxic way, and it was unwilling to be accountable for its behavior. It was time to end the marriage.

We said we were done, and with that came emotions, a whole flood of them: righteous indignation, self-doubt, relief, worry, freedom, a sense of shame. It was a wide rush of feelings, just like you have with any significant decision, justified or not. At times our emotions became more intense, or alternatively, we just felt a little numb, which was the worst part of it.

Did we lose our faith? To say yes no doubt oversimplifies things, but it would be at least partly accurate. We lost something we thought was important to us. We had put five years of church going into this effort. We had indeed made some friends, some of whom we felt we needed to inform about our decision, which brought more difficult feelings. We had found our faith shaped by the place, as spending time in any faith community inevitably does, no matter how much some might argue with what is being said behind the pulpit or the songs being sung. But we were shaken. It was profoundly troubling. While we felt we lost something, we also knew that perhaps it wasn't us that lost faith but that rather the church that had betrayed our trust in a church that would be inclusive, not literalist fundamentalists.

What is more, I thought I was inoculated and immune to this happening again. I had taken precautions. I was equipped with a PhD. I knew what to do. Be involved yet independent. Be yourself, take initiative, and make things happen. Own it. Study and think for yourself.

Talk about clichés, here I was once again feeling isolated, lonely, and depressed. How did I screw this up so royally? How can I possibly be back at the beginning again, or maybe even a few steps back? Why did I drag my wife, who was raised Catholic, into this?

I had reasoned with myself that I could be around people who were in lower faith stages or did not have a religious studies degree, which was a dumb rationalization. Suddenly I was realizing that faith stages are no excuse for corporate discrimination. There is also the matter of common sense. I realized, had to realize, that no amount of wisdom and generosity and self-agency that I had achieved matters when such egregiousness happens right in front of you. These religious people acted the way they wanted to, or failed to act, and it was clear that they could not care less if I thought any different. Even with my conceptual understanding of what was going on, no amount of graciousness on my part was going to make any difference with these white, affluent, educated suburbanites who had created their tribe. I could see more clearly now just how entangled, how entrenched such abusive behavior is with a religious life that seems nice and kind and wonderful.

My wife and I will be fine. We are figuring things out, living in a dynamic fallow time. Where we will end up is unknown. What I do know is that we are not alone. One does not need to work hard to find the often-cited research of the undeniably growing number of "nones and dones," those who no longer claim a religious affiliation or even say they are no longer interested in religious life as we know it. If you do not want to look at the research, just ask any pastor or acknowledge in the churches around you that frequency of attendance is down compared to years gone by. We are all going through change, as we always have. What I also know is that the dynamics

discussed in the pages that follow still apply. They served me well the first time I lost faith, and they still apply now.

A Way of Looking at Things

What follows is a way of looking at things, a hermeneutic of suspicion, a psychological interpretation. The language of psychoanalytic psychology presents not just a taxonomy, a breakdown and categorization of the stages of spiritual life. More than that, the language of psychoanalysis provides a participant-observer stance of watching carefully and being better aware of the things that motivate us. It looks beneath the surface. It does not take things at face value, but as representations for so much more—and what a beautiful thing that is. Whatever we are going through, it is packed with meaning. One thing signifies another, and so much of it is based on needs that must be met, identities that must be formed, group coherence that must be achieved.

Perhaps the greatest question of our time is whether we can find community, a place to recognize and be recognized. With so much breaking down in our religious institutions, people want to know what is next. Is it a return to church like we have known it, a reformulation and reformation of church, or is it possible that we will or can find sacred community in a way we've never experienced? So many of us think that we must find some new form of church that looks much like the old form. Yet the very presumption in that question may hold the key to understanding the nature of our problem.

When we lose our faith, our connection, we are indeed embarking on new ground. The loss of spiritual community might simply be a disruption, but a disruption that is bound to happen on the way to what is next. It is not necessarily a progression of theological reasoning, which is possibly how most people express this loss, but a problem with the larger social structure, like the seemingly impenetrable superstructure of white evangelicalism. The question is, how do we understand how hard it is to break free, and what do the healthy steps

look like, both for each of us individually but also for how we form the community we so desperately need?

