THEOSOPHY
AND
WORLD RELIGIONS

A National Lodge Study Course
By Robert Ellwood

P.O. Box 270, Wheaton, Illinois 60189-0270

Contents

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter I

INTRODUCTION: THEOSOPHY AND RELIGION

RELIGION

Helena P. Blavatsky, in *Isis Unveiled*, said that "Truth remains one, and there is not a religion, whether Christian or heathen, that is not firmly built upon the rock of ages—God and immortal spirit" (I:467). In the same source, there is also reference to "the remote past, during those ages when every true religion was based on a knowledge of the occult powers of nature" (I:25).

However precisely one defines these terms, the basic idea seems incontrovertible. All that is usually called religion implies "God and immortal spirit"—that is, that there is something more to both the universe and ourselves than what is plainly visible, and that this "something more" has to do with the universe's ultimate origin, and with our own role as bearers of some common essence with the infinite source, or deepest nature, of all reality.

The universe, all religionists hold, is not merely out there, impersonal and indifferent, but is also humanly significant. Since we are children of the universe, we obviously came out of it in some way, and therefore some resemblance between parent and offspring must exist, and some form of family communication must be possible. If we have consciousness, a potential at least for consciousness must rest in the universe as a whole. If we communicate by word, sign, or symbol, we must also be able to communicate with the matrix out of which we are born, though it may take effort to crack its code.

Religion, then, is based on the awareness that we and the universe have two interlocking natures, which may for convenience be called material and spiritual. The spiritual relates to consciousness, thought, and will. On the universal scale it may be called God (or, for example, the Absolute, Ultimate Reality, the Unknown Root, or another name). On the individual level, it may be called soul, immortal spirit, or something else; names are less important than the reality. The essential concept is that the two, God and individual, are of similar essence, and are in inward and outward contact. Thus each religion in its own way tries to teach what channels of spiritual communication are most valid or effective.

Religion means something else too, suggested by the second quote above from *Isis Unveiled*, referring to a time in the remote past when every true religion was based on occult or secret knowledge of the powers of nature. A general characteristic of almost any religion is the belief that it is the custodian of a wisdom, which has come to us today from out of the past, either from a past revelation or from the immemorial tradition of the culture in which the religion is situated. This wisdom may be preserved in a sacred book, or in the lore guarded and taught by a sacred institution, or both.

THEOSOPHY

The Theosophical tradition shares the same fundamental assumptions expressed above for religion. Basic to Theosophy is the affirmation that life is more than its

material, mortal manifestation in the realm of appearance. Theosophy tells us also that knowledge about the God-and-immortal-spirit foundation of the universe and its varied life was known, at least intuitively, by the first beings who could be called human as they gazed wide-eyed upon their starry and sunlit world; that is why it is called Ancient Wisdom. But there the narratives of religion and Theosophy diverge.

Religion is the outward path. Over countless centuries, few human institutions have been more diverse and visible than the religious. Religious institutions have held immense social and political power, and at other times they have been powerless or even persecuted. The stories, exaltations, and agonies of the religious spirit have animated the literature of many nations. Religious art has dominated the painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and drama of innumerable traditional cultures in the East and West. The tenets of religion have helped billions decide how best to act when ethical choices present themselves. Buddhists ask themselves how, or if, a Buddha would go fishing or sell stocks. Christians inquire, “What would Jesus do?” Muslims may refer to the Hadith, texts retelling what the Prophet did in various life situations.

Theosophy has a very different place in the world, though one as intimately related to religion as inner to outer, or back to front. For it is based on what is, or was, known inwardly about the universe and our own nature—God and immortal spirit—though perhaps some of this knowledge has been superficially forgotten, in the busy years since the birth of human consciousness.

The supreme drive behind wisdom realizations, as Plato, that great philosopher of inward vision knew, is the sense of wonder—and he added that he was sometimes made dizzy with amazement at the significance of things. Wonder can be the child's silent awe at the beauty of a sunset or in the love of a mother's arms, just as it can be an adult's stillness before the majesty of a spiral nebula or the beauty of a child. But though wonder may begin beyond words, it then weaves its own webs of language and symbols. In ways relevant to Theosophy, these appear particularly in what are called esoteric forms of religion, such as the Kabbala in Judaism, Gnosticism in Christianity, the Ismaili and Druze forms of Islam, and Tantrism in Hinduism and Buddhism. (Esoteric or “inner” forms of religion may require special training and initiation for full access, and involve practices that communicate special knowledge not only factually, but also through mystical techniques by which they are experienced.)

The esoteric visions of hidden reality that start with wonder and a sense of oneness, and then proceed to unfold the behind-the-scenes structures that make the world, have a striking overall similarity despite great diversity in name and form. One key purpose of the Theosophical enterprise is to lift out and study that basic similarity, demonstrating its significance for understanding the meaning of human and planetary life.

COMMON ESOTERIC THEMES

Thus esoteric patterns throughout the religious world articulate the idea of a “great chain of being,” or series of emanations linking the One to the several levels of creation, from the highest gods, archangels, “Dhyan Chohans,” and logoi or creative energies, through the spirits of worlds and nature to human beings, and then on to the animal, vegetative, and mineral realms. These patterns of thought emphasize that all beings on all levels, emanations of and so not separate from the One, contain the

divine spark within; however dormant or well concealed it may be, it can awaken and transform its bearer. Esoteric wisdom also tells us that human beings are "microcosms" or miniatures of the whole, containing in their nature something of all levels. Thus we have in ourselves and accessible to consciousness the material realm and also several planes of consciousness up to the divine spark. The commonality of such ideas in the esoteric traditions of world religions, often concealed behind "exoteric," or outward, symbols, myths, and doctrines, is a major motif in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky and other modern Theosophical writers.

THEOSOPHICAL CRITICISM OF RELIGION

Yet the relation of Theosophy and esoteric teaching to the exoteric religions of the world that are the subject of our study may seem perplexing. Despite the inner connection, some Theosophical writing, including many vehement passages in the works of H. P. Blavatsky, appear harshly condemnatory of outer religion, or at least of certain very important religious institutions and doctrines. There is a famous passage in the *Mahatma Letters* (#10 in Barker edition; #88 in the chronological edition) in which a Master says roundly, "I will point out the greatest, the chief cause of nearly two-thirds of the evils that pursue humanity ever since that cause became a power. It is religion under whatever form and in whatsoever nation." The letter goes on to decry the workings of this evil no less in India than in Europe, and to declare that "It is the sacerdotal caste, the priesthood and the churches; it is in those illusions that man looks upon as sacred, that he has to search out the source of that multitude of evils which is the great curse of humanity and that almost overwhelms mankind."

This statement may sound surprising—even shocking—at first glance, yet a moment's reflection will reveal its truth. It is not an attack on religion as such. Rather, it is a blunt observation of how religion, broadly defined ("under whatever form and in whatsoever nation"), far too often functions in human life.

Simple selfishness and thoughtless hedonism do not account for the greatest and most pervasive evils of history. The most terrible crimes have not been done merely when pandering to ordinary lust, hate, or greed, but for the sake of something supposedly higher, often by zealots who see themselves as having sacrificed much for the sake of their cause. The object of their fanaticism may take many forms—God or the gods, pride of tribe or class or country, the idols of ideology or faith.

In the past these causes were usually identified with religion in the conventional sense, with the will of God or of a tribal fetish. In more recent times, the names of the gods have changed to such abstractions as nation, race, or political creed. But surely such modern "religions" as distorted nationalism or ideology come under the rubric of "those illusions that man looks upon as sacred," and surely one can find a modern "sacerdotal caste" in the propagandists and secular messiahs who served such false faiths all too well in the twentieth century. In that century, the evil brought about by plain greed, great as it was, fades beside that produced by such faiths as imperialism, nazism, communism, nationalism, and resurgent fundamentalism within a number of religions.

Yet we must also remember that, as the Master says in the same letter, "evil is the exaggeration of good." Religion, however defined, is not evil per se. Indeed, it may be a matter of the worst being a corruption of the best. Religion, insofar as it represents a yearning for more than mere material existence—that "something more" of which we spoke before—is an effort of the divine within to break free and be itself.

Such religion is an assertion that ultimate causes and ends are spiritual and is the impulse to truth. But how easily this aspiration becomes satisfied with partial truths, which become idols clung to with all the passion proper to the whole truth, and becomes diverted into the evil of which religion is capable!

It must be noted that Theosophical teachings are no less capable of idolatrous and evil misuse than those of exoteric religion. The concept of root races has sometimes been employed to support despicable forms of racism, and karma has been made a justification for indifference to suffering on the grounds it is "deserved."

It is not the content of a teaching or practice so much as the depth of understanding behind it that makes it good or bad. Any notion not conjoined with the sense of Oneness, and with the love and compassion that is the ethical expression of Oneness, quickly becomes divisive, an idol, and a potential source of evil.

CONCLUSION: RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In today's twenty-first century world, we still see numerous and diverse religious symbols pointing, like the Zen finger pointing at the moon, toward God and immortal spirit. Indeed, in the wake of the collapse of fascism, communism, and other pseudo-religious ideologies of the last century, it may seem that, apart from sheer consumerism and secularism, religion in something like its traditional form is what is left standing. That makes it all the more important for us, as Theosophists, to understand the world's religions and their connection to the timeless inner truths known to the wise from the beginning. But religion's capacity for evil is no less apparent today.

Not for a long time—perhaps not since the Reformation or even the Crusades—has religion so energized and demarcated clashing masses of humanity. In the absence of any other cohesive of comparable strength after the end of the cold war, religion emerges as divisive and war-prone as any force on earth. Its power for wickedness now seems almost as mammoth as its potential for good. Surely this is a world condition that calls for the deepest and subtlest understanding of religion in a way that is both respectful and critical.

How then do we study Theosophy and the world religions in such a situation? That is the difficult and important challenge facing Theosophists, and all persons of good will, today. In this course we will try to look at the timeless spiritual heritage — the God and immortal spirit side — of each world religion, yet also put each in context of our troubled planet and its combative cultures. More specifically, we will reflect on:

- What to look for when studying a religion in terms of its teaching, spiritual practices, and social organization.
- Finding the core experiences of each, and their doctrinal expressions. Correlating this core to Theosophy.
- Why, on the other hand, religions give people a sense of identity they often feel they need to define and defend over against others.
- How to promote inter-religious understanding and harmony.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING:

Besant, Annie. *Seven Great Religions*. Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House (TPH), 1966.

Das, Bhagavan. *The Essential Unity of All Religions*. Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Press, 1939.

Ellwood, Robert. *Theosophy: A Modern Expression of the Wisdom of the Ages*. Wheaton, Illinois: TPH, 1986.

Ellwood and McGraw. *Many Peoples, Many Faiths*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1999.

Hodson, Geoffrey. *The Concealed Wisdom in World Mythology*. Adyar, India: TPH, 1983.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How would you define religion? (Be sure to distinguish between a personal definition and a general descriptive definition that covers what are traditionally or conventionally called religions.)
2. How would you define Theosophy?
3. What is the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion?
4. How can religion be capable of both great evil and great good?
5. How do you now understand the role of religion in the world today?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter II

WHAT IS RELIGION?

DEFINITIONS

Religion is one of those things, like love or truth, that most people think they know the meaning of until they try to define it precisely. Then they may find it surprisingly difficult to get at a definition that covers exactly what they want the word to mean, no more and no less.

To begin with, religion can be defined in an "ought" way—that is, in terms of what I think "real" religion ought to be, for myself and others. ("For me, religion is simply love of humanity," or "I think religion should be inward, without creeds or rituals.") Or it can be defined in an objective way that describes the religions of humankind past and present, meaningfully distinguishing between the religious ideas, practices, and institutions of different societies, whether political, cultural, or social.

In studying "Theosophy and World Religions," we will of course concentrate on the second, descriptive meaning, since we will be looking at all sorts of religions in their social and historical settings. But hopefully this endeavor will help you to come, in the end, to a deeper understanding of what you believe personal religion should be. The purpose of the present discussion is not simply to indulge in an academic exercise, but to help you understand any religion as a total human experience, and so to look at it in connection with the deep awareness of our complex, layered nature and of the evolutionary journey that Theosophy offers.

First, we need to understand that religion centers on the theme we developed in the first paper: the awareness that human life is more than its outward, material manifestation in the realm of appearances. This "more" is presupposed by the fact that men and women are doing something to meet a need other than the immediate quest for food, shelter, or clothing. It indicates there is something more than meeting material needs that make us human, that there is another nature within us—what Theosophists might call the Higher Self or the Divine Spark—that must also be recognized and served.

Religion envisions a "split-level" self and world: the "lower" oriented to the material world, and the "higher" related to the more divine nature of the universe and the values, like love and awareness of oneness, that go with it. Furthermore, openings may be found within a religion affording communication between the two levels. The higher world makes itself known to us in manifestations of gods, angels, saviors, enlightened beings, scriptural revelations, sacred rites and institutions, and mystical experience. On our level we can approach it through belief, prayer, worship services, pilgrimage, and meditation. All these practices are the "stock in trade" of religion.

RELIGIOUS FORMS OF EXPRESSION

The basic aim of religion is to bring the followers into an aware relationship with the "Other," the "more" to human life than the ordinary and material. The ways this

relationship is expressed are many and varied. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that religion, as usually understood, is far more than just ideas, whether about God or anything else. Dealing with ideas about ultimate things is philosophy, not religion. Religion includes such ideas but goes on to express them through stories, worship, institutions, art, ethics, and the historical ramifications of great movements. Today, many people, if honest, will say that they go to a church or temple not just because of its doctrinal beliefs, but perhaps much more because they like the music, the support it gives them as a community, or because of their family or ethnic background.

The forms of expression of religion can be seen as a set of interlocking circles, each linked to all the others. Here six categories of religious expression will be presented: 1) Ideas and Stories, 2) Worship, 3) Institutions, 4) Art, 5) Ethics, and 6) History.[1] Imagine a central sun— the core awareness of Otherness—with six rays, each merging into the next, streaming out from it.

IDEAS AND STORIES

All religion worthy of the name has some concept of how the universe is set up: who is in charge of it, what it means to be human, and, assuming from our suffering and frustrations that we are not always in right relationship to the universe's true nature, how to get into that right relationship. In the first instance, these concepts are usually presented in the form of stories or narratives.

The most important are basically of two types. The creation story tells how God or the gods made the world. (Most humans assume that if we know where something ultimately came from, we will know its true nature.) This story will also frequently have a sort of second chapter, like the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and their sin and expulsion, explaining what went wrong: why we are no longer in the right relationship to the ultimate reality that was built into the original creation.

Then come the hero stories, like those of Rama, the Buddha, or Jesus, telling through the example of one mighty being how that hero pioneered the way back and how the original right relationship can be recovered by those who follow in the hero's path. (These stories are often called myths, which may properly be defined as a worldview presented in narrative form. However, since the word myth has lately acquired more and more a negative connotation, as when people say, "That's just a myth," terms like *sacred story* or *narrative* may just as well be used.)

Doctrine, or the transformation of beliefs implied by these stories into abstract propositional form, usually comes later, as when the Christian church condensed the biblical narrative into the Apostles' and Nicene creeds, and then into further doctrines like the Trinity. Similar processes can be seen in the other world religions. It is as though the theologians of the faith said, "If this is what the stories tell us God, or the gods, or the Buddha, did at this and this and this time, what can we say about them that is true all the time? What general truths come out of the stories?"

It should be added that all religions have acquired "secondary" stories and ideas alongside the primary ones: stories of particular gods, saints, exemplary converts,

[1] The first three are taken from religion scholar Joachim Wach's classic work, *Sociology of Religion*, where they are technically called the Theoretical, Practical, and Sociological. The last three, although inspired by the work of others, are my own additions to the list.

and crucial episodes in the faith's history, together with ideas ranging from mystical techniques to local folklore. All these narratives need to be seen as conveyors of the overall experience of living in and with a religion.

WORSHIP

For most ordinary religious people, it is less the ideas or even stories alone that make an impression, but more the ways they are communicated and experienced in public or private forms of worship. The practices of human religion and their settings could hardly be more varied. There are grisly sacrifices and quiet times of meditation, the color and drama of an elaborate liturgy and the austerely beautiful simplicity of a mosque, the joyous fervor of Christian Pentecostalism or Hindu bhakti and the restrained, intellectual demeanor of a Confucian sage.

Yet, what all these practices have in common, is that they are done because of an awareness of the "more" to human life, and do not have an ordinary, this-worldly explanation. (Even if the worship is intended to meet some worldly need, as a prayer for rain or healing, it is using otherworldly means that imply the existence of the "more.")

Furthermore, all worship contains a "message behind the message" about how best to get in contact with Otherness and the "more" of human life. The words of the worship, of course, will probably suggest that this is best done through recourse to this god, or saviour, or spiritual technique. But there is more to it than that. For example, if it is a very elaborate, highly traditional worship service involving music, liturgical drama, the smell of incense, and perhaps touch and taste as well, the "message behind the message" is that we should get out of the one-dimensionality of the present. A very rich and transcendent worship lifts us out of the present world through overwhelming multisensory experience. Moreover, by taking us into a worship context that has been enacted over many centuries, it takes us beyond our own time, perhaps even back to the beginning of the faith.

On the other hand, very simple worship tells us that by taking away, as it were, all that is *not* God or transcendent reality, one can get in touch with God directly. Religion with great emotional release, like intensely devotional Hinduism, pietistic or Pentecostal Christianity, or the Islam of the dervishes, tells us that by releasing all the power that is within us we can open the way to God and open ourselves to the Holy Spirit. In looking at the worship expression of any religion, then, look for the message behind the message.

INSTITUTIONS

Religion is social and interpersonal by nature. It involves shared ideas, experiences reinforced by interaction with others. Even those who believe they have a purely personal religion must use words (like "God" or "faith") that come from the language and culture of their setting. More often, people who see themselves as religious acknowledge being part, in some way, of a religious community or tradition.

But how much these vary! They range from universal faiths adhered to by millions to tiny sects consisting of no more than two or three individuals. The institution may be the dominant religion of a society, or a small and persecuted minority. Its followers may be born into it, and the religion important for family or ethnic reasons, or they may be mostly individual converts. They may be a very close-

knit group, or a highly diffuse body, whose members at best see one another only once a week.

Styles of leadership and organization also vary. The leadership may be democratic or stem from a central authority. It may be routine or charismatic in nature. If the former, it will consist of persons educated, like most ministers, priests, and rabbis in our society, in schools or training programs dedicated to that purpose, who are then given posts through a regular process of election or appointment. If charismatic, it centers on persons, whether popular preachers or saints believed to be God-realized, who seem to possess an inner self-validation quite apart from any institutional sanction, and who may gather their own independent following—perhaps eventually creating a new sect or religion in the process.

In all these forms of institutional life, whether large or small, whether routinized or charismatic, there is a "message behind the message." Is it better to get in touch with ultimate reality by being willing and able to work within a large institution consisting of all sorts of people on all stages of the spiritual path, or by dropping out and uniting with a small but presumably more pure group? Is it better to count on routine processes to produce reliable spiritual leadership, or on the appearance of inner charisma? These questions persistently arise as we look at religions in terms of their institutional forms of expression.

ART

Picture religious art as a stained-glass window. Behind is the "white radiance of eternity," but between it and our anticipating eyes, the bright forms on glass give the light shape and color and so help us to see it in ways enabling our eyes comfortably to receive its brightness. The world of religious art, of course, goes far beyond stained glass to include painting, sculpture, architecture, music, drama, dance, poetry, and novels with a religious theme. But they all have in common that mission to bring ultimate reality closer to home and yet still make it seem like something from another world. Like a stained-glass window, great religious art should be an inviting portal between two realms. For many people, it is probably religious art in all its forms that most create their inner religious worlds.

Religious art cannot be separated from the exceedingly important role of symbol in religion. Art may present, often in stylized forms, scenes from the basic narratives of the faith. Or it may portray fundamental images, like the Jewish Star of David, the Christian cross and conventional three interlocking circles that represent the Trinity, or the form of a Buddha or Hindu deity.

What is a symbol? The theologian Paul Tillich, distinguishing between a sign and a symbol, said that the former just points to what it indicates, like a road sign, but a symbol participates in that which it symbolizes, invoking feelings and responses appropriate to the object. Thus a believer, seeing the cross on a church or the star and crescent on a mosque, will not only be informed what that building is, but may also get some feeling for all the associations it calls up: the devotion, the saving acts, the cohesion of that faith's community.

All religions have many symbols. There are not only the main identifying symbols, like those just named, but numerous others connected with various tenets, saints' lives, and the like. They undoubtedly play a part in the religion's expression in

art, and so need to be studied. Most important, though, is to appreciate how important art is to religion, and to recognize its role in keeping religion alive.

ETHICS

How should we live? All religions offer some guidelines for deciding what behavior is most in harmony with the nature of ultimate reality in the practical areas of human life: honesty, family life, diet, sexuality, community life, violence and war, dealing with crime. This expression of religion may be articulated in several ways: by codes of law and morality, the example of the teachers and founders of the faith, general principles and ideals left to the individual to apply in particular cases, rules for proper ethical reasoning, authorities to which one can turn for help, or by all of these together. In any case, all religions recognize that how one lives in one's daily life is a crucial test of the seriousness of one's religious commitment, as well as a way in which outsiders are often apt to judge a religion.

HISTORY

Finally, it may be noted that religions express themselves through their histories. All the major world religions now have very long histories ranging from fifteen hundred to twenty-five hundred years or more. During this time they have presented themselves in a rich diversity of ways. They have held political power and been persecuted, enthusiastic devotional movements have risen and fallen, or they have often divided into many sects offering as many variations on the faith's central theme. Buddhist enlightenment has been sought through meditation and through rituals and chants that focus the mind. Christianity has been presented as both highly conservative and profoundly liberal, as based on sacramental rites and on inward faith. Islam has embraced and rejected the mystic Sufi way.

These diversities are often responses to the external situation within which a religion finds itself. But they are also expressions of any religion's need to explore all the potential within its central vision. Theosophy speaks of each religion as stemming from the presentation of the Ancient Wisdom by a master of the wisdom for a particular time and place.Even within a certain religion, that expression may vary as the religion's history unfolds, both because outer conditions change and because the fullness of the teaching given through that religion cannot be contained in a single expression.

Thus, from the Theosophical point of view, the historical vicissitudes of religion need to be received with understanding and some degree of tolerance. It is not that they are good or bad, right or wrong (though some may be perversions of what is good in the faith); it may also be they are like musical variations on a theme, developing its richness more fully. Nor is it necessarily the case that religions are purest at the beginning, and degenerate from there. Early Christians were far from perfect, to judge from the strictures in St. Paul's letters, and one would be hard put to say that such recent Christians as Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. represent a decline after two thousand years.

The historical development of a religion may be of special interest to Theosophists, since it indicates how that particular faith fits into the overall course of spiritual evolution. It is important to see where religion has been, and what appears to be its coming forms. We will return to this theme in the next installments of the

National Lodge course. To comprehend religion fully, we must be aware of all its forms of expression and how to analyze them.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING:

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane.* New York: Harper & Row, 1959.

Ellwood, Robert. *Introducing Religion: From Inside and Outside.* New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1983.

Jung, Carl. *Man and his Symbols*. New York: Doubleday, 1964.

Tillich, Paul. *What Is Religion?* New York: HarperCollins, 1973.

Wach, Joachim. *Sociology of Religion,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What is the relationship between the inner essence of religion and its forms of expression?
2. What would you list as religion's major forms of expression?
3. How would you describe the role of story and doctrine in religion?
4. Thinking about the worship of a religious institution known to you, how would you define the "message behind the message" in its worship?
5. Do the same for its institutional structure.
6. What patterns do you see in the history of religion?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter III

PRIMAL RELIGION

THE FIRST HUMAN FAITHS

Behind the panorama of the great religions with their founders and scriptures, before the invention of writing, hangs the backdrop of the prehistoric religious world. That was a religious world without written texts but rich in art, myth, and dance. It was the religious world of our ancestors for hundreds of thousands of years between the emergence of human culture and written history. As late as the nineteenth century, vast stretches of the earth, from Siberia to Africa, from Australia to the Americas, still supported such preliterate, tribal societies. A few still remain, though in very diminished numbers and often under threat from the incursions of what we call civilization.

The preliterate religious world has gone by many names. It has been called *prehistoric*, since it came before recorded history, but that term scarcely does justice to its richness and diversity, or its continuing life to the present. The common word *primitive,* accurate in that it indicates it is what came first, has acquired inappropriate pejorative connotations. The labels *animism* (the belief there are spirits or souls in everything) and *shamanism* (the belief in an unseen world of spirits responsive only to or through the shamans) have been used, but they really refer to common but not necessarily universal beliefs or practices among these peoples. I prefer the term *primal religion*, which to me suggests not only the first human religion, but also that which contains forms and themes that have been fundamental to all religion ever since.

Mysticism can be seen as but a sophisticated version of the vision quester's or the shaman's inner illumination and access to the world of the gods. The dying and rising savior-god is based on the ancient agricultural deity, dying with the harvest in the fall and reborn in the spring. Even the sense of ultimate Oneness, reflected both in the monotheistic (belief in one God) and in the monistic (belief in one universal Reality) religions, has roots in the primal belief in one creator-god or one universal law or pattern behind all the diversity of heaven and earth.

COSMOS AND HISTORY

There are, however, differences in the way fundamental ideas are experienced and practiced in different periods of religious history. The history of religion can be divided into three major epochs, corresponding to stages of culture. The first is an epoch of hunting and gathering peoples (the Paleolithic). The second is an epoch of archaic agriculture after the discovery of agriculture some 12,000 years ago (the Neolithic). The third epoch is the period of our present-day "great religions"—Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and the Chinese religions. Most of the founders of these religions lived between about 500 B.C.E. and 500 C.E. Written scriptures and historical records of the founder and his revelations are inevitably central to these religions, because they *come after* the invention of writing. On a deeper level, their message spoke to new kinds of human anxiety and self-awareness induced by those literate and complex times.

Theosophically, it may be suggested that the primal hunting and gathering era corresponds to that of the Lemurian Root Race; the religious world of archaic agriculture and the ancient empires based on it to the Atlantean; and the present age of the historical "founder" religions to the Fifth Root Race and its spiritual dilemmas. Is it possible that we are now on the cusp of a new spiritual way of being in the world, which will differ as much from what went before as each of those three periods did from its predecessor?

Before we can answer questions like these, we must return to primal religion and its characteristics. Our concern now is with religion *before* writing. Another way to identify the forms of primal religion—that of hunters and gatherers and archaic farmers—is to apply the expression *cosmic religion*. This means religion centered mainly around sacred places: the holy mountain, the sacred grove, the sun and moon and powers of nature, the village shrine. Cosmic religion's calendar centers on the turn of the seasons—new year's (usually the biggest festival), midsummer, spring and fall, seedtime prayers, and the harvest thanksgiving.

That cosmos-based calendar is in contrast with the founder religion's festival calendar, which is based on historical events instead: Passover, Christmas, Easter, Wesak (the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and entry into Nirvana), and the Laylat al-Qadr ("Night of Power") commemorating the giving of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad. The sacred places are likewise historical sites, such as Jerusalem, Bodh Gaya, and Mecca.

A moment's reflection, however, will show that despite the undeniable importance of these religions' historicity, cosmic religion lingers just beneath the surface. Christmas, for example, commemorates a historical event for Christians, around which all history is said to turn. But consider the Christmas symbolism—a celebration of light at the darkest time of the year, the inauguration of a new year, an ornamented sacred tree symbolizing Christ. It calls to mind Yggdrasil, the cosmic tree rising from the center of the earth to heaven in the old Germanic religion, and it was from Germany that the Christmas tree derives. This bright tree is not only pre-Christian in origin, but is also an expression of cosmic religion: the spiritual experience produced by the turn of the seasons, the sacred meaning of landmarks of nature like trees and mountains, the sheer evocative power of symbols like light and glitter, the perennial importance of family to spiritual life, and the sacred, set-apart time of festival.

Then there is our orange-and-black feast, with its atmosphere of jack-o'-lanterns and tales of witches amid frost and falling leaves. Halloween is perhaps the oldest holiday that is a part of general American culture. It is almost a pure memento of cosmic religion, and it incorporates no small number of its themes. On this night, children masked and costumed as ghosts, witches, and devils, or as pirates, cowboys, or monsters visit homes to receive candy with threats of "trick or treat." Perpetuated in Christian times as the eve of All Hallows or All Saints' Day, Halloween was originally Samhain, the autumn festival of the ancient Britons and their Druid priests. It was also the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon New Year. Like festivals of harvest and the new year everywhere, Samhain had motifs of settling accounts, the harvest moon, the celebration of the last harvest before winter, the return of the dead to visit the living, and the kindling of a new fire to light the way and warm the spirit as the darkest, coldest time of year loomed near. It suggested a temporary return to the chaos before the world was created and thereby the release of the dark and uncanny

denizens of chaos. Behind children's masks of monsters and witches, behind "trick or treat" and bobbing for apples, lies the ancient cosmic religious orientation toward the turn of the seasons, rather than a historical event, as the time when inner reality is revealed.

Consider how Theosophy, with its cyclical view of the world and its interlinking of human, planetary, and cosmic evolution, manages to combine important features of both cosmic and historical religion. We are children of the universe with its sacred places and times of transformation, represented astrologically by the sun's annual pilgrimage through the zodiac. But we are also spiritual sons and daughters of the great religious founders, in Theosophy spoken of as Masters of the Wisdom, who reveal portions of the unfathomable lore behind the universe using various words and symbols for different times and places.

Now let us look at some basic themes of primal religion.

GODS, SPIRITS, AND THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

Primal men and women practiced polytheism, or belief in many gods; they lived in a spiritually richly populated cosmos. As the theologian Paul Tillich once said, the difference between polytheism and monotheism is one of quality rather than quantity. It is not just a matter of numbers; it is a different kind of religious experience. For the monotheist, everything ultimately is subject to a single force and center of meaning. For the polytheist, spiritual variety prevails: there is a different "feel" and meaning to the god of this sacred well and the goddess of that sacred grove, or between the deities of love and war, and each may be honored in its own time and place. Consider how Theosophy embraces both sides of this distinction too: Devas, or entities governing various realms of nature, provide a panorama of spiritual diversity, as do the varied personalities of the Masters guiding human evolution. At the same time Theosophy insists on the ultimate Oneness of all that is, while expressing itself through many splendid hierarchies of being.

