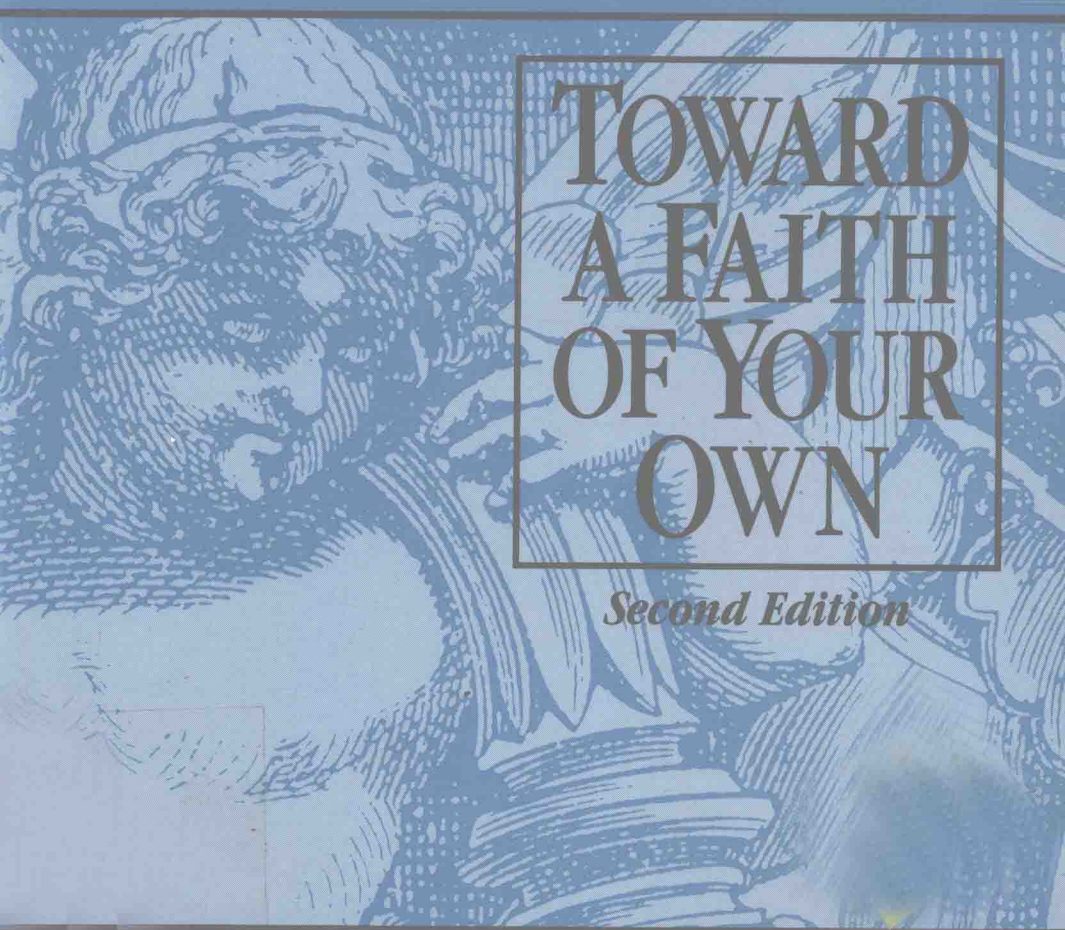


Religion & Doubt



TOWARD
A FAITH
OF YOUR
OWN

Second Edition

Richard E. Creel

Second Edition

RELIGION AND DOUBT

Toward a Faith
of Your Own

RICHARD E. CREEL

Ithaca College



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RELIGION AND DOUBT

To Diane—truly my other half

*To my parents, Richard and Grace—for a lifetime
of love and encouragement
and*

To my brothers, Dan and Randy—fellow seekers and finders

Foreword

When I was asked if I would prepare a foreword for Richard Creel's book, my reaction was one of surprise, delight, and hard-nosed realism: What an unknown author does not need is another unknown author to introduce his book.

