

OAKESHOTT ON THE CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: NEED THERE BE A CONFLICT BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION?

by Timothy Fuller

Abstract. Michael Oakeshott reflected on the character of religious experience in various writings throughout his life. In *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) he analyzed science as a distinctive “mode,” or account of experience as a whole, identifying those assumptions necessary for science to achieve its coherent account of experience in contrast to other modes of experience whose quests for coherence depend on different assumptions. Religious experience, he thought, was integral to the practical mode. The latter experiences the world as interminable tension between what is and what ought to be. The question, Is there a conflict between science and religion? is, in Oakeshott’s approach, the question, Is there a conflict between the scientific mode of experience and the practical mode? Insofar as we tend to treat every question as a practical one, these questions seem to make sense. But Oakeshott’s analysis leads to the view that scientific experience and religious experience are categorically different accounts of experience abstracted from the whole of experience. They are voices of experience that may speak to each other, but they are not ordered hierarchically. Nor can either absorb the other without insoluble contradictions.

Keywords: Christianity; experience unmodified; historical experience; modes of experience; practical experience; religious life; scientific experience; worldliness

Michael Oakeshott rarely acknowledged specific intellectual debts. In *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), however, he cited as major influences on his thinking G. W. F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and F. H. Bradley’s

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Appearance and Reality (1893). Oakeshott was invoking the tradition of Hegelian/British idealism, knowing that he was swimming against the tide of philosophic fashion. What did he get from this philosophic tradition? Human experience is our world: "Experiencing and what is experienced are, taken separately, meaningless abstractions. . . . The character of what is experienced is, in the strictest sense, correlative to the manner in which it is experienced. These two abstractions stand to one another in the most complete interdependence; they compose a single whole" (Oakeshott 1933, 9). For Oakeshott "there is nothing whatever which is not experience," and "there can be no experience which does not involve thought or judgment" (1933, 251).

A number of things follow, for Oakeshott. He sought to understand arguments by uncovering the assumptions or postulates on the basis of which each party to an argument seeks a coherent understanding of experience, thereby clarifying how each makes sense of its experience. He pursued not refutation or advocacy but rather descriptions that show the assumptions at work to support conclusions reached on each side; he preferred to turn debate toward conversation and to treat arguments as conversational gambits. Talk is interminable so long as there are human beings. The aim of the philosophic inquirer is to understand better the voices offering accounts of what is already given in experience. The philosopher does not resolve disputes but gives an account of why they are the way they are, and also why from the perspective of each participant the alternatives may seem mistaken or irrelevant. He did not think that victories inevitably deepen insight or that defeats reveal lack of insight. The philosophic quest is for experience as a whole "unmodified." "Thinking," he said, "is not a professional matter. . . . It is something we may engage in without putting ourselves in competition; it is something independent of the futile effort to convince or persuade" (1933, 7).

Oakeshott was of a stoic disposition, disinclined to engage in quixotic ventures to change the world or set it right, whatever that might mean. He once remarked to me that Don Quixote was the prototype of the modern rationalist, that Cervantes' great work was both the anticipation and the critique of modern rationalism. Oakeshott did not always attain detachment, but his disposition was to do so. He saluted Montaigne, who had seen that reasoning is the faculty that makes us human but also produces the ordeal of consciousness that makes us problematic for ourselves. We self-conscious beings impose snares and traps on ourselves and then have to figure out how to deal with them. We continually interpret—well or ill—the world. Our reason leads into difficulties and then to contrivances to escape them. There is no reliable definition of *progress*. Thus Oakeshott identified himself as a skeptic: one who would "do better if he only knew how" ([1951] 1991, 44).

He recognized as unending the task of comprehending the whole of experience. Given that, grasping the order of reality would ever elude us. We usually settle for abridgements—interpretations of experience through which visions of order from various perspectives may be attained. Some of these interpretations (arrests in thought) get sufficiently elaborated—even equipped with a method of inquiry that may be taught and learned—to turn into modes of experience. A *mode* is a powerful human invention (although its emergence may take a long time) for making sense of the world to its adherents, binding together individuals in associations that explore the world from their chosen modal perspectives. Each of these modes makes sense in its own terms but can at most achieve the appearance of universality by marginalizing experiences that threaten the coherence (and thus the satisfaction) of the understanding its adherents have come to defend. The coherence of each is abstract—that is, abstracted from the whole it seeks to understand. Imperial tendencies lurk among the adherents of each of these modes, tempting claims of methodological competence to assess critically the alternative modes and experience as a whole; each mode will tend to explain all of experience in terms of its own assumptions.

