The Religious Dimension of Ordinary Human Emotions

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Understanding how emotions are composed as mental states can help us understand the access many people have to their own emotions. It also can help us understand how people might increase this access and make more effective use of it in their efforts to become more free and responsible in their emotional lives. This essay focuses on some forms of cognition that enter into the composition of at least some emotional states. It shows how thoughts, beliefs, assumptions, intuitions, and questions that are arguably religious can condition the ways in which people construe objects and events in their lives and thus the ways in which they form emotional responses to those objects and events. The essay takes its bearings from the work of James Gustafson and Martha Nussbaum.

What is it to function well as a distinctively human being? Scholars in the tradition of Aristotelian virtue ethics have shown that doing well at being human has at least something to do with being well moved. It has partly to do with being disposed to feel—or, perhaps, not to feel—certain emotions in response to certain situations. What is it, however, to have well-formed emotional dispositions? What is it to be prone to respond “in the right way,” internally, to matters that many people take to be emotionally charged? It is difficult to imagine making much progress on this ethical question without clarifying the terms of the debate. What, after all, is an emotion? What goes into the composition of an emotional state? And how is it possible that some people, even while feeling emotions, can detach from their emotions sufficiently to alter them (if need be) to bring their emotions more closely into line with chosen religious or moral ideals?

In seeking to understand the emotions and the role religion plays in the formation and reflective reformation of emotion, Thomas Aquinas is a powerful resource. In the Summa Theologica, Aquinas presents a provocative account of the appetitive as well as the cognitive dimension of emotion. He also sheds light on what can happen when religious reflection is brought to bear on Platonic,
Aristotelian, and Stoic insights into the emotions, many of which continue to hold the Western imagination. Yet one cannot appreciate the promise of a Thomistic approach to the emotions without investigating other theoretical paths.

One path that is well worth exploring is that of James Gustafson. This theological path progresses patiently and carefully through detailed descriptions of the impact Christian faith can have on believers’ moral lives, including the affective dimension of their moral lives. Although Gustafson’s path covers explicitly Christian ground, it has broad implications for religious ethics: It elucidates some of what composes people’s interior lives—some of what humans likely have in common as beings who relate to reality partly in the mode of affectivity—and it makes suggestive forays beyond Christianity and other forms of organized religion into the comparative study of human religiosity more broadly construed.

A second fruitful path is that of Martha Nussbaum. This philosophical path leads into the secret, interior regions of the emotional life, seeking to lay open the structure of emotion as such and particular emotions, such as grief, that appear to be experienced by most human beings. Nussbaum’s analytical path exposes the way that background beliefs of a religious nature can become ingredients in people’s seemingly ordinary emotions. For this reason, her approach makes additional contributions to the religious ethical study of emotion. In what follows, I trace portions of these two paths, pressing Gustafson into some territory that lies beyond the open trail and drawing on Nussbaum for additional insight.

**Gustafson on the Affections**

In an important little book, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* Gustafson argues that having faith in God is likely to have a notable impact on one’s character, including one’s characteristic ways of being moved. In Gustafson’s view, having faith is not simply a matter of believing certain propositions to be true. It is a matter of experiencing what one takes to be the reality of God, as mediated through the symbols and stories of a particular historical community, and experiencing the reality of God is partly a matter of the affections. Faith itself, in this view, is an “emotional, passionate assent . . . and commitment” to certain truths about God. Moreover, as an element of piety, faith is bound up with several “sensibilities” that Gustafson, following Jonathan Edwards, refers to as “religious affections.” Gustafson focuses on six religious affections that he thinks are basic to Christian piety: “a sense of radical dependence, a sense of gratitude, a sense of repentance, a sense of obligation, a sense of possibility, and a sense of direction.”

In Gustafson’s view, faith is yoked to these religious affections, and they, in turn, are evidently connected to other, ordinary affections or emotions, such as
anger, fear, and love, which people commonly experience in relation to finite objects, persons, and events. Gustafson only begins to explore these connections. Nevertheless, his efforts are instructive for those who wish to press further. Gustafson acknowledges that it is notoriously difficult to arrive at—and get much agreement on—a basic definition of “affection” or “emotion.” These words, he says, are “so uncertain in terms of their references that it might be well not to use [them].” Yet he must use some such words if he is to elucidate what happens to someone when he or she is moved at the thought or perception of certain objects and when these movements take on predictable patterns that mark a person’s character. He must use some such words to discuss the religious significance of people’s habits of being moved.

In need of a working definition of affection or emotion, Gustafson returns to the work of Edwards: “Edwards uses the term ‘affections’ to refer to what exercises the will or inclinations; they move the person from a state of indifference to a state of caring, and to action. They are ‘vigorous’ and ‘sensible.’” For Gustafson, as for Edwards, affections “exercise not only the will to act but also the mind.” Notably, in seeking to define affections Gustafson does not actually say what he takes them to be. Instead, he mentions some of their properties and some of what they “do.” He says, for example, that affections “affect one’s fundamental inclinations and one’s desires,” but he does not say whether they are themselves forms of inclination or desire. He says that affections “exercise the mind,” but he does not say whether they are themselves forms of thought. He says that affections are “sensible”—which implies that they are connected to noticeable bodily changes or sensations—but he does not specify the nature of these connections.

