

RELIGION AND THE MODE OF PRACTICE IN MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

by Elizabeth Corey

Abstract. Michael Oakeshott's religious view of the world stands behind much of his political and philosophical writing. In this essay I first discuss Oakeshott's view of religion and the mode of practice in his own terms. I attempt next to illuminate his idea of religion by describing it in less technical language, drawing upon other thinkers such as Georg Simmel and George Santayana, who share similar views. I then evaluate Oakeshott's view as a whole, considering whether his ideas about religion can stand up to careful scrutiny and whether they have value for present-day reflection on religion.

Keywords: British Idealism; modality; Michael Oakeshott; practical mode; practice; religion; George Santayana; Georg Simmel; Eric Voegelin

Michael Oakeshott's religious view of the world stands behind much of his political and philosophical writing. Yet it is difficult to get a firm grasp on what religion means to Oakeshott. His ideas about it constitute nothing that most people would recognize as religious. He rarely writes about God, creeds, dogma, metaphysics, theology, or transcendent experience. Many readers find it a stretch to see his thought as religious at all. How, then, can one reasonably assert that it was an essential part of his philosophy?

To appreciate the centrality of religion in Oakeshott's work we must attend to two preliminary tasks. First, there is the obstacle of the language Oakeshott employs to discuss religion. His most explicit consideration of it took place only in his youth, during the 1920s and 1930s. During these years he was immersed in the philosophical school of British Idealism, and

Elizabeth Corey is Assistant Professor of Political Science in the Honors College, Baylor University, One Bear Place #97122, Waco, TX 76798-7122; e-mail Elizabeth_Corey@baylor.edu.

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his usage of such technical terms as *abstract* and *concrete* will likely be foreign to a present-day audience. Readers of Oakeshott also must consider his view of modality, because his explicit discussion of religion occurs as part of a discussion of the particular “mode” of practice. The first task, therefore, is to explain these concepts and to place Oakeshott’s theorizing within the philosophical context in which he wrote.

The second task is perhaps more important, as well as more interesting. It is fundamentally a work of translation or, perhaps better, transposition. Because the “key” of British Idealism serves nowadays more to obscure than to clarify, the present essay aims to transpose Oakeshott’s provocative ideas into language more accessible to a modern reader. It aims to answer the following questions: What *is* the experience that Oakeshott calls religion? How is it related to the mode of practice? What exactly is the character of the religious person? Clear answers to these questions depend not only on Oakeshott’s own work but also on the writings of others who have described a similar experience.

Thus I proceed first to discuss Oakeshott’s view of religion and modality in his own terms. I then attempt to illuminate his idea of religion by describing it in less technical language, drawing upon other thinkers who share a similar view. Finally, I turn to an evaluation of his view as a whole, considering whether it can stand up to criticism and whether it has any value for present-day reflection on religion.

OAKESHOTT AND MODALITY

In his first book, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), Oakeshott asserts that religion is “the consummation of practice” (p. 292). This rather cryptic formulation makes more sense in the context of the book as a whole, but even so it is not entirely lucid upon a first reading. It presupposes knowledge of both the idea of modality—the idea that experience may be apprehended and understood in a variety of different “modes”—and the philosophical school of British Idealism in which Oakeshott was immersed at the time.

In Oakeshott’s conception of modality the term *experience* denotes a world of ideas. All experience is, in a sense, *thought*. There is nothing that does not pass through the human mind and therefore nothing that is prior to thinking. Even sense perception and intuition, often understood as more immediate forms of experience, do not escape the conditions of thought. These activities are merely different from the conscious and intentional consideration we normally associate with thinking. All experience is filtered through the mind.