In *Experience and Its Modes* (1933) Oakeshott discussed the “historical,” “scientific,” and “practical” modes of experience. He thought they currently “represent the main arrests or modifications in experience,” coexisting as abstractions from the whole of experience, attempting, each in its own way, to abate the mystery of human self-understanding (p. 84). The historical mode knows experience as past experience; the scientific mode knows it as stable, quantitative relationships; the practical mode lives by the tension between what is and what ought to be.

As long as a mode remains content within itself it remains coherent to itself. When it steps out into other realms it begins to confront its own abstractness:

It belongs to the nature of an abstract world of experience to be self-contained, sovereign and to lie beyond the interference of any other world of experience, so long as it confines itself within the limits which constitute its character. Of course, if it oversteps itself, an abstract world of experience immediately becomes vulnerable, and of course, in the end, it must overstep itself, demand to be judged as embodying a complete assertion of reality: but so long as it remains faithful to its own explicit character, even the concrete totality of experience itself cannot compete with it on its own ground. History, Science, and Practice, as such, and each within its own world, are beyond the relevant interference of philosophic thought. (p. 332)

In short, as long as a mode enters no dialectical engagement with other modes, or with a philosophic inquirer, it is protected from subversion by excluding what it wants to consider extraneous.

Oakeshott concentrated on these particular modes, but his point is applicable generally. He did not think that these modes exhausted the possibilities. "Indeed, my view is that there can be no limit to the number of possible modifications in experience. And the business of philosophy, in so far as it is concerned with these modes at all, is not to anticipate or suggest arrests in experience, but to consider the character of those which actually exist" (p. 331).

He did not think that philosophic investigation added something to a mode that was not already there or that philosophy could "improve" the character of a mode by making it "less abstract." If anything, philosophic examination does not relieve but rather dramatizes the abstractness of a mode of experience: "It is my business to insist equally upon the incapacity of philosophy to take the place of any abstract world of experience, and in particular its incapacity to take the place of historical, scientific or practical experience" (p. 354). The philosopher cannot rule the modes or bring them to completeness but can only liberate himself from their seductiveness when he sees that they are barriers to experience as a whole.

In the 1950s Oakeshott discerned a "voice of poetry" that was separable from the practical mode where he had once thought poetry to be located. He transposed it to the status of an independent mode of experience in *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (1959). He never attributed modal status to religion; religion remained where he had located it in 1933—in practical life. Yet he reflected on religious experience throughout his life. He did not think that there was a specific way to be religious, as there might be a distinct way to be a historian, a scientist, a politician, or a poet. He denied that there was a sustainable distinction between the professionally religious and the laity, a distinction inherited from medieval times that he thought to have been superseded, the "belief that the true, unhindered service of God was possible only to members of a religious order or officials of the Church (that is, to those who made a profession of it) [which] promoted a false and irreligious division between those who were called to serve God, and those who were not, and gave a false importance to the former" ([1939] 1993, 92).

Nor for Oakeshott is philosophy itself a mode, because experience as a whole is never identical with any mode of experience. Every mode is an abstract account of the whole of experience, and so a philosopher can never be at home in any of the modes; like Odysseus, he is restless for another home no matter how charming the local Calypso might be. The attractiveness of a mode of experience as a resting place for thought is a siren song distracting one from thinking without arrest, tempting one to abandon thought's odyssey. Wherever the philosopher's home may be, there can be no urgency to get there—because there is no plan, program, or map that we can consult to speed us on our way. "Philosophy is merely experience become critical of itself, experience sought and followed entirely for its own sake" (1933, 82).