The primal world was plenteous with such beings. Yet a few were of particular importance. First came the creator gods or first beings, often (though not always) led by a "high god" who was likewise the sublime ruler of the cosmos. Frequently, however, having exerted the supreme effort of making the world and all that is, this "high god" rested, not just on the seventh day but more or less permanently, becoming what is called a *deus otiosus* or resting god, though possibly available to be called into action by extreme emergency. The day-to-day management of the universe, however, is in other hands.

The story of creation of the world and of humanity is of great importance in many primal cultures, as always saying much about the people who tell the story and their understanding of what it means to be human on this earth. Some, like the Dogon of Africa, tell of a world egg, from which androgynous twins came forth who generated the rest of creation. Others, like the Zuni of the American Southwest, posit primordial beings emerging in a kind of gradual birth out of a pre-existent mother earth. Others, like the Polynesians, speak of primal parents personifying heaven and the watery world below. (There are echoes of all these stories in the Stanzas of Dzyan of *The Secret Doctrine*.)

THE ORIGIN OF EVIL

Originally we must have been close to the gods who made us; a problem that must be dealt with next is what happened to cause our present separation from the divine. Many stories are told reminiscent of the Garden of Eden tale in Genesis, not seldom suggesting that a problem came about because of terrible ignorance or misunderstanding on the part of our first parents. The natives of Poso, Sulawesi (Celebes), in Indonesia, for example, say that at first the sky where the creator dwelt was very near the earth, and he would lower gifts down on a rope to his children. Once he let down a stone, but the first men and women were indignant at such a useless gift and refused it. So the creator pulled it back up and lowered instead a banana. This they took. But the creator called to them, "Because you have chosen the banana, your life shall be like its life. Had you taken the stone, you would have been like it, changeless and immortal."

THE CULTURE HERO

Next there may appear the quasi-divine figure known as a "culture hero." He or she clears the way for human life and teaches people necessary skills, such as hunting and farming, but may also have mischievous qualities, perhaps explaining the uncertain elements of life in this world.

The Apaches say that Jonayaiuin saved humankind by destroying huge monsters that were killing people, thus making the world fit for habitation. Tudava, of the Trobriand Islanders in the South Pacific, taught the people to build canoes and introduced the cultivation of yams. Nyikang, culture hero and first king of the Shilluk in East Africa, is said to have been the son of a cow, those people's chief resource, and to have given them grazing land for their herds.

Sometimes the culture hero is also associated with death; the Cheyenne believed they had emerged from the murdered body of their culture hero. In a common motif, certain Inuit (Eskimo) say that the sea creatures on which they depend came from different parts of the body of the female culture hero, Sedna, who had been killed by her father.

Frequently the culture hero is identified with the trickster, another important figure, known among many Native Americans as Coyote. This fascinating personage performs functions typical of the benign culture hero: he destroys monsters, creates animals, and teaches various skills necessary to human life. Yet he is also a clown who embarks on over-ambitious adventures that fail, often humorously. Moreover, Coyote or his equivalent is capable of amorality, crudity, and heartless tricks toward humans; he is also pictured as alternately kind and cruel, truthful and deceptive. In this perhaps the trickster is like this strange world in which we find ourselves, which can also be serious and comic, gracious and ruthless. Similarly, Gnostic myths, endorsed by *Isis Unveiled* and other Theosophical sources, attribute the creation of this world not to the high god, but to an incompetent demiurge or lower emanation who bungled the job, and in whose prison house planet we find ourselves trapped.

CIRCLING PATHS THROUGH LIFE AND DEATH

In primal societies, the concept of the soul as a separable, undying part of the self is very widespread. But ideas as to what happens after death are varied. In fact, a notion of several souls to accommodate different postmortem prospects is common;

one soul may remain around the familial hearth, another abide at the place of internment, another join the ancestors, and another go to a paradisal world.

A departed soul, one or one of many, may stay close to home, where it must be propitiated at a nearby grave or shrine. Sometimes these spirits are personified by dancers in ceremonies, often with masks. Ancestral spirits, especially in Africa, can be very powerful, enforcing traditional ways among their descendents and intervening to help in crises.

Another idea is that spirits go to a distant land of the dead, perhaps a known but remote island or mountain, perhaps a more mythical place like the Australian "Dreaming." But often this land is less a fanciful paradise than a mirror image of this world, where life goes on much the same as here though perhaps more pleasantly, with days always mild and food always abundant. Finally, it is also sometimes thought that the dead reincarnate in the same tribe or family.

Many of these primal ideas of the afterlife are reflected in Theosophy, with its teaching of different "bodies"—physical, etheric, astral, mental, atmic—that separate at physical death, and may have different destinies on the varied planes of reality. However, within some primal traditions, passage into the afterlife is not automatic, but may require preparation in the form of initiations.

INITIATION

For most primal cultures, life is a series of initiations, and it is through them that the most meaningful signs of status are bestowed, and the deepest mysteries of life and death revealed.

Appropriately, initiation is a painful trial, like birth and death. Among certain Papuan tribes in New Guinea, the traditional initiation ceremony for young men was held every ten or eighteen years. At this time, candidates were taken by the men of the tribe into the forest, and were told they would be eaten by a ghostly monster. To prevent this horror, sacrifices of pigs had to be offered, one for each boy. During the time of initiation the candidates stayed in a secret lodge representing the belly of the beast, undergoing rituals, including circumcision, and learning the tribal lore. At the end of the seclusion period, they returned to the village as men rather than boys—but first they were treated as babies and given only soft food, for they had been reborn. Indeed, in some New Guinea initiations the candidates literally pass through the legs of the elders, as though undergoing a new birth, or are buried as though dead and then summoned to re-emerge from the earth.

In the related culture of Malekula, in the New Hebrides, the men spent their lives undergoing a series of higher and higher initiations, which not only gave them status, like lodge degrees, but also enhanced power to confront the monster that guarded the road to the spirit world, past whose lair they would have to pass after death.

In some examples, initiation is more individualized. The Native American Pawnee young man was expected to remain alone in the bush until he personally received a dream or vision of his guardian spirit. In many primal societies young women also went through initiatory rites, often in conjunction with first menstruation and coming of age. But it is interesting to note that the men's rites often seem to mimic not only death and rebirth, but also what girls becoming women do naturally: emit genital blood (imitated in circumcision), or "give birth." Some

initiations, of course, are special to particular classes of people, like shamans; this will be discussed in the next paper.

Theosophy also sees life as a series of initiations, and often speaks of inner experiences that amount to initiation.

RELIGION OF THE HUNTERS AND GATHERERS

Religion always has major connections to a society's main sources of livelihood, and so it is no surprise that for the first peoples, for whom life depended on what could be hunted or gathered in forest and field, these were religiously charged occupations. To go on a hunt was a venture requiring ritual preparation: a sacred dance that perhaps imitated the animal sought, taboos of speech and diet, and a yoga-like silence waiting in ambush.

Archaic hunters frequently believed in a divine "Master of Animals" who had control over the terrain of a major species, and was able to "open" or "close" the forest, making game available or impossible to find. This lord of the beasts had to be treated with reverence, and expected his or her animal wards to be regarded as fellow creatures, given honor for their sacrifice. When animals were taken, it was important to ritually apologize to them for their killing. Perhaps then the souls of hunted quarry would agree to return again, covered with flesh once more, so that they could again be killed for the feeding of the tribe.

Women, on the other hand, were undoubtedly chiefly involved in gathering. This led them to an intimate knowledge of herbs, roots, seeds, and soils that helped them become healers, wise women, and perhaps eventually discoverers of agriculture.

CONCLUSION

Primal humanity did not so much "have" a religion as imbue all aspects of life with religious or sacred meaning, from birth to death, from daily food-gathering to night-time story. Theosophy, too, is ideally seen more as a way of life than as an abstract doctrine, one that infuses all life with the "deep background" meaning imparted by its view of our origin and destiny. In the next paper we will consider two further aspects of primal religion, shamanism and the religious meaning of archaic agriculture.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Dahlberg, Frances. *Woman the Gatherer.* New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1983.

Eliade, Mircea. *Cosmos and History.* New York: Taylor & Francis, 1985.

Gill, Sam. *Native American Religions.* Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1981.

Lowie, Robert. *Primitive Religion.* New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1948.

Maringer, Johannes. *The Gods of Prehistoric Man.* Troy, Michigan: Phoenix Press, 2003

Ray, Benjamin. *African Religions.* New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1975.

Redfield, Robert. *The Primitive World.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1957.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How would you distinguish between cosmic and historic religion?
2. Reflect on the human issues and experiences that lie behind common ideas of gods, culture heroes, tricksters, and spirits.
3. What do you believe early myths may be trying to say through their accounts of the soul, its often multiple character, and its destiny in the afterlife?
4. Explain initiation in terms of your understanding of human life.
5. Although Theosophists are generally not sympathetic to hunting, what can be learned from the primal experience of hunting?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter IV

PRIMAL RELIGION: SHAMINISM AND ARCHAIC AGRICULTURE

SHAMANS

In primal society, the shaman—sometimes called, less precisely or respectfully, the medicine man or witch doctor—is one who, through special initiations, has been given spirit assistants and access to the mysterious world of spirits, and is able to heal, enter the spirit realm to find lost or strayed souls, guide the departed on their long journey, and intervene with the divine on behalf of the people. The shaman knows the geography and dynamics of the invisible spirit world that overlays and is present within our world. Thus he or she is able to serve as counselor and loremaster in a primal tribe, and not seldom—because shaman performances are likely to be highly dramatic—entertainer as well.

Let us look at two or three shamanistic performances and try to understand some common features of shamanism.

The word *shaman* comes from Siberian tribes, and it is among the primal peoples of that vast land of endless forests and tundra that shamanism's classic form is found. The Altaic shaman in Siberia wore brown leather and elaborate decorations of metal discs, bird feathers, and colored streamers. He entranced himself by sitting astride a horsehide-covered bench or a straw goose and beating a drum rhythmically for hours, the beat being the pounding of the hooves or wings of the magical mount that bore him to secret realms of gods and spirits. Finally the shaman would dismount and, flushed with ecstasy, climb nine steps notched in a tree trunk. At each stage in the ascent he would relate the difficulties of his journey, address the gods of that level, and report what they were telling him about coming events. Some of these episodes were comic, such as a burlesque hare hunt on the sixth level. The shaman's scenario was generally enacted with a rich dramatic sense for the right combination of spectacle, mystery, suspense, comic relief, and exalted sentiments. When the Altaic shaman reached the ninth level, he concluded with a reverent prayer of devotion to Bai Ulgan, the high god, and collapsed, exhausted.

The shamans of the Salish Indians of the American Northwest would take an imaginary journey by water to recover the lost or stolen soul of a sick person. They traversed the wide River of the Dead dividing our world from the next. The voyage was made by a complement of ten shamans, standing in two rows with a paddle in the hands of each, the chief shaman serving as helmsman. The crew would make rowing gestures clearly visible to the sick person and the spectators.

After a long crossing, the invisible craft reached the Land of the Dead, and the chief shaman disembarked. However, his trials had only begun. He had to cross a raging torrent by placing a tree trunk over an imaginary turbulent stream as a bridge. He then had to struggle with a guardian who refused to tell him the way.

Finally reaching the gates of the Land of the Dead, the chief shaman would come into conflict with spirits who tried to prevent his entry with flaming spears; these were enthusiastically played by boys of the tribe waving and throwing torches of cedar wood. Eventually, however, the shaman entered the Land of the Dead, found

the lost soul of the sick person, and bore it triumphantly homeward. As he progresses he joyfully sings the song of that spirit. On hearing his or her own song, after so much effort on the part of brave shamanic healers, one can well imagine the patient would feel much better; indeed, some sources say he or she immediately leaped up healed.

SHAMANIC INITIATION

To become a shaman properly requires initiation. The process in some cultures can be sufficiently violent as to be what Mircea Eliade, in his celebrated book, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, called "initiatory psychopathology." The future shaman's career typically begins with a "call" from gods or spirits, in the form of "voices" or strange impulses and seizures. For a time, unable to escape from a supernatural world for which he or she is not prepared, the candidate may be tormented in mind and body. The future shaman may wander about the village in a dissociated manner, have fits, be unable to eat or drink, even become criminal. In our culture a person acting in this way would certainly be called mentally ill.

In a shamanistic culture, however, such a disturbed individual is one marked by the gods as a possible candidate for a mighty vocation. However much he may want merely to be "normal," that can never be; the gods will not let their singling-out of a potential novice be scorned. One must either become a shaman or face unending punishment in mind and body.

The chosen one should therefore undergo initiation, perhaps through long isolation in the wilderness, until the tormenting spirits have been brought under control to become the shaman's helpers, or the initiation has failed and the pathetic individual becomes completely insane.

Here is a vivid description by Eliade, based on an account by the famous Arctic explorer Knud Rasmussen, of the manner in which an Inuit or Eskimo shaman received power in the form of his *angakok*:

> The *angakok* consists of a mysterious light which the shaman suddenly feels in his body, inside his head, within the brain, an inexplicable searchlight, a luminous fire, which enables him to see in the dark, both literally and metaphorically speaking, for he can now, even with closed eyes, see through darkness and perceive things and coming events which are hidden from others: thus they look into the future and into the secrets of others.
>
> The candidate obtains this mystical light after long hours of waiting, sitting on a bench in his hut and invoking the spirits. When he experiences it for the first time it is as if the house in which he is suddenly rises; he sees far ahead of him, through mountains, exactly as if the earth were one great plain, and his eyes could reach to the end of the earth. Nothing is hidden from him any longer; not only can he see things far, far away, but he can also discover souls, stolen souls, which are either kept concealed in far, strange lands or have been taken up or down to the Land of the Dead.

Rasmussen was also told by an old Eskimo shaman, "All true wisdom is only to be found far from men, out in the great solitude, and it can only be acquired by

suffering. Privations and sufferings are the only things that can open a man's mind to that which is hidden from others."

Other shamans, however, may receive their calling by heredity or by relatively gentler means. The *miko* or shamanesses of Japan are all female and are all blind or nearly so. All are initiated into the vocation of shamanism as young girls. While it precludes marriage, unlikely in traditional society for a blind girl in any case, being a shamaness provides a respected place in the village for girls who otherwise would have had slim prospects.

Blind girls become apprentices of older shamanesses at six or eight years of age. After strict training involving fasts, cold-water ablutions, observing of taboos, and the learning of shamaness songs and methods of trance and divination, they are initiated.

For this rite, the novice wears a white robe called the death dress. She sits facing her mistress and other shamanesses; these elders sing and chant formulae and names of deities. Suddenly the mistress cries, "What deity possessed you?" When the candidate gives the name of a Shinto or Buddhist deity (who will thereafter be her main supernatural patron), the mistress throws a rice cake at her, causing her to fall onto the floor in a faint. The elders then dash water onto her head many times. Then they lie beside her and revive her with body heat. When she comes to, she is said to be reborn; she exchanges the death dress for wedding apparel, and a traditional Japanese wedding is performed. The new shamaness is the bride; her deity, the groom. A great feast of celebration follows, shared by relatives and friends of the new shamaness, and she demonstrates her proficiency by communicating with spirits of the dead. For the next week, as a sort of divine honeymoon, she may live alone in a shrine of her deity.

(I visited such a blind miko in northern Japan in 1966. After going into a light trance by sitting on the floor in front of an altar of many Shinto and Buddhist deities and swaying back and forth, she evoked the popular bodhisattva Fudo, said to be my guardian, and then the spirit of my grandmother, who had died the year before.)

TRICKS AND BELIEF

It should not be imagined that shamans are unaware of the showmanship and even trickery involved in their art. The famous anthropologist Franz Boas long ago published the life-story of Quesalid, as told to him by that shaman of the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia. Quesalid said that he started out as a skeptic and associated with shamans to learn their tricks and expose them. Invited to join the shamans of his clan, he learned plenty: sacred songs, how to induce trances and fits, how to produce seemingly magical feats by sleight of hand, and much else. Knowledge of his training spread, and he was invited by a family to heal a sickness.

Despite Quesalid's disbelief, he felt constrained to accept the offer, and the healing was a success. As more triumphs followed, word spread that he was a great shaman. Knowing certain tricks—for example, that the "sickness" he pretended to suck out of the ill person's body was actually made of down he had previously concealed in his mouth— Quesalid was at a loss how to interpret to himself what he was doing. Finally, he came to feel that the healings worked because the sick person "believed strongly in his dream about me," and he apparently felt that the deceptions were justifiable insofar as they helped people believe. Nonetheless, he proved the

superiority of his methods in competition with shaman colleagues and was contemptuous of most other shamans as charlatans, saying he had known only one he thought was a "real shaman," who employed no trickery he could detect and who would not accept pay.

The best shamans may no doubt be thought of theosophically as archaic Masters of the Wisdom, and the first custodians, under whatever symbolic form they took in their tribe, of the Ancient Wisdom. The spiritual journey of H. P. Blavatsky, like that of other great spiritual teachers and mediators past and present, can be compared in some respects to the shaman's initiation.

THE FIRST FARMERS

The discovery of agriculture and the coming of Neolithic culture was, for primal humanity, as much a religious event as an economic change, for it moved a central locus of the sacred from the animal to the plant, and from the forest to the soil. In place of the Master of Animals the Goddess of the Earth (or Earth Mother) controlled feast or famine, and the agricultural year became the basis of the spiritual calendar as well—one of the features of cosmic religion. The sedentary farmer's closeness to the cycle of the plant made him extremely aware of the turning seasons, especially planting and harvest. Out of this came such festivals as May Day, Halloween, and Thanksgiving. The Neolithic revolution also often wrought a greater role for women in religion, as priestesses, shamanesses, and models of the Mother Goddess of the Earth. It may be that agriculture was first discovered by women.

There is another theme too: in a remarkable number of myths from around the world, the discovery of agriculture seems to have involved a crime, virtually a second "fall" into sin, as though the first cutting of the skin of Mother Earth, with a plow, put humanity still farther away from the gods and primal innocence than when the gifts of fruit and flesh left on earth's surface were gathered. (The second offense in the Bible after that of Eden was committed by Cain, tiller of the soil.) It would be said that the first plants were "stolen," or that the one who introduced agriculture was a trickster or rebel against the primal gods, or that the first plants came from the body of a slain but innocent maiden.

Thus, in ancient Japanese mythology, it is related that the moon god, Tsukiyomi, came down to earth and, going to the home of the food goddess, requested something to eat. She gave him a meal, but he considered it all repulsive food. In his anger he slew her and found in her body all types of food plants of a new sort–rice, beans, and other agricultural products. These Tsukiyomi took back to heaven, and the High Goddess Amaterasu said they would be for planting in the broad and narrow fields of heaven and earth.

It is after the discovery of agriculture, and chiefly in archaic agricultural societies, that some of the darkest features of religion are found: large-scale animal and human sacrifice, cannibalism, and headhunting, as though agriculture taught all too well the principle of life for life. An example is the *Jivaro* tribe of the upper Amazon, famous for their shrunken heads. A Jivaro male who had taken and shrunk a head would then perform a dance with two female relatives, usually his sister and wife. He would hold the head in his outstretched hand, and the women would hold on to him from behind as they danced; this would empower these women to gain great productivity from the crops and animals it was their task to tend. The dance seemed to make power flow from the head of the husband and then through the

women into the crops. After this rite, the head was no longer powerful and could be discarded.

Theosophically, perhaps the Neolithic or archaic agriculture stage can be compared to the Atlantean, destroyed in the end because of black magicians. But for all its dark magic, early farming moved human culture, and so religion, forward. A much larger population can be sustained by agriculture than by hunting and gathering. This helped create towns, trade, cities, division of labor, and finally the ancient civilizations like those of India, China, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. Today we still live in the wake of the agricultural revolution, with many fundamental features of contemporary religion and life still shaped by it. But it was no more than a century or so ago that the great majority of humanity still lived in peasant societies, whose ways of life and worship were more similar to those of their Neolithic ancestors thousands of years before, than to those of the high-tech city-dweller today. It remains to be seen if the urban and technological revolutions of recent times will shape the religion of the future as dramatically as did the change from hunting and gathering to farming.

References for Supplementary Reading

Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy.* Princeton, New Jersey: Bollingen, 2004.

Eliade, Mircea. *A History of Religious Ideas*, Vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Frazer, James. *Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild.* New York: Macmillan, 1925.

Gimbutas, Marija. *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe.* Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1982.

Myerhoff, Barbara. *Peyote Hunt.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1976.

Lommel, Andreas. *Shamanism: The Beginnings of Art.* Columbus, Ohio: McGraw-Hill, 1966.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What do you think is the essential experience of the shaman? What can be learned from shamanism?
2. What wisdom did ancient shamans have that is comparable to that of Theosophy?
3. How did the agricultural revolution change human life? Think of both direct and indirect changes, and changes both good and bad.
4. The discovery of agriculture resulted in significant changes in the practice of religion. What kind of religious changes could come from urbanization and recent new technologies, especially computer technology? How could Theosophy help understand these changes?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
CHAPTER V

THE HINDU VISION

WHAT IS HINDUISM?

First let it be said that there is no such thing as Hinduism, if by that one means a religion with a distinct and definite body of doctrine or system of organization, and establishment at a definite point in history by a "founder" analogous to the Buddha, Jesus, or Muhammad. In fact, the word itself is not Hindu, but comes from the Persian name for the country whence our word India is also derived, plus the western ending "ism."

Hinduism thus just means "India-ism," the "religion" or "ideology" of India—and that is as good a definition as any. In the present-day Republic of India, about 12 percent of the population is Muslim, and another 12 percent is comprised of minorities of Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians (Parsees), Buddhists, and others. The remaining 75 percent, persons of Indian heritage and culture who do not claim a different religious heritage, can fairly be accounted Hindu.

But what a diversity that remainder is! Here are colorful village festivals of local gods replete with trumpets, processions, carnival-type events, gaudy lights around divine shrines, and chanting priests. Here are yogis in mountain or forest caves who, far from the bustle of human life, seek to still the mind and senses so as to realize the true essence beyond, or within, both mind and sense. In centers of learning there are astute professors of Vedanta philosophy who seek the same through the disciplined life of the mind. Visitors to India will never forget the great ornate temples thronged with worshippers and home to familiar deities: fierce Kali, playful Krishna, dignified Vishnu, monkey-like Hanuman, and Shiva who may be represented only by a massive pillar, the Lingam. Yet many devout Hindu householders rarely go near a temple, and instead worship the divine protectors of their family at a home altar every morning.

Common threads run through the diversity, and that commonality starts with the word *Dharma*. Traditional India would not have used the term Hinduism (just as the country itself was not India but Bharat), but would have spoken of Dharma, or *Sanat dharma*, the eternal Dharma. Dharma defies easy translation. Perhaps cognate to our word "form," it basically suggests a fundamental form or pattern in the universe, the social order, and individual lives. In traditional Hinduism, it meant seeing society as a vast organism, like a great tree or human body, individuals being like cells and their groupings or "castes" like limbs or organs: *Brahmins*, priests and intellectuals, were the head; *Kshatriyas*, warriors and rulers, were the arms; *Vaisayas,* merchants and craftsmen, were the abdomen, and *Shudras* or peasants were the feet. (However, castes were and are not always occupational; more important were relative degrees of ritual purity associated with each, which determined who could cook for whom, eat with whom, or marry whom.)

Traditionally, Dharma also means righteousness—that is, action in harmony with the pattern of the universe and society. To uphold Dharma means to uphold the right ordering of things, in contrast to giving in to one's own self-centered desires and predilections. To follow Dharma is to live in conformity with the duties of the

universal moral order and of one's place in society. It was said that it was better to follow one's own dharma even imperfectly than to attempt someone else's. (Today, caste is often reinterpreted to mean not just birth, but more importantly one's own innate character and disposition—to follow *this* honestly and truly would be to follow Dharma.)

Finally, Dharma also refers to ritual actions which uphold the order of the universe by "feeding" and placating the gods who sustain it. Thus it also includes basic religious responsibilities, both communal and personal.

THE QUEST FOR LIBERATION

Dharma, then, is fundamental to Hinduism. Another theme, *moksha* or liberation, is in some ways its opposite. Moksha suggests that one can "leap up and out" (the word may be related to our word "buck," as in "bucking bronco") of the level of Dharma altogether to live in freedom from all forms and patterns, released from the chains of *karma* (cause and effect) that usually go with life in the ordinary Dharma world. An interesting presentation of the idea is found in the Laws of Manu, an important text from around 100 C.E. It says there are four basic goals to life: *kama* or pleasure, *artha* or gain, *dharma* or righteousness in this world, and *moksha* or liberation. These can lead successively from one to the other as each, except the last, is tried and found wanting.

So it was that traditional Hinduism held up the ideal of one who, after completing a worthy life as a student and then householder, retired from the world and ultimately became a *sannyasin* or renunciant. Such a person would live as a monk, without family and possessions, wholly devoted to God and liberation. Some today still take this path. The sannyasin is free of the duties and restrictions of caste; one can go anywhere, eat with anyone, but at the same time is dependent on what is given him or her. Ideally, one lives only for the spiritual quest.

THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

How does one seek moksha? Hinduism is a broad stream and diverse currents flow with it to lead toward liberation. The Bhagavad-Gita, one of the best known of Hindu texts, spells out three basic routes according to modern interpretations: *jñaña* or knowledge, *karma yoga* or duty, and *bhakti* or devotional love. Perhaps many sannyasins would follow the first, for jñaña does not mean mere factual knowledge but the deep knowledge of God that comes with giving up all that is not God, and with meditation. Practitioners of it would say true knowledge is discrimination between the Real (God) and the Unreal (maya, illusion, the world seen as other than God).

Karma yoga, the yoga or spiritual discipline of activity—that is, working for Dharma-as-righteousness in the world—is a special motif of the Bhagavad-Gita. This book, really a part of the vast ancient epic called the Mahabharata, involves a dialogue between a prince, Arjuna, and the god Krishna. The prince is troubled because he must fight a war against his kinsmen. Even though his cause is just (that is, the cause of Dharma), the bloodshed that war entails profoundly disturbs him. Krishna assures him that as a Kshatriya or prince and warrior by caste, it is his duty to uphold Dharma outwardly, by force if need be. Furthermore, his righteous military dharma can be a way of liberation for him as surely as meditation for the renunciant, for by doing one's dharmic duty without attachment to the fruits of one's actions—

just because they are duty, letting God work through one—one is just as pure and "renounced" as the holy man in a cave. The karma yoga ideal of the Gita sustained Mahatma Gandhi in his work for Indian independence. Of course, as an apostle of non-violence, he interpreted the war in the Mahabharata allegorically, as representing the struggle against forces of evil within and around us toward which none of us can be neutral.

The way of *bhakti* or devotion is the path most congenial to many people. (Of course these three paths are not mutually exclusive; most of us probably would do well to have elements of all three in our spiritual lives.) Bhakti is prayerful love for the gods who in Hinduism represent the ultimate divine One with human form and face. It is the way to liberation or moksha through losing one's egocentricity in love for a chosen god. This path is quite comparable to the devotion to the Sacred Heart or the Blessed Virgin Mary found in Roman Catholicism, or to the love many evangelical Protestants feel for Jesus in their hearts. In Hinduism it can be carried to very intense degrees of feeling and expression, above all toward Krishna or a form of the Mother Goddess.

Love is, for most people, the human drive which most readily forgets self-centeredness. In moments of love, one's feelings go outside of oneself and share in the subjective life of another human being through caring and empathy. Why not, then, bhakti says, utilize this drive to propel the ultimate quest, for loss of self in the Divine? Through the love of gods we can visualize and adore, but who are themselves in loving union with the Absolute, we share their oneness with the One, for we—whether human or god—become what we love.

THE GODS OF HINDUISM

Who are these gods? The devotional gods are best thought of as belonging to two families—the Vishnu family and the Shiva family. Vishnu and his religious system are somewhat like the western concept of God, in that he is a Creator who represents not so much the cosmic totality as the forces working on behalf of order and righteousness. In his mythology, creation and destruction are cyclical, immense cycles of divine sleep and waking. Between universes, the god sleeps. When it comes time for the cosmos to be made again, a lotus grows out of Vishnu's navel, and on the lotus appears Brahma, the creator god (not to be confused with Brahman, the philosophical Absolute), who makes the world. Then Vishnu rises up and seats himself in high heaven on a lotus throne with his consort goddesses Lakshmi (fortune) and Bhudevi (the earth-goddess), and with Brahma and his consort, Sarasvati (patroness of learning, culture, and music). The supreme Lord then rules over that universe, upholding Dharma, and descends into the world as an avatar to set things right whenever Dharma declines.

The avatars (descents or, roughly, incarnations) of Vishnu are among the greatest of bhakti deities. There is Rama, subject of the great epic called the Ramayana, which tells of this kingly hero's battles to rescue his consort Sita, with the help of the monkey-god Hanuman, after Sita had been abducted by the demon Ravana. Most popular of all is Krishna, with his consort Radha. As a child and youth, Krishna represents God as playful, enticing, and above all loving, the supreme object of devotional love; in the Bhagavad-Gita he displays a sterner, though deeply wise, side as Arjuna's charioteer and confidant in the great war. Other avatars include the Buddha and the coming "descent," Kalkin.

In the Shiva system, God is above all simply the absolute and so the union of all opposites—creation and destruction, male and female. Shiva and Shakti (his female energies, represented as a great goddess) have equal prominence, and the goddess, as the manifested world, displays immense force and variety. But, though the divine couple may appear in visions, it is claimed they are not usually to be born incarnate among humans. Shiva, as the Absolute personified, has different guises. He may be the Nataraja, "Lord of the Dance," whose various steps dance out the different ages of world history, until it is time for one dance-concert to end and the Lord to rest, before beginning the dance again. As the Master Yogi, he is seated high in the Himalayas, on Mt. Kailas, where his meditations sustain the world. As the Master Teacher, he instructs through silence, simply imbuing those in his presence with wisdom. But it is as the Lingam, an abstract representation of pure being and life-force, that Shiva is most commonly portrayed: a simple pillar like a pivot on which the wheel of the universe turns.