Edwards himself says that the affections are “vigorous and sensible exercises of... the heart,” where the heart is conceived as a power of the soul “by which the soul is some way inclined with respect to the things it views or considers.” In this account, affections are inclinations or desires by which a person is attracted to what he or she beholds approvingly and repulsed by what he or she beholds disapprovingly. Affections are modes of being inclined toward, seeking, and enjoying what one regards as pleasing or likeable; they are modes of being disinclined toward, avoiding, and being displeased by what one takes to be unlikable. Affections are desires that cause (but for Edwards are not themselves composed of) notable bodily sensations.

Gustafson prefers to use the term “affectivity” to refer to a set of related responses that include “‘senses,’ attitudes, dispositions, and more particular affections or emotions.” He is not much concerned to distinguish affections or emotions from the other members of this set. He does indicate that affections tend to be situational. They are “evoked by particular events, others, and occasions; they do not have the same settledness that attitudes and dispositions have. Yet to some degree they are governed by our senses, our attitudes, and our
dispositions.”\textsuperscript{13} Gustafson acknowledges the importance of efforts in philosophical and moral psychology to define affections or emotions relative to other sorts of mental phenomena, but he is not interested in delving into these debates himself.\textsuperscript{14} He is more interested in exploring the affective dimension of human experience, broadly construed, in ways that reflect the “unity” of experience.\textsuperscript{15} “Distinctions can be drawn and for purposes of understanding are necessary, but experience is prior to refined distinctions and to some extent resists the imposition of categories we develop.”\textsuperscript{16}

**Gustafson on Religious Affections**

Working with an admittedly “loose” definition of affection,\textsuperscript{17} Gustafson tries to draw a distinction between religious affections and other sorts of affections. In *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* he writes that what makes an affection “religious” is its “ultimate object.”\textsuperscript{18} The ultimate object of a religious affection, he says, is God. Gustafson implies that God is the ultimate object of a religious affection in the sense that God is its metaphysical cause: What makes an affection religious, he says, is that “it is evoked by the powers of God.”\textsuperscript{19} As Edwards puts it, a religious affection is one that is evoked by the Holy Spirit dwelling in the heart as “a principle or spring of a new nature and life.”\textsuperscript{20} This thesis raises many difficult questions, including the question of how a person can know whether it is God or something other than God that evokes a particular affection (within himself or herself or within someone else). Edwards wrestles with this issue, but Gustafson chooses to focus on other matters.\textsuperscript{21}

Gustafson also implies a weaker thesis: What makes an affection religious is that it is evoked by what one perceives to be the power of God (setting aside the question of whether one’s perceptions are accurate). He also implies that what makes an affection religious is that it is aroused by thoughts about God or divine things (setting aside the question of whether these thoughts are caused by God in a way that other thoughts are not, and setting aside as well the question of whether these thoughts reflect the way things really are). As Gustafson puts it, a person’s affectivity “becomes” religious when the person brings a “religious consciousness” to objects and events, so that these objects and events “are perceived [by the person] to be ultimately related to the powers that sustain us and bear down upon us, to the Ultimate Power on which all of life depends.”\textsuperscript{22}

On this view, certain affections are religious in that they are “about God”: God is the central intentional object of the affection. It is only with reference to the divine—and, more specifically, with reference to thoughts or images concerning a particular feature of the divine—that one can identify what a person is feeling as a religious affection and distinguish which religious affection it is. For Gustafson, “a sense of gratitude,” for example, can be identified within a
Christian context only with reference to thoughts or intuitions about God's goodness and beneficence. A sense of possibility or hope can be identified only with reference to thoughts or intuitions about the ultimate source of creativity and renewal.

In Gustafson's judgment, however, characterizing God as an intentional object is problematic. God is not a reality that can be encountered as a "distinct and isolated object" of experience. Gustafson agrees with John E. Smith, who argues that "every alleged experience of God [also is an] experience of something else at the same time." In Gustafson's words, "The ultimate power that sustains us and bears down upon us is experienced through the particular objects, events, and powers that sustain us, threaten our interests, create conditions for human action, or evoke awe and respect." God is encountered only in and through finite "media of disclosure." How, then, is one to characterize the object of a religious affection in a way that distinguishes such an affection from other, ordinary affections that take the same finite items as their objects? How, for example, does one distinguish between gratitude toward one's mother for her unconditional love and "a sense of gratitude" toward God, whose unconditional love one encounters in one's mother's presence?

As I read Gustafson, a religious affection takes God as its object in the sense that, in feeling an affection, a person's attention is focused on a particular object or situation and, at the same time, on the thought that this object or situation discloses (or might disclose) something about "the ultimate power and orderer of all of the creation." Feeling a religious affection involves being affected not only at the perception of an object or the thought of one's relationship to that object but also and especially at the thought that this object and the self both stand in relationship to the "purposes of the divine governance." With a religious affection such as "a sense of gratitude" toward God, thoughts of the goodness of the divine purposes become central and defining elements of the affection.

