

UNDERSTANDING
RELIGION

S.A. Grave



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Phone: (+61 8) 9315 9617
Fax: (+61 8) 9315 9618
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S.A.G.

Publisher's Note

The production of a posthumous work carries more than the usual responsibilities—especially when, as in this case, the author was both friend and mentor.

When Selwyn Grave died in Oamaru, New Zealand, in August 2002, he was approximately one-third of the way through the final proofs. Fortunately, Selwyn was blessed with good friends, two of whom—Thomas Heyes and George Middleton—continued the difficult proofing process. After much conferring, taking great care to ensure that Selwyn's essential thoughts and arguments remained unchanged, we arrived at his final text. I am extremely grateful for the time they invested and for their attention to detail.

On the other side of the Tasman, I was similarly fortunate to have another group of friends—Ted Watt, Bob Ewin and Alan Tapper—who, as former colleagues or students of Selwyn's, not only gave me much encouragement but made many useful suggestions about the text. My good friend and former colleague, Tony Rutherford, also agreed to act as 'third umpire' upon some particularly thorny matters of punctuation.

Finally, I should express my thanks to Selwyn's widow, Dorothy. Her early insistence that the book must proceed, together with the timely provision of resources from his estate, have ensured that Selwyn's final work will find its way into the world.

My sincere thanks to everyone who helped bring this about.

Chris Ulyatt

Introductory Remarks

The purpose of this book is to further an understanding of religion—not of the kind that might come from psychological or sociological enquiry—but an understanding from the inside, so to speak, of the subject-matter of such explanatory enquiries. An understanding of the kind possessed by someone who, firmly believing in a religion, has thought about the nature of religion. The book aims at increasing this kind of understanding where it already exists, and in its absence, at bringing about some degree of it without presupposing in a reader any religious belief at all.

Involved in an understanding of religion of the kind envisaged, is the realization that, as this book will try to make evident, religion is unlike anything else in human life. Not in every respect of course, but fundamentally. No words could more strikingly express the difference between religion and everything else in human life than those used by Émile Durkheim, one of the great names in the sociology of religion, in his division of human concerns into the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ (the secular). The ‘heterogeneity’ between them is ‘absolute’, he says.¹ (Applied to the difference between the sacred and the secular in Durkheim’s account of the origin of the sacred, the words, as will be seen later on, are altogether inappropriate.)

In view of the singularity of religion, one looks, as a matter of course, at institutions which are certainly religions, in order to understand it. What would determine whether or not an institution was certainly a religion? If the question arises in relation to an actual institution because of the peculiarity of some of its features, the answer is: a general consensus of competently based judgement. One would not know what to make of a question which asked whether Christianity, say, or Hinduism, was a religion.

An attempt is made in this book to identify the conception of religion implicit in religions, specifically in those which are great on

the world-scene. Showing up as most fundamentally constitutive of a religion is a concern either with divinity or with a state of existence after death, typically with both—concerns which are well on the way to making religion unlike any other concern. We shall limit ourselves to identifying the conception of religion put forward as implicit in religions; we shall not be producing a formulation of it. An impediment is that while some elements of the conception become quickly evident, some remain problematic, and some may not have been discerned at all. It is evident when religions are looked at in order to see what constitutes them as such, that having a concern with divinity, or with a state of existence beyond death, is essential to being a religion. The question (discussed in the first chapter) is whether *both* concerns are essential. Having a category of the sacred is manifestly an essential constituent of a religion, but is having a moral teaching essential?

Identification of the conception of religion implicit in religions does not by itself effect an understanding of religion as if from within. An account of this conception, however, with that as one of its aims would have made a poor choice of material, from its scriptural and other sources, if it failed altogether to convey a *sense* of what religion is. And to have a sense of what religion is, is to have some understanding of it as if from within.

The idea of religious experience is obviously a central idea in thinking about religion. Two remarkable kinds of religious experience are discussed, mystical experience and numinous experience. As a preliminary indication of the nature of numinous experience, among its elements are dread, mystery, and fascination. Descriptions of numinous experience can convey a strong sense of what religion is. It might be supposed that descriptions of mystical experience could also do this. But there is no parallel: in contrast with a numinous experience, the *quality* of a mystic's experience—its experiential character, what having it is like—is incommunicable.

Except, incidentally, in connection with the issue as to the objectivity of religious experience, nothing is said about 'ordinary' religious

experience, about feelings, states of mind, attitudes such as awe, hope, trust, peace, guilt, dread, desolation, yearning—ordinary by contrast with mystical and numinous experience which require theoretical discussion, and ordinary as staple religious experience. Talk about ordinary religious experience could not effect a realization of its character. To obtain this realization, and, more generally, a feeling-toned understanding of religion, one has to turn to the prayers of a religion and passages of its scriptures, to devotional writing, religious poetry, autobiography.

Religious experience occurs in the context of religious belief. (Exceptionally, a religious experience may modify—or even create—a religious belief.) In, or connected with, the cluster of beliefs of a great religion are momentous themes. Religion has its life in religions, and engaging in a consideration of such themes can bring about an internal understanding of religion deeper and wider than a mere sense of what it is.

The themes chosen for consideration in order to serve this purpose, and as especially interesting in themselves, are: the idea of God; the problem posed for belief in God by the existence of evil (suffering and moral badness); the cause of suffering; the termination of suffering; the human self and the divine Self; beatitude beyond death. The first two are drawn from the thought of the theistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the third mainly from Buddhist thought; the fourth from Buddhist thought; the fifth from Hindu thought; the sixth from Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian thought.

There are several reasons for the prominence given to Buddhist themes. One is an anomaly (discussed in the first chapter) which stands out when early Buddhism is looked at alongside other religions, an anomaly which is very important for an attempt to determine features essential to any institution which is a religion. In widened untypicality as a religion, Buddhism rejects any notion of a self to which one's experiences and actions belong. A further reason for the prominence of Buddhist themes is the uniqueness of Buddhist thought about suffering.

Throughout the book some notice is taken of contrasts and convergences among the religions, more or less extensively brought into view in the consideration of the various themes. A brief account of these religions would have been useless and a distraction from what the book aims at doing. The intention has been to present a self-contained exposition of these themes. At the end of the book, suggestions are listed for reading about the religions to which reference has been made.

Only once does the book have an aim additional to promoting an understanding of religion and, to that end, an understanding of some of the beliefs of several religions. The question whether the existence of evil is a good objection to the existence of God (discussed in Chapter 4) raises an issue not only of understanding but also one of appraisal: namely, whether the answer that is set out to this problem, works. To deal with the idea of God and not to discuss a problem-of-evil issue, would be a dereliction. For many see the undeniable existence of evil as a fatal objection to the very conception of God by rendering incoherent the idea of God as both all-powerful and perfectly good, which God is held to be in a fully-developed theism.

From the unreal lead me to the real!
From darkness lead me to the light!
From death lead me to immortality!

There is an unborn, a not-become, a not-made,
a not-compounded ... if that unborn, not-become,
not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be
apparent no escape from this that here is born,
become, made, compounded.

O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee:
my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee
in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is ...

In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word was
God ... All things were made by Him ... and the Word
was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld
His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the
Father, full of grace and truth.

He is the all-knowing Creator. When he decrees a
thing He need only say: 'Be,' and it is.

Chapter 1: The Conception of Religion Implicit in Religions

The first of the foregoing quotations is from a Hindu text, the second from a Buddhist text, the third from Hebrew Scripture/the Christian Old Testament, the fourth from the New Testament, the fifth from the Koran.

No definition of religion could do what these utterances do. Recognizable straightaway as religious, they convey a sense of what religion is and a sense of it as being unlike everything else. They are paradigms of religious utterance, quintessential examples of it. With them in mind as pointers towards what is to be looked for, we shall try to identify features of any institution which is certainly a religion.

Sometimes it can be asked of a complex of beliefs, practices, and attitudes whether it is a religion. It would be absurd to ask this question about Christianity, say, or Hinduism. Suppose it appropriately asked about an institution, what would have to be done to obtain an answer? A comparison would have to be made between features of the institution in question and those of institutions which are indisputably religions.

The most notable instance in which this comparison was once required relates to the doubt as to whether early Buddhism was a religion. It was once quite often denied to be a religion, because it was 'atheistic'. (Theravada Buddhism, which claims identity with early Buddhism, is not the only Far-Eastern religion to which this term is applicable.) Typically, in a religion there is a belief in a divine being or beings. But no such belief is significant to early Buddhism (there may be gods but they are of no account). Early Buddhism, however, had a profoundly religious theme in its doctrine of a state of existence to be achieved beyond death—attainable even in this life and enduring beyond death. And it had features not likely to be found outside

a religion, its monks, for instance, and features typically found in religions. On reflection, a religion it certainly was. (Something might quite justifiably be decided to be a religion on balance, and there is nothing wrong with the notion of a border line religion.)

To be attempted now, is a determination of some of the features characterizing any institution which is a religion, judged by the standard of what is found in institutions which are undoubtedly religions. Only a complex of beliefs, practices, and attitudes possessing these features counts for us as a religion.

1. *Transcendental Concern*

Looking for these features, we come upon a striking difference between two religions. To the Jewish religion, Judaism, the other great theistic religions, Christianity and Islam, owe the fundamentals of their conception of God. They both acknowledge as a revelatory utterance the 'Hear, O Israel' (the Shema, as it is called) which begins 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord'. (Deuteronomy 6.4) Judaism's belief in God was highly developed before it had a belief in a life after death. In the belief of early Judaism, death was the end of anything that could be thought of as life:

Shall thy loving kindness be declared in the grave? Or thy
faithfulness in destruction? Shall thy wonders be known in the
dark? And thy righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?

[Psalm 88. 11–12]

Temporal blessings rewarded obedience to God's laws (though reward was not all that mattered; God was also loved for Himself, as the Psalmist's words show).

By contrast with early Judaism, Buddhism had no God, but directed aspiration toward a supremely desirable deathless state: Nirvana. Typically in religions, there is a belief in God (or gods) and a belief in life after death. In the later development of Judaism, belief in a life after death appears, replacing the notion that a shadowy relic of oneself was all there would be. To the historical Buddha, and to

Theravada Buddhism, whose scriptures are the earliest Buddhist scriptures, gods were of no account, but in developments of Buddhism the Buddha is a divine being.

A characteristic which an institution must have if it is to be regarded as a religion, judged by the standard being worked with, can now be pointed to. This characteristic is a *transcendental concern*, 'transcendental' having the first of the meanings assigned to the word in the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*: 'pertaining to ... the divine as opposed to the natural'—'divine' construed broadly enough to include a deathless state of existence, such as Nirvana. A transcendental concern is, then, specifically, a concern with God (or divine beings), or with a state of existence beyond death, or, as is typical in religions, with both. Each of the quotations placed at the head of this chapter encapsulates one or other of the alternative components of transcendental concern.

It is disconcerting that what one takes to be the most fundamental constituent of a religion should show up as alternatively-structured: concern either with divinity or with a state of existence beyond death—one or the other—being sufficient for transcendental concern to be present. The price, however, for refusing to have transcendental concern alternatively-structured is intolerably high. When a distinction is drawn between institutions which are, and those which are not, indubitably religions: either Theravada Buddhism lacking belief in a divinity, or early Judaism lacking belief in a life after death, will have to be regarded as doubtfully a religion.

Transcendental concern is not just a matter of *belief* in a transcendental reality. Involved are attitudes of commitment and devotion. And involved in these attitudes are feelings, for example, of yearning for the transcendental. Utterances such as those assembled at the beginning of this chapter, or the poetry of religious devotion or yearning, are needed to effect a realization of what is covered by the abstractness of the words 'concern' and 'transcendental'.

In one of these utterances the transcendental is spoken of as the real: 'From the unreal lead me to the real'. What we take to be real—the world we experience when we are awake by contrast with a

dream—masks reality from us, passes itself off as reality, is the thought behind these words. There is a strong tendency in Hindu and Buddhist thought to see the world of ordinary experience in this way. In other great religions, the transcendental is seen as the real, but not in contrast with anything deceptive. Cardinal Newman's epitaph (translated from the Latin) reads 'Out of shadows and reflections into reality'. Shadows and reflections are not normally deceptive.

That it is directed towards the Real, is a central idea of religion. Mircea Eliade, the historian of religions, sees this to be true of both primal and developed religion. 'Whatever the historical context in which he is placed, the religious man', Eliade writes, 'believes that there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends the world but is manifest in the world.'¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, who brought the theological and philosophical thought of the Middle Ages to its highest development, argues that God is best designated as 'He Who Is'.² The divine name, whose revelation is described in the Book of Exodus (3.14), is 'I AM'.

Belief in God without Belief in an After-Life

There is something that should not go unnoticed about the alternatives in what is being referred to as transcendental concern. These alternatives are belief in a divine being (or beings), and belief in existence after death, one or other of which must be present where there is transcendental concern. Now, there is a very important dissimilarity between belief in God and not also in existence after death, and belief in existence after death and not also in God. Not believing in God carries no threat to the *point* of believing in existence after death. What about not believing in existence after death and believing in God? There is no threat to the point of this belief in God if it is belief in an interventionist God (as the Jewish belief in God always was); that is, belief in a God who brings about what would not happen in the natural course of things, the chain of events that would occur if things were left to themselves. But suppose you hold (with some modern theologians):

1. that nothing happens outside the natural course of things,
and
2. that there is nothing after death.

What is the implication of combining these two opinions with a belief in God? The implication is that whether belief in God is *true* or *false*, nothing in anyone's experience will ever be different either way.

2. Other Characteristics of a Religion

Transcendental concern is an essential constituent of all religions, but it does not by itself constitute a religion. A philosophy might have this concern. The Platonic philosophy does have it in its concern with divinity and immortality. That does not make this philosophy religious rather than philosophical or religious as well as philosophical. Add that the divinity is an object of worship, and Platonic transcendental concern is taking on the character of religion. Where belief in divinity is absent from a religion, it may be that the great significance of worship as a constitutive element of a religion is balanced, not by any one thing, but by a range of practices.

An essential constituent of a religion, and one that is unique to religion, is its having a category of the sacred. A non-religious object—something belonging to someone one has loved, for example—can of course be 'sacred', but in a derivative sense of the term; it is treated *as if it were* sacred.

The 'heterogeneity' between the sacred and all other human concerns is 'absolute', Durkheim was quoted earlier as stating. This statement coming from a secular-minded sociologist, and before Rudolf Otto's influence had brought about the wide recognition of the sacred as a category of central religious importance, could appear to be remarkably perceptive about the nature of religion. Durkheim made the assertion without specifying any features which differentiate the sacred from everything else. This specification comes later, along with his account of the origin of the sacred.

According to this account, society creates the sacred. 'In a general way,' Durkheim says,

it is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them; for to its members it is what a god is to his worshippers.³

Durkheim speaks as if every society is to its members as a god is to his worshippers. An example of *any* society of which this comparison holds good would have been useful. The intimation of this comparison and of the passage in which it occurs is that the sacred as described by Durkheim is going to be of negligible *religious* significance.

In Durkheim's theory, the work of society in the generation of the sacred is invisible to pre-scientific eyes. The following are basic steps in the theory. Social life would be impossible without peremptory rules of conduct. Felt in their peremptoriness to have a source external to oneself, the rules have at the same time one's endorsement. Generating the idea of the sacred, they are taken (in pre-scientific thinking) to have a supernatural origin.

Knowing how in fact the idea of the sacred is generated, we can see, Durkheim says, 'society constantly creating sacred things out of ordinary ones'—out of monarchs 'in whom their age had faith', for example. And that it is 'society alone which is the author' of this sacredness, is 'evident since it frequently chances to consecrate men thus who have no right to it from their own merit'. (pages 212–213) Durkheim's next sentence is: 'The simple deference inspired by men with high social functions is not different in nature from religious respect.' Further down the page comes his remark that many regard as 'untouchable, that is to say, as sacred', the principle of free enquiry.

The respect felt for the highly placed not different in *nature* from religious awe; free enquiry *sacred*—and not in a derivative, extended, figurative use of the term? If the quotations assembled at the beginning of the chapter are intimations of what is to count as being religious, Durkheim is speaking of something only remotely analogous to religious feeling, and to a sense of the sacred.

Eliade praises Durkheim for having recognised the absolute heterogeneity between the sacred and the profane. A very interesting remark he makes about the difference between them, however, runs counter to Durkheim's representation of the nature of the sacred. 'The contrast of sacred and profane', Eliade says, 'appears to be a genuinely intuitive concept'.⁴ An intuitive concept is one which is not derived from any other concepts; there is nothing from which it could be obtained other than that of which it is the concept. Durkheim's concept of the sacred is a construction out of other concepts.

Drawing on descriptions of ceremonies conducted by Australian Aborigines, Durkheim brings up again the notion of two altogether disparate worlds. 'How could such experiences,' he asks, 'fail to leave in a participant the conviction that there really exist two heterogeneous and mutually incomparable worlds?' One is the world of the man's daily life; he

cannot penetrate into the other without at once entering into relations with extraordinary powers that excite him to the point of frenzy. The first is the profane world, the second, that of sacred things. So it is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born. [pages 218–19]

The world of 'sacred things' is not of course a transcendental reality for Durkheim; for him, it is only a matter of human beliefs and attitudes. (The sacred as 'wholly other' than everything else, and as having transcendental significance, will be discussed in the section on numinous experience in the following chapter.)

To resume itemization of essential constituents of a religion: a world-view is one such—that is, an account of the origin of things and of the place of human beings in the scheme of things. It is not of course unique to religion that it presents a world-view. Marxism presents a world-view.

Transcendental concern, a category of the sacred, and a world-view are essential constituents of a religion—by contrast with features which a religion is more or less likely to have, but which it might lack. To assert of anything that it is an essential constituent of any insti-

tution which is indisputably a religion, is to make an empirical claim. It would be knocked out by the instancing of an institution which competent judges would agree is indisputably a religion, but which lacks the feature specified.

Transcendental concern and an acknowledgment of the sacred get embodiment in 'practices', things done in a religion by ritual words or actions. So important can a religion's practices be, that its beliefs are never formulated but remain implicit in its practices. A practice very generally present in religions but absent in some religions, can have such deep roots in the human psyche that it can influence the behaviour of someone brought up in a religion to which it is alien. The offering of sacrifice is an example. In Olive Schreiner's novel, *The Story of An African Farm*, a girl, brought up in a version of Christianity in which the offering of sacrifice was unthinkable, offered up in sacrifice the lamb chop which was part of her meal.

Religions have a moral teaching. But fundamental moral rules, such as the prohibition of murder, lying, sexual licence, transcend religious differences; and in societies where a distinction has developed between moral rules and religious rules, religions typically endorse, and reinforce with spiritual sanctions, an already existing morality. But that moral rules may be only endorsed by a religion and not initiated by it, is no reason for thinking that an institution can be a religion without its having any moral teaching.

The relation of moral rules—'the moral law'—to God's commands and prohibitions is an important matter in thought about God. A former colleague of mine used to ask his class in moral philosophy whether God could have taken the 'nots' out of the Ten Commandments. To suppose that God could have done this, is to suppose no action right or wrong until God willed it to be one or the other. The implication is that right and wrong are nothing in themselves: an action is right *because* commanded, wrong *because* forbidden. A further implication is that the celebration of God's laws as always *just*, which is a theme in the worship of God, would entirely lose significance; for the justice of any of His laws would have become simply that He willed it. Had He willed its opposite, it would have been that

opposite that was just. In the predominant thinking of a developed theism, things are not right because commanded by God, but commanded because right; not wrong because forbidden, forbidden because wrong.

The Ten Commandments are not uniform in kind. Compare the prohibition of theft with the prohibition of work on the Sabbath day. Theft *has* to be prohibited by a God whose laws governing human behaviour are just; not so, work on the Sabbath. Commands and prohibitions of the kind to which the prohibition of work on the Sabbath belongs are sometimes called, in a technical meaning of the word, 'positive' commands and prohibitions. (They will have a point, but this is something we don't need to go into.) *Commanded because right, prohibited because wrong* does not apply to 'positive' commands and prohibitions.

There may be other essential constituents of a religion besides having a transcendental concern, a sense of the sacred, a world-view, and a moral teaching. That would not matter. A complete account, even in outline, of the conception implicit in whatever is indisputably a religion is not being aimed at: the aim is only to give an account of the content of this conception sufficient to identify it.

Institutions which are certainly religions have other features besides essential ones, features which particular religions may lack and others have. Examples are a priesthood, sacraments, the offering of sacrifice, the veneration of images, the going upon pilgrimages. We shall, however, watch out for the possibility that what at first sight looks to be no more than a feature typically found in religions, will insinuate itself upon reflection to be one which a religion must have.

Considerations of some remarks by William James, the greatly influential American psychologist and philosopher, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) will enable us to perceive more of the character of a religion than has so far come into view. 'Religion,' James says,

shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend them-

selves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.⁵

James explains that in view of the 'atheistic' character of Buddhism, the word 'divine' needs to be taken in a broad sense, though 'popularly ... the Buddha himself stands in the place of a God'.

Surprisingly, religious feelings, acts, and experiences are to be those of 'individual men in their solitude'. Counter-instances to this restriction crowd in. Examples are revivalist meetings (so common in American life in James's time), an Aboriginal corroboree, processions on religious festivals (a Nazi procession in Leni Riefenstahl's film 'The Triumph of the Will' has deliberately a liturgical character fitting the quasi-religious character of Nazism). James, was not, however, defining religion. He was only circumscribing the topic of the lectures he was giving. The individualistic restriction in his statement is due to the kinds of religious experience—mystical experiences and experiences of conversion, for example—with which the lectures especially deal. Consequently, there is no implicit criticism of James in the assertion made here that to look at religions through individualistic eyes is to misperceive their character.

The 'Givenness' of Religious Beliefs

Beliefs are not mentioned by James presumably because they are not experiences (though the coming to have a belief might be an experience). But religious beliefs are presupposed by religious experiences, though an extraordinary experience may create a belief.