His consort, Shakti, also takes different forms. In all of them she represents the world, the realm of time and change, in its relation to the Absolute. She can be Parvati, the world in its beauty at rosy dawn. As Annapurna, she is the bountiful mother, the goddess of food and abundance. As Durga, she rides a lion and wields a sword with which to kill demons. Finally, as Kali, dark, eyes bulging, tongue hanging out, holding a bloody sword and wearing a necklace of severed heads, receiving sacrifice, we see the mystery of the divine as terrible and destructive. Yet it is said that until Kali is fully understood and loved, one cannot truly find peace or know God, for the side of God she represents is as much the divine as that of Parvati.

Shiva and the goddess have a well-known son, Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, often prayed to as the remover of obstacles.

THE HISTORY OF HINDUISM

Where did this tradition come from? Apart from a few scholars, Hindus have not been too concerned about the religion's history but rather with it as a living presence, and so we have presented the living side of it first. A few remarks on history are in order, though. Most would see Hinduism as having two sources: the ancient Dravidian civilization of India, represented by the ruined cities of the Indus Valley which date back to 2500 BCE; and the culture of the Aryans, Indo-Europeans, or Vedic peoples, cattle-herders who entered India, or arose in India, beginning about 1500 BCE. Their language was Sanskrit, related to most of the European languages, and in that tongue they recited the sacred chants, ritual instructions, stories, and great philosophical poems of the scriptures called Vedas. (They were not actually written down until much later.) Fire rituals, which had to be done precisely, were very important to them. Those aspects of Hinduism centering around Shiva, yoga, water, and mother-goddesses probably came from the Dravidian side of the heritage; Sanskrit, the Vedic rituals and scriptures, Brahmins, and the caste system came from the Indo-European side.

In the end the two sides were extensively, if not perfectly, fused together. One sign of that was the emerging philosophy called Vedanta (the "end," in the sense of culmination, of the Vedas), expressed in the last set of Vedic scriptures, the Upanishads, from about 500 BCE to 100 CE. We will discuss it in the next lesson.

Many other teachings appeared in the early centuries CE. Often they arose as Hindu responses to Buddhism, influential in India at that time. Thus the Buddhist

bodhisattva ideal of the liberated person working for good in the world perhaps stimulated the Bhagavad-Gita's picture of karma yoga, and Buddhist images, the development of bhakti. But Hinduism was growing from within as well. It was in this period that the Yoga sutras of Patanjali (also to be discussed in the next lesson) envisioned the interior path, Tantrism began to portray a more radical "short path" to enlightenment, and the Laws of Manu explicated the Hindu vision of the ideal society. Above all, the systems of gods we have already presented were largely articulated in the early and late Middle Ages in texts called Puranas.

From the Middle Ages to the twentieth century much of India was under non-Hindu rule, first Muslim and then British. This inhibited extensive further development for centuries, though some movements, like Sikhism and the verse of the great poet Kabir, tried to fashion a spirituality beyond both Hinduism and Islam. By the nineteenth century, however, growing contact between India and the West under British rule prompted some to advocate reforms along western lines, and others to react against the West. One example of wanting it both ways was the Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayananda in 1875, the same year as the Theosophical Society. Though Dayananda rejected what he considered "idolatrous" worship of the Hindu gods and advocated monotheism, as well as some social reforms, this movement was overall conservative and nationalistic, accepting the Vedas as the ultimate source of all knowledge. The young Theosophical Society had a fraternal relationship with the Arya Samaj, but later there was a falling-out as the restrictive nature of the Indian group became clearer.

HINDUISM AND THEOSOPHY

That brings us to the role of Theosophy in this pattern. Though wellsprings of the Ancient Wisdom can be found in all major philosophies and religions, Theosophical teachers from H. P. Blavatsky on down have particularly pointed to India as the earliest and (with Tibet) still greatest living reservoir of that knowledge. While rejecting major aspects of Hinduism in nineteenth-century practice, such as some temple worship, caste, and the role of Brahmin priests, Theosophy is full of terminology and insights from Hindu scripture, mythology, and philosophy. The Hindu ideal of the accomplished yogi and God-realized individual certainly underlies the concept of the mahatma (great soul) or master, along with the western notion of the adept. *The Secret Doctrine*'s elaborate picture of cosmic cycles and evolution owes much to the Vishnu Purana's depiction of that deity's periodic sleep and creative awakening. When the first Theosophists, Helena P. Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, went to India in 1880, they and their movement were enthusiastically received because, unlike most westerners in the heyday of imperialism, they showed great respect for the Hindu tradition and its timeless lore. That regard was much appreciated by Mohandas K. Gandhi, spiritual father of Indian independence. An English translation of the Bhagavad-Gita was first given to Gandhi by his Theosophical friends in London.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Basham, A. L. *The Wonder That Was India.* Columbia, Missouri: South Asia Books, 2000.

Ellwood and McGraw, *Many Peoples, Many Faiths.* New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2001.

Kinsley, David. *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective.* New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1993.

————*The Sword and the Flute* (on Kali and Krishna). Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1977.

Zimmer, Heinrich. *Philosophies of India.* Princenton, New Jersey: Bollingen, 1969.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What is the relationship between life in this world (Dharma) and liberation (Moksha) in Hinduism?
2. What is the role of the gods in Hinduism? Going to other sources, try to understand the mythology, worship, portrayal in art, and meaning of at least two of the deities.
3. Interpret the fundamental meaning of the Hindu caste system.
4. Consider the role of *sannyasin* or "holy men" in Hinduism.
5. How do you understand the relation between Hinduism and Theosophy?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter VI

YOGA, TANTRA, AND VEDANTA

CULTURES IN CREATIVE CONFLICT

From as far back as one can see, Hinduism has changed and grown. It has assimilated numerous new gods and ideas into its copious systems over the millenia. Much has also been rejected, and thereby too its nature has been defined.

At the beginning, as we saw in the last lesson, this process involved the meeting of Dravidian and Indo-European cultures. One product of that encounter was the emergence in Hinduism—however far back it went before—of one of the eminent themes of Hindu thought and practice: the realization of the divine within through yogic, or disciplined meditation. That emergence centered around what has been called the "interiorization of sacrifice," an idea found in the Upanishads (the last and most philosophical of the Vedas), that Atman *is* Brahman; in other words, that the innermost essence of a human being is none other than the divine essence and consciousness underlying the entire universe.

Yoga has always been a part of India. It has a background in the mystical Indus Valley civilization that appeared in India as early as 2500 BCE. A seal from that culture shows a figure in what seems to be a yogic posture. The Indo-Europeans who arrived around 1500 BCE also appear to have had a tradition of ascetic practices making one a *muni*, or sage. At the same time, they made much of sacrifice, centered around the making of a ritual fire and putting offerings, such as *ghee* or clarified butter, into it. The rite had to be done correctly; if so, it was like a miniaturization of the universe, in sync with the whole, and so could sustain the cosmos or affect its movements.

But as the centuries wore on, Brahmin scholars and students in the "forest schools," in which these rites and their meaning were studied profoundly, began to ask questions: What really is the fire of the sacrifice? Is it just an outward fire, or can it also be the interior heat achieved through *tapas*, asceticism, or by intense concentration and meditation, such as that which is the goal of yoga? If so, this would mean that, just as the fire *is* the universe in small, then so is the meditator, and the divine without is unified with the divine within. Brahman is Atman, and the fire sacrifice and yoga come together in the last of the Vedas and the first great philosophical exposition of Vedanta, the Upanishads.

THE UPANISHADS AND VEDANTA

The Upanishads, technically commentaries on older Vedas composed c. 500 BCE – 100 CE, emphasize this inward knowing by contemplative means:

> The Self, whose symbol is OM, is the omniscient Lord. He is not born. He does not die. He is neither cause nor effect. This Ancient One is unborn, imperishable, eternal: though the body be destroyed, he is not killed.

> If the slayer think that he slays, if the slain think that he is slain, neither of them knows the truth. The Self slays not, nor is he slain.
>
> Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, this Self forever dwells within the hearts of all. When a man is free from desire, his mind and senses purified, he beholds the glory of the Self and is without sorrow.
>
> Though seated, he travels far; though at rest, he moves all things. Who but the purest of the pure can realize this Effulgent Being, who is joy and who is beyond joy.
>
> Formless is he, though inhabiting form. In the midst of the fleeting he abides forever. All-pervading and supreme is the Self. This wise man, knowing him in his true nature, transcends all grief.
>
> The Self is not known through study of the scriptures, nor through subtlety of the intellect, nor through much learning; but by him who longs for him is he known. Verily unto him does the Self reveal his true being.
>
> By learning, a man cannot know him, if he desist not from evil, if he control not his senses, if he quiet not his mind, and practice not meditation. [2]

This tradition is also called Vedanta, the "End of the Vedas," in the sense of their culmination or ultimate meaning. Vedanta developed into what has generally been the most prestigious school of thought in India, and the best known outside. The most influential school of Vedanta among intellectuals is Advaita Vedanta, or "Nondualist Vedanta," supremely taught by Shankara (?700 – 732 CE), India's greatest philosopher. Building on the poetically expressed worldview of the Upanishads, Shankara brought home in metaphysical language that only one reality, Brahman, exists. All else—every idea, form, and experience—is "superimposed" on Brahman owing to our *avidya*, ignorance of the true nature of reality.

According to Hinduism, what we see ordinarily is *maya*, often translated as "illusion." But illusion has to be understood in the right sense, for maya is an appearance of Brahman and not merely a hallucination. The illusion comes in our mistaking appearances for reality, not seeing them for what they are—creative expressions of Brahman. Shankara used the illustration of a man walking down the road and seeing something long and black lying there. He jumps back, thinking it is a snake. But looking again, he sees just a piece of rope. Something was really there, but it was misperceived, and what was actually harmless was taken as threatening. In the same way, by seeing the world as many-ness, we think we see much out there to be desired, and much to make us angry or afraid. But when we see it all as God incognito, just as we ourselves are, we realize it is none other than our own immortal self, which can neither slay nor be slain, and so the source of joy rather than dread.

[2] Katha Upanishad, from Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, trans., *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*. New York: Mentor Books, 1957. Copyright (c) by The Vedanta Society of Southern California.

AN AGE OF FERMENT

The centuries around the turn of the millennium, 100 BC–100 CE, were times of great spiritual change in India as well as in Europe. Buddhism had now reached its high point of influence in India, and the older religion had to respond. Buddhism, especially in its Mahayana form, emphasized spiritual paths to liberation available to everyone, and personal saviors represented in art. Hinduism replied through the three yogas, or ways to liberation, presented in the Bhagavad-Gita—the New Testament of Hinduism, as it has been called. In fact it appeared in India about the same time the Bible was being compiled far to the west around the Mediterranean. The Gita taught *Jñaña yoga*, the way of knowledge, comparable to the Upanishadic path; *Karma yoga*, the way of action in society; and *Bhakti yoga*, the way of devotion. Hinduism thus capitalized on its strong points as a total religious expression: Hindu concern was not only with liberation but also with the righteous organization of society, and it taught the pluralism of spiritual paths and stages implicit in its many representations of the Divine.

The Laws of Manu also came from this period, presenting a vision of the ideal society; the Puranas, with their panorama of Hindu deities, came somewhat later. (These were both discussed in the previous lesson.) Another interesting and important book, with very ancient roots but probably prepared in its present form around 300 CE, is the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

YOGA

What would one do during the course of seeking liberation? One important Hindu answer was given in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali—another response, at least in part, to the rise of Buddhism. That new faith had emphasized introspective meditation, with analysis of sensation and consciousness; the Yoga Sutras, undoubtedly systematizing practices going back thousands of years, returned to India's deeply biological, psychosomatic understanding of human nature as the background for liberation. Thus *hatha yoga*, the physical yoga of postures and breathing exercises, plays a major role in the spiritual quest. Rightly understood, breath and body are indispensable tools. Brought under the guidance of spirit as precision instruments, they can facilitate states of consciousness that evoke the goals of spirit.

The Yoga Sutras begin by telling us that the goal of the yogi is control of the "modulations of mind"—in other words, *kaivalya*, "isolation" of *purusha* or spirit, giving independence from the anxieties and limitations imposed by interaction with the changing world of sight, feeling and fantasy. This is done by strictly reining in the mind and body through posture and breath exercises, and then—with the physical and emotional levels no longer in the way—withdrawing attention from the outer world, turning it to the inner light.

This process is comprised of eight steps, called limbs. The first two, *yama* (abstentions) and *niyama (observances)*, offer negative and positive moral rules aimed at a lifestyle of quietness, gentleness, and purity, for one's manner of life must be consistent with spiritual attainment before yoga can hope to succeed. Indeed, combining the spiritual energy yoga can bring with an unworthy life can be dangerous both to the individual and society. The five yamas are: abstention from harming others, from falsehood, from theft, from incontinence, and from greed. The observances are purity, contentment, mortification, study, and devotion.

Then come the two "limbs" of *asana* (posture) and *pranayama* (breath control) in which body and mind are harnessed to the drive for liberation. The basic purpose of these physical techniques in the quest for kaivalya is bringing the body, and its attendant appetites and emotions and even its stream-of-consciousness thoughts, under control so that they do not impede the higher meditations needed for inner freedom. With good yogic posture and full, slow breathing, one can meditate without distraction for long periods, and prana or life-energy can be aroused and directed where needed.

After the yogi gains control of his or her bodily and emotional home in this way, *pratyahara*, the stage of the disengagement of the senses from outer things, becomes possible. This makes for acute inner and subtle ways of awareness. Just as a blind person develops an especially sharp sense of touch and hearing, so yoga tells us that when *all* the physical senses are withdrawn, other undreamed-of capabilities latent in the human being begin to stir. When they are mastered, the yogi has awareness of things near and far and the ability to use occult forces, beside which the ordinary senses and capacities are as an oxcart to a rocket ship. The Yoga Sutras tell us how to read minds, walk on water, fly through the air, make oneself as tiny as an atom, and live impervious to hunger and thirst.

But these powers, called *siddhis*, doubtless tempting to many, are to be given up for an even greater goal—true liberation of the true self. This is the work of the last three limbs, called *raja* or kingly yoga. They are interior in nature: *dharana*, concentration; *dhyana*, meditation; and *samadhi*, the absolutely equalized consciousness of perfect freedom. These interior stages reflect the classic eastern method of meditation: "one-pointed" focus on a single object of thought (like a mantra) to stop the unbridled flow of consciousness, expanding that quietness of mind through longer and longer periods of time, then finally letting stillness rise to samadhi, in which the self shines forth in its true nature and, according to Vedanta, no distinction remains between the individual and universal Self.

TANTRISM

Another movement starting in these early centuries CE cut across both Hinduism and Buddhism, and deeply affected the course of both. That is the complex and mysterious set of spiritual attitudes and practices called Tantrism. It is a road to enlightenment through powerful initiations, "shock therapy" techniques, the negation of conventional morals and manners, magical-seeming acts and chants, and the use of sexual imagery and ritual. Tantrism seeks through radical means to induce powerful consciousness-transforming experience, while preserving something of the technical aura of the old Vedic rites.

Tantrism's origins and teachings are hard to trace because secrecy has usually been a part of its character, and because it has often attracted persons in reaction against the current religious establishment of brahmins, princely rulers, or Buddhist monks. It presented itself to left-out people as a secret, underground path far more potent than the official teaching, if one were bold enough to reject conventionality. If the adept does not shrink back or go mad on its "steep path," Tantrism says, in a single lifetime it can bring him to a state of realization and power that would take countless lives by ordinary means.

Roughly, the procedures of Tantra are this. The novice is initiated into the practice of a particular Tantric path by a guru; this impartation of power is often said

to be physically felt and is extremely important. Being empowered, the aspirant then seeks identity with a deity like Shiva or Kali through magical evocations of the god's visible presence; practices visual fixation on diagrams of his or her powers (*mandala*, schematic arrangements of deities in a square or circle, and *yantra*, geometric designs symbolizing gods or divine energies); and recites mantras that encapsulate his or her nature. By becoming one with the divinity, the student hopes to share the divinity's cosmic realization and omnipotence. Above all, the Tantrist wants to experience the god as the totality, the unity beyond all opposites.

To do this, one on a Tantric path may seek to liberate oneself from "partiality" by getting outside of structure—living independent of caste and morality. In some Tantric traditions, "forbidden" things, such as meat, alcohol, and sex, were partaken of, either symbolically or actually, in specific rites. Sexuality, in particular, is important to Tantrism, not only because of the "shock therapy" effect of sexual rites, but also because it is a tremendous producer of energy, which the skilled practitioner can then sublimate to the spiritual quest, and a symbol and sacrament of the Tantric view of reality. In Hinduism, the male Tantrist identifies himself with a male deity like Shiva, the Absolute, and his female partner with Shakti, who is the phenomenal universe; as the couple unites, they mystically unite the Absolute and the universe in a flash of ecstasy.

But the rite cannot be accomplished sacramentally, nor can moral reversal be spiritually efficacious, nor the sexual energies transmuted, until the novice is well advanced in a Tantric *sadhana*, or path. Unless one has truly negated self and identified with the god, sex is merely lust and not participation in divine mysteries.

Tantrism had an influence far beyond the schools that taught it in its strictest form. All Hindu worship on a serious level is now likely to show some influence of Tantra, if only in the use of yantra and the repetition of the name and mantra of the deity over and over. It has also had a substantial impact on Indian art.

The important concepts of *kundalin*i and the *chakras* come out of Tantric tradition, although they are presented today in most kinds of yoga. The kundalini, or "serpent power," is a feminine energy believed to dwell, coiled three and a half times, below the base of the spine. Through yogic techniques of posture, breathing, and concentration, the kundalini is awakened and aroused to be drawn up the spinal column. In the process it "opens" seven chakras, "circles," or lotus-centers of dormant psychic energy located along the spinal column: at the base of the spine, the lower abdomen, the solar plexis, the heart, the throat, and the forehead (the "third eye"), culminating in the *sahasrara* or thousand-petaled lotus at the top of the head.

Chakra-opening, together with the withdrawal of senses from the outer world incumbent on all yogic practice, is said to produce remarkable states of energy and awareness. The final objective, however, is only achieved when the kundalini reaches the inside of the skull where, with a psychic explosion at the crown chakra, it opens the thousand-petaled lotus that grants cosmic consciousness and God-realization. The awakening brings into the light an entire world within the head, replete with its own miniature mountain, lake, sun, and moon, and in its midst Shiva is enthroned.

THEOSOPHY AND HINDU SPIRITUAL PATHS

Vedanta, Yoga, and Tantra have all had an important influence on Theosophical terminology, concepts of the adept, and spiritual practice. They can be regarded as

bearers of the Ancient Wisdom, though imperfect and corrupted when they lose sight of the overall moral significance of spirituality, and concentrate only on personal "liberation" without regard for others, or focus on the mere acquisition of *siddhis* or powers for their own sake, or even for use in black magic. Nonetheless, they tell us tremendous powers are latent in humanity that can be realized through serious practice, and, even more important, that we each bear within us, as in the Atman of Vedanta or the Purusha of yoga, a pure and divine nature waiting to be led forth.

References for Supplementary Reading

Bharati, Agehananda. *The Tantric Tradition.* Boston: Red Wheel Weiser, 1975.

Eliade, Mircea. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom.* Princeton, New Jersey: Bollingen, 1970.

Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Patanjali.* Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1996.

————*Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination.* Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1970.

Prabhavananda and Manchester, *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal,* Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1996.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Why and how do the meetings of different cultures produce new developments in both?
2. How would you explain in your own words the central message of the Upanishads?
3. Why is it important that a practitioner of yoga's way of life be devoted to purity, non-acquisitiveness, harmlessness, and study?
4. What is meant by the "freedom" which yoga promises?
5. What can be learned from Tantrism if one does not intend seriously to follow Tantric *sadhana*?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter VII

THE BUDDHA'S LIFE AND MESSAGE

THE NATURE OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism is many things. On the flat Ganges plains east of Benares, it is an ancient enshrined tree, said to be a descendant of the very tree under which, on the night of a full moon, he who is called the Buddha ascended through the four stages of trance and attained full, perfect, and complete enlightenment. In Southeast Asia, it is steep-roofed temples, rich in gold and red, that house conventionalized images of the same Buddha, perhaps standing to teach, perhaps in the seated meditation posture of enlightenment, perhaps reclining as he makes his final entry into Nirvana. The images are often gilded, gleaming with transcendent golden light, and the figures' eyes are half-closed and enigmatic. Above the head a many–pointed crown or simple burst of flame may suggest this is no ordinary man. Outside the temple, saffron-robed monks of the Blessed One walk with begging bowls, seeking alms.

In the snowy Himalayas, Buddhism is a prayer wheel, a cylinder on an axle inscribed with a mantra such as "*Om Mani Padme Hum*" and set up on a roadway or near a temple to be spun by passing pilgrims. In Japan, it is an old Zen monk making tea or contemplating the rocks in his monastery garden, as well as vigorous, dynamic young people organizing rallies that combine Buddhist chanting with marching bands and rock concerts.

What is it that ties this tradition together? Buddhism is not rooted in a single culture or area, as is Hinduism, but is an international religion, a movement introduced by missionaries into every society where it is now at home. Its relation to Hinduism is similar to Christianity's relation to Judaism: Each is an "export version" of fundamental values of the older faith, but centered on a single person who lived in historical times.

A distinctive thing about Buddhist altars is that, instead of portraying the archetypal hero, mother, or cosmic pillar, as do Hindu altars, the image personifies in a Buddha or bodhisattva a unified psychological state—profound meditation, warm compassion, or even unambiguous fury against illusion. Buddhist practices, too, are focused on strong and clear states of unified consciousness. Either they produce such states, or they draw power from beings who have achieved unfettered clarity. Buddhism may be said to be, on the deepest level, a psychological religion, though one which takes exploration and employment of consciousness far beyond the limits of secular versions of the science.

THE BUDDHA

The origin of the religion lies, according to its own tradition, in a single deep and unified psychological experience of one person. That individual was Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakya clan, called the Buddha, who lived approximately 563-483 BCE. Buddha is not his name, but a title which means "The Enlightened One," or just as accurately and more provocatively, "The Awakened One" or "He Who Has Waked

Up." That is, he is one whose state of consciousness is to the rest of us like an awakened person is to one who is still asleep and lost in the world of dreams.

He is also called the Tathagata, a term used in some of the most ancient scriptures and which he may have used for himself. Tathagata is difficult to translate, meaning something like, "He who has come thus and gone thus," in the sense of "He who passed beyond all bounds; one cannot say where he came from or where he went, but can only point in that direction." This refers to his overcoming of all conditioned reality in his enlightenment to become "universalized." He was seen, and no doubt saw himself, as one with the universe itself and not merely with any particular part of it—thus being "in" Nirvana, unconditioned and unlimited reality.

A person of whom such things were said must have been a very remarkable individual, and so he was if half the stories about him are true. Much of the traditional life story of the Buddha is undoubtedly legend, but is important nonetheless because the legends reflect the impact this man had on those who heard him or heard of him; they tell the way he has been perceived by the hundreds of millions, over some twenty-five centuries, to whom he has represented the supreme example of spiritual achievement.

The Buddha was born, according to that tradition, at Lumbini, near where the border of India and Nepal now lies, in the foothills of the Himalayas. His father was ruler of a tiny state. His mother, Queen Maya, who died only a week after his birth, had not conceived him in the normal manner, but in a dream in which a white elephant pierced her side with a tusk. This indicates, of course, that the infant, Siddhartha, was an exceptional being, the bodhisattva or "Becoming Buddha," who had vowed to the previous Buddha of ages past to become the next Buddha for his own age—no matter how long it took, no matter how many obstacles had to be overcome.

A few months later, we are told, a wise old brahmin came to the court of the king, Siddhartha's father, and recognizing from certain remarkable signs on the infant's body that he was no ordinary baby, announced that he must become either a chakravartin, a world emperor, or a buddha, an enlightened one who would show the world the way out of suffering. The royal father, more political than spiritual in orientation, preferred that his son bring undying renown to his house by taking the world ruler option. But apparently the monarch was just perceptive enough to realize that if his son saw anything of the suffering of the world, he would not be content merely to rule over the earth from a throne, but would want to bring to it the healing gifts of wisdom and compassion. The father therefore decreed that the prince should be brought up in a pleasure palace filled with all delights, including thousands of dancing girls, and surrounded by high walls to keep out any sight of suffering.

So was Siddhartha raised. He matured, married, and had a son of his own. But even unbroken pleasure palls eventually, and when he was about twenty-nine years of age he became curious about the world outside the walls, and persuaded his charioteer to take him down the road toward the nearby city. He took four trips in all, and saw four thought-provoking sights new to him: an aged man, a man suffering in agony from a hideous disease, a corpse, and finally an old wandering monk who appeared content. After this, Siddhartha saw even his dancing girls in a different light, as beings like himself of only transitory youth and beauty, like him destined for old age, sickness, and death; disturbing thoughts clouded his mind.

What is the meaning of life, he asked himself, if its initial promise of joy ends long before its dreams can possibly all be fulfilled, in tottering old age, in sickness that can reduce a man or woman full of zest and hope to the state of an animal howling out in pain, or finally to the apparently blank extinction of death? How can one be delivered from this ghastly dance of birth, fantasy, and anguish? Amid this dance, is it possible to live a life of contentment and find tranquility of mind?

Siddhartha did not know the answer to those questions, and was honest enough to acknowledge he did not know. But he also realized that he could no longer live for anything but finding answers to these ultimate questions. The last sight, the itinerant monk with his staff and begging bowl, inspired in him the ideal of a life wholly dedicated to finding the answers he sought. Not long after, in the middle of the night, the prince kissed his wife and son farewell without waking them, and slipped off with his faithful charioteer to the banks of a river. There he exchanged his fine raiment for the coarse garb of a renunciant, and proceeded off alone on the great quest.

In his search he sampled the mazework of paths to realization that crisscrossed the spiritual map of old India. He talked with Brahmin philosophers, who at this time were probably developing the ideas that went into the Upanishads; but this seeker from the *Kshatriya* or kingly caste felt they were only playing intellectual games and were not passionately concerned, as he was, with answers that would really change lives. He worked with teachers of trance meditation and went the route of extreme asceticism, getting down to one grain of rice a day and becoming so emaciated that his ribs and spinal column stood out as if he were a walking skeleton. But he found that neither philosophy, nor fasting and self-control, alone brought what he desired. He gave them up and went back to a moderate diet.

Then, late one afternoon, as he wandered not far from the banks of a tributary of the Ganges, he felt the time had come. Purchasing a pallet of straw from a farmer, he seated himself on it under a huge fig tree. He placed his hand firmly on the ground and swore by the earth itself that he would not stir from that spot until he attained complete and final enlightenment. All night he remained there, sunk in deeper and deeper meditation. Mara, a god of the old Vedic order, buffeted him with furious storms and sweet temptations, but a wave of the Blessed One's hand was enough to dispel them.

The Buddha's consciousness refined itself by moving through four stages of trance, beginning with the calming of the passions that concentration brings and ending with transcendence of all opposites. He also passed through several stages of awareness.

First, he saw all of his own previous existences. Then he saw the previous lives, the interlocking deaths and rebirths of all beings, and he grasped how karmic forces work; the universe became like a mirror to him. Finally, he saw with full understanding what principles underlie this spider's web of illusion and how extrication from it is possible. He saw the mutual interdependence of all things and perceived how egocentric ignorance leads sentient beings inevitably through desire to suffering, death, and unhappy rebirth. The Four Noble Truths appeared in his mind: The truth of suffering; suffering caused by desire; the end to desire; the way as the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha spent the remaining years of his life teaching this message throughout north India and gathering monk-disciples, who became the Sangha, the

monastic order that has ever since been the sociological center of Buddhism. He finally died at the age of eighty, allegedly from eating tainted food unknowingly given to him by a lay follower. As he lay dying, he again passed through all the stages of trance and awareness, finally and irreversibly entering unconditioned reality, Nirvana. But we must now return to the Buddha's basic teaching, the Four Noble Truths, and the meaning of Buddhahood itself.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Four Noble Truths have been compared to a skilled physician's approach to a disease: the first gives the "presenting symptom"—that there is suffering in life; the second the diagnosis, that this symptom is caused by attachment or desire; the third the prognosis of the end of desire, assuming the proper treatment is followed; and the fourth, the prescription for that treatment, living according to the Eightfold Path.

The first, suffering, does not mean that all of life is filled with excruciating pain. If it is true that the Buddha lived the first years of his life amid unalloyed pleasure, he of all persons could not say that. Rather, the unusual word used, *dukha*, seems originally to have meant a wobble, like that of an insecure wheel on a cart. It means, therefore, something is unsteady, uncertain, and unsatisfactory about life as it is ordinarily lived—what Socrates around the same time called the "unexamined life." In words we commonly use today, life is full of anxiety and frustration. One also thinks of what Thoreau meant when he said, "Most men live lives of quiet despair."

This then is the condition the Buddha proposes to treat. But the next step is to know why our lives are like this. It is because they are dominated by desires—attachments, cravings, cleavings. The original word is *tanha*, literally thirst, but just as we use the word metaphorically, as in "thirst for power," the Buddha's term alludes to a whole attitude toward life. We want to latch onto so many things: objects of sensual gratification, property, possessions, persons, beliefs, ambitions, whatever. Why do these desires cause *dukha*? Because, according to Buddhist teaching, everything is transitory, always changing (including ourselves, all the persons to whom we relate, all we can have or imagine having). Therefore trying to grab hold of anything is like trying to grab the water in a river flowing by—it will always leave us empty-handed and frustrated.

The objects of the desires that cause suffering range widely, from the gross physical desires to various worldly ambitions, however noble, even to desire for wisdom, sanctity, or immortal life in heaven—so long as it is fundamentally a desire centered in the ego. That is because the basic desire is not for the outward things, but for ego, for a separate individual self, and we project ego-attachment onto objects that seem to reinforce our selfhood. (If I can just get this person to love me, that means I must be a separate individual self, otherwise who would he/she love? If I can just win eternal salvation, I must be a separate individual self, or else who would be saved?)