It is never undifferentiated, however. The character of what is experienced is always “correlative to the manner in which it is experienced” (Oakeshott 1933, 9). And so we unwittingly enter into a particular mode

whenever we do anything at all. An ancient vase discovered in Pompeii, for instance, is to the tourist a curiosity or perhaps an object to be photographed. To the philologist or historian it is a subject for study. A scientist may find it suitable for thermoluminescence dating. In making such distinctions we have already begun the journey into modality. Although experience in its most general character can never be partitioned or divided, it is nevertheless a homogeneous whole within which “distinctions and modifications may occur” (Oakeshott 1933, 27). We therefore find ourselves immersed in a particular modification of experience (a mode) such as science, history, or, most commonly, practice. Science, according to the explanation in this book, is the world understood under the category of quantity and is concerned with numbers, amounts, and properties. History, however, exists *sub specie praeteritorum* (under the aspect of the past). It is a form of thought concerned with “pastness.” The mode of practice is the world of moral conduct: of love, friendship, utility, pleasure, aspiration, and disappointment. Each mode is independent of the others, and, technically speaking, one mode cannot say anything relevant to another.

Practice is unavoidably the dominant mode in human life, and its dominance is at once a blessing and a curse. There are many rewards in practical life and much enjoyment to be had. We hope and plan for outcomes and satisfy multiple desires, forming friendships and completing projects. We invest for the practical future, hoping that a combination of prudence and foresight will allow us to achieve our aims. But also in practice we suffer terrible losses. Disease and death are practical events. For Oakeshott, however, the most unsatisfactory aspect of practice is not so much the evils that may befall human beings as the essential character of the mode itself. Practice can offer no lasting satisfaction. Every achievement is but the prelude to another, and nothing is ever fixed or finished. The essential character of practice lies in the always-incomplete attempt to reconcile the *is* of one moment with the *ought* of the next. In practice, the “deadliness of doing” (Oakeshott 1975, 74) is never overcome.

THE BACKGROUND OF BRITISH IDEALISM

Despite what seems to be an insuperable obstacle to any kind of lasting satisfaction in the practical mode, Oakeshott describes religion as the “consummation of practice” (1933, 292). The problem here is evident. If the mode of practice is incomplete and partial, what are we to make of its consummation? This would be the consummation of something inherently unsatisfactory.

Alternatively, Oakeshott may be offering some kind of ideal view of religion—an ideal never achievable in human life that nevertheless stands as a model for what all practical experience aims at. Religion as the “consummation of practice” evidently is something of this latter type. Here

Oakeshott explicitly echoes the British Idealist philosopher F. H. Bradley in *Ethical Studies* (1988, 320), arguing that the imperfection of morality necessarily implies a certain kind of perfection in another realm. This is the realm of religion. The incoherency of morality, in other words—the irreconcilable nature of the is and the ought—could not be perceived as an incoherency unless human beings had a sense that these might somewhere, somehow, be reconciled.

Indeed, according to Bradley this ideal not only exists but stands as the one vital reality over and against the mere appearance of the empirical reality of nature and human society. Our truest lives are spiritual, although we often forget this or fail to realize it altogether. As A. J. M. Milne describes this Bradleian account of religion, human beings “become real only to the extent that we are able to spiritualize ourselves, to live a genuinely religious life in which we try to embody in ourselves the ideal self which we now know to be the ultimate reality.” We emerge “from the transience and finitude of the merely natural life by realizing in ourselves, albeit incompletely, something of the character of the ideal” (Milne 1962, 79).

With this background in mind, Oakeshott’s odd formulation of religion as the consummation of practice begins to come into focus. It is not that Oakeshott thinks moral life qua moral life may ever be brought to a state of completion or consummation. On the contrary, as he emphasizes throughout *Experience and Its Modes* and elsewhere, moral activity consists in constant and interminable striving. But morality would be altogether purposeless were not some kind of ideal at least implied, and this is where religion steps in. The tendency “of all practical activity is towards this integrate state of mind” that is religion. “Whenever the seriousness with which we embrace this enterprise of achieving a coherent world of practical ideas reaches a certain strength and intensity, whenever it begins to dominate and take possession of us, practice has become religion.” It is characterized by “intensity and strength of devotion and by singleness of purpose” (Oakeshott 1933, 295).

This way of conducting oneself is described in one of Oakeshott’s early essays, “Religion and the World.” Here the religious person is someone who lives fully in each moment, not postponing present satisfaction in favor of some great, future achievement. Rather, such a person is fully aware of who he or she is and possesses “the courage to know what belongs to his life” (1993, 37). Worldliness, here, is achievement and career. Religion, on the other hand, is self-realization and an integrated, authentic self-knowledge that aims at an ideal of moral perfection.

