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You gonna be here long? Religion and Sustainability[1]

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Abstract
Responding to the environmental crisis requires a fundamental transformation of world religions. In the concept of sustainability we find a change not only in religion's understanding of the value of the natural world and the need to alter its own ecological practices, but a possible awakening to the finite nature of human—including religious—existence.

Keywords
sustainability, religion, environmentalism

The EPA tells us that "common use of the term 'sustainability' began with the 1987 publication of the World Commission on Environment and Development report, *Our Common Future*. Also known as the Brundtland Report, this document defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'" (Environmental Protection Agency, n/d).

"Sustainability" then, expresses a commitment that the future should be like the present, that whatever changes we are making should coexist with an underlying stability. At least in this definition, it presupposes that we can distinguish between needs and other motivators—such as desires,

[1] I am grateful for helpful comments from Willis Jenkins, Margaret Bullit-Jonas, and an anonymous reviewer.

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wants, or greed—and that our ecological concerns can or should be captured by a term which suggests constancy rather than change. Let us ask how much sense any of these presuppositions make, as we also ask whether achieving some kind of social and ecological sustainability has anything to do with religion.

Sustaining Religion

Whether or not they use the word, most religions commit themselves to the value of their own sustainability. Whatever their theologies assert about how everything will change when the messiah comes or how individual egos will snuff out like extinguished candles when they achieve Enlightenment, religions create and maintain powerful, well-supported *institutions* so that the faithful of the future will be able to meet their (spiritual!) needs with as much instruction and support as those in the present. Through the church, the sangha, and the Sunday school religious groups establish collective identities over time and try to insure that their traditions will continue indefinitely. The faithful's "needs" to know Ultimate Truth will be met by clergy and educators, to have spiritual fellowship by the physical and social solidity of local houses of worship, to connect their daily lives with God by a repository or prayer and ritual passed down from generation to generations. Sustainability is therefore a religious question at least to the extent that religions are almost always investing in their own futures.

Ecological sustainability is therefore a religious issue first off simply because without it the institutional and doctrinal dimensions of *religious* continuity—i.e., religious sustainability—will become impossible, or at the least much more tenuous then they are at present. This means that if religions do want to persist into the future, it would behoove them to devote some measure of focused attention and concern to the ecological conditions under which they live. (Unless, of course, religious authorities come to think that the secular world can handle this one without their help—but I doubt that even the most devout could muster that much faith.)

To put it another way: "belief" or "faith" may be thought of as a purely mental or a spiritual act. When we think of "believing in God," then, we may typically forget the physical conditions which are required if such a belief is to be even possible.

By contrast, however, "being a believer" most certainly is, under practically any description whatsoever, in the first place a physical act. We have to have brains to have minds, and beliefs—including belief in God or Spiritual Truth—exist only in minds. Explicitly or not, religious institutions have always known and more importantly acted on this knowledge. From a willing embrace of their tax exempt status in the U.S. to the Buddhist monk with his begging bowl, from giving sacrificial leftovers to the high priests of ancient Israel to having a tag sale to raise money to repair the church's aging heating system, religions have "sustained" themselves as physical entities. As familiar as these dimensions of religious sustainability are, the environmental crisis—which is of course the occasion of this discussion—adds something new and particularly challenging.

Religions are familiar with external threats to their own existence, and with people leaving the fold in favor of another religion or a purely secular life (for instance in the case of Jewish assimilation or the fading of Catholicism in Latin America in comparison to evangelical Protestantism). Still, it is hard to think of many instances in which devout members of a faith put their own faith's future in jeopardy.[2] And yet to the extent that devout Christians, committed Moslems, and Orthodox Jews continue to drive their gas guzzlers, pay taxes to militaristic governments, and store their pension funds in oil and chemical companies they are doing just that. If we continue to meet the physical needs of the present generation of people of faith as we have been doing, and to increase consumption at the present rate, future generations of Christians, Jews, Moslems, Hindus and Buddhists will not. This inability may take a truly cataclysmic form; for example, cascading feedback loops of climate change or genetic engineers who let the wrong genie out of the bottle. Alternatively, ecological degradation and consequent social unrest and deterioration might simply proceed as a long, slow decline, one in which we don't have a dramatic collapse but simply "apocalypse as way of life" (Buell 2003).

