

— Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm, »A Quantum of Solace and Heap of Doubt«

— A B S T R A C T —

The article examines two lines of reasoning for consolation on the basis of a religious belief about life after death. The *first* line departs from the presumed consoling power of such a belief (summarized in the »factory-girl« argument of John Henry Newman). According to Richard Dawkins and John Stuart Mill, this pragmatic line of reasoning is wholly irrelevant when it comes to the question whether it is rational or not to entertain such a belief. The *second* line of reasoning has to do with epistemic arguments for beliefs in a life after death. John Stuart Mill has certain arguments for the claim that it is rational to entertain such a belief. One of them is based on his specific form of theism. But is it possible to believe that the theistic Creator desires our good? I argue that it is possible even in the face of horrendous evil providing that a certain comprehensive fundamental pattern is chosen. I call this pattern »a theology of waiting«. God is revealed in the world but only in an unpredictable and ambiguous way. Such a theology of waiting is beyond the objective canons of science and logic. In sum, religious belief provides consolation conjoined with an ineradicable quantum of doubt.

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■—This presentation will argue that religious believers are justified when they draw consolation from their faith. They have a license to hope – and under certain specific conditions – also a license to believe and draw consolation from their faith. But in this there is also an ineradicable element of doubt. They have, in short, a quantum of solace conjoined with an ineradicable heap of doubt.

My point of departure is John Henry Newman. He lived between 1801 and 1890, converted to the Catholic church 1845 and became cardinal in 1879. One of his basic books in theology is *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*.¹ There he develops a number of theistic arguments more seldom advanced in Roman Catholic theology. One of these has been called the »factory-girl« argument. More precisely, it is an argument from the need of consolation. I shall present this argument in the *first* part of this article and link up with some of Richard Dawkins's reasoning in *The God Delusion* (2006) and John Stuart Mill's arguments in his essay on theism in *Three Essays on Religion*.² In the *second* part I shall consider how the problem of evil impacts on religious consolation. In the *third* part I will analyze how the context-dependency of rationality affects the way that religious belief may offer consolation.

Let me add that many of my remarks are inspired by Jeffrey Jordan's book *Pascal's Wager*.³

— THE »FACTORY-GIRL« ARGUMENT —

But, first, here is the famous »factory-girl« argument. For us today acquainted with Monte Python's shoebox sketch it may sound comically exaggerated, but needless to say the original intentions were very serious indeed. The argument is found in chapter VII of Newman's *Grammar of Assent*. The title of that chapter is »Informal Inferences« and suggests that Newman has certain reservations concerning its logical strength. He begins with a presentation of the French philosopher and witty skeptic Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592).

— Montaigne was endowed with a good estate, health, leisure and an easy temper, literary tastes, and a sufficiency of books: he could afford thus to play with life, and the abysses into which it leads us. Let us take a case in contrast. »I think«, says the poor dying factory-girl in the tale, »if this should be the end of all, and if all I have been born for is just to work my heart and life away, and to

sicken in this dree place, with those mill-stones in my ears for ever, until I could scream out for them to stop and let me have a little piece of quiet, and with the fluff filling my lungs, until I thirst to death for one long deep breath of the clear air, and my mother gone, and I never been able to tell her again how I loved her, and of all my troubles. – I think, if this life is the end, and that there is no God to wipe away all tears from all eyes, I could go mad!⁴

The »factory-girl« argument can be formally reconstructed in the following way:

— Premise 1: Religious belief offers consolation for many people in situations of distress and bereavement.

— Premise 2: If a belief offers consolation for many people in situations of distress and bereavement, then it is rational for those persons to seek consolation in religious belief.

— Conclusion: It is rational for people in distress and bereavement to seek consolation in religious belief.

Without specific reference to Newman, Richard Dawkins discusses this argument from consolation towards the end of his *The God Delusion* (2006). His main point is that »(r)eligion's power to concole does't make it true«⁵ and I shall return to this shortly. But Dawkins also has serious doubts concerning premise 1. He defines consolation as the alleviation of sorrow and mental distress and recognizes two forms of consolation. The first form is direct physical consolation. It may appear that religious belief offers such consolation by direct contact with God, but this consolation is – writes Dawkins – imaginary, because God does not exist.⁶ (Moreover comfort from science and scientific medicine is much more effective.) Needless to say, this is based on the existence of valid arguments against the existence of God. If it is justified to dispute those arguments, then consolation from contact with God would be possible.

