JLG's Personal Philosophy on Religion and Agency (final draft: 6-15-26)

Part I: Religion

- Why religion emerged.
- Human need for explanation and meaning.
- Littlefair quote.
- Personal belief versus institutional belief.

It is appropriate to clearly articulate my personal philosophy on religion and its impact on agency.

Fundamentally, I believe that all religions are a **human construct**, created by mankind for several purposes.

First, religion attempts to **explain the mysteries and unknown phenomena** of life, the world, and the universe. Throughout history, humans have sought ways to understand events and forces that seemed beyond their comprehension. Religion provided stories, beliefs, and systems that helped people interpret those mysteries.

Second, religion developed as a means to **incur the favor or avoid the wrath of a higher power**. In many traditions, people believed that certain behaviors, rituals, or forms of worship could influence divine forces that governed fate, fortune, natural events and even life itself.

Over time, these systems evolved into organized religions with established doctrines, rules, and authorities.

However, while religion may originate as a collective human effort to understand existence, **belief itself must ultimately become personal**.

Faith should inform Agency, not replace it.

One of the most influential statements I ever heard on this subject came from my minister, Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair, (Minister of the Fountain Street Baptist Church, Grand Rapids, MI., who said:

"Whatever your god is or choose to believe in, make him YOURS."

That statement shifted my thinking. Instead of viewing God as an external force controlling my life, I began to see that the quality and direction of my life were

shaped primarily by the decisions I make. While many events remain outside my control, my responses to them are largely within my power.

Part II: Agency

- Definition of agency.
- Personal responsibility.
- Confirmation bias.
- Risk and decision-making.
- Faith informing agency rather than replacing it.

To have Agency means: ultimately accepting personal responsibility for our choices of action, our conduct, and the direction of our lives. Religion may offer guidance, moral frameworks, or inspiration, but it should never eliminate the individual's responsibility to think, evaluate, and choose their own path.

It reinforced the idea that faith should not simply be inherited or accepted without reflection. Instead, belief should be **examined, understood, and consciously adopted by the individual**.

In that sense, religion becomes less about institutional doctrine and more about **personal responsibility for one's beliefs and actions**.

This perspective connects directly to an understanding of **Agency**.

In other words, faith should **inform agency, not replace it**.

A person must decide what values they hold, what principles they will live by, and what meaning they will give to their own life.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty of choosing Agency is the presence and influence of risk. Facing the unknown (lacking previous experience or the influence of a trusted source) raises the specter of a harmful outcome. Yet, perhaps with a sense or belief in something fun, rewarding, or safe, the caution around risk disappears.

Thus, those who take risks that are rewarding will be inclined to continue doing so, perhaps as long as the outcomes are at least more favorable than the failures. Others may take a risk to act, the experience of which is so damaging, threatening, or catastrophic that avoidance of future risks prevails.

Agency is exercised most clearly when uncertainty exists. If outcomes were guaranteed, choice would require little courage. The willingness to act despite uncertainty is one of the defining characteristics of agency.

Yet exercising agency is not as simple as making choices. Human beings are subject to psychological tendencies that can distort judgment. One of the most influential of these is **Confirmation Bias**. (The part of us that automatically looks to find ideas, beliefs, and opinions that we agree with and support our own.)

Faith or spiritual understanding should be consciously examined and personally adopted.

- **Independent thinking is essential.**
  One should never surrender the responsibility to question, reflect, and evaluate ideas—including religious ideas.
- **Religion can offer guidance but should not override personal agency.**
  Institutions may provide wisdom and tradition, but the individual must still decide how to live.
- **Meaning in life is something each person must define.**
  Purpose and values are not given automatically—they are discovered and chosen through reflection and experience.

Essentially, I am asserting:

- Agency requires action.
- Action involves uncertainty.
- Uncertainty creates risk.
- Past outcomes influence future willingness to act.

Thus, Agency is exercised most clearly when uncertainty exists. If outcomes were guaranteed, choice would require little courage. The willingness to act despite uncertainty is one of the defining characteristics of agency.

Part III: Legacy

- Family story.
- Bearcamp River ceremony.
- Children and grandchildren.

- Why these reflections are being written.

Certain moments in life carry deep personal meaning and remain powerful symbols of family and continuity.

One such moment for me involved a quiet ceremony on Bearcamp Pond in Sandwich, N.H.

My children and I were together in a canoe on two separate, beautiful days when we distributed the ashes into the water of my mother, and, years later, my wife. They were simple and brief ceremonies, and deeply meaningful. The setting in nature and the presence of family made it a moment of reflection, remembrance, and connection,

It represented not only a farewell but also a profound appreciation for these two extraordinary women, their contribution to our lives, and a continuation of the bonds between generations.

My children are:

- **Cynthia M. Greenawalt**
- **Jon Jr.**

My grandchildren are the two children of Jon and Jennifer Greenawalt:

- **Allegra Greenawalt**
- **Julian Greenawalt**

They represent the continuation of the family story and the hope that the ideas, values, and experiences of one generation can offer something meaningful to the next.

Purpose of These Reflections

These reflections are written not as instructions or doctrines, but as a way to share the thoughts and principles that shaped my life.

If they provide guidance, encouragement, or simply a better understanding of how I thought about the world, then they will have served their purpose.

Ultimately, each person—including my children and grandchildren—must develop their **own beliefs, their own principles, and their own sense of purpose they find compelling and worthwhile**.

And if there is one lesson that stands above the rest, it may be this:

Think for yourself, stay curious, question validity, and take responsibility for all the outcomes in your life. Make your beliefs truly your own.