Quite simply, then, if sustainability is not a religious issue, then religious people are ignoring how they themselves are destroying the necessary conditions for their own faith to exist in the future. If sustainability *is* a religious issue, however, then religions cannot continue as they have in the

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[2] The closest comparison which comes to mind is the religious community's tacit acceptance of the development of nuclear weapons.

past, they cannot "sustain" their own complicity in our civilization's unsustainable form of life. They cannot relegate ecological concern to a secondary status as it is now, but must take it at least as seriously as sexuality, poverty, war and peace, and tithing to the church. Actually, given the severity of the environmental crisis, it may be necessary to take environmental issues *more* seriously than these other issues. As the sea levels, the cancer rates and the prices of oil and food rise, religious sustainability demands that a full and direct confrontation with our collective and individual ecological practices take pride of place.

In this confrontation, one in which world religions have been deeply engaged for more than two decades, religious people are faced with more than the crucial question of the physical condition of their own bodies. What is at issue is the effect of human actions on the entire web of life on this planet—including but not limited to other human beings—and how we are to take responsibility for that effect. Sustainability is thus not only a practical question, capable of being reduced to asking whether "the church" can deal with more expensive electric bills and higher cancer rates. It is also a question of *moral* sustainability—as we ask whether this or that faith is morally relevant to the actual conditions of suffering, threat, and collective denial and irresponsibility in which we find ourselves. If religions cannot help illuminate the moral conflicts created by the environmental crisis, of what use are they?

This issue is all the more pressing because unlike many other moral issues in which the "church" is either comparatively blameless and/or powerless, religion's relation to the environmental crisis raises question of its *own* moral integrity and authenticity. Bishops cannot declare war, rabbis by and large do not take illegal bets, and most Imams have little wealth. By contrast virtually all religious people in developed or developing nations—from the Pope right down the humblest parishioner—are by virtue of their participation in ecologically damaging economies part of the problem.

For How Long?

Even as we energetically pursue sustainability, seeking to insure that future generations will get their needs met as we do now, we might simultaneously be aware that the whole enterprise of sustainability is a losing game.

In the very long run the sun will explode and in that explosion destroy the earth—at which point all human accomplishments, beliefs, organizations, and memories will all be swept away.

While the sun's future as a nova is pretty remote in time, other concerns—doubts about the stability of the stock market or the continued fertility of the U.S.'s Midwestern breadbasket—loom closer on the horizon. If we step back from the myriad immediate anxieties which arise when we awaken each morning and glance at the newspaper, what hope do we have that sustainability could ever be more than a stopgap measure? Do we really think that humanity, to paraphrase an ironic dialogue from novelist Joseph Heller's (1996) *Catch-22*, will last as long as the frog? There have been frogs on earth for approximately seventy million years. Do we want to stack up our nation states, universities, cultures, languages, and even, yes, our religions against that kind of cosmic time? Whatever technological cleverness we come up with, do we really think it will protect us for as long as its own natural adaptiveness protected the frog? Certain Native Americans famously asked how their current decisions would affect the "seventh generation" down the line. It certainly would be a vast improvement if the U.N., the Chinese Minister of Economic Development or General Motors used the same rule to guide their decisions. But let's be clear that "sustainability" makes no sense if we think of 700, or 700 thousand generations to come. We just are not going to be here that long. It is all temporary.

Unsustainable

Is nature *itself* "sustainable," even without the presence of ecosystem altering human cultures? Since around ninety percent of species which have existed on earth have gone extinct, most before humans started in on everybody else, the answer would seem to be "not very much." Evolution is, after all, a process of deep change; and long before people arrived on the scene the natural world stopped meeting the "needs" of the dinosaurs, to take just one example. Even the non-living elements of the earth and *its* surroundings are not marked by anything remotely like permanence, but by endless alteration. The placement of the continents, the creation of the atmosphere, the landscape altering paths of rivers and tides and rain—all these suggest a series of changes to planetary settings and therefore to

ecosystems and species. To ask of such a system that the future be like the past is to fundamentally misunderstand it.[3]

How are human beings to sustain what nature cannot—and does not even desire to sustain? Is sustainability perhaps a distorted term, expressing mostly the human psychic need to control and preserve that which it values, a term unsuited to the essentially dynamic process of evolution and the interaction between the living and the inorganic in ecosystems?