But Dawkins also considers another form of consolation, namely by discovery of a previously unappreciated fact or a previously undiscovered way of looking at a existing facts. For example, »a woman whose husband has been killed in war may be consoled by the discovery that she is pregnant by him, or that he died a hero.«⁷ But religion cannot offer such a consolation, because religions rests on false beliefs and »(f)alse beliefs can be every bit as consoling as true ones, right up until the moment of disillusionment.«⁸ But a few lines later, Dawkins acknowledges »(a) believer in life after death can never be ultimately disillusioned.«⁹ I think that Dawkins means that if you draw consolation from this belief *before* death, then it is a delusion, because there is no life after death. Again, this is convincing only under the provision that there are valid arguments against life after death.

But what about consolation through discovery of a previ-

ously undiscovered way of looking at existing facts? Dawkins has an interesting example (attributed to Derek Parfit) of this form of consolation. It merits to be quoted in full:

— A philosopher points out that there is nothing special about the moment when an old man dies. The child he once was »died« long ago, not by suddenly ceasing to live, but by growing up. Each of Shakespeare's seven ages of man »dies« by slowly morphing into the next. From this point of view, the moment when the old man finally expires is no different from the slow »deaths« throughout his life. A man who does not relish the prospect of his own death may find this changed perspective consoling. Or maybe not, but it is an example of consolation through reflection.¹⁰

Now, this way of perceiving death is an extremely interesting example. But it has an unintended twist. If death is seen in analogy with one age of a human being »slowly morphing into the next«, then some kind of continuation beyond death is suggested. This is central to the Christian understanding of death and comes forward in a famous hymn by John M.C. Crum (originally published in the Oxford Book of Carols, 1928):

— Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,
Wheat that in the dark earth many years has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

— In the grave they laid Him, Love Whom we had slain,
Thinking that He'd never wake to life again,
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

— Up He sprang at Easter, like the risen grain,
He that for three days in the grave had lain;
Up from the dead my risen Lord is seen:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

— When our hearts are saddened, grieving or in pain,
By Your touch You call us back to life again;
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.

The parable of the grain applied in this way to human life and death could also be described as a consoling discovery through discovering a new way of thinking about a situation. Needless to say, it would not be a kind of consolation favored by Dawkins, but it is not substantially different from his own example.

Be this as it may. The important question is whether is rationally justified to rely upon such a discovery of a comprehensive pattern in human life. I shall return to this question towards the end of this article.

Dawkins has a second argument directed against premise 2. »Religion's power to console doesn't make it true.«¹¹ In other words, the »factory-girl« argument should not primarily be understood as an effort to present evidence for God or immortality, that is an epistemic argument for Christian hope. Rather, it is a pragmatic argument. The difference between the pragmatic and the epistemic argument can be explained in the following way.

Epistemic reasons for a statement are reasons about causes of the state of affairs that the statement describes. For example, an epistemic reason for the statement that a person has cancer might be certain tests indicating antibodies against cancer in the person's blood. The antibodies are caused by the cancer. Similarly, an epistemic reason to believe in God refers to phenomena caused by God such as – for example – certain religious experiences. The problem is that these experiences might be caused by purely natural factors. Possibly, the factory girl – nor anyone else for that matter – has any epistemic reasons to believe in God or immortality. But still there might be a pragmatic argument for Christian hope – and that is that it consoles us in the face of evil and suffering. Evidence is only *one of the reasons* one might have for believing, but there are other reasons. For example, I have a reason to believe in my recovery from a serious illness, if hope and optimism about my recovery makes it more likely that I will recover. There might be no clear medical evidence for or against my recovery. I might plunge into despair or be engaged in hope and one reason to believe and hope for my recovery is that this hope makes my recovery more likely. We could call this pragmatic reason for believing – in contrast to epistemic reasons.

With reference to the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews, Jeff Jordan writes that »hope is a positive attitude directed to uncertainties in the future, that a particular outcome obtains«.¹² Christian faith – and several other religious traditions – includes hope of immortality. But is it possible to hope and be rational at the same time?