But according to Buddhism the idea that one is a separate individual self is the foundational illusion, its opposite represented in the basic doctrine of *anatman*, "no self." While of course we have the sensation of self-consciousness, that is as transitory as everything else, always changing like the flowing river, and as stated in the Buddha's final words, all that comes together must come apart. We cannot hold onto ourselves, as though we had a hard, solid, and immutable separate ego or soul.

Rather, we must let go and live life like a surfer riding the waves. This is the "Middle Way" of true liberation, of attachment neither to extreme asceticism nor indulgence, neither to life nor death, neither to being nor nonbeing.

How do we do this? First by recognizing that attachment can be stopped. This is done basically by stopping the input of sensory data, including memories of past experience, which feed desire.

The way to do that is to live according to the Eightfold Path: right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right meditation or concentration. The key is the last, right *samadhi*, meditation or concentration. In good meditation, the mind is at an opposite pole from when it is conditioned by the suffering and desire syndrome. It is quiet, cut off from sensory input, allowed to take a vacation and just be itself, pure consciousness. In this state it gets in touch with the ultimate universal power of consciousness, and so is living out of a different center from the illusory ego. The first seven steps of the Eightfold Path should be seen as setting up the lifestyle and frame of mind requisite for good meditation—for if the rest of one's life is totally at odds with the peaceful, desire-free, and compassionate state of meditation, the effort to achieve it is not likely to be successful, but rather to tear the individual apart.

Buddhism as a religion is far more than just individual right meditation. It means worshipfully honoring the Buddha's supreme achievement of right meditation and its enlightening, liberating consequences, together with appropriating the power of that supreme achievement for the worshipper and the world. To understand this we need to understand what the meaning of a World Buddha, called Teacher of Gods and Men.

WHAT IS A BUDDHA?

The Buddha, as the central focus of religious Buddhism, is of a category different from anything in western theology, being neither God nor ordinary man. He is not the God of monotheism, for he is not Creator of the Universe, which is uncreated and eternal, nor is he of an absolutely different nature from humanity. Yet he is like God in being omniscient, all knowing, and omnipotent, able to do anything, for these are potentialities of the infinite consciousness within all of us, accessible once the barriers set up by our attachments and desires have been totally removed.

So it is that ordinary Buddhists offer prayers to the Buddha. Even though he is now in Nirvana, on his level of horizonless consciousness space and time fall away, and he is able, as he was twenty-five centuries ago, in his omniscience to know our petitions today and in his omnipotence and infinite compassion respond to them. Further, his entry into Nirvana was like an implosion on the karmic field which left a stream of good karmic energy flowing in the direction he went; by good thoughts, good deeds, and good preliminary meditation we can enter that stream and let its energies carry us further, through more good works and thoughts, toward the infinite sea.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Bahm, Archie. *Philosophy of the Buddha.* rev. ed., Fremont, CA: Jain Publishing Corp. 1993.

Conze, Edward. *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development.* New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959.

————*Buddhist Meditation.* New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969.

Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught.* New York: Evergreen, 1962.

Robinson, Richard H. and Willard L. Johnson. *The Buddhist Religion.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What do you think was the fundamental problem the Buddha was trying to solve?
2. How would you explain in your own words his basic teaching?
3. Why are so many legendary stories told about the Buddha?
4. Do you agree with the Four Noble Truths? Or do they present, as is sometimes alleged, too pessimistic a view of human life and its possibilities in this world?
5. What do you think is meant by the "right views" mandated by the first step on the Eightfold Path? (The conventional opinion is that it means accepting the Four Noble Truths as a "working hypothesis" and living as though they were true.)

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter VIII

VARIETIES OF BUDDHISM

The Buddhist world is now divided into two great traditions: Theravada ("Path of the Elders") and Mahayana ("Great Vessel") Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is found in the nations of Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), Myanmar (formerly Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos.[3] Mahayana Buddhism has spread throughout China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Nepal, Bhutan, Vietnam, and corners of India and Russia. Let us look first at Theravada Buddhism.

THERAVADA BUDDHISM

If you were to visit one of the Theravada countries, you first might be struck by the great number of ornate and colorful temples with pitched roofs and soaring spires, dotting the cities and the lush tropical hills of the countryside. Monks walk the streets in their saffron-yellow robes, their heads shaved and arms bare in the warm humid air.

Most of the monks are young, for in all the Theravada countries except Sri Lanka, it is a custom for a teenage man, whether prince or peasant, to spend a year of his life as a monk. This experience serves to stabilize his religious life and is an initiation into manhood. At the monastery, the young monks, if undergoing proper training, are given Buddhist instruction and trained in the practice of meditation. The teaching centers around the basic doctrine attributed to the Buddha himself, contained in the scriptures called the Tripitaka ("Three Baskets"), the oldest Buddhist texts.

These lessons start with the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, the meaning of *Anatman* or "No Self," karma and rebirth, and the many rules of monastic conduct. Monks are taught the Five Precepts, which devout laypersons also try to follow: do not take life, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, lie, or take intoxicants. On the positive side, the monks endeavor to practice the four "unlimited" virtues: unlimited friendliness, unlimited compassion, unlimited sympathetic joy, and unlimited equilibrium of mind. They learn the six possible places of rebirth: the hells, the realm of hungry ghosts, the animal world, the world of the asuras or ogres, the human realm, and the heavens, which reward good karma. They learn the meaning of Nirvana, the unconditioned realm beyond even the highest heaven, for even paradise is still transitory and conditioned.

Theravada meditation is of two kinds: *samadhi* meditation, which explores the *jhanas* or higher states above earthly matter and form, and *vipassana*, which breaks through directly to Nirvana. Samadhi is a kind of training meditation. Vipassana or "analysis" meditation aims at personally experiencing three Buddhist truths: the impermanence of all things, that all is "ill" or unsatisfactory in conditioned reality, and that one has no real ego or self (anatman).

[3] Theravada Buddhism was at one time called Hinayana ("Little Vehicle"). That is a derogatory term, however, used by Mahayanists for what they considered a lesser tradition, not used by Theravadins themselves.

Vipassana meditators analyze themselves, beginning by observing their thoughts and watching physical sensations come and go, until they realize the truth of these three points. Then, in the gaps left by the breakdown of the ordinary, ego-centered way of processing experience, flashes of nirvanic consciousness arise. The meditator "enters the stream" and continues in it until becoming an *arhat*, one who has full continuous nirvanic realization and will not be reborn. (In Theravada Buddhism, anyone can become an arhat, but there is only one Buddha, an enlightened being who is also the universal "Teacher of Gods and Men" in each age of the world.)

Lay people in Theravada countries ordinarily do not attempt these meditations, although some meditation teaching centers for the laity have appeared in recent years. They emphasize works of piety and virtue that will win good karmic merit and lead to good rebirths, eventually one in which the individual becomes a monk and realizes arhathood.

MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddhism of the northern tier of Buddhist countries, represents a different style of the religion from Theravada. It began around the first century C.E., when certain members of the Sangha (the Buddhist monastic order) began arguing that lay followers of the religion could be liberated as well as monks. This required new methods of liberation, broadly comparable to *bhakti* in Hinduism, that could be practiced as well in the fields and the shops as by full-time monks meditating in monasteries. Thus Mahayana promoted a diversity of routes to liberation, some based on faith and devotion and some on elaborate forms of meditation. To justify them, Mahayanists discovered new sutras, or texts recording the teachings of the Buddha, said to have been concealed until the right time to release them had come. Those sutras were in Sanskrit rather than the Pali language of the Tripitaka, and include some of the best-known Buddhist scriptures: the Heart Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, the Diamond Sutra, the Pure Land sutras, among others.

Basic features of Mahayana Buddhism include the following:

- Sanskrit Sutras supplementing the Tripitaka
- Belief in universal salvation
- Varied methods of salvation (e.g., Nichiren chanting, Pure Land faith, Zen sitting)
- "Cosmic" Buddhas and bodhisattvas in addition to the "historical" Buddha
- Nagarjuna's philosophy of the Void, and that Samsara equals Nirvana

The Mahayana worldview is probably most easily accessible through the teachings of Nagarjuna (c. 150-250 C.E.), even though they are subtle and require insight. His two basic principles are that Samsara (the phenomenal or manifested world) and Nirvana are not different, and that the most adequate expression for this totality is "Void."

That Samsara is Nirvana and Nirvana is Samsara means that one does not "go" anywhere to "enter Nirvana. Nirvana is here and now; we are all in it all the time, and so we are all enlightened Buddhas right now. Experiencing getting up, eating breakfast, walking down the street, selling cars, or washing dishes as Nirvana rather

than as toiling on the wheel of Samsara is simply a matter of how one sees and relates. The way to see everything as Nirvana is with complete nonattachment and nonegotism, which means making nothing more important than anything else within the web of our experience. Neither self, nor any god, nor Buddha, nor any concept or idea, or prior principle, are to be made into a basic upon which reality is constructed. None exist or persist of their own power. They are all "hollow"—impermanent, part of the flux of entities and ideas out of which the cosmos is constructed. All exist not out of their "own being" but in their interrelationships only."

Nagarjuna's universe, including our own consciousness and seemingly separate existence, is like a shadow-show based on shifting patterns of interaction. This universe neither starts nor stops anywhere. In it all things are continually rising and falling and moving in and out of each other, and nothing is stable except the totality itself, the "framework" within which this endless moving picture is situated.

Because the cosmos has no pivot or center of reference within itself (no starting or ending point), Nagarjuna believed the only adequate word for it is "Emptiness" or "Void." The eternal screen on which the show is seen can be called Emptiness, Void, or Nirvana.

To say the cosmos is Void is not to say that nothing exists. The term *Void* is only a metaphor. But Emptiness or Void are the only appropriate words for Nagarjuna's cosmos, because any other word would imply some positive standard or "reality" to be grasped in order to understand everything else, and he taught that there is none, only eternal flux against the Void. Void or Emptiness communicates the non-graspable quality of conditioned reality. Like the inside of a dewdrop or a soap bubble, Mahayana reality is a hall of mirrors—full of light and color, but everything in it is just a reflection of everything else, and there is nothing to seize on as the key to it all. This perspective carries the second of the Four Noble Truths—that suffering is caused by grasping or attachment—to the ultimate level. One who tries to grasp the universe with some concept or theory, rather than just seeing and appreciating it "with empty hands," is like a person who attempts to lasso a rainbow or bring home a sunset in a bucket.

Out of this fundamental philosophy come the other distinctive features of Mahayana Buddhism. The diversity of practices inducing enlightenment, and the possibility of "sudden enlightenment" by Pure Land faith or Zen *satori* ("surprise" in Japanese), make sense when you understand the idea on which they are based: that we are already enlightened Buddhas but just don't know it. All we need is something to knock us out of our conventional, egocentric way of thinking and realize our true nature here and now, in the midst of everyday life. That realization doesn't require a long, difficult program, which may in any case only reinforce egocentricity in devious ways; all it needs is something to make us turn our heads for a moment and see everything differently.

The Lotus Sutra, one of the most important of all Mahayana texts, tells us that a simple offering of flowers or of a tiny clay pagoda, presented by a child to a Buddha, is of far more worth than all the proud efforts of an aspiring arhat. We can't advance toward Buddhahood through our own self-centered efforts; but if we just *forget* ourselves in a childlike sense of wonder and giving, we are already there, for in that moment our high walls of ego have fallen away.

Thus, in Japanese Nichiren Buddhism, one aligns oneself with the core energies of the universe and realizes one's buddhahood simply by chanting *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo* ("Hail the Marvelous Teaching of the Lotus Sutra"), not by meditating. The Pure Land Buddhism of East Asia, immensely popular in China, Korea, and Japan, also does not teach liberation through meditation, for it believes that just by simple faith one can receive the grace of Amida Buddha, and so "plug into" the infinite energies that the cosmic being generates out of *his* unimaginably deep meditations. (Amida Buddha, not the historical Buddha but a great buddha of the unfathomable past who in some ways represents the "universal buddha nature" of all beings, is believed to have vowed that all who call upon his name in faith will be brought into the "Pure Land" or "Western Paradise," a heavenly realm from which access to Nirvana is easy. Like Martin Luther in Christianity, Pure Land teachers believe that dependence on the help or grace of another out of simple faith is really purer and less egocentric than endeavoring to reach salvation by one's own efforts or "works.")

Mention of Amida Buddha brings up another characteristic of Mahayana: the existence of many "cosmic" buddhas and bodhisattvas beside Theravada Buddhism's one historical buddha and one bodhisattva at a time. This is another of the evocative, complex, and hard-to-pin-down notions typical of Mahayana. But the reality of that pantheon immediately strikes anyone who visits a Mahayana temple, whether in Asia or America. There, instead of a single, solitary Buddha image on the altar, attended by mere gods and men, one will see radiant Buddha after Buddha, bodhisattva after bodhisattva, all transcendentally aware, but all in different moods and poses, from deep withdrawal to many-armed compassionate activity. The pantheon of bodhisattvas include: the historical Buddha; the Great Sun Buddha, who personifies the consciousness-essence of the whole universe; the Healing Buddha with his jar of salve; Amida, the Buddha of the Pure Land; and his bodhisattva expression, called Guanyin in China and Kannon in Japan, the "goddess of mercy" who has many arms to indicate her ability to do many acts of compassion at once.

These great beings, also called *Dhyana* or Meditation Buddhas, are sometimes patterned in mandalas or diagrams, representing them as transcendent aspects of consciousness and other aspects of our nature. They show that whatever is in us must exist also in infinite potential—or reality—in the universe as a whole. We can imagine that larger dimension as great minds at the interface of subjective and objective reality. The way we think of them, whether as "gods in heaven" or in human form on earth, is of course our own necessary accommodation, but the universal mind-reality is out there.

Bodhisattvas, "enlightenment beings" active in the world out of wisdom and compassion, are innumerable in Mahayana and key to its worldview. From one point of view they are who have vowed to remain in the world to do good until all sentient beings are saved; from another, they are active expressions of the great cosmic buddhas, as Kannon is of Amida. In either case, the bodhisattva epitomizes the ideal of Samsara and Nirvana being the same, for he or she lives in both simultaneously. The bodhisattva is in the world, but without attachments, and therefore is able to see everything as it really is and to work with all the subtle power that comes with that insight. The enlightened being is thus activated by two powers, compassion and skill-in-means. Both derive from unconditioned awareness of the total interrelatedness of all things. Compassion is the ethical expression of this awareness, for if one truly realizes that everything in the cosmos is dependent on everything else, and nothing

and no one can exist apart from anything or anyone else, the only logical consequence for one's behavior is love or compassion.

The bodhisattva's compassion is not a vague, diffuse force, or, like the compassion of some, well-intentioned but capable of doing almost as much harm as good because of a lack of knowledge of all factors in a situation. The bodhisattva's compassion is instead a precise instrument, for it is combined with the accurate insight that the bodhisattva's freedom from ego and illusion allows. This is what is conveyed by the attribute "skill-in-means." He or she is able to see all the karmic factors in a life situation and to know just what can be done to set a person's steps in the right direction.

The same profound awareness gives the bodhisattva control of appearances, based on a deeper awareness of subtle forces than the ordinary person has. Bodhisattvas thus can accomplish seeming miracles when they would truly be of help, and are able to take any appearance that their compassionate knowledge tells them would be most beneficial in a particular case. Bodhisattvas have worked in the world, according to Mahayana scriptures and legends, as monks, orphans, beggars, prostitutes, rich benefactors, and gods. It may be that people you know, or even you yourself some of the time, are bodhisattvas in disguise, without even realizing it.

BUDDHISM AND THEOSOPHY

Buddhism and Theosophy have had a close relationship. The two principle founders of Theosophy, H. P. Blavatsky and Colonel H. S. Olcott, "took pansil," that is, formally became Buddhists, in Ceylon. Colonel Olcott labored long for the dignity and revitalization of Buddhism in his time, and is highly regarded in the Buddhist world. In one of the first Theosophical books, A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1884), the word Buddhism (or, "Wisdom-ism") is used to mean more or less Theosophy. In classical theosophical writings, Buddhist terms like those used in this paper are frequently found, and in many ways Buddhism is regarded as an important reservoir of the Ancient Wisdom. The "cosmic buddhas" are the Dhyan Chohans or creative minds behind the universe of *The Secret Doctrine*, and the historical buddha is a great Master of the Wisdom. Many Theosophists today follow a Buddhist practice in their own spiritual life as well as studying Theosophy, although Theosophy should not be simply identified with Buddhism. But as Buddhism becomes more and more a presence in the West, relations between it and Theosophy, and with western spirituality generally, are bound to grow.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

King, Winston L. *A Thousand Lives Away* (on Theravada Buddhism). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964.

Chen, Kenneth. *Buddhism: The Light of Asia.* Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1968.

Williams, Paul. *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations.* New York: Routledge, 1989.

Conze, Edward. *Buddhist Thought in India.* New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962.

Streng, Frederick. *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (on Nagarjuna's philosophy). Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1967.

See also translations of key Buddhist texts.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How would you explain the differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism in your own words?
2. In Theravada, what is the difference between a Buddha and an arhat?
3. Is Nagarjuna's philosophy too complex or too simple to understand easily?
4. Does salvation by faith, whether Pure Land or Lutheran, make it too easy or too hard? Do you understand how it can work?
5. Can one be a bodhisattva without knowing it? (Remember: if you think you're a saint, that may mean you aren't one. . .)
6. How similar are Theosophy and Buddhism, and how do they differ?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter IX

VAJRAYANA AND ZEN

MIND ONLY

In the last paper we considered Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Two further developments of Buddhism deserve special attention. This is partly because both have received particular attention in the West, and partly because they are of exceptional philosophical interest, especially in relation to Theosophy. These are Vajrayana and Zen.

Vajrayana, the "Diamond" or "Thunderbolt" Way, is the Buddhism of Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, and Nepal, and has had influence elsewhere, especially in the Shingon denomination in Japan. Tantric-influenced and highly esoteric, it makes great use of mandalas of cosmic buddhas and bodhisattvas, powerful visualization meditations, and elaborate rituals. Zen, on the other hand, though it has some formalities, is famous for its exaltation of naturalness and simplicity. It is the Buddhism of monastic practice, especially in China, Korea, and Vietnam, where the practice of the laity is more likely to be Pure Land; Zen is represented by two major Buddhist denominations in Japan. Zen is certainly an expression of Mahayana; Vajrayana is sometimes considered Mahayana, but also sometimes so distinctive as to be a third major division of Buddhism.

Both schools have roots in a further Mahayana philosophical development after Nagarjuna's Void and Samsara-Nirvana teachings. (His teaching is technically called *Madhyamika*, or "Middle Way.") The new development is formally called *Yogacara* ("Yoga practice"), or *Vijñanavada* ("the way of consciousness"), or, more simply, *Citta-matra*, "Mind-only." It is a pure idealism in the philosophical sense of the word, stating that only consciousness or ideas really exist, and that out of them we construct or project the world we think we see around us.

After Nagarjuna showed that only the Void or Emptiness ultimately exists, it is as though people began to ask, "Yes, but what is the nature of the Void? Is it *only* nothingness, or is there something more?" In the fourth century, along came two brothers, Asanga and Vasubandhu, to say there *is* something more: the Void is also pure consciousness, but empty of ideas till we put them there, to make a world.

How does this work? Basically it is karma, the infinite regress of cause and effect, that keeps the show going, and to which we add our bit with all our thoughts, words, and deeds. The karmic heritage from the past—universal, world, national, family—is built into us at birth, like our DNA genetic heritage. It is called store-consciousness, and it makes the world-picture we see—unless we decide to switch channels to another.

Think of it as a movie projector. The screen is the universal void-consciousness, the light bulb within is our own pure consciousness, and the reel of film already installed in the machine is the store-consciousness, edited slightly and unconsciously by our own experience. It projects out the world as we know it.

We see roughly the same world as everyone else—not because it is the only possible one, or because it is more real than any other, but because everyone on this

earth at this time has much identical karma giving them a common affinity for the same time and place: twentieth and twenty-first century planet Earth with its peculiar mix of pain, pleasure, and problems to be solved. We're all shipwrecked on this particular island in space and time because, for better or worse, it's where the waves of karma have washed us. It presents the survivor-show issues with which we have to deal, individually and together, even though personal karma has added on differences within the framework of that time and place: family, gender, ethnic background, wealth or poverty, good or bad experiences, personality features, talents.

There are individual nuances in how we see the world too. If in our nature we are fearful, we see much out there to make us afraid. If we are prone to anger, we see much to make us angry. If, on the other hand, we see much that is beautiful, or better yet we see through the whole celluloid tissue of cosmic movieland illusion to the light of clear consciousness behind and beyond it, we will be infinitely joyous.

VAJRAYANA

That is what Vajrayana as a spiritual path says to do. Take out one reel of film from the mental projector and put in another, and another, and another, until you realize you can project out any universe you want, and finally that they are all unreal compared to the clear light behind them. Vajrayana is also called the way of power, because in this process one can attain great authority over the realms of mind and appearances. One can make gods come and go, and allegedly can control one's dreams and rebirths, or bless and curse with powerful effect. However, unless such abilities are used with wisdom and compassion, they reduce the user to the status of a black magician. In any case, as a kind of "shock therapy," Vajrayana channels alternative realities filled with demons and powerful allies through energy-packed words, gestures, and hard meditation.

The basic Vajrayana practice is visualization meditation. As a Tantric form of Buddhism, it places great importance on the guru-disciple relationship. (In Tibet, the guru would be called a lama.) When a novice is initiated, the lama assigns him or her a personal buddha or bodhisattva from a mandala with which to "work." The disciple will endeavor, through reciting the mantra or words of that figure, making its mudra or hand-gestures, and above all visualizing it as it appears in conventional art, to construct that beneficent entity. First the disciple should make it appear on the altar, and finally enthrone it in the heart, so that his or her consciousness is united with the deity's universal consciousness.

Drawing on Vajrayana's Tantric roots, its cosmic buddhas are often pictured locked in sexual embrace with a transcendent consort. The male figure portrays the phenomenal world and skill-in-means, and the female, *prajna* or infinite, enlightening wisdom. Thus, in identifying with the Buddha, one also embraces Wisdom, and vice versa. The great Vajrayana mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum* (something like, "The One, the Jewel in the Lotus, the Manifestation") expresses it all: the ecstatic union of samsara and Nirvana, of the path and realization, of male and female energies. In the Vajrayana lands, it is chanted continually by priest and peasant alike, and is the message of a million prayer wheels and prayer flags.

THE TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD

The famous *Bardo Thodol*, or "Tibetan Book of the Dead," expresses this worldview vividly and unforgettably.

First we need to bear in mind a further product of Mind-only thought is the three forms of expression of the Buddha-nature, which may be defined as the self being the world. A buddha realizes this at the moment of enlightenment. This buddhahood takes three forms: as the *Dharmakaya* or universal essence, the eternal dance of the atoms and galaxies, and the eternal consciousness and joy underlying the dance; as the *Sambhogakaya* or heavenly realms, in which the buddha-nature takes on the most transcendent thought-form we can conceive of, like God in heaven, or like the buddhas in paradisal realms such as Amida in the Pure Land; and finally as the *Nirmanakaya*, the buddha-nature in this physical world, as a teacher among us like the historical Buddha.

In Tibetan, the Bardo comprises the "alternative" or "intermediate" realms we travel through between one life and the next, particularly the heavenly Sambhogakaya. While we seem to be living in the terrestrial world, we really alternate, we are told, between it and the Bardo. We lived in the Bardo during the nine womb-months before birth, we enter it again in dreams and meditation, and we will re-enter it at death. The Tibetan Book of the Dead is like a guidebook to the Bardo realm, read into the ear of a dying or recently deceased person, explaining what that person is seeing, how those sights are projected, and how to handle them. The book is based on the great Mind-only and Vajrayana principle that we project out the world we experience, in this life and the life to come. We write the script of our own afterlives and make our own heavens and hells.

The newly deceased entity starts with the "highest" level to encounter the "Clear Light of the Void"—the *Dharmakaya*, Nirvana, or the absolute essence of the universe. It is of "terrifying brightness," and out of it comes a roaring louder than a thousand thunderclaps at once, the light and vibrancy of an entire cosmos. If the pilgrim recognizes the Dharmakaya as his/her own true nature, however, he/she can merge with it, be liberated, and avoid all future births into Samsara.

Unless the individual is highly trained, it is more likely one will instinctively shrink back from the awesome sight and sound, and the moment of opportunity will be lost. One will then fall into the Sambhogakaya level to see the Dharmakaya resolved into cosmic buddhas of transcendent form. The pilgrim now faces, one at a time and then all together, a mandala of five great cosmic buddhas in their "peaceful" aspects.

They are each described as having all the attributes, from gestures to the particular consort, in the traditional "meditation" paintings. If one asks why one finds them in those precise forms, the answer is because that is the way the Bardo voyager put them there. Through intensive visualization meditation one constructs images to set against the infinite Void, and thus they are what one sees. The book does not say so, but one could certainly assume that devout travelers of different religious persuasions, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or other, would see images appropriate to that faith in the Bardo.

If the venturer in the Bardo realm sees them as projections of his inner nature, that individual will merge into one of them and be liberated then and there. But if the test is failed, the deceased will be frightened at these tremendous beings and pass

quickly by, or be drawn by colored rays off to the side leading to places for rebirth: smoky for the hells, white for the devic heavens, and so forth.

The next encounter will be with the same deities in their hideous, terrifying aspect, full of wrath but with the same opportunity for recognition. It is as though if beauty did not sway one, perhaps the shock of horror will.

If this opportunity too is missed, the process of rebirth firmly takes hold; the pilgrim is propelled by winds of karma reaching hurricane force. One experiences flash visions of judgment and of one's future parents in copulation, and finally swoons, forgetting everything at the conscious level, all that has transpired between the worlds, to awaken in the womb of whatever animal or human is fated to give one birth in the upcoming life.

But even in these last stages the process can, with tremendous spiritual effort, be cut short and redirected. The most effective way is to meditate on the "father-mother" guru, the union of Buddha and Wisdom as male and female locked in erotic/ecstatic embrace, as in Tibetan sacred art. For the greatest power comes from the union of opposites, and psychologically the deepest polarity that needs to be rejoined, is our partiality toward the male or the female. The Tibetan Book of the Dead said, centuries before Freud and his Oedipus complex, that the ultimate beginning of attachment-suffering is attraction toward the parent of the opposite sex and repulsion toward that of one's own. Meditation on the conjoined male-female guru even before birth is the primal way to negate this and shut the womb door, so as not to be reborn again.

With this thought we must end our exploration of the dynamic lightning-bolt world of Vajrayana, and enter the peaceful gardens and "sitting quietly, doing nothing" practice of Zen.

ZEN

Zen (*Chan* in Chinese) is a transliteration of Sanskrit *dhyana*, or meditation. With Zen, enlightenment arises unexpectedly, often suddenly, in the course of *zazen*, (Zen sitting) or perhaps in response to an unconventional teaching gesture by a master. Enlightenment means getting in touch with the Buddha-nature within oneself and in all things, and so seeing everything—oneself, others, the natural world—just as it is. This is Zen's expression of the Mind-only philosophy: seeing a flower as a flower, tasting a cup of tea as a cup of tea, just as it is in the original enlightened consciousness. In Zen, one wants to see the secret truth prior to words, which is that we are Buddhas and in Nirvana now. A Zen master was once asked, "What is the first principle?" and answered, "If I told you, it would become the second principle." The idea is not to philosophize, but just to live naturally and spontaneously out of original nature, what one Zen teacher called the "Unborn Mind." But Zen does not confuse naturalness with mere self-indulgence, or the spontaneity of the truly liberated person with mere impulsiveness.

One Chinese master, Huihai, when asked if he did anything special to live in the Way replied, "Yes; when hungry I eat, when tired, I sleep." When asked how this way differed from what ordinary people did, he replied in effect that ordinary people do not just eat when they eat, but use eating as an occasion to let the desire-stimulated imagination run wild, thinking of what food they like and what they dislike, or having conceits of how the foods they eat symbolize their prosperity, lifestyle, or ethnicity;

similarly, ordinary people do not just sleep when they sleep, but lie on their beds awash with waves of restless worry, imaginings, and lusts. The goal of Zen, however, is just to eat when you are hungry and sleep when you are tired—nothing more. But to do so you need to be fairly enlightened and working out of the Buddha Mind or Higher Self, not what Zen calls the "monkey mind," or what Theosophists would call the fantasies of the astral or desire plane.

To help students get there, many Zen teachers use *koans*, those enigmatic anecdotes, riddles, and sayings, such as, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" While these puzzles can be answered in terms of the Void and Mind-only philosophy (the sound of one hand clapping is the roar of the Oneness before the two hands of the dualistic universe emerge), the real point is that such conundrums bring the "monkey mind" to a stop. They stop its perpetual chatter by feeding it something it cannot handle in the usual way. Then maybe it will be forced to break through to a new level of consciousness.

Zen also places great importance on *zazen*, seated meditation. Zen practitioners sit in a stylized posture, ideally the lotus posture of legs crossed and each foot on the opposite thigh, for periods of a half hour or so at a time. The mind may be engaged in counting or following the breaths, or focusing on one's assigned *koan*. Again, this is not easy, but it helps to discipline the mind, body, and feelings. Liberation is not doing what you want to do, for the tradition is well aware that what ordinary, unenlightened people think they want is merely the operation of those attachment-rooted desires that, fulfilled or not, only enslave them in the bitter syndrome of craving, anxiety, and despair. The life of a well-ordered Chan or Zen monastery or center is very much the reverse of a hedonistic life. But it is hoped that therein students can find out who they are apart from the desire-wrought illusions manufactured by the senses and the ego-centered mind.

The real world manifested on the screen of the Void, though, is no illusion, even if one cannot say exactly what it is. Another old master, Qingyuan, said that before he studied Zen for thirty years, he saw mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers. When he had made some progress, he no longer saw mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers—perhaps thinking of them as only the Void. But when he had got to the very heart of Zen, he again saw mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers.