It should go without saying that this is not a content-filled description of religion—a description of a specific religion with a positive content of dogma, sacraments, and creeds. It is an account of the religious inclination in humankind and a positioning of that inclination on the map of overall human experience. Religion appears on that map as a kind of practical

moral experience—indeed, as the consummation of that experience, meaning that religion is the larger whole that contains all moral activity. Most of the time human beings act not religiously but merely morally. Yet a few individuals have the “rare and peculiar genius which enables [a person] to see clearly what belongs to his life and to follow it without reserve, unhindered by the restraint of prudence or the impediment of doubt” (Oakeshott 1933, 295), and only those persons ought to be called religious.

Oakeshott thus far has described a kind of religious experience that emerges from the human desire for a certain kind of moral excellence. Following Bradley, he finds religion to be a preeminently practical endeavor, although it is more than “merely” practical. It looks beyond ordinary human moral concerns to a kind of conduct that is fully satisfying. That a truly religious existence is seldom, if ever, achieved does not make it less worthy as a point of orientation.

Up to now I have been describing the character of religion as Oakeshott does, drawing upon his modal theory as set out in *Experience and Its Modes* and the language of British Idealism that he borrows from Bradley and others. It will already be apparent that this is an exceedingly *self*-oriented view of religion. It arises not from a sense of sin and moral failure, and the consequent need for redemption, but from the desire to express oneself in the most expansive and meaningful way possible. It is vulnerable, of course, to a host of criticisms. Such a view, some will say, is far from religion. It is rather a variant of Friedrich Nietzsche’s will to power, purged of its more objectionable characteristics and modulated by a gentler British sensibility. Or it is Aristotelian magnanimity, but without the need for great power and possessions. Oakeshott’s so-called magnanimity consists in the ability to conduct oneself appropriately and do exactly as one wants, with little or no regard for what others think. How can such a self-regarding view partake of any traditional religious virtues, such as faith (in what?), hope (in what future?), or charity?

Such a criticism cannot be dismissed out of hand, for it certainly points to the unusual character of Oakeshott’s view. It is difficult to reconcile his view of the religious person with any particular religion as it is actually practiced. Moreover, if one assumes that organized religions have cornered the market on true religious expression, Oakeshott will emerge as a decidedly nonreligious thinker, for he does not write about typical theological issues. But this is intentional, because he is engaged in something quite other than describing religion as it is practiced; he is explaining the essential impulse that lies behind religion in the context of the entirety of human experience. He is giving a specifically philosophical account of religion. It is thus an attempt to distinguish religious conduct from other ways of acting in the world. Religious conduct is distinguished precisely in terms of its clarity of focus, its confidence in the appropriateness of actions, and its reflection of a person’s hard-won self-understanding.

So much for the presentation of Oakeshott's view in the terms of British Idealism. What does it mean for the concrete human being? How could one approximate "the consummation of practice" in one's own life?

Perhaps the best way to approach this question is by observing the ideal character of Oakeshott's "religious man" (just as Aristotle illustrates the ideal character of the high-minded man in *Ethics* 4.3). In "Religion and the World" Oakeshott describes a particular kind of religious experience and the kind of personality fit to engage in it. A religious person, he writes, is characterized by an adherence to a certain "scale of values" or "system of beliefs" (1993, 30). His religious nature is therefore fundamental to all he does. Religion, for such a person, is not some portion of life, an activity to be attended to only on Sunday mornings and in Wednesday night Bible studies. Rather, it informs the whole of his being and his every action. The substance of this religious view consists in an inclination to reject the worldliness of ambition and achievement in favor of a life that is lived wholly in the present. Such a person aims not at success but at "insight," always cultivating what Oakeshott calls "a personal sensibility" (1993, 34). The religious person seeks "freedom, 'freedom from all embarrassment alike of regret for the past and calculation on the future,' freedom from the encumbrance of extraneous motives and parasitic opinions, which is the sole condition of the intellectual integrity he values more than anything else" (1993, 37). He cares not about what others think of him but is concerned only to live a life that is full of meaning.