People usually get their religious beliefs from their parents, the origin of these beliefs being an institution—a sacred book or a church or an oral tradition. While many will pick and choose among its teachings (with more or less inconsistency if they profess belief in the institution), to come across someone claiming to have constructed himself the religion he adheres to would be a rare find, even if the modest explanation was given that religious classics had been heavily drawn upon in its construction. Consider Luther's famous declaration,

which is so significant in the rise of Protestantism: 'Here I stand. I can do no other'. It has become one of the great examples of a stand on the ground of conscience. How greatly it would be misconstrued if it was seen as the declaration of a man acknowledging no authority in religion other than his own conscience! That is not how Luther himself saw it. Just before he said 'Here I stand', he said 'I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God'.⁶

Why the notion of constructing one's own religion is religiously anomalous is nicely indicated by an element in Freud's characterization of religion in *The Future of An Illusion*. The illusion meant is religion. Why Freud maintains that religion is an illusion is beside the point here. But just because he does maintain this, it was important for him not to mischaracterize religion. Speaking of the 'psychological significance' of religious doctrines, Freud says that they purport to 'tell one something that one has not oneself discovered'.⁷

When religious beliefs are thought about, the notion of authority emerges. This notion is implicit in the sense of religious beliefs as having come to the believer, and in the idea of sacred oral traditions or sacred writings. In a religion the notion of authority does not attach itself to religious beliefs only in relation to what is taken by the believer to be their sacred origin: authority has a continuing presence in relation to them through the arrangements a religion makes for pronouncement on what its beliefs are, should the question arise. Without this continuing authority, a religion would not have any *teaching*, only changeable views. Some sort of authority therefore seems to be an essential constituent of a religion.

3. Evolutionist 'Religion'

We are about to look at characteristics of religion, or analogies of them, in a complex of beliefs and attitudes which is not a religion, judged by the criteria we have adopted for what is to count as religion:

it lacks the essential characteristics of transcendental concern and a category of the sacred. In virtue of the parallel between some of its features and those found in religions it can be called a 'religion' or a quasi-religion. If religion is unlike anything else, it is going to be difficult to understand. So it might be illuminating to look at features of it, or their analogues, in a secular context, unclouded by the mystery of religion. Understanding certainly moves in the opposite way: features of a quasi-religion might not be fully understandable without some awareness of what corresponds to them in a religion. A particularly baffling feature of Marxist Communism provides an illustration. This was its assurance, while its predictions were being falsified, that 'the direction of history' was towards a paradisaal end. This assurance becomes less baffling if it is seen as akin to a religious assurance, 'the direction of history' attracting to itself feelings appropriate to belief in the working of divine providence.

The quasi-religion we shall be exemplifying is evolutionism. Evolutionism, as it may be called, is the investing of a biological theory of evolution with features found in religions. A reason for taking evolutionism as an example of a quasi-religion is that its foremost proponents (with the exception of its most influential one) have been atheistic scientists.

Another reason is that evolution has become a matter of great and varied interest. For quite a while in several areas of thought outside biology, notably in philosophy, a good deal of attention has been given to the explanatory value of evolutionary considerations. Outside the specific intellectual disciplines, 'evolutionary psychology'—'the selfish gene' is its best-known concept—has been producing very popular explanatory levellings-down of exalted human motivations. Evolutionism, unlike a scientific theory of evolution, does not deal in explanations, though its proponents are scientists—rather, were scientists, for it is no longer current.

Material for our discussion of evolutionism largely comes from Mary Midgley's widely-noticed book *Evolution as a Religion* (1985). (Operating with a conception of religion which contains no transcendental reference, the book treats evolutionism as a religion, not as a

quasi-religion.) Because of the importance for an understanding of religion of the fact/meaning distinction it draws, we shall spend some time on this matter before moving on to a consideration of evolutionism.

Fact and Meaning

'Science and religion', the biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky is quoted by Midgley as saying, 'deal with different aspects of existence ... If one dares to over-schematise for the sake of clarity, one may say that these are the aspect of fact and the aspect of meaning.' Midgley comments: 'Since the notion that facts are the province of science is very widely accepted, this seems a reasonable suggestion.'⁸ She has religion contribute to the bestowal of meaning.

Facts come within the province of science. And fall outside the province of religion? To handle that question, prompted by Midgley's comment, we need to understand by 'facts' in the present context what are to be taken to be facts, claimed to be facts. A little later on we shall find Midgley speaking of 'factual beliefs' and she will mean by a 'factual belief' a belief which is taken to state a fact, whether or not what it states is a fact.

Deprived of such beliefs, deprived of factual claims, how could religion give meaning to anything? It is often said that religion gives meaning to life. If someone who says this was asked 'How does religion do that?', the answer might be: 'By enabling people to see that eternal happiness has been made available to them'. The answer makes a factual claim. Factual claims would appear in any answer to a question asking how religion bestows meaning on something or other.

What 'distinguishes religion from other sources of meaning', Midgley asks; what makes a system a religious system? The answer she gives is that religion is a faith to live by. A faith is characterized as follows:

A faith is not primarily a factual belief, the acceptance of a few extra propositions like 'God exists' or 'there will be a revolu-

tion'. It is rather the sense of having one's place within a whole greater than oneself, one whose larger aims so enclose one's own and give them point that sacrifice for it may be entirely proper. This sense need not involve any extra factual beliefs at all. Marxism does not ... [page 14]

The 'acceptance of a few extra propositions'. What would be the heart of one of the theistic faiths, say, to which its fact-claiming doctrines were *extra*? And isn't the doctrine of a materialist interpretation of history both fundamental to Marxism and also a factual belief? (Remember that by a 'factual belief' is meant a belief which is taken to state a fact, whether or not what it states is a fact.)

The down-playing in this passage of what a believer regards as factual beliefs produces a misleading impression of the character of a faith. Two elements are essential to any faith, religious or secular. One is that those who adhere to it regard its beliefs as fact-stating. The other is that its adherents have certain attitudes, notably a commitment of the will, towards what its beliefs specify. These two elements are reflected, for example, in the words (from one of the creeds) 'I believe in God'. This expression of faith—in God, not merely *that God exists*—is in the same breath an avowal of the being of God and a commitment of the will to God. A faith, contrasted with a factual belief, and construed as a 'sense of having one's place within a whole greater than oneself', strongly suggests that a faith is no more than a matter of attitudes and feelings.

To look into the philosophical considerations and motivations behind such accounts (that is, accounts which suggest that religious beliefs are little more than expressions of attitudes and feelings) would be too peripheral to the concern of this book. Our concern is in general with what religion shows itself to be. With regard to religious beliefs in particular, the question for us is what the believer holds their character to be.

We shall take belief in God as an example of a religious belief. The existence of this or that is a frequent object of belief, specula-

tion, investigation. Sometimes it turns out that what is believed to exist does exist; sometimes that it doesn't. No such verification or refutation of the religious belief is to be looked for. It won't do to say that there is a parallel between belief in God and unsettled ordinary existential beliefs, because what would establish their truth or falsity can be specified, however unattainable knowledge of this might be.

A further kind of difference between belief in God and ordinary existential beliefs can be seen in the commitment of the will previously noticed in the credal affirmation 'I believe in God'. (There is some analogy between this commitment and the unswerving belief of one person in another's integrity—an unwillingness to let oneself doubt.)

These points of dissimilarity between a commitment to belief in the existence of God—a *religious* belief, for the bare belief that there is a God is not in itself a religious belief—and ordinary existential beliefs are based on the character religious beliefs show themselves to have. The dissimilarities are not enough to show that these beliefs are not really fact-claiming beliefs.

Philosophical considerations specifying conditions which must be met by any fact-claiming belief which is really such, lie outside our interest. And so does the translation of religious beliefs into expressions of attitudes and feelings. Belief in God construed as an attitude of reverence towards all existence, will do as an example of such a translation.

We shall take up at the beginning of the following chapter the same sort of issue as to the character which religious experience presents itself as having.

A remark now on the general content ascribed by Midgley to a faith, that it is a sense of one's place in a greater whole. Applicable perhaps to an aspect of Marxism, this description of the content of a faith has no clear correspondence with anything in the content of the great religious faiths. In all of them—except in that variety of Hinduism where the goal is absorption into the divine reality—the goal is *individual*, one's attaining whatever is thought of in the religion as the supremely desirable state of existence.

Evolutionism

We turn now from the important but incidental matter of Midgley's fact/meaning distinction to her account of 'evolution as a religion'. To be picked out are features of an atheistic quasi-religion, which correspond to features of a religion. A very significant one is the cosmic sweep of the evolutionist faith, with humanity, nevertheless, set in a pivotal place. Thus:

From among these types a new species, Omega man will emerge ... If evolution is to proceed through the line of man to a next higher form, there must exist within man the making of Omega man. It is reasonable to assume that man's intellect is not the ultimate, but merely represents a stage intermediate between the primates and Omega. What comprehension and powers over Nature Omega man will command can only be suggested by man's image of the supernatural.⁹

The writer is a molecular biologist. Another example of the cosmic sweep of the Evolutionist faith and of the pivotal place it assigns to humanity is the following, this time from a geneticist:

And so we foresee the history of life divided into three main phases. In the long preparatory phase it was the helpless creature of its own environment and natural selection gradually ground it into a human shape. In the second—our own short transitional phase—it reaches out at the immediate environment ... shaping and grinding to suit ... the requirements ... of man. And in the long third phase, it will reach down into the secret places of its own nature, and ... shape itself into an increasingly sublime creation—a being beside which the mythical divinities of the past will seem more and more ridiculous, and which setting its own marvellous inner powers against the brute Goliath of the suns and planets, challenges them to contest.¹⁰

A consummation and an origin are themes profoundly characteristic of religions. A consummation is the principal theme of both

these evolutionist passages. How naturally the theme of origins set in an evolutionary context can take on a religious tone, is indicated in Midgley's remark that evolution is 'the creation myth of our age'.

But while evolutionism provides religiously-toned substitutes for the origin and consummation themes so deep in religion, something profoundly alien to religion needs to be noticed in these evolutionist passages. This is the hubris, the towering pride, to which they give utterance. According to the Biblical story of the human Fall, 'ye shall be as gods' were the words of the temptation in the Garden of Eden.

The section of *Evolution as a Religion* which contains the passages we have been considering concentrates on 'prophecy' because it is a 'standard charge against religion that it panders to wish fulfilment by prophesying "wonders in the future"'. (The book frequently turns against promoters of evolutionist 'religion' charges which are commonly brought against religion.)

The prophets of a religion rarely argue. They say: 'Thus saith the Lord'. The proponent of an evolutionist faith announcing wonders to come does not argue much either. Look at what passes for argument in the first of the two evolutionist passages just now quoted. The back-up for the claim that the human intellect is 'a stage' on the way to Omega man—a being so stupendous that only images of the supernatural are vast enough to fit it—is stated to be something it 'is reasonable to assume'! The prediction in the second passage that a being will evolve which will outclass all the imaginary divinities of the past, is put forward without even a gesture towards argument. Recall Freud's remark, quoted earlier, on the 'psychological significance' of religious doctrines, their purporting to disclose what one has not discovered for oneself. Evolutionist doctrine as presented in these passages has something of that character. By contrast, when theoretical discoveries are put forward by scientists, attention is drawn to how they were made, to the reasoning of which they are conclusions.

But once it is thought about, the certitude expressed in these passages ceases to suggest anything analogous to that of a Biblical prophet (who much more characteristically declares the mind and will of God than makes predictions). No, the certitude plausibly suggested by

these passages is the certitude of a scientist speaking outside the area of his expertise, of testable hypotheses; for it is only outside this area that he could feel that *his being a scientist* gave evidential weight to his words.

An ironic theme in *Evolution as a Religion* is that the promoters of evolutionism see themselves as hostile to religion. This is not true of its most influential promoter, Teilhard de Chardin. That is no doubt why he is a minor figure in *Evolution as a Religion*, for its purpose is to characterize as religious, views whose natural presupposition is atheistic. A palaeontologist and a Catholic priest, author of *The Phenomenon of Man* (1955, English translation 1959), Teilhard became a cult figure in the 1960s. He combined Christian and evolutionist doctrine. In Teilhardian Christianity 'Christ the Evolver' ('Le Christ Évolateur'), the motor-power of a 'super-creative' evolution, takes precedence over Christ the Redeemer: the cross will come to symbolize 'much more the ascent through effort than the expiation of an offence'.¹¹

In evolutionism we have come upon features which match features found in religions and centrally important to them. It presents a world-view in which a doctrine of creation and consummation figures; and, like religious faith, it goes beyond evidence, however scientific its proponents might deem it to be.

A faith goes beyond evidence, but it does not dispense with evidence. It would be a misunderstanding of religions to suppose that they see their beliefs as needing no reasoned backing, 'faith' by itself being sufficient; a condemnatory theological term for that kind of view calls it 'fideistic'. Religions certainly do not see their beliefs as human discoveries, as products of reasoning. But when a religion is on the level at which questions about the foundation of beliefs can arise, its thinkers *argue* for its beliefs.

Faith is found outside faiths. In everyday life we don't often deal in knock-down certainties, or in decisive probabilities; faith in persons or things is an everyday occurrence. And the logic of the notion is the same whether faith is called for from the adherent of a faith, or occurs in an everyday setting. If you put your faith in something, you

may be mistaken in thinking you have grounds for doing so: you don't think that no grounds are needed.

4. Religion and Naturalism

We look now at an account of what its proponent describes as the 'genuinely religious', which is in implicit contrast at every point with the account of the nature of religion given in this book. It is set down by John Dewey, one of the most influential of twentieth-century American philosophers, in *A Common Faith* (1934).¹² His purpose was to show that a rejection of the supernatural does not entail the rejection of 'everything religious' and, more grandly, to show that with the rejection of the supernatural and its accompaniments, 'what is genuinely religious' is emancipated. Dewey held the philosophical position known as 'naturalism', and his more general motivation was, no doubt, to indicate the capacity of naturalism to accommodate everything of human significance.

Naturalism

According to naturalism, 'there is nothing outside nature'. What does this formula exclude? Excluded, all naturalists would agree, is the supernatural. Most naturalists would take this exclusion to exclude any being that could be called, at all significantly, God. This would appear to rule out as a naturalist so great a source of the naturalistic frame of mind as the seventeenth-century philosopher, Spinoza, for such a being appears to have an essential place in his system of thought. (Spinoza's ideas about God are discussed in Chapter 3 of this book.) What *has* to be excluded from a consistent naturalism is (1) a self-existent self-sufficient being which created everything else that exists, and (2) a being which can intervene in the natural course of events.

Naturalism does not countenance belief in a life after death. There is nothing necessarily supernaturalistic about that belief; but a com-

ponent of naturalism is an endorsement of what science is taken to say about human beings, and a naturalist will, rightly, urge that belief in a life after death is (without supernatural intervention) incompatible with a Darwinian account of the origin of human beings.

It looks as though finding a place for anything religious in this view of things would take some doing.

'The Religious Aspect of Experience'

It is with reference to what is often styled the conflict between science and religion that Dewey explains what he means by 'the religious aspect of experience', separating it with this conflict in mind, from the supernatural and 'the things that have grown up' around the supernatural. These things are beliefs held by religions to be 'true, true in the intellectual sense' of the word. By this phrase Dewey means: true, as corresponding to fact. The 'religious aspect of experience' is to be dissociated from the fact-claiming beliefs of religions. 'I shall try to show', Dewey writes, that such beliefs are

encumbrances, and that what is genuinely religious will undergo an emancipation when it is relieved of them; that then, for the first time, the religious aspect of experience will be free to develop ... on its own account. [page 2]

The enterprise Dewey announces—understood as it would be by anyone unfamiliar with Dewey's thought—is of great and obvious human interest. Its starting-point, one would think, would be an examination of the phenomena of actual religions with an eye on the connections among beliefs, practices, attitudes, and expectations to see what could, on argued grounds, be disengaged from what. Dewey goes in for none of this. No application is made of the 'empirical method' he so insists upon in other contexts. The fact is that he does not embark upon the enterprise he announces. Instead, what happens is as follows:

Considerations are adduced on the anti-religion side of the conflict between science and religion and the inference drawn that 'the religious aspect of experience' must be extricated from 'intellectual

assents', from fact-claiming beliefs. With this extrication, the conflict between science and religion is bypassed. Dewey proceeds to enunciate the 'common faith' he proposes:

I should describe this faith as the unification of the self through inclusive ideal ends which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires and choices. [page 33]

Nothing in this description of the 'common faith' suggests analogy with some feature of one of the actual religious faiths, Christianity or Islam, for instance, as features of Marxist Communism and Nazism do, making them illuminatingly called 'religions', or secular religions, or quasi-religions. Absent from it is any suggestion of what is *distinctively* religious. Why might Dewey feel that the 'common faith' is fittingly called religious? Well, its 'ideal ends', like the injunctions of a religious faith, have authority over the conduct of anyone whose faith it is. No other reason suggests itself.

The distinctively religious, absent from the 'common faith', disappears from the faith of actual religions in Dewey's discussion of a 'symbolic' interpretation of them. If this proposal of a symbolic interpretation were to be adopted, 'it would be obvious', he writes,

not only that the intellectual articles of a creed must be understood to be symbolic of moral and other ideal values, but that the facts taken to be historic and used as concrete evidence of the intellectual articles are themselves symbolic. These articles of a creed present events and persons that have been made over by the idealizing imagination in the interest, at their best, of moral ideals. Historic personages in their divine attributes are materializations of the ends that enlist devotion and inspire endeavor. They are symbolic of the reality of ends moving us in many forms of experience. The ideal values that are thus symbolized also mark human experience in science and art and the various modes of human association ... [page 41]

The significance of a religion's affirmations about God and His works, and the significance of the great personages of a religion, such

as Christ or Mohammed, is turned into a symbolizing of ideal values in morality, science, art—in every sphere in which the notion of ideal values is applicable.

We have now before us the completed process of the emancipation of the 'genuinely religious' from its traditional bondage. All connection of it with fact-claiming beliefs severed, it is identified with 'the religious aspect of experience', and this with the totality of ideal values. The reader comes upon these identifyings: there is no talk about them, so no justification is offered for them.

The remark was made earlier that Dewey did not embark upon the emancipatory enterprise he announced. The remark was made because, although he spoke of 'trying to show' that the 'genuinely religious' emerges when it is freed from traditional encumbrances, there is no *trying to show* this in what he actually does: all of it is simply posited. The appearance that it was of great human interest, worn by Dewey's enterprise on its announcement, was illusory. And what we supposed would take some doing—finding a place for anything religious in a naturalistic view of things—is effortlessly accomplished, given Dewey's construal of 'religious'.

In line with Dewey's conceptual obliteration of what is distinctively religious, is his seeing the idea of God in the theistic religions as primarily that of an underwriter of morality. Unnoticed, is the idea of God as the object of ultimate longing—'O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee; my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee ...'

* * *

No attempt is made in this book to produce a definition of religion. Having to satisfy the requirement of a definition that it be applicable to every variety of the thing defined and to nothing else, a definition of religion, being so thin, could not effect any degree of the kind of understanding of religion which is our concern: the understanding possessed by a strong adherent of a religion who has thought about the nature of religion.

Nor is an attempt made to indicate features of the *right* conception of religion. There is no conception of religion which is the right one: the terms 'religion' and 'religious' are used with a range of meaning which has no definite boundaries. It does not of course follow that one conception of religion is as good as another. A conception of religion framed, say, in order to distinguish religious from other factors in a piece of social enquiry, can serve this purpose better than another one devised for the same purpose. And a conception of religion whose purpose is to further an understanding of religion may be more or less illuminating—or not at all illuminating, but obfuscatory.

Although the terms 'religion' and 'religious' have an indefinite range of meaning, they have a primary designation and derivative designations. 'Religion' primarily designates a complex of beliefs, practices, and attitudes of the kind found in institutions recognized as religions, but to which a person without institutional attachments can be committed; 'religious' primarily designates having to do with religion, strongly committed to religion.

An attempt has been made in this chapter to set down essential features of any institution that is certainly a religion—sufficient of them to identify it as such—only what possesses these features counting for our purposes as a religion. 'Transcendental concern', which showed up as the most fundamental constituent of a religion, was sketchily described. Chapter 3 ('The Idea of God') is especially relevant to the descriptions of one of the objects of this concern, and Chapter 5 ('Beyond Death') to the description of both of its objects, typically conjoint, but one of them sometimes its only object.

Chapter 2: Religious Experience

In the first section of this chapter various matters bearing on the issue as to the objectivity of religious experience are briefly discussed. We shall be looking only at the internal character of religious experience. We shall not be concerned with anything relevant to the substantiation of religious beliefs beyond what a consideration of religious experience might disclose. We first ask whether religious experience ever purports to be experience of a transcendental reality, there independently of the experience. Instead, is it without any truth-claims at all, being entirely a matter of feelings and attitudes, such, for example, as a sense of one's place in a whole greater than oneself and an orientation of one's life accordingly? If religious experience is entirely a matter of feelings and attitudes, to ask about its objectivity would be a misplaced question—a question about objectivity does not arise. (And religious *beliefs* would be a misnomer, since on such a construal of them they would not be true or false; they would not purport to correspond to any fact.)

1. Objectivity Issues

Does religious experience, then, ever purport to be experience of a transcendental reality? Two kinds of non-religious experience are usefully contrasted in approaching this issue. Compare X's claim to enjoy a certain piece of music with Y's claim to hear a certain sound. The fact that quite a few of those X is talking to do not enjoy this music leaves his claim unaffected. (No, not quite: their attitude might be some indication that X falsely claims to enjoy the music; he wants to be thought avant-garde, or whatever.) Truth here is simply truth about X. The truth of Y's claim to hear a certain sound is not simply truth about Y. And whether others

can hear the sound Y claims to hear is very relevant to the question whether it is there to be heard. If there is nothing making the sound, we might say of Y that he is 'hearing things'. Unless we think that he is lying, we don't doubt that he is having an experience as-of hearing a sound, a *subjective* experience.

Which of these two kinds of non-religious experience—the enjoyment of music or the hearing of sounds—does religious experience present itself as resembling? In case it is thought totally obvious that religious experience presents itself as resembling the experience of hearing sounds (though a hearing suffused with feeling) and not the enjoyment of music, what is to be made of these lines from a hymn?

O Sabbath rest by Galilee,
 O calm of hills above;
 Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
 The silence of Eternity,
 Interpreted by love.