A psychological understanding of religion can be helpful. Speaking purely psychologically, religion helps us find meaning and offers identity. It comprises symbols, beliefs, practices, and the corporate structures that codify and reinforce those things for the individual. Such a definition, for example, does not necessarily mean that religion is any of the multitude of denominations one may choose, especially in Protestant evangelicalism in the US. The sheer number of splintered denominations and churches—doing religion the "right" way—in this context itself lends credence to the idea that religion, psychologically speaking, can be many things. In other words, religion may, and perhaps more than not, be something that could be markedly different than what we think it is. Defining religion strictly in a psychological sense, therefore, opens the possibilities of different kinds of concrete expressions that we might call religious or spiritual.

Here is where an analytical, participant-observer point of view really kicks in, and here is where we can bring in a broader, sociological or a "psychosocial" point of view. For example, we might talk about how American religion is extraordinarily shaped by individualism (hence all the church splits), and how that individualism shapes any one person's identity, relationships, and presenting worries and anxieties. We might also talk about empirical sociological research that shows a quality of sadness in spiritual seekers, and by extension, that sadness is a defining characteristic of the religious self today. Or we could also talk historically about what I like to call "the great inward turn" of religion that happened as soon as Europeans left their homeland in search of religious freedom. Arguably, we've been losing our religion since the days we came to America, constantly seeking, relying on ourselves, sometimes just surviving, never really able to form real community.

How, for example, do a people embedded in a culture of the individualistic, sacred self, who have institutionalized an inward spiritual life, properly mourn the loss of religion and spiritual community? Do we really "go back" to faith? How do we find trust

and faith in our worldviews again, without the structures we are accustomed to? The task of our time is to redefine what it means to be religious, to have healthy symbols of ultimacy shared in community. It is a monumental task, but also a dynamic one and at times exciting.

There is no doubt that this exploration showed me some of the keys to finding our way to once again trusting in ultimate symbols, even in community. One of those keys is learning how to own your faith, take responsibility for it, and to slough off heavy-handed high achievers. Then to take what you own and show up in community and discover a sense of play with others. I thought that I could apply these ideas, even if sometimes the "others" were not necessarily playing fair at times. I thought I could accept that. Instead, I found out that the faith community I was in not only did not play fair, but it also was downright hostile. Play cannot happen in that kind of environment.

What I found out, eventually, was that you could put yourself in a new situation, a new playing field, and you might convince yourself that it is a healthy environment (the evangelical church mentioned above did allow women pastors, for example). You could get pulled in and form some friendships and attachments, but then realize just how conditional it was. You also realize that you were seen in a way that was not the full you. The environment could not hold all of you. To be true to yourself, to allow all your theological thinking, your religious experience, and any new experimentation meant that you were going to have to hide. And I could not hide any longer and abide by what was wrong. I felt bad that I was involved. I felt like I led those people along, but also realize they led me along, that we were leading each other along.

All that to say is that there are principles in this book of what a healthy faith looks like, especially in the context of overcoming unhealthy faith. But just because you learn them, it does not mean it will be easy. In a way, that's the whole point. It will be messy, even potentially traumatic. There's no reason to put up with that, and yet when you do try to participate in community, it can happen again. What I hope will become evident is that you can always find a good

game, a place to be careful but to try to play along. That's the only way you are going to make progress. Try to find a safe space (and I'm not necessarily talking about a church), and be ready to lose at faith again and again.

The foregoing introduction will explain what is to come throughout this book. There is a lot of background discussion summarizing sociological research, psychological stages of faith, and the basic psychoanalytic stance toward religion. Then there is a prolonged exploration in the psychoanalytic theory that pertains to loss of religion, what can be called mourning religion. The theoretical sections can be demanding and perhaps at times presuming some background in psychology, psychoanalytic theory, and sociology. Hopefully, the theory is not so hard to follow and the jargon not too overwhelming, and hopefully it holds a certain evocative nature for putting a language to the religious identity crisis so many of us feel. And as mentioned above, some of this thinking simply cultivates a discipline of common sense, or reason, and a way of looking at things under the surface. I would also recommend to the reader not to miss the biographical analysis in Part II, as that is where the theory is applied, and the interpretive, analytical stance goes into action.

David Morris, January 2022

Introduction

The Faith Crisis in Our Time

THROUGHOUT THE LIFE of someone in the United States, religious experience seems like a perpetual game of Twister—you're always trying to find some new additional spot to stand on and keep yourself from falling. Alternatively, you just don't play the game, worried you might lose. Either way, it's not easy. Social upheaval, economic fluctuation, a free-flowing world of ideas, and increasing cultural diversity make it no simple matter. It is difficult to form attachments to beliefs and rituals that motivate and bring people together. Change, not stability, rules the day. It is part of our religious DNA.