But what is specifically *religious* about this view that might not also be called simply moral? Intellectual integrity, freedom, and confidence in one's own perspective may be seen as obvious moral goods, whether or not one is inclined toward religion. It seems that again Oakeshott must answer by taking refuge in the language of Idealism. He observes in a different essay (written at about the same time) that while morality is "a battle with no hope of victory," religion is the "whole" that completes the endless abstractions of "mere" morality (1993, 44). We find him again using the language of completion and abstraction—patent British Idealism.

KINDRED SPIRITS

In a sense, this language of completion and abstraction is frankly unsatisfying. If we are content to restate the phrase that "religion is the consummation of practice" or "completion of morality," as Oakeshott does, we avoid the primary problem: What precisely does this formulation *mean*? To clarify his view, we may turn to other thinkers who have described a similar conception of religion in clearer, more direct language. One of these thinkers is the early twentieth-century German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel.

As a young man, Oakeshott was immersed in German philosophy and culture. As Efraim Podoksik has pointed out in several places, Simmel was

quite a significant part of this culture at the time (Podoksik 2003, 18–19; 2007, 2–3). It is likely that Oakeshott read Simmel's work. What can be said with certainty is that Oakeshott's ideas about religion are remarkably similar to Simmel's. But it is Simmel, not Oakeshott, who best explains this unusual conception of religion. He employs a much clearer style, avoiding the language of Idealism and setting out his religious ideas in a series of lucid essays published between the years 1903 and 1918.

The substance of Simmel's view is that the essence of religion lies in an individual's mode of approaching the world, not in the specific content of the religious views he holds. Thus doctrinal issues become decidedly unimportant. Both Oakeshott and Simmel place a strong accent on the religious individual rather than on the content of the dogma to which an individual assents. The person who is truly religious does not view religion as a separable part of life—something that one attends to at certain times—but as the whole of life. From this point of view, every action that a religious person takes is unavoidably religious in character. There is no distinction between secular and religious actions, and such a person's religion does not consist in any tenets of faith that could be abstractly stated. Rather, his "very being is religious" and exhibits "a oneness that cannot be broken down into specific features" (Simmel 1997, 10). It is quite "independent of the content to which faith attaches itself" (1997, 5). To be religious is to exhibit a fullness of being and "a form of life in all its vitality, a way in which life vibrates, expresses itself, and fulfills its destinies" (1997, 14). In Oakeshott's formulation, it is simply to know what belongs to one's life and to follow it without reserve. It resists formulation in codes, creeds, and teachings, which tend to reduce the complexity of experience in ways that both Oakeshott and Simmel disapprove.

Simmel and Oakeshott would say even more. Far from religion depending on the content of faith statements, both thinkers actually reject religious dogma on principle. A religious life may well adhere to strict demands and ideals, but only the religiously naive would assume that these must result from some externally imposed code. Instead, for someone who is truly religious, demands and ideals result from profound self-understanding and from one's own intellectual integrity:

. . . life is too short and uncertain to be hoarded, too valuable to be spent at the pleasure of others. . . . [It is] too precious to be thrown away on something [one] is not convinced is his highest good. In this sense, then, we are all, at moments, religious; and that these moments are not more frequent is due to nothing but our uncertain grasp on life itself, our comparative ignorance of the kind of life which satisfies, not one part of our nature, but the whole, the kind of life for which no retrospective regrets can ever be entertained. (Oakeshott 1993, 35)

The aim of living religiously is to discover precisely what kind of life does "satisfy."

The danger of externally imposed demands and ideals, according to both thinkers, is that these are liable to be transformed into a rigid system of knowledge or, more often, of moral obligation. Much like the packaging of democratic institutions to spread around the world, religion is often similarly packed up for export to those who desire a ready-made code of conduct or, perhaps, an externally imposed meaning for their lives. But as soon as religious ideas are codified, they also become subject to critique. In “imitating the thought processes of science” religion becomes refutable (Simmel 1997, 6). It is forced to compete with science and philosophy on *their* terms, and religion often loses or must take refuge in irrationality. To understand the religious life as a set of doctrines that must simply be accepted or rejected is to have mistaken religion’s fundamental character, which consists primarily in “a certain state of being” (1997, 6). In short, obeying a set of religious commandments does not make a person religious. This signifies only that we may be good followers of a law. The essence of religion for both Oakeshott and Simmel consists not in obedient observance but in the intensely personal character of the religious life, its lack of dependence on external doctrines, and the all-encompassing nature of a religious orientation for an individual.