Is the idea of sustainability, despite the good intentions which animate it, an expression of the same old human fear and lack of acceptance of death: of individual death which leads us to imagine a home in heaven for ourselves after earthly life, or of species death which leads us to imagine ourselves especially favored by an infinitely powerful benign force, or of cultural death which leads us to imagine that our nation or religious group or ethnic bonds will last "forever"? All of these will surely not last even a fraction as long as the frog.

A Frog's Life

On the other hand, as temporary as all this may be due to factors outside of human control, and as shaped by arising and passing away like the rest of nature as we are, we still have to ask how we should live. And how we should live *given* the fact of our impermanence. Consider the frog again. While frogs have been doing pretty well for a very long time, in recent decades they have been doing, to say the least, not so well at all. Throughout many places in the U.S. and the planet as a whole, frogs have been in decline. Consider but one of the hundreds of studies that have documented this troubling trend: in 1996 in the upper Midwest and parts of Canada frogs with severe birth defects were discovered. These included

> frogs with missing legs, extra legs, misshapen legs, paralyzed legs that stuck out from the body at odd places, legs that were webbed together with extra skin, legs that were fused to the body, and legs that split into two halfway down.... One one-eyed frog had a second eye growing inside its throat (Montague 1996).

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3) For a related critique of ecological morality on the basis of what nature is "really" like, see Sideris 2003.

The causes of these and related problems for frogs stem from what we are doing to their ecosystems: plausible agents include UV-B radiation, chemicals, pollution, pesticides, climate change, and habitat disruption and disappearance.

The question then is not whether we can keep the frog around forever. After all, *nothing* is forever. The question, rather, is whether we want to be the ones who *cause* a continuing worldwide decline in frogs; who place, as it were, the eye in the frog's throat. A world with no, or with dramatically fewer, frogs means, among other things, a world in which insects and other pests dramatically increase, and in which there are many fewer frog predators—including large birds, snakes, hedgehogs, fish, and foxes. A world without, or with dramatically fewer and fewer types of frogs means the loss of the brilliantly colored tropical "golden frog," now extinct in the wild (Revkin 2008), or the Ecuadorian tricolor frog whose poison serves as a painkiller many times more powerful (and with fewer side effects) than morphine (N.Y. Times 1998). It means the loss of yet another evolutionary miracle of vibrant and unique potentiality.

If we live unsustainably will future generations fail to have their "needs" for frogs met? Do we actually "need" frogs? Can we have high schools, malls, Christmas trees, the Koran, the Red Cross, and *American Idol* without them? Probably. Will we starve to death if we decimate the frog population? I don't know, and I suspect not. So perhaps we can live "sustainably" without them.

If, that is, you call this "living."

And is it a life *worth* living if we are knowingly (for the news about frogs has been out for at least a decade) and willfully (because the means to stop a good deal of what is killing frogs is already available to us) depriving them of life?

Religion Again

Framed in this way there can once again be no doubt that sustainability is a religious question, for what if not religion is in the business of telling us when and why life is or is not worth living? Political democracy, at least on the current narrow view which identifies it with voting, can only aggregate preferences. Science and technology can only tell us, in the true fashion of instrumental reason, how to get what we want already. An economic and

social system dominated by global capitalism will necessarily encourage us to the accumulation of wants felt so intensely that we cannot help but mistake them for needs.

That leaves religion, which has as a central task instructing us in the value of things.[4] Simply to say that we must live sustainably so that future generations can meet their needs as we meet ours is, for religion, only the beginning of a long conversation about learning how to tell the difference between what we really do need, and what we might think—mistakenly—that we need. Authentic religious voices have for a very long time had some critical things to say about the claimed "needs" of the surrounding culture. On the level of material wealth, or what we nowadays call "consumption," Isaiah (5:8) railed against those "who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land." The Talmud (*Avot:* 4:1) defined wealth as "being satisfied with what one has" and Mohammad claimed that "A man's true wealth is the good he does in the world."