Our spiritual instability is so common that many of us may wake any morning, like a Sunday morning, and our trust in religion is no longer there, we have simply lost our grip on it, or we work even harder to grasp it more tightly. We have trouble defining spiritual practice, giving it a name, and having it remain something solid that we can share with others. Observe for example the growth of generic, nondenominational Protestant churches in recent decades. Isn't there within this movement an unwanted compromise with passive spectatorhood and a corresponding lack of community or feeling of belonging? Aren't there difficulties in agreeing upon compelling sacred objects, resulting in the big box church experience?

The fluid, seemingly shapeless features of religion, especially of

late twentieth and early twenty-first century Christianity in the United States, create what seems to be a difficult challenge to the ways in which we accumulate experience and knowledge of religion. Churches attempt to respond to this challenge but may miss the root causes. Whether the task is beefing up attendance in an ailing, urban mainline church or starting a new "seeker sensitive" megachurch in the suburbs, elusive obstacles lie in the way and the process seems slow if not impossible. A new and improved Sunday morning service or a clever way to repackage a set of doctrines can sometimes seem no more than mere marketing or emotionalism and fail to address the deeper dynamics that keep us always on our toes trying to figure things out.

There indeed are deeper dynamics at work, often hidden from view. Briefly stated, this book is about the overlooked interplay of psychological and social dynamics in the individual journey of faith. Such dynamics are always, always playing a role in how we create and interact with the formal structures of religion, such as its various theologies, symbolisms, and structures. Sometimes God the Father, for example, is far more your real-life father than you've ever possibly acknowledged.

So just what may we say about the individual experience of religion? What is its depth, scope, and power? When does it begin, how strong is its hold, and what effect do its beginnings have on later religious life? What are the consequences of an experience gone wrong? Before answering these questions, let's be reminded, because it is so easy to sweep it under the rug, of the affecting and influential force of the individual experience of religion.

The Power and Influence of Individual Experience

Exposure to religious symbols and religious community, begins in the very early months and years of life. Even the experiences of how a child is handled, greeted, dressed, taught, and developed in relation to a sacred community should, in and of themselves, be inspiration enough for us to undertake careful examination of the lasting

developmental effect of religious life. These experiences always remain a part of the individual, regardless of whether he or she still participates in that tradition or believes in its creeds.

Kate Young Caley, in her memoir *The House Where the Hardest Things Happened*, describes a scene from her childhood when she attended the First Church of God in Moultonborough, New Hampshire. She recalls one day when the pastor, Brother Munroe, was preaching with tears in his eyes a message about the importance of the Bible, and how important it ought to be for every Christian:

> Then he is shouting to us, "And if you don't feel this way, then you might as well throw the whole thing out the window right now!" And as he says the words he flings his Bible out into the congregation toward the window where Althea Buckley always sits.
>
> Maybe it is only my imagination, but the Bible seems within inches of hitting me in the face as it flies by. I wait for the smashing of glass at the window, but there is none. Brother Munroe had tied a rope around his Bible, and just as it is about to smash windowpanes he jerks the rope and whips the Bible back to him like a cowboy in a movie.
>
> Thirty-five years later, that sermon illustration is still working its message in me. Part of the message I keep with me is that things can happen in a church you'll never be able to forget.[1]

How is it that this experience has stayed with Caley through all those years? Her memoir lets the reader know that it is memories like these that motivate her to discover a new and different connection to religious life.

Getting beyond an outsized childhood experience with religion may be possible, but to discover a new way of connecting to it as an adult can often be fraught with difficulty. Facing one's symbols of ultimacy means dealing with far-reaching and potent matters. Bestselling author Kathleen Norris describes how she came from a "thoroughly Protestant" background, but during her young adult years fell

away and became disillusioned. Nearing middle age, she made attempts to return, but reconciling herself with the symbols, people, and practices of her religion was not easy:

> When I first began going to church, I was enormously self-conscious and for a long time couldn't escape the feeling that I didn't belong there. . . . My attempts to worship with others on Sunday mornings would trigger a depression lasting for days. . . . Gradually, over several years of fits and starts, I was finally able to feel that I was part of a worshiping congregation. But I still had a tenuous hold on belief, and any number of powerful words I might encounter during church—commandments, creeds, resurrection—could send me reeling.[2]

As we hear in Norris's narrative, a falling away from a religious community involves forces that go well beyond any sort of rebellious wanderlust or young adult experimentation. Something in her religious life apparently went so wrong, was so unfortunately mishandled and misguided, that she had great emotional difficulty, marked by a visceral, physiological power, which made it nearly impossible to set foot in a church at all. Again, one might suggest that such a physical reaction to reapproaching one's religious tradition may be a normal response in the life cycle of faith, but to do so would be to underestimate the power of memory or the experience of personal and collective history.