D.T. Suzuki, the great apostle of Zen to the West, was once asked what the difference is between the first and last seeing. "None," he replied, "except the second time from about two feet off the ground."

VAJRAYANA, ZEN, AND THEOSOPHY

It is well known that Tibetan Buddhism, that is, Vajrayana, has had a definite historical connection to Theosophy through H. P. Blavatsky's initiations in Tibet. Furthermore, the radical Mind-only philosophy that underlies both Vajrayana and Zen is apparent in *The Secret Doctrine* in such passages as this: "The existences belonging to every plane of being, up to the highest Dhyan Chohan, are, comparatively, like the shadow cast by a magic lantern on a colorless screen. Nevertheless all things are relatively real, for the cognizer is also a reflection, and the things cognized there are real to him as himself." (I, 39, 1993 Quest ed.) Furthermore, the idea of a personal journey through various realms of reality toward self-transformation and the realization of one's true nature, though not exclusive to

Vajrayana or Zen, is clearly expressed in them in a way many Theosophists are bound to find congenial.

References for Supplementary Reading

Blofeld, John, *The Way of Power*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970.

The Dalai Lama, *The Buddhism of Tibet*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1987.

Thurman, Robert A., Jr. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. New York: Bantam, 1994.

Hoover, Thomas, *The Zen Experience*. New York: New American Library, 1980.

Kapleau, Philip, *The Three Pillars of Zen*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

Suzuki, D. T. *Zen Buddhism*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Is the Mind-only philosophy meaningful to you, or does it seem too removed from everyday life?
2. How would you explain in your own words its basic teaching?
3. Why do you think Vajrayana and Zen are forms of Buddhism particularly appealing in America?
4. Compare the scenario of the Tibetan Book of the Dead to Theosophical views of the afterlife.
5. How natural is the Zen idea of naturalness?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter X

CHINESE RELIGION

BASIC FEATURES

The religion of the vast nation of China has traditionally been seen as comprised of "Three Teachings": Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Despite a few tensions over China's long history, these faiths are not usually perceived by the Chinese as being competitive, such as Western denominations might be, but as complementary. Most people traditionally had a relationship to all three: Confucianism provided the basic moral code; Taoism dealt with the world of magic, spirits, and inner mysticism, and Buddhism with karma and reincarnation. Specialists, such as Confucian philosophers or Taoist and Buddhist monks, emphasized the doctrine and practice of their own tradition. But in popular religion, all three had a place in a world fundamentally defined by family, concerned with maintaining right relationships with all beings, visible and invisible, and imbued with motifs of popular or folk religion even older and more pervasive than the "Three Teachings."

What are these motifs? First, consider the feeling of the Chinese that they and the soil on which they live are inseparable and have been together as far back as one can go. In many other societies, a history of having come from some other place and settled in a new land is an important part of the national image. Think of the significance of the Exodus and the Promised Land for the ancient Israelites, or of immigration and the pioneers in America's national consciousness. In China, however, there is a quieter but more secure assurance that these people have always been in that rich and beautiful country, were created there, and belong to it as surely as the rivers and mountains and rice fields.

This may be called "The Good Earth" theme, to use the title of Pearl Buck's prizewinning novel about the life of a Chinese peasant family. In one memorable scene in that book the father, Lung, takes a few moments off from his hardworking life to go up into the hills above his fields, where the ancestral tombs of the family are located. There he reflects on the many generations silently watching their now-living descendants till the same fields they had worked in their time. He realizes that one day he himself will be interred there, like them, watching his sons and grandsons and the ensuing generations work the same land, age after age.

That brings us to the next motif, family and ancestry, really one and the same. In traditional China, one's primary loyalty was to the family and its head, not directly to the state. In this view, one's major identity was as a member of a particular family. One's role in it, whether as husband or wife, parent or child, older or younger brother, took precedence over individuality. The family gave one place and support, and a person unfortunate enough to be without a family—an orphan or estranged individual—often had a hard lot.

Confucian moralists said that if one had to choose between loyalty to the family and the state, the family came first. Even the emperor of such a vast nation was thought of as the head of a great family, and one's loyalty to the sovereign was through the head of one's own family. Even one's relation to the ultimate parents,

heaven and earth, was theoretically through the long chain of ancestors going back to them.

The veneration of ancestors in Chinese religion is really just "family-ism," above all the honor owed to parents by children for the gift of life itself, and was carried beyond the grave. Although ancestors could be displeased and required propitiation, fear was not at all the primary motive for their worship. In many cases it was no doubt genuine love, and certainly the sense of respect and obligation, so instilled in traditional Chinese, to those who had given the immeasurable gift of life itself. Offerings and respect are presented to ancestors at three places: at home altars, at extended family shrines, and at the grave.

The home altar is usually just a simple shelf bearing tablets with the names of recent ancestors, to which a bit of water or food and incense may be presented daily. The extended family shrine is a separate building belonging to an extended clan, in which larger tablets bearing ancestral names are set up going back ten generations, each tier of course with twice as many as the one below it. The arrangement gives a powerful sense of the weight of ancestors, generation upon generation, standing above and behind the living.

The family graves are visited for purposes of respect and reflections, as by farmer Lung; in particular, they are tended by the family in the spring and fall, when the site is cleaned and the ancestors celebrated. Often the family has a picnic at the grave, at which the ancestors are invisible but honored guests.

The sense of land and place also gave rise to one of the most basic features of popular Chinese religion, one that underlies and transcends the "Three Teachings": the cult of the Earth-god and the City-god. In rural China, local Earth-gods, commonly depicted as aged men, guard the fields and byways. Their tiny shrines and modest temples, usually red—the sacred color in China—can be found along roads, beside farms and shops, and in villages.

The Earth-gods are considered subordinate to the City-god of the nearest large center. As it developed in historical times, the honoring of the City-god was intertwined with the Chinese empire's ubiquitous bureaucracy. Significantly, the City-god, like most Chinese deities, was a deified human being, perhaps a powerful and respected official of the past, who after death was promoted to similar work in the spiritual realm. Just as the human magistrate of the district was charged with advancing his population's welfare and keeping out criminals, so his spiritual counterpart was responsible for their spiritual well-being and for driving away the evil spirits that might cause epidemics, insect infestations, and poor harvests.

The local government was responsible for the worship of the City-god and the maintenance of his temple. It could even happen, and often did, that if a City-god failed in his duties, he could be punished or replaced with another. To the practical Chinese mind, all gods under Heaven itself were, though on another plane, simply finite entities like humans—not objects of abject awe or devotional reverence, as the gods of bhakti Hinduism might be. Like human officials, they had their job to do; if they did it well they deserved thanks, but if they did not they could be demoted or even whipped, and another given a chance to prove himself.

The world of the gods was called the Realm of Light (*yang*). On the shadow side was the Realm of Shade (*yin*), relating to the spirits of the dead. *Yang* and *yin* refer to the eternal polarities in Chinese thought: respectively, male and female, light and

shade, day and night, spring and autumn, which must be balanced. They will be discussed further under Taoism. The souls of the departed were honored in elaborate funeral rites intended to preserve the deceased from the harsh judgment and punishment envisioned especially by popular Buddhism, and then were enshrined as honored ancestors.

It is important to realize, though, that all of this was ultimately grounded in the family system. A family would spend considerable amounts of money on a fine funeral with worthy offerings, professional musicians, mourners, and a team of Taoist or Buddhist priests. This was out of the respect owed a parent or other relative, for the honor of the family, and because the rite served as a kind of catharsis for the loss, after which the family could feel reintegrated. Even austere Confucian philosophers, who might personally harbor some skepticism concerning gods and the afterlife, recognized the social and therapeutic value of such rites.

The Ultimate, therefore, was harmony—of light and shade, of the turning seasons, of life and death. That ultimate harmony was referred to as the Tao. (Confucianists sometimes spoke of Heaven (*Tian*), or the will of Heaven, or the Great Ultimate, but with the same import so far as the present discussion is concerned.) Tao is the most basic and influential of all themes in Chinese religion. It is to it, then, that we must now turn.

THE TAO

The unity in which all things in heaven and earth fit together is called the Tao. (*Dao*, closer to the proper pronunciation, is used in the current *Pinyin* system of transliteration. We will follow *Pinyin* in this and the next two chapters, except for words like Tao that are widely familiar in older spellings.)

The word Tao is most often translated "Way," and originally meant a road, though it can also mean "to speak." Among philosophers it came to indicate the broad track down which all things roll, the unity of the universe understood as an endless process of change. The world is never the same one day as it was the day before, yet its eternal evolution follows certain cycles in which all modifications are related naturally to what went before.

Tao, therefore, has been rendered as "Way," "Nature," "Existence," and even "God." All these terms add some flavor to its meaning so long as it is not limited to any one of them. It is more than Nature in a materialistic sense, yet less than the concept of a personal God. Tao has also been called the "Great Change." That notion is important, for the Chinese ultimate is not just a static Ground of Being, as Brahman in Vedanta Hinduism or the Void in Mahayana Buddhism might be perceived. An important characteristic of the Tao is its ever-shifting variety. In this respect it is like a mighty river, continually flowing, never the same, into which, as a western philosopher said, one cannot step twice.

Tao—how to know it, how to live in accordance with it, how to construct a society in harmony with the real nature of Tao—is the great theme of Chinese thought and religion. Do we best understand the Tao through feeling or reason? In nature, in one's own inner being, or in the midst of human society? By religion or philosophy? These are big questions and the Chinese have experimented with many kinds of answers to them.

Never was this issue of how to live in harmony with the Tao more burning than in the last two centuries of the ancient Zhou dynasty, 403-221 B.C.E. This was an era when, because the emperor had been reduced to a powerless figurehead, rulers of feudal states battled unceasingly with each other. Although it was time of cultural and material advance, people felt that all sense of restraint and morality had been lost. Even rough warrior codes no longer held, and society was caught up in a madness of rapacity, intrigue, and violence. The peasants, exploited in the best of times, suffered most.

Thoughtful people had to ask themselves, "Where did we go wrong? How can we get society back on the right track and find the Tao? How can we reconstruct society so that it is in harmony with the Tao, and if that is not possible, how can an individual live in harmony with the Tao in the midst of so much wrong?" It is no accident that the period of the Warring States was also called the period of the Hundred Philosophers. (Note that the Buddha and the Upanishads in India, the great Hebrew prophets, and the great Greek philosophers flourished during roughly the same era.)

The religiously most important answers fell into two groups, Confucian and Taoist. The basic difference was that Confucianists thought the Tao, or Tian, was best found by humans in human tradition and society, and the Taoists argued it should be sought instead in nature and inwardly.

Disciples of Confucius contended that humans are social animals, and while the Tao may be found inwardly and alone by rocks or solitary animals, like the leopard, we are meant to find it primarily in the social order, in the faces of family and friends. It is realized through human relationships, starting with the family, and through rituals and the use of reason.

Taoists thought, on the other hand, that reason and society perverted the Tao, which was best found in nature and in mystical or poetic rather than rational or social experience. The values of society, they said, are likely to be superficial and artificial, and reason to be too limited by what little we can know of the universe. To find the deeper meaning of things one must turn to nature or look deeply within.

The distinction is comparable to that between rationalists and romantics in the West. Needless to say, Confucianism has been mainly associated with moralism and the ruling elite together with their education and governing systems. Taoism, on the other hand, is linked with sensitivity to feelings, with artists and poets, and with all sorts of colorful, bizarre, "outsider" things—from fairy tales to unusual sexual techniques, from exorcising devils to revolutionary secret societies and esoteric rites. For those who remember the 1960s, it is instructive to reflect how similar Confucian concerns are to what was then called the "establishment" and Taoist activities to the "counterculture" of those days—except that in China the two sides managed to coexist for some twenty-five centuries. In their wisdom, the Chinese have tacitly understood that, like *yang* and *yin*, the two sides, represent two valid parts of human life: Confucian for social obligations and Taoistic individual needs for artistic expression, and for dealing with one's personal gods and demons.

It is important to recall that relatively few Chinese in the past would have thought of themselves as exclusively Confucian, Taoist, or Buddhist. In the lives of most people, features from all those strands had a place. Confucian attitudes undergirded family and work ethics; Buddhism helped to answer questions about

what happens after death; a dash of Taoist color met aesthetic and spiritual needs in one's personal life. (It has been said that Chinese officials were Confucian at work and Taoist on vacation or in retirement.)

Now, after a traumatic century of upheaval, war, revolution, and Communist rule, together with industrialization, urbanization, and changing lifestyles, the old China in which these values flourished, from peasant Lung's tombs to City-gods to traditional Confucianism and Taoism, is much diminished, except for Chinese in Taiwan or overseas. Some temples and practices survive, however, no doubt as do inner attitudes associated with the great traditions of China. We must first look at that tradition, and then try to understand contemporary China.

References for Supplementary Reading

Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan, 1960.

Jochim, Christian, *Chinese Religion: A Cultural Perspective*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986.

Jordan, David K. *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Faith of a Taiwanese Village*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.

Thompson, Laurence G. *Chinese Religion: An Introduction*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1969.

————*The Chinese Way in Religion*. Encino. CA: Dickenson, 1973.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What aspects of American religion seem most comparable to fundamental Chinese themes like "The Good Earth," ancestor-worship, the Earth-god and City-god, or the balancing of social and individual aspects of religion?
2. Which approach to knowing the Tao most appeals to you, the Confucian or Taoist?
3. By favoring one or the other, are you minimizing an important side of human life? Could either side become unhealthy or dangerous if emphasized exclusively?
4. Why do you think the twentieth century had such a devastating effect on traditional China?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XI

CONFUCIANISM

THE WISE AND HOLY SAGE

Kong Fuzi, or the Master Kong—his name and title are conventionally Latinized as Confucius—was the most important single person in Chinese history. He inspired, or at least can be said to symbolize, the traditional social order of a third of humanity. Not only China, but also Korea, Vietnam, and Japan fell under his philosophical sway. Yet he was by all accounts a sincere, winsome, and unpretentious man, willing to listen as well as teach, sure only of one thing, that it was his duty to do what he could to make the world a better place.

We must distinguish Confucius as a man of his time from the almost-deified, impossibly wise and remote figure of the Confucian educational tradition and state cult. But at the same time we must remember why this particular man was selected as the symbolic embodiment of that tradition. Much of the traditional account of his life may be legend, but it is significant because it too tells us what kind of life this tradition has regarded as most exemplary.

Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) lived in a time of great social disruption in ancient China. He was born in the feudal state of Lu, on the Shandong peninsula, the son of a minor official or military officer. He and his family were members of a class called *ru*, who specialized in the "six arts"—ceremonial, music, archery, charioteering, history, and numbers—and so he was trained in the classical and cultural tradition of those days. He was expected to follow his father in government service, the appropriate career for people of his class. But Confucius had great difficulty in finding a position, apparently because he was too outspoken about proper conduct on the part of rulers and seemed hopelessly to have "his head in the clouds." He had to settle for a role that to him seemed second best but in the long run proved to be far more influential than that of government minister. He became a teacher. Among his students were young men who were successful in attaining practical influence and power over the years—and through subsequent generations over centuries became the "mandarin" elite who shaped the values and structures of Chinese politics, education, and social organization.

Confucius was revered not only for his own teachings but also because he was associated with the classical literature that was the real bedrock of the traditional culture. Five books, which existed in early form by the time of Confucius and which are the basic texts of the *ru*, are now often called the Confucian classics. These are the Book of History, the Book of Poems, the Book of Change (the famous *Yi Jing*), the historical Spring and Autumn Annals, and the Book of Rites.

Four other books from shortly after the time of Confucius are also canonical and bear the seal of the master's authority: the Analects (containing remembered words of Confucius himself), the Great Learning, the *Chung Yung*, and the Book of Mencius. (Mencius was the second most important philosopher in the Confucian tradition, after Confucius himself.)

These books are important because they reflect basic Chinese values and ways of thinking. Their tradition came before Confucius and continued after him. Confucius is not a peerless sage because he created his tradition; on the contrary, he is unequalled because the tradition "created" him, and he reflected it faithfully.

Confucius' response to the crisis of the "Warring States" described in the last paper was profoundly conservative and social: he believed that the way to get back in harmony with Heaven or the Tao was to go back to the ways of the wise sage-emperors, believed to have ruled at the beginning of Chinese history and enshrined in the classics. In their tradition, Confucius taught, the key to human well-being was a good social order, in which people recognize and act on their mutual responsibilities to one another, beginning with the family as the cornerstone of society. Hardly less important were "rites," social rituals through which people enacted right relationships and the responsibility of rulers for the welfare of their subjects.

The basic structures of society, he felt, were adequate. The needful thing was to convince people they must act in accordance with the roles society has given them. The father must act like a father; the son, like a son; the ruler must be a real ruler like those of old, wise and benevolent; the ministers of state must be true civil servants, loyal and fearless and giving of themselves.

The change to becoming what one "is" (called "rectification of names") must start within. One must be motivated by virtue, or *ren*, a typically vague but eloquent Confucian term suggestive of humanity, love, high principle, and living together in peace. It is the way of the *jun-zi*, the superior man, who, as the Confucian ideal suggests, is at once a scholar, a selfless servant of society, and a gentleman steeped in courtesy and tradition; as an official and family head, he continually puts philosophy into practice.

This noble ideal is enforced by no outside sanctions except the opinion of good men. It is based on no belief in divine rewards or punishment after death. Its sincere practice might at times lead to persecution and exile rather than honor. Yet in the end Confucian virtue provides its own reward: knowing one is upholding a great tradition, and acting in accordance with Tao or Heaven, with the way things are meant to be.

THE CONFUCIAN SOCIAL ORDER

One of the "four books," the *Chung Yung*—literally the "Central Pivot," but which could be translated as something like "Living the Balanced or Centered Life"—is attributed by tradition to Confucius' grandson and is said to summarize the Sage's teachings on personal life. It starts off by pointing to the natures we possess, our "personal nature"—who we are deep down inside, the person known in full only to ourselves; and our "social nature"—who we are in interaction with others.

These two sides are not unconnected. Something of who we are inwardly appears in our outward appearance and manner. Social experiences, good or bad, can affect our inner being. Yet often the two are not in harmony. We play social roles that are not true to our genuine inner self, and we repress that self rather than finding ways to express it.

The Confucian answer is not, as some traditions might have it, to withdraw from society in favor of a monastic or contemplative life. In this teaching, humans are by

nature social beings, and are incomplete without social fulfillment through family and community. As one translation of the *Chung Yung* has it, "When our 'genuine personal nature' and 'genuine social nature' mutually supplement each other perpetually, then conditions everywhere remain wholesome, and everything thrives and prospers..."[4] The same version goes on to say, "Nature's way [i.e., the Tao] is not something apart from men. When a man pursues a way which separates him from men, it is not Nature's way."

The *Chung Yung* tells us that the social order is based on five relationships. These are those 1) between sovereign and subject, 2) between father and son, 3) between husband and wife, 4) between elder brother and younger brother, and 5) between friend and friend consorting as equals. We may note several things about this set. First, all except the last are hierarchical, that is, one party in the relationship is superior to the other. We will see in a moment, however, that domination is conditioned by responsibilities on both sides.

Second, the five relationships refer mostly to males. Confucianism unabashedly assumes male dominance in society, and this is no doubt one of its features least attractive to many moderns. But without defending this arrangement, we might look at its ramifications. The cornerstone relation is the second—father and son. It is prior to one's relation to the larger society, and to one's own later marriage and family, for it is here—through "filial piety"—that one first learns love and loyalty. While filial piety includes reverence for mother as well as father, the relation to father and the line of male ancestors is central to the Confucian way of life.

Why father-son rather than mother-child? Perhaps it can be looked at this way: in Confucian eyes, mother-child is essentially biological, whereas father-son, while obviously containing a biological component, is also social; it is that part of one's heritage which gives one a family name, and a place in society. Thus it is the foundation of what in this worldview is most important, a solid social order based on the family.

Father-son obligations are mutual. While the son is expected always to negate his own feelings and individuality in deference to the parent, and always to uphold the family honor, the father has an equally important obligation to bring up his son properly, instilling in him the proper virtues. I recall once seeing a movie from Korea, traditionally a highly Confucian society. A seven or eight year old boy had stolen some fruit from a neighbor's tree. When his father came home and found out what had happened, he took the lad out in front of the ancestral tombs, and pulled off his belt. I expected him then to begin lashing the boy, but the father commenced lashing his own body instead, saying he was punishing himself for having failed in his obligations by raising such an unvirtuous child. One can well imagine the effect such a scene, in front of the family ancestors, would have on the young boy!

Mutuality, in fact, is a key to Confucianism. Society depends on the so-called Silver Rule: Do not do to others what you would not have others do to you. To have a good society, everyone must meet one's responsibilities and work for the good of all.

Another key is the role of *li*, or rites. Confucianism is full of rites: for mourning after the death of a parent, for honoring one's parents while living, for the turn of the seasons, for conducting the affairs of state. Many modern people object to ritual,

[4] Archie Bahm, *The Heart of Confucius.* New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

thinking of it as merely artificial and insincere. Confucius' view was very different. He saw it as humanizing, allowing the inner harmony of human society to express itself. Ritual makes the social order like a great dance rather than the law of jungle, and the dance keeps going from one stage to another. Funeral rites, for example, enable one to express sorrow in a channeled and cathartic way, then serve to seal the rift in the family left by the loss.

Confucianism soon became a social order—a form of government and social organization. It dominated China for two thousand years, into the twentieth century, and perhaps still does inwardly. As stated earlier, it was based on education and the scholarly *ru* or "mandarin" class. Apart from the imperial dynasty in power, rule was in theory not by hereditary right or democratic election, but by a meritocracy based on virtue and education; one was admitted to this class through education in the classics, followed by a rigorous examination system. But rule was from above, since it depended on the Confucian virtue of those admitted to the mandarin class. And in turn, Confucian virtue had to come from within, on the basis of moral education—very much contrary to the American concept of democracy and governmental "checks and balances." The mandarins were administrators, judges, chief ritualists, and educators, and held the vast empire together for some twenty centuries as dynasties came and went.

MENCIUS AND XUNZI

Two Confucian philosophers of a century or so after the Sage deserve mention for their contrasting views of human nature. Mencius (372-289 BCE) held what was to become the prevailing Confucian doctrine, that human nature is basically good, and is only impeded by an evil social environment. This is shown, he said, by the way in which, if a child falls into a well and is crying for help, a passerby will stop to help him, even if there is no benefit to himself in the kindhearted act. More broadly, Mencius said, humans tend to the good as water flows downhill. It can be perverted in other directions, just as one can dam flowing water and force it to back up, but this is contrary to its intrinsic nature. The perversion comes from a corrupt social environment: if rulers set a bad example, robbing and exploiting so that people cannot feed their families, one cannot expect those people to be any better. But this is contrary to the proper, natural order of things. Like most thinkers who have held that basic human goodness is twisted only by a wicked society, Mencius taught the right of revolution against unjust government; if the bad social structures can be changed, by force if need be, then natural human goodness can once again assume its course.

Xunzi (Hsun-tzu; 298-238 BCE) criticized Mencius' view as overly sanguine, saying instead that human nature is basically bad, and can only be corrected by education and social control. The newborn child is nothing but self-centered, thinking only of its own needs as it cries out for food, warmth, and comfort. It naturally always wants what it does not have. In this, however, there is hope, since what it does not have is adult manners and morals, through which our native selfishness is made to conform to the social standards that make society livable for all. Thus the child can be taught the right values. Children want to dress up like adults, because adulthood is an experience they covet; thus they can be taught mature behavior. This is where the great Confucian emphasis on education, on proper behavior, and on rites (which were seen, especially by Xunzi, as a means of popular education and a way of safely venting extreme emotions) comes in.

NEO-CONFUCIANISM

The Neo-Confucian movement, which began in the eleventh and twelfth centuries during the Song dynasty, eventually became the authoritative interpretation of the Confucian intellectual tradition. It arose partly in response to new issues raised by Taoist and Buddhist thought, which required the rather pragmatic, worldly Confucians to ponder what their way meant in the context of ultimate metaphysical questions about the nature of the universe and humanity. Two leading Neo-Confucianists were Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and Wang Yangming (1472-1529). Zhu Xi taught that one ultimate principle is manifested in the principles of the myriad separate things, as the light of the moon is broken onto many rivers and lakes. Through reflection on particulars, especially human morality, one can know the Ultimate. The more idealistic Wang Yangming taught that the principles are actually within the mind itself, and that the supreme requisite is thus sincerity of mind. Through such reflections as these, the spiritual and intellectual side of Confucianism was deepened. Morality became an expression of inner sincerity, the rites more profoundly religious, and the Confucian way of life even a sort of mysticism in the midst of an active life of service.

CONFUCIANISM TODAY

Although Confucianism is today less of a living tradition of teaching and rites than it was before the upheavals of the twentieth century, it remains immensely important as a source of morals and values for the third of the human race living in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, and for the many immigrants from those lands in the U.S. and elsewhere. One need only observe the continuing strong family structure, the "work ethic," the paternalism of Japanese and Korean corporations, the sense of orderliness and self-discipline, the this-worldliness balanced by a sort of inner mysticism, to appreciate this. The People's Republic of China, though formally repudiating Confucianism, often seems little more than Confucianism under another name, in such mottos as "Serve the People," and in Party cadres like a new race of mandarins. Even the Tiananmen tragedy can be seen as a conflict between two pillars of Confucian tradition: the ideal of virtuous scholars—particularly students because of their relative independence from other obligations—who protest lack of virtue in government; and the other tradition, the idea that government should come down from above, in the form of officials who have gotten where they are by their own merit. 1989 was not the first time such a conflict was enacted, and student protesters quashed; a similar conflict occurred as far back as the Han Dynasty in the second century CE. It is difficult to understand this part of the world, so important to the United States in economic and political as well as spiritual terms, without understanding Confucianism.

CONFUCIANISM AND THEOSOPHY

To the best of my knowledge, there has been little active interaction between Theosophy and Confucian thought. However, that makes the prospect of making those connections now all the more important and exciting. Certainly the need is there. In both views, the strong sense of tradition combined with open-mindedness, the importance of service, and the realization of one's true inner nature offer grounds for dialogue. Theosophy could offer the ancient Chinese tradition a feeling for greater gender and generational equality, and a worldview which puts the Great Sage into

the fellowship of other Masters of diverse times and places, exploring ways in which he articulated the Ancient Wisdom for his time and place.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan, 1960.

Bahm, Archie, *The Heart of Confucius*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Chai, Ch'u, and Winberg Chai, *Confucianism*. Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1973.

DeBary, W.T. *The Trouble with Confucianism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Nivison, David S., and Arthur Wright, *Confucianism in Action*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959.

Wares, James R. *The Sayings of Confucius*. New York: Mentor Books, n.d. [The Analects]

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How do you feel about the Confucian idea that society should be based on the family?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Confucian concept of governance?
3. Who is right about human nature, Mencius or Xunzi?
4. How do you see Confucianism and Theosophy relating?
5. Is there any future for Confucianism?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XII

TAOISM

MAN OF MYSTERY, BOOK OF WONDER

Many legends are told about Laozi (Lao-tzu), an older contemporary of Confucius. It is said that he was an archivist at the court of the Zhou dynasty, a popular fellow who kept a good table. But he eventually became weary of the grasping and hypocrisy of the world and at the age of eighty left his job, mounted a water buffalo, and wandered off to the west. At the western frontier of the empire, the gatekeeper is reported to have detained him as a guest, refusing to let him pass until he had put down his wisdom. So Laozi wrote down the short book called the *Daodejing (Tao te ching)*, then departed in the direction of Tibet, never to be seen again in China. Some say he even made it all the way to India, where he became the Buddha! There is also the assertion that he was conceived by a falling star and spent sixty years in his mother's womb, being already an old man when he was born. What matters, though, is that to him is ascribed the *Daodejing*, that wonderful epitome of Taoist wisdom to which one can return over and over again to find fresh insight.

Most of his story is undoubtedly fable, and indeed whether "Laozi" was ever a single individual may be open to question. Laozi itself is not a real name, but just means "the old man" or "the old teacher." Many scholars believe that the *Daodejing* itself is really a collection of sayings from various sources, attributed to the "old man" in about the same way Americans attribute folklore and bits of wisdom to figures from Uncle Remus to Yogi Berra. (Perhaps Laozi could have commented with Yogi Berra, "I really didn't say everything I said.")

The book is also mysterious. Although a treatise about the Tao, it starts off with the curious statement that nothing can be said about its subject matter.

> Existence [the Tao] is beyond the power of words to define:
> Terms may be used.
> But are none of them absolute.
> In the beginning of heaven and earth there were no words.
> Words came out of the womb of matter.[5]

No word adequately conveys what the Tao is. As we have seen in the introductory paper on Chinese religion, it can be rendered the Way, Existence, Nature, the Great Track, Evolution, even God—all terms which hint at something of its essence, but need to be supplemented by the others, plus a lot of experience, to say it all. The Tao is all that is, together with the realization—and experience—that this "all" is not just lying there, but is continually in process, changing and evolving, like an ever-flowing and ever-widening river, never the same from one moment to the next.

Words can get in the way of the fullness of this realization. Even the greatest words, like God or Tao, may point to the infinite object but also come out of the finite

[5] From Witter Bynner, trans., *The Way of Life: According to Lao Tzu.* New York: John Day Co., 1944. Citations in this paper from this source.

experience of the one using them. It helps to realize that the vast universe, including the sun and planets and the old earth itself, were there long before any names, at least in our human language, were there to label them, and managed very well to be what they are without such labels. Words, the text says, "came out of the womb of matter"—or, more literally, "being named, [the Tao] is the mother of the ten thousand things." [6] In other words, because we live in the world of matter and multiplicity, we create words to distinguish one of the ten thousand things from another, but they were not named—or seen so separate one from another—in the beginning.

The first chapter of the book goes on to say that the core and surface of life, the inner and the outer,

> Are essentially the same,
> Words making them seem different
> Only to express appearance.
> If name be needed, wonder names them both:
> From wonder into wonder
> Existence [the Tao] opens.