One could conceive of the object of a religious affection more broadly as what a person takes to be the truth of things—the truth concerning what is really (and not only apparently) real, where the truth is thought to be capable of gripping the human mind and heart, yet also to lie to an irreducible extent beyond the power of humans as such to grasp and control. Thus, feeling a religious affection would involve encountering a person, object, idea, or event in such a way that one's interest and attention alight on that object but also are drawn expressly toward the object's ineffable center, toward the truth of its reality (considered in light of what one suspects might only appear to be true), toward the ultimate cause or reason for its being, or toward a horizon of meaning (only partly visible) against which that object takes on significance that it would not otherwise have.

I imagine that few people have words, concepts, and symbols that are adequate to express what seems to happen within them when they encounter a
sacred depth through a finite medium that otherwise might have appeared ordinary or profane. Nevertheless, many people are sometimes captivated or charged, in their encounter with particular objects, by what strikes them on some level of awareness as lying at the heart of the object, transcending it on all sides, or cradling it with extraordinary meaning. The fact that people sometimes are gripped in this way becomes apparent when they are asked to share their experiences of emotions that seem to them to connect them with what is most real or of unusual importance. In any case, this is how I would interpret and begin to extend Gustafson’s view of how to characterize what is religious about a religious affection.

The Religious Dimension of Ordinary Emotions

Gustafson’s analysis focuses primarily on religious affections such as “a sense of gratitude” or “a sense of possibility,” which take some aspect of the Christian God as their central intentional object. Gustafson says less about other, ordinary affections or emotions that most of us know by more familiar names—such as anger, fear, and love. Clearly, however, these emotions also can have a religious dimension. That is, some of these emotions also might profitably be referred to, under certain circumstances, as religious affections—or, as I prefer, religious emotions.  

First, within many worlds of religious meaning, it makes sense to say (at least, one commonly hears) that people feel some of these familiar emotions toward God, toward other spiritual beings, toward what people take to be most real, or toward what they regard as a higher (if not the ultimate) order of things. For example, many people feel anger toward God. Many others, who relate to the sacred in a less personal way, sometimes feel angry about the way things are going, where “the way things are going” is thought to unfold according to a higher principle or power beyond the person’s grasp or control. Anger toward God or toward the hidden truth of things might be bound up with anger toward a particular object; for example, one’s anger might be evoked by and remain focused on some bad news about one’s health. If the intentional content of one’s anger extends, however, beyond thoughts about this or that piece of information to include something like accusing or pleading thoughts and questions about the deeper causes, reasons, or meanings of one’s diminished health—or one’s general vulnerability to disability and death—one’s anger is appropriately characterized as a religious emotion.

Second, many people with lively religious imaginations feel ordinary emotions such as anger, fear, and love in relation to particular, finite persons or events. As they feel these emotions, however, they wonder or raise questions about what is “really” going on with respect to this person or event; why these
things are happening to them or to another person; or what it all means relative to "the big picture," the ultimate point of their lives. For example, some people feel the emotion of love toward a loved one in such a way that the intentionality of this love extends, on occasion, to include thoughts or intuitions concerning the awesomeness of the beloved's life and the unfathomable depth of the beloved's reality as a person. The lover is drawn, in that love, out of himself or herself toward the other, but the lover also is drawn beyond the surface reality of the other. The lover is invited and perhaps compelled to look (as it were) behind the beloved's eyes; when the lover does so, the lover has the impression that he or she is approaching something surprisingly, profoundly real, in comparison to which much of what he or she encounters in everyday life pales in significance.

In a case like this, the lover's emotion is not well characterized (at least, not centrally) as "a sense of gratitude" toward God or even as love for God, which many moral theologians recognize to be another, standard religious emotion. The central intentional object of the emotion remains this particular person. Yet there are good reasons for characterizing such a love as a religious emotion because the beloved appears to the lover in such a way that the lover feels captivated by something more than ordinarily meets the eye—something truly amazing about the beloved that presents itself in the guise of the beloved but evidently cannot be contained by him or her. The lover who encounters this uncontainable something may go on to think that he or she has just received a glimpse of eternity, at which point a religious emotion like love for God may supervene and displace the love for the finite beloved. It is possible, however, to hold a beloved in one's attention and to encounter the beloved in his or her sacred depth without effectively losing the beloved to thoughts about the sacred depths of reality. In any case, emotions such as this are composed through the engagement of the religious imagination; they cannot be well described or distinguished from other, related emotions without reference to thoughts, intuitions, or images, however inchoate, concerning what is highest, or deepest, or of superior (if not supreme) power or goodness.