Is the experience expressed in these lines like the hearing of sounds, or like the enjoyment of music? The answer might be: like both. The question then is, What is the content of the experience's truth-claim? The value of a borderline case such as this is its bringing into prominence the fact that, typically, religious experience has every appearance of involving truth-claims.

The occurrence of sounds can be determined in other ways than by hearing. There are no such procedures for corroborating religious experience; nothing like a machine which might corroborate a claim to hear a certain sound by recording its occurrence. Is there anything in religious experience comparable to the corroboration of a non-religious experience by that of someone else? Well, thousands claimed to experience a vision of the Virgin Mary at Fatima. But a disanalogy suggests itself: *why* one person can see or hear something which another person is unable to see or hear, can be explained, whereas there is no comparable explanation as to why one person experiences the vision and another does not.

Religious Experience Culture-Relative?

Arguing for the subjectivity of religious experience, Antony Flew remarks that the character of religious experiences ‘seems to depend on the interests, background, and expectations of those who have them rather than upon anything separate and autonomous’.¹ It would be surprising if the character of a religious experience was not determined to an indefinitely large extent by the circumstances that Flew mentions. It would be a different matter if no religious experiences occur except those rendered likely by these circumstances. But it is a fact telling against the subjectivity of religious experience, that it is not only the devout or the expectant that experience a vision or an apparent miracle.

Amplifying his argument for the subjectivity of religious experience, Flew goes on to say that the

varieties of religious experience include not only those which their subjects are inclined to interpret as visions of the Blessed Virgin or senses of the guiding presence of Jesus Christ, but also others more outlandish presenting themselves as manifestations of Quetzalcoatl or Osiris, of Dionysus or Shiva ... the expert natural historian of religious experience would be altogether astonished to hear of the vision of Bernadette Soubirous occurring not to a Roman Catholic at Lourdes but to an Hindu in Benares ... [page 127]

One might not be mistaken in thinking that a vision such as the apparition of the Virgin Mary to a Hindu in Benares too unnatural even for a miracle, considering the devastation of the whole ordinary context of a person’s experience that would be necessary for its occurrence. And what would be the point of its occurrence?

Religious Experiences Telling Against One Another?

There are, Flew remarks, experiences ‘ostensibly authenticating innumerable beliefs many of which are in contradiction with one another’.
(page 126)

You would have to scout around to find religious phenomena which would tend to authenticate one religion *in competition* with others. Apparent miracles of healing in different religions would not do this unless their context invested them with this significance by associating them with some doctrine which another religion would reject. And when you have found religious phenomena that tend to authenticate one religion in competition with others, for such phenomena do exist (those bearing on the matter of the resurrection of Christ are an instance), there remains the question of their competitive appraisal. It is a bad mistake in the understanding of religion, to think that all religions are on a level, evidentially and in the quality of their content.

Hume, writing in the eighteenth century, is the most famous proponent of the contention that different religions destroy each other's credibility.² The truth is that all that can be said in support of the bare contention that miracles in different religions cancel each other's credibility, is that competing claims to miracles, without further discussion, cancel out.

The most serious threat to the objectivity of religious experience would be conflicting deliverances by mystical experience. That is because mystical experience presents itself as direct—that is, non-inferential—awareness of transcendental reality, just as sense experience presents itself as direct awareness of everyday reality. Whether there are conflicting deliverances by mystical experience is discussed in section 3 of this chapter.

2. *Numinous Experience*

Characterization of the Numinous

The term 'numinous', coined by Rudolf Otto from *numen* meaning a divinity, on the analogy of 'ominous' from *omen*, was first used in one of the most influential books on religion written in the twentieth century. This book, published in 1917, was translated into English under the title *The Idea of the Holy*.

The 'holy' is generally taken to mean the 'completely good', Otto remarks. In addition it has, he maintains, 'a clear overplus of meaning'.³ More than that: the words equivalent to 'holy' 'in Latin and Greek, in Semitic and other ancient languages, denoted first and foremost *only* this overplus'; the moral element may be altogether absent from their meaning. It would not be possible to come upon a more astonishing example of what Otto had in mind than is implied in the story in 1 Chronicles 13.10 of the death of a man who tried to steady the sacred ark when the oxen drawing it along stumbled: 'And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzza, and he smote him, because he put his hand to the ark; and there he died before God'.

Commenting (not with specific reference to this incident) on the character which the 'anger', the 'wrath', of God frequently has in Hebrew Scripture/the Old Testament, Otto writes: 'There is something very baffling in the way in which it "is kindled" and manifested. It is, as has been well said, "like a hidden force of nature", like stored-up electricity, discharging itself upon anyone who comes too near.' It is 'incalculable', and 'arbitrary'. (page 18) The moralization of the numinous took a long time.

It is the numinous that makes religious experience unique, Otto holds. Two elements in his description of the numinous are *mystery* and *awfulness*. God is *Mysterium Tremendum*: dreadful, terrible, frightful, fearful are dictionary meanings for *tremendum*.

Otto emphasizes that although numinous dread is analogous to ordinary dread, they are not at all the same emotion. He draws attention to the places in the Book of Job in which a contrast is made between numinous dread and ordinary dread: 'let not his fear terrify me' (Job 9.34); 'let not thy dread make me afraid'. (13.21)

Otto speaks of religious dread and of 'daemonic dread'. What does he take to be the relation between them? The question is important because at issue is Otto's thought about the origin of religion. As its 'antecedent stage', Otto writes, religious dread has

'daemonic dread' (cf. the horror of Pan) with its queer perversion, a sort of abortive offshoot, the 'dread of ghosts'. It first begins to stir in the feeling of 'something uncanny', 'eerie', or

'weird'. It is this feeling which, emerging in the mind of primeval man forms the starting-point for the entire religious development in history. [page 14]

In the first part of this passage daemonic dread does not seem to be an early phase of religious dread, but to be a feeling which *precedes* religious dread. The rest of the passage, however, seems to say that the feeling which first stirs in a sense of the uncanny, the eerie, is the beginning of a religious continuum.

That daemonic dread is a primitive *religious* feeling is affirmed in the following passage, which, however, by referring to its threshold character, suggests that it is a *pre-religious* feeling:

It is not only the more developed forms of religious experience that need to be counted underivable ... The same ... is no less true of the primitive, 'crude', and rudimentary emotions of 'daemonic dread' which, as we have seen, stand at the threshold of religious evolution. *Religion is itself present at its commencement*: religion, nothing else, is at work in these early stages of mythic and daemonic experience. [page 132]

Elsewhere (page 117), daemonism, worship of the dead, magic, fetishism, totemism are among things stated to contain a numinous element and to be 'preliminary to religion proper'.

One's overall impression is that Otto is best understood as having regarded the numinous as a wider category than the religious, of which it is an essential component. But if a feeling can be numinous without being religious—a sense of the uncanny, eerie, weird, for example—it becomes hard to appraise Otto's statement that '*Religion is itself present at its commencement*': for we are left with no idea of what the first stirrings of *religious* feeling might be if these, and similar feelings, are *pre-religious*.

It is integral to an understanding of numinous dread to see that it can be associated with the thought of *benediction*. God promises to Abram, descendants as countless as the stars. After the promise, 'a deep sleep fell on Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him'. (Genesis 15. 2–5,12)

Besides being dreadful, the numinous is mysterious. Feelings of something ‘uncanny’, ‘eerie’, ‘weird’ are reactions to this aspect of the numinous as well as to its fearful aspects, in primitive numinous experiences. The term Otto uses as best designating the *mysterium* is the ‘wholly other’, that which is utterly unlike anything else. Taken in its purely ‘natural sense’, he writes,

mysterium would first mean merely, a secret or a mystery in the sense of that which is ... uncomprehended and unexplained; and so far *mysterium* is itself merely ... an analogical notion taken from the natural sphere, illustrating, but incapable of exhaustively rendering, our real meaning. Taken in the religious sense, that which is ‘mysterious’ is—to give it perhaps the most striking expression—the ‘wholly other’ ... that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible ... filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment.
[page 26]

Mysterium tremendum—et fascinans. The numinous mystery, fearful as it is, also fascinates. It would not be reading anything into Otto to see him as holding that these three elements of the numinous are integrally related; as holding, in particular, that the fascination is inseparable from the mystery and its fearfulness. Commenting upon the supposition that ‘the religious consciousness’ first took shape only as ‘daemonic dread’, Otto remarks that on that supposition, the concern of religion would be ‘only with the averting or the appeasement of the “wrath” of the numen’; it would be inexplicable ‘how it is that the “numinous” is the object of search and desire and yearning’. (page 32) In the great religions, the numinous object is both uniquely daunting and uniquely desirable.

Essential to the process of the development of religion from its dawning, has been the moralizing and the spiritualizing of the sheerly numinous. A sense of this transformation is worth obtaining. Recall the episode of the man struck dead because he ‘put his hand to’ the sacred ark. Juxtapose this episode with the following account of a religious experience which, for all its moralization and spiritualization, is intensely numinous:

It is Sabbath, and already in the dark ... we hear that sing-song of prayers and reading of scripture, that nasal half-singing half-speaking sound which Church and Mosque have taken over from the Synagogue ... The ear tries to grasp individual words but it is scarcely possible and one has almost given up the attempt when suddenly ... causing a thrill of fear, there it begins unified, clear and unmistakable: *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh Elohim Adonai Zebaoth* [Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts] ...

I have heard the *Sanctus Sanctus Sanctus* of the cardinals in St Peter's, the *Swiat Swiat Swiat* in the Cathedral of the Kremlin ... In whatever language they resound, these ... words ... always grip one in the depths of the soul, with a mighty shudder, exciting and calling into play the mystery of the other world latent therein.⁴

Within numinous experience a distinction is necessary as between what might be called, on the one hand, numinous *feeling*, and on the other, numinous *encounter*. Reflection on the experience just now described will help to clarify the distinction. To have this experience, would one need to be a believer, or at least a half-believer, in religion? Or might an atheist have the experience—not perhaps as strongly as a believer—but an experience as unmistakably numinous?

Supposing an atheist did have such an experience, a question worth a thought is whether, while he had the experience, he would be bound to feel that there was some truth in religion? Or would the effect of the experience upon him be analogous to the effect of music upon a person? This is an effect which does not ever seem to intimate anything taken to be a *truth*. (Too crude? A character in one of Aldous Huxley's novels who had been listening to a Beethoven symphony, said he had been listening to Beethoven's proof of the existence of God.)

To be contrasted with numinous experience as feeling, exemplified by that which *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh* induced in Otto, and, more tenuously, by the numinous effect which he mentions 'silence and darkness' may have, is a numinous *encounter*. Discussing creature feel-

ing—a sense of one's 'nothingness' relative to that which is 'supreme above all creatures'—Otto writes: 'creature feeling' is 'a subjective concomitant and effect' of an experience 'which casts it like a shadow, but which in itself indubitably has immediate and primary reference to an object outside the self'. (page 10) Otto is saying here that a numinous being is taken to be encountered, and in consequence, numinous feeling is generated; he is rejecting the supposition that a numinous being is postulated in consequence of the experience of numinous feeling.

As would be expected, examples of numinous encounter are to be found in the scriptures of various religions. An example from a non-scriptural source is the following: 'The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that *He* was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two.'⁵

A place can be the object of numinous experience—'How dreadful is this place'; Otto quotes the words from Genesis 28.17. The context of the utterance is a dream from which Jacob has awakened ('the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not'). In this dream Jacob was promised great blessings. Even in benediction God arouses numinous dread. The place where Jacob had this dream becomes numinous, because of the action there of a numinous being. But places themselves can generate numinous awe; they can be 'eerie', 'uncanny', give the impression of being 'haunted'.

Except for such feelings as these words express, the examples of numinous experience so far mentioned have been unmistakably religious. What is to be made of the experience described in the following passage from Wordsworth? He is recalling a boyhood experience which he had one night when he took a boat out on a lake. Is the experience to be seen as numinous? Is it to be seen as religious?

... a huge peak, black and huge,
 As if with voluntary power instinct,
 Upreared its head ...
 And growing still in stature the grim shape

Towered up between me and the stars, and still,
 For so it seemed, with purpose of its own
 And measured motion like a living thing,
 Strode after me ... after I had seen
 That spectacle, for many days, my brain
 Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
 Of unknown modes of being ...
 Huge and mighty forms, that do not live
 Like living men, moved slowly through the mind
 By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.⁶

In the transforming development of the numinous from its primitive manifestation, 'dread', Otto remarks, 'becomes worship; out of "shudder" comes awe, "holy" becomes "good" and "good", from that very fact becomes "holy", "sacrosanct"'.⁷

The magical, in Otto's opinion, is a 'form' of the numinous. A transformation which he ascribes to the magical is surprising:

art has ... means of creating a unique impression—that of the magical ... Now the magical is nothing but a suppressed and dim form of the numinous, a crude form of it which great art purifies and ennobles. In great art the point is reached at which we may no longer speak of the 'magical', but rather are confronted with the numinous itself ... [pages 66–67]

Great art a confrontation with the numinous? It is a question whether in this claim the numinous has been left with anything of the nature Otto has described it as having.

There is a second question about the nature of the numinous arising out of what Otto sees as coming within the scope of its development. This time the development is religious. Otto sees being 'rapt in worship' as a numinous experience. This second question, then, is whether intensity of worship is felt as a matter of course to be numinous in character, or whether when numinous feeling occurs in worship, it is the result of something additional to any intensity of worship.

An aspect of the quality of numinous experience to be kept in mind in thinking over these questions is provided by Otto's render-

ing of two Biblical texts: The Lord 'is in his holy temple' becomes 'haunts his holy temple'; the place 'where thine honour dwelleth' becomes the place 'haunted by Thy Majesty'. This haunting is not merely figurative as in 'a haunting melody'; it is akin to a ghostly haunting. Is some trace of this haunting felt in all experience of great art and in all intensity of worship?

A Miscellany of Numinous Objects

The numinous experience evoked by the objects about to be mentioned is numinous *feeling*, which may intimate or suggest numinous reality, not numinous *encounter* (exemplified in the passage quoted from James on page 33), which presents itself as a confrontation with numinous reality.

No principle governs the choice of the items in the collection, or the order in which they are set down. Its purpose is to make an understanding of the idea of the numinous less abstract. With regard to any item in the collection, the reader's thinking out whether it should have been included will further an understanding of this idea. Is it an objection to items in the collection that the object said to evoke numinous feeling might evoke it in some people and easily fail to evoke it in others? Certainly, if the feeling is evoked in few besides oneself, a poor example has been given of the evocation of numinous feeling. But numinous feeling is a *feeling*; and what arouses a feeling, aesthetic feeling, for instance, might arouse it in some and not in others, and in different degrees of intensity when it is aroused. Here then is the list.

The giant Buddhas in paddy fields in Thailand, their features for one who saw them, 'expressing total distance from the ordinary world, over which they nevertheless seemed to preside'.

The great Buddha in the Lung-Men caves in China. Of it, Osvald Sirén writes: 'Anyone who approaches this figure will realize that it has a religious significance without knowing anything about its motif'.⁸ No doubt, when the figure is actually seen, its numinous character is more intensely felt than when it is seen in the photographic

reproduction of it in Sirén's book. Judged by this reproduction, it illustrates the remark that numinous feeling is not uniformly aroused by the same object in different people.

Byzantine painting of religious figures. Giotto's religious figures are strikingly less numinous. Far less numinous still, if numinous at all, are religious figures in the painting of the High Renaissance. If this statement is true, the fact has a significant bearing on Otto's claim, noticed a little while ago, that in great art we are 'confronted with the numinous itself'.

Gregorian chant (the traditional music of the Roman Catholic Church).

Tenebrae—perhaps the most numinous of Roman Catholic ceremonies. Now discontinued, it was performed on the Thursday before Easter. Candles were extinguished one after another, symbolizing Christ's desertion by the apostles, till only one was left. Its extinction symbolized Christ's death and burial and its reappearance symbolized His resurrection. The clatter at the end of the service could be seen as symbolizing the shaking of the earth when Christ died.

The muezzin's call to prayer.

'Victory over Death' (in the Australian National Gallery), by the New Zealand painter, Colin McCahon.

McCahon's painting is included among the variety of objects likely to evoke numinous feeling, partly because of the high inapplicability to it of anything corresponding to Sirén's remark that anyone encountering the Buddha of the Lung-Men caves, would realize that 'it has a religious significance without knowing anything about its motif'. The point needs to be made that not every evocation of numinous feeling occurs independently of all such knowledge.

The painting is non-figurative: on a black background are words in white, some fading towards invisibility, some bold; some printed, some in cursive script. Covering about half the large pictorial space are the words: I AM. Their context is the crucifixion of Christ, indicated by such quotations as: 'Father, save me from this hour No, it was

for this that I came to this hour'. It is through the words I AM and their visual character, and their being placed in this context, that the painting has its numinous effect. It would have this effect only on a viewer who knew that for Judaism and Christianity, I AM is the revealed Name of God.

3. *Mystical Experience*

The term 'mysticism' is defined by the *Penguin Dictionary of Religions* as 'An umbrella term for practices, experiences, and writings in which direct awareness of/and/or union with God or ultimate reality is the main focus'.⁹

It is mystical experience with which we shall be concerned, and therefore only with mystical writings insofar as they are clearly intended to *report experiences*. We shall not be concerned with writing which can properly be called mystical because of the character of its doctrine, but which is not presented as having any 'autobiographical' foundation.

The importance of a clear autobiographical foundation is stressed by Phillip Almond in *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine*.¹⁰ Criticizing an exposition of a passage from a Hindu text which takes the passage to reflect a mystical experience, he remarks that no more might lie behind the passage than a procedure thought to increase the efficacy of sacrificial rites. One reason for the weightiness of a distinction between mystical writing which purports to reflect a mystical experience and mystical writing which does not purport to do this, is the authority which an experience, presenting itself as a direct awareness of ultimate reality, would lend to a doctrine.

There is no *correct* definition of mystical experience, but definitions of it vary in value. The one contained in the Penguin Dictionary's entry on Mysticism is a good one. When we have examples of mystical experience in front of us, it will be seen that it picks out features fundamental to this kind of experience, which presents itself as *direct awareness of ultimate reality*.

Features of Mystical Experience

The term ‘mystical experience’ is often used to designate vaguely religious experiences. In our use of the term, it designates experiences that are anything but vague. Here is an example of mystical experience—with no vagueness about it—in which the features just now mentioned show up, as well as others not yet mentioned: ‘I have never had’, the poet, Tennyson, said in a letter,

any revelations through anaesthetics, but a kind of waking trance—this for lack of a better word—I have frequently had, quite up from boyhood, when I have been all alone. This has come upon me through repeating my own name to myself silently till all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not a confused state but the clearest, the surest of the surest, utterly beyond words—where death was an almost laughable impossibility—the loss of personality (if so it were) seeming no extinction, but the only true life. I am ashamed of my feeble description. Have I not said the state is utterly beyond words.¹¹

James adds a correspondent’s recollection of Tennyson as saying of this condition: ‘By God Almighty! there is no delusion in the matter! It is no nebulous ecstasy, but a state of transcendent wonder associated with absolute clearness of mind.’

Also illustrating fundamental features of mystical experience is the following account of an experience given by the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, St. Teresa of Avila:

Thus does God, when He raises a soul to union with Himself, suspend the natural action of all her faculties. She neither sees, hears, nor understands, so long as she is united with God. But this time is always short, and it seems even shorter than it is. God establishes Himself in the interior of this soul in such a way, that when she returns to herself, it is wholly impossible for her to doubt that she has been in God, and God in her. This truth remains so strongly impressed on her that,

even though many years should pass without the condition returning, she can neither forget the favour she received, nor doubt of its reality.¹²

James (pages 380–381) lists four features which, he says, will count for him as ‘marks’ of mystical experience, the first two decisively. The four marks are:

1. ‘*Ineffability*’. No ‘adequate report’ of the content of the experience ‘can be given in words’. Consequently, mystical states are like ‘states of feeling’. ‘No one can make clear to another who has never had a certain feeling, in what the quality or the worth of it consists’.
2. ‘*Noetic quality*’. Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of *knowledge*, states in which truth is ascertained, and with certainty.
3. ‘*Transiency*’. ‘Mystical states cannot be sustained for long.’
4. ‘*Passivity*’. ‘Although the onset of mystical states may be facilitated by voluntary operations ... yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his will were in abeyance.’

Do these marks of mystical experience show up in the two examples before us? Ineffability does, explicitly, in the passage from Tennyson (‘Have I not said the state is utterly beyond words?’); and implicitly in St. Teresa’s description of her experience when, shortly before the passage cited, she speaks of her ‘understanding’ as having been ‘stricken with inactivity’. The noetic character of the experience Tennyson describes—its presenting itself as a state of knowledge, of downright objective certainty—is unmistakable (‘not a confused state, but the clearest, the surest of the surest’). This is a quality also of the experience described by Teresa (‘it is wholly impossible for her to doubt that she has been in God, and God in her’). The transiency of Tennyson’s experience is implied, and is asserted by Teresa of her experience. Passivity in his experience—though it has voluntary antecedents—is implied by Tennyson; passivity is one of the themes in Teresa’s description of her experience.

Central to James's account of the nature of mystical experience is the analogy he points to between sense experience and mystical experience:

mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us ... they are absolutely sensational in their epistemological quality ... that is, they are face to face presentations of what seems immediately to exist. [pages 423–424]

Arguments for and against analogy as between sense and mystical experience are examined in Wainwright's book *Mysticism*. He picks out this issue as 'critically important both to those who ascribe cognitive value to mystical experiences'—to those who think that knowledge is achieved in these experiences—and to those who deny that they have cognitive value.¹³ (Two other matters to which we shall give some attention are discussed by Wainwright, whether there are fundamentally different types of mystical experience, and what he refers to as 'chemical mysticism'.)

Taking mystical experience to be analogous to sense experience would explain the mystic's certainty that the experience is objective, is a disclosure of reality: to use James's words, our senses 'have assured us of certain states of fact'.

Of course, the objectivity of the experience does not follow from the mystic's being unable to doubt its objectivity, just as it does not follow from your being unable to doubt that you are seeing an X, that you are actually doing so. But if you can't doubt that you are, it's likely that you are.