The way to know the Tao, in other words, is not to argue about words or philosophy, much less to claim that something deep within us is more "real" than the world of infinite nature we see around us (for they both express the Tao in different ways), but to recover the sense of wonder we may have had as a child, and just truly to see the awesomeness of existence itself.

Nonetheless, we must live in this world of separateness and finiteness, so we had better learn how to do so gracefully and with a minimum of mistakes. For one thing, we need to learn to avoid making too many comparisons, and to receive everything that comes our way as an experience to be savored, not something to be held onto with an iron grip—above all honors and status that from time to time pass through our lives:

> People through finding something beautiful
> Think something else unbeautiful.
> Through finding one man fit
> Judge another unfit…
> Take everything that happens as it comes,
> As something to animate, not to appropriate…
> If you never assume importance
> You never lose it.

There is a side to the *Daodejing* that is anti-Confucian, or at least pokes fun at the sometimes heavy-handed moralizing of the Confucianists. With rich satire, we are told that

> When people lost sight of the way to live
> Came codes of love and honesty.

[6] See Jonathan Star, *Tao te Ching: The Definitive Edition*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2001, p. 100.

Learning came, charity came,
Hypocrisy took charge;
When differences weakened family ties
Came benevolent fathers and dutiful sons;
And when lands were disrupted and misgoverned
Came ministers commended as loyal.

What for the Confucianists was the very soul of true civilization, for the Taoists was decay and hypocrisy. To them, true virtue, like that of nature or a child with eyes full of wonder, could never be forced by bookish ethics. The Taoists thought that by getting rid of formalized learning and imposed duty, people would be a hundredfold happier and would do the right thing naturally and spontaneously—that they only resist because they are told to do it.

The *Daodejing* also provides instructions for rulers. But the Taoist leader, needless to say, is not like other leaders. Taking seriously such maxims as "If you never assume importance, you never lose it" (v. 2) and "Without being forced, with strain or constraint, good government comes of itself" (v. 3), he will walk the walk more than he talks the talk: "When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they [his people] will all say, 'We did this ourselves'" (v. 17).

His state might become like the village described near the end of the book. There few mechanical inventions tempt people to eschew hard labor, even reading and writing have been discarded as superfluous and records are kept on knotted cords, and food is plain but hearty and clothes simple and unostentatious. "Yet even though the people of this community can hear the dogs of the next village bark, none wish to leave their humble paradise for they know theirs is the good life, close to the earth and to the Tao" (v. 80).

THE TAOISTS

The first and greatest Taoist writer after Laozi was Zhuangzi, or Chuang-tzu (died c. 300 B.C.E.). Little is known of him apart from his book. Zhuangzi wrote in a vivid, fanciful, and sometimes humorous style, using many devices to bring the reader into a world of expanding horizons. First he tells of strange marvels, like in the world of Sinbad, such as an immense fish thousands of miles long that changes into a bird just as large and flies to a celestial lake in the south. He then compares this fantasy with the tiny motes in the air that make the sky blue, and with a mustard seed to which a teacup is an ocean. As the reader's imagination is wheeled violently from the unimaginably large to the microscopically small, from a fairy tale world to the homey, one gets a sense of mental vertigo. The mind is spinning, and things are coming unfastened.

This is what Zhuangzi wanted one to feel, for his mission was to shake the reader loose from ordinary ways of seeing things—above all, from one's own prejudices, partial views, presuppositions, and from viewing everything in terms of oneself. To this Taoist, man is *not* the measure of all things. The way the universe happens to appear to a biped six feet tall is no more the way it is than the way it appears to a fish, a mote, an eagle, or a star. Only the Tao itself is the measure, and it is infinite.

Nor is one particular state of consciousness more "real" than any other. Zhuangzi said he once dreamed he was a butterfly, and when he awoke he was not sure

whether he was Zhuangzi who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly who was now dreaming he was Zhuangzi.

Unlike the sober Confucianists, Zhuangzi and other Taoists delighted in the worlds of fantasy: of fabulous birds and fish, or wizards who could fly over the clouds, and islands of immortals. In their reaction against ordinary conventions of thought and behavior, and their affirmation of the power of wonder and imagination to expand one's consciousness, they soon found it easy to affirm the most extraordinary ideas: the possibility of deathlessness, the reality of supernatural forces and secrets.

A later Taoist thinker, Ge Hong (283-343 C.E.), put it plainly enough. One of his writings consists of a fictional debate between a Taoist and a Confucianist on the possibility of immortality. The rationalistic Confucianist argues that every living thing anyone has ever heard of dies, and therefore belief in immortality is untenable nonsense. But the Taoist responds there are exceptions to every rule, and we know so little of the vast universe we can hardly say that the life cycles of the things we know tell us all there is to know about life. In effect, the Confucianist says, "You can't prove immortality," and the Taoist, "You can't prove there isn't immortality." For the Confucianist, the instinctive response is the safe, rational, common-sense answer, and for the Taoist, the romantic, speculative approach open to nonrational, even sensational possibilities. This opening shows the way Taoism went: it became the philosophy and religion of poets, artists, alchemists, magicians, popular cults—and immortals.

RELIGIOUS TAOISM

The Taoist religion of China presents a rich and colorful face. Perhaps no religion in the world has had a vaster pantheon of gods—many said to have once been human beings who became immortal and finally reached divine status. The supreme deity was the Jade Emperor, a personal high god. Around him was his court: the Three Pure Ones—Laozi, the Yellow Emperor (mythical first sovereign of China), and Bangu (the primal man); the Eight Immortals, very popular in art and folk tales; and gods of literature, medicine, war, weather, and other attributes. The gods and immortals lived in numerous heavenly grottos, in Islands of the Blessed to the east, and the Shangri-La of the Mother Goddess in the west, deep in the mountains.

The priests of this faith were a varied lot, affiliated with several different sectarian strands and possessing different specialties. Some were celibate and monastic; others married. Some were contemplative, concerned above all else with harmonizing themselves with nature or perfecting in themselves the seeds of immortality; there were Taoist hermits rumored to be hundreds of years old. Some were custodians of lavish temples with huge and ornate images of the Jade Emperor and other deities; to these temples believers would come to receive divination, have memorial services performed on behalf of their departed, and worship at important festivals, which were also occasions of community carnival and feasting.

Behind all this lay the affirmation of immortality and of immortal entities, a very important theme of religious Taoism. For, believing that the Tao is immortal, this faith held that if one could harmonize oneself perfectly with the Tao, one could share in its immortality. That meant, first of all, completely balancing within oneself the yang and yin energies, the male and female forces that make up the Tao and which in the Great Tao of the universe are totally harmonized. To achieve the ultimate goal of

harmony and deathlessness, religious Taoism offered three main avenues: alchemy, yoga, and merit.

Alchemy referred to the preparation of elixirs supposed, in combination with spiritual preparation, to circumvent death through manipulation of yin and yang and the five traditional Chinese elements: earth, wood, water, fire, and metal. The central motif of Taoist yoga was holding the breath to circulate it throughout the body inwardly, awakening the gods of various physical centers, and finally uniting it with the semen to produce an immortal "spiritual embryo," which emerged as new life within the self. The old mortal shell then fell away like the chrysalis of a butterfly. Diet based on yang and yin considerations, and sometimes sexual practices of the Tantric sort to balance yang and yin through exchange of bodily fluids, were important supports of this process.

The masses, who had less access than elite adepts to alchemy or yoga, might strive toward immortality through accumulation of merit by the performance of good deeds—merit which could be wiped out in the eyes of the stern judges of the underworld by even one misdeed. Some popular temples had a large abacus or calculating machine in full view to remind the faithful of the reckoning to come.

The image of immortality was as picturesque and concrete as the means toward it. Immortals, often portrayed as wise, white-bearded sages, as wizened ascetics, or even as portly, clowning wise-fools, might live in out-of-the-way corners of this earth as well as in heaven. Taoism consistently hovered between the deep natural wisdom of Laozi and the delightful fairy-tale atmosphere of its innumerable legends; perhaps the two sides are not as far apart as one might think, for the tradition well recognized that the fullness of human life and wisdom requires a touch of fantasy and color as well as rigorous thinking.

Today, Taoism flourishes on Taiwan, and reportedly there are also some active temples and monasteries on mainland China, despite repression of religion earlier in the communist era. Taoism is a culture as well as a religion, and is also expressed both in China and abroad in painting, poetry, various occult arts, and in countless folktales, some of which are now popular movies. Taoism has a vogue in the west as well, manifested in brisk sales of the *Daodejing*, the popularity of the martial arts and the Taoist yin-yang symbol, and even the common use of the word Tao and Taoist, as in books like *The Tao of Pooh* and *A Taoist on Wall Street*. Whatever the future of the religion, the Taoist mystique will doubtless live on.

TAOISM AND THEOSOPHY

Taoism and Theosophy have resonated with each other in several ways. Theosophical thinkers have long appreciated parallels between the cosmology of the *Daodejing* ("First the one, then the two, then the three, then the ten thousand things") and that of *The Secret Doctrine* and other esoteric sources. A translation of Laozi's and an essay on Zhuangzi by the Theosophist Walter R. Old was published by the Indian Section of the Theosophical Society as early as 1894.

More broadly, Theosophists may appreciate parallels between the Taoist immortals and the masters or adepts of Theosophy, regular human beings who by dint of great dedication and spiritual effort attained higher initiations, who may live in this world as quiet but powerful helpers, or have chosen to ascend to the inner (heavenly) planes, but in any case are pioneers of human evolution.

Theosophists today also have come to appreciate the ecological and lifestyle admonitions of the Taoist tradition. As we have learned the importance of simple living in harmony with nature, and of respecting the ebb and flow of natural cycles, we have realized the Laozi and his spiritual kindred had a similar vision over two thousand years ago. But it is a lesson to which we can continually have recourse; the *Daodejing* has been translated into English more often than any other book except the Bible.

References for Supplementary Reading

Blofeld, John, *The Secret and Sublime: Taoist Mysteries and Magic*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973.

Cleary, Thomas, *Immortal Sisters: Secrets of Taoist Women*. Boston: Shambhala, 1989.

Feng, Gia-Fu and Jane English. *Lao Tsu: Tao Te Ching*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan, 1960

Goullart, Peter, *The Monastery of Jade Mountain*. London: John Murray, 1961.

Merton, Thomas, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. New York: New Directions, 1969.

Welch, Holmes, *Taoism: The Parting of the Way*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How do you feel about the legendary elements in Taoism, starting with the legend of Laozi himself?
2. Are comparisons always bad? Why or why not?
3. In what way do you think immortality should be a goal of spiritual practice?
4. How do you see Taoism and Theosophy relating?
5. What would an ideal Taoist society be like? Would you want to live in it?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XIII

SHINTO AND JAPANESE RELIGION

THE SPIRITUAL WORLD OF JAPAN

The first non-Western religion that I encountered was Shinto, and the country was Japan. I saw Japanese Buddhist temples on the same visit, of course, but it was Shinto shrines I saw first and which for some reason buried themselves most deeply in my consciousness.

I could not forget the *torii*, the simple gate with its round pillars and two crossbeams that led into the sacred precincts of a shrine, separating the noisy bustle of the streets from the quiet, ancient sanctuary with its rustic architecture. The torii was like a mystic portal between one age and another, even between one dimension and another. In the midst of a modern industrial city, the plain but graceful sanctuaries of the *kami*, the Shinto gods, are set amidst sacred groves of gnarled old trees. These austerely beautiful homes of the kami compliment modernity with a suggestion of the past, the natural, and a greater than human power.

Shrines to Inari, a deity of prosperity, are often seen atop department stores, and the complex of the Toyota corporation headquarters has found room for a shrine to the god and goddess of metal. Such shrines always have a torii and living greenery in their sacred spaces. In the country, where shrines grace mountaintops, clear rushing streams, or inlets of the sea, they lend an aura of the divine to already beautiful vistas.

The fortunate observer may have opportunity to be at a shrine festival or *matsuri*, when a dramatic change in the atmosphere takes place. Instead of a quiet deity in a leafy refuge, the kami now becomes a dynamic presence, calling exuberant festivity into being. First, offerings of rice wine (*sake*), vegetables, and seafood are slowly brought forward by white-robed priests and presented on an eight-legged altar, together with green boughs of the sacred *sakaki* tree presented by leading laypeople. Then, suddenly, this mood of stylized dignity breaks. Sacred dance in vivid costume is performed, and the kami-presence is carried through the street in a palanquin (*mikoshi*) by running, sweating young men, who shout "*Washo! Washo!*" as they zigzag down the streets or roads of the kami's parish. On the shrine grounds, a carnival may be held, with everything from cotton candy to sumo wrestling.

Shinto has a distinctive personality of its own, yet it also reflects characteristics of Japanese religion in general. One is the idea of deep harmony between gods, buddhas, nature, and men and women. Shinto shrines never seem to intrude on nature, but enhance it with a graceful suggestion of the divine. Likewise, Zen gardens and the mountaintop settings of some great temples of other traditions support the idea that the respective orders of the natural, the human, and the divine ought not to be at odds with each other, but in profound and creative interaction.

There is a widespread attitude in Japanese religion in general—similar to the attitude in Chinese religion—that the different spiritual traditions are not in competition with each other or mutually exclusive, but should be seen as complementary. There is a sense that different religions relate to different areas of

life, and also a belief, perhaps influenced by Mahayana Buddhist concepts of truth, that ultimate reality is beyond words and concepts—that all human language and practice is like the proverbial finger pointing at the moon: fingers can point toward it from different directions.

Thus most traditional Japanese are affiliated with both a Shinto shrine and a Buddhist temple. The popular notion is that Shinto has to do with the good, joyous things of this life and Buddhism with the ultimate mysteries of enlightenment and of life after death. Shinto matsuri are times of pageantry, clowning, dancing, joviality, and common enterprise that bring families and communities together, and which in spirit can perhaps best be compared to Mardi Gras or carnival in Latin countries. Buddhist temples, on the other hand, while they may have their quieter festivals, are places for meditation, retreat, and memorial services for departed loved ones. Characteristically, weddings are held in Shinto shrines, and newborn children presented in them to the kami, while funerals are held in Buddhist temples.

Finally, Confucianism is a part of the Japanese mix. While there are virtually no Confucian temples in Japan as there are in China, Confucian philosophy and moral values have had, and still have, a very important place in the Japanese way of life. Imported long ago from China, and congruent with even earlier Japanese themes, Confucian ideals of family life, loyalty to one's patrons and group, and mutual obligation on a deep level shape the relationships of children and parents, employees and corporations, and citizens and the state today. One way or another, the moral teachings of Shinto, Buddhism, the new religions, and even Christianity in Japan give voice to much that is basically Confucian.

SHINTO

Let us now look in more detail at Shinto. The "to" at the end of the word is simply the Japanese version of the Chinese Tao, and "shin" means gods. Shinto thus means "the way [or Tao] of the gods," that is, a spiritual path based on the worship of the ancient kami or gods of Japan, deities known to the Japanese people even before the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century by the western calendar.

Once the official religion of Japan, since World War II Shinto is no longer under state control and has been shed of ultranationalistic overtones. It has reverted to its base as the cultus of local deities who watch over the comings and goings, the births and deaths, of particular communities and families. At a shrine of any importance, the visitor will not wait long before seeing an individual or family pass through the torii, wash hands and mouth in a basin, approach the shrine, clap twice, bow, murmur a prayer, and leave a small offering in a grill.

Virtually every Shinto shrine prides itself on its unique traditional festivals. It is always important that rituals be enacted in the same way year after year, generation after generation. This may be the case even if the original reason has been forgotten. For many Shintoists, the important point about Shinto is the way it conveys continuity with the past in an often rapidly changing world, a sense of connection with roots and tradition. Thus it is pre-eminently a religion of tradition, of community identity, and of the experience of colorful ritual and festival rather than of doctrine. In these respects it has been compared to Judaism.

Another important feature is Shinto's polytheism—its affirmation of many gods. These range from Amaterasu, the great sun goddess who is said to be ancestress of

the imperial line and protector of Japan and is worshipped at the national shrine of Ise, down to minor spirits of rocks and groves. Most were originally the patronal deities of ancient clans, and their main shrines—often situated in numinous natural settings—were located near its original seat. A few gods, however, have also come to be associated with particular crafts or concerns, and a few others are deified historical individuals. The most famous shrine in Tokyo, the Meiji Shrine, is dedicated to the Emperor Meiji, who presided over Japan's remarkable modernization and died only in 1912.

What does polytheism mean? Shinto is the only thorough-going polytheistic religion centered in a highly-developed modern nation, which contemporary Japan certainly is. The theologian Paul Tillich once commented that the difference between monotheism and polytheism is not merely a matter of quantity, of one god versus more than one, but also of quality—it is a different way of experiencing the sacred. The monotheist sees the entire universe centered around a single divine will or state of being, whereas the polytheist experiences, in William James' term, a pluralistic universe, in which the sacred is present but with different nuances in different places and occasions: a god of this sacred waterfall and a goddess of that sacred grove, a god for love and a god for war.

A Shinto priest of my acquaintance—whose family, incidentally, has been priests of a certain shrine for some forty generations—liked to argue that Shinto is really more modern and democratic than any other religion, because it views the universe not as a divine dictatorship, but as a consensual republic. Ancient myths tell us that in times of crisis, the kami—like a Japanese family or the management of a present-day corporation—gather for an extended conference, talking over the issue until a consensus emerges with which everyone is reasonably well satisfied. So it is that Shinto has a unique place in the modern religious world.

BUDDHISM IN JAPAN

According to tradition, Buddhism first came to Japan early in the sixth century C.E. from China via Korea. Buddhism had entered China itself in full force only some three centuries earlier, and was still a young and dynamic movement in that part of the world. A Korean king, it is said, eager to secure an alliance with the Japanese emperor, sent him a Buddhist image and scriptures.

At the time, Japan was a collection of clans, among whom the chieftain later to be known as emperor had only a sort of figurehead significance. With some agriculture and a tribal social structure, but without a written language, Japan in the sixth century was perhaps at about the level of much of the Americas at the time of Columbus. Buddhism, and the Confucian texts that arrived soon after it, represented a heretofore unknown level of "progress" in the island's history: a universal religion able to unite a country divided among tribes, each worshipping its own kami. The new faith was supported by sixth-century modernizers, and spread rapidly as the country acquired literacy using Chinese characters, and based a court and capital on the Chinese model.

The first permanent capital was Nara, 710-784, which boasted temples of Buddhist sects imported from China. Next came the Heian period, 794-1185, based in the city then known as Heian and now as Kyoto, the nation's great cultural center. It was dominated by two Buddhist denominations, Shingon and Tendai. The former is a complex school in the Vajrayana or Tibetan-type tradition, with elaborate mandalas

and rituals. Tendai is based on the Lotus Sutra, but soon also acquired considerable philosophical subtlety and ritual complexity. Both were headquartered in vast mountaintop monasteries that exercised political as well as spiritual power.

The Kamakura period, 1185-1333, produced changes in Japanese Buddhism that have been compared to the Protestant Reformation in Europe. After a series of civil wars, political power shifted from the imperial court in Kyoto to the rising *samurai* or warrior class headed by a shogun, in effect a military dictator, centered in Kamakura to the north. The new class was less interested in complicated priestly doctrines and rites than in a simple faith that could serve a soldier on the field of battle as well as a monk in a monastery, and several new movements arose in Buddhism to answer that need. If an age can be understood as well by the questions it asks as by the answers it gives, one could say that Heian Japan, like the medieval Catholic Europe of Thomas Aquinas and similar thinkers, was asking, "How can all human knowledge and experience be brought into one comprehensive system centered in religion?" But the new age, like Martin Luther, was content to set that aside and just ask, out of desperation, "How can I know that I am saved?"

The answers, like Luther's, were forms of salvation by sheer faith, or more precisely divine grace received through faith. Under teachers like Honen (1133-1212) and Shinran (1173-1262), Jodo (Pure Land) Buddhism swept Japan in great revivals, teaching that all that was really necessary was faith in the vow of Amida Buddha to bring all who called upon his name into the Western Paradise or Pure Land. The fiery prophet Nichiren (1222-1282) taught faith instead in the Lotus Sutra—not merely faith in its teachings, though he considered them the supreme expression of Buddhist truth, but also in chanting the *Daimoku*: the words *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo*, "Hail the Marvelous Teaching of the Lotus Sutra," which embody its power. Zen, which appealed especially to the samurai class because of its discipline and austerity, also was introduced in this period through Eisai (1141-1215) and Dogen (Dogen 1200-1253). While not strictly faith-based in the sense of Pure Land and Nichiren, Zen's inculcation of quiet sitting and inward realization also represented a Reformation-type simplification of the ancient faith.

Since the Kamakura period, these five strands—Shingon, Tendai, Pure Land, Nichiren, and Zen—though subdivided into further schools, have dominated Japanese Buddhism. As we shall see, Nichiren had a tremendous new growth in the twentieth century, though Shingon may be showing fresh life in the twenty-first.

THE NEW RELIGIONS OF JAPAN

One of the most fascinating of all contemporary religious phenomena is the so-called "new religions" of Japan. Although most of them have earlier roots, they grew and flourished tremendously in the years of disillusionment with traditional life after World War II, including conventional Shinto and Buddhism. The older faiths were believed by many to have compromised themselves too much with the militaristic clique that led the nation to disaster.

Some of the new religions have been rooted broadly in the Shinto tradition, often based on revelations through their founders, frequently women in the tradition of ancient shamanesses. But generally such revelations have pointed in the direction of monotheism rather than Shinto polytheism. One example is Tenrikyo ("Religion of Heavenly Wisdom"), founded in 1838 by Miki Nakayama (1798-1887), who taught that "God the Parent" is seeking to call humanity back to himself through retelling

the forgotten story of creation. The main temple of the faith, in Tenri city near Nara, centers around a pillar said to mark the place where creation began and where a new paradisal age will be inaugurated in the future. Rituals include beautiful sacred dances acting out the creation story as revealed through the foundress.

Other new religions have a Buddhist heritage. The most successful of all is Soka Gakkai, technically a lay organization of Nichiren Shoshu, a medieval form of Buddhism based on the Lotus Sutra. It emphasizes chanting the Daimoku. The chant brings not only spiritual benefits, but also material, for the faith teaches that spirit and matter, and this world and the next, are ultimately inseparable, and cause in one can produce results in the other.

Both in Japan and where it has spread throughout the world, Soka Gakkai or Nichiren Shoshu has broken with traditional styles of Buddhism to reshape the ancient faith in modern form. Here are no rows of ethereal monks meditating, but modern young people in ordinary dress enjoying popular music, and chanting for good grades or a good job. Soka Gakkai has been criticized in Japan for its alleged use of high-pressure conversion tactics and its political muscle, but despite an acrimonious split in 1993 between the lay Soka Gakkai organization and the priest-led Nichiren Shoshu "church," it remains the largest single religious denomination in Japan.

In recent years some still newer religions have emerged in Japan, some with clear links to the "New Age" movement in the West. Among them are Mahikari, a healing faith, and Agonshu, a movement of Buddhist background emphasizing ancestrism and the enactment of spectacular *goma* or fire rituals. A more ominous example was Aum Shinri Kyo, which in 1995 apparently attempted to provoke the apocalypse by releasing a poisonous gas in a Tokyo subway, injuring more than 5,000 people.

SHINTO, JAPANESE RELIGION, AND THEOSOPHY

Theosophy can be said to have both polytheistic and monotheistic, or monistic, aspects. On one hand it strongly emphasizes "oneness," the unity of all reality under single "laws" and a common nature. On the other, it points to the tremendous diversity of the forms under which oneness appears. Innumerable devas, buddhas, bodhisattvas, angels, saints, and immortals in many cultures express it for different times and places. Shinto, it seems to me, can be thought of as manifesting particularly well the "devas" or spirits of places and nature in the form of its kami.

At its best, religion in the Land of the Rising Sun expresses well the theosophical ideal of unity in diversity. The characteristic Japanese attitude toward religious truth, that there can be many paths to an ultimate realization beyond words and forms, is akin to the theosophical idea that the different religions have been founded by Masters of the Wisdom for different times and places—and perhaps also for different kinds of personality.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Ellwood, Robert S., and Richard Pilgrim, *Japanese Religion: A Cultural Perspective.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1985.

Kitagawa, Joseph M. *Religion in Japanese History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966.

Pickens, Stuart, *Essentials of Shinto.* Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1994.

Reader, Ian, *Religion in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991.

Ross, Floyd H. *Shinto: The Way of Japan*. New York: Greenwood, 1983.

Saunders, E. Dale, *Buddhism in Japan*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. With what idea or religious practice in the West would you most compare Shinto?
2. Why do you believe Shinto came to have symbolic importance for the Japanese nationalists in the period before and during World War II?
3. How would you interpret the difference between a medieval-type and reformation-type religion, whether in Europe or Japan?
4. How do Shinto and Buddhism coexist in Japan?
5. What are important features of the "New Religion" of Japan?
6. As a Theosophist, how do you look at Japanese religion?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XIV

WESTERN MONOTHEISM

MONOTHEISTIC MEANING

In the last paper we compared polytheism, belief in many gods as represented by Shinto, with monotheism or belief in one God. We noted that the difference is, as Paul Tillich said, not simply a matter of quantity but also of quality. It is not just that the polytheist has two or more gods whereas the monotheist has only one, but that the whole way in which the sacred is experienced is different. For the polytheist it is varied and nuanced. The deva or nymph of this sacred grove may have a different personality from the one who abides in that sacred waterfall, and of course the deities of love and war, of farm and forge, vary greatly in character.

But in monotheism one divine personality, one center of consciousness and meaning, governs the universe. At least according to monotheists, whatever is lost in nuance is more than made up for in a sense that the cosmos has coherence, purpose, and overall is moving in one direction. One can count on the same rules, moral and otherwise, applying at all times and places. Furthermore, wherever one is, one can worship the same God, who is universal, not bound to particular mountains or temples.

So it was that Abraham, the father of western monotheism, erected an altar to Yahweh, the God who had called him away from his home, wherever he and his flocks went in their journeying across the desert. Indeed, it has been noted that monotheism tended to emerge first among pastoral herdsmen, whether the ancient Hebrew shepherds or the ancient Iranian cattle-herders. That is understandable since such nomads must feel their God is not tied to a particular place, but reigns from above in the vast desert sky wherever they wander.

To be sure, most polytheisms have a divine hierarchy, with a Zeus or Wotan as "king of the gods" at the top. Generally one also finds some underlying principle, known especially to the wise, binding it all together: the ma'at of the ancient Egyptians, the Tao of the Chinese, the way in which the gods of Hinduism, who on the surface seem like polytheism gone wild, are said by sages to be all merely manifestations of Brahman, the One Reality. While the idea of a pluralistic, many-centered universe has had its intellectual supporters both past and present, the philosophical argument remains that for things to exist in the same universe at all, they must share some common substance and presumably some ultimate common origin.

Nonetheless, a distinctive monotheistic religious style is to be found in traditions in which there is not merely a "passive" universal divine substance, but which has a single God in charge with a vibrant, distinctive personality. Such a deity can be seen in Vaisnava and Saiva Hinduism, for as we have seen most Hindus are in effect monotheists of Vishnu or Shiva, or of one of their "family" like Krishna or Kali. Vedantic theologians will say these divine figures are merely *Saguna Brahman*, or manifestations of Brahman with personal attributes. But for their worshippers, most likely practitioners of bhakti or devotional love toward the "chosen ideal," it is their personality and capacity for active love that makes them appealing.

They would no doubt agree with the great Vaisnava theologian Ramanuja, who argued, in words very similar to those of many traditional Christian apologists, that personal consciousness is more important than mere abstract substance. God may be unimaginably greater than human personality, but he certainly is not less than our own personhood, and since personality is the highest form of consciousness we know, we must think of God in personal terms, though on an infinite scale. Moreover, Ramanuja said in countering Shankara, the premier philosopher of Advaita or non-dualist Vedanta, that the relationship of love between two centers of consciousness is greater than mere identity. Therefore we should think of love between God and humanity as a finer thing than holding that humans and God are one and the same. The love of parent and child, or of two lovers for each other, describes a more mysterious, complex, conscious, and demanding relationship than simply saying they have the same essence. With this kind of thinking, one is getting into the world of personal monotheism in religion.

THE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM

However, that is Hindu monotheism, as similar as it may appear to modern western monotheism. The latter, which includes Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and in a real sense Zoroastrianism, has had a quite different origin and history. The first three of these faiths are often called Abrahamic, for they began with God's call to Abraham, first of the patriarchs of ancient Israel, and Zoroastrianism (to be considered in the next paper) began with a prophet— Zoroaster or Zarathustra—as well. They can all be considered one religious family.

Needless to say, rarely has there been more interreligious hatred than within this family, but family they are nonetheless, and perhaps our own sad experience has taught us that hatreds can often be more bitter within a family, whose members know each other too well and who have had to live with each other, than between those who are more distant neighbors or acquaintances. Now this family with all its squabbles embraces half the human race, with two billion of the planet's six billion souls at least nominally Christian and one billion Muslim. Judaism, though the parent of the clan, is much smaller numerically, as is the uncle, Zoroastrianism, who however passed on to the sons much of their inheritance.

FAMILY RESEMBLANCES

What do we mean by family resemblances? We know that one can often tell members of the same family. Many will have the same style of hair, the same eyes, the same cut of ears, nose, or chin. Not all will necessarily have all the same features, but Harry and Joe may sport the same shock of black hair, while Pete does not have that hair but has the same eyes as Joe, and so on. So it is with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three have a few features in common; two or three share other features, but all have something that identifies them as family.

They begin with the story in the book of Genesis, chapter 12, telling how, some four thousand years ago, a man named Abraham was called to leave his city, Ur of the Chaldees (in the Valley of the Two Rivers, then Sumeria, now Iraq), and go into a new land God would give him. This meant taking his extended family and his flocks and herds, for this patriarch was said to be wealthy by the standards of his time and place. He was to go on a venture of faith into the desert, setting up altars wherever he went to worship the God, Yahweh, who had called him. There, deep in the desert,

God made a covenant with Abraham, saying his descendents would be as numerous as the stars of the sky, out of them kings would come, and in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. But God would above all bless the descendents of Abraham, while they in turn would agree to follow his particular rules.

