



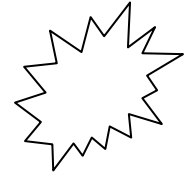
Absolute Nothingness and Absence of Meaning

A Theological End Point

by Sheila T. Harty

*Enraptured skywards since the dawn of wonder, I gazed transfixed;
Caught on a thought of epic proportion, dwindling myself under heaven's height.*

STH, New York, 1976



Analysis of life's secret codes begins for all of us as a progressive unfolding of layers of meaning—like peeling colored cellophane that we didn't know was detachable off the video screen of our mind's eye. I remember when I got my first pair of eyeglasses in elementary school. I kept lifting them up and down in awe over the clarity that I had not known existed. St. Paul made such analogy in First Corinthians, which Sister Laurene had us memorize in second grade at Christ the King Elementary:

*When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, and I thought as a child,
now that I have become a man, I have put away the things of a child.
For now we see through a mirror in an obscure way, but then we shall see face to face.¹*

This “coming out” party of consciousness begins with finding out that Santa Claus doesn't exist and then with finding out how babies are born. I remember those “ah-ha” moments for the exhilarating, mind-stretching feel of new consciousness—like moving toward a mirage and finding, incredibly, that it's not wet. I felt that often in college after class with a particularly superb history professor.²

The same wonder at new consciousness is elicited in other ways, like LSD. Going through the “doors of perceptions”³ forever changes one. The “Mind at Large” seeps past ego, opening one's consciousness to the *Mysterium Tremendum*.⁴ Insight is always thereafter accessible—like having a new pair of glasses. Still, we must be careful who our teachers are. We particularly need to protect ourselves from the false consciousness of contemporary culture, especially through television and advertising. The sociology of knowledge asserts that wisdom is only attainable by “*socially unattached intelligentsia*.”⁵ In fact, solitude and silence are the ideal conditions. In contrast, the religious beliefs of the masses are suspect. As a brave new book explains:

*Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds
that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity—a vanishing point beyond
which rational discourse proves impossible.⁶*

The cumulative layers of religious belief are ancient myth, oral history, and metaphor mortared together by political expediency and profitable salesmanship. These layers need to be decoded. Thus, I became a debunker.

Demythologizing religion has intrigued me since I was lucky as a freshman to have a polyglot teacher⁷ who knew 27 languages. Oh, the hidden meanings he could decipher! The realization that received truths are in disguise with ulterior motives can result in either empowerment or disillusionment. I felt empowered. I became a debunker of blind faith though once I was a believer—a pious, fervent, righteous believer. I wanted to be a nun, a Carmelite. I wanted to give my life in complete assent to the deeper spiritual meaning of life, though I hadn't yet seen deeply enough. There were other layers, deeper still.

Today, I feel that I have arrived at a far enough polarity from where I began to now laugh a full Buddha belly laugh. The truth? Life is spiritually ambiguous. We dignify ourselves too much in this search for meaning. We create an illusory reality to satisfy the quest. Worse, we fail to revere the enormous, awe-inspiring

¹ I Cor 13: 11-12.

² Dr. Robert Burke, History Department, University of South Florida, Tampa, 1965-70.

³ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954).

⁴ Rudolph Otto, *Das Heilige* (Breslau, 1917), trans. John W. Harvey, as *The Idea of the Holy* (London, 1923).

⁵ A phrase from Alfred Weber, brother of Max Weber, quoted in Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 1952).

⁶ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (W.W. Norton, 2004), pg. 25.

⁷ Dr. Ira Gessman, Classics Department, University of South Florida, Tampa, 1965-70.

magnificence of “*absolute nothingness*”⁸ and its absence of meaning. It is profound. If you’ll permit a personal biography, I’d like to take you on my theological journey to that end point.

INITIAL CONDITIONS

As we know from the new science of chaos, our lives unfold with a “*sensitive dependence on initial conditions*.”⁹ I was born in Nürnberg, Germany, during the War Crime Trials. I had a repeating nightmare throughout childhood. My mother would call out down the hall: “*It’s all right, It’s just a bad dream. Go back to sleep.*” Well, it wasn’t a dream. Fifty years later, I was watching an old black-and-white movie; the opening scene was straight out of my dream. Then the caption appeared: Nürnberg 1948. Stanley Kramer’s *Judgment at Nürnberg* begins with scenes of the city in rubble. Those childhood nightmares were memories of what I saw backwards over my father’s shoulder. What does that mean? I don’t know...but it’s heavy.

I was raised Roman Catholic with a parochial school education back when that meant nuns. My piety peaked in 8th grade, when I spent all of recess and lunch hour fasting and praying in the chapel. I sought an audience with the Mother Superior to ask for admittance to the novitiate, but she said no, that I was “*too worldly.*” I was 12. She gave me some holy cards and dismissed me. I never quite accepted being rejected for the convent. In defiance, I became a theologian.