The domain of ordinary emotions appears to shrink as various forms of religious consciousness turn much of what might otherwise appear ordinary into manifestations of, windows into, or invitations or instructions from something more than the inattentive or unimaginative eye is prone to see. Nevertheless, this way of thinking about religious emotions allows some emotions to be characterized as ordinary or "not religious." Such emotions might include, for example, forms of object-oriented affectivity that arise within persons who lack an awareness that they are more than what they presently feel—persons who do not reflect on themselves as they feel and thus do not wonder about the significance, let alone the ultimate significance, of the relationship they have to the object of a given emotion. Nonreligious emotions also might include forms of affectivity
that arise within people who are not “awake” to the religious dimension of life and culture or those who lack religious receptivity and imagination—that is, persons who do not perceive, believe, or intuit that (or even wonder whether) there is a difference between the way things really are and the way they only appear to be. It is difficult (but not impossible) to imagine a person of able mind remaining in such a state for an adult lifetime, dead to his or her religious impulse, never pondering the point of his or her life or shuddering at the thought of death; it is easy, however, to imagine extended periods of distractedness, particularly if and while a person’s life seems to be going smoothly.

Nonreligious emotions also might include forms of affectivity that arise in people who have a religious consciousness but whose religiosity does not go “all the way down” (to adapt the phrase of John P. Reeder, Jr.)—people whose religious imagination does not consistently condition their perceptions and interpretations of things. There may be few people for whom every emotion arises as a religious emotion. I imagine, that is, that there are few people who bring a religious awareness and concern to every aspect of human experience, so that every time they experience an emotion they do so within the larger frame of this awareness and concern. We can anticipate, however, that there is little to prevent what seems to arise as an ordinary emotion from being transmuted into a religious emotion when and as the religious imagination is engaged.

The Religious Ethical Study of Emotion

Gustafson’s thoughts on piety and affectivity reveal that there are good reasons for scholars who are engaged in the academic study of religion to turn their attention to the inner lives of humans, to attend to and imagine what many people would characterize as experiences of emotion, and to look there for manifestations of the religious. To investigate the religious dimension of people’s emotional lives, we need a workable theory of the emotions. We need a theory that specifies the sorts of things that emotions are, relative to other mental states or forms of experience. We need to be able to specify the parts of which emotions are composed, so that emotions can be analyzed, where helpful, in terms of their related parts. We need a way of thinking about emotions that allows for identification of different emotions. And so on. There is a place for reflecting in an inclusive manner on “a broad range of affective responses . . . to the powers that bear down on us.” Gustafson would agree, however, that there also is a place for analyzing experiences that many people associate specifically with emotions.

To investigate the religious within the domain of human emotion, we also need a good working definition of the religious. Gustafson works primarily with religion in the form of traditional Christian piety, which accords with his
Theological and ethical purposes. He also acknowledges, however, the usefulness of a broad definition of religion that includes other forms of monotheistic faith, as well as polytheistic and nontheistic ways of being human in relation to what one takes to be "beyond human control." Gustafson’s scholarship reveals that there are good reasons for analyzing emotions with a broad conception of the religious in mind, particularly when many people appear to be "bored with or offended by traditional religious symbols and concepts." In addition, there are good reasons for learning how to specify this conception, as needed, in the direction of many different worldviews and paths. Using an expansive and flexible notion of the religious allows scholars of religious ethics to help a wide variety of people—including some people who might not think of themselves as religious—to think more deeply, subtly, clearly, and critically about aspects of their own and other people’s lives that might otherwise remain opaque.

Many people experience emotions that they do not fully understand, in relation to which they feel driven or oppressed. Some of the emotions that are in need of compassionate ethical scrutiny are religious in a familiar sense. For example, a person might feel a religious emotion of guilt because he has committed an act that he was taught as a child to consider a sin. He may no longer consider this act a sin, and he may think that he therefore has nothing to feel guilty about; however, he has not really investigated and tried to sort through the enormous number of competing beliefs about God and sin that he has incorporated (without thinking much about it) into his habitual way of interpreting reality. Hence, he continues to feel guilt. This person also might get angry with himself for feeling guilt, but his anger is no more transparent to him than his guilt. This tangle of self-lacerating emotion inserts itself ineluctably into the middle of his most important relationships.

Other emotions are religious in a less obvious sense. Another person might feel guilt when she finds out that she has passed a devastating genetic mutation to her fetus. She did not do so intentionally or through culpable ignorance or negligence, but she feels guilt nonetheless. As the news sinks in and she begins to feel crushed, she wonders; she pleads with the universe, “Why is this happening to me?” Even if she was not raised in a traditionally religious family and she does not appear to harbor specific beliefs about the sins of the fathers being visited on subsequent generations, about karma, about offended ancestors or spirits, or about original sin, she may begin to wonder if she did something horrible to bring about such a dreaded fate, and she may begin to pore over her past actions, looking for a cause—assuming that there has to be a cause or set of causes sufficient to explain this event (because there has to be some sort of moral order to the universe). Such a person is likely, without moral guidance, to fall into a self-destructive attitude that diminishes her ability to parent her disabled child. It is hard to imagine how a growing self-understanding and self-acceptance could be realized apart from an effort on the part of such a person to identify
and scrutinize her background beliefs, implicit assumptions, or inchoate questions concerning the ultimate causes of things or the deeper meaning and significance of things.