Still, this view of religion may appear somewhat difficult to grasp. In Idealist terms, it is the “completion of morality.” In Simmel’s language, it is a mode of life that infuses every action but does not require any particular set of beliefs. There is, however, another way of conceiving Oakeshott’s view of religion that may help somewhat in clarifying it. It is what may be termed *poetic religion*—a romantic, aesthetically inspired view that appears in the work of the philosopher and poet George Santayana, whom Oakeshott also read in his youth. Like Oakeshott and Simmel, Santayana describes a religious sensibility that is at once intensely personal and all-encompassing. It is an orientation toward the world that values present experience rather than constant effort to achieve some predetermined *telos* (end).

Santayana did not write a philosophical treatise about his view of religious experience but rather suggested its contours in his poetry and essays. The substance of this poetic religion is the idea that life is too precious to be exhausted in the insidiously practical attempt to live up to an externally imposed religious or moral code, where one is never quite successful. A similar view clearly is implied in Oakeshott’s work, both in his 1929 essay “Religion and the World” (in Oakeshott 1993) and in his later treatment of religion in *On Human Conduct* (1975). Defining religion as a set of rules to be obeyed would make religion into yet another variant of rationalism, an endeavor Oakeshott sharply criticized elsewhere. Instead, human beings ought to engage in activities and pursuits that are both more meaningful and more immediately “present.” We ought, in other words, to think less about some hypothetical future happiness and more about

living a life that is, in each of its moments, grounded, mindful, and self-aware, as Santayana implies.

This view, of course, is diametrically opposed to the way people live most of the time, because we usually are immersed in the mode of practice. But, as Oakeshott emphasizes in numerous places, practical life—that is, the life of investment for future happiness—is inherently unsatisfying because it can offer no termination point. This is why he (and Bradley) needed to postulate some kind of ideal in which the inadequacies of practice could be reconciled. Oakeshott calls this ideal religion, but what it also seems to be, particularly in the writings of Santayana, is a kind of embrace of transience and reconciliation with impermanence.

But does not the unsatisfactory nature of practice consist precisely in its transience and impermanence? Indeed it does. And yet there are different ways of approaching the transience inherent in human experience. There is the constantly changing nature of relationships and affections and of all created things in the natural world. The emblem of this kind of change is death. The unsatisfactory nature of practice is evident here: If one holds on to such created things and hopes for their permanence, disappointment is bound to follow. Wood rots, and people die.

An alternative way of approaching transience consists in recognizing and embracing the impermanent nature of the human world, letting things change as they will and not grasping them too tightly. The only stability that exists for mortals, Oakeshott and Santayana imply, consists in a settled and cultivated disposition to *enjoy* mutable things as they present themselves to us. Wood rots and people die, but here are wonderful houses to be lived in and precious people to be loved, so long as they endure.

The crucial part of living this way is not to postpone it to the future. As Oakeshott observes, the only immortality that fascinates the religious person is a present immortality. Although the worldly view of immortality is that it is “found in some far distant, future perfection of the race” (Oakeshott 1993, 37), the religious person practices a life that is truly contemporary, looking to neither the past nor the future but instead enjoying what is presently available even though it will soon pass away. In Santayana’s formulation, when contemplation is freed from “animal anxiety about existence,” it “ceases to question and castigate its visions, as if they were mere signals of alarm or hints of hidden treasures; and then it cannot help seeing what treasures these visions hold within themselves” (Santayana 1922, 22). Both authors seek an escape from the practical—from alarm and treasure alike—and a reorientation toward present experience.

To illustrate this focus on the present even in the midst of change, it is worth observing a few of the many examples in Santayana’s work. In his essay “Cloud Castles” Santayana observes, while watching the constantly changing shapes of clouds, that

it is not sinful to be fugitive nor in bad taste to be new. Accordingly cloud castles have nothing to blush for; if they have a weak hold on existence, so has everything good. . . . Cloud castles are hints to us that eternity has nothing to do with duration . . . and that even in heaven our bliss would have to be founded on a smiling renunciation. (Santayana 1922, 20)

Some such view is surely not far from Oakeshott's. It is a more positive expression of what Oakeshott expressed, toward the end of his life, as the primary task of religion: "reconciliation to nothingness" (1975, 84).