My undergraduate curriculum was interdisciplinary religious arts & letters, which included primitive anthropology, classical philosophy, medieval history, Renaissance humanities, Reformation studies, psychology of religion, and existential themes in literature. My graduate studies were in the sociology of religion with a Catholic focus, a dose of Islam, plus a good mix of scripture and feminism. My mentors are the French Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin,¹⁰ the British mathematician Alfred North Whitehead,¹¹ and the radical social critic Ivan Illich.¹² I’m often asked why I studied theology, despite that one can never know the answers to its questions. Ah, but the integrity is in the inquiry.

After graduation, I taught theology at a Catholic high school, but my contract was not renewed. That’s a euphemism for being fired. The head nun said I was “*answering questions they hadn’t asked yet.*” A fair comment. I indeed wanted to go deeper than the catechism to shatter the students’ insulation. They were too comfortable, as I had been, with the master story as received truth. I wanted the prism of religion to be more fully appreciated in order to mitigate the arrogant certitude of their faith. Still, I wanted to leave them with a sense of awe for the mystery.

All religious beliefs are true—metaphorically. As metaphors, they point to higher truths. But belief in these beliefs is a detour from their initial means as teaching tools toward their mistaken ends as “THE” faith. That’s packaging a vector as if it were a fact. Still, I like St. Augustine’s appellation for God: “*Oh Sweet Light of my hidden eyes.*”¹³ That endearment reflects humility about our fuzzy insight. Yet Joseph Campbell’s definition is better: “*God is a metaphor for a mystery.*”¹⁴

REVELATION OF CHAOS

My theology got the biggest boost from science, a quantum leap in deeper meaning. While working in Washington, D.C., I took a course in physics at the Smithsonian Campus on the Mall. I read the *Tao of*

⁸ Martin Heidegger.

⁹ Citing Henri Poincare, 1890, in Stephen Wolfram, *A New Kind of Science* (Wolfram Media, 2004).

¹⁰ *The Phenomenon of Man* (Harper & Row, 1959); *The Future of Man* (H&R, 1959); “The Eternal Feminine,” *The Making of a Mind: Letters from a Soldier-Priest, 1914-1919* (H&R, 1961); *Hymn of the Universe* (H&R, 1961).

¹¹ *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Cambridge University Press, 1929); *Science and the Modern World* (MacMillan, 1925); *Modes of Thought* (The Free Press, 1938); *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality* (Indiana University Press, 1966).

¹² *Celebration of Awareness: A Call for Institutional Revolution* (London: Marion Boyars, 1971); *Deschooling Society* (1971); *Tools for Conviviality* (1972); *Energy and Equity* (1974); *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health* (1976); *Disabling Professions* (1977); *The Right to Useful Unemployment: and Its Professional Enemies* (1978); *H2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness* (1986).

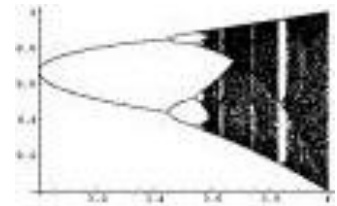
¹³ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 397-401 AD.

¹⁴ Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (Broadway Books, 1988).

Physics,¹⁵ finding that the parallel of quantum physics with Eastern mysticism helped me to follow along. Then I read the *Dancing Wu Li Masters*¹⁶ and other such physics books for the complete idiot.¹⁷ I recognized Whitehead's "process theology"¹⁸ in Einstein's four-dimensional space-time continuum where everything affects everything. I began to ask "must God be supernatural?" Einstein had written: "What is commonly called 'God's will' is identical with the laws of nature."¹⁹

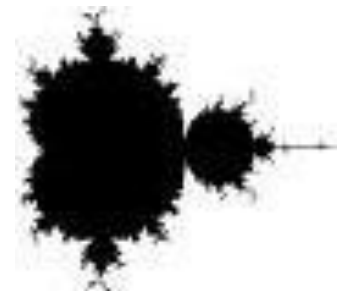
Christianity damns such thinking as pantheism,²⁰ preferring an anthropomorphic personal God. The only possibility of a God in a quantum universe is as a differential equation. Quantum physics even has a competing explanation to creation in the biblical Genesis. In a quantum genesis, a vacuum fluctuation within a *virtual* reality of elemental particles can cause the spontaneous emergence of a particle into existence.²¹ That trumps Aquinas' cosmological argument for God as the necessary and efficient primal cause.