What can we conclude about this kind of religion? First, at least in the exoteric reading of Genesis (esoteric readings, like that of the Kabbalists, may add other dimensions of understanding), God is like a glorified human being. He speaks, admonishing and making promises, to Abraham as one man to another, and they seal a covenant, as it were establishing a contract between one party and another. Indeed, we read in Genesis 18:26-33 that Abraham was able to debate with God concerning the destruction of Sodom, talking him down from saying he would not destroy the city if there were fifty righteous in it, to conceding he would spare it for the sake of only ten. (Alas, not even that many were found.) I have known Jews to remark, with a characteristic combination of pride and humor, that Judaism is the only religion in which one can argue with God. One can reflect on what this says about both God and human dignity.

EXEMPLARY AND EMISSARY PROPHETS

At the same time, it must be noted that Abraham is not presented as a perfect person, much less as a saint, sage, ascetic, or mystic. He was not a man who left ordinary life to meditate and find enlightenment like the Buddha, or a divine avatar like Krishna, or even a wise teacher like Confucius. Nor was he a priest or any sort of clergyman. Abraham was instead a respectable man of affairs, married with family, who for some inexplicable reason was chosen by God out of no doubt many other possibilities to start something in history that was to reverberate down forty centuries to date, and still counting. He may have been "righteous," though he was not above domestic problems, or arguing over flocks and wells with his neighbors. But righteousness cannot always be asserted for the next "patriarchs," his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is less interested in the loftier spiritual attainments of a person than whether that person is in the right time and place to advance the divine plan. God can use unpromising material; indeed, with true omnipotence he may reach out to one who is not only flawed in character, but very marginal to the political, social, gender, and religious establishments of the time. (Theosophists may think of the Masters' choice in the nineteenth century of H. P. Blavatsky for a particular important task, despite her manifest defects; one Master wrote of her in *The Mahatma Letters* [#2 chronological ed.], "imperfect as may be our visible agent—and often most unsatisfactory and imperfect she is—yet she is the best available at present.")

This paradox can be understood partly by thinking of two kinds of representatives of the divine. Max Weber, the sociologist of religion, wrote about exemplary and emissary prophets. The exemplary prophet, like the Buddha or the Hindu "god-realized" person, in some profound way interiorizes and radiates out of himself or herself the divine of which he/she is the spokesperson. Ideally, everything about this exceptional individual is part of the message: the exemplary presence, the way of walking, the way of meditating as much as the words said. The emissary prophet, on the other hand, is well aware of the distinction between himself and God; he sees himself as an ambassador or envoy from one party to another, just bearing a message. This role is more typical of the great figures of western monotheism.

While the emissary may be regarded by the tradition as being of outstanding character, as are Abraham and Muhammad, this is not strictly necessary; the important point is that the message be delivered accurately. Many of the great saints of western religion have certainly been exemplary figures in Weber's sense, infused with radiant inner holiness. But the founders themselves, from Abraham and Moses to Muhammad, have been known as much as "a man sent from God" as a man filled with God.

(Jesus, in orthodox Christian understanding, was both kinds of prophet at once. But Islam clearly distinguished between Muhammad as emissary or *rasul* of God and the saint or *wali* who is known for *baraka* or infused divine power. Thus Muslim saints are performers of miracles, while it is explicitly said that the Prophet Muhammad worked no miracle except the miracle of the Holy Qu'ran, which it was his job to deliver from God to humanity. He seems to have been chosen for this task as inexplicably as Abraham for his—someone had to do it.)

GOD WHO ACTS

Even more basically, these faiths say that God is a God who acts. He acts with divine initiative in human lives and in human history. Starting with Adam and Eve and going on to Abraham, Moses, and many others, the Bible tells a story that forces us to confront the spiritual meaning of living in time and history. Even though some of the biblical narrative may be legendary, it overall sends the message, important to western monotheism, that God is at work in the time and space of the human world—and through the terrible pain and flawed characters of which that world is all too much composed. The story puts hope not only outside of this world in some otherworldly realm, but ahead of us in historical time, and tells us we will only fulfill hope by working for the divine plan through the wars and messy politics of real human experience.

On this level, the esoteric perspective reminds us that there is a secret thread running through human history, the thread leading like Ariadne's to a divine purpose at the end of time brighter than we can now scarcely imagine. This thread runs deep through the heart of the world's work, even when matters seem most discouraging and grim, and in the end makes all the suffering worthwhile for those who can cause their own pilgrimage to run parallel with that purpose and remain true to it.

LINEAR TIME

Congruent to this forward-looking hope is the notion of linear time, also basic to western religion. Time is seen in two ways by religions and philosophies, as linear and as cyclical. In Hinduism, Buddhism, and some Western philosophies like Platonism, the universe is everlasting, moving though great cycles of creation and destruction and creation again. There is no ultimately meaningful goal to time and history as a whole. Time is like a wheel, all points on the turning rim equidistant from the center. The only real goal to human life is individual liberation from the despair of going round and round indefinitely on the wheel of time, and this can be done, for one can as it were jump from anywhere on the wheel down one of the spokes to the still point at the center.

But for Western monotheism, the image is a straight line rather than a wheel or circle. Its world begins with creation and ends with final judgment. History is not an irrelevant illusion, but crucial for getting from start to finish. The acts of God in

history—the creation, the giving of the Law to Moses, for the Christian the incarnation of God in Christ and for the Muslim the giving of the Holy Qu'ran through the Prophet—are events that definitively color spiritual life. Retrospectively, it makes a tremendous difference whether one lived before or after Exodus or Jesus. One's spiritual world would not have been at all the same otherwise. As the familiar Christmas hymn says of the little town of Bethlehem at an hour crucial to that historical unfolding: "The hopes and fears of all the years/are met in thee tonight."

THE AFTERLIFE

This leads to a final common characteristic of western monotheism, a magnificent vision of the end of linear historical time in a final judgment of the world, and the creation of a new heaven and earth, or eternal paradisal world. Again, there is a goal to history toward which one may look, however discouraging the surrounding scene. At the End, chapter 21 of the Book of Revelation tells us:

> I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them . . . He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new! . . . I am the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son."

THEOSOPHY AND WESTERN MONOTHEISM

The remarkable way in which Theosophy offers a synthesis of East and West should be apparent to the thoughtful student. While Theosophy emphasizes the transpersonal nature of ultimate divine reality, the "Unknown Root," it is often said that the Solar Logos of our system is a personal manifestation of that Reality like the "Saguna Brahman" of Hinduism, and has all the attributes of a personal God. The Theosophical notion of evolutionary cycles combines, as do other modern expressions of Hinduism and Buddhism, key features of both cyclical and linear time. Finally, Theosophy accepts the roles of the patriarchs, prophets, and religious founders who illumine the history of western monotheism—but enlarges the concept to say they appear as the founders and teachers of many religions in diverse times and places. The western as well as eastern religious background of Theosophy must not be forgotten, for both heritages are parts of the spiritual context of human life today and bearers in veiled form of the Ancient Wisdom.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Abduh, Muhammad. *The Theology of Unity*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1966 (Islamic view).
Goodman, Lenn E. *Monotheism*. Totowa, NJ: Allenheld, Osmun, 1981.
Heschel, Abraham. *Man Is Not Alone*. New York: Farrar, 1951 (Jewish view).
Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. New York: Harper, 1960.
Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy*. London: Oxford University Press, 1923. Many reprints.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How do you feel about the issue of whether God is personal or impersonal?
2. What would it mean to be able to argue with God?
3. How would you define the distinction between exempolary and emissary prophets? Can you give examples of both?
4. Is time cyclical or linear or both?
5. Western monotheism has undoubtedly had tremendous historical, political, and ethical consequences—both positive and negative. Can you give examples and discuss them?
6. Is Theosophy monotheist?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XV

THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES AND ZOROASTRIANISM

A UNIQUE SCRIPTURE

The Hebrew scriptures, called the Old Testament by Christians, are like no other sacred book or collection of books in the world. To begin with, they are far more varied in content and genres of writing than the Vedas, the Buddhist sutras, or the Qu'ran. They contain history, law, ritual, poetry, philosophy, and the special genre of "prophetic" books. Even more remarkably, one does not find a single consistent message in them. These writings contain main themes, but also what have been called "minority reports" concerning God's dealings with humanity, or even questioning whether there is a God like the God of other parts of the Bible.

If the mainstream of biblical books teaches God's righteousness, wrath, love, and judgment, Job in his anguish is prepared to ask whether God is really righteous at all. If the Psalms present powerful poetry of faith and doubt, the Song of Songs is erotic love poetry in which God is never mentioned. Nor, contrary to what many may expect from a sacred source, is life after death taught much in the Hebrew scriptures. All the profound issues they raise of hope and despair, love and death, right and wrong must generally be worked out in this world and in this life, or in future generations on earth.

THE HISTORY OF A PEOPLE AND THEIR GOD

Let us begin by looking at the main historical narrative of the Hebrew scriptures, basically contained in Genesis through Nehemiah, excluding the Law parts. It is the story of the creation of the world, Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, the call of Abraham mentioned in the last paper, the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, and Joseph and the descent into Egypt. Later in this narrative comes the call of Moses at the Burning Bush, the Exodus with its miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, and the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews. Judges and kings ruled that "Promised Land," and many dramatic events transpired: the battles of Israel, its "captivity" under the Babylonians, their unexpected and joyous return from Babylon to their homeland, the rebuilding of the temple in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Theirs was, in other words, a relation to God defined by linear time, developing in the context of human history.

The main theme of these historical narratives is the varying and oft-troubled relation of Yahweh or God to the people of Israel. According to the Abraham story, this God made a special covenant, establishing a special relationship, with the first patriarch and through him with his descendants. They were to worship him exclusively and keep his commandments, and in turn he would give them their own land and fight with them against their enemies. (But, as the Jewish children of Abraham have learned well over the centuries, this special relationship is not necessarily only one of favoritism; it also means unparalleled demands and persecutions. It was an agreement not easy to keep on either side.) The relationship with God can be seen as a graph, the points rising and falling as the people are more or less faithful to God.

The Babylonian captivity represented one such swing from a low point to a high point. When, in 538 B.C.E., Cyrus of Persia took Babylon, allowed the exiles to return and the temple to be rebuilt, it seemed a marvel beyond hope or belief, a victory of God when all was darkest. It is sung about in Isaiah 58:8:

> Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
> and your healing shall spring up speedily;
> your righteousness shall go before you,
> and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Or in a psalm, like Psalm 126:

> When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
> we were like those who dream.
> Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
> and our tongue with shouts of joy.

THE PROPHETS

As a kind of backdrop to this dramatic history, almost like a Greek chorus, rise the words and songs of the prophets, persons who labored throughout to proclaim the word of God regarding what was going on in their times. This lineage begins with prophets very active in the historical books, such as Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha. Then come the separate "books" of the four major "writing prophets," Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and of the twelve "minor prophets," including the well-known books of Hosea, Amos, Jonah, and Micah.

Prophets are today conventionally thought of as persons who foretell the future, and to be sure some words of the prophets have been taken by Christians to predict the coming of Christ, and even events in our own time some 2,000 years after Christ. But the word "prophet" really means "forth-teller" rather than "foreteller," and the great concern of those ancient seers was, in the jargon of the 1960s, to "tell it like it is": to point to evil fearlessly in the courts of kings and in the population at large, whether their words were welcome or as was understandably often the case, were not.

For they frequently declared that God was displeased even when his tribes seemed successful. His chosen people mixed pleasant pagan practices with the worship of the God who had brought them out of Egypt, or forgot the side of the Law calling for justice and mercy. In prosperity they might, as Amos said, be too much "at ease in Zion" and sell the poor for a pair of shoes. For as God also declared through the prophet Isaiah in chapter one, alluding to the rituals and sacrifices of the temple cults,

> I have no desire for the blood of bulls,
> of sheep and of he-goats. . .
>
> Rather what pleases the Lord of heaven and earth is that we humans
> Cease to do evil and learn to do right,
> pursue justice and champion the oppressed;
> give the orphan his rights, plead the widow's cause.

In the course of such prophecy, the "forth-tellers" often referred to coming events, linking them to the "graph"—that is, saying that disaster would follow as divine punishment if evils were allowed to go unchecked. But these were often events that, like the invasion by Babylon, did not necessarily take supernatural power to anticipate, and the focus of the prophet was always on the present. Like many another commentator, he might say, "If this evil practice continues, then I can assure you such-and-such will be the result—so you must stop the evil practice *now*."

Yet the prophets were no mere political pundits. They were persons of deep faith who believed God had called them and was speaking through them. Thus they could also look far ahead, to the consummation of all things in linear time, to the "Day of the Lord," in order to put the problems and prospects of the present dramatically against the most awesome possible backdrop. Chapter 11 of Isaiah, in a passage favored by many Theosophists and vegetarians, inspires us in our struggles today by setting the violence around us against a time when

> The wolf shall live with the sheep
> and the shepherd lie down with the kid;
> the calf and the young lion shall grow up together,
> and a little child shall lead them. . .
> They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain;
> for as the waters fill the sea,
> so shall the land be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.

In the words of God in Isaiah 65:

> For behold, I create
> new heavens and a new earth.
> Former things shall no more be remembered
> nor shall they be called to mind.
> Rejoice and be filled with delight,
> you boundless realms which I create. . .

ZOROASTRIAN INTERLUDE

A word should be said here about the ancient Zoroastrian religion, because its influence on western monotheism can be felt in words like these. Some scholars have pointed out that passages in the Hebrew scriptures involving such themes as cosmic war between God and Satan, the consummation of linear time in divine judgment, the defeat of Satan, and the resurrection of the dead in a new heaven and earth are only in the later parts of the Old Testament, or even do not appear in Judaism until the three centuries or so between the Old and the New Testaments.

To be sure, these themes are important in the New Testament, and to Christianity and Islam. (They may be considered gifts of the Magi, the "wise men" who visited the infant Jesus, for that word refers to Zoroastrian priests.) But the themes begin their biblical appearance only during and after the Babylonian exile. This was a time when Zoroastrianism, which had long held concepts like these, could have influenced the biblical tradition; remember that the exiled Jews had contact with the religion of the ancient Persians, and were rescued by Cyrus, the great Zoroastrian emperor.

The Persians were cousins of the Aryans who entered India (the word Iran is a variant of Aryan) and like them were cattle herders. Among them, some time before 600 B.C.E., arose the prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster in Greek), who like Isaiah was repelled by animal sacrifices and the rest of the traditional cults. Instead he saw, in a great vision on a mountaintop, that one God, Ahura Mazda or "Lord of Light," reigns over the universe. Ahura is in cosmic battle against Ahriman, the Lie, the evil force. Humans must choose, out of free will, which side they are going to be on. This is not a ritual matter but a moral choice: are we going to serve Truth and Good or the Lie? Whenever we choose the good, we strengthen Ahura Mazda and weaken Ahriman. Moreover, after death those who chose good will be rewarded in heaven, those who chose the Lie suffer punishment in hell.

In the end, on the Last Day, Ahura Mazda will defeat evil. He will purify the entire world and reign over it. All persons will be raised in a general resurrection; the souls of the wicked, having been purified along with the earth, will be brought out of hell with their sentences terminated. All together will enter a new age in a new world free from all evil, ever young and rejoicing. Just before the Last Day, it was said, Zoroaster would return in the form of a prophet, conceived of a virgin by his own seed stored in a mountain lake.

To what extent parallels between motifs in Zoroastrianism and later Judaism, Christianity, and Islam represent borrowings, and to what extent independent religious realizations, the reader must decide.

WISDOM LITERATURE

The remaining category of works in the Hebrew scriptures is the so-called wisdom books, treatises neither historical nor prophetic but poetic and philosophical. They include the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Job contains the story, told in magnificent poetry, of a man who believed he had suffered unjustly at the hands of God. The Psalms, poems originally used in temple worship, express with great vividness and depth the vicissitudes of the spiritual life and the human condition, from exaltation to desire for vengeance to despair, focusing always in the end on God; they have been staples of Jewish and Christian worship over many centuries.

Proverbs is a collection of sayings about life. Many seem little more than moralistic but some passages, especially those in chapters one and eight in which Wisdom is personified as a woman of cosmic importance standing beside the Creator, are rich in philosophical meaning. Ecclesiastes is an essay on life attributed to King Solomon. It is the "minority report" in the Bible *par excellence*, speaking of all as emptiness and folly, and mentioning God only perfunctorily. Of itself it could lead to extreme pessimism—unless of course "emptiness" is understood in a Buddhist way!

The Song of Songs is another "minority report," though one with a different feel to it, for it is essentially a love poem full of sensual overtones. It suggests the view that the this-worldly life is sufficient if lived passionately enough, for "love is strong as death. . . fiercer than any flame" (8:6). Whatever one thinks of these books, it seems wonderful that they are included in the scriptures, for they allow the Bible to reflect the whole range of human experience.

UNDERSTANDING THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

How can we understand these diverse, sometimes disconcerting and sometimes splendid scriptural writings? A number of possibilities have been voiced in the past, and are still being expressed.

First, take the texts as historical documents. Exactly how historical remains a matter of sometimes fervent debate. Fundamentalists view them all as literal truth. Fairly conservative scholars may discount the literal truth of Genesis and even Exodus and the conquest of Canaan as presented, though they are likely to believe some historical reality lies behind those accounts, and to say the subsequent narratives in Judges, Samuel, and Kings are basically reliable. More radical scholars today claim there is no evidence that even the stories of David and Solomon are more than pious fiction, and rely on the historicity of little before the return from the exile.

But if one focuses on the scriptures as history, however one reads it, what does this say about God and humanity? In particular, how does one understand the terrible texts therein, such as when Yahweh seems to order his people to commit genocide against their enemies?

One way, favored by literalists, is to take them as what Martin Luther called the "strange work of God," by which God does things beyond human comprehension, or to show that he is at first a God of wrath and power, even though at the end his love will wipe away all tears.

Another more moderate way is to see the history as the story of a "God who acts," in which the all-too-human story of ancient Israel is a means through which God is working out his plan for the salvation of the human race through human history. This is a God who, because he is truly involved in human life as it is, acts *in* and *through* this process (messy though it is), not just in some metaphysical realm.

Still another way, favored by theological liberals, is to say that the story is not really about God, who stays always the same, but about growing human understanding of God—from the tribal protector of a particular people to the universal God of the great prophetic visions.

Second, beside the historical emphasis, is what might be called the illustrative or metaphorical use of the scripture. Forgetting the difficult historical problems, one looks most at how one can apply the meaning of these luminous passages to one's own time. For example, African-Americans leaving slavery via the underground railway often found inspiration in the account of the escape of the Israelites from Egypt.

Third, there is a symbolic meaning to these texts. Many Jewish Kabbalists, often mentioned in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky, found what they regarded as the deepest meaning of the text in the symbolic and even numerological values of its Hebrew words and letters. They were followed by Christian writers of similar disposition, such as Emanuel Swedenborg and later Mary Baker Eddy of Christian Science and Charles Fillmore in his *Metaphysical Bible Dictionary*. Often this kind of reading produces values quite difference from the surface meaning of a passage. For example, Fillmore tell us that Moses represents growing divine wisdom, while the Red Sea is the fixed human thinking that must be crossed or transcended as wisdom grows.

A fourth way to understand the Hebrew scriptures is through mystical interpretation. Both Jewish and Christian mystical writers have dealt extensively with ways the biblical narrative parallels the deep inward experiences of the mystical path. For example, for them slavery in Egypt is slavery to the material world, the Burning Bush the beginning of the path, the crossing of the Red Sea the dark night of the soul, Mt Sinai and entry into the Promised Land the vision of the God and attainment of the unitive state.

THEOSOPHY AND THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

In its breadth and depth, the Theosophical worldview offers still more possibilities for understanding the Hebrew scriptures. First of all, the idea of a divine plan running like a golden thread through the ancient history of Israel suggests the Theosophical idea of a universal divine plan for the evolution of the earth. Second, the Theosophical idea of many planes and universes may hint that some parts of this history, while not literally historical or physical on this globe, may reflect events we cannot fully comprehend otherwise on the astral plane, or even in parallel worlds.

On the other hand, some Theosophical writers on scripture like C.W. Leadbeater and Geoffrey Hodson have developed their own version of allegorical or metaphorical reading. For example, Hodson, in his classic *The Hidden Wisdom in the Holy Bible*, tells us that the crossing of the Red Sea represents the evolution of consciousness through and out of the realm of matter under the guidance of an adept (Moses).

In the end, the Hebrew scriptures (more mysterious every time one looks at them) are simply there—open to an almost endless spectrum of reactions, feelings, and ways of understanding. Perhaps that is what they are intended to provoke.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

The New Oxford Annotated Bible. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Boyce, Mary. *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.

Bright, John. *A History of Israel*. Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1981.

Flanders, Henry Jackson, Robert W. Capps, and David A. Smith. *People of the Covenant: An Introduction to the Old Testament*. 3rd ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Heschel, Abraham. *The Prophets*. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.

Hodson, Geoffrey. *The Hidden Wisdom in the Holy Bible*. 4 vols. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1967. Also in a two-volume abridged edition.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How do you feel about the variety of material in the Hebrew scriptures, including the "minority reports"?
2. How important is the question of historicity in the scriptures to you?
3. What would you is the main message of the historical books?
4. What would you say is the main message of the Prophets?
5. What would you say is the main message of the Wisdom books?
6. How would you look at the Hebrew scriptures as a Theosophist?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XVI

JUDAISM

JEWISH UNIQUENESS

Every religion is unique in its own way. But none perhaps is as distinctive or has as remarkable a history as that of the Jews. Judaism seems always to be the exception to every rule of history, just as Jewish thought or even the mere presence of the Jewish community has so often pointed up the limitations of whatever "universal" truth and practice someone else has tried to lay out. Toward the ancient empires and polytheisms, toward Eastern mysticism and Christian salvationism, toward modern nationalism, dictatorship, communism, mass culture, and atheism, Judaism—or at least some segment of Judaism—has said, "Yes, but. . ."

It has not opposed all these things. Judaism has had mystical systems like Kabbala that compare with those of India; it has also had its share of skeptics; and it has sometimes been, as it is today, expressed in nationhood. But it has been wary of making an "ism" out of them and then saying that mysticism, skepticism, or nationalism is the end of meaning and truth. Jews have a tendency, fired by centuries of living as a minority different from the majority culture of whatever nation they happen to inhabit and honed by centuries of hard study of their law, to say, "Yes, but perhaps there's another side. If the majority worldview leaves us out, it's not the complete and final truth."

These questions have not always been put verbally. The mere presence of the Jewish community as an all-too-visible exception to a nation's spiritual and cultural homogeneity has stated them more eloquently than words. Needless to say, such questions, whether verbal or implicit, are not always welcome by those who prefer to leave the waters of mystical or cultural unity unruffled. Jewish "differentness" and the awkward questions it raises for others have given Jews much suffering. But they have persisted in making the questions felt and have thereby pressed humankind as a whole not to settle for partial truths.

JEWS AMID ANCIENT EMPIRES

In the last paper, we discussed the early history of the Jews. After the return from the Babylonian Exile, the land of Israel remained a province of the Persian empire, often locally ruled by favored Jews like Nehemiah. In 331 B.C.E., Alexander the Great conquered Persia, and with it the homeland of the Jews. After his early death, Alexander's empire was divided among his leading generals, Syria and later Palestine going to the house of Seleucus. In 168 B.C.E. the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV, seeking to impose Greek civilization on all his people, desecrated the Temple and prohibited the practice of Judaism.

This led to a rebellion celebrated in Jewish lore. The Maccabee brothers mounted a successful campaign to drive out the Oppressor. Then, in 165 B.C.E., they relit the lamps of the Temple, a joyous event commemorated in the festival of Hanukah (a Jewish holiday occurring at around the same time as the Christian Christmas). For over a century thereafter, from 167 to 63 B.C.E., Judea existed as a tiny and

precariously independent state under the Hasmonean house, descendents of the Maccabees who increasingly combined kingly and high priestly functions. Then, in 63 B.C.E., the region was annexed by the Roman Empire, which ruled sometimes directly by governors like the notorious Pontius Pilate, sometimes indirectly through subordinate kings like the no less infamous Herod the Great and his successors.

During those difficult years, Jewish religious tradition was consolidated by distinguished rabbis such as Hillel, Gamaliel, and the school known as the Pharisees, who composed precedent-setting commentaries on the Law. Eventually such writings, together with folklore and much else, made up the great multi-volumed text known as the Talmud. It is a source to which all learned Jews turn for illumination of the tradition's thought on virtually any issue.

Jewish Orthodoxy does not mean the kind of direct, unmediated adherence to the Bible claimed by Christian fundamentalists. Rather, it acknowledges both scripture's divine inspiration and its legitimate interpretation and application by a recognized succession of rabbis, beginning with the Talmud and continuing down to today. Like a court of law, their judgments are bound to honor precedent, whether in the Talmud or by later jurisprudents.

The Temple was still in operation, but because of the Exile and the increasing dispersion of Jews throughout the ancient world, in practice the religion became more and more a matter of worshipping the Law in personal life and in local assemblies called synagogues, combined with occasional pilgrimages to Jerusalem and the Temple—the picture of Judaism presented in the New Testament. Then, in 70 C.E. (A.D.), the Temple was destroyed by Roman troops in the brutal suppression of a Jewish rebellion, and most Jews in Palestine were slaughtered or exiled to many different lands.

The Temple was never rebuilt. Ever since, Judaism has been centered in the synagogue and the Law. The "Fence of the Torah" set Jews apart and gave their scattered communities cohesion. One who followed the Law seriously could only with great difficulty live apart from the community, marry outside it, or even eat with non-Jews. Thus Judaism survived as the faith of a distinctive people. In the Middle Ages, they were often persecuted throughout Europe, yet in many communities, especially in the burgeoning cities, Jews thrived. As they did so, they developed patterns of Jewish life that have lasted into the present and new forms of Jewish spirituality arose.

THE KABBALA AND HASIDISM

One form of Jewish mysticism, called the Kabbala, had its supreme expression in the Zohar, or Book of Splendor, probably composed within a developing tradition by Moses de Leon about 1275. Based on finding deeper, allegorical meanings in the words and letters of the Hebrew Torah that point to metaphysical realities, it held that God in himself is infinite and incomprehensible, but his attributes provide windows of insight into the divine majesty as it relates to humanity. In Kabbala, certain basic attributes of God drawn from the scriptures are arranged into patterns of male-female polarities and put on different levels in the hierarchy of spiritual things—the "kabalistic tree." Meditation on their dynamic interaction provides a subtle and often profound spiritual path.

Kabbalism had many areas of influence, from magic to messianic movements. The most important is the popular form of Jewish mysticism called Hasidism. This is a pietistic movement that started in Eastern Europe during the eighteenth century through the teaching of Ba'al Shem Tov (1700–1760). Hasidism was a feeling-oriented reaction against over-emphasis on learning, legalism, and stifling social conditions; it teaches Jews to follow the Law but also to make it an expression of fervent love for God. The colorful stories through which its venerated teachers explained the meaning of love for God and the symbolism of ritual law are deeply dyed with kabbalistic lore. They emphasize pious love and innate wisdom in persons of simple devotion. Music, dance, and even uncontrolled ecstatic behavior are frequently part of Hasidic worship. Small but vigorous groups of Hasidic background, such as the Lubavitcher movement, which has done much to encourage a return to Orthodox practice, are still active in Israel and America.

Another strand of modern Judaism, the liberal and rationalistic, has roots both in certain ancient schools and in the thought of the medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), whose commentaries on the Talmud and law codifications made use of Greek philosophy and present a smooth, logical face to the faith. It was not until the Enlightenment in the eighteenth-century, however, that this lineage exercised its full influence on Jewish life. Particularly in Germany, Jewish leaders and thinkers such as Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) emphasized acculturation to non-Jewish European life and the critique and defense of Judaism through philosophy. In the end—although this was not Mendelssohn's intention—many Jews in Western Europe (as did countless Christians of the same period) became more or less secularized more interested in the mainstream of European culture than the Law and the synagogue.

MODERN JEWISH LIFE

Modern Jewish life, then, is a mix of several forces. It has been touched by traditional Orthodoxy, Hasidism, and Enlightenment liberalism. This complex heritage is reflected in divisions within the religion. American Judaism is divided into four main groupings. Orthodox synagogues teach the full following of the Law, or Torah, and are quite traditional in Talmudic scholarship, theology, and forms of observance. Reform Judaism, which calls its places of worship temples rather than synagogues, has roots in the German Enlightenment. It is liberal in attitude, oriented more to the prophets than the Law, and believes the essence of Judaism does not involve following the Law strictly, but is more a matter of ethics and community life. Conservative Judaism, regarding the Law seriously as a guide to life but believing its provisions can and should be adjusted to modern living, takes a middle ground. Reconstructionist Judaism, rooted in humanism and the most radical version, holds that Judaism should be ever-evolving to meet the challenges of the contemporary age.

These distinctions indicate that no one set of doctrinal beliefs defines Judaism as a whole. No dogma is as significant to most Jews as adherence to the Jewish community, a relationship many feel is better expressed through practice—participation in Sabbath worship, festivals, and traditional customs—and through a living sense of being part of the Jews' long history than in creedal affirmations.

Many religious Jews, however, would probably agree on at least three points: That there is a God or divine force who is creator of the universe and its underlying

reality; that this God reveals himself *within* time and history; and that in this revelation, the Bible, above all the Law given to Moses and the insights of the prophets, has a special place.

Modern Jewish theologians have developed these themes in interesting ways. Martin Buber (1878–1965) spoke of the importance of an "I-Thou" relationship to God and others, based on the biblical relationship of individuals to a personal God. Buber made the I-Thou concept a keystone of all authentic interpersonal relationships, in which the "other" is not simply an "it" to be used like an impersonal object, but a "Thou" full of inwardness and subjectivity like that of the "I." Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), a Jewish thinker of mystical bent, saw Jewish practice as sanctifying the whole of nature and life, in particular the sanctification of time through Judaism's view of God's revelation in history, the succession of holy days throughout the year, and the consummation of linear time in the coming of a Messiah or messianic age. Judaism as a religion does not center itself in doctrine or metaphysical realities, but in time: tradition out of the past and hope for the future.