In fact, throughout Santayana's *Soliloquies in England* there appears again and again a focus on the immediacy and intensity of experience. He envies the skylarks, who spend their "whole strength on something ultimate and utterly useless, a momentary entrancing pleasure which (being useless and ultimate) is very like an act of worship or of sacrifice. Sheer life in [them] has become pure" (1922, 109). Santayana moreover describes the fullness of the religious life in ways that echo both Simmel and Oakeshott: "A man's life as it flows is not a theorem to which there is any one rigid solution. It is composed of many strands. . . . The Englishman finds that he was born a Christian . . . but his Christianity must be his own, no less plastic and adaptable than his inner man" (1922, 84). Santayana clearly understood religion as something extremely personal. The religious life is different for each individual, and thus it must be resistant to doctrines and creeds. It is not at all what we think of when we ordinarily think of religion—and this dissimilarity is precisely the problem of calling such experience religious.

EVALUATION AND CRITIQUE

We return to the question with which this essay began. How can we call Oakeshott's thought religious if it bears no real resemblance to anything normally considered religious? Even given the interesting commonalities between the views of Oakeshott, Simmel, and Santayana, some may see their conceptions of religion as inadequate. Without going into much detail, it is worthwhile to catalogue the kinds of criticisms that could be leveled at the conception of religion I have been examining.

First, in such a view—whether in Oakeshott, Simmel, or Santayana—there is no received doctrine or dogma and apparently no need for belief in anything or anyone. It is a religion entirely without articles of faith. Second, it is extremely focused on the self and the project of self-realization. Nowhere do these authors imply that community would enhance the religious experience; indeed, it seems that religion can be engaged in only by individuals. Third, none of these writers mentions any kind of transcendence. The entirety of the religious experience seems to take place in the mundane everyday life of an ordinary human being. Granted, an individual must make things sacred by his orientation toward them, but there seems never to be any possibility of an irruption of transcendence. Fourth,

a primary aim of many religions has been to offer consolation in times of crisis or trouble. It is often precisely when people feel weakest that they turn to religion. Notwithstanding the famous critiques that have been made of this aspect of religion, religion tends to give its most vital support precisely in times of greatest vulnerability. The view of religion we have been examining has none of this consolatory characteristic. Instead, it seems to require tremendous and consistent fortitude on the part of the religious individual. Finally, there appears to be a wholesale rejection of tradition in this kind of self-oriented religion. Although dogmas and creeds sometimes appear archaic and ossified, at their best they also contain a great deal of wisdom and experience. To reject outright all the trappings of religion seems a rather hubristic endeavor.

If any of these criticisms is correct, and if Oakeshott's view of religion is self-indulgent, solipsistic, and generally unsatisfactory, why is it worthy of consideration? I can suggest two possible answers to this question, in addition to the historical interest of grappling with ideas that are different from one's own.

First, a strong case can be made that the view of religion set out by Oakeshott, Simmel, and Santayana is *not* self-indulgent or solipsistic. Their conceptions focus on an individual self not because some sort of self-interest is our highest good but because without introspection our actions are likely to be either ineffective and aimless or malicious and harmful. In other words, this view of religion does not imply that a person must be selfish. It does, however, require a great degree of self-examination. The content of religious activity, on all three accounts, is necessarily left indeterminate precisely because such content could consist in so many different things. Religion may well involve an orientation toward others in performing acts of charity. It may show itself as a much more conventional faith. Alternatively, it could be the attempt at moral perfection that this essay has described throughout. What any religion requires, for these three thinkers, is an understanding of one's own motivations, interests, and tendencies. Insofar as action is authentically religious, it springs from self-understanding, and for this there is no substitute. As Oakeshott observes, the religious person values intellectual integrity more than anything else.