Newman argues a positive answer to this question. On closer inspection, the argument contains two major claims. The *first* claim is that pragmatic reasons are sufficient for the factory girl – and, possibly, any other person – to be rational in his or her hope of immortality. In short, the pragmatic argument for Christian hope is valid. The *second* is that there are no epistemic reasons for the Christian hope of immortality. In short, any epistemic argument for Christian hope fails.

— THE ARGUMENTS OF JOHN STUART MILL —

John Stuart Mill argues against both these claims. I shall first address Mill's argument against any claim that *pragmatic* arguments are sufficient for claims to immortality. Secondly, I shall consider his *epistemic* arguments concerning immortality.

1. There is no evidence that he had read Newman's *Grammar of Assent* (published in 1870) or that he was acquainted with the factory-girl argument. Nevertheless, certain of his considerations in *Three Essays on Religion* suggest familiarity with pragmatic arguments from consolation. Like Dawkins, Mill argues that references to the consolation of belief in immortality are of no relevance for their rationality whatsoever. »As causes of belief these various circumstances are most powerful. As rational grounds of it they carry no weight at all.«¹³ Mill argues that the consoling nature of an opinion – the pleasure we should have in believing it to be true – is irrational in itself and »would sanction half of the mischievous illusions recorded in history or which mislead individual life.«¹⁴

Jeff Jordan has serious misgivings about Mill's line of thought.

— As it stands, Mill's objection is seriously underdeveloped. It does claim that half humankind's mischievous illusions flow from belief-formation based on consolation. But it is silent regarding the causation of the other half (might the other half flow from a strict compliance to evidentialism? It is unlikely but we need to know); and it is silent regarding the relative balance between the gain derived from the consoling belief-formation, and the ill derived from it. Does the benefit derived outweigh the loss involved? Without that information, Mill's objection just strikes an odd note, as a complaint about the production of happiness from one who advocated that production as the overriding duty of humankind.¹⁵

2. Let me leave this line of thought and consider Mill's thoughts on the epistemic weight of beliefs in immortality. His arguments are most favorably considered in light of his more general remarks on immortality (in part III of his last essay on theism in *Three Essays on Religion*). At the outset he distinguishes between those indications of immortality »which are independent of any theory respecting the Creator and his intentions and those which depend upon antecedent belief on that subject.«¹⁶

First, he considers the indications for a life after death independent of any theory about a creator and the creator's intentions. Mill quickly dismisses Plato's arguments in the

Phaedon on the ground that Plato presupposes a certain theory of the soul, namely that human beings have souls, which are separate from their bodies. But there are no scientific arguments in favor of this theory. We have »sufficient evidence that cerebral action is, if not the cause, at least in our present state of existence, a condition *sine qua non* of mental operations.«¹⁷ This notwithstanding, these arguments afford no positive argument against immortality. »We must beware of giving *a priori* validity to the conclusions of an *a posteriori* philosophy [---] The relation of thought to a material brain is no metaphysical necessity; but simply a constant co-existence within the limits of observation.«¹⁸

Even if certain mental events are constantly conjoined with certain processes in the brain on this planet, these mental processes might persist under other conditions in other parts of the universe. Mill makes an illuminating comparison between belief in the soul's existence after death and belief in witchcraft. Witchcraft implies belief in non-material spirits interfering in the events of life and is conclusively disproved. »But there are no conclusive proofs against the idea that souls or the persistence of thoughts, emotions, volitions and even sensations exist elsewhere«?¹⁹

Secondly, Mill considers another argument against immortality. As far as we know everything in this world perishes. But Mill argues that human beings could be an exception. Feelings and thoughts are different from inanimate matter. Moreover, feelings and thoughts are much more real than anything else.

— ... they are the only things which we directly know to be real, all things else being merely the unknown conditions on which these, in our present state of existence or in some other, depend.²⁰

From this Mill concludes that no comparison can be made between mental events on the one hand and the material world on the other. It's certainly possible that thoughts and feelings are as perishable as flowers and planets, but we cannot know this for certain.

