I love you and I am smiling at you from wherever I am.[1]
—Jackie

Off in a distant corner of the universe, unknown to the stars around it,
a little spark is ignited and a light is born.
The light grows steadily larger and stronger until finally,
in a great burst of energy, it flares up and flares out,
extinguished without a trace,
its little life and gentle smile unknown to all its neighbors.
The light burns because it burns, in all its brilliance,
and then the little star has to die
and the universe moves on.
—Fragment from *The Game of Jacks*[2]

CHAPTER ONE

Nihilism and the Smile on the Face of Matter

Jackie and Me

Ever since I was a little boy—they called me "Jackie," a name with a story to it—I would look up at the vast spread of stars at night and think quietly to myself, "No one knows we are here."[3] This suspicion was a well-kept secret, strictly between Jackie and me—and the stars, of course. I had memorized the "Baltimore

Catechism" as instructed, and I knew as well as everybody else what it said. But that did not quell my inquisitiveness. I still wondered, in the back of my mind, is there anyone out there, God or anyone at all, or is it just stars all the way out? It was a passing thought. I never brought it up with the nuns because they would have killed me or, even worse, turned me in to the pastor, an imposing priest who would have expelled me from my parish school. Then I would have had to go to public school with all the Protestant kids, who I was reasonably sure were going to hell for being heretics.

Our parish was our world. It was like being born in a little European village, with the church in the center of the neighborhood. That did not change when my world widened in high school, when I first met kids from other parishes. To this day at reunions, bald and overweight simulacra of our high school selves recognizable only by pictures taken fifty years ago still identify themselves by the parishes from which they hail. So it wasn't worth it. I was not about to bring up an occasional thought, a whimsical bit of imagination born of summer nights lying on my back looking up at the skies, just a touch of the incredulity I harbored about the story they were telling me—the nuns, the priests, my parents, and everyone I knew. I myself dismissed it as an idle thought. All that immensity was just the power of God stretched out in space and time, God showing off some of those omni-attributes for which the Catechism said he was so famous. Where else could the stars have come from anyway?

After high school, I entered the "religious life" (Catholic-speak for life in a religious order), and they started calling me "Brother Paul." I still remember a sermon given by a retreat master when I was a novice. A million, million, million years from

now, his voice soaring through our little chapel and out across the eons, *you* will still be here—he meant mostly our immortal souls, of course—and everything depends on how you use this fleeting morsel of time, some three score and ten or so. (The numbers down here on Earth have since improved, at least if you're affluent; we are inching close to four score.) Jackie, Brother Paul, and I—or someone or something in what I with less assurance than ever still call "I"—believed him thoroughly, and my heart stirred with fervor. I went to the Director of Novices and asked if there could be one exception to the vow of poverty I was going to take at the end of the "canonical year and a day" of Novitiate. I wished to have a personal copy of the Retreat Master's book, which I was sure would both preserve my vocation and ensure my eternal salvation.

I needed all the help I could get with both. They told us that by entering the religious life we had "left the world" to dedicate ourselves to God. But leaving the world did not keep me safe from the stars, which still came out every night and found me hidden in my remote Novitiate setting. And with the stars just a wisp of a thought, Jackie's memory of the stars, his slight suspicion of a cosmic void, floating gently in the back of his mind. Of course, I did not dare broach such a thought to the Retreat Master, or to the Director of Novices, and I tried not to bring it up too often with Brother Paul.

I have been brooding over this thought ever since, from my childhood life in pre-Vatican II Catholicism, an altar boy and all the rest, in a Church that was about to change more in the next forty years than it had in the previous four hundred. The specter of it followed Brother Paul and accompanied me later into professional life, when they were calling me "Professor," and Jackie

could safely conceal himself behind "John D." Philosophy professors, I discovered with delight, were actually paid a salary to brood over the stars, *ex professo*, as it were. (Not wanting to lose any leverage, I never told the dean with whom I negotiated my first contract that I would have done the whole thing for nothing!) It—this thought, this spooky feeling of being surrounded by some anonymous something or other—has lasted until now, which they all tell me is called old age, and maybe they're right. Now bank clerks and supermarket cashiers, in an effort to be cheery, call me "young man," which makes for a piercing confirmation of my advanced years. They are being friendly, and they mean well, but their condescending irony shocks me and burns into my skin every time I hear it. They cannot know out there that from in here nothing much has changed. In here, I am still a little boy looking up at the sweep of stars, since enabled by contemporary technology to look back from outer space at the little bluish ball called planet earth. Jackie, Brother Paul, the professor, and several other fellows I have no time to introduce have been faithful companions throughout and we have all been good friends, happy to have known one another. Jackie in particular revisits me every night, just before I fall off to sleep, or sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night, when I just can't shut him up. I can't get mad at him; he is just a little boy, a bit scared and a bit too inquisitive for his own good, and he does not realize that these days I need my sleep.