Karen Armstrong, who has authored books on religion for general audiences, says her memoir *The Spiral Staircase* was written as an attempt to accept that she could not, no matter how hard she tried, ignore that she had spent several formative years, beginning at age seventeen, in a convent preparing for life as a nun. This book was not her first attempt at spiritual memoir; in fact, it was her third. Her first, *Through the Narrow Gate*, offered insight into the challenges of her life as a young novice.[3] Her second, *Beginning the World*, was meant to show unequivocally how she had left the convent both physically and spiritually, had completely severed her connection with the rigid

and stultifying experiences there, become a new person, and embraced life in the freedom of the 1960s and early 1970s.[4] Armstrong tells us that *The Spiral Staircase* was written to correct the hasty conclusions of earlier writing, as she had come to realize that she could no longer extricate herself completely from nor deny the intense experiences of the convent:

> I have never managed to fully integrate with "the world," although I have certainly tried to do so. Despite my best endeavors, I have in several important ways remained an outsider. I was much closer to the truth at the end of *Through the Narrow Gate*, when I predicted that in some sense I would be a nun all my life.[5]

> [B]eing a nun at that time was not like training to be a teacher or a broadcaster or a doctor, where you learn a skill but your deepest self remains—and personal life remains intact and unaffected. This training was meant to be a conditioning, a conditioning that was designed to last a lifetime, and it did. And when I left the convent, I did not know how to live without these structures. I felt the whole tenor of my life had changed, and yet I was still the same. I was still basically a nun, but in secular clothes, and I needed to train myself to become a secular as rigorously as I had trained myself to become a nun.[6]

In *The Spiral Staircase*, Armstrong seems to be doing important psychological work. With a tragic but hopeful tone, she lays claim to a past that possesses her. By doing so she seems to come closer to something true and genuine about herself that allows her to both incorporate the past and meaningfully pursue the future, regardless of whether she had shed her religious clothing and could call herself a "secular."

While Caley, Norris, and Armstrong have their struggles, for others, the damage of a religious background is so profound, so insipid and abusive, one must wonder that the *only* appropriate response is complete and permanent rejection. In her memoir of growing up in

a fundamentalist and racist community, Julia Sheeres describes the emotional austerity of her parents, especially her father, who was prone to fits of rage and violence, often directed at her African American brothers, two boys adopted by the family in the name of Christian duty. Sheeres, along with one of her brothers, was sent by these parents to a Christian reform school in the Dominican Republic, where she was subjected to still more verbal and emotional abuse. Her memoir is rife with bitterness and indignation, yet also with a certain strength, direct engagement, and active interest in the troubles that haunt her:

> Having been brainwashed from birth as a Calvinist, it took me years to shake my religion entirely. . . . I lost my religion by degrees. The first step was witnessing the hypocrisy of Christians around me when I was a child. The second was escaping the rigid subculture I grew up in and meeting secular folks who were much more moral and trustworthy than the Christians I was told to revere.[7]

Sheeres had to divorce morality from the religion that she knew, even from the image of the parents who raised her, to rediscover it in the everyday people around her. A story like Sheeres's leaves us with the question of whether the rediscovery of faith and the symbols that represent it occurs outside what is conventionally considered religion.

It would be easy for some, in evaluating stories like these of those who have fallen away from a community of shared faith, to put focus on "sin," that is, individual failures to follow specific religious doctrines and practices. My focus here, however, will be to avoid observations from within a religious framework, and to take a more empirical, pragmatic mindset. What can we see that can be named in the individual experience of the sacred, including all that works in its favor and all that does not?