Oakeshott was Socratic in finding himself committed to the examined life, to the dissolution of the certainties abstractions offer. All undertakings involve knowledge affected by ignorance. Each mode of inquiry specifies methods for reducing ignorance and criteria for defining knowledge. Thinking unconstrained by modal assumptions is “radically subversive” in its refusal to be satisfied with an “arrest” of inquiry ([1940s] 1993, 140).

What Oakeshott has to say about religious and scientific experience needs to be seen in light of these considerations. Religious experience is a manner of being in the world, but it is not a mode, let alone the mode of modes. Religion has affinities with the poetic aspect of life but retains practical import, whereas Oakeshott came to see poetry as a contemplation of images that delight but do not point beyond themselves. Poetry is imagination liberated from practicality. He knew, of course, that many people attribute practical meaning to poetry and the arts, but what he meant to identify was what makes poetry poetry. He knew that many defend science for its technological fruits but that technology is not what makes science science. He knew that for many religion is uplifting and salutary for social well-being. But to him, all of this showed how preoccupation with practical life muddies thought. The incursion of science into the world of practical experience

causes no less error and confusion in the world of practice than that which follows, in the world of science, from a similar incursion of practical thought . . . it is not easy for the modern mind to accept this view. We have too long been accustomed to the notions that science is a guide to life, that science is the only true guide to life, and that the world of practical experience (and particularly moral and religious ideas) must submit themselves to the criticism of scientific thought, for any other view not to appear false or reactionary or both. But there is little in the history of folly to which one may compare the infatuation which the modern mind has conceived for ‘science. . . . In so far as economics, or psychology or biology belong to the world of scientific experience, they must surrender all claim to be a guide to life. (1933, 312–13)

Oakeshott clearly is criticizing not science but “science”—popular notions of what science is in terms of what we hope science can do for our practical desires and concerns. Even if we allow practical concerns to dictate areas of scientific research, scientific findings, if they are to be scientific, cannot be defined or corrected by practical desires.

Religion, by contrast to both poetry and science, does not separate from our practical, mortal existence. Rather, it visualizes life’s completion or perfection, the reconciliation of what is with what ought to be; it is an imaginative response to the arduous task of living consciously. Oakeshott did not see how religious experience could appeal if it were separated from the practice of living. Religion is not philosophy. Religion to him must be *practical* (in a special sense of the word, as I shall explain) or it has nothing to offer:

Religious truths are those which are necessary to practical existence, without which practical existence falls short of coherence; they are those which attempt to satisfy the furthest claims and largest needs of practical life. Yet religion . . . has claimed that its truths are not merely practical but belong to the world of concrete truth. But, were this so, their practical value would at once disappear. . . . If religion has anything to do with the conduct of life, then the ideas of religion—ideas such as those of deity, of salvation and of immortality—are practical ideas and belong to the world of practice. And an idea which serves this world can serve no other. (1993, 309)

Religion for Oakeshott is not a kind of philosophy. What philosophy may have to say about religion is not directly pertinent to faith. Theology may have the appearance of philosophy, but because it is generated by and serves faith it does not escape its grounding in practical life. Philosophy is indifferent to the practicalities of living; to pursue experience as a whole is to leave behind the world of practice; to be faithful to thinking is not the same as having religious faith; thinking passes beyond the limits of particular modes of inquiry—it is, practically speaking, “useless.” Philosophy depends for its existence upon maintaining its independence from all extraneous interests, and in particular from the practical interest. . . . Few, perhaps, will be found willing to surrender the green for the grey, but only those few are on the way to a philosophy. And instead of a gospel, the most philosophy can offer us (in respect of practical life) is an escape, perhaps the only complete escape open to us. (1993, 3)

Oakeshott often spoke of the “deadliness of doing” and of the “*danse macabre* of wants and satisfactions.” Philosophy escapes, is detached from, the practical life. Religion rescues us from the deadliness of doing and the frenzy of the *danse macabre*, but it does so by evoking experiences of fulfillment or completion in practical life.

How do these reflections affect thinking about religion and science?