The task of religion, then, is not just to be "sustainable" but to tell us what should be sustained, even to the limited degree to which humans can keep anything alive. When we are told by economists, politicians, civic leaders and our own addicted consumerist psyches that we "need" growth, it is the function of religion to ask us: "growth *for what*" and "growth *of what*" and more simply "*why*?" If religion in the developed world takes it for granted that we need all that we currently have, if its moral challenge is limited to helping others get to where we are, then it will have committed itself to moral irrelevance. To sustain itself *morally*, then, religion has to contest the widespread expectation that "more" is "better."[5] It has to trust the value of religious virtues and forms of life as sources of true human betterment, and advocate the spiritual value of "less." Unless "need" becomes synonymous with "want," we therefore cannot pursue "sustainability" without some comprehensive understanding of what people are and what should be important to them.

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[4] Philosophy, free-lance spirituality, forms of social theory, and art also face these tasks. However, my focus here is on religion, which as a social force has an enormously greater impact than any of these others.

[5] The phrasing, which he explores in his usual intelligent way, comes from McKibben 2007.

And religions have to mean it, and show by example that they do. If people of faith are not to be exterminating frogs in exactly the same ways as secularists, atheists, and communists, etc. they must demonstrate by word and action that they have found themselves wanting and are willing to change.

Finitude

Is a human form of life that causes frogs to be born with eyes growing in their throats a life worth sustaining, even for the next few centuries or so?

Two decades of ecotheology have provided us with a wide range of resources to say that in many respects religion clearly commits itself to a resounding "no." Scripturally based assertions that the earth is a gift from God, that other creatures deserve respect, that a lifestyle centered on accumulation of wealth and transitory pleasures is a profound spiritual mistake—all these serve as negations of our current global environmental regime.[6]

But while I salute the many creative and critical accomplishments of theologians—and even more the environmental activism which has been expressed by religious groups worldwide—is it, I ask myself, enough?

Is there, I wonder, some more profound religious change that is needed: something besides seeing that ecological virtues—like caring for the poor, developing personal humility, or eschewing violence—are essential religious obligations. Can it be that as any serious concept of sustainability needs to take into account the ultimate and final reality of change, so religion has to take into account the transitory quality of its own presence on earth?

We are physical, we are finite, and we will not last forever: not our churches, or our holy books, or our insights, or our visions. *This* thought, which we come to by reflecting on the true nature of sustainability, is perhaps the most demanding one that confronts religion as it faces the environmental crisis. Our *religious* identity, as part of our *human* identity, is no more sustainable than the maple tree, the bald eagle, the local river ecosystem, or the frog.

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6) For an overview of religious environmentalism as a movement, see Gottlieb 2006a; for a wide-ranging collection on religion and ecology, including ecotheology, see Gottlieb 2006b.

Seeing people as subject to the same temporal limitations as the rest of life runs counter to the dominant presuppositions of the world's dominant religions, each of which in their own way proclaims that we are not natural, or not purely natural; and that we at least stand out if we do not stand above. Made in God's image, possessors of a soul, capable of Enlightenment or union with Godhead, we are not like frogs.

And yet looking at our human institutions, the present chaos of our social relationships, the recklessness of our economically oriented actions, can we really suppose—once again in comparison to the frog—that we are (very) long for this world? Such realization does not rule out the eschatological promise of Hinduism or the Abrahamic religions. The messiah may come and lead us to heaven; our unity with Brahman can be complete. And these things may indeed last for an eternity. But our life on earth will not. And therefore neither will our religious institutions, our Holy Books, our cherished traditions, our memories, or the people we know ourselves to be. This sense of our own impermanence can—and should—be incorporated in our sense of earthly religious practice and institutional life.

In answer to the question, "You gonna be here long?" then, the answer is—"For a while, that's all."

And therefore we should ask, not "what can we sustain forever, for every future generation that's coming down the pike" but "given that our time, personally and collectively, is limited, how do we want to live? Even if the frog is going to be extinct sometime no matter what we do, do we want to be the ones that hasten its end?"

Finite Persons

Why can't we live forever? Why can't our souls dwell in eternity? Quite simply because that is not who *we* are—at least, not as we actually experience ourselves in our daily lives, our families, our work, our struggles against scarcity and competition with other life forms. *We*, as we actually know ourselves, rejoice in new life and mourn for the dead. We sense the preciousness of our own sentience and, in the face of our approaching dotage, feel most acutely what will be lost as that sentience diminishes. We defend ourselves from assault, nourish our babies, and buy an awful lot of

vitamin pills. Outside of the occasional profession of faith in our immortal souls, we talk and act like the very mortal creatures we are. Whatever we may aspire to or hope for, our lives are permeated by realizations of vulnerability and finitude. If there is a part of us which is immortal, it is known only very fleetingly and through a much darkened glass.