The Notion of Mystical Experience as Uniform

The uniformity of mystical experience—the notion that its disclosures are always and everywhere the same—has been called a 'platitudinous truth' about mysticism. A statement by James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the book read by everyone with an intellectual interest in religion, perhaps did more than any other single thing to promote the notion of the uniformity of mystical experience:

This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystical achievement. In mystical states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting ... mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neo-platonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which brings it about that the mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land. [page 419]

So portentously significant a statement sticks in the memory more firmly than what appears in the detail of the *examples* of mystical experience assembled by James. Variety we have already seen exemplified in the utterances of mystics cited by James. Recall the reported experiences of Tennyson and St. Teresa: partial *identity* with 'boundless being' in Tennyson's experience, and no mention of God; identity altogether absent from what Teresa takes to be an experience of union with God.

Soon after the passage quoted above, James writes—this time accurately, but of course not so memorably: 'Religious mysticism ... is much less unanimous than I have allowed'.

It is dualistic in Sankhya, and monistic in Vedanta philosophy. I called it pantheistic; but the great Spanish mystics are anything but pantheists. [page 425]

Significantly promoting the notion in our times that mystical experience is uniform, of a single type, has been the influence of Aldous Huxley. In *The Perennial Philosophy*, Huxley claimed to have got hold of the unifying truth of the great historical religions. An earlier theosophy had made the same claim. Huxley's intellectually glittering exposition of it did nothing to substantiate it. Huxley has adherents of the 'perennial philosophy' all agreeing that within us, there is 'something similar to or even identical with, divine Reality'.¹⁴ The difference between being like God and being God reduces the extent of this agreement to next to nothing.

Huxley's Mystical Experience

The Perennial Philosophy was to display the essential unity of the great religions. The essential unity of mystical experience is implied in Huxley's book, *The Doors of Perception*. In fact, as we shall see, the experience which Huxley describes is an example of one type of mystical experience.

Huxley's experience was drug-induced, but it does not follow that it can be dismissed out-of-hand as a possible disclosure of reality. We shall come shortly to an account of an experience resembling Huxley's which was not drug-induced.

Huxley's experience is not typical of a drug-induced experience. And it was not itself all-of-a-piece. Predominantly blissful, it had a stage at which he found himself 'all at once on the brink of panic'.¹⁵ He also felt that he understood what being mad was like. R.C. Zaehner's book, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, a detailed examination of the notion that mystical experience is always more or less the same, which was touched off by Huxley's book, has appendices relating various drug-induced experiences, some of them his own. Some were blissful, some frightening. What the experiences seemed to disclose varied from next-to-nothing to vague truths of cosmic or religious quality. Zaehner's own experience 'plunged him into a universe of farce'.¹⁶

When the mescaline which Huxley had taken had worked, he saw in a glass of flowers 'what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence'.¹⁷

Huxley continued to look at the flowers. In their 'living light', he says,

I seemed to detect the qualitative equivalent of breathing—but of a breathing without returns to a starting-point with no recurrent ebbs but only a repeated flow from beauty to lightness, from deeper to ever deeper meaning. Words like Grace and Transfiguration came to my mind, and this of course was what, among other things, they stood for. My eyes travelled from the rose ... to the smooth scrolls of sentient amethyst

which were the iris. The Beatific Vision, *Sat Chit Ananda*, Being–Awareness–Bliss—for the first time I understood, not on the verbal level, not by inchoate hints or at a distance, but precisely and completely what those prodigious syllables referred to. [page 17–18]

The Beatific Vision is the vision of God in the enjoyment of which, according to Christian belief, all yearning reaches fulfilment. Being–Awareness–Bliss (a translation of *Sat Chit Ananda*), characterizes, according to Hindu belief, Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, corresponding (with, of course, important differences) to the God of theistic belief.

There was a further stage in Huxley's experience:

everything shone with the Inner Light, and was infinite in its significance. The legs ... of that chair—how miraculous their tubularity, how supernatural their polished smoothness! I spent several minutes—or was it several centuries?—not merely gazing at those bamboo legs, but actually *being* them—or rather being myself in them; or to be more accurate (for 'I' was not involved in the case, nor in a certain sense were 'they') being my Not-Self in the Not-Self, which was the chair. [page 20–21]

The celebration of the Not-Self is a celebration of much more than the disappearance of self-preoccupation. It is a celebration of the disappearance of personality—of me-ness and you-ness—which is presented in *The Perennial Philosophy* as blocking attainment of the highest goals to which religion points.

At this stage of Huxley's experience the unitive element in mystical experience shows up—identity or union with the object of the experience. His experience was not merely one of looking at marvellously transfigured chair-legs, but of actually *being* them.

Huxley's sense of actually being the things he is looking at—a *chair*, *flowers*, *books*—is obviously not a sense of union with *God* or of identity with *Brahman*. So what he could mean by saying that his experience enabled him to understand what was referred to by the 'Beatific Vision' and by the 'Being–Awareness–Bliss' characterization of Brahman is altogether opaque.

Nature Mysticism

Huxley's experience was an idiosyncratic example of a common type of mystical experience—Nature mysticism. Nature mysticism is often called pantheistic. Pantheism means 'all-God-ism', Zaehner remarks. Since nothing that might be called God figures in this type of experience, the view it implies, he says, would be much more accurately called 'pan-en-hen-ism', 'all-in-one-ism'.¹⁸

Many would regard this type of mystical experience as *religious*. Why? The notion of God is absent from it, or, at least, unessential to it; and it carries no intimations of immortality. Consequently, an answer to this question might throw some light on the nature of religion.

In Nature mysticism the self experiences itself as identical with Nature, the 'within' and the 'without' being experienced as one. Compare the following example with Huxley's:

I lay down on my back on the warm, dry moss and listened to the skylark singing ... No other music ever gave me the same pleasure as that passionately joyous singing ... And then a curious experience befell me. It was as if everything that had seemed to be external and around me were suddenly within me ... *The whole world seemed to be within me.* It was within me that the trees waved their green branches, it was within me that the skylark was singing, it was within me that the hot sun shone, and the shade was cool.¹⁹

It will be noticed that there is no reference to God, direct or implicit, in this description of the experience. The all-in-oneness is very apparent.

Experience of One's Self as Deathless

Nature mysticism can incorporate a type of mystical experience which can exist independently of it, namely, an overwhelming sense of immortality. The experience in which Tennyson irresistibly felt himself one with 'boundless being'—the words suggest

Nature mysticism—was also as irresistibly an assurance of his deathlessness. Here now is an example of the mystical assurance of deathlessness without any suggestion of Nature mysticism. The passage about to be quoted is not, throughout, the report of an experience; philosophizing goes on in it—where time is said never to have existed and to be an artificial arrangement. A prehistoric burial mound touched off the experience:

my soul has never been, and can never be, dipped in time. Time has never existed, and never will be; it is a purely artificial arrangement. It is eternity now, it always was eternity, and always will be. By no possible means could I get into time if I tried. I am in eternity now and must remain. Because the idea of time has left my mind—if ever it had any hold on it—to me the man interred in the tumulus is living now as I live. We are both in eternity ... It is beyond telling more natural that I should have a soul than not, that there should be immortality.²⁰

Experience of Identity with God

On the face of it, the following passage reports what is taken to be an experience of the identity of one's self with God:

Every man whose heart is no longer shaken by any doubt knows with certainty that there is no being save only One ... In his divine majesty the *me*, the *we*, the *thou*, are not found, for in the One there can be no distinction. Every being who is annulled and entirely separated from himself, hears resound outside of him this voice and this echo: *I am God*: he has an eternal way of existing, and is no longer subject to death.²¹

There is a strong appearance of inconsistency in this report of a mystical experience (and in others like it) which is very damaging when the experience is seen as disclosing the identity of one's self with God. According to the report, no 'I' is experienced ('the *me*, the *we*, the *thou*, are not found'). It would seem to follow that '*I am God*' expresses nothing that was *experienced*.

Caution is needed when deciding what to make of a mystic's description of an experience as being one of identity with God: it is possible to mistake the expression of ecstatic feeling—'drunken religious speech', the Muslim theologian al-Ghazali called it—for a fact-claiming statement. A very substantial indication of what the mystic regards as stating a religious *fact*—by contrast with a tumultuous expression of feeling—are the mystic's routine religious beliefs.

The writer of the passage just now quoted was a Sufi. The Sufi's were (and are) Muslims with an orientation towards mystical religion. What would this Sufi's routine religious belief have been? Muslim orthodoxy would have tremendously committed him to the belief that God and the mystic are distinct beings. But Hindu influences were strongly felt within Sufism. And so the identificationist utterances in this passage could be not merely expressions of ecstatic feeling, but also a voicing of the mystic's *belief* in his identity with God.

Theistic Mysticism and Identificationist Language

In theistic mysticism, union with God—wholly distinct from oneself—is taken to be experienced. The passage quoted earlier from St. Teresa gives a description of this experience in straightforward language. But the language might not always be straightforward: the description might strongly appear to be inconsistent with a presupposition of the experience, namely, that God and the mystic are totally distinct in being.

Suppose the Sufi whose remarks were quoted just now to have been a strict theist: how is his identificationist language to be explained? It is not explained by saying that his utterance is ecstatic. Why the ecstatic utterance is *identificationist* needs to be explained. A remark by St. Teresa (quoted by James, page 408) helps towards an explanation. In this 'union', she says, 'the soul is fully awake as regards God, but wholly asleep ... in respect of herself'. She doesn't figure at all in the experiential picture; only God does. (There is, however, a question to which no answer suggests itself: how is the mystic aware

of her union with God if she doesn't figure at all in the experiential picture, and only God does?)

That theistic mysticism is a love-mysticism helps to account for the expression of union with God in identificationist words. Where distinction is altogether absent, love is not possible. But love, in a manner, overcomes the difference it presupposes. 'Lost' is a term in the vocabulary of love. In intense love one being is 'lost' in another. The term is frequent in mystical vocabulary. One is *lost* to oneself, *lost* in God.

St. John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century theistic mystic, speaks of the 'deification' of the soul. But he says 'The thread of love binds so closely God and the soul, and so unites them that it transforms and makes them one by love; so that, though in essence different, yet in glory and appearances the soul seems God and God the soul'.²²

Maintaining the 'separate existence' of Allah and of the seeker who has attained experiential union with Him, a modern Sufi describes the relationship between them thus: 'Allah's acceptance of the seeker's soul to himself, is the ultimate nearness where duality is extinguished as though Allah has *come in between a man and his own heart*'.²³

The mystical experience of union with God is like

... music heard so deeply

That it is not heard at all, but you are the music

While the music lasts.²⁴

A Change of Mind about a Mystical Disclosure

We now look at a change of mind after a mystical experience as to its disclosure from what this was taken to be during the experience.

Martin Buber, the Jewish thinker whose book *I and Thou* (1923) had an impact especially on Christian theologians for fifty years or so, writes in a later book:

Sometimes I hear it said that every *I and Thou* is only superficial, deep down ... there is only the one primal being unconflicted by another ...

Now from my own unforgettable experience I know well that there is a state in which the bonds of the personal nature of life seem to have fallen away from us and we experience an undivided unity. But I do not know—what the soul willingly imagines and indeed is bound to imagine (mine too once did it)—that in this I had attained to a union with the primal being or the godhead. That is an exaggeration ... I can elicit from those experiences only that in them I reached an undifferentiable unity of myself without form or content. I may call this an original pre-biographical unity and suppose that it is hidden unchanged beneath all biographical change, all development and complication of the soul. Nevertheless, in the honest and sober account of the responsible understanding, this unity is nothing but the unity of this soul of mine, whose 'ground' I have reached ...²⁵

It is fairly clear that 'union' with 'the primal being or the god-head' is to be understood as *identity* with this being. And Buber is saying that the experience misrepresents what it is that is experienced: it is 'an undifferentiable unity' of *oneself*, the 'ground' of the soul, that is experienced; but the experience irresistibly seems to be an experience of the undifferentiable unity of oneself with (in a phrase Buber goes on to use) 'the soul of the All'.

Why is a person having this experience 'bound to imagine' it to be something it is not? In the absence of a description which would give us an idea of what the experience was like, we are unable to get much out of the explanation Buber gives:

The unity of his own self is not distinguishable in the man's feeling from unity in general. For he who in the act or event of absorption is sunk beneath the realm of all multiplicity that holds sway in the soul cannot experience the cessation of multiplicity except as unity itself. [page 25]

The 'ground' of the soul is spoken of in the literature on mysticism. And if there are reports of its being experienced *as such*, not as mistaken for something else—reports which have much more experiential content to them than there is to Buber's report of his

experience—another variety of mystical experience might have to be recognized.

Let us consider in relation to the analogy between sense and mystical experience, Buber's change of mind as to what he had experienced. No sense experience, however indubitable it might take itself to be, is inerrant, so the occurrence of mystical experiences mistaken as to what they are experiences of, would not damage the analogy. You may not have the slightest doubt that you are seeing X, but be wrong; it is Y you are seeing. You might never know that you were mistaken. But if it could never be shown that an experience which presents itself as one of indubitable perception is mistaken, our concept of a perceptual mistake would not have come into existence; because in the structure of this concept the veridicality of a perception is determined by ascertainable facts external to the perceptual experience. The implication of this is a drastic limiting of the analogy between sense and mystical experience; for it is of course no news that the deliverance of a mystical experience cannot be shown to be true, or knocked out by, independently ascertainable facts.

Why does Buber judge his experience to be mistaken in presenting itself as an experience of unity or identity with 'the soul of the All'? He gives no explanation. One supposes the explanation to be his seeing that this deliverance of the experience is incompatible with what he believed, or has come to believe, is the truth about the relation between God and human beings.

Compatibility Issues

Three sorts of mystical experience which are, to all appearances, irreducibly different in type have been exemplified: the experience of one's essential unity with Nature, the experience of one's self as deathless, the experience of union with God. (Understand 'an experience of' to be short for 'an experience taken to be of', 'an experience which presents itself as an experience of'.)

An experience of identity with God is perhaps a fourth type of mystical experience. We leave the question open: having been unable

in the case discussed to determine what to make of the mystic's '*I am God*'—whether it is to be construed as an assertion of what is taken to be truth, or merely as an expression of ecstatic feeling; and in cases where the identity of oneself with God is clearly put forward as doctrinal truth, not having come across any description of an experience foundational to its truth. For the purpose, however, of comment on compatibilities among mystical experiences, we shall include an identity-with-God experience.

As ordinary sense experience—seeing or hearing, for example—presents itself as a direct and indubitable awareness of something real, each of these three (possibly four) types of mystical experience presents itself as a direct and indubitable awareness of something that is transcendently real. So how far they are compatible with one another is a very important question.

The theistic mystical experience of *union* with God is clearly incompatible with an experience of *identity* with God. Theistic mystical experience and the experience of one's self as immortal are clearly compatible.

The question as to the compatibility of an identity-with-God experience and an experience of one's self as deathless, is tricky. The reader might care to think about it after going through the section in Chapter 5 headed '*That art Thou*'. Is there any reason to regard an experience disclosing an essential unity of oneself and Nature as incompatible with an experience of union with God, or with an experience of the identity of oneself with God, or with an experience of one's self as immortal?

Those who have thought that mystical experience is always and everywhere one and the same have usually thought that this experience was of the kind designated as 'Nature mysticism', pantheistic (or 'pan-en-henic') mystical experience. Another supposition to be found among mysticism-unitarians is that the uniform experience is one which *underlies* the apparent varieties of mystical experience and that they are products of different interpretations of that experience, due mainly to cultural differences. Thus a mystical experience 'interpreted as', 'seen as', an experience of

union with God in a theistic tradition would appear as something else in a non-theistic tradition.

Suppose that this experience is interpreted as one of union with God; what, however conjecturally, might it be *uninterpreted*? (Its existence is of course conjectural: it is never come upon uninterpreted; it never figures in reports of mystical experiences. It is oddly called an *experience*.) Whatever the uniform 'experience' supposedly underlying the apparently diverse mystical experiences might be, there is a character it must have. It must be such that it can lend itself to the production of experiences as disparate as St. Teresa's and Tennyson's (see page 38). Good reasons would be needed for believing in the mere possibility of an 'experience' of such chameleon potentiality.

Mysticism and Agnosticism

A pronouncement on mysticism made by Karen Armstrong in the introduction to her widely-used 'anthology of religious and poetic experience', *Tongues of Fire*, if true, is as important as any characterization of mysticism could be. It is that

Essentially to be a mystic is to be an agnostic. When the immediate answer to the question 'What is God?' is 'I do not know', it is clear that there is no dogmatic insistence on religious 'beliefs'. Agnosticism is the religion of the mystic in a profound way.²⁶

Agnosticism in its original (nineteenth-century) meaning maintained the impossibility of an answer to the question as to whether or not God exists. It denoted a position between theism and atheism. It still does. Derivatively from this original meaning, agnosticism might be declared with regard to anything: 'My position on this matter is agnostic', meaning 'It's an open question for me'.

Clearly, theistic mysticism is not agnostic as to whether or not God exists. In every type of mysticism, so far is mystical experience from being agnostic, that its deliverances come to the mystic charged with certainty: recall Tennyson's report of the experience in which he saw death as an almost laughable impossibility; recall its being for James

a defining characteristic of mystical experiences that they are 'as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us'.

The principal citation on which Karen Armstrong bases her opinion that mysticism is essentially agnostic is a passage from the fourteenth-century English mystical treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*. She quotes (page 24) this remark: 'But now you will ask me, "How am I to think of God himself, and what is he?" and I cannot answer you except to say "I do not know"'.²⁷

There are two clouds in *The Cloud of Unknowing*: one is 'the cloud of unknowing', the other is 'the cloud of forgetting'. First, the cloud of forgetting. This forgetting is a procedure in the *Cloud's* version of what is called, technically, 'contemplative' prayer. The contemplative aim is that the soul be 'oned with God' in love. To be removed from the mind, to be 'forgotten', this mystical treatise maintains, is any thought of created things—angels, saints and, very much, any thought of oneself—all thought of everything except God. To be forgotten even, is thought about the works of God, including the work of redemption. The bare thought of *God* is to fill the mind.

But, 'of God himself can no man think'. (Ch. 6, page 62) The context of these words is the 'cloud-of-unknowing' situation. This cloud is the 'darkness' there is between God, the 'supremely desirable thing', and anyone who seeks to know God in His own being. And so, the mystic says, 'I would leave all that I can think, and choose to my love that thing that I cannot think', for the cloud of unknowing can be 'pierced' with the 'sharp dart of longing love'. (page 62)

The mystic's assertions, that 'God Himself' is unthinkable and that the answer to the question What is God? is 'I do not know', are not expressions of total ignorance as to what God is. The mystic of course takes himself to know, as any ordinary believer does, such truths about God as that, uncreated, He is the creator of everything else that exists. In the procedure of the contemplative enterprise such knowledge of God *relative to His creation*, though presupposed by the enterprise, is to be 'covered by the cloud of forgetting'. The ignorance declared in the enterprise is of what God is *in Himself*.

A general point. Religious declarations of ignorance can be very tricky. Here is a Buddhist comment on one such instance. A Zen Buddhist (of the sixth century AD) was asked a question by the Chinese emperor of the time, to which he replied 'I do not know, your Majesty'. Narrating the incident, D.T. Suzuki remarks: 'Clearly the answer could not have been one of an *agnostic* who believes in the unknowability of the ultimate truth'. He continues: 'The Zen teachers are all unknowing knowers or knowing unknowers. Therefore their "I do not know" does not really mean the same as our "I do not know"'.²⁸

Chapter 3: The Idea of God

What is said of God in this book is said of the God of a fully-developed theism, a development which, broadly speaking, reached its completion in the Middle Ages. Two matters will be concentrated upon in this chapter, because they are fundamental to the idea of God, and because they are especially relevant to other things dealt with in the book. They are the ideas of God as infinite, and as the Creator.

1. Theism

‘Infinite in Every Perfection’

St. Augustine (fifth century AD) asked a disciple this question: ‘If we can find something indubitably superior to our reason, would you hesitate to call that, whatever it be, God?’ Augustine approved of the answer he got. It was ‘I would not straight away call that God. For it is not one to whom my reason is inferior whom I would call God, but one who has no superior.’¹

Implicit in a willingness to call a being *God*, is thinking of this being as rightly worshipped. What can be rightly worshipped has been a consideration of supreme importance in the development of theism. The development did not stop at the conception of something that has no superior. It reached its culmination (in the eleventh century) with St. Anselm’s description of God as a being ‘than which no greater can be conceived of’, a being therefore which *could have* no superior, a being—in the words of a later formulation than Anselm’s—‘infinite in every perfection’; for that is what the greatest being conceivable is.

Here, in contrast with the conception of God reached in the Middle Ages, is the conception of God put forward by the novelist H.G.Wells in *God The Invisible King* (1917). There was surprise at the

time that Wells should have anything to do with a God, however conceived of; Wells was justifiably seen as an atheist, or at least an agnostic. (The Great War had very considerable and very various effects on feeling and thinking about matters of religion on others besides Wells.) The God described by Wells is said to be ‘the God of the human heart’, ‘the personal God of mankind’. The ‘new faith’, which Wells said he found growing up inside himself and others, worships ‘a *finite* God’. Somewhere ‘in the dawning of mankind’ this God had a beginning, and ‘as mankind grows, he grows’. He ‘needs us as we need him’.

Two of the ‘perfections’ which a fully-developed theism ascribes to God held to be infinite in every perfection, will especially concern us in the next chapter. They are perfection in goodness—moral goodness—and in power. It would be readily agreed, no doubt, that a being whose goodness was imperfect would be unworthy of worship. But power might strike you as another matter altogether. You might even think of power as a low-grade element in a conception of God. With that thought before us, we shall look at what Edmund Burke, one of the most original minds in the eighteenth century, writes about the significance of the idea of power in the conception of God.² The present-day response to the citations from Burke is likely to be polarized between hostility and an endorsement of what one would probably not have thought up for oneself.

Almighty Power

‘I know some people are of opinion, that no awe, no degree of terror accompanies the idea of power’, Burke writes, ‘and have hazarded to affirm, that we can contemplate the idea of God Himself without any such emotion.’ Burke’s rejoinder tries to produce the realization that what most activates religion *emotionally* is thought of the fearful power involved in the creation of the world.