The so-called conflict of religion and science is a prominent feature of contemporary debate. For Oakeshott, this is misleading because science and religion are of different modes of experience; one cannot absorb the other without unbearable contradictions in which unavoidable questions have to be disdained or explained away. There is no mode of modes—that is, no mode that can incorporate the other modes while maintaining its own coherence. Science is not a mode that explains all the modes. Science, no less than the other modes of experience, must make limiting assumptions in order to maintain its own coherence. According to Oakeshott, “The question of the character of scientific experience is not itself a scientific question” (1933, 173), it is not a question scientists need take up before they can start to do what they do. Science’s characteristic modification of experience “is its attempt coherently to conceive the world, under the category of quantity; the explicit purpose in science is the elucidation of a world of absolutely communicable experience” (1933, 243). Further:

The world of scientific experience is, then, created by a transformation of our familiar world; in science there is no attempt to elucidate the character of this world of perception in which we live, what is attempted is the elucidation of a world of absolutely stable experience . . . science can borrow and use no component of that world which it has not learnt how to transform. Scientific knowledge is not “organized common sense”; it is a world of knowledge which begins to exist only when common sense and all its postulates have been forgotten or rejected. Experience becomes scientific experience when it is a world of absolutely communicable experience. Scientific experience is based upon a rejection of merely human testimony; its master-conception is *stability*. (1933, 171)

This sort of critique Oakeshott applies to every mode. For example, the historian’s reverence for past experience is the enemy of decisions that practical life demands. History remembers what the politician would forget. Historians sometimes imagine that we can avoid mistakes in the present if we remember the past, but, as Hegel said, what we learn from history is that we never learn from history—it is too easy to see in the past what we already take the present to demand. The history of science reminds us of the open-endedness of scientific inquiry, and thus science’s imperialism can never succeed in subduing experience as a whole to itself; neither can the historical, the political, the poetic, or the religious understanding achieve such a triumph. “Science, history and practice, as such, cannot collide; they are merely irrelevant to one another,” asserts Oakeshott (1933, 316). For this reason he came to celebrate the “conversation of mankind,” which accepts that we are already fully human and cannot progress toward perfection by a putative comprehensive integration of knowledge or by synthesizing the ways of knowing.

Oakeshott wanted to purge dualisms from his thinking, beginning with overcoming the distinction between experience of the world and the world itself. He emphasized that human beings have access to nothing independent of their experience. The distinction between experiencing and what is experienced cannot stand. The something outside our experience is a thought within our experience. The experience of transcendence is a form of self-understanding. “Revelation” is an aspect of experience and must be within our experience or it is nowhere. Nothing comes to us unmediated by thought; everything must be in experience—there is no unthought experience. Meaning comes in the endless effort of human beings to interpret the world and respond according to their understanding of what it is they are responding to.

Although this certainly shows Hegel’s influence, Oakeshott was also affected by Augustine, whom he often called the most imaginative theologian in the Western tradition. Oakeshott was taken by Augustine’s meditation on the radically temporal, mortal character of human existence, which in our consciousness of it gives rise to the thought of that which is not temporal. That is, the idea of the eternal emerges in the capacity of human thought to imagine the negation of the temporal, to imagine the

eternal as the not-temporal (see *The Confessions*, Book XI). But Augustine thought that the capacity to conceive the nontemporal revealed that the eternal preceded and presided over the temporal, drawing the temporal to it, leading him to faith that he could converse with God. Oakeshott remained reticent about this affirmation. Like Hegel, he thought that the unfolding of thought had shown us that the Sun that enlightens is not above us but within us, it is human intelligence at work. For Oakeshott, Plato's Allegory of the Cave is an essay in self-discovery and self-understanding, not a divine illumination drawing us to itself from beyond (see Oakeshott 1975, Part I). We are, he said, self-making beings who are "in ourselves what we are for ourselves." To be a human being is to be a "for itself," we are what we "learn to become" ([1974] 1989, 19). We pursue the intimations of our existence, continually making ourselves into what we imagine we want to be. Religious experience does not rescue us from this temporality. Rather, it is a response of varying intensity to this unsought and unavoidable but necessary "evil."