The Inhuman

Over the course of my professorial life and the flood of books and papers and conversations in conference hotel bars, I have

come upon several brilliant formulations of Jackie's musings, various versions of the same dubiousness about the same dark skies that keep me up at night and cause me to toss about in bed like a little craft in a tumultuous sea.[4] One of the more poignant expressions, which I will share with you here, is found in Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), a twentieth-century French philosopher. I will try not to overdo it, but you should not be surprised to find me citing French philosophers. Having come of age intellectually in the bosom of the Catholic Church, having had the good fortune to be educated by a handful of intelligent, progressive Catholic teachers in high school and professors in college, it was the intellectual culture of Continental Europe, German and French, that most spoke to our hearts, addressing what we called in those days—and the word still has a use—the *existential* questions. Those questions show up pointedly in art, religion, and philosophy, and make up the passion of my life. They search for truth existentially conceived, which Søren Kierkegaard—a lifelong hero of mine—called a truth "to live and die" for. It is not an accident that so many Catholic graduate programs in philosophy—surrounded on all sides by an Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture and a philosophical climate that had abandoned American Pragmatism and adopted a more positivistic, empiricist, and logicist approach to philosophy—went "Continental." After Vatican II, which was spearheaded by French and German theologians, Continental philosophy was the discourse of choice for most Catholic and recovering Catholic philosophers who were looking for an alternative to the austere scholasticism on which they were raised.

Lyotard was famous for giving us what would prove to be the received definition of the "postmodern condition" in a

commissioned report on the state of knowledge today (in 1979). This condition, he said, is one of "incredulity"—an excellent word of which Jackie and I could make good use—about any big overarching story that tries to make the Big Point, to make sense of everything. Then, about a decade later (1987), Lyotard felt obliged to report in again, this time informing us that our condition was even worse than he first thought, even more unnerving, indeed pointless. This condition he called the "inhuman,"[5] which has a very eerie sound, and makes incredulity look like small potatoes.

Lyotard put this spooky feeling, which I knew fairly well, quite pointedly. As we speak, he says, the sun is inexorably expanding and in four or five billion years will explode. Star death the physicists call it, a thought that would have been unthinkable to the ancients. In a billion years or so the earth will be toast, burnt to a crisp by the solar expansion. Then, says Lyotard, all of the conflicts and wars of today, all of our inconclusive philosophical debates will have finally been concluded. That is a taunt aimed at the philosophers, in case you missed it. All of our hopes will be dashed, all of our fears put to rest. Everything will die with the sun, and in that sense, if we allow ourselves to look that far ahead, everything's dead already, before the fact. If to be alive now means to hope in the future—to hope that things have a point—then we are already dead. We cannot even say that humanity will be "history" because history depends upon memory, and at that future point memory and thought itself will be dead. Art, religion, philosophy, the sphere of absolute spirit (Hegel) and existential concerns (Kierkegaard), will have proven not so absolute after all. Thought will have ended and no one will be there to report the ending, neither Lyotard nor

anyone else. Thought will have disappeared and that very disappearance will go unreported, unthought. Instead of absolute spirit, the absolutely unthought. Instead of reaching a consummation, a catastrophe awaits us; instead of a final conclusion, a terminal condition. Here was the suspicion I harbored on summer nights long ago coming back to haunt me, framed by a master of incredulity with a poetic flare. Jackie never imagined anything quite that dark.

Lyotard goes very far with this idea. We cannot even say that at that point things will be "dehumanized," he points out, because that would require a survivor, a human witness left behind to lament the devastation. There will be no humans around to feel dehumanized, just the posthuman or inhuman. In the inhuman situation there are no humans to pronounce the situation inhumane. Our days on earth "under the sun," as the author of Ecclesiastes says, will all have been, as Lyotard puts it, "no more than a spasmodic state of energy, an instant of established order, a smile on the surface of matter in a remote corner of the universe," a splendid poetic formulation of the anxious meditations I have been making all my life. "Vanity of vanities and all is vanity," Ecclesiastes says (Eccles. 1:2).