What must not be overlooked, for example, is not only personal experiences but also the broadest social factors of contemporary

living. In other words, religion is not experienced in isolation—in fact, it is far more socially determined than we realize. Gen-X writer Douglas Coupland, in his collection of short stories, *Life After God*, provides a glimmer of the broad scope of society that impacts the individual sense of the sacred. He writes with an allegorical nostalgia about growing up as "children of pioneers" in a world of suburban affluence and apathy, and the milieu of contemptuousness that it breeds, including a cynicism toward all things religious. He relays a sense of faith lost that encapsulates so much of what is working against the strivings for gritty, life-giving coherence, and a religion that holds it all together:

> I think there was a tradeoff somewhere along the line. I think the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to fully believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched. And I wondered if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God.
>
> But then I must remind myself we are living creatures—we have religious impulses—we *must*—and yet into what cracks do these impulses flow in a world without religion? It is something I think about every day. Sometimes it is the only thing I should be thinking about.[8]

As we see in these snippets, religion motivates powerfully. Religious tradition connects individuals to a cause so great that it has to do with the very creation, control, definition, and destiny of their lives. No amount of scientific discovery, commercial success, or satisfaction of physical desires can equal the psychological and social dynamism of religious symbolism. Nothing better inspires or destroys the individual's basic faith and trust in the world, and their connection to community, than the way we use symbols to express ourselves.

So when something goes awry in the life of faith, it is no wonder that it can easily turn into something of great personal cost. When we fail to discover hope despite each new challenge, and when those

around us fail to nurture and encourage our relationship to ultimate symbols and community, we fall deeply into despair. Unfortunately, such despair is often kept secret, or it is difficult to find words to describe it. When things are not working out the way they are supposed to, no one wants to talk about it. When doubts, misgivings, or even simple questions arise, there is a natural tendency to dodge them. Instead of dealing with these feelings, one invests energy in distraction, turns inward, or alternatively adopts a belligerent stance. All those things may be necessary, but eventually the motivating unmet needs cannot be avoided altogether, not brought to light. Even in academic research, it can be said that the role of doubt is seldom given its due. Yet it may be that only through understanding this doubt and despair that we will document the spark of religious imagination, the process of spiritual creativity, and the signs of new growth.

Problem and Thesis

The argument I will make works with the assumption that Christianity in the United States today is in a time of change, and that it is always changing just as social constructions of life are always changing. Within that change it is reasonable to assume that some individuals become lost and even suffer at the hands of traditions or situations that adapt poorly to change. Yet, after losing their way and leaving organized religion, certain individuals find their way back, or forward. While a thorough review of the sociological data regarding church attendance trends and patterns is beyond the scope of this book, it is safe to surmise, from the narratives sampled above, that the personal journey of faith in our time—that is, the individual's experiences with religion in the US—can be fraught with struggle, some of which seems to go so far as to cause psychological damage. If we hold the above assumption to be true, at least in degrees, the fundamental question is this: how are individuals able to respond to the challenges of our time and rediscover and reclaim a powerful, life-shaping connection to sacred objects and symbols?

Most research that analyzes the spiritual journey today seems either unwilling or ill-equipped to recognize the suffering associated with religious identity loss and spiritual amorphousness. We find that the struggles of those who have abandoned their religious identity, and yet have made gains in discovering a new one, are analyzed through two basic lenses. On the one hand, developmental, cognitive psychological theory—probably the easiest way to understand it—tells us that people are working their way through known stages of personal development, or in other words, are merely making a journey of faith that has been true for all time and in all places. Each person strives toward a point where cumulative life experience and emotional growth can enable progression toward a more universalized and deepened religious understanding. On the other hand, sociological studies tell us that individuals falling away from religion join the many for whom the religious identity handed them has lost its relevance in today's mobile world, especially among the highly educated, and they return to church because marriage, children, and greater social participation enter the picture. While both approaches bring important insights, they are incomplete evaluations of the fluctuations in faith, neglect the component of the inner emotional life, and especially overlook the effect of religious trauma.

What is often missing is an in-depth understanding of how internal life impacts the coming into relation with social constructions of trust and faith. Why, for example, do people become angry with God or religious leaders, or conversely, why does it drive them to depression? Why are these struggles so difficult and why do they take so long? What can we learn from those who have overcome the feelings they associate with their past religious experience? Do people follow a neat pattern of faith development, or do they grow and mature in some ways while remaining immature in others? What role does trauma play, either on the familial level, or as well on the broadest possible social level? Although there have been a number of church-focused investigations to explain why people leave faith, few go further than applying some combination of the sociological or cognitive-developmental approaches.[9] It can even seem like they are

purposely avoiding something.

To grapple with these enduring questions, we must delve into the hidden aspects of individual narrative and explore an interpretive theory that makes it possible to reveal that narrative. Without such an approach, we are at a loss to recommend action that can encourage understanding, healing, and growth.