I took another Smithsonian course, this time on Chaos, which changed my thinking dramatically. Chaos theory reveals new simplicities within the complexities of deterministic natural systems²²—that is, everything that undergoes change over time. Life! The mystique of chaos is that a deeper order masquerades underneath apparent randomness.²³ Within complex natural systems with too many variables, like weather, much of the data seem chaotic. Yet, by plotting the calculations graphically, computers can map the structure of chaos, which actually evolves into ordered geometric patterns. Yet, that order is not perceived until the frame of reference is much larger, which only emerges over time.



Hidden in the details of a whole spectrum of aperiodic phenomenon is a continuous unfolding of patterns within patterns, dissimilar yet related with a symmetry of scale and a compounded rate of change or period doubling. This holds whether the phenomena are ocean temperatures, wind vibrations, waterfalls, river flow, earthquakes, insect migrations, disease epidemics, heart arrhythmia, breathing disorders, price fluctuations, income distribution, dripping faucets, or radio static. The chaotic details of all these nonlinear systems show the same transition to order. This is mind boggling! The same transition! The same proportional scale! The same rate of change.²⁴ Across astoundingly different data sets. As if all were related parts of a larger universal set. The heresy of pantheism be damned!

Chaos is also fractal—that is irregular shaped. I attended a lecture on fractals by the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot.²⁵ More layers of meaning were revealed, deeper still. Fractal geometry challenges the idealized world of Euclidian geometry, whose three dimensions of line, plane, and solid reflect an abstract perfection, which is almost nonexistent in nature. In contrast, fractal geometry mirrors nature's complexity as expressed in algorithms. The mystic of fractals is that irregular patterns remain similar across scale, such as branching patterns in trees or cloud shapes and coastlines.²⁶ The most beautiful fractal yet



¹⁵ Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (Random House, 1975).

¹⁶ Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics* (Bantam Books, 1979).

¹⁷ Timothy Ferris, *Coming of Age in the Milky Way* (Wm Morris, 1988); Lincoln Barnett, *The Universe and Dr. Einstein* (Bantam Books, 1957); Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (Bantam Books, 1988), et al.

¹⁸ "Every elementary particle hangs on a filigree that binds it to the rest. No longer objective observers of the stars, we participate with the atoms in all events." Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Cambridge University Press, 1929).

¹⁹ Max Jammer, *Einstein and Religion* (Princeton University Press, 1999), pg. 44. Also, "God's will is materialized through Time's duration" from Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (Henry Holt, 1911).

²⁰ Belief that God is coextensive with the universe: that is, not separate as Creator from the creation.

²¹ Wolfram, pg. 223.

²² Edward N. Lorenz. "Deterministic Nonperiodic Flow," *Journal of the Atmospheric Sciences*: vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 130–141.

²³ James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (Penguin, 1987).

²⁴ Period doubling in the proportions of Feigenbaum's constant: 4.6692016090. Ilya Prigogine, *Order Out of Chaos* (Bantam, 1984), pg. 167.

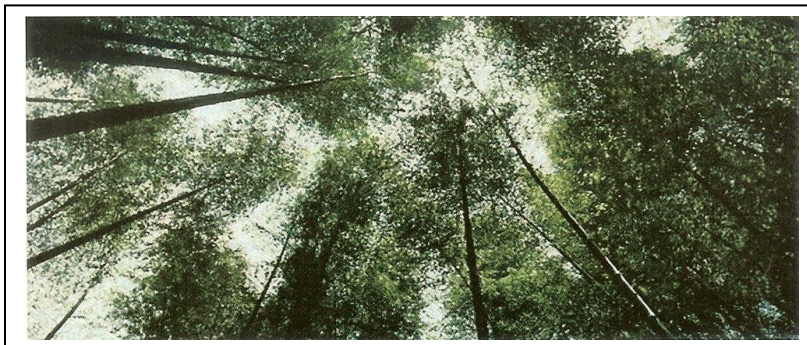
²⁵ Benoit B. Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (London: W.H. Freeman, 1982).

²⁶ Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart, *The Collapse of Chaos: Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World* (Viking, 1994).

is the intriguingly “*baroque*”²⁷ Mandelbrot set, whose dynamic calculation²⁸ starts with zero!²⁹ Through the constant feedback loops of complex numbers over millions of iterations, order emerges from chaos in repeat patterns of intricate beauty. Revere that!

ABSOLUTE NOTHINGNESS

Religious beliefs presume to answer the questions of “why” and “how” about the profound mysteries of time and space and life itself, but answering thus with faith in a God doesn’t make it so nor explain those mysteries. Most people, nevertheless, are consoled. Most people also feel a spiritual profundity within Nature. As a child, I used to feel this transcendent bond while lying under trees, looking up through their branches at the sky. But that’s a sheltered perspective, a moment of spiritual security.