Though no doubt all of God’s attributes are on a level, yet to our imagination His power is by far the most striking. Some reflection ... is necessary to satisfy us of His wisdom, His jus-

tice, and His goodness. To be struck with His power, it is only necessary that we should open our eyes. But whilst we contemplate so vast an object, under the arm as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before Him.

Our reminding ourselves of the justice and mercy with which God's power is exercised, cannot, Burke continues, altogether remove the 'terror' naturally arising from 'a force which nothing can withstand'. In Scripture 'whenever God is represented as appearing, everything terrible in nature is called up to heighten the awe and solemnity of the Divine presence'. The word 'tremble' can appear, Burke points out, even when God is shown exerting His power beneficently: 'Tremble thou earth! at the presence of the Lord ... which turned the rock into standing water'. Innumerable passages in 'sacred and profane' literature establish 'the inseparable union of a sacred awe with our idea of God'.

Since Job is mentioned by Burke in the pages we have been drawing upon, it is strange that no mention is made of the answer given by God to Job's complaint about his suffering. The answer is a display of the tremendous works of God's creative power. (Job 38–41) No justification for the suffering is proposed, yet Job's answer to God is: 'I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes'. (Job 42. 5–6)

We have been in numinous territory again, and it is appropriate to recall a verse to which Otto drew attention as marking the difference between numinous dread and ordinary dread: 'let not thy dread make me afraid'. (Job 13.21)

Theistic Equations

Two equations sometimes appear in an exposition of theism. They are:

God minus the world = God;

The world minus God = nothing.

These equations summarize the belief reached in a fully-developed theism, as to the relation between God and the world. ('Theism', in our use of the term, means a fully-developed theism; and the 'world', means in this quotation, as throughout the book, what these days is more commonly called the 'universe'.) Infinite in His perfection, God has no dependence of any kind on anything; and whatever exists besides God owes its entire being to God.

According to the theistic doctrine of creation, the world is not created out of pre-existing material, but—'from nothing'. ('When He decrees a thing He need only say: "Be", and it is.') It is not an implication of this doctrine that the world had a *beginning*; but it is an implication of the doctrine that if the world has existed eternally, it has existed eternally in absolute dependence on God. Brought out of nothingness by the power of God, created beings are held back from nothingness by the same power—but this is a feature of the theistic conception of the relation between God and the world which we will leave without comment.

The absolute self-sufficiency of God might make Him seem remote, out of reach. But it is an implication of this self-sufficiency that no self-interest, so to speak, on God's part is involved in His relation to the world. The only needs involved are those of created beings.

We shall consider the self-sufficiency of God in connection with two matters. The first has to do with the direction in which the benefit of worship flows, the second with the purpose of human existence.

'Does Piety Do the Gods some Good?'

There is a widespread belief that the God of theistic religion is hungry for worship, and it is felt to be pretty disgusting that a being hungry for worship should be worshipped. A memorable repudiation of the idea that God needs worshippers is to be found in Plato's dialogue the *Euthyphro*.

An attempt is being made in this dialogue to define reverence, piety, religious devotion. One of Euthyphro's proposals is the following:

Well, Socrates, it seems to me that reverence or piety is that kind of rectitude which is concerned with tendance of the gods, and the remaining kind of rectitude is that which is concerned with the tendance of human beings.⁴

(Whether there was one God or many gods was not an issue in this dialogue. Take 'tendance' of the gods as meaning service to the gods, and 'tendance' of human beings as meaning the right conduct of oneself towards other human beings.)

Isn't the effect of 'tendance' the same, Euthyphro is asked, namely, benefit to whoever receives it? Does piety, then, do the gods some good? The answer is: No. What the gods give (Socrates is speaking now)

is obvious to anyone, for we have nothing good that they don't give us; but what benefit do they get from what they receive from us? Is our commerce with them so much to our advantage that we receive all our good things from them, while they receive none from us? [page 40]

'But do you really imagine, Socrates', Euthyphro asks, 'that the gods derive benefit from the things that they receive from us?' Of course Socrates does not imagine this. Euthyphro has missed the irony in what Socrates has said. He thinks that Socrates has likened exchanges between the gods and human beings to an ordinary commercial transaction in which there are profitable exchanges between both parties involved in the transaction. Socrates meant that there is no profit to the gods in the strange commerce they engage in with human beings.

Why piety is dear to the gods is not discussed in the *Euthyphro*. The reason why piety is dear to the God of developed theism, who has no need of it, is that it is a need of our nature to offer it to Him. All the benefit of religious devotion flows in a human direction.

There is a difficulty in this idea to which attention should be drawn. It is difficult to square the doctrine of the absolute self-sufficiency of God with scriptural assertions in theistic religions such as that of God's longing for His people (so notably instanced in the Book of Hosea). Perhaps there might be some value in the suggestion that

although God does not need a response from those of His creatures who are capable of it, His love for them is of such a kind that He has chosen to subject himself to this need.

'What Are We For?'

The 'scientific world picture', Kurt Baier writes in a well known essay 'The Meaning of Life', sees man 'as a being with no purpose allotted to him by anyone but himself'.⁵ The Christian world picture, on the other hand, sees man as a 'creature ... a divine artefact ... with a purpose or task assigned him by his Maker'. (The claim for any world picture that it is scientific, it should be mentioned, is not a scientific claim, not a claim like claims made in any of the sciences. However much sciences may be drawn upon for the construction of a world picture, an overall account of things, the result is a philosophical construction.)

Baier distinguishes two senses of 'having a purpose'. In one sense, persons have purposes. (What was your purpose in doing that?) In the other sense, a purpose is normally attributed only to a *thing*. (What is the purpose of that object?) Baier's comment on these two senses of 'having a purpose' is that the scientific world picture does not prevent us from having purposes in the first sense. As for the second sense, to be allotted a purpose in this sense is degrading:

If at a garden party, I ask a man in livery, 'What is your purpose?' I am insulting him. I might as well have asked 'what are you *for*?' Such questions reduce him to the level of a gadget. I imply that *we* allot to *him* the tasks, the goals ... he is to pursue, that *his* wishes and ... purposes are to count for nothing. [page 104]

Dealing with the question 'What makes a life meaningful?', Baier remarks that 'we call a person's life meaningful not only if it is worthwhile, but also if he has helped in the realization of some plan or purpose transcending his own concerns'. (page 106) Someone dying of cancer, for example, can make the life remaining to him significant by allowing experiments to be done upon him that might help to

overcome cancer. 'In a similar way, only on a much more elevated plane', Baier says, 'every man ... is guaranteed significance by the knowledge that he is participating in God's purpose'. (page 106)

This remark should have made it a question for Baier whether the Christian world picture was not too hurriedly represented by him as turning human beings into gadgets. To justify that representation of it, a case would have to be made out to show that its account of the relation between God and human beings implies that they are tools of God's purposes, their own of no consequence.

In fact, the Christian teaching is that among God's purposes, is everyone's attaining a happiness desirable beyond anything else. No other purpose that God might have overrides this one. Thus, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, that distillation of medieval Christian thought and feeling about human destiny, there is no appearance of a cosmic purpose into the achievement of which human beings are slotted, let alone one overriding the end for which they were made. And in a post-Reformation statement (the *Presbyterian Shorter Catechism*) about the purpose of human existence, this is to be found: 'Man's chief end'—what we are for—is to 'glorify God', the glorifying of God being not a divine need but a human need—'and to enjoy Him forever'.

2. Pantheism

Pantheism is an identification of the world with God. A love of Nature might dispose a person towards pantheism but, of course, the most intense love of Nature would not by itself induce pantheism. Suggesting a connection between the love of Nature and pantheism, is the readiness with which some of the greatest poetry of Wordsworth, the great poet of Nature, is thought to be pantheistic—notably the following well-known lines:

And I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts: a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
 A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought
 And rolls through all things.⁶

There is poetry of Wordsworth's (altered in later revision) which is unmistakably pantheistic. It is a question whether these lines are to be understood as pantheistic in attitude, because the God of theism not only transcends the world, but is immanent in the world, indwells it.

The world deified by pantheism is not just the world of Wordsworthian Nature—mountains, storms, mists, and clouds at sunset. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines pantheism as the 'doctrine that God is everything and everything is God'. The pantheism of most pantheists is vague. But it does not take much thinking to make you wonder, not whether everything—mountains, factories, etc—are possibly God; but what the pantheistic doctrine can possibly *mean*.

'God or Nature'

So we will look at some of the ideas of the great pantheist philosopher, Spinoza (who wrote in the seventeenth century). He was called both the 'God-intoxicated man' and 'the monstrous atheist'. Why he was called 'God-intoxicated' is obvious: he called reality God *or* Nature. Why he might be thought of as an atheist will be mentioned later on. The first thing we have to do is to see whether we can get any help from him in understanding the doctrine that God is everything and everything God.

Spinoza makes two fundamental distinctions which are a help. The first is between 'substance' and 'mode'. God is defined by Spinoza in his *Ethics* as 'a being absolutely infinite, that is, a substance consisting of infinite attributes'.⁷ The attributes of God are properties of the divine substance, two of which are known to us.

They are 'thought' (mind) and 'extension' (space). The term 'substance' in Spinoza's use of it is a technical one; the old word for a noun, a 'substantive', in contrast to an adjective, is a pointer to its meaning. An adjective qualifies a substantive. God is the infinite 'Substantive'. Finite minds such as our minds, and extended objects such as our bodies, have, as it were, an adjectival existence as 'modes' or modifications of the divine substantive. They are not simply God—only God adjectivally. That dissolves to some extent (doesn't it?) the apparent incomprehensibility of everything as being God and God as being everything.

There is an associated distinction made by Spinoza which helps us towards an understanding of any pantheism which is intellectually and religiously viable. Spinoza refers to the divine universe as 'God or Nature'. But he distinguishes within Nature between 'Nature-Producing' and 'Nature-Produced'. No creative act of will, however, brings about Nature-Produced. It comes about with the same necessity as governs a theorem in geometry. (Spinoza's *Ethics* with its 'axioms', 'propositions', 'corollaries', looks, designedly, like a book of geometry.) The world cannot exist without God, and God cannot exist without the world. This is not just Spinoza's doctrine; it is pantheistic doctrine. And standard pantheism would hold, with Spinoza, that the world is not, as in theistic belief, brought into existence by a creative act of will. What is distinctively Spinozistic is that the necessity which binds together God and the world is of the sort found in geometrical deduction.

God, in theistic religions (and Brahman, correspondingly in Hinduism), is the *Ground* of everything else, that to which everything else owes its existence. Though Spinoza uses the terms 'God' and 'Nature' interchangeably, this fundamental element in the conception of God is preserved in the conception of Nature-Producing. Consequently, though for Spinoza the universe is divine, it is an implication of his thought that to call everything in the universe God, would be to trivialize the idea of God.

We glance at the aspect of pantheism just now mentioned in a religion whose traditional conception of God is predominantly

pantheistic. The Hindu 'rubs shoulders with the divine in every field and in every street', it has been said. But pantheistic Hinduism does not ascribe to rivers, animals, holy men, the attributes of Brahman who is their Ground. Operative in its thought, is the distinction between the Divine as producing and the divine as produced.

For Hinduism, divinity is encountered in the world not only because it is all-pervasive, but also because special manifestations of divinity occur. Nothing corresponds to these manifestations in Spinoza's system of thought. And there is no response from Spinoza's God to our attitude to Him, whatever it might be. 'He who loves God', Spinoza argues, 'cannot endeavour to bring it about that God should love him in return.' (*Ethics*, pt. V, props., XVII, XIX)

What we have seen of Spinoza's thought could be usefully reflected upon in relation to the main concern of this book. That concern is with the question 'What is religion?'. For all the centrality of God to Spinoza's thought, would it not be an odd use of the word to speak of his *religion*?

Pantheism does not by itself generate a way of life, an ethics. It can contribute to an ethics. It contributes to some extent to Spinoza's ethics. The reality of human beings in Spinoza's view, is that they are finite modes of the infinite divine being. The right attitude to the human condition followed, he thought, from knowledge of this, and, more generally, from knowledge of how things are. We are in 'bondage' until this knowledge about ourselves and the order of things is obtained. In the state of bondage one sees one's will as colliding with, and often overcome by, other energies. Deliverance involves learning to see all that happens 'in the light of eternity'. Seen in this light, everything that happens is seen in its necessity. There is nothing arbitrary anywhere, nothing that could be different.

Further, to be free is to be unconstrained by anything external to oneself. Only God is absolutely free in this way. But the modes of the being of God participate, in their measure, in this freedom. Con-

sequently, Spinoza holds, to see all that happens in the light of eternity, is to see that nothing that happens is ultimately alien to oneself.

It was mentioned earlier that Spinoza was called by some 'the monstrous atheist'. The crucial question with regard to any view put forward as pantheistic, when the possibility of its being atheistic is brought up, is this: Does it hold the mind of God to be something more than the sum-total of finite minds? If the answer is No, the view is atheistic not pantheistic; its use of the word 'God' does not designate anything that could significantly be called God.

The question might seem to be settled as far as Spinoza is concerned by this statement:

God can think infinite things in infinite modes ... or (what is the same thing ...) he can form an idea of his essence [his nature] and of all things which follow from it. [pt. II, proof of prop. III]

But to the opposite effect is another statement which has 'the eternal and infinite intellect of God' is 'constituted' by modes, including human minds. *Constituted by modes*: therefore, it would seem to follow that the mind of God is nothing above and beyond its modes: Our mind, Spinoza writes,

in so far as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking, which is determined by another eternal mode of thinking ... and so on to infinity: so that all constitute at the same time the eternal and infinite intellect of God. [pt. V, note to prop. XI]

Pantheistic Equations

Given that pantheism is taken to regard the mind of God as something more than all the thinking, the consciousness, throughout space and time, and so is genuinely pantheism and not in reality atheism, two equations corresponding to the theistic equations cited earlier in this chapter concentrate the most fundamental belief of pantheism. They are:

God minus the world = nothing;

The world minus God = nothing.

3. God and Other Divinities

Our final concern in this chapter is with the notion of a god or goddess in relation to the monotheistic belief that there is only one God.

But first we look at a contention which carries weight because it is put forward by perhaps the most eminent social theorist of our time, Max Weber: 'Only Judaism and Islam are strictly monotheistic in their essence'.⁸ Weber continues:

The Hindu and Christian forms of the sole or supreme deity are theological concealments of the fact that an important and unique religious interest, namely in salvation through the incarnation of a divinity, stands in the way of strict monotheism. The path to monotheism has been traversed with varying degrees of consistency, but nowhere was the existence of spirits and demons permanently eliminated. Even in the Reformation they were simply subordinated unconditionally to the one god, at least in theory.

Weber mentions two different kinds of inconsistency to which he sees monotheism as subject in professedly monotheistic religions. The first is produced, in Hinduism and Christianity, by belief in 'salvation through the incarnation of a divinity'. The second kind of inconsistency is the profession of monotheism along with a belief in the activity of 'spirits and demons'.

Why is a belief in the activity of spirits and demons inconsistent with monotheism, especially when these beings are 'subordinated unconditionally to the one god'? In the remark which Weber goes on to make after these words, it is not the mere belief in these beings (which is there in Judaism and Islam also) that is damaging to monotheism. The 'decisive consideration', he says, 'was and remains: who is deemed to exert the stronger influence on the individual in his everyday life, the theoretically supreme god or the lower spirits and demons?'

Weber does not indicate why he thinks the consideration he makes decisive is even relevant to the issue. He is speaking about religions which are or are not strictly monotheistic 'in their essence'. A religion's 'essence' in this context would naturally be understood

as its central beliefs along with their embodiment in rites and other practices. Weber takes no notice of the essence of a religion thus understood in determining whether or not a religion is strictly monotheistic. The consideration he makes decisive might have been significant if the 'supreme God' of the religions in question had become an 'otiose' god—the term applied by anthropologists to a god who retains a grand title though he is not thought of as doing anything, his former activities having been taken over by other gods. But the God of these religions is not an otiose God.

How does belief in 'salvation through the incarnation of a divinity' compromise strict monotheism in Hinduism and Christianity? Again, nothing that is said suggests what Weber might have had in mind. (Weber's *Sociology of Religion* is only a segment of an uncompleted, very large and wide-ranging work of social theory and its statements are often oracular.)

Incompatible, on the face of it, with monotheism is a belief in gods and goddesses. And so, on the face of it, Weber's ascription to Hinduism of a compromised *monotheism* is surprising. Isn't Hinduism a religion of gods and goddesses? We need, however, to notice the manner of being they have in Hinduism as compared with the manner of being that gods and goddesses have in the typically polytheistic religion of Greece or Rome. The Greco-Roman divinities are wholly separate entities—as much so as individual human beings. The gods and goddesses of Hinduism are 'emanations' of the one God with which they are, in reality, *one*.

Speaking for the one God, Krishna says in the Bhagavad-Gita:

Whatever form [whatever god] a devotee
With faith desires to honour,
That very faith do I confirm in him,
Making it unswerving and secure.

Firm established in that faith,
He seeks to reverence that god,
And thence he gains all he desires,
Though it is I who am the true dispenser.⁹

The sage Yajnavalkya is asked: ‘How many gods are there?’ He answers:

‘As many as are mentioned in the invocatory formula in the hymn to the All-gods—three hundred and three and three thousand and three.’

‘Yes,’ said he, ‘but how many gods are there really, Yajnavalkya?’

‘Thirty-three.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but how many gods are there really?’ ...

‘Three.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but how many gods are there really, Yajnavalkya?’

‘Two.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but how many gods are there really, Yajnavalkya?’

‘One and a half.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but how many gods are there really, Yajnavalkya?’

‘One.’ ...

‘Which is the one God?’

‘... Brahman, the beyond ...’. [Brihadaranyaka Upanishad III.IX.1–9]

(Explanations are given in the Upanishad for the varying numbers of the gods, including the ‘one and a half’.)

Leave aside any pantheist issue with regard to Hindu belief in God, take monotheism as the belief that there is only one God and that from this God everything else that exists derives its existence: then Hindu belief in God for sophisticated—but wholly orthodox—Hindu thinkers is monotheistic.

It is not an implication of this remark that adherents of theistic religions should recognize Hindu belief in God as fundamentally monotheistic. For Islam whose profession of faith, the Shahada, begins ‘There is no god but God’, the ‘association’ of any being with God as in any way His ‘partner’ is a fearful sin; and the intensity of Judaic and Christian belief in ‘one God’ would similarly disallow any such

recognition. Our concern is only with the *understanding* of this Hindu belief.

How do gods differ from angels, who in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are intermediaries in God's dealings with the world? Angels are incorporeal; gods, at least typically, are not. Angels are essentially messengers; gods are not. A god may be a messenger for an assembly of gods or another god, but being a messenger is not part of the notion of being a god. Angels are created—brought into existence; some gods are created, some are not. Some gods are even deified human beings, the Aztec divinity Quetzalcoatl, for instance. It might very well be that there is no characteristic or set of characteristics the possession of which means that a figure of religious significance is to be categorized as a divinity.

Decisive for the categorization of such a figure, is the attitude taken towards it by a particular religion. A striking illustration of this is the status ascribed to the Virgin Mary by the Roman Catholic Church. One of the titles accorded to her by this church is 'Queen of angels', a title which indicates her tremendous exaltation in Roman Catholic belief. But she is not a goddess: the veneration declared to be due to her is separated by an absolute gap from worship, due to God alone.

Worship, in the belief of a developed theism, is due only to a being infinite in goodness and power, in every perfection; a being on which everything else is wholly dependent, but which itself in no way depends on anything else; whose providence, accordingly, is directed only towards the good of what has been created.

But is the existence of such a being even possible, given the existence of evil?

Chapter 4: Problems of Evil

Two problems of evil are discussed in this chapter. The first is the problem which the evil of suffering, along with moral badness, presents for the theistic religions: the problem of theodicy. ('Theodicy' is the old term for the vindication of God in relation to evil in the world.) The other problem is the great preoccupation of Buddhist thought: how suffering comes about and how it can be brought to an end. 'I teach but one thing,' the Buddha said, 'suffering and the termination of suffering.'¹

1. God and Evil

The most widely and deeply felt objection to the existence of God is the existence of evil. Argumentation between an anti-theist and a theist will be presented, the theist giving reasons for thinking that this objection to the existence of God is not a well-grounded one. It needs to be kept in mind by the reader to whom it is left to monitor move and counter-move in the argumentation, that this theist is not allowed any *religious* assumptions. The intention has been to supply him with a course of argument which could, so far as the logic of it is concerned, be conducted by an atheist.

Does the Existence of Evil Rule Out the Existence of God?

We shall first confront the theist with an argument designed to prove that the existence of any evil at all, no matter how little, is incompatible with the existence of God—of a God limitless in power and goodness. The argument, a very old one in its elements, was put forward by John Mackie in an influential article 'Evil and Omnipotence' (1955). Later, we shall be concerned with the question whether the *actual* evil in the world is compatible with the existence of a God limitless in power and goodness.

The 'problem of evil' in its 'simplest form', Mackie writes, is this:

God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists.

There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if two of them were true the third would be false.²

To make sure that we see what Mackie has in mind, we shall count off a couple of possibilities. If the propositions 'God is omnipotent' and 'God is wholly good' are true, the proposition 'Evil exists' is false; if the propositions 'God is omnipotent' and 'Evil exists' are true, the proposition 'God is wholly good' is false.

The point of Mackie's argument is, of course, to show that there is no God. For in his triad of propositions, there is one which is quite certainly true: that evil exists. Then Mackie's argument runs in effect thus: there can't be a creator of the world who is both omnipotent and wholly good; so the existence of God is impossible.

It will become evident, if it is not so already, that this problem of evil would not arise if the conception of God was that of a limited deity; if, say, God is thought of as very powerful but not omnipotent, able to do remarkable things but not absolutely everything. Why, then, doesn't the theist content himself with a limited deity when faced with an argument set to deliver an atheistic conclusion? The answer is that he can't, because, as we saw in the previous chapter, he is constrained by religious demands.

The contradiction Mackie sees arising when the three propositions—'God is omnipotent', 'God is wholly good', and 'Evil Exists'—are taken together 'does not arise immediately', he says: 'to show it we need some additional premises ... connecting the terms 'good', 'evil', and 'omnipotence'.