— The case is one of those very rare cases in which there is really a total absence of evidence on either side, and in which the absence of evidence for the affirmative does not, as in so many cases it does, create a strong presumption in favor of the negative.²¹

Mill's argument deserves a critical comment. Mills argues that mental events are the only things we *directly* know to be real and everything else are mere assumptions to account for our sensations. Echoing Berkeley, Mill claims that physical objects

in the material world are nothing but »permanent possibilities of sensation«. ²² But is this really true? Suppose that mental events are not the only things we know directly to be real, but that we also know other things such as material objects directly. I would argue that this makes no significant difference to Mill's argument. The radical difference between our feelings and thoughts on the one hand and the material world on the other is still there. And this radical difference should make us cautious about conclusions from the perishability of things material to things mental.

Thirdly, John Stuart Mill argues that there is a certain kind of epistemic reason for Christian hope. In contrast to the former arguments, this is dependant upon a modified form of traditional theism. In short, it is modified in the sense that there is low probability that a creator exists. But if a creator exists such a creator's benevolence, intelligence and power might be more limited than traditionally assumed. There is no assurance whatever of a life after death on these grounds. But even if there is no reason to believe with a high degree of assurance, there might be a reason to hope. I want to quote a significant passage from Mill's *Three Essays on Religion*:

— Appearances point to the existence of a Being who has great power over us – all the power implied in the creation of the Kosmos, or of its organized beings at least – and of whose goodness we have evidence though not of its being his predominant attribute; and as we do not know the limits either of his power or of his goodness, there is room to hope that both the one and the other may extend to granting us this gift provided that it would really be beneficial to us. The same ground which permits the hope warrants us in expecting that if there be a future life it will be at least as good as the present, and will not be wanting in the best feature of the present life, improbability by our own efforts. ²³

Mill expands this argument in the concluding part of the essay and defends a principle that, where the evidence and probabilities yield, there hope can properly take possession. »The whole domain of the supernatural is thus removed from the region of Belief into that of simple Hope.« ²⁴ Mill's position is difficult to interpret, but it seems clear that he wants to make a distinction between rational and irrational hope. As I understand him, it is possible to make a departure from the rational principle of regulating our feelings as well as opinions strictly by evidence. But under what conditions?

Jeff Jordan discerns three such conditions in Mill's analysis. ²⁵ It is permissible to hope if and only if

- L1. for all one knows or justifiably believes, the object of one's hope could obtain; and
- L2. one's hope fits with one's beliefs; and
- L3. one believes that hoping contributes to one's own happiness, or to the well-being of others.

L1 and L2 are epistemic principles of a weaker nature. L1 states that your hope is (weakly) justified if it is consistent with other thing you know about the world. L2 goes beyond L1 and states that there is a stronger relationship than mere consistency, but weaker than that your beliefs logically implies your hope or imply them with a high degree of probability. Hope of existence after death fits with belief in a creator, in the sense that it would not be surprising that there is survival if a creator exists. Indeed, it would be surprising if a deity exists and there were no survival. In short, a hope for immortality has a natural fit with theism. L3 is straightforwardly pragmatic and restricts hope to those who have goals either of personal happiness or of contributing to the well-being of others. »Believing that hope results in the promotion of happiness or well-being is a necessary condition of a permissible hope.«²⁶

— THE CONDITIONS OF RELIGIOUS
CONSOLATION —————

Mill's argument that it can be rational to entertain hope for a life after death rests upon his general conclusion that there is evidence – but no proof – that the universe is created by an intelligent mind, »whose power over the materials was not absolute, whose love for his creatures was not his sole actuating inducement, but who nevertheless desired their good«.²⁷ This may give us a quantum of solace. *But do we really live in world, which »fits« the conviction that the creator wills the well-being of the creation including the well-being of human beings?*

This brings us to the problem of evil. It is a huge area and the literature is an ocean. In the present context, there is only room for a few reflections. I will depart from a literary example.

Among the last letters from Stalingrad, there are two letters relevant in the present context. They are both, presumably, from German soldiers engaged in battle. The first writes about a Christmas Eucharist. It is celebrated in a bunker that still protected the worshipping soldiers from the anti-aircraft shells. The soldier writes: »I read my boys the Christmas story according to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verses 1–17; gave them hard black bread as the holy sacrifice and sacrament of the altar«.²⁸

There is no doubt that this Eucharist was experienced as a consolation in a situation of utter despair. It seems that the soldiers had a very strong non-epistemic reason to engage in

such a ritual and into the beliefs this ritual presupposes. But is the hope they entertained really rational? Let's return to Jordan's three conditions for rational hope. The soldiers in Stalingrad celebrating the Eucharist were indeed justified in their hope in the sense that they indeed believed that their hope would contribute to their happiness and, furthermore, to the well being of others. So L3 above is clearly fulfilled. But what about L1 and L2?