But then, quite by accident, I discovered that what I had thought was spelled "forward" is spelled "foreword"! This put the matter in an entirely different light; in effect, I was being given the opportunity of getting in the *first word*. This is a point of chivalry, an advantage seldom granted by philosopher or theologian to a layperson. So, on behalf of my fellow readers, I make the following comments.

The First Word—is a complaint, not about Richard Creel, but about philosophers and theologians in general. They dig and dabble in the ultimate truths and in the precious mysteries of life; indeed, they discover and package these truths in such precise, concrete structures of logic and language that they become almost forever sealed from the throngs of would-be seekers. Hence, what philosophers and theologians need is a translator. That is the complaint.

Suddenly along comes Richard Creel, loping over the hills by Lake Cayuga's waters. He actually sits down with his readers and chats! Without fuss or pretense, he tackles topics that ordinarily leave us tongue-tied. He

slips us questions and some of the answers, till, presently, lo, we discover we are acquiring for ourselves some of the tools of philosophical and theological thought. Indeed, we find that to grow in personal faith is something more than to study religion.

The Second Word—is that I had a better title for this book! It should have been called *Dandelions of Faith*.

“But,” says the author, who is trying to think like his publisher (very important!), “no one will understand from *that* title what my book is about. People do not naturally equate dandelions with religion, let alone doubt.”

“A pity,” says she.

“Explain the metaphor,” says he.



“Dandelions . . . You mean dandelions??? Well, it’s like this. There is a thing about dandelions. We uproot them, we poison them, we try to get them out of our manicured lawns . . . but they persist, are absolutely indestructible, will appear even in the cracks of a concrete superhighway. And that is the way also with this thing called faith, this thing called religion, and this thing called doubt. Dandelions are simply descriptive of our human and religious predicament.”

“Predicament?!”

“Ah, *hah* . . . don’t you see?

1. No matter how hard institutional religions attempt to codify and structure our faith, we persist in heretical intuitions and doubts, and
2. no matter how hard secular society would infest us with doubt and relativity, there is something deep within us which hungers for truths and patterns, for forms of eternal meaning.”

“And so . . . ?”

“And so what seems inevitable is that our faith, our doubts, and, to a certain extent, our religions are like the dandelions, which refuse to be exterminated, and which have a beauty and a freedom all their own.

“Moreover, our personal faith and our understanding of religious phenomena is usually a hodge-podge of experience and perception; it is not a well-groomed, manicured lawn. I suppose, systematically and theologically speaking, we are a Lovable Mess.

“Hence, I propose that, if our very own personal faith is alive and kicking, we are not like a lawn but a meadow, albeit possibly or properly fenced with tradition, logic, or dogma. And within this meadow there is a constant flowering of new thoughts and intuitions which give color and

pattern. And after the blossom, the seed which floats on tails of fluff from one meadow to the next—crazy, unsystematic . . . quite defying

the logic and training and
instincts of a theologian
or a Vatican Council.”

“I think I’m gettin lost in your meadow-phor!”

“Lost?? You can’t be. You are the one who has gathered the dandelions. You have lined up the meadows of mind and spirit, and, theologically speaking, helped us to fence them in.

“What is more, Professor Creel—all metaphors aside—you have done it rather well . . . and we

Thank You.”

HARRIET CRAMTON
Ithaca, New York



Preface

Readers familiar with the first edition of *Religion and Doubt* will not find many startling changes in this second edition, but I hope they will find a more mature volume. I have had a decade to develop as a person, scholar, and writer and believe I have made some progress, which I have tried to express in this revision of *Religion and Doubt*. Regarding form, I have tried to make the structure and development of the paragraphs and chapters clearer and to focus my points more sharply and explain them more fully. I have also tried to be less abrasive to those who do not share my enthusiasms and convictions.