The following passage shows how Oakeshott adapted elements of Augustinian and Hegelian thinking to say something about religious experience:

Religion, indeed, as I see it, is not a particular form of practical experience; it is merely practical experience at its fullest. Wherever practice is least reserved, least hindered by extraneous interests, least confused by what it does not need, wherever it is most nearly at one with itself and homogeneous, at that point it becomes religion . . . religion is practical activity, and religious experience is practical experience; and that in religion practical experience realizes its full character, religion is the consummation of practice. . . . What is important for religion has always been the profession which is contained in the actual conduct of life. (1933, 292)

Oakeshott had expressed himself on what he meant by the "conduct of life" in his "Religion and the World" ([1929] 1993). In that essay, Oakeshott took up the following issue: Our religious (specifically Christian) legacy demands other-worldliness. But we live in and for the world, so this legacy demands negation of our existence. We cannot deny that religion has always had this other-worldly aspect. Does this mean that religion must be irrelevant save for a few eccentrics who willingly cultivate separation from life? That is, are we irreligious if we continue to take life in the world seriously?

This is one of those dualisms Oakeshott wanted to dissolve. He cared about religion, but he also was of the world. What was he to do? The opposition of worldliness and other-worldliness was, stated thus, unacceptable to him. He was seeking to understand the problem of worldliness. Intellectually, he was convinced that human beings are implicated in only one world of experience. The question, then, is not about being in the world or out of the world but rather of different ways of being in the world. "For, should our interest lie with religion at all, we shall scarcely be

content with the dogma that it consists in an escape from the ‘world’, when we know no more of the ‘world’ than that it is what the religious man must escape” ([1929] 1993, 27–28). Thus Oakeshott set out to explore the changing historical connotations of the term *world*. He argues that *worldliness* has meant different things in different times in order to show further that *other-worldliness* has quite practical in-the-world significance, that it has a history. Other-worldliness is constituted in response to the prevailing idea of worldliness.

For Oakeshott, the religious sensibility must be a way of being in the world, not a way of escape from it. For the early Christians this meant rejecting the corruptions of the pagan Roman world, living in hope of a new age to come that would be purged of those corruptions. In rejecting the “world” they were rejecting not human experience in general but rather aspects of a particular historical era. To live against those aspects was to reject not the human world but a particular set of human practices in light of a vision of an alternative set of practices in a “heavenly kingdom” that they expected soon to appear. As that event was more and more delayed, the emphasis shifted to living in hope of the age to come; medieval religious practice came to mean living in “comparative freedom from material interest and a complete abandonment of any save the most elementary pleasures” ([1929] 1993, 29). The emphasis shifted from living for a new time to living for another place, the heavenly kingdom. This elicited the distinction between the material world and the spiritual world, a tension-ridden duality between the natural and the supernatural. Oakeshott argues that this duality is for us decreasingly convincing. “But this does not imply that there is no world from which the religious man will desire to escape” (p. 29).

Oakeshott thus preserves the idea of the “religious man,” but because this idea has a history it is necessary for him to say what being religious can mean for our time. We are to escape from something, but what? Oakeshott considers, critically, the thought of competing “scales of values”:

I suppose when we have rejected the crude dualism of the medieval view, the distinction between the world and religion would seem to turn most naturally upon material and spiritual values. And our belief in money, comfort, pleasure and prosperity, and the peculiar value we set on these things, is taken to distinguish us as worldlings; while a life spent in the service of an ideal is some evidence of religion. But such a view is, I think, scarcely less superficial than that it is designed to replace, for it, also, does but relieve one element in our experience at the cost of another. What really distinguishes the worldly man is, I think, his belief in the reality and permanence of the present order of things. (p. 30)

In addition to rejecting “secularized” modern political idealism, by these remarks Oakeshott points to the fact that we human beings come and go while the world abides, and we seek to perpetuate ourselves in the world. Perpetuation is defined in various ways such as honor, glory, reputation,

material prosperity, awards, memorials, descendants—immortality through our works. (Does this explain the obsession with technology?) To live thus is to live for some imagined future outcome or achievement—for what will be, not for what is present to us here and now. This is to “make humanity a Sisyphus” (p. 32). Religion is reduced to either a quaint adornment to make the Sisyphean task less dreary or to nostalgic, antiquarian practices. To live against worldliness—to live religiously—is to live not for external accomplishment but for “the whole value of life,” which we find only if we attend to the possibilities present in each moment of existence, adopting a personal standard against the external standard.