Another German soldier at Stalingrad suggests a negative answer to this question. He writes to his father and contrasts the pious feelings of the worship at home with absence of God at the battlefield of Stalingrad. »In Stalingrad, to put the question of God's existence means to deny it.« And he concludes with the following words:

— And if there should be a God, He is only with you in the hymnals and the prayers, in the pious sayings of the priests and pastors, in the ringing of the bells and the fragrance of incense, but not in Stalingrad.²⁹

Obviously, the German soldier is referring to the argument from evil. The presence of evil in the form of suffering and cruelty at Stalingrad – and throughout human history and beyond – makes it impossible to believe in a loving and almighty God. If the argument from evil is a conclusive argument against belief in God, then the consolation drawn from this belief is illusory.

There is no doubt that the problem of evil is a heavy argument against religious belief and, furthermore, against the consolation that may be drawn from such a belief by soldiers, factory-girls and others. The main issue is whether it is a *conclusive* argument. Many philosophers before and after Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz and his famous *Essai de Théodicée* (1710) have argued that is not.³⁰ For example, it might be the case that God is not that mighty and/or that good which is traditionally presumed. This is the position of John Stuart Mill. He argues that »there is preponderance of evidence that the creator desired the pleasure of his creatures«.³¹ He admits that the creator's wish for the well-being of human beings is indicated by the fact that pleasure is afforded »by almost everything, the mere play of the faculties, physical and mental being a never-ending source of pleasure«.³² Furthermore, pleasure is the result of »the normal working of the machinery« but pain is either due to some external interference with it (in the form of accidents) or the result of defective machinery. But it is not justified to jump to the conclusion that the single aim and end of creation is the happiness of human beings, but only one purpose among many others.

The structure of Mill's argument is that of natural theology,

moving from a premise about the world – that is the ontological primacy of pleasure – to a theological conclusion that pleasure (in contrast to evil) is agreeable to the creator. Needless to say, there are critical questions both to the premise and the conclusion, but a closer analysis of these questions would take too far from the main purpose of this article. More significant is another point made by Mill:

— The author of the machinery is no doubt accountable for having made it susceptible of pain; but this may have been a necessary condition of its susceptibility to pleasure; a supposition which avails nothing on the theory of an Omnipotent Creator but is an extremely probable one in the case of a contriver working under the limitations of inexorable laws and indestructible properties of matter.³³

There is, of course, another, a second possibility, namely that the creator may indeed be omnipotent, but for various reasons limiting her power over creation. A very common but very limited explanation is that evil and pain are necessary for moral growth and character. Such an explanation is clearly insufficient when it comes to what Marilyn Adams has called »horrendous evils«, i.e. »the participation in which (the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole«.³⁴

A more far-reaching reason for an omnipotent creator's self-limitation of power might be that creating a material universe such as ours with all its horrendous evils is a necessary condition for any personal existence over against the creator at all. Brian Hebblethwaite explains this in the following way:

— For we have come to see more clearly that it is the operation of the same general laws that both has led to the evolution of sentient and conscious life, with all its possibilities for good and creativity, and also makes inevitable the kind of accident and damage and pain which constitute the problem of physical evil. To wish away the evils is to wish away the conditions of all life and growth as well. Consequently the more we know about the structure and interconnectedness of the physical universe, the less easily can we imagine alternative universes which retain the good features of ours, but lack the bad.³⁵

Interestingly, Mill comes close to a similar idea in the first essay in *Three Essays on Religion*. Having Leibniz particularly in mind, Mill argues that religious philosophers »have always saved his goodness at the expense of his power«. And he continues:

— They have believed that he could do any one thing, but not any combination of things; that his government, like human government, [was] a system of adjustments and compromises; that the world is inevitably imperfect, contrary to his intention.³⁶

It is an open question if such a theodicy succeeds in convincing the nonbeliever, but there is another more existential issue, which haunts the believer. It is a problem closely related to the problem of evil, but nevertheless different from it, namely the problem of divine hiddenness or divine silence. This problem is especially puzzling in the face of horrendous evil – as the German soldier in Stalingrad testifies.