Regarding substance, I have done several things. First, I have added a section on secularism in order to acknowledge a viable alternative to the religious point of view—an alternative which I did not acknowledge in the first edition when, in good Tillichian fashion, I was seeing everything as religious. My discussion of secularism makes this edition more adequate in terms of the worldviews it covers, and it enables me to make the nature of religion clearer by virtue of contrast. Second, I have included a more extended, discriminating discussion of communism, and I think I argue much more persuasively than I did in the first edition that communism can be considered a religion; however, I also, thanks to discussions with my colleague Stephen Schwartz, point out that there are nonreligious forms of

communism—an important point which I did not understand a decade ago. Third, I present a fuller discussion of similarities and differences between philosophy and religion. Fourth, I discuss explicitly the difference between religion understood institutionally and religion understood devotionally. The institutional understanding is so common because it is easy to talk about and comprehend, but it is profoundly inadequate because it is in fact *devotion* which is at the heart of religion and which has given rise and vitality to religious institutions. Fifth, my most satisfying accomplishment in this edition is to have distilled my earlier thoughts about religion into the concepts of agathism and agatheism, according to which the right way and the religious way to be human is to live in wholehearted pursuit of and devotion to absolute goodness. In the first edition of *Religion and Doubt*, Chapter 7 was even to me a puzzlingly short chapter with no subsections. Now I realize it was waiting for this new material concerning agathism. Finally, the notes in this edition do much more work than they did in the first edition, so I hope that students as well as teachers will refer to them.

A new category for the bibliography in this edition is that of “Women and Religion.” That topic is not yet discussed in *Religion and Doubt*, but it has recently become one of the most exciting and fruitful topics in religious studies and will continue to be so. It is an intriguing, illuminating gateway into history of religion, sociology of religion, psychology of religion, comparative religion, scriptural studies, mysticism, and so on. Hence, I want to alert my readers to it, and I deeply appreciate the fact that my colleague Dr. Alice McDowell, an expert on women and religion, has compiled for this book a well-balanced list of anthologies and essays on women and religion by major feminist voices. Her list should get anyone off to an excellent start.

From readers’ reactions to the first edition of *Religion and Doubt*, it is clear that Harriet Cramton’s original foreword and illustrations are too exquisite to change, so I gratefully pass them on again.

In addition to the many people whom I thanked in the preface to the first edition, I would like to thank the following people for discussions that have resulted in some of the most important corrections and improvements in this second edition: my friend Stephen Schwartz of Ithaca College, and my friend James Keller and his students at Wofford College.

Richard Creel

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Introduction

There have been eras when it was easy to believe wholeheartedly in a particular worldview. Medieval Europeans were largely convinced by the Christian worldview. Many twentieth-century people believe in a scientific-atheistic worldview. Characteristic of such eras is the feeling of obviousness which attaches to the belief in question. To many medieval Europeans the Christian view of the world seemed obviously true; to many contemporary people the scientific-atheistic view seems obviously true. Yet in every era of faith there have been doubters—not malicious or cynical people, but people who, for diverse reasons, have not been firmly convinced by the prevailing worldview in their society, or, for members of minority groups, by the worldview within which they have been reared.

Perhaps you are such a person. Chances are that you are, for our own era of faith seems to be crumbling. On the one hand, science hasn't given us what we expected of it (some now think of it as a Frankenstein monster which is causing more harm than good), and theories being proposed by subatomic physicists and scientific cosmologists are becoming as strange and counterintuitive as some of the more troublesome doctrines of religion.

On the other hand, because of extensive and increasing international communication and travel, we can hardly fail to feel challenged by the fact that there are numerous ways of understanding the world other than in our own way—ways among which we must choose because they are incompatible with, and sometimes even attack, one another.