These are the principles that good is opposed to evil in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.

[page 224]

Compressing Mackie's argument and making its atheistic point stand out, we get the following: a being that is wholly good eliminates evil as far as it can, and there is nothing that an omnipotent being can't do; but evil exists; therefore, there is no being which is both wholly good and omnipotent—no God.

Of Mackie's additional principles, the one that needs discussion is the principle that there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.

What Omnipotence Can Do

Dealing with the topic of God's omnipotence, Aquinas raises the question whether God can make the past—anything that has happened—not to have been. He regards the view that God can do this as incoherent, but in accordance with his method, he first supplies argumentation in support of the view that God *can* do it. Included is the following piece of reasoning: he who can do the greater can do the lesser; charity is a greater virtue than virginity and God can restore lost charity; therefore God can restore lost virginity.³

But no argument could do the trick. For to speak of making a past event not to have been is to run words into a self-contradictory combination: since it is a past event, the occurrence has happened; consequently, the upshot of its being made not to have happened would be that it will both have happened and not happened.

God cannot bring about a state of affairs, the description of which is self-contradictory, but such a 'state of affairs' is not a possibility that God cannot actualize; it is a cancelled description of a possibility.

It is convenient to introduce here a technical term: 'logical impossibility'. A state of affairs whose description is self-contradictory is a logically impossible state of affairs. Not even omnipotence can do what is logically impossible; but this implies no limits on what omnipotence can do, because what is logically impossible is not *something* that God can't do.

A miracle is 'impossible' as the contravention or suspension of a law of nature, but it is not *logically impossible*; there is no self-contradiction.

diction in the notion of contravening or suspending laws of nature. The bringing about of miracles would therefore come within the scope of omnipotent power—an important consideration, which will be taken up later in the discussion of theodicy.

Contrast the impossibility of an event in the course of nature, implied by its being a *miraculous* occurrence, with the impossibility of compassion if there was no suffering or need. How do we know that compassion is impossible in these circumstances? Not in virtue of anything found out about the order of nature. The answer is, of course, that this impossibility is read off from the meaning of the word 'compassion'. Compassion is, roughly, pity towards someone in distress. So self-contradiction is involved in talking about compassion in a world in which there is no distress. Similarly, from the meaning of the word 'courage' we can see that courage would be logically impossible in a world in which there was nothing dangerous and nothing that had to be endured.

The theist is now in a position to bring up a counter to the conclusion of Mackie's argument, that the existence of evil—any evil at all, no matter how little or of what kind—is incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent God who is also perfectly good.

There are some things that are good, that are greatly prized (the theist points out), whose existence would be logically impossible if no evil existed. Compassion and courage are examples. Omnipotent power is limitless power, but not even limitless power could create a world in which there was nothing to be endured, but in which, nevertheless, these prized things had a place. With competing preferabilities having to be taken into account (the theist completes his move) as between a world in which the kindly and stern virtues are possible and a painless paradise in which they are not, all hope is lost of a damaging argument against the existence of God from the fact that any evil exists. A wrangle about values would start up.

An objection raised by Mackie to this sort of move in theodicy, is that if the existence of suffering is necessary for there to be moral goodness, such as that of compassion and courage, suffering makes possible the moral evil of malevolence, cruelty, and cowardice. And

if moral goodness is an important kind of goodness which God is concerned to promote, so moral badness will be, correspondingly, an important kind of evil, 'the kind which God, if he were wholly good and omnipotent, would eliminate'.⁴

Freewill and Determinism

The theist counters this objection with the claim that God gave human beings freewill and that, consequently, they, not God, are responsible for the evil they do. The notoriously inconclusive freewill/determinist dispute breaks out here; and an anti-theistic argument with a determinist component will be infected with this inconclusiveness. All the same, we shall spend some time on the freewill/determinist issue. Its religious importance is not confined to our present concern: the matter of theodicy. Fundamental to both Buddhism and Hinduism is the doctrine of karma, with which we shall be concerned later in this chapter. This doctrine maintains that everything desirable or undesirable that comes one's way is deserved because of one's past behaviour. In the course of discussing freewill we shall be raising an issue as to what is presupposed by the notion of *desert*.

To the move in theodicy that God gave human beings freewill, and that consequently, they and not God are responsible for the moral evil they do, Mackie's reply is that:

if God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? ... Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good. [page 230]

It might be wondered how people can be acting freely if they are *made* in such a way that they always choose the good. There is, however, a freewill that is compatible with the determinism implicit in what Mackie says. Standard determinism is the doctrine that for every event, including everything human beings do, there is a set of antecedents—prior conditions, causes—given which, that event will

inevitably occur. ‘Necessitarians’ in eighteenth-century France thought it to be an implication of this doctrine that such expressions as ‘responsible for’, ‘accountable for’, should be purged from the dictionary as encapsulating illusion. These Necessitarians had counterparts, the ‘Compulsionists’, among Islamic thinkers in the Middle Ages. Compulsionist thought denied to human beings any autonomy in action.

Argument to show that there is an autonomy of action which no *theory* can invalidate is a prominent feature of modern philosophizing on the freewill/determinist issue. Some of the modern distinctions—distinctions which are matters of *experience*—are of a kind anticipated in the Middle Ages. Thus, al-Ashari, arguing against the Compulsionists, drew attention to the difference between involuntary movements, such as shivering with cold (for which we are not responsible) and movements such as those of ‘our coming and going’.⁵

It is important for a believer in determinism to be able to hold that determinism is compatible with the freewill presupposed by our ordinary notion of moral responsibility. Many people, if they were convinced that the two are incompatible, would feel more sure of our moral responsibility for our conduct than they could be of the truth of determinism. The following are considerations for and against a compatibilist position.

The truth of determinism, of the doctrine that for everything taking place, human actions and inactions included, there is a set of prior conditions given which, what occurred would inevitably occur—the truth of this doctrine would not alter the fact that we did many things because we chose to do them and, correspondingly, left many undone. And we hold a person responsible (don’t we?) if we believe that he could have acted differently if he had chosen to.

Is more than that required? Is it a requirement that the person could have *chosen* to act differently? This requirement, too, can be met, compatibly with determinism. We don’t make many of our decisions on what to do under threat, before we have time to think, in the grip of some violent passion, in a post-hypnotic trance, and so on. (Such freedom-disabling circumstances range

from making choice difficult to making it impossible, and of course affect responsibility accordingly.) Anyone attempting exculpation by saying that the situation was such as to leave no choices open, would have to be prepared to explain how this was so. He will adduce one of the freedom-disabling circumstances just now mentioned, or one out of an indefinite number of others that might be added to the list. Dependably, no explanation offered will run counter to determinism.

People then, often—usually—could have behaved differently from the way in which they actually did behave. Nevertheless, if determinism is true, then in another sense of ‘could have behaved differently’ than the sense specified by the absence of freedom-disabling circumstances, no one ever could have behaved differently, all one’s behaviour being the inevitable product of its antecedents. And these determinants of one’s behaviour were themselves determined, in a succession of causes and effects going back beyond one’s birth; going back to the Creator, if there is one, going back endlessly if there is not. In the light of this cosmic determinist story, does a freewill that is compatible with determinism appear adequate for our being morally responsible for our behaviour?

At this point it looks as though argument runs out and *seeing* has to take over. But an opponent of determinism might suggest that the question needs to be viewed from a Last-Judgement perspective. (You don’t, of course, have to believe there is going to be a Last Judgement in order to adopt a Last-Judgement perspective.) If people are to live together tolerably, they must be held morally responsible for what they have done or have failed to do in the absence of freedom-disabling circumstances. No such social purpose is served by the Last Judgement. The principle governing its administration is the rendering to everyone what is *deserved*. Supposing the truth of the cosmic determinist story, is that deserving to be seen as still intact or as cancelled?

There is no doubt that if determinism is true, and there is a Creator, and there is moral responsibility, the Creator is responsible for the moral evil in the world. (Though if the freewill compatible with

determinism is adequate for moral responsibility, we, as well as God, will be responsible for the evil we do.)

A difficulty that can be strongly felt about an *indeterminist* freewill is that it is a power of inexplicable choice: considerations in favour of choosing this instead of that can be deployed, but if they are of anything like even weight, there is mystery in the coming down of the will on one side or the other, which no knowledge we can conceive of could dispel.

The upshot of the freewill/determinist discussion upon which we have been engaged is that no reason has emerged for thinking that the existence of moral evil is incompatible with the existence of a God all-powerful and wholly good. The existence of any moral evil in the behaviour of created beings but ultimately brought about by God as Creator, would be fatal to theodicy. Not so, the existence of suffering. For the price of the non-existence of suffering would be the non-existence of greatly prized things such as compassion and courage. Not even omnipotence can break their connection with the existence of suffering of some kind, of something that has to be endured.

Questions about Foreknowledge

God is not causally responsible for the moral evil done by His creatures if they are its *initiators*, if it is not the inevitable result of the way they were made and the circumstances in which they found themselves. But God's omniscience can appear to threaten His goodness. Being omniscient, God foresaw freely-chosen evil brought about. Foreseeing it, isn't He responsible for it? Yes, the theist has to concede, but not in a way that implies any defect in God's goodness. Not if a consideration holds along the lines of one put forward by M.B. Ahern.

'Can the bringing about of good justify the non-prevention of moral evil?', Ahern asks. 'We commonly accept that it can', he answers:

for example, moral evil would be prevented if people did not have any children. It can be foreseen that if children are born, they will at some time commit moral evil. Yet, if there were

no children, great good would be lacking. We do not hold people morally blameworthy because they do not radically prevent moral evil by refusing to have children at all.⁶

God's foreknowledge of everything that will happen can appear to threaten human freedom. Here is a story that Islamic theologians used in a discussion of this matter. A man in Baghdad felt himself jostled in the crowd one morning and when he turned round he looked into the face of the Angel of Death. He made off as fast as he could out of Baghdad to a place called Samarra. Speaking of the incident soon after, the Angel of Death said: 'I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him that night in Samarra'.

To borrow words from *Paradise Lost*, do you see here 'fate' as a *consequence* of 'foreknowledge absolute'? If you do, you have been taken in by an illusion. It was decreed—'fated' if you like—that the man would die at the time he did. It was not fated that he would die in Samarra. Had he chosen to stay in Baghdad, this choice instead of the one he made would have been foreseen, and his death would have taken place in Baghdad.

God and Actual Evil

We have been concerned with the question whether the existence of a God who is unlimited in power and goodness is compatible with there being any evil at all. There is the further question whether the existence of such a God is compatible with the evil that *actually* exists, with the amount of evil there is. A 'God's eye view of the world' would be needed, Ahern remarks, before that question could be answered. Something, however, bearing on the issue can be usefully said. The theist being matched with an anti-theist will not be trying to undermine the agnosticism reflected in Ahern's remark. His purpose is to indicate how poorly fitted we are to think up changes in the creation or administration of things which would have resulted in a better world than the one we have got.

A tree falls on someone sheltering under it and kills him. How might God have prevented an evil of this kind? On the face of it, in

one or other of two ways. (For what the theist says about them we draw on the great—now neglected—Anglican philosophical theologian of the eighteenth century, Bishop Butler.⁷)

1. God could have created the world such that the evil in question would not eventuate in the *natural course of things*, the world being so ordered in its constitution that the events resulting in sequence from this ordering would have been different in some respects from what does occur; the tree, in consequence, would not have fallen while it was sheltering anyone.

But things have such interrelations that, for all we know, a world in which this evil did not arise might have been worse than the one that exists, might have been unimaginably different from it, might have been a world in which there was no human life at all.

2. God could have given us the present system of things, and prevented by *miraculous interposition* every evil which would arise in the natural course of events, holding back the fall of the tree, for example, till a little later.

But the price to be paid would be incalculable. This scheme of providence would (in Butler's words) 'render doubtful the natural rule of life'—our knowing what to expect and so being able to organize our lives—'which is ascertained by this very thing, that the course of the world is carried on by general laws'.

The construction of worlds that we might have had if God had been good, and wise, and powerful enough is talk, Butler remarks, 'quite at random and in the dark'.

Looking back over this section: even if it has been shown (without recourse to any religious assumptions) that the objection to the existence of God based on the existence of evil is not well-grounded, the religious believer will feel that argument here needs supplementation by religious doctrines. By one especially, in the view of traditional theodicy: the doctrine of the Fall—the primordial catastrophe of the Fall of angels, and the closer catastrophe of the human Fall, figuratively described in the Book of Genesis. We inhabit a world, Butler remarks, which is 'in a state of ruin'. A remark such as Butler's answers to our sense that the evil actually encountered is far

in excess of what is to be expected from the inseparability of the casualties of the operation of natural laws from the benefits of their operation, and from a freewill capable of choosing good or evil.

The evil in the world might not imply any defect in the Creator, but it is a devastating state of affairs if that is the end of the story. Why? One of the optimist/pessimist jokes points to the answer. The optimist thinks that the world that we have is the best of all possible worlds; the pessimist is afraid that it is. It is the belief of the great religions that beyond death there is available something immeasurably better than anything in this world. We shall be concerned with variations of this belief in the next chapter.

2. 'Suffering and the Termination of Suffering'

One of the fundamental themes in the Buddhist conception of the cause of suffering was Hindu before it was Buddhist: the doctrine of karma. The teaching of the Buddha (sixth-fifth century BC) was a revolutionary break with Hinduism. In our discussion of the doctrine of karma, the magnitude of the differences between Buddhist and Hindu thought will become apparent. For an account of what is distinctively Buddhist in the Buddhist conception of the cause of suffering, we shall draw on teaching from the 'Buddhism of the older books', as it is sometimes called, Theravada Buddhism. Only in connection with the termination of suffering does anything have to be drawn from the variety of Buddhism, Mahayana, which developed later than Theravada. For the account of Nirvana (given in the last chapter of this book) only Theravada Buddhism is drawn upon.

There is a supplementary reason for our concentrating upon Theravada Buddhism. The transcendental concern of a religion, as there has been frequent occasion to mention, is typically with both divinity and what lies beyond death. In Mahayana Buddhism the Buddha is a divine being. The greatest system of religion whose transcendental concern is only with what lies beyond death, with the 'Deathless', is Theravada Buddhism.

The Karmic Explanation of Suffering

These ills in our state of woe are but the fruits of evil deeds,
The karmic outcome of your accumulated acts;
For you and only you could make them.⁸

Theodicy is of only marginal significance in any system of karmic thought. It does not arise at all of course in one to which the notion of a deity is irrelevant. But even when this notion is prominent, a problem of theodicy does not become correspondingly significant. The 'problem of evil', Reichenbach observes,

is formulated in identical fashion in Indian philosophy, irrespective of whether the context is theistic or not. For example, the description of the problem to be solved by the law of karma in Theravada Buddhism which is not theistic, does not differ from that found in theistic Vedanta.⁹

It does not seem possible, however, that Hindu thought could allow all suffering to be karmically explained. That possibility seems to be excluded by the mysterious conception of the destroyer goddess, Kali, and, more generally, by an association of destruction with divinity.

Karmic theory diminishes the significance of a theodicy for an obvious reason: according to the law of karma every being gets what is deserved; so the goodness of a deity does not call for vindication.

That we reap as we have sown is not just an Eastern idea; but the Western idea these words also express is much vaguer than the corresponding karmic principle according to which, sooner or later, in one life or another, we get *exactly* what our conduct deserves. Thus, although theodicy is absent from karmic thought or only minimally present, something resembling theodicy in one respect is operative in it: the suffering that occurs is provided with a *justification*.

In karmic thought, what we deserve comes to us in the natural course of things. This idea is altogether foreign to Western thought. Consider someone's death from the falling of a tree he was sheltering under, complicating events by having someone else who was also sheltering under

the tree escape injury when it fell. The Western kind of explanation of such events is in terms of a combination of natural laws and particular circumstances. The tree fell in accordance with the relevant natural laws, combined with a set of particular circumstances; for example, the extent to which the tree had become rotten and the force of the wind at the time. Included in the circumstances of the incident in which one person is killed and the other unharmed, would be their exact location under the tree, and behind that would lie a circumstantial story detailing how this came about. A difference in desert as between the one who was killed and the one unharmed does not come into the explanation. (Even where there is belief in the action of God on human lives, it is not thought that in general the good and bad occurrences in a person's life are providentially ordered in accordance with desert.)

In a karmically-run universe, natural laws and particular circumstances have to fit in with the requirements of karmic desert. Desert, however, could not specify and bring about what would satisfy its requirements. In Hindu belief, divinity is available to arrange things in accordance with karmic desert. Sankara (around eighth century AD), the great Hindu philosopher and theologian, argued that only 'the Lord', the

ruler of all who by turns provides for the creation, the subsistence and the reabsorption of the world, and who knows all the differences of place and time ... is capable of effecting all those modes of requital which are in accordance with the merits of the agents.¹⁰

There is no divinity in Buddhist thought to make the karmic arrangements. Buddhist speculation developed theories on the transmission of karma through death and rebirth, but they leave unexplained a karmically-ordered *system of Nature*. A modern comment in reference to this problem for Buddhism is that the world-process is 'as if by a kind of pre-established harmony so constituted as to cater for the needs of Karma, and hence is determined by Karma, like our own life itself'.¹¹

This 'as if' by a pre-established harmony means that no such harmony has actually been established between the 'world-process' and

the 'needs of Karma'. Perhaps a Buddhist thinker might be content to say, that though no such harmony has been established, it just happens to be a fact that this harmony exists.

Walpola Rahula, a Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and an eminent Buddhist scholar, sees the doctrine of karma as having no connection with justice and requital. 'The theory of karma', he writes,

should not be confused with so-called 'moral justice' or 'reward and punishment'. The idea of justice or reward and punishment arises out of the conception of a supreme being, a God, who is a law-giver ... The theory of karma is the theory of cause and effect, of action and reaction; it is a natural law ...¹²

Corrected in this passage is any notion that, according to Buddhist belief, the law of karma is like moral law in prescribing what is to be done and not done, but having no part in bringing about the consequences of one's conduct for oneself. As is indicated by a well-known simile—that of the 'seed' and the 'fruit'—the bringing about of these consequences is ascribed to karma.

Whether or not it is a misconception of Buddhist belief to see it as holding that a bad karmic lot is a punishment, it is certainly a misconception to take its doctrine of karma to have no connection with *desert*. This should become obvious when we look, a little further on, at the stolen-mangoes analogy in an explanation of the transmission of karmic consequences from an earlier to a later life.

As a 'natural law', the law of karma would be altogether unlike the natural laws which the sciences discover. Correlating the *moral* quality of one's conduct—its being compassionate or cruel, for instance—with desirable or undesirable consequences later on for oneself, the law of karma lies outside any system into which these laws fit.

Given that the suffering that comes our way is in the strictest proportion to our merit and demerit, what especially needs to be explained is the anomaly—to all appearances—that the good are often afflicted, while the bad do very well. The karmic explanation of this is that what one has done or failed to do in a previous existence is the primary determinant of one's present lot. An illustration of the connection between actions in a former life and what happens in a subsequent one is the Buddha's

saying that a holy man who died a violent death did so because of a transgression against his parents in an earlier life.

The Transmission of Karmic Consequences

Buddhist karmic thought is confronted with an ethical difficulty not faced by the Hindu karmic thought, which holds that there is in each human being a self or soul enduring through life, death, and rebirth. The agent in one's actions, on this view, is also the bearer of their karmic consequences:

Just as in this body the embodied soul must pass through childhood, youth and old age, so too (at death) will it assume another body ... As a man casts off his worn-out clothes and takes on other new ones ... so does the embodied soul cast off its worn-out bodies and enters others.¹³

According to the Buddhist 'not-self' doctrine (framed in rejection of fundamental Hindu beliefs), there is nothing permanent that is oneself; there are only transient events of experience and action associated with an everchanging body. Nor is there any cosmic Self. Universally, there are no substantial selves. All existents are momentary items in sequences of items. The not-self doctrine raises issues relevant to desert in connection both with agency in actions, and with the bearer of their karmic consequences. The agent will have only a momentary existence, and the deterministic implications of this seem pretty obvious, namely that an action is the inevitable outcome of its chain of antecedents. A momentary existent is not easily thought of as capable of autonomous action. As regards the karmic consequences of actions, the difficulty is this: how their agent and the bearer of their karmic consequences can be one and the same; and if they are not identical, how the bearer of these consequences might be justly denominated the 'culprit' when the action was evil. (Nowhere can be found a place 'where karma does not catch up with the culprit'.¹⁴)

Before we discuss the bearing of the not-self doctrine on the transmission of karmic consequences, some indication needs to be given

that the doctrine, as outlined above, really is Theravada doctrine, and some idea given of the reasons for its being held.

Steven Collins in *Selfless Persons*¹⁵ shows that commentators on the not-self doctrine (among them two of the best-known names in the exposition of Buddhist thought, Mrs. Rhys Davids and Christmas Humphries) have widely refused to allow that the doctrine is as radical as it appears to be in Theravada scriptural texts. Making this refusal very surprising are the grounds Collins sets out for taking the radical doctrine to be authentically Theravada doctrine. These are a multiplicity of citations in which the radical doctrine is unmistakably asserted, and an exposition of arguments in support of the not-self doctrine which make sense only as adduced in support of the radical doctrine. The following statement of the doctrine (quoted by Collins, page 182) is plainly incompatible both with suggestions that it is only the 'small' or 'surface' self whose existence is denied, and that the notion of a cosmic Self lies beyond the doctrine's reference. The 'wise' see

no doer beyond the doing, no experiencer of the result beyond the occurrence of the result ... Elements alone occur.

There are abstract Buddhist arguments for the not-self doctrine, but consideration of them is beyond our concern with the doctrine. The grounding claimed for it in experience, however, must be mentioned—the experience of coming upon a blank when we look inwardly to find a self to which our various states of consciousness could belong. (One of the most celebrated of British philosophers, David Hume, reported the same experiential finding.) A Buddhist might want to argue with less mere negation to the effect that different 'Is' are experienced on different occasions. The actor, Peter Finch, remarked that the 'I' doesn't exist. 'There are a thousand different "Is", and a good actor or actress can reveal thousands of truthfully observed "Is".'¹⁶

Although a self 'is not to be found', the sense of being a self (generated by the conjunction of impersonal constituents of personality) is stressed by Collins as a theme in Theravada Buddhist thought, according to which the sense of being a self is something 'everyone must have until they are enlightened'.