Gustafson’s work focuses valuably on some affections that are common to traditional Christian piety. His work also leads us to appreciate that “ordinary human affectivities evoked by ordinary human events [can] be at the same time religious affectivities.” It is important for scholars of religious ethics to study the religious meanings that attach to particular emotions. Greater understanding of the emotions is needed by those who belong to organized religions, which commonly make it their business to cultivate habits of emotion that have enormous implications, positive or negative, for personal and social life. Greater understanding also is needed by people who have little to do with organized religion but have a religious dimension to their lives inasmuch as they are prone to wonder and to care—in whatever terms are available to them or make sense to them—about what is really going on in their lives and in the world around them, about why certain things “have to” happen as they do, and about what it all means.

The challenge for religious ethics is to use concepts that capture at least some of what a significant number of people would be likely to say, on reflection, about what they feel when they are moved or stirred emotionally. The challenge also is to use concepts that allow people to say more about their emotions than they might otherwise say. Indeed, the challenge is to allow people to feel more or differently than they might otherwise feel—by learning to encounter emotion-evoking features of reality with greater curiosity, creativity, and flexibility. Religious ethics can provide strategies for increasing one’s receptivity to the truth of things—to what is most real and of greatest importance. It can provide conceptual tools that allow people to examine their religious beliefs and assumptions critically—partly with an eye toward reforming some of the emotions, and the habits of emotion, that embody these assumptions.

**Nussbaum on Emotion**

Given the impact that religious ideas and images evidently have on people’s interior lives, and given the power that emotions can have to direct and sometimes fuel people’s actions, Gustafson’s inquiry into religion and morality, with its focus on the affective dimension of the moral life, makes important contributions to the religious ethical study of emotion. Clearly also, there is more ground to cover—more must be done to elucidate the ways in which the religious can enter into the composition of emotional states.

At this point, turning to Martha Nussbaum’s philosophical account of the emotions becomes especially fruitful for religious ethics. Nussbaum analyzes
the structure of emotion as such, which allows her to distinguish emotions from other sorts of mental phenomena and to distinguish certain emotions from other, related emotions by identifying subtle differences in their constituent parts. Moreover, Nussbaum’s account privileges the cognitive dimension of emotion in a way that allows close attention to be paid to thoughts and images—many of which turn out, on a broad conception of the religious, to be religious. The religious has many different dimensions, but the cognitive is one of them. I have treated Nussbaum’s theory of the emotions in considerable detail elsewhere.\(^40\) In what follows, I draw on this theory in a limited way to extend what Gustafson’s work has allowed us to say about what makes a given emotion religious and to consider why it matters morally that people reflect on the religious dimension of some of their own and other people’s emotions.

Since the publication of _Can Ethics Be Christian?_ and _Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective_, many accounts of emotion have been proposed by scholars of philosophy, philosophical psychology, moral psychology, and ethics (as well as by scientists who study the brain). Some of these accounts have sought to make manifest the contributions that well-ordered emotions can make to the exercise of moral agency and to human flourishing. Many of these accounts, however, have focused on the logically prior question of what emotions are or how they ought to be defined so that we know what we are talking about when we refer to them. Most scholars who study the emotions philosophically agree that some form of cognition plays a central role in the constitution of an emotional state.\(^41\) More specifically, many agree that emotions are not only caused psychologically or mentally by thoughts; they also are (at least partly) composed of thoughts. They are composed of thoughts about some object, person, event, or situation—commonly thoughts about what has happened, is happening, or is likely to happen; about how that event matters to the self or to others who matter to the self; and about how much that event matters relative to other things that also matter.\(^42\)

According to Nussbaum, emotions are composed not only partly but entirely of thoughts. As she uses the term, “thought” includes a wide range of embodied mental activities.\(^43\) It includes, for example, being aware of a sense-perception, entertaining an appearance, assenting to an appearance as the way things really are, pondering one’s goals and projects, and assessing what is happening with a particular object that bears on one’s goals and projects.\(^44\) “Thought” includes activities such as picturing something in the imagination and resonating with formal musical structures that embody “ideas” of urgent need.\(^45\) According to _Upheavals of Thought_, emotions are thoughts about “how things are with respect to the external (i.e., uncontrolled) items that we view as salient for our well-being.”\(^46\) Emotions are “judgments in which the mind of the judge is projected unstably outward,” like a “geological upheaval,” into a world that is full of value and attachment.\(^47\)
Typically, on this account, a given emotion embodies a complex set of related thoughts. Some of the thoughts that make up emotions are conscious; some are less than fully conscious or are unconscious, becoming evident to the imagination only as one searches for hidden psychological causes for otherwise unaccountable mental phenomena and behavior. Some emotion-thoughts are general: They refer to general features or abstract-able properties of persons, situations, or events. Other emotion-thoughts are more concrete: They refer in imaginative and perceptive detail to what is specific to a person or situation. Some emotion-thoughts, whether general or concrete, are background thoughts that “persist through situations of numerous kinds”; they can be characterized as “ongoing,” even if the person who has them is not always aware of having them (just as a person who has the background belief that he or she will die someday is not always thinking about death). Some emotion-thoughts are situational. They arise only in the context of a particular situation, and they tend to change as certain features of the situation change or as a person’s way of construing the situation changes. All of these distinctions suggest differences of degree, rather than sharp divisions of kinds.