Another, more important, virtue is inherent in this kind of religious understanding. It functions as a bracing corrective to the idea that the essence of religion consists in doctrines and teachings that must be adopted before one can call oneself religious. Oakeshott does not see religion as a set of commandments enjoining or prohibiting action or as a theology that must be accepted intellectually before it can be practiced. Such an approach to the religious life would be akin to adhering to a rule book, abdicating responsibility for one's conduct by allowing some external authority to dictate what one should do and not do. For Oakeshott and the others, religion is neither a theology nor a set of obligatory laws.

Indeed, although in a religious life the pursuit of theology may offer itself “as an alternative to the practice of piety,” this is fundamentally to mistake the character of the religious life. Religion shares with all moral conduct a poetic aspect, which is denied by such a rationalistic and legalistic approach. As in poetry, where nothing exists prior to the poem itself “except perhaps the poetic passion,” so in religion our actions spring not from law but from a kind of intuition and sensibility (Oakeshott 1991, 478–79).

As Oakeshott liked to remind his readers, a philosophical account of a thing is not itself that thing. So it is that a person can tell time without being able theoretically to explain the concept of time. Likewise, according to Oakeshott, a person can live religiously without being able to explain the theology that undergirds his religion. Religion is, above all, a way of living, and religious people do not need to wait on evidence from philosophy, theology, or history before deciding to believe. They may believe in the absence of such evidence or even despite it. This view is intimately related to Oakeshott’s view of modality, in which the modes of history, science, and practice cannot speak to each other but stand as entirely separate and disconnected ways of approaching the world.

Oakeshott, Simmel, and Santayana all emphasize the uniquely personal and creative character of true religion as they understand it, and this aspect of their religious understanding is quite persuasive. At the same time, it is a somewhat philosophical approach to the religious life. By calling it philosophical I do not mean that it depends on some set of a priori theological or philosophical propositions. It also is not philosophical in Oakeshott’s strict sense of the term, where philosophy has no bearing on practical conduct but is entirely explanatory. But it is clear that for Oakeshott religion does depend upon a certain kind of thought. The religious life represents a considered decision to live in a certain manner—a decision that may, indeed, be continually before the mind and subject to revision. Fundamentally it is an attempt to answer the existential question How ought I to live? and is thus philosophical in the ancient sense of *Nosce te ipsum* (Know thyself).

In this respect, Oakeshott shares much with philosopher Eric Voegelin, who describes religion as an answer to a question and castigates those who fail to ask the question. Those at rest “in an uninquiring state of faith,” writes Voegelin, “must be *stirred* by the reminder that man is supposed to be questioner, that a believer who is unable to explain how his faith is an answer to the enigma of existence may be a ‘good Christian’ but is a questionable man” ([1971] 2000, 174). This, too, is a philosophical account of religion, where the religious life depends on introspection.

The difficulty in such an account is that many people do not wish to do the hard work that it requires. As Voegelin so persuasively explains, most of us are unwilling to live with anxiety about the meaning of existence, and

thus we search for quick and easy solutions. Ideologies of various sorts can resolve this anxiety, but often so may a certain kind of religious life. If our roles in the world are thought to be determined by a religious code, we need not fret any longer about what to do. This clearly is an approach that neither Voegelin nor Oakeshott would approve.

At the beginning of this essay I stated that it would prove worthwhile to transpose Oakeshott's account of religion into language more accessible to modern readers. This is the virtue of comparing him to other thinkers who share aspects of his view. Like Simmel, he focused on the personal and individual nature of religious consciousness, shying away from institutional expressions of dogma. Like Santayana, he valued a life lived fully in the present, embracing transience and loving beauty. Placing these writers together helps to illuminate their unusual view of the religious life, making the contours of the actual experience clearer and brighter. Using the metaphor of music, it is as if Oakeshott's expression of religion is a melody, but we are concerned with the symphony as a whole.

What is this religious life that all three writers, and perhaps Voegelin too, found so compelling? It is a view of religion that is at once philosophical, practical, and poetic. It is philosophical because it requires self-examination, requiring us to live according to the understanding we have acquired about ourselves. It is practical because it is, above all, a way of living in the world, and the practical mode is concerned with how we actually live. Practice concerns action, not explanation or contemplation. Finally, religion is, like much of human activity, poetic. It requires adaptability in conduct and a disposition to accept life as it happens, embracing transience and enjoying what is there to be enjoyed.

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