When I speak of the poetry of Lyotard's language, I am not criticizing him. On the contrary, it's the thing I love about the French philosophers. I think the poetry is the best, in fact, the only rigorous way to make his point. Then he adds another twist—he evidently enjoys taunting the philosophers. Even those of you who fancy yourselves skeptics and unbelievers, even you incredulous atheists: "You're really believers, you believe much too much in that smile, in the complicity of things and thought, in the purposefulness of all things."[6] That smile is just a bit of

euphoria from which we should all awaken—both the skeptics and the more upbeat, both the philosophers and theologians, artists and teachers, doctors and politicians, the just or unjust, everyone under the sun, anyone who *believes* (*credere*) anything, who believes in anything or anyone. You will all be toast.

The prick of Lyotard's thought of death, its particularly punishing point, is that Lyotard is not talking about death-as-a-part-of-the-cycle-of-life, death as the way the torch of life is passed on to a new generation—many an institution, it is sometimes said with a wry smile, makes its best progress at funerals. This is really death, death pure and simple, the death of death-as-part-of-life. This *death of death* does not mean immortality, which is the way theologians try to blunt the point; it means there is nothing living left to die. This is not the cozy lap of nature (ecologists take note) in which we like to curl up like a cat on a cushion. This is the end of thought, pure disaster, "negation without remainder," says Lyotard, nothing cozy or comforting, nothing ecological or theological, no one there to remember when there was something rather than nothing. Just nothing. Contrary to my retreat master, a million, million, million years from now, we'll just be cinders!

That's nihilism! If that's not nihilism, nothing is!

Of course, we all have had days in which solar oblivion doesn't look so bad. But normally we get over that and life goes on. In fact, it's actually worse than Lyotard is letting on. Beyond the solar nihilism he is describing, there lies what we might call "cosmic nihilism," meaning that in virtue of the accelerating expansion of the universe, everything, the entire cosmos, not just our solar system, will have finally amounted to nothing. At the very end, there is, there will have been nothing. There is no

simpler, clearer definition of nihilism than that: being expands into nothing; being becomes nothing. It is hard to imagine a harder nut for hope to crack, a higher hurdle for hope to scale. Nihilism is surely the end of hope, surely the most hopeless, the most pointless situation imaginable. Nihilism means it's all hopeless—or else nihilism means nothing at all! If we say that hope means the aspiration that the future is worth more, nihilism means it's not. In the long run, as an old joke goes, nihilism thinks we are all dead. The euphoria will fade. The brief smile on things at present will soon enough be wiped off the face of the cosmos, leaving not a trace behind.

So there was a name for my thought. This phantom thought that I have been carrying around since long before I ever heard the word is what the philosophers call "nihilism." What lies ahead for humans is the inhuman. What precedes and follows and surrounds the human is the inhuman.

Faced with the facelessness of this cosmic oblivion, what do we do now? Is there any human hope in the face of the inhuman? We have two options, Lyotard proposes.

(1) Ignore it. Invoke Epicurus's saying about death, that I have nothing to do with death. So long as I am, death is not; when death is, I am not. Epicurus was talking about the death of the individual; but what he was saying applies to solar death all the more, given that it is eons away. Be oblivious of this oblivion, on purpose. When the inhuman comes, no humans will be there to be bothered by it. The inhuman poses no threat to human euphoria. True, the thought of the deluge that will inevitably ensue will persist in the back of our mind, but way, way back, where it is really no bother. Occasionally we will be reminded of it by the philosophers—but fortunately nobody reads the

philosophers—or by one of those National Geographic specials on television. Just change the channel. Best to behave like the politicians: they know there are long-term problems out there, but right now the only thing that interests them is the current news cycle and the next election. In short, the Epicurean recommends, let's just say Lyotard was having a bad day and thank God it's Friday.