On Nussbaum’s account, all emotions include some form of the thought that one’s own well-being and the well-being of others to whom one is attached are important. All emotions also include some form of the thought that “the well-being of this thing or person is not fully under one’s own control.” Thus, all emotions include something like the tumultuous thought that one is vulnerable to loss and to the pain of loss because one has staked one’s happiness on external goods (especially persons) whose life and flourishing—and whose contribution to one’s own flourishing—ultimately cannot be secured. For Nussbaum, emotions are “acknowledgments of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency.” Ordinarily, such thoughts about value and vulnerability remain in the background of one’s awareness. They come to the fore only when one meets with an event in the world or in one’s imagination that gives rise to the thought that a valued object is at issue in some way. (For example, an object might appear to be close at hand, far away, gone forever, threatened, or itself a threat.) As one conceives such an object, many background thoughts about value and vulnerability shift to the forefront of one’s attention, joining thoughts that are specific to the situation, and all of these thoughts together thrust themselves toward the object—at which point, Nussbaum says, one feels an emotion.

For example, Nussbaum draws on her own experience of grief to argue that grief over the death of a beloved parent is composed of a dense web of thoughts, including thoughts about who the person was and how important that person has been to one’s life. Grief includes the thought that the person is dead and thus is forever cut off from oneself. Grief includes picturing, in imagination, and thus remembering the person prior to his or her death. It includes thoughts about how incomplete one’s life will be without this person, as well as
thoughts about how vulnerable one is to additional loss because one has allowed one's happiness to hinge on other loved ones as well. Grief includes thoughts about one's own mortality. Some grief-composing thoughts are unconscious in that they can be accessed only through honest and courageous self-examination, usually with the help of others. Some are better construed as conscious but background thoughts in that they come to mind relatively easily at the occurrence of certain events. Some are general: They are about life, death, love, and parents. Some are concrete and situational: They are about this person, in all of his or her relevant detail.

The Religious Dimension of Emotion Revisited

Although I ultimately want to work with a Thomistic conception of emotion as intentional appetite or desire, rather than cognition only, Nussbaum's focus on the rich intentional content of emotion is tremendously valuable. It allows her to make manifest the large number and kinds of cognitions—general and concrete, linguistic and nonlinguistic, entertained on different levels of consciousness—that commonly enter into the composition of an emotional state. In this view, certain thoughts (including the thought that the way things look is the way things really are) do not simply cause or accompany an experience of emotion; they are the experience of emotion. Accordingly, as certain emotion-thoughts give rise to additional thoughts, and some of the latter call forth powerful visual images that trigger memories, causing a shift in one's interpretation of what is happening, and so on, a person's experience of an occurrent emotion is likely to change. A given emotion might mutate into what feels like another emotion if there is a significant enough change in the way the central object is viewed. The emotion might simply dissipate. Or it might change in more subtle ways, taking on a somewhat different felt quality because of the way that a few new thoughts alter the way in which the central object appears.

Nussbaum's analysis shows that emotions such as fear, anger, love, or grief include thoughts about what is happening in one's life and how much it matters. More than this, however, her analysis suggests that some of these emotions also include (what for many people are probably rather incipient and inarticulate) beliefs, assumptions, intuitions, or questions about the fundamental order of things, about what is really going on in the universe, about whether anyone has any control over how things unfold, about whether humans are free in any significant sense, about how important certain things really are, about the ultimate impact of one's choices, and so on. Thoughts such as these are in the background of many emotional states, and these thoughts are likely to have an impact on how a person feels various emotions, whether the thoughts are conscious or not, whether the person is explicitly aware of them or not. Particularly
when such thoughts are part of one's awareness as a given emotion is aroused—when religious curiosity, wonder, or concern becomes part of the conceptual wherewithal with which one interprets and assesses what is happening with respect to a valued object—the impact on how one feels is likely to be significant. This impact is worth investigating.

*Upheavals of Thought* opens the door to this sort of inquiry with a discussion of the socially conditioned nature of much human emotion. Nussbaum notes that a person’s emotional dispositions can be affected by his or her metaphysical, religious, and cosmological beliefs. The fear of death, for example—which appears to be very common across cultures—nevertheless is “powerfully shaped by what one thinks death is, and whether one believes there is an afterlife.” Experiences of grief, too, are affected by religious beliefs. “Although people who have a confident belief in an afterlife still grieve for the deaths of loved ones, they usually grieve differently, and their grief is linked to hope.” The door to religious inquiry opens further when it becomes evident through Nussbaum’s analysis that significant differences in people's emotional lives are present not only across cultures but also within cultures that include different conceptions, intuitions, and images concerning what is ultimately real and really important for human life. Much of the latter half of *Upheavals of Thought* is an inquiry into the truth about erotic love as a constituent of human flourishing; this inquiry raises serious questions about the highest good for humans and the deepest meanings of inevitable loss.