Grasp, instead, a moment of spiritual insecurity for a more profound experience. Stand at the edge of the ocean at night and stare into the immeasurable darkness that is 95 percent or more of space. When I do so, I feel the same the same ineffable incomprehensibility, the same rapturous awe at the vast depth of nothingness as I ever felt at my most pious belief in the majesty of God. Odd. The feeling is the same, but the content is different. I realized that the nature of belief is what’s so strong; its presumptive, unsubstantiated risk is what carries the punch, not the object of the belief or its content.



Most cultures create Gods in their own images, because they are afraid of the awesome void. “*Nothing*” is an awe-inspiring concept, yet essentially indigestible, which most people regard with anxiety, nausea, and panic.³⁰ Bewildered before the unfathomable cosmos, they project a supernatural one. This socially constructed faith offers a shield against the howling hyenas of the night—for to reject the master story is to exile oneself. Yet, preference for the security of belonging eclipses the freedom of authentic existence, which is only possible with courage.

For those unable to accept the absence of meaning, a faith shared with others is a lifeline against an undertow. Indeed, society endows the content of faith with an ontological status—that is, as if it were real³¹—in order to encourage conformity, which gives the illusion of stability as we whirl on a sphere in the darkness of space. Beliefs create reality: that’s the true illusion. Buy into “*false consciousness*”³² and you’ll never have to think on your own. As Nietzsche wrote, “*faith means not wanting to know what is true.*”³³ If we could only learn to revere instead—even be enthralled with—the infinity of nothingness, we would not need to project a sacred canopy for its illusory comfort. Anything beyond belief in diffuse connective energy is the arrogance of religion in an anthropomorphic straightjacket.

When one senses the instability—the incredibility!—of the sheltering fraud of faith, this sacred canopy fades as a phantom mist. Relish that existential breathing space. Take your stand on the edge of the abyss with

²⁷ Cohen and Stewart, pg. 230.

²⁸ $z \rightarrow z^2 + c$

²⁹ The black space is defined by “*all values that do not go to infinity in the orbit of zero.*”

³⁰ Martin Gardner, Chapter 45: “Nothing,” *The Colossal Book of Mathematics* (W.W. Norton, 2001), pg. 608.

³¹ “*The fundamental coerciveness of society lies...in its power to impose itself as reality.*” Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Doubleday, 1967), pg. 12.

³² Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*.

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist: An Attempt at a Critique of Christianity*.

the balanced grace of a daring pirouette, relying on form and force to defy gravity. Fix your eyes on the fathomless expanse with the raw edge of a poet's insight, seeing beyond the blinding lights of civilization. Ponder in awe the "*vertigo of relativity*"³⁴ with the evolved specialty of our neurological edge. Embrace the boundless depth that shrinks our egos from believing we are created in the image of divinity. Truly, "*Religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant.*"³⁵

Space and time and life itself may be sacred, but no God makes them so. "Salvation," for those who want it, is available in each moment's choice for thought or action: one choice progresses us; the other diminishes us. "Redemption," for those who need it, is available in the next moment as we choose to choose differently. Life has no end purpose—just a continual process—sequential moments of becoming. You keep the ledger internally; no one is judging. We should savor instead, with arms outstretched and head thrown back, the freedom of living without a God—not with the arrogance of pride, but with the grace of courage. A trapeze act without a net.

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Sheila Harty is a published and award-winning writer with a BA and MA in Theology. Her major was in Catholicism, her minor in Islam, and her thesis in scriptural Judaism. Harty employed her theology degrees in the political arena as "applied ethics," working for 20 years in Washington DC as a public interest policy advocate, including ten years with Ralph Nader. On sabbatical from Nader, she taught "Business Ethics" at University College Cork, Ireland. In DC, she also worked for U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, the World Bank, the United Nations University, the Congressional Budget Office, and the American Assn for the Advancement of Science. She was a consultant with the Centre for Applied Studies in International Negotiations in Geneva, the National Adult Education Assn in Dublin, and the International Organization of Consumers Unions in The Hague. Her first book, *Hucksters in the Classroom*, won the 1980 George Orwell Award for Honesty & Clarity in Public Language. She moved to St. Augustine, Florida, in 1996 to care for her aging parents, where she also works as a freelance writer and editor. She can be reached by phone at 904 / 826-0563 or by e-mail at stharty@bellsouth.net. Her website is <http://www.sheila-t-harty.com>

³⁴ Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Doubleday, 1966), pg. 5.

³⁵ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, pg. 28.

THE MANDELBROT SET ($z \rightarrow z^2+c$): the black areas represent all values that do not go to infinity in the orbit of zero. If any region of the set is magnified, new and intricate detail appears as illustrated in the sequence below.

SOURCE: H.O. Peitgen and D. Saupe, eds., *The Science of Fractal Images* (Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 1987), pp. 202. © H.O. Peitgen, H. Jürgens, and D. Saupe.