The not-self doctrine is of great spiritual importance in Buddhist teaching. The notion of a self is seen as laying the foundation for self-centredness. More specifically, the notion of anything as being *mine* lays the foundation for 'grasping' and 'greed', which are not only bad in themselves, but are connected with 'craving'. And in Buddhist teaching, 'craving' leads to the woe of rebirth.

It is not the Buddhist view that there simply isn't any self. There is a self. It is what one's name designates, and that is an everchanging psycho-physical organization of bodily components, and of mental components such as items of consciousness. There is no self which has one's experiences, which is the agent in one's actions. And—raising a problem about the transmission of karmic consequences—there is no *continuant* which is one's self linking one's successive lives.

Buddhist handling of the issue of personal identity through death and rebirth is famously contained in 'The Questions of King Milinda'. Milinda, an Indian king, is a Hindu. He is arguing with the Buddhist monk, Nagasena. 'If a man were to light a lamp,' Nagasena asked, 'could it give light throughout the whole night?' The King agreed that it could.

'Is now the flame that burns in the first watch of the night, the same as the one that burns in the second?'—'It is not the same.'—'Or is the flame which burns in the second watch the same as the one that burns in the last one?'—'It is not the same.'—'Do we then take it that there is one lamp, in the first watch of the night, another in the second, and another again in the third?'—'No, it is because of just that one lamp that light shines throughout the night.'¹⁷

The lamp corresponds to the body; the flame to the succession of states of consciousness. (It needs to be remembered, though, that the lamp has only a relative permanence by contrast with the fugitive character of the flame. Impermanence affects everything except Nirvana.)

The lamp-flame analogy, which would illustrate the Buddhist account of unification in a life, is applied to illustrate unification through successive lives. In both unifications a body is foundational.

(There is some point in saying that Buddhism is nearer to materialism in its account of the constitution of a human being than to immaterialism, though it is of course not materialist.) Nagasena continues:

‘Even so must we understand the collocation of a series of successive dharmas [‘dharma’ here meaning state or act of consciousness]. At rebirth one dharma arises, while another stops; but the two processes take place almost simultaneously...’ [page 150]

In further explanation, Nagasena brings in the notion of *being produced by* as the bond that is needed to unify successive lives:

‘Milk ... turns ... into curds; from curds it turns into fresh butter, and from fresh butter into ghee. Would it now be correct to say that the milk is the same thing as the curds, or the fresh butter, or the ghee?’—‘No it would not. But they have been produced because of it.’—‘Just so must be understood the collocation of a series of successive dharmas.’ [pages 150-151]

The discussion of this ‘simile’ by the King and Nagasena will reach the conclusion that there is a connection between an agent and the bearer of the karmic consequences of his action which (though not one of identity) renders these consequences deservedly borne by the person who has to bear them.

The King asked whether at death there was ‘any being’, ‘which passed on from this body to another body’. Getting the answer, No, he asked: Would not one, then, ‘in one’s next life be freed from the evil deeds committed in the past?’ The answer was, Yes—‘if one were not linked once again with a new organism’.

What does ‘one’s past life’, ‘one’s next life’, refer to, if no ‘being’ goes from the old to a new body? They refer to an earlier and a later phase of a series. (The ‘series’ is a term sometimes used for a person in authoritative Buddhist writing.) To understand the argument, which it is left to the reader to weigh up, it is essential to realize that there is not just succession in the series as between one’s past life and one’s next life. Evil done in one’s past life *brings it about* that one is linked with a new body, as curds are not just preceded by milk, but *produced* because of it.

Told that 'one is not freed from one's evil deeds' for one is linked to a new organism, the King again wanted a 'simile'. The following dialogue ensues:

'If a man should steal another man's mangoes would he deserve a thrashing for that?'—'Yes, of course!'—'But he would not have stolen the very same mangoes as the other one had planted. Why then should he deserve a thrashing?'—'For the reason that the stolen mangoes had grown because of those that were planted.'—'Just so, your majesty, it is because of the deeds one does, whether pure or impure, by means of this psycho-physical organism, that one is once again linked with another psycho-physical organism and is not freed from one's evil deeds.' [page 151]

The stolen mangoes were not the same as those that were planted. The implication is that the doer of evil and the being punished in a subsequent life are not the same. That is the not-self position from which the argument takes off.

The argument aims at showing that, nevertheless, one deservedly bears the karmic consequences of what one did in an earlier life. The stolen mangoes, though not the same as those that were planted, were *produced* by them. Therefore their stealer deserves punishment for the theft just as much—it is implied—as if the planted and stolen mangoes had been identical. And one's deeds have produced a new embodiment of oneself after death. Therefore—the conclusion paralleling that of the mango simile would be—in this new embodiment thus produced, though not the same being as the doer of the evil, one deservedly suffers the requital its doing calls for.

The 'Holy Truths' about Suffering

'Of all religions, Buddhism is the one which concentrates most immediately and directly on suffering,' John Bowker remarks in *Problems of Suffering in Religions of the World*. And suffering is the most 'universal' experience there is, endured by 'all sentient beings' since all are subject to old age, disease, and death'.¹⁸ The sufferings picked out are those which, according to the traditional account, began the awakening of the Buddha to an understanding of existence. He had been

brought up in a palace unaware of any suffering. And then he encountered, first someone stricken with age, then someone stricken with disease, then a corpse carried out. After his enlightenment the Buddha made suffering and its termination the 'one thing' he said he taught.

There are in Buddhist teaching four 'Holy Truths' about suffering ('Noble Truths' is the familiar expression). More is claimed for them than that they identify the cause of suffering and the way it can be brought to an end. They are described in one place as the 'four facts which summarize the essential nature of reality'.¹⁹

The first Holy Truth:

What then is the Holy Truth of ill? Birth is ill, decay is ill, sickness is ill, death is ill. To be conjoined with what one dislikes means suffering. To be disjoined from what one likes means suffering. Not to get what one wants, that means suffering. [page 186]

Birth is notably an evil: 'all calamities grow on the soil of birth', but 'even the most frightful gales could not possibly shake trees that have never been planted'. (page 113) The Buddhist conception of suffering seems to see existence—anything we can conceive of as existence—as itself an affliction. That a life may be happy does not prevent the triple characterization of life as 'insubstantial', 'impermanent'—and as 'suffering'. Suffering is made constitutive of human existence in the following passage which asserts this existence to be void of substantial being:

The mental and the material are really here,
But here there is no human being to be found.
For it is void and merely fashioned like a doll,
Just suffering piled up like grass and sticks.²⁰

The second 'Holy Truth':

What then is the Holy Truth of the Origination of Ill? It is that craving which leads to rebirth, accompanied by delight and greed, seeking its delight now here, now there, i.e. craving for sensuous experience, craving to perpetuate oneself, craving for extinction. [page 186]

The cultivation of desire for Nirvana, even, is an impediment to the attainment of Nirvana. All craving is to be replaced by ‘non-attachment’.

Central to Buddhist teaching, is an account of the relatedness of things known as Conditioned Arising (or Dependent Origination). In the scheme of Conditioned Arising, the origination of ill begins with ‘ignorance’—not craving. This ignorance conditions the activities of a personality. A further sequence of conditioning and conditioned precedes craving.

There appears to be a very great contrast between the Christian view of the primal fault and the Buddhist view: obliquity of the will in the Christian view; ‘ignorance’ in the Buddhist view. Buddhism, Peter Harvey writes, ‘sees the basic root of suffering as spiritual ignorance, rather than sin, which is a wilful turning away from a creator God. Indeed, it can be regarded as having a doctrine of something like “original sinlessness”²¹ (Harvey cites a Buddhist text in which the mind is spoken of as ‘brightly shining’ underneath ‘defilements which arrive’).

But Harvey also writes (page 56) that ‘ignorance is given as the first link [in the chain of Conditioned Arising] due to its fundamental influence on the process of life but is itself conditioned by sensual desire, ill-will, laziness, agitation and fear of commitment’. If the ignorance in the scheme of Conditioned Arising is due in some degree to a mind thus tainted, the contrast between the Christian and the Buddhist view of the primal fault is at least not so striking.

The impression exists that Buddhism (unlike Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam) has little or no metaphysical commitment—few views about the ultimate nature and dynamic of things; few, at any rate, that are controversial. This impression is greatly mistaken. Nothing could be more metaphysical than the beliefs that the origin of suffering is ultimately due to ignorance, and that craving leads to rebirth.

The third ‘Holy Truth’:

What then is the Holy Truth of the Stopping of Ill? It is the complete stopping of that craving, the withdrawal from it, the

renouncing of it, throwing it back, liberation from it, non-attachment to it.²²

There is no difficulty in this proposition. If the difficult proposition laying it down that rebirth results from craving is true, this proposition is straightforwardly true. How craving brings about rebirth is the problem. There is an explanatory *metaphor* in Buddhist use: one is 'sewn to' the process of life, death, rebirth by 'the seamstress, craving'.

The fourth 'Holy Truth':

What then is the Holy Truth of the steps which lead to the stopping of ill? It is this holy eightfold Path which consists of right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

[page 187]

The first two steps of the Path are traditionally put under the heading 'Wisdom'; so 'right intentions' are rightly directed thoughts rather than morally right intentions in the area of conduct. Put under the heading 'Morality' are 'right speech'; 'right conduct'; 'right livelihood' ('right livelihood' having to do with making a living, rules out certain occupations). Put under the heading Mental Discipline are the meditative procedures 'right effort', 'right mindfulness', 'right concentration'.

The Path as trodden by ordinary Buddhists is transformed for those who have become spiritually transformed. 'Wisdom', for instance, changes from a mere acknowledgement of fundamental Buddhist doctrines to an intuitive perception of their truth.

Karma and Grace

To all appearances, the law of karma requires that the doer pays for the evil done. Consistently with the karmic requirement thus understood, the spirit of early Buddhism made one's salvation—escape from the wheel of birth–death–rebirth, the attainment of Nirvana—one's own work. The Buddha showed the way; you walk it yourself.

Though the view that one's salvation is entirely one's own work accords with the spirit of early Buddhism, there appeared in

Theravada Buddhism, notwithstanding its being governed by that spirit, the beginning of a notion of transferred merit in the idea that the 'auspicious' quality of an act could be shared with or transferred to another being.²³

Mahayana Buddhism developed the ideal of the Bodhisattva who postponed his own entry into Nirvana for the sake of others:

However innumerable sentient beings, I vow to save them.

However inexhaustible the defilements are, I vow to extinguish them.²⁴

The appearance in Buddhism of the notion of transferred merit and its great expansion in the ideal of the Bodhisattva suggest a less rigid conception of the law of karma than the face-value one. The moderated conception would be to the effect that, while compensation has to be made for evil done, it does not have to be made by the doer of the evil alone. The implicit principle here is very widespread in religion. It is the principle of grace: that is, favour out of all proportion to any merit. The Bodhisattva's vow is a statement of grace. The incarnation of a divine being is an act of grace.

There are a number of incarnations in Hindu belief. The best known of them is the incarnation of Vishnu in the person of Krishna, as narrated in the Bhagavad-Gita. The 'Blessed Lord' is presented as saying:

Unborn am I, changeless in my Self, of (all) contingent beings

I am the Lord! Yet by my creative energy ... I ... come to be.²⁵

The purpose of a divine incarnation (paradoxically described in this passage as a coming-into-existence of a Being, in Itself, eternal and changeless) is stated thus:

For whenever the law of righteousness withers away and lawlessness arises, then do I generate myself ... For the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil-doers, for the setting up of the law of righteousness, I come into being age after age.

[IV.7-8]

Incarnation in Christian belief, as in Hindu belief, is a supreme work of grace. In Hindu belief, a divine being can have an indefinite number of incarnations. There is only one incarnation in Christian

belief. Incarnation in Hindu belief is, impermanently, the 'manifestation' of a divine being or its assumption of a human 'form'. Incarnation in Christian belief is the indissoluble uniting of human nature to the divine nature.

What incarnation in Hindu belief accomplishes, is indicated by the passage from the Bhagavad-Gita just now quoted. What in Christian belief is the purpose of the Incarnation? Why did God, the Word, by whose creative utterance the world was brought into existence, become 'flesh'? (John 1.1-14), take human nature upon Himself? Ultimately, so that human beings might be 'made partakers of the divine nature'. (2 Peter 1.4) But, first, atonement had to be made on behalf of human beings for human wrong-doing, the debt settled which human beings could not pay. The idea of vicarious expiation, of atonement made for the offence of others, seems to be a respect in which the Christian conception of grace differs from a Hindu or a Buddhist conception of it.

Our thinking about deliverance from the cycle of life–death–re-birth and, more particularly, about grace, has brought into prominence the idea of salvation. Though not universal in religion, it is an idea which powerfully evokes a sense of what religion is.

Chapter 5: Beyond Death

In a view to which the Roman poet, Horace (first century BC), gives expression, the dead are not absolutely nothing; they are 'shades', they have the emptiness of shadows. At death we go 'into eternal exile'.¹ By contrast, however, it is the life we live *now* that is represented in one of the recurring Christian images as a life of exile. A prayer coming down from the Middle Ages, the *Salve Regina*, directs our mind to what there will be 'after this our exile'.

While the image of our present life as one of exile, or of our home as being elsewhere, is characteristically Christian, it is not exclusively Christian and Western. In Indian folk-poetry is to be found a wife's contrast between this life as spent in her mother-in-law's house, and the life to come when she will be in her own home. The idea that death is going home is given expression in the traditional language of the Dayaks of Borneo.

Though often differing in their characteristic imagery, the great religions have in common the thought that the goal of human beings lies beyond death. The following Hindu story can be taken as representative. A sage striving for salvation, made over his possessions to his two wives. One of them refused her share with the words 'If I am not thereby freed from death, what are these to me?'.² Commenting on what she wanted, Rudolf Otto remarks that it was not merely 'the survival of death'.

Of that, according to Indian ideas, she had experienced only too much, for death did not extinguish empirical existence, which rolled on from birth to birth unendingly. It was from just this mere 'immortality' that the Indian seeker after salvation longed for release. [page 57]

In this chapter an outline is given of the view held in three different religions of what is both supremely desirable and obtainable. Dealt with first, is the early Buddhist idea of Nirvana. Next, the dominant

idea in Hindu theological thought of the goal of human existence as the realization of one's identity with Ultimate Reality. Finally, the Beatific Vision, its context theistic: 'And though worms destroy this body, yet ... shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another'. (Job 19. 26-27)

1. Nirvana

'Opened for those who wish to hear are the doors of the Deathless'³—words spoken by the Buddha soon after his enlightenment.

The Extinguished Fire

'Nirvana', Peter Harvey explains, literally means 'extinction', 'being the word used for the "extinction" of a fire'.⁴ On any interpretation of Nirvana, fires are put out in the attaining of Nirvana. According to the Buddha's Fire Sermon, people are burning with the fires of attachment, hatred, and illusion. With their extinction there is no more birth–death–rebirth. If that is the whole story, death brings with it extinction of the person in whom these fires burned. The view which takes that to be the whole story will be referred to as the annihilationist interpretation of Nirvana.

In a striking passage, 'cessation' is what Nirvana is—*all* it is:

The King asked: 'Is cessation Nirvana?'—'Yes, your majesty!'—'How is that, Nagasena?': '... the well informed holy disciples do not take delight in the senses and their objects, are not impressed by them, are not attached to them, and in consequence their craving ceases; the cessation of craving leads successively to that of grasping, of becoming, of birth, of old age and death, of grief, lamentation, pain, sadness, and despair—that is to say to the cessation of all this mass of ill.

It is thus that cessation is Nirvana.'⁵

The simile of an extinct fire is brought by the Buddha into connection with the issue as to whether Nirvana is a transcendence of death. He was asked whether someone who has attained enlighten-

ment 'arises' after death. He answered that it could not be asked in what direction—North, East, South, or West—a burnt-out fire has gone. This answer has been widely taken to imply that the end of the birth–death–rebirth cycle brings with it extinction.

Commenting on the answer given by the Buddha, Harvey remarks that 'the Buddha's audience in ancient India would generally have thought of an extinguished fire as going back into a non-manifested state as latent heat',⁶ he gives a reference to a Buddhist text. (A passage from a Hindu text expresses a similar notion: 'The form of fire present in the fire-producing wooden stick is not seen; yet there is no destruction of the form'.)⁷ Harvey continues: 'The simile of the extinct fire thus suggests that the state of an enlightened person after death is one which is beyond normal comprehension, not that it is a state of nothingness'. He cites the following passage from a Buddhist text:

There exists no measuring of one who has gone out (like a flame). That by which he could be referred to no longer exists for him. When all phenomena are removed, then all ways of describing have also been removed.

The themes in Buddhist texts of the immeasurability and indescribability of Nirvana are altogether incompatible with an annihilationist interpretation of Nirvana.

Characterizations of Nirvana as 'emptiness' and 'the void' do not imply its nothingness. Both in Western and Eastern religious thought, negations have been used to designate what is conceived of as superlatively positive. Like 'the void', 'not being' has been exalted above 'being' in this use of the term. So has 'the nought'. Altogether contrary to the meaning of 'the nought is the ground of everything', would be: 'there is a hollowness at the heart of existence'. The drive to point to absolute uniqueness, and to the falling short of language in every attempt to describe it, motivate this verbal paradoxicality.

Western understanding of Nirvana was once predominantly annihilationist. Stcherbatsky, writing in the 1920s, felt he could confidently speak of there having occurred in the development of Buddhism a desertion of the Buddhist 'ideals' of a 'lifeless' Nirvana and an 'extinct' Buddha.⁸ A considerable change of opinion has taken

place. An indication of this change is the entry under Nirvana in the Glossary of Terms in Conze's *Buddhist Scriptures* (1954): 'Nirvana is the extinction of a craving ... a life which has gone beyond death'. A *life beyond death*: the death-is-the-end interpretation of Nirvana given glossary-type dismissal. An indication that an annihilationist interpretation of Nirvana is still widespread, however, is the glossary-type endorsement of this interpretation in the entry under Nirvana in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (1995): Nirvana, as well as being an end to craving, suffering, and rebirth is 'the blowing out of the flame of the self ... Commonly understood as pure extinction'. (The writer of the entry is A. Chakarabarti of the University of Delhi.)

The following passage from a Buddhist text in which cessation, Nirvana, and the ending of a person's existence are spoken of, certainly sounds as if it endorses the view that the doctrine of the not-self implies one's extinction. Asked whether it ever occasions distress to learn that 'something permanent in oneself is not found', the Buddha answered Yes. Believing in a self which is 'everlasting' and 'unchanging',

a man hears the Tathagata [the Buddha] or a disciple of his, preaching the doctrine aiming at the complete destruction of all speculative views ... aiming at the extinction of 'thirst', aiming at detachment, cessation, *Nirvana*. Then that man thinks: I will be annihilated, I will be destroyed, I will be no more. So he mourns ... and becomes bewildered.⁹

The saddened man's belief included philosophically controversial elements—belief in an *unchanging, everlasting* self—and the Buddha was speaking against anything 'speculative'; but it is not just philosophical notions that are being rejected. The Buddha's words offer less than no assurance that the self, unavoidably referred to when it is denied that there is any entity underlying one's experience which is *oneself*—that this self, of which everyone has a sense prior to any philosophical notions—is going to live on. The impression left by this passage is that the man is right when he says 'I will be annihilated'.

The characterization of life, which can be happy at times, as being, nevertheless, *suffering* (noticed in the previous chapter), suggests that life itself is felt to be a burden over and above the burdens with which it is fraught. (The most memorable expression of this transcultural feeling is in an aphorism which has come down from classical antiquity: 'Happy is the one who has his heart's desire, but best of all is never to have been'.) A question and answer about Nirvana suggest a Buddhist expression of this feeling and an annihilationist interpretation of Nirvana. Asked how there could be happiness in Nirvana where sensation has ceased, Sariputta (the Buddha's closest disciple) answered:

Just this is the happiness ... that there is no more sensation.¹⁰

If the feeling that existence is itself a burden was congenial to the Buddhist mind, how intensified it would be at the prospect of rebirth which could not be escaped from, until accounts with karma were settled.

A scriptural statement conveying the strongest sense of Nirvana as deathless *being*, and its attainment as salvation, which especially needs to be looked at is this:

... there is an unborn, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded, ... if that unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this that here is born, become, made, compounded.¹¹

(In English translations of this passage, Rahula's, for example, 'no escape *from*' is sometimes rendered as 'no escape *for*'. There does not seem to be any significant difference in meaning; for on both renderings, more clearly in the second, there is escape for what is 'born, become, made, compounded'.)

The characterization of Nirvana in this passage is incompatible with a conception of Nirvana as no more than cessation. Nirvana is cessation—of craving and the other fires burning in a person, of the round of life–death–rebirth; but 'an unborn, a not-become ...' could not characterize cessation. The conception of Nirvana as cessation, this passage implies, is not false but incomplete.

In this passage it seems to be said that Nirvana effects escape from what 'is born, has become ...'. But in what we have seen of Buddhist teaching, escape, liberation, deliverance, is not *effected* by Nirvana; it is effected by the paying of one's karmic debt (along with removal of 'Ignorance'). In a frequent meaning of 'Nirvana' this liberation is Nirvana; in another meaning Nirvana *follows upon* this liberation. The two meanings can be brought together, it might be suggested, when Nirvana is thought of as that *into which* there is escape.

Interpretational Authority

A most valuable achievement in Buddhist scholarship would be one which enabled general agreement to be reached as to whether those passages in early Buddhist scripture which seem to point to an annihilationist interpretation of Nirvana really do so. But, to make a general point: it is characteristic of religions which have a serious belief in their teaching, that *they* determine the doctrine to be extracted from their sacred texts. They declare what has been 'revealed'.