I propose that to complete the picture of analyzing the individual experience of religion in our time—characterized by dislocation, separation, and trauma—we need to draw insights from psychoanalytic process and theory. I argue that by turning to psychoanalytic psychology as both a theoretical and research tool we can better understand the process of leaving and then returning to a participatory faith. In particular, the application of what we know about the role of religion in psychic life, knowledge taken from the psychoanalytic concepts of mourning, object relations, and creativity, will help shed new light on personal crises of faith. I will offer observations on those who have "fallen away" from their religious tradition, experienced a time of fallowness, and yet made certain gains in overcoming the past and creating the possibility for a future in community. I will demonstrate that the return journey to a community of shared faith is not limited solely to a denouement of youthful wanderlust or stage growth, but also involves a lifelong psychological process of finding freedom from disillusionment and the freedom for discovery.

In Part I, chapter one will begin by surveying the sociological research surrounding the topic of the faith journey in contemporary society. Social analysis has been the primary lens through which academicians have analyzed changes in faith participation over time. Surveying the basic findings in this area will accomplish the twofold purpose of drawing the social context of the individual response to religion in our time and suggesting avenues for new research, namely, a stronger focus on psychological experience. Chapter two will take a somewhat intermediary step toward the individual by summarizing studies that draw on a sociological, psychological, *and* historical approach to the experience of the sacred in our time. It is here that the assertion of the role of dislocation and loss finds its strongest

expression. I will show that the loss in any one individual is connected to factors that reach far beyond a snapshot of localized experience and, moreover, demonstrate that overcoming a loss of faith means overcoming these larger factors.

Having drawn the broader context of the challenges to the life of faith in our time, chapter three will offer an analysis of faith stage theory in the widely used work of James Fowler. Like social analysis, cognitive developmental faith-stage theory is another common response when questions of transitions of faith arise. While Fowler's research adeptly describes the structural progression of religion, and helps us understand that, regardless of social contexts, individuals as they mature psychologically will inevitably have different needs and outlooks, I will show that this research has little to offer in terms of understanding the pathology that arises as a response to existential loss and widespread trauma. What is needed, instead, is a language that can help us approximate how individuals experience and then respond to both their personal history as well as the broader changes in society and culture.

To begin that discussion, however, we must first lay out the fundamental interpretive theory of the life of human faith that can show how religion is linked to psychology, a theory that can also accommodate psychological pathology. Consequently, chapter four will summarize the essential psychoanalytic stance on the individual, religion, and society. I will briefly survey two seminal figures in this approach to demonstrate that religion creates symbols that are linked to our deepest, most powerful desires, hopes, and dreams, and that the community in which such symbols are employed plays a vital and indispensable part in actualizing individual faith.

With the psychoanalytic approach to religion established, chapter five will then drill deeper into the psychoanalytic theory that articulates the language of mourning. I will sketch a theoretical position that begins with Sigmund Freud's stance on mourning, contrast that with the work of Melanie Klein, then turn to D.W. Winnicott to show the linkage between the work of mourning, the use of play and creativity, and how these relate to the life of faith and religion. This

core theoretical approach, one that works as a response to the observations of previous chapters, will equip us with a set of hypotheses with which to analyze spiritual disillusionment and the rediscovery of hope.

In Part II, the ensuing chapters comprise case analyses of biographical data. Here I will provide in-depth reviews of five religious memoirs. I will put these memoirs "on the couch," and offer analyses that illuminate both the contours of disillusionment as well as the path of returning, that is, stories of individuals who were once active church members, experienced a time of withdrawal and fallowness, and then once again felt certain freedoms to become involved in a faith community. The methodology I will employ will be the psychoanalytical literary study that delves into personal religious history. By looking at how people narrate their lives, their context, and their spirituality and religion, we can discern heretofore undiscovered psychological patterns in the return journey to sacred community. I will assume, as much as possible, the posture of the psychoanalyst, only in this case I will be working solely with written text, and employing psychohistory, much in the way Erik Erikson does in his studies of Martin Luther and Mohandas K. Gandhi.[10] Taking this approach will connect us with the unconscious, unspoken dimension of religious experience. As a subject for academic and scholarly inquiry into the religious life, unconscious territory is not an easily articulated topic. Inquiries of this nature require much more than a fleeting nod to personal history. They must consider a variety of trajectories including early family relationships, social milieu, economics, history, and the way the individual unconsciously processes all these trajectories. The language of psychoanalytic psychology can be of practical value in that it uses personal narrative as data. Psychoanalysis explores overall tone, manifest content, and inconsistencies, and creates a way for us to listen to the hidden themes that reveal the road to healing. Memoirs such as these also provide rich self-descriptions that span the entire life of the individual. Above all, what we also find in memoir are doubts and misgivings that are not so forthcoming in the social scientific interview. Much like the therapist's office, what is