(2) The other choice is to do something about it. Attempt an escape. Take on the challenge. Try to outwit it. That would demand finding a hi-tech way to hightail it out of here, to keep thought alive in conditions beyond planet Earth, and ultimately even beyond the solar system. Seek to remove thought from its dependence upon its venerable but vulnerable biological base, maybe by uploading consciousness onto a computer and downloading it into shiny new robot bodies that could escape into outer space. Treat contemporary physics as a weather forecast and evacuate the place before the solar storm arrives.

Does Religion Offer Any Hope?

"For heaven's sake!" Jackie would have said, before his mind was corrupted by the study of philosophy, "That's what religion is for!" Answering questions like that is what priests and nuns, pastors and rabbis have spent years of formation being trained to do. This is how they earn a living! Why doesn't this man bring up religion? My Novitiate retreat master would have made mincemeat of Lyotard!

That brings us back to this postmodern "incredulity" that Lyotard describes. It's a symptom of this incredulity that he does not even mention the most famous, tried and true—unless it has

been tried and found wanting?—solution of all to his problems: *religion*. It is the business of religion to offer us hope in such circumstances. To anyone with a religious faith, Lyotard seems like a man whose pipes have burst: there is water everywhere, and it never even occurs to him to call the plumber. Are not the priests and pastors precisely the plumbers of the cosmic pipes, the first ones you call at the sign of a cosmic leak? The stock in trade of religion is to offer us the hope of salvation, of something saving that keeps us safe from destruction. The priests can make sense out of anything, says the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who was raised a Catholic and is speaking to the Catholics when he says this.[7] Whether it be personal, national, terrestrial, solar, or even cosmic destruction, bring it on! Religion can handle it all. Or so it claims. O, death where is thy victory? (1 Cor. 15:55)—that is perhaps its most famous boast.

Having been called to the scene of this cosmic catastrophe, and having taken the measure of his audience, my retreat master would solemnly explain that the events the unbelieving philosopher describes are already foretold in the New Testament. This is the day of the coming of the Son of Man, when the sun will go dark, the moon will lose its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and then the nations will be judged (Mark 13:24; Matt. 25:31). Sure now that he has the attention of his listeners, he continues. The philosopher's infidel vision is constricted to the fate of the "natural" world. But our faith teaches us—now his eyes tilt noticeably heavenwards, the choir springs to its feet, hymnbooks in hand—that we have immortal souls which have a supernatural destiny. The heavens (in the plural) may be headed for extinction but we are headed for Heaven (capitalized and in the singular!). Not the heavens, but Heaven (that's the punch

line and he's pounding on his pulpit now!). At death we put off our corruptible bodies and thereafter assume incorruptible ones, in which we flit about for all eternity, safe from the assaults of the material world below, buffered from the bruises of the Big Bang, world without end, amen. Alleluia.[8] That's the choir's cue and there follows a robust rendering of "Amazing Grace," while the collection plate is passed around (with much hope).

But why does Lyotard not even bring that up? It's that "postmodern condition" thing—in the postmodern world we greet all such big stories, whether they come from the philosophers or the theologians, stories that show the ultimate point of things, with incredulity. Incredulity is just the word for Jackie's musing many summer nights ago, a nicely nuanced word whose root, from *credo*, *credere*, I could hear perfectly in Catholic liturgical Latin. The language spoken by God, as I was early on led to believe, Latin is the first foreign language I studied. As an altar boy, I could spit out long strings of it, spelled out in a kind of phony phonetics, *ahd day-um*, which I could not even understand. I had memorized it, recited it, sung it, and been swept up in the *mysterium tremendum* of its lush, lyrical liturgical rhythms. *Credo* was the name and the first word of the Nicene creed we recited at Mass. *Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem cæli et terræ, visibílium omnium et invisibílium.*

A perfectly crafted word for Lyotard's purposes, from *credere* + *in*, in the privative, *I un-believe*, incredulity means to decline to believe in God, the Father Almighty, thank you very much. He does not say "I deny it," or "It can be proven false," just that it's unbelievable—the belief is not credible, and we in turn are rightly incredulous about it. Lyotard "prefers not to" believe, striking a very postmodern pose.[9] We greet these big stories (*grands récits*)

with a big yawn. Lyotard treats the religious solution with such exquisite incredulity that he never so much as mentions it. That tells us something about the moribund state of religion today. By failing to include religion in his report on the inhuman, Lyotard is reporting that there is no hope to be found in religion—and therefore no hope *for* religion! That is worlds removed from the religion Jackie, Brother Paul, and I grew up with.