Nussbaum does not discuss the idea of religious emotion per se, nor does she seek to distinguish religious from nonreligious emotions. What she does is define emotions as multi-layered networks of thought and evaluative judgment; she also offers examples of such networks that include or imply what many scholars of religion would regard as religious elements, especially religious thoughts. I have considered some ways that a person who wonders about the truth of life might experience anger, love, and guilt, such that his or her attention lights on a particular person or event, but also extends beyond it, to the heart of it, or around it, toward a horizon of meaning against which the person or event takes on more significance. Nussbaum’s account allows us to say with greater clarity that a religious consciousness—even an initial religious curiosity—can condition a person’s emotions by contributing to the thought-networks that (at least partly) compose these emotions. I return briefly to the case of anger.

A given episode of anger might be composed of many thoughts (in Nussbaum’s broad sense) that are arguably religious. Depending on the cultural context and the particulars of the situation, a person’s anger might include, for example, vague impressions concerning the substantial nature of the self and the importance that other people's respect has to the self’s efforts to define itself,
affirm itself, and secure itself against loss. (These impressions might "feel" like the impulse to defend the self.) This same person's anger might also include budding but hardly articulate questions, however, about whether the self is, indeed, as solid as it seems to be—and whether it really is in need of the defensiveness toward which it is prone. This person's anger might include a growing concern that the struggle to defend the dignity of the self might (ironically) reflect a failure of the self to recognize its true nature. At issue within the heart of anger is nothing less than the ultimate nature of reality.66

Again, a person of religious curiosity wonders once in a while about the ultimate meaning of his or her relationships. He or she might wonder specifically about the value that emotions such as anger have to these relationships. On one hand, anger seems to provide important information by registering (in a bodily-resonant way that is difficult to ignore) that something is wrong in a particular relationship. On the other hand, anger could register distorted perceptions or judgments about what is really important. The anger of a person who periodically wonders about such things might be composed, in a given case, of a desire to be happy, along with the belief that to be happy one has to secure the respect of certain people, combined with the impression that someone important just treated one as if one were of no account—and the person did so knowingly and on purpose. Yet this anger also might include the suspicion that allowing one's happiness to hang on other people's regard makes one a slave to their changeable opinions, which can only have a destabilizing effect on one's sense of well-being. This anger might include the thought that the offending person must not be given the power to determine the quality of one's consciousness. At issue within the anger of someone who wonders about what is "really" going on in his or her anger is the ultimate meaning and ground of human happiness.67

Examples such as this may give the impression of over-intellectualizing emotion, especially if one focuses on the cognitive dimension of emotion. It might be more common for a Westerner with some religious curiosity to experience anger that is partly composed of thoughts such as, "How dare you talk to me that way! I deserve better than that!" combined with the thought, "I'm going to make you show me the respect I deserve," combined with the creeping suspicion that "maybe he really doesn't care about me; maybe the only thing my anger proves is how much power he has over my state of mind; I'm such a fool." The point is the same: Such thoughts can be analyzed philosophically to uncover some of the metaphysical and moral assumptions and concerns on which they are based, all of which are open to investigation. It is not necessary that these assumptions and concerns be identified by the angry person for them to make a compositional difference to his or her anger. I am most interested, however, in thinking about the difference it is likely to make when a person is at
least somewhat aware that there is more going on in the angry moment than meets the eye of someone who lacks religious awareness and imagination.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This inquiry is intended primarily to deepen understanding and appreciation of the ways in which the religious can be perceived or imagined within human life and culture. My investigation suggests that there are good reasons for bringing a broad conception of the religious to the analysis of the moral life and the study of emotion, in particular. Bringing the study of religion to the study of emotion allows us to identify some of the ways that general assumptions or intuitions about the nature of reality, the ultimate order of things, the point of human life, and other matters of profound human concern can affect not only the way the world appears to us but how it "feels" to us. This inquiry suggests that the religious imagination is likely to condition not only the emotions that humans have "about God" but also their seemingly ordinary emotions—that is, the ways they feel about themselves and each other and the important events of their lives.

Another reason for bringing the idea of the religious and methods for the academic study of religion to the study of human emotion is that it begins to reveal how difficult it is—and why it is so difficult—to determine how one ought to feel. It is difficult because one cannot make a good decision about how to feel about people and events in one's life (episodically or as a matter of cultivated habit) until one determines, at least to one's own satisfaction, what is really going on—and what is really at stake. Yet many people, if they think about it, will admit that they are unsure about the truth of reality. Many are unsure, for example, about whether there is a final guarantor of justice, so that it is morally responsible for humans to let God or the universe take care of making things right—which means that many people are unsure about what to do with some of their righteous anger. This wondering and worrying, I maintain, is likely to affect the composition of their anger, in ways that are worth analyzing. Similarly, many people are unsure about what will happen to them when they die and about whether and in what form they will meet up with their dead loved ones—which makes them unsure, on a certain level, about what to do with some of their fear and grief, as well as their love for other people in their lives who also could die at any time. Again, this wondering and worrying must affect, to some degree, the intentional content of their fear, grief, and love. This effect is likely to make a difference in how these emotions are experienced. Hence, the ordinary emotions of people—particularly people with religious imaginations—are more interesting than most studies suggest.