Belief in revelation does not, as is often thought, differentiate religions originating in the Middle-East from religions originating in the Far-East. Certainly, if Judaism, or Christianity, or Islam is taken as prescribing what a religion which claims to be based on revelation must look like, the Hindu claim to revelation is bound to appear anomalous. The Hindu scriptures do not speak with the voice of ultimate authority; altogether different in this way from their utterances, is the Biblical 'Hear, O Israel'. And revelation is dateless in the Hindu conception of it: absent from it is anything like the historical circumstantiality of the life of Christ and of Mohammed. Nevertheless, the Vedas, the foundational Hindu scriptures, take themselves to make known what human beings could not have found out for themselves.

It corresponds to the quality of *givenness*, which is among the phenomena of religion that those who believe in a religion should take for granted, that some kind of revelation underlies it (understanding

'revelation' here to cover a revelation-like experience, such as that of the Buddha). A misconception needs to be avoided. From the fact that all religions take themselves to be derived from 'revelation', in a wide sense of the term, it does not follow that, as regards objectivity, one religion's claim is as good as another's. If a claim to be the bearer of revelation is made, it follows as a matter of common-sense logic that the credentials of the claimant are up for scrutiny.

Religions determine the doctrine contained in their sacred texts. Living Buddhism altogether rules out one's extinction as being involved in the doctrine of Nirvana taught by Buddhist scripture. Rudolf Otto recalls asking a Buddhist monk about the nature of Nirvana. It is 'ineffable bliss', he was told.

2. 'That art Thou'

Hinduism, in its later sacred texts, the Upanishads, stands in notable contrast with the other religions which are great on the world-scene, in a preoccupation with the question 'What am I?', in its concern with God. For Buddhism, there is no self to be preoccupied with. The preoccupation of the great theistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for all their concern with human beings, is with God.

'That art Thou' (the old, familiar rendering) is one of the 'Great Sayings' of Hinduism. (Another is a saying to the same effect: 'I am Brahman'.) The third is 'All this world is Brahman'. The original setting of 'That art Thou' was in a piece of religious instruction a father was giving to his son. He said of various creatures he had mentioned that they all had 'Being as their foundation'. Then he said:

This finest essence—the whole universe has it as its Self. That is the Real: that is the Self: that *you* are, Svetaketu.

[Chandogya Upanishad, VI, 8]

Svetaketu is told that he is the Being, which supremely Real, is the foundation of everything else, of which it is the Self.

Hinduism traditionally designates this being, Brahman. The term Atman, in its predominant meaning, designates the self or soul. So the generalized formula corresponding to 'That art Thou' is 'Atman is Brahman'. To approach an understanding of the Atman/Brahman synthesis we need further characterization of the nature of Brahman and some reflection on the self that is said to be Brahman.

Brahman

Brahman is 'Being–Awareness–Bliss'. Brahman is eternal being. It is all-knowing mind. It is itself the source of its supreme bliss. These are also characteristics of God in a fully-developed theism. Itself eternal being, Brahman stands in a kind of causal relation to whatever comes into being. Of this, it is the 'foundation' or 'root'. As both words indicate, what comes into being is not wholly distinct from Brahman. The creative relation in which Brahman stands to it is thus unlike that between God and His creatures, in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In these religions, God is wholly other than his creatures.

Upanishadic affirmation about Brahman is either plainly pantheistic or pantheistic in tendency. It is plainly pantheistic in the Chandogya Upanishad: the 'whole universe is Brahman'. (III, xiv.1) But this pantheism is genuine pantheism: divinity is not atheistically ascribed without distinction to everything there is. Distinctions are made which correspond to distinctions in Spinoza's systematic pantheism.

Brahman is Atman, the Chandogya Upanishad affirms. The Being through whom all that happens comes about, and who 'encompasses all this universe',

he is my Self within the heart, smaller than a grain of rice or a barley-corn ... this is my Self within my heart, greater than the earth ... greater than all these worlds. [III, xiv,3]

By contrast with the thorough pantheism of the Chandogya Upanishad, the later Svetasvatara Upanishad is theistic. But its position is not fully theistic. A mark of a fully-developed theistic posi-

tion is its holding that God would be just what He is if nothing else existed. A pantheistic statement is made about the God of the Svetasvatara Upanishad (who is expressly called God):

All this universe this Person is,
What was and what is yet to be ... [III.15]

Theistic descriptions, however, are emphasized in the Upanishad, notably of God as ruler, as sovereign. Though God has been said to be 'All this universe', it is said of Him that 'Over this whole universe, He alone holds sway'. He is 'Another'; He is 'utterly beyond'; He is 'Maker of all'; 'This whole universe reflects His radiance'; He is 'all knowing', 'present everywhere'.

In the Svetasvatara (I.10) the human self, though immortal, is clearly distinguished from God:

Perishable is Nature,
Immortal and imperishable the self,
Both the perishable and the self
Both the one God ... rules.

Later in the Upanishad, God is spoken of as the 'Inmost Self' who forever 'dwells within the hearts of men' (III.13), as 'the Self hidden in the heart of creatures'. (III.20) If no more than this had been said, there would be no grounds for thinking anything to have been meant other than the theistic doctrine that God dwells within his creation *while remaining entirely distinct from it*. (The Jewish Talmud invented a term to name the transcendent God as immanent in all created things: God is *Shechinah*—'The Indwelling'.) But some sort of identification of the human self with the divine self seems intended, when it is said (III.18) that the 'embodied soul' 'Like a great bird flutters outward, Though the whole world's in its power'.

In whatever way this apparent identification of the human self with the divine Self is to be accounted for, there is a consideration which tells strongly in favour of an interpretation of the Upanishad as distinguishing between them. This is its constant representation of God—incompatibly with an identification of the human self with the divine Self—as an object of worship and of

love. (Incompatibly, because worship presupposes a distinction between the worshipper and the one worshipped; likewise with love.)

As though conscious of rectifying error, the Upanishad says near its end: 'By much austerity and by the grace of God did the wise Svetasvatara make Brahman rightly known'.

The Human Self

'That art thou', the Chandogya Upanishad states. This being told that he is identical with Brahman is named Svetaketu. Other particular beings, similarly identical with Brahman, have different names. But Brahman is the 'foundation' or 'root' of everything coming into existence, of all 'contingent' beings. Can Svetaketu (and these others) possibly be thought of as that? It is obvious that a distinction has to be drawn between the self that Svetaketu takes himself to be and the Self he is told he is.

Brahman is not a being which has modifications which it might not have had, one of which might be Svetaketu. Everything that Brahman is, it *essentially* is. So if Svetaketu's self is identical with Brahman, it is absolutely what Brahman is. Looming up now is the threat that the declaration 'That art Thou' becomes the emptiness of 'Brahman is Brahman'.

The self of Svetaketu that is identical with Brahman can't, straight-off, be Brahman, for that would bring on the tautology that Brahman is Brahman. Nor can it be his empirical self, the everyday self of which he is aware, for that is clearly not the 'foundation' of everything that begins to exist. It must, it would seem, be an inner self of Svetaketu that is identical with Brahman. On that supposition the very difficult question arises: What is the unifying connection of one's inmost self with the 'I' or 'me' of ordinary experience—the I who did that, or the me to whom it happened? What can be thought up which would enable me to say of my inmost self: 'Yes, that's me'? (It should be pointed out that it is not only Hinduism which faces severe difficulty in connect-

ing the self of ordinary experience with whatever is taken to be one's inner, real, or fundamental self—one's soul, for instance.)

The problems which have come into view when the That-art-Thou declaration is reflected upon may have been illuminatingly dealt with by some scholars in the field. If so, what has been accomplished needs to be made much more widely known.

Merging into Brahman

At the beginning of this chapter, something of the story was told of a woman who refused a share of her husband's property when he was setting out in search of salvation. (He was the Yajnavalkya whose answer to the question 'How many gods are there?' was quoted in Chapter 3.) The story comes from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. It turns out to have an ironic ending.

Maitreyi said to her husband: 'If, sir, this whole earth, filled as it is with riches, were to belong to me, would I be immortal thereby?' 'No', he said, 'there is no hope of immortality in riches.' And Maitreyi said: 'What should I do with something that does not bring me immortality? Tell me ... what you know.'

Passing over a good deal of what she was told, we come to this:

As a lump of salt dropped into water dissolves in it and cannot be picked out ... yet from whatever part of the water you draw, there is still salt there, so too, I say, is this great Being ... After death there is no consciousness ... [II,iv,12]

'You have thrown me into confusion', Maitreyi said, 'in that you say after death there is no consciousness.' Her husband denied that there was anything confusing in what he had said.

Two things told to Maitreyi are of a piece with the information that her consciousness will come to an end. One is the analogy of the lump of salt, obviously representing Maitreyi's individuality dissolving away. The other is a later remark about the absence of 'duality'. After Maitreyi's death, there is only a single consciousness—Brahman's. When Brahman has become Maitreyi's 'very Self', her consciousness has ceased.

But later in the same Upanishad, an ascending scale of bliss is spoken of which culminates in the bliss of the 'Brahman-world'. And the bliss referred to does not seem to be the bliss of Brahman who is eternally 'Being-Consciousness-Bliss', but the bliss of someone who *enters* the Brahman-world. The scale starts with the highest 'measure' of bliss, that of someone 'possessing everything possible that could minister to human enjoyment'. The bliss of the next level of the scale is a hundred measures of the highest human bliss. And so on up to the highest bliss, the bliss of the Brahman-world. Yet the seer on entering the Brahman-world, it is said (IV.iii.32), becomes 'One', without 'duality'. So when he achieves his goal, there would seem to be only a single consciousness—that of Brahman.

An interpretation of 'merging into Brahman' has been put forward by Pratima Bowes which, if it could be sustained, would create no problem as to how the disappearance of one's own consciousness into Brahman's could be anyone's supremely desirable goal. She writes:

As the overcoming of duality in love and the experience of unity or identity achieved therein does not mean that either the husband or the wife ceases to exist as a distinct person, so the experience of the realisation of Brahman as Self, which is the same as one's own essence, does not mean that the world of multiplicity, including the mind-body components of leaving one's own personality, physically disappears ... leaving only a unitary substance called Brahman. All that it need mean is that the actual experience of Brahman as Self, the essence of all existence, is such that it does not involve any awareness of multiplicity ...¹²

A later remark (page 149) is: 'Psychologically one can say multiplicity disappears *as it were* because it is not experienced.'

Bowes sees merging into Brahman as an experience which can be entered upon and emerged from. Her account of the Brahman experience does not appear to be significantly different from the account of theistic mystical experience given in Chapter 2 of this book under the heading 'Theistic Mysticism and Identificationist Language'—an

experience in which consciousness of oneself is eclipsed in the contemplation of God.

Maitreyi was saddened on hearing her husband say that ‘after death there is no consciousness’. Had he explained merging into Brahman along the lines of its explanation by Bowes, instead of desolation at the thought of it, she would have felt longing for it. But an explanation of it along these lines cannot be sustained. Two different beings are presupposed in the explanation: one of them is oneself, the other is Brahman. But a presupposition of merging into Brahman is the reality, behind appearances, of one’s *identity* with Brahman—‘That art Thou’.

The Real

‘From the unreal lead me to the real!’: the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (I.iii.28) quoted these words from a prayer used in purificatory rites. It explains that by the unreal is meant ‘death’; by the real, ‘immortality’. It is not, however, immortality which the Brihadaranyaka actually designates as the real. It is the Self; it is Brahman:

As small sparks rise up from a fire, so too from this Self do all ... the worlds, all the gods and all contingent beings rise up ... The hidden meaning of this is ‘the Real of the real’.
[II.1.20]

The sparks-and-fire analogy implies that the world around us and we ourselves, having the same nature as the Real, are real—not illusory. And this is the general teaching of the Upanishads, implied when Brahman is said to be ‘the All’—which has to be everything *real*. The Brihadaranyaka, though, maintains more than the reality of what is generated by Brahman. It declares this to be ‘not other than’, to be ‘nothing but’, Brahman. It does not, however, seem to us that we and the world are Brahman: a veil of appearance hides the truth from us; we have to be brought to an awareness of it. ‘From the unreal lead me to the real’ could be understood as asking that we be brought to this awareness.

Non-Dualist Vedanta

Vedanta means 'the culmination of the Veda'. The books of the Veda are the foundational Hindu scriptures. Their 'culmination' is how they are to be understood, their upshot. Hinduism sees this as contained in the Upanishads (whose compositions began in the sixth century BC). Sankara, writing in the Middle Ages, is the most celebrated interpreter of Vedanta. His interpretation of it, still strongly current in Hindu thought, is known as non-dualist Vedanta.

The Mandukya Upanishad is especially significant for non-dualist Vedanta. The world is Brahman and the self is Brahman, this Upanishad states. And Brahman, with which the world and the self are identical, is 'devoid of duality'; multiplicity and diversity of every kind are absent from it. It is One in every way. Non-dualist Vedanta erases more than 'non-dualist' would suggest.

But the world shows every appearance of multiplicity and diversity, including every appearance of a multiplicity and diversity of selves. Sankara contends that the whole of this appearance is illusory. In this contention he was not a free-wheeling philosopher; its motivation is his fidelity to what he took to be implied in the teaching of Scripture. He remarks in his Commentary on the Vedanta-Sutras that it could not be 'grasped' that everything has 'its Self in Brahman' without the aid of the scriptural 'That art Thou'.¹³

Elucidating the meaning of this formula, Sankara says it 'teaches that what is denoted by the term "thou" is identical with what is denoted by "that"', which denotes the Brahman who is 'the cause of the origin and so on of the world'. (IV.1.2; *Sacred Books*, vol. 38, page 335)

There are different levels in the cosmic illusion of multiplicity and diversity; a piece of rope, for example, is less unreal than a piece of rope misperceived as a snake—all our ordinary contrasts of real and illusory are left standing by Sankara. Nevertheless, everything in the conception of which multiplicity and diversity is presupposed is infected with unreality. This holds even for the conception of Brahman as Creator and Lord of all being (Commentary, II.1.14; pages 322,

329); for if there is only the undifferentiated Brahman, nothing is brought into existence and there is nothing over which there is rule. And also involved in the cosmic illusion will be subjection to the law of karma, and the arrangement of things in accordance with its requirements which (as mentioned in the previous chapter) Sankara argues only Brahman could effect.

How does the cosmic illusion arise? Sankara often says in his Commentary that it is the 'effect' or 'product' of 'Nescience', not-knowing—not knowing that the undifferentiated Brahman is the only reality. But Nescience is far too slight a cause of what is so experientially real as we and the world around us are. And, in fact, the *power* of projecting the illusion seems to be attributed to Nescience understood as Maya, Nescience as not-knowing being the precondition of the exercise of this power.

Maya, Sankara states, 'cannot be defined as that which is or that which is not' (Commentary, I.4.3; vol. 34, page 243), and its products, in his categorization, have neither 'being' nor 'non-being'. Otto, describing the power of Maya, perhaps does something to make understandable this categorization of what is so momentarily *there*:

Maya is in origin a *magic* force, the power by which the magician obtains his effects. He produces an 'existence'... which approaches the calling up of a mere illusion, and which yet on the other hand results in extremely real effects.

'Maya retains a final flavour of magic', Otto continues, even in Sankara's 'highest speculation'. 'The world which we perceive in multiplicity ... floats like a magic spell indeterminate between being and non-being.'¹⁴

Ramanuga (eleventh-twelfth century AD), as much engaged as Sankara in fidelity to Scripture, is Sankara's most celebrated critic. The current of his ideas still flows strongly in modern Hindu thought, though not so widely, it seems, as that of Sankara. Against Sankara's view that the entire apparent world is illusory, he raises the objection that this view rules out the existence of anyone taken in by the illusion. But the notion of an illusion requires that someone be subject to it. What is subject to the cosmic illusion? It can't be 'the individual

soul', Ramanuga argues, for this 'exists in so far only as it is fictitiously imagined through Nescience'; nor can it be Brahman, for Brahman is 'self-luminous intelligence'.¹⁵

For a person released from birth–death–rebirth, Sankara held out the prospect of becoming undifferentiatedly one with Brahman. Ramanuga thought this prospect injurious to religion. Religion promises release, but if this is held to carry with it 'annihilation of the I', anyone who had wanted release would turn away at the mention of it. Nobody would be moved to religious effort by the thought that when 'I myself have perished there still persists some consciousness different from me'. (page 58)

How does Ramanuga construe the That art Thou? So far from its being an affirmation of the absolute unity of a non-differenced substance, difference is presupposed, he says: 'The word "that" refers to Brahman omniscient, etc. ... the word "thou" ... conveys the idea of Brahman ... as having for its body the individual souls connected with non-intelligent matter.' (page 130)

Against Sankara, Ramanuga says: if the That-art-Thou had been meant 'to express absolute oneness', it would have been in conflict with an utterance earlier in the same section of the Upanishad, in which Brahman expresses the (creative) intention to become 'many'. (page 131) But Ramanuga, as well as Sankara, is in trouble here, for it is *not* because Svetaketu is one of the 'many' constituting the 'body' of Brahman that he is told he is Brahman: as we have seen (page 92), he is told he is Brahman as being the 'Self' of 'the whole universe'.

3. The Beatific Vision

The That-art-Thou realization is the becoming aware of *having been all along identical* with ultimate Reality, with Brahman, with what corresponds to God, in a fully-developed theism. Nothing in the Christian idea of heaven as constituted by the vision of God (nor in 'seeing God', as this is thought of in Judaism and Islam) corresponds to these italicized features of the That-art-Thou realization. The gulf

in nature between Creator and creatures is the gulf between infinite and finite.

There is, however, a significant correspondence between the identity-realization and the vision of God in the Christian idea of it. Those attaining this vision, though remaining creatures, have made available to them nothing less than the infinite source of the divine beatitude itself. They are in this way divinized, 'made partakers of the divine nature'. Consistently with the self-sufficiency of God spoken of earlier, the admission of creatures to the Beatific Vision is, in Christian belief, an act of God's wholly unself-regarding love; always having everything, He gains nothing.

Love is a great theme in the doctrine of the Beatific Vision. For love to be possible, there must be some distinction between the lover and what is loved; that is why love can have no place in or after the That-art-Thou realization. Love is a great theme in the Bhagavad-Gita when its teaching is theistic:

Souls bent on That, selves bent on That

With That their aim and That their destination

They stride along the path from which there's no return.¹⁶

'By love and worship is He won.' (VIII.22)

'They Have the Infinite Good Itself'

The notion of goodness, in the discussion in an earlier chapter of the question whether, though evil exists, God might nevertheless be all-powerful and perfectly good, was the notion of *moral* goodness. The notion of goodness we are operating with in this sketch of the idea of the Beatific Vision is the notion of goodness as *desirability*: something is good in this sense of the word if it draws to itself and satisfies desire.

In the enjoyment of the Beatific Vision there is no call for the exercise of virtues such as compassion and courage which figured prominently in what was said (in Chapter 4) about evil and omnipotence. The presupposition of their exercise is suffering, and temptation by what is wrong. The habitat of these virtues is this

world; their relation to heaven is that they are part of an orientation towards it. In other great religions, similarly, the moral virtues are part of an orientation towards a state of blessedness beyond death. Common to all great religions is the belief that there is nothing automatic about the obtaining of this state. A supplication (in the Book of Common Prayer) asks that 'we may so pass through things temporal that we finally lose not the things eternal'.

According to the theology of the Beatific Vision, there is of course a 'rectitude of the will' in heaven, a morally right disposition. Unlike rectitude of the will in this life, in heaven it is effortless and unassailable. It is so, because there is no longer anything that could attract one to moral evil by a specious desirability. For in the vision of God the blessed have, in Aquinas's words, 'the Infinite Good itself'.¹⁷

If the idea of the Beatific Vision is to be understood, it has to be realized that the vision of God is not just the fulfilment of religious desire. It is, as these words of Aquinas indicate, the fulfilment of all human yearning in the possession of an infinite source of beatitude. In harmony with this belief, Beatrice, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, speaks of Dante's longing for her in her mortal life as leading him towards 'love of that good, beyond which there is nothing that could be longed for'.

Though not just the fulfilment of religious desire, the Beatific Vision is, of course, the fulfilment of religious desire (and so of a desire unlike any other). Specifically, it is the fulfilment of the desire which Psalm 63 expresses in these words:

O God, thou art my God;
 early will I seek thee:
 my soul thirsteth for thee,
 my flesh longeth for thee in
 a dry and thirsty land
 where no water is ...

The Beatific Vision would also be the fulfilment of the vague, and perhaps very general, religious longing of which Wordsworth spoke: 'our being's heart and home/Is with infinitude'.

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Religions: Suggested Reading

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1.

The Encyclopaedia of Religion, Eliade, Mircea (ed.), New York and London, Collier Macmillan, 1987. A work of great distinction, its sixteen volumes contain thorough discussion of a wide range of topics.

A Concise Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths, Zaehner, R.C. (ed.), 3rd edn., London, Hutchinson, 1977.

The New Penguin Handbook of Living Religions, Hinnells, John R. (ed.), Penguin Books, 1997. The religions dealt with in this sociologically-orientated survey are not limited to those of world significance: they include, for example, 'African Religions' and 'Modern Alternative Religions in the West'.

The Penguin Dictionary of Religions, Hinnells, John R. (ed.), Penguin Books, 1984.

2.

It is essential if a religion is to be understood, to know what it makes of itself: what it takes its beliefs and practices to be and the significance it assigns to them. Recourse is naturally had to its scriptures and, where issues of interpretation arise, to its authoritative commentary upon them, if this exists. Secondary access to a religion's self-definition is provided by encyclopaedias or dictionary-type works which have some sort of sponsorship by authoritatively-placed representatives of the religion concerned.

3.

Some realization of how a religion is lived is essential to an understanding of it. The lavishly illustrated books that are around with titles such as *The Hindu World*, serve this purpose.

4.

Some points of divergence and convergence as between one religion and another, and some general differences in character as between Western and Far-Eastern religion, were noticed in the course of this book. The books mentioned in this section preserve the specific character of the religions they bring into view. Comparative surveys of religions which marginalize their differences present an outsider's impression of them.

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An important distinction drawn by anthropologists is between primal religions, which involve the worship of a 'high god', and those which are animistic, practising the cult of spirits such as totemic an-

cestors and primordial heroes. An example of the first of these types is the religion of an African people, the Nuer. It is described by Evans-Pritchard in *Nuer Religion*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956. Australian Aboriginal religion is, predominantly, an example of the second type of primal religion. Suggested reading:

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