— I have searched for God in every crater, in every destroyed house, on every comer, in every friend, in my foxhole, and in the sky. God did not show Himself, even though my heart cried for Him.³⁷

There is a difference between the problem of evil and the problem of divine hiddenness. The problem of evil arises because the alleged contradiction between (1) God's goodness, (2) God's omnipotence and (3) the existence of physical evil. God's goodness implies that God wants the well-being of God's creatures (including human beings), God's omnipotence implies that God can realize this well-being. So if God wants and can avert physical evil, no physical evil should exist. But it does.

Hebblethwaite (and, possibly, Mill) might avoid this contradiction by assuming that God's omnipotence does not imply God being able to realize contradictions and that it is logically impossible to create finite persons without at the same time allow physical – and even horrendous – evil in the world. Such a combination of things might be impossible. Let's assume that this brings a solution to the problem of evil. Unfortunately, this does not solve the problem of divine silence. Why not? *Because the goodness of God implies that God consoles devout believers in face of horrendous evil.* But as the testimony of the German soldier shows, this is not always the case. On the contrary, God is silent.

This reasoning is not on the margin of Western religion. It concerns the very essence of Christianity. The Gospels of the New Testament unanimously witness that Jesus died on the cross in an agony similar to the German soldier. »My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?« (Matt. 27:46). But faith – and not despair – is among the chief virtues of Christian life. Moreover, we are justified by faith *alone* (*sola fide*).

This Lutheran doctrine is by no means uncontroversial, but it seems to cohere with the earlier reasoning. In a certain sense it would seem impossible for a devout believer confronted with

horrendous evil to be consoled by her belief in the benevolence of God – and consequently in God’s granting us eternal life – if God is silent. Such faith would require nothing short of a miracle. Not surprisingly, the doctrine of »sola fide« transforms faith into a miracle in the sense that it would not occur unless God intervenes (*sola gratia*).

The alternative to this line of thought would be an argument which showed that it is (1) rational to affirm the benevolence of God, (2) live in hope of eternal life even in the face of horrendous evil, and (3) draw consolation from (1) and (2). In the last part of this essay I intend to suggest such a line of thought.

— THE CONTEXT-DEPENDENCY OF RATIONALITY

In his book *Hidden Principles* (*Dolda principer*. 2002) the Swedish literary scholar Torsten Pettersson analyses basic issues in the interpretation of literature.³⁸ One issue is of specific relevance in the present context. How is the plurality of scholarly interpretations of literary works to be explained? A literary work can be interpreted in a number of ways (and the British philosopher of religion Basil Mitchell, once gave an interesting example and analysis of this.³⁹) This has to do with that is impossible *per se* to ascertain the number of implications a certain sequence of words may have. The sentence »This is a heavy suit-case« can have implications such as »Can you help me to carry it?, »Look how strong I am that I can carry it!«, »You have been able to fill it well«. ⁴⁰ But plurality of interpretations is also connected with what Torsten Pettersson calls context-dependency. One important question is what context is the relevant and primary context. The answer to this question affects methods of literary scholarship and »methods are to a greater or lesser degree related to a worldview«. ⁴¹ This worldview is often obvious when it is the question of, for example, openly declared Marxism, postcolonialism, feminism or psychoanalysis, but in other cases it is harder to describe in detail. ⁴²

In a similar way, the rationality of certain religious beliefs is dependant upon a worldview in the sense of a comprehensive fundamental pattern (CFP). Many different religious beliefs are dependent upon a particular CFB, namely the claim that *if a benevolent God exists, then God is present in human experience*. We can call this a *theology of presence*. If such a theology of presence is presupposed, experiences of divine silence or absence present problems. This is exactly what the German soldier in Stalingrad tells us. (1) if a benevolent God exists, then God is present in human experience. But (2) God is absent. Therefore (3) God does not exist. Needless to say, there are numerous ways to circumvent this argument. Different ad hoc-hypothesis might take care of the second premise. There might be different reasons for God being silent for this particu-

lar German soldier in Stalingrad. He might carry a resistance to religious belief or God might want to put him to a test. But aside from these hypotheses, given (1) and the horrendous evil the German soldier is experiencing in Stalingrad, he seems to be quite rational in his denial of a benevolent God.