revealed is the story people want to tell, and do not mind telling when the fear of rejection or misunderstanding is relaxed. More than that, I will look between the lines of the text to see what interpretations and conclusions can be drawn from each memoirist's journey, showing what they have in common despite being different people. The approach here will not pinpoint a particular faith stage, but rather draw the overall picture of what the ongoing struggles and successes are and how they compare to the others. Moreover, I will not simply explore past relationships with parents or a particular religious community. Instead, a wider lens will be at work, one that considers the cultural-historical challenges outlined in chapter two. How these challenges have been met, in conjunction with the way each individual author has been able to attend a group assembled around ultimate symbols, will be a crucial part of understanding the dynamics at work in rebuilding faith.

After discussing these five individuals, the concluding chapter offers the overall analysis that can be drawn from the biographical content. I will summarize key findings and how they relate to psychoanalytic mourning and object relations theory, outlining both the difficulties as well as the ideal tasks that individuals encounter on the return or forward trip to sacred community. I will also include any new conclusions we may draw regarding that theory when applied to the life of faith.

Defining Faith, Religion, and the Absolutist Mindset

There are many words in the discussion of religion that may seem vague or interchangeable. It is therefore helpful to set forth a few loosely held definitions, especially because I will use variations of these words simply to avoid repetition, but also to allow the words at least some flexibility. First and foremost, I wish to be clear that the word *faith* as it will be used in this discussion means something universal and rudimentary to individual experience, and not a specific religious tradition or even a separate dimension of life. In the same manner one might refer generically to the words *trust*, *hope*, and *to have*

faith, faith in the context of the psychology of religion refers to something that could simply be described as the basic desire for living. As Erikson points out in his stages of the life cycle, basic trust and its partner, hope, form at the earliest stage of life and comprise one of the infant's first tasks.[11] What is experienced as faith at this stage is the grand originator of and participant in the symbols and images that reflect, capitulate, and provide the means through which humans articulate their deepest desires and strongest attachments across the entire life cycle. Such symbolic life is, namely, our religion, and it is not ever discrete. Instead, religious expression, and the faith that animates it, is the ultimate and most transcendent symbolism in life, a culmination and recapitulation.

Furthermore, faith is a basic human response, as well as something that is shared and negotiated with others through tradition. In the act of sharing, symbolic life takes on multiple meanings and holds some of the broadest possible powers over the articulation of experience. For the purposes of this discussion, religion will represent symbolic life—objects, rituals, practices, beliefs, and creeds—of a group tradition that is a connective communication between the basic faith of its members. Moreover, and in keeping with Erikson, faith is directly involved in matters of identity. Basic trust, as opposed to mistrust, is a response garnered by how well an infant recognizes itself while at the same time being recognized by the mother. Erikson generally uses this language in connection with matters of identity during adolescence, but the principle of the concept, which echoes other theorists' concepts, one example being Winnicott's "mirroring" mother, has its roots in early life. We may think of faith, then, as the force and drive of religion, whereas religion may be considered as the content of faith.

James Fowler, in the preliminary chapters of *Stages of Faith*, adeptly summarizes these very points. He draws on the following: Paul Tillich's *Dynamics of Faith*, which considers faith as ultimate concern, and religion as the objects of ultimate concern; H. Richard Niebuhr, who sees faith as a search for shared visions and centers of value and power; and especially Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End*

of Religion, which labels religion as the "cumulative tradition" that expresses the faith of people in the past.[12] From one of Fowler's later books, we find this nuanced definition of faith:

> Faith . . . may be characterized as an integral, centering process, underlying the formation of beliefs, values, and meanings that (1) gives coherence and direction to persons' lives, (2) links them in shared trusts and loyalties with others, (3) grounds their personal stances and communal loyalties in a sense of relatedness to a larger frame of reference, and (4) enables them to face and deal with the limited conditions of human life, relying upon that which has the quality of ultimacy in their lives.[13]

All of the above further illustrates the definition of faith and religion that will be employed in the present discussion. Moreover, such a definition points to one of the key assumptions of this study, namely, that faith is communal or participatory. This aspect of the definition becomes important when we survey popular understandings in contemporary culture that faith can be mutually exclusive of community. Furthermore, just as it is impossible to separate one from the other, no rediscovery of religion is possible or complete without a social or institutional component.