Two philosophers make this point clearly. Martha Nussbaum (2006: 132-33) argues against Kant's rigid dualism between reason and nature rather than religious splits between soul or spiritual essence and nature, but her position is perfectly relevant here. She asserts that human dignity or worth "just is the dignity of a certain kind of animal"; much of what we value about ourselves that has worth we share with other animals; morality and rationality are "thoroughly material and animal"; it is a mistake to think of the "core of ourselves as atemporal.... since the usual human life cycle brings with it period of extreme dependency." Or as David Hume (1779) put it: "All the sentiments of the human mind, gratitude, resentment, love, friendship, approbation, blame, pity, emulation, envy, have a plain reference to the state and situation [i.e., the frailties and limitations] of man."

When knowledge of ourselves as vulnerable and finite coexists with aspirations to immortality and claims that we are essentially "eternal spirits" of some kind," we live in what Hegel (1997) called the "unhappy consciousness": one in which an identification with the infinite is always haunted by a suppressed awareness of the crushing reality of the finite. Our understanding of the inevitable evolutionary finitude of life, and the imperfect and short-lived nature of human institutions (even religious ones), means that such awareness, or at least the truth towards which it gestures, is inescapable. Like everything else, and precisely because it is part of everything else, religions arise, have their day, and then will pass away.

Temporarily Yours

Despite protestations of good intentions by everyone from the Pope to the leaders of the World Council of Churches, from the (Koranically oriented) environmental ministry of Saudi Arabia to the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary (Gottlieb 2006a), I suspect that somewhere we

know that what is at stake is a little closer to home than a generalized "human" temporality and limitation. It is not just that humans have been, and will continue to be, imperfect; it is that we *in particular* will be as well—the author and reader of this essay, the priest and the local parish, the rabbi who reads from the Torah on Sabbath morning, the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church who flies around the world on ozone-layer-destroying, fossil-fuel-consuming jets to make his (truly inspiring) environmental pronouncements. We will *not* do everything we should; we will not sustain for as long as we could as much as we could. Along with the destabilizing forces of evolution sustainability is limited because human beings are limited, because our addictive psychology, lust for power, fascination with technology and ease, and plain moral laziness leave us acting, let us say, far below an ideal moral standard.

So the chain of ethical reflection which begins with sustainability brings religion—after serious reexamination—down to earth. It challenges us to end or at least limit our endless pretensions to being moral exemplars, our arrogance about our insights about what God thinks and wants, our repeated demands that other people listen to us. It thrusts center stage the often recommended but rarely practiced virtue of humility. If we cannot teach and practice humility *now*, after all the mistakes we've made and facts we've ignored and in so many ways *continue* to ignore, we never will.

If humility (which given our collective track record is certainly warranted in secular contexts from progressive politics to technological innovation as well) actually arises, a deeply serious alteration in religion's self-understanding will have taken place. For it would mean that religious leaders and theologians, along with their customary assertions about The Nature of it All, will admit to *not* knowing an awful lot: not really understanding, for instance, how their own faiths could have been blind for so long, or what kind of economic changes are necessary, or what the politics, education, or technology of a Brave New Sustainability should look like. A sustainable religion is thus first of all one that admits its sizable limitations, asks a lot of questions and truly wishes to learn. This learning cannot take place purely internally, for religions cannot begin to answer these questions without enlisting the aid of political theory, environmental economics, and the psychology of addiction (for a start). A Catholic bishop cannot understand the forces which motivate the environmental crisis without some understanding of social theory anymore than he can build his own

computer by reading Matthew. Religious morality, as an autonomous form of normative knowledge, simply ceases to exist.