Gustafson says that religion is partly a matter of the affections. Analysis of the idea of religious affection reveals that many affections or emotions, in turn,
are partly a matter of religion. Nussbaum’s work helps us see that many of our common emotions are partly composed of religious beliefs, assumptions, intuitions, wonder, and concern. Some of these “thoughts” might function primarily as background beliefs, until they are evoked by a situation that demands more than a surface interpretation and assessment. Some of them might be at work in composing emotion-laden meanings in ways that are barely evident to consciousness. If an important task of religious ethics is to promote self-understanding and the understanding of others with whom we share this planet, we would do well to inquire further into the religious dimension of our humanity. The study of emotion is one avenue into this dimension.

Notes

I am grateful to colleagues and students who commented on earlier versions of this essay, especially to an astute, anonymous referee.

2. Ibid., 38–39, 49, 65.
3. Ibid., 39; see also 63.
4. Ibid., 43, 92.
5. Ibid., 92.
6. Ibid., 43.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 199.
14. Ibid., 43.
15. Ibid., 120. Following Julian Hartt, Gustafson is especially interested in reflecting the unity of experience under the impact of theology, which he defines as “a way of construing the world” that has both “affective religious elements and more cognitive or intellective elements” (158).
16. Ibid., 120; see also 129.
19. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 195.
24. Ibid., 110–12.
30. Ibid.; see also 227.
32. I prefer “emotion” to “affection” partly because, at present, “affection” seems to apply most fittingly to “positive” emotions, and specifically to expressions of love. Reference to the “affection” of hatred, for example, is likely to strike many readers as awkward, if not oxymoronic.
34. Gustafson discusses broadly affective responses to complex objects such as nature, history, and culture and the sense in which these responses can be “religiously significant.” See *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, chap. 5, especially 229.
35. John P. Reeder Jr., “Why Are We So Confused about Religion?” (James C. Spalding Memorial Lecture, Department of Religious Studies, University of Iowa, 2002). See also Reeder, “What Is a Religious Ethic?” 171–73. Reeder argues in the Spalding lecture that “our assumptions about what is supremely important and fundamentally real go ‘all the way down,’” in the sense that they “enter into the substance of our moral views” (19). I agree. I argue in this essay that they also enter the substance of at least some of our emotional states. My specific point here, however, is that people do not always or consistently experience emotions in a manner that is framed by an awareness of these assumptions or the questions and concerns that commonly accompany them.
37. Ibid., 135; see also 308.
38. Ibid., 135.
39. Ibid., 205.
41. Accordingly, the academic-cultural context for this inquiry into religion and emotion differs from that identified by Paul Lauritzen in “Emotion and Religious Ethics,” in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16, no. 2 (fall 1988): 307–324. Lauritzen argues against “the traditional view” of emotions, as epitomized by William James, according to which emotions are “irrational and animal-like” and “little more than stomach aches and fatigue” (307). My own study of emotion has focused on different voices in the western philosophical and religious tradition, especially Aristotle and other ancient philosophers, as well as Thomas Aquinas—none of whom hold such a view.
42. Consider, for example, the work of Robert Roberts, Robert Solomon, Ronald de Sousa, Jerome Neu, Richard Sorabji, John Cooper, and Amélie Rorty, as well as Martha Nussbaum.

43. For a discussion of Nussbaum on the relationship between thought and other sorts of things such as feelings, desire, and appetites, see Cates, “Conceiving Emotion.”


45. Ibid., 65, 272.
46. Ibid., 4.
47. Ibid., 1–2.
48. Ibid., 71–72.
49. Ibid., 68.
50. Ibid., 65.
51. Ibid., 69–70.
52. Ibid., 69.
53. Ibid., 52–55.
54. Ibid., 74.
55. Ibid., 43.
56. Ibid., 22.
57. Ibid., 44–45.
58. Ibid., 39.
59. Ibid., 65.
60. Ibid., 70–71, 75–76.
61. Ibid., 38.
62. Ibid., 152.
63. Ibid., 153.
64. Ibid.

65. For a different analysis of anger that makes a similar point, see Lauritzen, “Emotions and Religious Ethics,” 318–21.

66. I have in mind, for example, the way in which a serious consideration of certain Buddhist views of reality, including views of the self, can alter a person’s ways of experiencing anger. See The Dalai Lama, *Healing Anger: The Power of Patience from a Buddhist Perspective*, trans. Geshe Thupten Jinpa (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1997).