I now think, these many years later, and I bring this up nightly to Jackie and other auditors of my nocturnal seminars, that Lyotard has a point. The faith of my childhood and my parents' home, and of my coming of age intellectually in the world of Catholic universities—let's say the beliefs of the classical orthodoxy—have become increasingly unbelievable, even in the best of hands. I do not merely mean that they find themselves under fire today from militant atheists who attack them from the outside. That the atheists take one look at religion's violence, authoritarianism, intolerance, ignorance, and primitive superstitions (quite a list!) and wash their hands of it should come as no surprise. That attack has been around ever since the Enlightenment enjoined us to "dare to think" (*sapere aude*).[10] It comes from people who have a point. But their critique of religion suffers from the fact that they cannot quite see religion from the inside, the way Jackie and I can. They are like critics of nonrepresentational art or atonal music who just plain don't get it—and they don't appreciate the enormous force for good of what I like to call "peace and justice" religious people, like the people of the Catholic Left that I have known all my life. These people are heroic in their service to the needy of the earth and of a more loving heart than the pugnacious leftist intellectuals who want to save humanity but seem to have utter contempt

for most of the human beings they know. Although I am critical of religion below I never for one moment forget this side of religion, the working church, which is its living heart.[11]

What is more serious is that religion is coming apart at the seams all by itself, withering away from within. More and more of the faithful are coming to agree with Lyotard: this faith has become incredible and we have become incredulous. As a result, religion is being torn up by an internal divide. On the one hand, the conservatives, stampeded first by the naturalism of a hostile "secular" modern world, and then by the relativism (as they see it) of the postmodern world, are in full flight to biblical literalism or the authority of the Church. On the other hand, the progressives are in full flight from the conservatives, from their literalism and authoritarianism, in search of a way to live sensibly and commodiously in a rapidly changing, postmodern, hi-tech, multicultural world. They are incredulous; they simply do not believe, or they attach less and less importance to believing the old beliefs. At most, such people accept the old dogmas and the old supernaturalism with a grain of salt and quietly conclude—or sometimes not so quietly—that at best the old orthodoxy has a purely metaphorical significance. By such people I do not restrict myself to the people in the pews; I also mean the people up front, in the pulpit doing the preaching.

The conservatives confirm that religion requires believing fantasies. The progressives confirm that living well has little or nothing to do with believing in religion's supernatural beings and codified doctrines. Indeed, far from being sustained by such beliefs, living well is actually impeded by it and too often results in leading furiously reactionary, intolerant, exclusionary, avaricious, mean-spirited, science-denying and anti-modern lives.

The swiftness with which so many conservative churches align themselves with the most hateful politics, with racism, sexism, militarism, and free-market euphoria, with xenophobia and homophobia, with the very forces that oppress "one of the least of the members of my family" (Matt. 25:40), makes religion unbelievable even to the very people who struggle to believe it. The ugliness of spirit of so many religious people within religion constitutes a much more effective argument against religion than anything the new atheists can come up with from without.[12] This inner rot is a much more serious problem for religion than the drive-by shootings of religion attempted by its militant critics. It would be like the nonrepresentational artists themselves concluding that their art has all been foolishness, giving up on it and deciding to go to law school.

A Past That Was Never Present

I share Lyotard's incredulity about the classical idea of religion. Jackie, Brother Paul, and I have paid our dues to it, swayed in unison with its rhythms, and lived in its bosom, and my wife, Kathy, and I tried our hand, with uneven success, in getting our children to rock with us. Kathy and I were born and raised in the same neighborhood and we gave our children a run at Catholicism, but it did not quite take. I think that it has been given ample time to state its case over the last couple of millennia. This is not to say that I agree with Freud, who thought it was an illusion and that it was done for; religion's death has been repeatedly predicted since the middle of the nineteenth century. I agree with Lacan that the illusion is to think it is done for. On the contrary, there is no telling how long the power of illusions

to soothe and seduce souls will keep it in business. Nonetheless, I do think it is bearing up less and less well under scrutiny for those who care to scrutinize it and that it is being eaten away by incredulity. The old Enlightenment motto, "Dare to think," is slowly catching up with religion, and I think religion is presently running out of steam among the dare-to-think set, which does not mean it will not continue to flourish among those who do not dare to think or read or to pause over the dark depths of a cosmic sky.