Ambition and the world’s greed for visible results, in which each stage is a mere approach to the goal, would be superseded by a life which carried in each of its moments its whole meaning and value. . . . The worth of life is measured, then, by its sensibility, not by its external achievement of the reputation behind which it may have been able to hide its lack of actual insight. (pp. 32–33)

For Oakeshott, *salvation* means attaining to a self-understanding that allays anxiety for the future or regret for the past. He reinterprets the meaning of the question, What must I do to be saved? The kingdom of God is at hand here and now. To be religious means to set aside debates about the natural and the supernatural, the material and the spiritual, the past versus the present, science versus religion. Everything depends on self-understanding, which can also mean that the character of religious experience is impossible to define directly because religious experience is constituted in an individual’s stance toward all experience, an individual’s self-enactment: the attitude one has in everything one does.

Oakeshott asserts that the anxiety to achieve permanence—that which would convey our temporality into immortality—is part of the reason for the misguided conflict between science and religion:

For science, human life appears as a brief interlude in the history of an insignificant planet, and the importance of human thought and sensibility is proportionate to the space and time it occupies in the physical universe. . . . But to religion the importance of human life is always its felt value, which no “scientific” argument can dictate or destroy. And that such a value could be considered “unreal” beside the “real” value of science is more than a little arbitrary. This “universe” of physics is, after all, the creation of a particular and abstract kind of thinking on the part of an insignificant number of the insignificant inhabitants of this insignificant planet: and the relative *importance* of things is a subject about which science is powerless to enlighten us. (p. 32 n1)

This states a religious stance in Oakeshottian terms. Science is a mode of experience, a particular interpretative framework that wants to make sense in its own terms of the whole of experience. There is nothing to show that the assumptions of this mode either refute the assumptions of other modes (history, poetry, or practical life) or that the others must be subordinated to the scientific mode. We may choose to look at everything through the lens of science, but we will do so knowing that we choose to do so and that

we can also refuse to do so. In short, no mode of experience, not even the scientific, captures experience as a whole such that no choice is set before us; no such claim has ever succeeded in bringing debate to a close about what is important in the quest for human self-understanding. To say “We ought to so choose” acknowledges the issue implicitly.

Oakeshott unequivocally asserts that religion belongs to the world of practice. But religion is so bound up in personal self-understanding as to accompany one’s sojourn in any of the modes and may perhaps come closer to acknowledging experience as a whole (offering an alternative to philosophy?) than a mode of experience could ever do. Consider the following (rather Kierkegaardian) remarks:

Religion . . . is simply life itself, life dominated by the belief that its value is in the present, not merely in the past or the future, that if we lose ourselves we lose all. “Very few men, properly speaking, live at present,” writes Swift, “but are providing to live another time.” Such seems to me an irreligious life, the life of the world. The man of the world is careless of nothing save himself and his life; but to the religious man, life is too short and uncertain to be hoarded, too valuable to be spent on the pleasures of others, of the past or the future, too precious to be thrown away on something he 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. ([1929] 1993, 34–35)

Moreover,

Memento vivere is the sole precept of religion. . . . The religious man, though he may take himself seriously, will not bore others by letting them know that he does so, because it is only in the world’s view that a man is better off for being known to be what he is; for religion it is enough to be it. (p. 37)

This is what Oakeshott meant when he said that religion is the consummation of practice, that “religion is, itself, the conduct of life” (1933, 292). But this consummation of practice is invisible in the ordinary course of practical affairs. Neither victories nor defeats in the affairs of the world concern the one who leads her life with religious seriousness. Nor is it in propositions, creeds, or rituals that one’s experience is of this kind. Theology is a “qualified and limited” form of philosophy (1933, 335 n1). One might even say that, in the logic of Oakeshott’s argument, theology offers an alternative to philosophy that philosophy is obliged to refuse. Adherents to propositions, creeds, or rituals can have an acute sense of the inadequacy of these as expressions of the experiential encounter that excites them, or, just as likely, they know too well that they let these practices stand in for their inability to live fully in the present in disregard of worldliness. Religion is the consummation of human conduct, but there is no institutional generalization of it that does not obscure and distort the experience. “Christendom” is a threat to the Christian life.