A natural response to the challenge of these other points of view is to attempt to study all of them in order to expose the false ones and choose the true one. But there are so many of them and they are so deep and complex that such an endeavor quickly becomes perplexing and exhausting, impelling us to drop the whole enterprise, declaring it hopeless. Still, a desperate decision to become agnostic, to say, “I don’t know the truth and there is no way to find out, so I’m going to quit trying!” is a resolve that is rarely kept. Most of us cannot escape from the nagging desire to have some sense of what we are, why we are here, where we have come from, and where we are going. Consequently, after resolving to forswear these kinds of questions, without even realizing what is happening we become involved in a discussion or a book or a thought or a situation that leads us right back to those central questions of religion: What is death? What is the nature of the reality within which I live and move and have my being? Who am I? How ought I to live my life? What is worthy of my wholehearted devotion? Hence, our challenge is not to decide *whether* to take these questions seriously; rather, it is to discover *how* to take them seriously in the most beneficial way.

Helping you with that *how* is what this book is all about. Along the way I will present to you the views of many writers in religion, philosophy, and psychology, but my ultimate intention is not to teach you what they say; rather, it is to *provoke* you into reflection by means of what they say and to *involve* you in the process of thinking their ideas through and making up your own mind about them. My sincerest wish is that you will find yourself caught in the flow of these ideas and pulled along by your own deep interest until you have reached the end of this book—an end which, if I am successful, will prove to be a launching pad rather than a stopping place. Through this process I hope you will acquire a more profound understanding of the nature of religion and some assistance in understanding and furthering your own spiritual growth.

THE SECULAR AND THE RELIGIOUS

Prior to the nineteenth century most people, including high officials and governing bodies of nations, understood in a religious way who they were and what their responsibilities were. During the nineteenth century, searing blasts were aimed at the religious point of view by Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Arthur Schopenhauer, so that the twentieth century is the

first century in which large numbers of individuals, including high officials and governing bodies, have lived their lives and understood their responsibilities from a secular point of view. This book is primarily about the religious point of view, but the one point of view can be understood adequately only in contrast to the other, so I want to convey something of the contrast before proceeding to other topics.

This is especially important because people to whom the one point of view is profoundly natural often seem as though they are tone-deaf to the other point of view. They don't disagree with it so much as they just don't feel its attraction at all and cannot understand how anyone could be attracted to it except for neurotic reasons. I once took a group of Introduction to Religion students to visit a Pentecostal worship service. The members of the church, as they always did, broke out into spontaneous songs; prayers; and confessions of weakness, guilt, gratitude, or joy, as they felt "moved by the Spirit" and they spontaneously hugged one another and cried and rejoiced together. To be in the midst of such a thing can be a very emotional experience for people who, like most of my students, have never been exposed to it before. After the service, as we were walking to our cars, one of my students said, "You know, that was a beautiful experience. I want to go back and learn more from those people."

Soon thereafter I took my other group of Intro students to The Love Inn. The worship service went very much as it did before, but this time as we were returning to our cars one of my students said to me, "Those people are sick!" I couldn't help but chuckle and sigh at the extreme difference between the two reactions. It seemed clear to me that each student would have a very difficult time seeing and feeling the merits of the other point of view. I would like to say a few things here to try to bridge that gap.

The secular mentality, or worldview, is one that senses nothing of transcendent reality or value in life. This is not necessarily a pessimistic or morally indifferent view, but to this way of thinking there is nothing beyond nature, and death is the end of the individual. Moreover, nature is not thought of as sacred. Nature is what science tells us it is, and science tells us that nature is a mindless swirl of physical particles interacting unintentionally with one another. From within the secular framework, then, life is experienced, understood, and lived on the plane of "everydayness." The mottoes of the secularist are "Seeing is believing" and "What you see is what you get."

To be sure, the secularist would agree that drugs or meditation may be used to enhance our ordinary experiences or to give us experiences which are not had in ordinary life, but the secularist would add that those experiences should not be interpreted as revealing anything transcendent or religious about life or reality. Wonderful as those experiences might be, they are simply the result of unusual electrochemical states brought about in the brain by drugs or meditation.