Nonetheless, I remember a past that was never present, a possibility that was never actual, traces of something that was never there, a dream, perhaps—a dream of a religion perhaps—which never existed, which is always promised, which never comes, like a messiah who never shows up. So whether for autobiographical or philosophical reasons—how would I ever be able to separate them?—I am not quite ready to give up on the word *religion*, however many reasons religion gives me for doing so. Ill-advised though this may be, I will, accordingly, in what follows work through the memory I have of something that did not exist, of a more elemental faith and hope and love, and hence of a more elemental religion, a kind of proto-religion. The orthodox will rend their garments and denounce this as a completely phony religion, a poor, thin-blooded imitation of the real thing. That is one of the reasons I am tempted to abandon the word to them and let them all go up in flames together. I proceed with this proposal all the while being acutely uncomfortable with the word *religion*. I am attempting to retrieve a deeper religious attitude from the *homo religiosus*, from the dogmatism and supernaturalism of the "men of religion,"[13] in whose hands religion is codified, regulated, and even turned into an alibi for murder and

violence. I am seeking to know what religion would look like, what form it could take, if it were wrested free from people who consider themselves authorities in matters in which we are all unlearned novices and perpetual beginners.

Imagine if religion appeared incognito, under a pseudonym, taking both the believers and the unbelievers by surprise when it finally removes its disguise? Imagine someone, for example, rewriting Augustine's C*onfessions*, where all the dogmatically charged language in this magnificent story of a restless heart is transcribed into another idiom, and making it to the top of Amazon's best-seller list. How chagrinned the new atheists would be to learn the provenance of this book they bought and read and recommended to one another! Jacques Derrida, my favorite twentieth-century philosopher, has actually written something like such a book, except it is so difficult to understand that it will never top the Amazon rankings.[14] In this book he revealed that "Jacques" was a pen name and his real name was, glory be to God, "Jackie!" (I was dumbstruck by this!) This other Jackie, as I will call him, would loosen my tongue, and if I am ever dragged before the Inquisition, I will blame it all on him. Jackie made me do it, a *double entendre* they will not understand, as sometimes I do not understand it myself. My life has turned into a confusing game of Jacks.

So rather than jettisoning the word altogether, I propose instead we think again, thoroughly re-think, from the ground up, what we mean by "religion," a Christian Latin word that I embrace with unrelenting wholehearted incredulity. I will recommend here we move on to what I will call here, following Derrida, a "religion without religion" or, following the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a "religionless Christianity"[15]—once

again attesting to the emancipatory power of this little word "without." I could not make it without this word; I cannot do without *without*. There may be hope in and for a religion of a different kind, one that comes through, after, against, and without religion, which would start out by keeping a wary distance from a lot of what is going on in religion right now but without relapsing into a simple antagonistic new-atheist diatribe against religion.[16] Even so, I seek to show that something significant, something irreducible, something we cannot do without, is going on *in* religion, something happening in or to religion that religion itself does not grasp and even seeks to repress, something that both religion and religion's antagonists do not allow themselves to think, to dare to think, which is what I think now. Every night I bring this up with Jackie, Brother Paul, the professor, the entire committee, whenever we have a quorum.

As for Lyotard, I want to outbid him, raise the stakes, be more Lyotardian than Lyotard, by persuading him there is a certain religion that resides *within* the very cosmic nihilism he described so well. This implies—if I can get away with saying this—that there is a kind of *theology of nihilism*. (I can already see the protesters forming a line outside my window.) I recommend neither Epicurus nor technology nor classical religion. I have no reason—let alone the mathematics—to doubt the physicists about the cosmic climax they predict. As a matter of fact, I find nothing in the cosmic death sentence they pronounce cause to give up on the world of space and time. Religion and physics now seem to me less and less opposed, more and more juxtaposed.

On the contrary! *I never lose hope in hope*, and though we are tempted, Jackie and I do not quite quit on religion, albeit on an

odd and audacious religion, one that will never win ecclesiastical approval. If I am ever commissioned to negotiate with the nihilists, I will state from the start that these three—hope, the reality of the material world, and (an oddly religionless) religion—are my non-negotiables. They are the materials from which I will forge a peculiar religion revolving around what I like to call the "nihilism of grace" that the priests and nuns back in my childhood parish would judge purely heretical. If my ships sinks, I will stand by materiality, hope, and grace to the end like a loyal captain, and we will all go down together.