Oakeshott borrows Augustine's insight that even if there is no salvation outside the church (and who knows the boundaries of the church?), to be a member by itself guarantees nothing. Conversely, in Oakeshottian terms, anyone who lives fully in the present moment is "saved." One can live religiously while pursuing scientific inquiry; one can "practice religion" and yet be suffused with worldliness. Augustine's "two cities" are, for Oakeshott, alternative self-understandings within a single world of experience.¹ This orientation of spirit cannot be a "mode" of experience because it surpasses any of the modes in personal significance without rejecting whatever the modes may have to offer with respect to enlarging our grasp of things and without revising the operations that instantiate a modal perspective.

So "religion finds its place in the world of practical experience," and "The most thoroughly and positively practical life is that of the artist or the mystic" (1933, 295–96). Oakeshott made it clear that the practical life "comprises all that we mean by a 'moral' life, a life directed by an idea of the right and the good; it includes all that we mean by beauty; it comprises the religious life; and it comprises a conception of truth and reality" (p. 296). Religious experience designates some ambitions as vulgar, or at least not the whole of practical life. The practical life is constituted in tension between desires for pleasure and lofty aspirations between one's self-image and one's contingent circumstantial temptations.

However, because religion in this sense can go with us when we engage in the characteristic activities of any of the modes, it cannot be the practical life merely; it is the practical life with a difference. Is religious experience "in" the practical mode but not "of" it? The "consummation" of practical life is not, in the obvious sense, practical if it is the life of the artist or mystic. Given Oakeshott's later translation of the "voice of poetry" to modal status, perhaps in the end it is not the artist but the mystic who will know this consummation, or perhaps the artist and the mystic are difficult to distinguish from one another. Oakeshott does not say anything explicit about it. However, we find this:

The gift of a religious faith is that of a reconciliation to the unavoidable dissonances of a human condition, a reconciliation which is neither a denial, nor a substitute for remedial effort, nor a theoretical understanding in which the mystery of their occurrence is abated or even dispelled, but a mode of acceptance, a 'graceful' response . . . it is as complete as it may be when it is a release from care and generates an unostentatious, unaccusing serenity in conduct . . . although a faith is an understanding, a theoretical understanding of a faith is not itself a faith. (1975, 81)

And,

Religious faith is the evocation of a sentiment (the love, the glory, or the honour of God, for example, or even a humble *caritas*), to be added to all the others as the motive of all motives in terms of which the fugitive adventures of human con-

duct, without being released from their mortal and their moral conditions, are graced with an intimation of immortality . . . themselves encounters with eternity. (1975, 85)

There is, then, no mode of all modes, but there is a motive of all motives. Oakeshott knew well that the practical mode intrudes itself powerfully and incessantly into the other modes; we observe that pursuers of the others—scientists, historians, poets—often fall prey to politicization. Science, history, and philosophy “are wholly independent of the world of practical experience. And when we seek in them the achievement of some practical end, when we approach them from the standpoint of practice, we misconceive their character” (1933, 297). Yet we also must admit that most people believe the practical world to be the foundation of all experience: “that it belongs to the character of thought to be for the sake of action, is assured in advance of the concurrence of the majority of mankind” (1933, 248).

Politics, which makes conspicuous the coerciveness—the willfulness—of the practical mode, is always with us. How shall we elude this domination? We cannot leave and go to some other universe where politics is absent. “It is impossible to conceive of the modification of experience I have called Practice ever disappearing. It is an arrest in experience, but it is indispensable to life” (1933, 350). If the individual’s interior religious experience carries one beyond the control of the political, or the control of science, history, or poetry, the issue is the conversion of one’s self-understanding to resisting by quiet refusal the obtrusive demands of practical life:

The general view of the character of practical experience which stands in direct antithesis to the view I have suggested is that which sees in practice the complete and absolute realization of experience. All thought exists for the sake of action; action is the consummation of experience, and we try to understand the universe only in order to learn how to live. . . . To realize the will is itself to realize the mind as a whole. (1933, 317)