Even more dangerously, religion has to admit that it has only just begun to take seriously some of the most troubling moral dimensions of the environmental crisis. For example, it still does not know how to treat wealthy parishioners who make money from polluting industries. While a local church or a national religious organization would in all likelihood be loath to have a morally and psychically polluting pornographer as one of its lay leaders, such a stricture has yet to be applied to the equally dangerous practices of physical pollution. That the church endowment may be invested in polluting industries makes the moral question here that much more complicated. It is no wonder that religions haven't figured this one out yet. Indeed, they are still hesitant to be direct about the simple fact of their own moral confusion about it.

"Shehechiyanu"

When the good times roll for Jews—at a wedding, a bar mitzvah, the beginning of any important holiday—we say the 'Shehechiyanu' prayer: "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, master of the universe, for sustaining us, and keeping us alive, and bringing us to this season."[7] The Shehechiyanu prayer expresses the fundamental realization that we do not sustain ourselves and that the simple fact of being alive calls for a celebratory blessing. It is about appreciating how much it took to get us here, admitting that there is no cosmic necessity that we survive as long as we have, and savoring the moment.

These sentiments are rooted in both a true understanding of the human condition and a life-affirming commitment to making the most of that condition. If religion is to be sustained for as long as possible, which is a good deal less long than we are used to presupposing, it will help to cultivate these sentiments in some form or another. Without some delight in existence, even an existence tarnished by human aggression and thoughtlessness, human life cannot be sustained in a meaningful way.

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7) This is similar in intent to the traditional Jew's first thing in the morning prayer thanking God for keeping us alive while we slept.

Without an acknowledgment of all that supports us, we are not likely to care for it. Without a realization of human finitude and contingency, the grace of our moments of celebration dwindles to noticing the passing of time or mere "pleasure." Obligation and guilt and even fear will only take us so far—and in all probability not far enough. To stop poisoning the frogs, or at least poison them less, we also have to enjoy them.

How can we connect religion's moral obligation to understand and challenge the social forces which are causing the environmental crisis with its vocation for spiritual delight in existence? Not easily, to be sure. But there is one link that is clear: the essential religious intuition that moral action is meaningful even if it does not "succeed" in an instrumental or strategic sense. The hour is so late, the forces arrayed against really significant change so great, our own powers so weak and inconstant, that it often seems that the game is already up. It would thus not be surprising nor unwarranted if we turned to helplessness and despair. From the *Talmud* to the *Bhagavad Gita* religions reject this kind of moral depression. Rather, spiritual perspectives assure us that God is always watching, moral life is its own reward, and every spark of kindness matters. Different faiths will tell different stories about *why and how* it matters, but variations in metaphysical mechanics are much less important than the general agreement shared across traditions. And while the general spirit of this point of view is not *necessarily* religious, it is contingently more associated with religious culture than with secular political commitments, which tend to focus on close calculation of results. A religious spirit, in just this sense, can be enormously useful to the wider movement for ecological sanity. That is not necessarily because secularists will come to adopt a religious view on the ultimate powers governing the universe. It is that the faithful who live out their faith with a modicum of joy and delight in simply being alive, even as they immerse themselves in the gritty, boring, or dangerous world of environmental activism, can provide inspiring examples of politically committed compassion to offset the partisan, egotistical belligerence which too often marks political struggles.[8]

[8] See Gottlieb 2002 for an account of what "politics can learn from religion" on this score.

Love

Where does this leave us? Doubtless in a state of grave uncertainty. We do not know for how long we will sustain ourselves and the web of life on earth, what actions will succeed in lengthening that time, and if we have the moral and psychological courage to do what needs to be done. And yet… is it not the task of religion precisely to give us faith at such a time? Not faith that guarantees a happy outcome, but faith that human beings can carry on when things are at their most bleak and that despite the bleakness it is truly worth carrying on. Abraham striding up the mountain with Isaac, the Apostles not on that glorious Sunday afternoon when Jesus had returned but in the silent hours of Saturday night when He was so far away, the Buddha facing down the weapons of Mara. All these spiritual personalities must be understood, as Kierkegaard (1985) tells us, not during the successful outcomes of their trials but while they dwelled in the oppressive shadows of fear and doubt. If we wait for a sign that the outcome is guaranteed, that the right thing will be done and that we in fact will do it, that the final result will be a nice one, we will have misunderstood the nature of religious life. Such a life is truly about love without any concrete guarantees whatsoever. If we can sustain our love *now*, then whatever our future, we will have made our present something worth living. That worth need not be "forever" to be real.

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