But there is also another option and it is to deny (1) and the theology of presence. God exists and is benevolent, but God is not revealed in the world. This idea surfaces in the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his youth work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922) he writes in proposition 6.432:

— *Wie die Welt ist, ist für das Höhere vollkommen gleichgültig. Gott offenbart sich nicht in der Welt.*

The only things that shows itself is the unspeakable, the mystical, *that* the world is (6.44). One could say that Wittgenstein represents a *theology of absence*. Consequently there is nothing strange with divine silence. On the contrary, it is all claims to experience God that are problematic. All such experiences are basically illusory – provided they are not interpreted as experiences of the unspeakable.

Needless to say, there are many positions between a theology of presence and a theology of absence. One such position is a benevolent God exists, but is unpredictably revealed in the world. Hence, divine silence is not unexpected. The adequate (and rational) response is to wait for God to be revealed and prepare oneself for this event. We could describe this as a *theology of waiting*.

In *Waiting for Godot* (1952) Samuel Beckett suggests that such a waiting is futile and irrational.⁴³ And indeed it is – providing that there is no benevolent creator in the first place. But the situation is not the same if it is rational to believe that a benevolent creator exists, but only unpredictably revealed in the world. In this perspective it would seem that concluding from an experience of divine silence to the non-existence of God is premature.

But why believe that a benevolent God exists, but is unpredictably revealed in the world? Well, there might be some reasons for this. The conditions for experiencing God are hard to fulfil and if Christian belief about God is correct, then human beings cannot dispose of God as they dispose of material objects. God will be experienced only when God chooses to be revealed.⁴⁴

Incidentally, the same is true for human beings (and possibly also many kinds of animals). This is illustrated by a recent and much discussed novel by the Swedish author Lena Andersson, *Utan personligt ansvar* (*Without Personal Responsibility*).⁴⁵ The main character, Ester, is unmarried, but lives in a relationship to a married man, Olof. They meet irregularly, but without

Ester getting any clear indications about Olof's commitments, feelings and intentions. In the following passage, Ester summarizes the situation:

- One argument she often entertained with herself to preserve the realism in her judgements were now grinding in the back of her mind. It was: has one right to create expectations for which there were no reasons? No. Does Olof know that he is doing that. Yes. Why is he doing that?
- One: He is enchanted but has not made up his mind.
- Two: He is enchanted but cannot refrain even if he has made up his mind.
- Three: He amuses himself and helps himself to what was offered, those not able to handle the concept should ask him to refrain.⁴⁶

Ester is convinced of the first alternative, but is constantly and repeatedly left in the dark about the real facts. She does not give up the relationship and as long she believes that Olof really loves her, but cannot show it, it seems reasonable for her to go on. Many of her female friends do not believe that Olof loves her and, consequently, they find Ester's behaviour utterly irrational.

Is Ester irrational? It depends on which fundamental pattern of interpretation is chosen. The religious believer finds herself in the same situation. Doubt about the of a creator's existence and benevolence could be silenced by a CFP that presupposed a theology of presence and lead to denial and atheism. A theology of absence would leave the issue wide open as would the modified approach of a theology of waiting. What is rational or irrational is dependent ultimately dependent upon the comprehensive fundamental pattern.

So, which CFP should be chosen? Well, it seems that many arguments could play a role in this context. Scientific and logical arguments could be of certain relevance, but also weaker argument from »fitness« in the earlier mentioned sense of John Stuart Mill. But ultimately the choice of CFP is beyond the objective canons of science and logic. If this is so, there is an ineradicable element of doubt in religious consolation. Georges Bernanos wrote that faith is ninety percent doubt and ten percent hope. For every quantum of solace there is an even larger quantum of doubt.

— SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION —

I have considered two lines of reasoning concerning religious belief in some form of existence after death. The first line departs from the presumed consoling power of such a belief (summarized in the »factory-girl« argument). According to Richard Dawkins and John Stuart Mill, this pragmatic line of reasoning is totally irrelevant when it comes to the question

whether it is rational or not to entertain such a belief. The second line of reasoning has to do with epistemic arguments for beliefs in a life after death. John Stuart Mill has certain arguments for the claim that it is rational to entertain such a belief. One of them is based on his specific form of theism. Hope for a life after death is weakly supported by the belief that the universe is created by an intelligent mind, »whose power over the materials was not absolute, whose love for his creatures was not his sole actuating inducement, but who nevertheless desired their good«. But is it possible to believe that the creator desires our good? I argued that it is possible even in the face of horrendous evil providing that a certain comprehensive fundamental pattern is chosen. I called this pattern a theology of waiting. God is revealed in the world but only in an unpredictable and ambiguous way. Such a theology of waiting is beyond the objective canons of science and logic. In sum, religious belief provides consolation conjoined with an ineradicable quantum of doubt. ■

■ — ENDNOTES —

- 1 John Henry Newman: *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York, 1870).
- 2 John Stuart Mill: *Three Essays on Religion: Nature, The Utility of Religion and Theism*, Great Books in Philosophy, Paperback 1998 [1874]).
- 3 Jeffrey Jordan: *Pascal's Wager. Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God* (Oxford, 2006).
- 4 Newman: *Grammar of Assent*, 312.
- 5 Dawkins: *The God Delusion* (London 2006), 352.
- 6 Dawkins: *The God Delusion*, 355.
- 7 Dawkins: *The God Delusion*, 353 f.
- 8 Dawkins: *The God Delusion*, 355.
- 9 Dawkins: *The God Delusion*, 356.
- 10 Dawkins: *The God Delusion*, 354.
- 11 Dawkins: *The God Delusion*, 352.
- 12 Jordan: *Pascal's Wager*, 186.
- 13 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 204.
- 14 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 204.
- 15 Jordan: *Pascal's Wager*, 192.
- 16 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 196.
- 17 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 198.
- 18 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 198.
- 19 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 206 f.
- 20 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 202.
- 21 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 203.
- 22 Ayer, Alfred: *The Central Questions of Philosophy* (London) 1973, 60 and 106.
- 23 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 210.
- 24 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 244.

- 25 Jordan: *Pascal's Wager*, 189.
- 26 Jordan: *Pascal's Wager*, 189.
- 27 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 242 f.
- 28 *Last letters from Stalingrad*. Translated by Franz Schneider and Charles B. Gullans. Introduction by S. L. A. Marshall. Illustrations by Szegedi Szuts (Westport, Conn, 1974 [c1961]). Letter 16. See also www.lifepunch.net/drew/stalingrad/ (access 20141210)
- 29 *Last letters from Stalingrad*. Letter 17.
- 30 Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz: *Essai de Theodicée* (Amsterdam, 1710).
- 31 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 191.
- 32 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 200.
- 33 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 191 f.
- 34 Marilyn McCord Adam: *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca and London, 1999), 26.
- 35 Brian Hebblethwaite: *Evil, Suffering and Religion* (New York, 1976).
- 36 Mill: *Three Essays on Religion*, 40.
- 37 See *Last Letters from Stalingrad*. Letter 17.
- 38 Torsten Pettersson: *Dolda principer: kultur- och litteraturteoretiska studier* (Lund, 2002).
- 39 Basil Mitchell: *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London, 1973), 47–71.
- 40 Pettersson: *Dolda principer*, 54 (translation by the author). Original: »Det här är en tung kappsäck, »Kan du hjälpa mig att bära den?, »Se så stark jag är som orkar bära den!«, »Du har lyckats fylla den väl.«
- 41 Pettersson: *Dolda principer*, 54 (translation by the author). Original: »Metoderna sammanhänger i högre eller lägre grad med en livsåskådning.«
- 42 Pettersson: *Dolda principer*, 58.
- 43 Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot* (New York, 1954).
- 44 See further Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm: *Problems of Religious Experience* (Stockholm 1985), 103 f.
- 45 Lena Andersson: *Utan personligt ansvar* (Stockholm, 2014).
- 46 Andersson, *Utan personligt ansvar*, 124 (translation by the author). Original: »Ett resonemang hon ofta fört med sig själv för att bevara realismen i sina bedömningar malde nu i medvetandets bortre regioner. Det lös: har man rätt att skapa förväntningar som det inte finns fog för? Nej? Vet Olof att han gör det? Ja. Varför gör han det då? Ett: Han är förtjust men har inte bestämt sig. Två: Han är förtjust men kan inte låta bli fast han bestämt sig. Tre: han förströr sig och för sig av det som bjuds, den som inte klarar upplägget får be honom låta bli.«