In the practical mode, there is continual tension between what is and what ought to be. So far, no “what is” has ever ended challenges from further thoughts of what ought to be, and no “ought to be” has been found to be all that it ought to be; there is forever a “not yet,” an indissoluble link between what is and what ought to be. These are expressions of a continuum of experience of the discrepancy between the present and future imagined and wished-for outcomes. Finality would take us beyond political and moral action, perhaps beyond life itself:

Practice sees its given world of fact as there, always in order to be changed; and “what ought to be” remains, consequently, always discrepant from “what is here and now.” Thus, resolution of this discrepancy which practice undertakes, can never finally be accomplished. . . . A theoretical resolution would be, if it were

successful, a final resolution. But, since practical activity undertakes not this general resolution, but the particular resolution of all instances of this discrepancy, it undertakes what, from its nature, can never be brought to a conclusion. . . . For every achievement brings with it a new view of the criterion, which converts this momentary perfection into imperfection. Indeed, we may find that even the "ought not" of one moment is the "ought" of another. Nowhere in experience is there uninterrupted progress or final achievement. (1933, 290–91)

Oakeshott's philosophical exploration, then, delineates modes of experience. Philosophy's exploration cannot attach itself to any mode, and it cannot replace any mode. Popular "ranking" of the modes—such as promoting science to preeminence in our time, or asserting that all relationships are political—fails to notice, or denies, the concrete whole from which these views are abstracted. The glories of science cannot absorb or replace the religious experience; politics will fail repeatedly to provide religious satisfaction; the historian's lust for the past will alienate us from the present. The triumphs of science or of politics may and do challenge received versions of the religious experience, as also will the historian's critical, demythologizing account of the past. Oakeshott thought "history" to be a greater threat to Christianity than "science" (1933, 316).

But for Oakeshott experience exceeds received versions of any kind about anything. All experience is present experience: The historical past is a present understanding of the past; politics is present judgment of the past and hortatory assertions about our future; science is the present understanding of relationships expressed in quantitative terms; poetry is a momentary, passing release into a world of images delightful to contemplate. In all of this, we pursue the intimations of experience, investigating through or around the modes we encounter, with more or less imaginative insight, and we live, more or less attentively, toward the mysterious fullness of experience—that is, we live more or less "religiously."

It remains to note that the world seems to commingle as inseparable all of these modal experiences. We talk both of the politics of science and of the science of politics, of historical guilt and innocence (resisting the study of the past "for its own sake") judging the past by our present convictions, of the "story of history," history's "direction," its "end" or "goal," of "political correctness," of political "change," change putatively "for the better," change toward perfection, or "solving our problems." Is poetry supposed to encourage patriotism or to demythologize war through art? We talk of the "conflict" of science with religion. All of these take their place in the ordinary discourse of the day, and we should not expect them to disappear. From the point of view of philosophic inquiry, as Oakeshott understands it, these are irrelevancies, because they run together the modal perspectives with little regard for their contradictoriness, indicating the reigning passion for the practical/political mode. He did not think his argument would cause this miscellany to disappear. There is nothing to prevent the world

from cultivating its abstractions and muddles. There is little likelihood that self-delusion will often be recognized or acknowledged. Most of the time we live in and for abstractions. The philosopher occasionally breaks through toward concreteness, toward experience as a whole, but, like all humans, cannot live permanently there. For, Oakeshott concludes, “we shall not easily forget the sweet delight which lies in the empty kisses of abstraction” (1933, 356).

NOTE

1. Augustine elaborated in *The City of God* the doctrine of the two cities. There is a single human community, descended from the first parents, Adam and Eve, composed of individuals whose allegiance is either to the temporal things of this world or to the spiritual things of the heavenly kingdom to come, the “earthly city” and the “heavenly city.” These “cities” are invisible on Earth, as only God can search the heart of a human being to know to which allegiance, regardless of external appearances, he or she subscribes, and thus to which end they may be destined. The metaphor of the two cities was thought by Oakeshott to represent two differing self-understandings, and he deemphasized Augustine’s association of the heavenly city with the institutional church.

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