Closely connected to the words *faith* and *religion*, one that finds frequent use in common parlance is the word *spirituality*. Today, spirituality often refers to something completely independent of a social component that is practiced on one's own and develops fully on the individual level.[14] While no doubt using the word *spirituality* in this manner has value for those who must create physical and psychological space between themselves and established traditions, the psychological definition of faith and religion leaves little room for a radically self-contained individual religion, free of any shared symbols whatsoever. Therefore, when I refer to spirituality in the pages that follow, I will do so without such a connotation. Rather, spirituality will refer more closely to the concrete individual practices of religion, whether that be prayer, reading sacred text, or attending the gatherings of a

religious community. It remains something of a synonym for religion and points away from religion's more institutional and organizational characteristics.

I will also often use the word "imagoes" or "sacred imagoes" to indicate an individual or society's entire amalgamation and pinnacle of what is imbued with deep and multifaceted meaning. The word imago is Latin for image, and it has been used in entomology to indicate an adult stage of an insect. Interestingly, the language of psychoanalysis has also incorporated this word to mean an unconscious idealized image, perhaps especially a parent. So the phrase sacred imagoes offers a certain richness in a conversation about psychology and religion.

Having defined faith, religion, and spirituality, it is important now to offer clarification of a few words that are unavoidable when studying individuals in the United States who have left a religious group, distanced themselves, and then returned. While the psychological processes at work likely apply to most religious experience in the United States if not the entire Western postindustrial world, the memoirs that I survey remain closely connected with American Protestant evangelical or fundamentalist tradition. Staying within this area is important because I hope to demonstrate that it is such traditions in our society that bear some of the most clear and extreme evidence for the psychological dynamics at play. The more rigid and legalistic forms of Protestantism—ones that purport a literal and "inerrant" interpretation of religious texts, and that create communities of exclusionary rhetoric and emphasize a "decision for Christ," often through crisis conversions—will be the focus here. Correctly or incorrectly, these areas of religious life in our society are often described alternately and interchangeably as fundamentalist and evangelical. Both terms include different connotations, have different origins, and even point to different and changing sets of cultural groups both in the United States and abroad. In truth, adequately defining these terms is beyond the purpose of this book. Consequently, I will try to use them sparsely because they lack precision in a discussion about the psychology of religion. Instead, I will employ

the words *totalism* and especially *absolutism* to describe a general mind-set that is at work in these forms of Protestantism.

Erik Erikson is credited with introducing the word *totalism* to describe "a fanatic and exclusive preoccupation with what seems unquestionably ideal within a tight system of ideas."[15] Robert Lifton expanded the definition, describing the "totalistic environment" as based on an absolute philosophical assumption, exclusivity of truth, manipulating communication, loading language to eliminate ambiguity, imposing a culture of confession, and mobilizing guilt through an imperative to remove internal taints.[16] Where Erikson and Lifton's descriptions of totalism have a stronger external focus on the politics of autocracy, Karl Figlio's use of the related word *absolutism* brings a more object relations driven description. Figlio defines "the absolute state of mind" as a core disposition in society and the individual that involves "a state of idealization of the self, merged with an idealized object as an ego-ideal, withdrawn from external reality. . . ." Absolutists dissolve into each other and their idealized leader. They separate their group from other groups, are easily subject to fragmentation and sectarian splitting in a never-ending quest for purity, and are stalked by a sense of cosmic failure. Self-denigration and a compulsion for unattainable completion drives the absolutist. "The ego, relentlessly and compulsively seeking to identify with the ego-ideal, drives itself out of the bonds of relating to the external world."[17]

Erikson, Lifton, and Figlio all share similar observations that the totalist or absolutist state of mind is at work in our world today, that it is widespread and an indicator of the psychological challenges of our time. Psychologically speaking, we may for example find very little difference between a fundamentalist and an atheist. Despite their seemingly stark external differences, both seek a well-defined, absolute worldview, are driven by demonizing each other, and are struggling equally with uncertainty. While a genuine comparison and contrast of fundamentalists and atheists could be a topic for another book all its own, we can be satisfied with the general idea that both types of individuals are responding to whatever crisis of meaning

their world presents them. How they respond to that crisis, one that I argue is defined by loss, is the underlying concern in identifying the dynamics of returning to a community of faith.