I hope I have made it plain that for the most part religion deserves all the incredulity by which it is presently greeted. My best guess is that in its orthodox form it will become more and more incredible with each passing day, which does not mean it will pass away. Unless there might be another religion, another way of hoping and having faith, another sense of grace and miracle, another way to pray and to practice what Kierkegaard called the works of love, without mystifying itself with supernatural forces or special revelations. If there is not another religion, then the hope religion offers is hopeless, religion is not worth saving, and Lyotard is right to ignore it.

My childhood was saturated by religion, a religion I see now was one of a loving but intimidating authoritarianism, in which "dare to think" was a veiled threat: just you dare and you'll live to regret it! (Parents, priests, and nuns practiced "corporal punishment" in those days.) This world, which was populated by good people with the best of intentions, I propose, requires a repetition, not a simple destruction. (To make a long story short, destruction is the modern critical approach to religion; repetition is the postmodern.) So my goal here is to sketch an

alternative view of religion, a religion worthy of our faith, a religion without this incredible religion, a religion that makes itself worthy of what is really going on in religion. This alternate religionless religion has to do not with fantastic otherworldly interventions into human experience, as if life were a Hollywood movie or an animated cartoon, but with the inventiveness and reinventiveness that has always marked human experience. If we lack religion in the sense in which I intend it, that will mean we have given up on life. If we "lose our faith" in the sense I have in mind, our life will collapse upon itself in a heap. This alternate religion crosses over the divide between believer and unbeliever, theist and atheist, faith and reason, the religious and the secular, this world and the next. This divide has succeeded in making religion more and more incredible and making us more and more incredulous.

I am not sure the word *religion* can be or is even worth saving. Without it we would have to do without sanctuaries for the refugees of repression, without radical peace and justice workers selflessly dedicated to serving the wretched of the earth, the very religion that Pope Francis, the pope of the poor, is trying mightily to revive in the face of entrenched opposition from within Catholicism itself. Religion is an ambiguous, two-edged sword. It is supposed to be all about salvation, so maybe it can save it itself. Pastor, save thyself! At the very least it is a good strategy, a bit of a Trojan horse trick, to use an old word in a new way, in such a way that something of the old word is still discernible even as it undergoes a deep mutation and allows something unexpected to emerge. That is what I mean by repetition and what I hope to do here by reenacting the tropes of religion, or redeploying its troops, above all those that turn on grace,

hope, and the future. My idea is to don the garments of a certain religion thereby luring in the pious and scandalizing my secular friends, at least long enough to take them both by surprise, which means I have lured them into hearing me out. Unlike traditional religion and its comforting stories, this religion will not ensure that we will all get more sleep. On the contrary, it ensures an endless conversation with the specters of the night.

Itinerary

For such an ambitious undertaking, I require help. This I find throughout in the mystics, figures who first paid a visit to Brother Paul and made a lasting impression upon an impressionable young man. In this book, the mystics play a special role as the insiders in religion, whose bold strokes cut to the core of religion, while all along being outsiders who unnerve the powers-that-be on the inside. The structure of this slash, of this inside/outside, within/without (another postmodern trope), is crucial to the line I am advancing here, where the trick is not to let one side get the better of the other. I will first explain my lifelong taste for the mystics (chapter 2). They sound the depths of our everyday and quotidian lives and have helped pave the way for the modern and postmodern world we live in. I will then turn to two familiar, everyday, commonplace experiences—giving a gift and hospitality—and propose that each of them trembles with mystical depth and each represents a powerful and important ingredient in the case I am making for a postmodern religion (chapters 3–5). That is all by way of amassing evidence to present to the court for the position I take on God, about whom I will say a few things that would have scared Jackie and Brother

Paul half to death (chapter 6). After a brief interlude in which Jackie and Brother Paul express their misgivings to the professor's ways, I formulate a repetition of religion, a religion without religion, which turns on what I call the *nihilism of grace*, all of which would definitely have gotten me expelled from my parish school (chapters 7–9). That will explain why Jackie, Brother Paul, the professor, and I have spent our entire life together praying like hell (chapter 10).