JEWISH OBSERVANCES

The cornerstone of Jewish practice is the Sabbath. This period of 24 hours from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday commemorates the Lord's day of rest after the work of creation, and it is intended for the rest and refreshment of both flesh and spirit. On the Sabbath no work is done, and there is nourishment and celebration for body, mind, and soul, at the Sabbath meal and at synagogue or temple. Far from being an onerous burden or a time of negative prohibition, the classical Jewish literature sees the Sabbath as a bountiful gift to God's people, as a lovely bride to be welcomed eagerly.

Traditional Sabbath observance begins with concluding one's ordinary business, bathing, and putting on fresh garments reserved for that festive day on Friday afternoon. After sundown, the previously prepared Sabbath meal is eaten, with traditional dishes and blessings.

Worship takes place the next day. Aspects of worship vary from one tradition to another. Considerable Hebrew will be heard in Orthodox liturgy, and swaying and dancing observed in Hasidic Centers. But the most important object in any Jewish place of worship is the Torah, the scroll of the Law, found in a large ornamented box called the Ark and located at the front of the hall. A lamp continually burns before it. Opening the door and Curtains in front of the Torah, and finally removing it from its case for reverent reading, are major actions in the drama of the service.

Besides the regular Sabbath worship, several festivals mark the Jewish year. Although not really as important as the weekly celebration of the Sabbath (only the Sabbath is mentioned in the Ten Commandments), many Jews today observe chiefly the "High Holy Days" in the autumn, which mark the beginning of the Jewish year, and Passover in the spring. The High Holy Days consist of Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the "Day of Atonement," when according to tradition God reckons up the sins of every person for the previous year and sets their fate accordingly for the coming year. While for many this is only a metaphor, it is a time of solemn reflection on the state and meaning of one's life.

Passover or *Pesah* recalls God's sparing, or "passing over," the firstborn of the Israelites and the hurried meal the people ate before leaving their enslavement in

Egypt for the great events of the Exodus. It is therefore an occasion for the celebration of freedom. Other holidays include Sukkot, a colorful harvest festival; Purim, a carnival-like commemoration of how the Jews were saved by Queen Esther (told in the biblical book bearing her name); and Hanukah, already mentioned.

Jewish boys undergo certain rites of passage: circumcision, performed as a religious act when they are eight days old, and Bar Mitzvah, around puberty, when the boy first reads publicly from the Hebrew scriptures and begins entry into manhood. It is often an occasion of gala celebration. In many American temples and synagogues a parallel festival for girls, Bat or Bas Mitzvah, has been introduced.

Jewish dietary laws have played an immense role throughout the centuries in keeping the faith alive and its people together. No restrictions govern food from plants; the law deals only with killing and eating sentient life. The basic rules are that animals eaten must have a split hoof and chew the cud; this includes cattle and sheep but excludes swine, reptiles, horses, carnivores, and most other species. Of sea creatures, only those with fins and scales may be taken; of aerial creatures, birds of prey and insects are forbidden. Furthermore, meat must be slaughtered and prepared in special ways to be kosher, or edible, by those keeping the rules. The rules also forbid the eating of meat and dairy products together, and expect that separate pots and plates will be used for each.

Today, the observance of the dietary rules varies immensely. Some follow them minutely, some give them only token honor such as refusal to eat pork, some feel they are irrelevant to the modern world and observe them not at all. An increasing number of contemporary Jews have become vegetarians, partly because thatb practice automatically makes all one's meals kosher.

Judaism has the highest regard for marriage and the family; ideally, Jewish life revolves around the home even more than the synagogue. Centered in family and community, it is a tradition highly conscious of living in the context of a long history and of having a special mission in the world.

JUDAISM AND THEOSOPHY

Theosophy has sometimes been accused of being associated with anti-Semitism, or anti-Judaism, but this seems grossly unjust. In fact, H. P. Blavatsky paid Judaism the tribute of considering the Kabbala, its great mystical system, to be a supreme vehicle of the Ancient Wisdom, a recognition accorded no Christian philosophy except Gnosticism. H. S. Olcott, in his *Old Diary Leaves*, mentions a learned Jew who had studied the Kabbala for thirty years. After discussing its lore with Blavatsky, he said that in all this time his researches "had not discovered the true meanings that she read into certain texts, and that illumined them with a holy light." (*First Series* 477) Moreover, in *Isis Unveiled* Blavatsky praises the Jews' unity, despite differences of opinion, and notes "how faithfully and nobly they have stood by their ancestral faith under the most diabolical persecutions." (Vol. 2, 526) If she sometimes attributes Judaism to even more ancient sources than the scriptures, and criticizes superficial readings of that faith, she does no more than many Jewish and other scholars and Kabbalists past and present. Judaism remains a significant conveyor of the ancient wisdom, and a mediator between East and West.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Bamberger, Bernard J. *The Story of Judaism*. New York: Schocken Books, 1970.

Blavatsky, H. P. *Isis Unveiled*. 2 vols. Edited by Boris de Zirkoff. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1972.

Kaufman, William E. *Contemporary Jewish Philosophies*. New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1976.

Neusner, Jacob. *The Way of Torah: An Introduction to Judaism*. Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1974.

Olcott, H. S. *Old Diary Leaves, First Series: America 1874-78*. Adyar, Madras, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1941.

Scholem, Gershom G. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Schocken, 1961.

Weiner, Herbert. 9 1/2 *Mystics: The Kabbala Today*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969.

Wouk, Herman. *This Is My God*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How do you understand the special role Jews have had in history?
2. Do you believe that God acts in history, and reveals himself through it?
3. What is the role of Kabbala in Theosophy?
4. What is the meaning of time in Judaism? Compare the role of the weekly Sabbath, the holy days, the revelations in and through history, and the future hope.
5. How do you understand the relation of Judaism to Theosophy?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XVII

JESUS AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

DREAMS AND DESPAIR

It was around 30 C.E. that Jesus, the central figure in Christianity, first came into public view. He appeared in distant provinces of the sprawling Roman Empire, though his homeland was one of the Roman Empire's most troublesome jurisdictions. The people of Judea and neighboring Galilee had proud memories of when they had meant something in the world, under kings like David and Solomon. But now they restlessly endured subjugation under harsh governors like Pontius Pilate or puppet kings like Herod, and dreamed of liberation.

The dreams took differing forms. Some, called Zealots, urged and often practiced direct armed resistance against the occupying Legions. Some urged spiritual renewal among the Jewish people. A revival preacher called John the Baptizer declared that God was about to judge the world and punish the wicked. He offered a symbolic washing away of sin through immersion in water to those who repented. Another voice, that of the party called the Pharisees, advocated strict following of the Law as the path to religious purity. Either way, the hope was that God, pleased with his people's new but sincere piety, would hear their cries for freedom. Still others, particularly some among the Jewish elite associated with the temple in Jerusalem, believed that discrete collaboration with Rome was in the best interests of the defeated nation.

Hovering in the background of all this spiritual and political agitation was the growing power of religious apocalyptic ideas. Apocalyptic teaching, or apocalypticism, from the Greek for "disclosure" or "revelation," offers secret knowledge of dramatic events to come as a result of direct divine intervention. Examples can be found in the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation. Characteristically, these colorful narratives predict a time of unprecedented troubles, followed by sudden, decisive action by God to defeat evil and establish righteousness. Needless to say, apocalypticism is likely to be especially rife in periods of great anxiety, and among subjugated peoples who can hope for no rescue except by supernatural means.

So it was that, under the heavy hand of Roman tyranny, whispers swirled around the homes, marketplaces, and synagogues of the Jews that God, in his own all-powerful way, would soon drive out the oppressor and reestablish the Jewish kingdom, God's kingdom. This would be done, they said, through the agency of a Messiah who would easily disperse the foe. (Messiah means "anointed one"; anointing with oil was the ritual used when making someone king in ancient Israel. Christ, *Christos*, is a literal Greek translation of the word.) Some said that nature also would respond to the messianic victory, and crops would grow a hundredfold more abundant than before. Some even claimed that the coming apocalyptic events would lead on to the End of Days foreseen by ancient prophets, when God would judge the world and create a new heaven and earth. It was often speculated, or declared, that the hoped-for Messiah would be a descendent of David, as would befit he who was to

restore David's house, and that this sublime hero would undergo various excruciating trials and magnificent triumphs suggested in the ancient texts.

THE MESSIAH AND THE KINGDOM

Among those who received baptism from John around 30 C.E. was the young man from Nazareth whom we call Jesus (a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name Joshua). Not much is definitely known about his background. The stories later told of his descent from David, miraculous conception, birth in Bethlehem, and childhood are difficult to corroborate historically and are generally accepted or not on the basis of one's religious outlook; for Christians, they embody important religious truths about Jesus.

Shortly after Jesus' baptism by John, John was arrested and later executed. This arrest did not give Jesus the leadership of John's movement directly, but apparently did inspire him to gather disciples and start a ministry of his own, which was in some ways parallel to John's, but came to develop distinctive characteristics.

Like John, Jesus began by proclaiming in his preaching that the Kingdom of God was at hand. The "Kingdom" meant the paradisal rule of God that would follow the apocalyptic distress and judgment. The Kingdom as a concept was intimately tied up with the work of the Messiah, who would inaugurate it. Jesus also taught that people should repent of their former ways and, in preparation for the Kingdom, live now as though in the Kingdom. The principles for this way of life are assembled in the Sermon on the Mount in chapters five, six, and seven of Matthew's Gospel. The essence is to practice forbearing love and nonresistance of evil, because God will shortly be dealing with it in judgment, and to be perfect even as the God who is to rule is perfect. By comparison, John's moral message was one merely of repentance and following justice.

Unlike John, Jesus did not baptize, although his followers did. His work of healing was the major sign in his ministry of the power of the coming Kingdom, just as baptism had been John's major sign. His miracles of healing the sick, the insane, the blind, and the paralyzed, and his other miracles such as feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two small fish, are presented as signs of the Kingdom's arrival. Healing was often understood as the exorcism of evil spirits from the disturbed. Jesus said, "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). He also reportedly performed nature miracles, like walking on water.

The nature miracles and healings bring to light another special feature of Jesus' ministry: his aura of authority and his mingling with both sexes and with all classes of society. Jesus taught everywhere, not only in synagogues but also by the lakeshore and in open fields. Instead of using close argument or extensive scriptural analysis, he used stories, parables, and simple but acute aphorisms to make his points or, better, to catch up the hearer in his vision of the Kingdom's nearness—so near its power is already breaking through and is within reach of those who see its rising light.

The Kingdom was for everyone—although in a special sense for the poor who had so little—and Jesus brought its message to everyone. He numbered among his associates fishermen, prostitutes, revolutionary zealots, despised tax collectors, and (though he also harshly upbraided them) members of the strict religious party, the

Pharisees, thereby brilliantly combining in one movement all the diverse and quarrelsome factions of occupied Palestine. He did not advocate extreme asceticism but rather was known as the teacher who came eating and drinking, and his illustrations show a sympathetic awareness of the ways and problems of ordinary life with its sorrows, joys, and innocent festivities.

After only a year or two of this life, however, the young wandering preacher and charismatic wonder-worker of the Kingdom left Galilee, his homeland, and went down to Jerusalem shortly before the Passover, when Jews traditionally made pilgrimage to the holy city. He clearly intended this journey, which God had laid upon him, to be a climactic appeal to Israel to accept the incoming Kingdom and to reject perversions of religion. To this end he made certain dramatic gestures: He entered the pilgrim-thronged holy city in a sort of procession (which has come to be commemorated as Palm Sunday), and he caused a disturbance by overturning the tables of the currency exchangers and the chairs of the sellers of birds and animals for sacrifice in the temple courtyard. He and his disciples then withdrew for a few days to live in suburban Bethany and to teach in the temple precincts.

But in the edgy political situation, these gestures combined with news of Jesus' popular appeal in Galilee understandably came to the concerned attention of Roman and Jewish authorities alike. They perceived revolutionary political overtones in the young prophet's activities and appeal. How far this perception was justified is much disputed by historians, but there is no doubt there were those among both supporters and opponents of Jesus who expected him to be at least the figurehead in an uprising against Rome, and perhaps against the collaborating Jewish elite as well. This was a situation neither the Romans nor the Jewish leadership wanted. Before the end of the week the decision had been taken and carried out to dispose of him.

Jesus was arrested with the help of Judas, a disgruntled radical among his disciples, and hastily but decisively tried by the various authorities concerned, ultimately before the Pontius Pilate, the harsh Roman governor who throughout his tenure had shown no pity to protesters against Roman rule. (Indeed, Rome finally recalled him for excessive cruelty.) On Friday in Passover week, Jesus was executed by crucifixion—nailed to a structure made of two crossed beams set upright—the slow and agonizing death that Rome awarded to troublemakers of low class. But, of course, the story did not end there.

THE EARLY JESUS MOVEMENT

The tragic death of one so young, beloved, and appealing to many inevitably worked deeply into the minds of those who had been committed to his movement and caught up in his vision of the Kingdom. They tried to find ways to understand the man and the event in categories familiar to them. Some, mindful of the tradition of a coming Messiah, conjoined that image with the poignant passages in Isaiah about the "suffering servant"—the hero who saves his people not by military victory but by undergoing extreme torture, baring his back to the smiters, his cheek to those who plucked out the hairs.

Some thought of the words "Son of Man" in connection with the enigmatic and unforgettable man from and "Son of God," which were used for Hellenistic kings and deities alike, or even of philosophical concepts like Logos ("Word" or "Principle") or Sophia ("Wisdom"), describing the creative power of God at work in the world. As to

exactly how he thought of himself and his mission, who can say? Almost all we know of him, including the words he is reported to have spoken, comes to us through the hands of those who saw him in light of categories and concepts such as those just mentioned. Beyond all the words, however, there is mystery—the mystery of one whose charm and sternness, magic and endurance of torture, empathy and remoteness, combined to make him both unknowable and unforgettable. He had the combination of mystery and clarification of all great religious images and symbols.

Soon enough he had become a supreme symbol of the ineffable mysteries of life, death, and God, all of which he somehow seemed to bring into focus. His form and the instrument of his suffering were reproduced in gold, silver, and gems around the world.Nazareth. He had often applied these words to himself, words that his hearers would have recognized, in apocalyptic expectation, as referring to the mysterious judge who was to descend on clouds on the last day. It was frequently ambiguous whether Jesus meant the title to refer to himself or to another who was still to come, or if he meant both at the same time. Others, closer to the Greek religious tradition, thought of the titles “Lord”

This kind of thinking took hold in the community of Jesus’ disciples and followers. Christianity, which has never been a purely individual religion, was communal even before the crucifixion. The disciples, leaving job and family, had formed a new social group around Jesus, and it was in the context of this group, especially formed in expectation of the Kingdom, that the teachings about the Kingdom and the wonders that foreshadowed it were imparted. The disciples were always at hand for Jesus’ preaching and miracles, and it was they who were told the inner meaning of parables and signs.

On the Friday Jesus died on the cross, this community was dispirited and scattered; Peter went back to his fishing. But on the first day of the next week, word of a new event brought the community together again. It was reported by Mary Magdalene, a woman close to Jesus and the disciples, and then by Peter himself, that the tomb was empty and Jesus was walking in the garden where he had been interred. More such accounts quickly spread: He had joined two disciples walking to Emmaus, and when they broke bread together he was known to them; the disciples were in a room with the doors shut, and he appeared in their midst; they were in a boat, and he appeared on the shore and cooked breakfast for them. He seemed the same and yet different in these postdeath appearances, as though partly in a different dimension. He ate. “Doubting Thomas” was able to touch Jesus’ wounds to assure himself that Jesus was really the crucified one and not a ghost or imposter. Yet this Jesus was able to pass through shut doors and appeared or disappeared unexpectedly and by no pattern discernible to mortals. Finally, forty days after the first appearance in the garden, the resurrected Jesus appeared to them, we are told, in familiar Bethany. There, as they talked, he took them out to a nearby hill, blessed them, and was taken up into heaven.

By now, the nascent Christian community—the disciples, certain women such as Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus, and peripheral followers—was vitalized and enthusiastic. The series of mysterious resurrection appearances, which came only to members of the community, greatly reinforced its thinking about who Jesus was along the lines of the categories and concepts discussed above. The supreme event came when, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost 50 days after Passover, shortly after his ascension into heaven, those who were gathered in an upstairs room

suddenly felt tremendously shaken by a spiritual force they were certain was the Holy Spirit of God, mentioned in the Old Testament and whose coming was remembered to have been promised by Jesus.

After receiving the Holy Spirit, the apostles, as the inner core of the group were now called, began preaching in the streets to the many people who crowded into the holy city. They preached basically that Jesus who had died was risen from the dead, that this event confirmed that he was and is both Lord and Messiah, the Christ, and that all the scriptural prophecies about both the Jewish and universal roles of the Messiah and the Last Days were fulfilled or would be in him.

Many heard and believed. Most were Jews, but some of the earliest converts to the truth and significance of this new happening in Judaism were Greeks, probably of a class called "proselytes," who, without undertaking the whole of the Jewish law, admired Judaism, worshipped its God, and accepted as much of its teaching and practice as possible. The incipient universalism of the Christian sect, with its proclamation of a new age when the reign of the Jewish God would be evident everywhere, and was now already present in Christ, must have greatly eased the spiritual plight of such people.

PAUL

Presenting Jesus as a manifestation of God who welcomed Jew and Greek alike was given preliminary definition by the council of the apostles described in Acts 15, where only a minimal adherence to the Jewish law was required of non-Jews. But it was in the work of Paul, the most notable convert and missionary in the days of the early fellowship, that this universalism in Christ fully came through.

Paul, a Hebrew who was a Roman citizen, was originally called Saul. He was a strict Pharisee and a persecutor of the new Christian sect. But while traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus in his anti-Christian efforts, he unexpectedly fell to the ground in a violent rapture. He experienced a vision of Jesus the Christ appearing to him and saying "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Although he did not immediately begin his public missionary work, Paul was a great if controversial advocate of the new faith between about 45 and 62 C.E. and Christianity's first theologian. His labors on its behalf took him through Asia Minor, Greece, and finally to Rome. More and more he saw himself as the apostle to the Gentiles (non-Jews), and his calling was to show that, in these days after Jesus, the Gentiles had been "grafted" into Israel as an alien branch onto an old tree, and so when they prayed in the name of Jesus, they had all the privileges and responsibilities of being God's people that had formerly been Israel's alone. But this did not mean, for Paul, that they had to follow the Jewish Law. They had only to believe the Gospel, or "Good News," about Jesus and have trust in him, and they would be brought into his oneness with God—not on their own merits but as a free gift of God transmitted even as they were grafted into old Israel through Jesus Christ. Jesus' death on the cross, Paul said, broke the sway of sin and death in the world, and his rising again brought new life. By joining oneself to Christ by faith (not just belief, but commitment of one's whole self) and by the acceptance of baptism (the ritual immersion in water representing initiatory rebirth), one received new life in Christ and was no longer of this world, which is passing away, but had entered into the everlasting reign of God.

THEOSOPHY, JESUS, AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Among the several ways of interpreting this remarkable figure, Jesus, and the Christian movement, the Theosophical approach is certainly as valid as any. H. P. Blavatsky and many other classic Theosophical writers have regarded both Jesus and Paul as initiates, like other masters and founders, who encapsulated the Ageless Wisdom in forms appropriate to their time and place. Throughout the next two lessons, we will consider more fully how this was done, beginning with Gnosticism, that ancient version of Christianity highly regarded by most Theosophists.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Borg, Marcus. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.

Court, John, and Kathleen Court. *The New Testament World*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990.

Fredriksen, Paula. *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988.

Kee, H. *Jesus in History*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977.

Meeks, Wayne. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983.

Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How would you summarize the life and central teaching of Jesus?
2. How would you place him in the context of his times?
3. How do you think the Ancient Wisdom could best be presented in a time and a social situation like that?
4. What is the key to understanding the life and teaching of Paul?
5. What, if anything, do you see in Jesus and early Christianity hinting that this could be the start of a major world religion?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XVIII

CHRISTIANITY FROM THE APOSTLES TO THE REFORMATION

CHRISTIANITY IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Before proceeding to what Christianity became, let us pause for a moment to consider what Jesus and Paul, as presented in the last paper, may mean to Theosophists. There are no fixed or required Theosophical beliefs on such matters, of course. Nor were there set dogmas at that time in the early church. In the first two or three centuries after Christ, a number of interpretations of the Christian message and community were articulated, as we have seen.

H. P. Blavatsky commented that, despite the diversity of early Christian belief, "... all the civilized portion of the pagans who knew of Jesus honored him as a philosopher, an adept whom they placed on the same level with Pythagoras and Apollonius." He taught in parables, in the manner of initiates speaking to those outside their inner circle.[7]

Blavatsky was willing to grant him even more. She refers favorably to the kabbalistic belief that on rare occasions the divine spirit within may unite with "the mortal charge entrusted to its care," and the Gnostic belief that in Jesus the man was overshadowed by the Christos—that is, that in Jesus the higher divine self within was absolutely united with the lower personality, so that they always worked in harmony.[8] And of course that higher divine self is itself united with the universal Logos, the universal creative principle of which it is the individual expression. Paul, according to this teaching, was also an adept, which to him as a writer in Greek meant he was initiated into the *gnosis*, or secret wisdom.

This brings us to the world of Gnosticism, an interpretation of Christianity subsequently labeled heretical, but in the first two or three centuries as viable a contender in the Christian marketplace as any. Its oldest texts are as old as any that made it into the canonized Bible, and its best teachers made Gnosticism seem only a Christian continuation of ancient philosophical thought. Gnosticism has also been increasingly appreciated in modern thought. This has been particularly evident since the discovery in Egypt in 1946 of the Nag Hammadi library of Gnostic texts; the most famous of these is the "Gospel of Thomas," which presents Jesus as a master of pithy and enigmatic sayings.

Schools of Gnosticism varied considerably. But basic themes included the idea that this world is imperfect because it was created by a lower, bumbling emanation of the true God rather than the Father of Lights above; that the inner essence of humans is light from the highest realm which is entrapped in material bodies in this imperfect world (thus we are only strangers here and heaven is our home); that Jesus has come from the Halls of Light above to recall those scattered and snared sparks of light back to the eternal Flame, and that by true *gnosis* or wisdom imparted by Jesus

---

[7] H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled.* Ed. Boris de Zirkoff. Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1972. Orig. publ. 1877. Vol. 2, p. 150.

[8] + Ibid., vol. 2, p. 154.

we can make the ascent out of this alien world, past the evil *archons* or guardians who patrol our prison-house planet, and back to our true home above. Although not too much is known about Gnostic organization and church life, they seem mainly to have been like "schools" around particular teachers of the Wisdom, but also to have had sacraments, charms, and mysteriously beautiful rituals and dances that enacted their teachings.

There were other interpretive strands too in those early years. Every religion has two major tasks to accomplish in its first few centuries if it is going to last over many more centuries: it must establish its canon of scripture, and it must create an organizational structure capable of surviving for the long haul. One can see a similar process of canonization and institutionalization in early Buddhism, Islam, and other religions that attained world stature. The leaders responsible for these developments were no doubt different from the Gnostics: less speculative mystics, more the practical, get-the-job-done sort of individuals who like clearly defined beliefs and smoothly running fellowships. Every movement needs such persons somewhere in its hierarchy if it is going to endure and accomplish its tasks in the world.

As it became institutionalized, the Christian church saw as its cornerstone the apostles—those direct disciples of Jesus—as well as Paul, whom they believed were the founders and leaders of the first churches, as well as being the writers or authenticators of the basic scriptures. Thus the church was to be led by bishops (from Greek *episcopos*, "overseer") who were successors of the apostles, and under them priests (from *presbyteros*, "elder") and deacons (from *diaconos*, "server").

The church met for worship early in the morning on Sunday (of course, just another ordinary workday then), the day commemorating the Resurrection, and perhaps on other days as well. To avoid legal problems, Christians often gathered quietly and, until late in the third century when churches began to be built, in private homes or catacombs. Worship combined Scripture, prayer, and instruction with the Eucharist— the sacred communal meal representing the Last Supper which, as the Mass, Holy Communion, or Lord's Supper, remains the principal act of worship of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and some Protestant churches.

The same bishops, in various conferences, gradually determined which of the many gospels or accounts of the life of Jesus and epistles or letters of apostles then circulating were to be considered scriptural. The basic criteria was association with an apostle, whether it presented a view of the life of Jesus centered on his crucifixion and resurrection, and its being a part of the tradition of a major church, like those of Rome or Ephesus. The final determination was made at a council in Carthage in 419 C.E., and the last texts at issue were the epistle to the Hebrews and the book of Revelation. Many then as now doubted whether the former was actually written by Paul and the latter by the apostle John, and whether Revelation's lurid apocalyptic belonged in the New Testament, but both were included in the end.

IMPERIAL CHRISTIANITY

By then the church was in a very different relationship to the world. In one of my recent books, *Cycles of Faith*, I present what I see as five stages in the life of a world religion—the sort spreading over vast, or several cultures, embracing hundreds of millions of people over many centuries, like Buddhism, the Chinese religions, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. The five stages are 1) Apostolic, in which the

above-mentioned tasks of scriptural and organizational definition are accomplished; 2) Imperial and Wisdom, when the religion aligns itself with a major empire, assuring its world-class status, and its intellectual life emphasizes continuity with the greatest wisdom of previous philosophy; 3) Devotional, the medieval era in most religions, when a wide and colorful diversity of devotion to gods, saints, bodhisattvas, and the like characterizes the faith; 4) Reformation, like the Protestant reformation in Christianity, when the emphasis changes to faith, radical simplification, and putative return to the scriptural sources; and 5) Folk Religion, when the faith reverts to a populist base, losing vital touch with the society's major intellectual, political, and cultural institutions.

(Because the religions began at different times, they are at different points on this timeline. For example, much may be understood about the relation of Christianity and Islam in the world today if we see Christianity as now moving from the fourth to the fifth stage, while the younger religion of Islam is in its tumultuous Reformation phase. We will return to this schema in the last paper, when we look at the present condition and possible futures of the world religions.)

In 313 C.E. the emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, extending toleration to Christianity. Throughout the remainder of his reign (and that of his successors) the faith of Christ became the dominant religion of the Mediterranean world, and later of all Europe. Christianity entered its Imperial stage, as Buddhism did under Ashoka and Islam under the Caliphate. This awesome transition naturally produced many changes in Christianity. The faith had to solidify its organizational structure to harmonize with the structure of the empire and the nascent feudal kingdoms of Europe, and meet the religious needs of all sorts of folk, from princes to peasants. To facilitate its role as a universal faith, its links with the spiritual past were reaffirmed. Philosophers were taught how Christianity was compatible with Platonic thought, with Jesus as an embodiment of the divine Logos or creative energy. Peasants were shown how holy wells and sacred trees could be reconsecrated to Christian saints or honor the birth of Christ as Christmas trees.

The form Christianity took in these long centuries may broadly be called early Catholicism. As in today's Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, the most direct heirs of that era, its main act of worship was the Eucharist. But as the church moved out of the spiritual underground of the great cities and into spacious buildings (typically modeled on the basilica or Roman court of law) or into the rural world of peasant and lord, the liturgy—or pattern of worship—also changed. It became expressive and ornate. The clergy wore symbolically colored garments and moved with slow ritual, accompanied by music and incense, to present and bless the bread and wine of the Eucharist. In the West, the language of the service was Latin; in the East it was Greek. These tongues, especially Latin, quickly became "sacred" languages, like Sanskrit in India, as the vernacular changed and numerous new populations came into the orbit of the faith.

There were other developments too. Monasticism—the dedication of men and women to lives of poverty, chastity, and obedience as members of religious orders—was an institution that was to prove very important to the church (and to western civilization) in the "Dark Ages" and medieval world to come. Often monastic centers were major centers of learning. Monks were also missionaries who carried Christianity to places like Ireland, England, and Germany.

During the confusion that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire, the bishop of Rome (called the Pope) increasingly became a dominant figure in both ecclesiastical and secular affairs. In addition, the primacy that Christ was said to have given to the apostle Peter (considered the first bishop of Rome) was applied to the Pope. This made him the head of the church in western Europe, the part of the church that eventually became known as the Roman Catholic Church. In eastern Europe—centered around Constantinople (modern Istanbul), where the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire still lingered—the church developed in a somewhat different way. Its liturgy was and remains slow and mystical, and it avoided domination by a single hierarchical figure like the pope. Instead, the church tradition now called Eastern Orthodox was closely associated with the Byzantine state, and then divided into a number of national Orthodox churches (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc.), though recognizing the primacy of the Patriarch of Constantinople. In 1054, on the issue of papal primacy and other differences, the eastern and western churches formally separated.

PROTESTANTISM

A few centuries later, a new style of Christianity was to emerge in the West—the Protestantism of the sixteenth century. The Protestant Reformation was certainly related to major historical changes: the Age of Discovery and the building of a European empire, the emergence of modern nation-states jealous of their independence, and the slow economic transition from feudalism to modern capitalism. But this religious change was overtly focused only on spiritual and theological issues. The man who by far most influenced its course, Martin Luther (1483–1546), had been a scholarly friar of the Augustinian order since the age of 21.

In his monastery, Luther experienced grueling anxiety. His problem was that he felt himself a sinner, however blameless a life he had lived as a monk. So long as he thought in terms of how much he had to do, what standards he had to meet, what religious acts he had to perform, and what devout feelings he had to feel, he could only live—it seemed—in a cruel uncertainty. This state of affairs would virtually lead to madness if one were really serious about it—and Luther was nothing if not serious. He felt trapped; he was commanded to love God, but how could one love a God whose demands left one in such anguish? Could he ever know if he had done enough?

Then, in studying the scriptures, Luther struggled with the lines “He who is righteous by faith shall live” (Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17), until this saying provided a sunrise of new awareness that led to his doctrine of *sola fides*, “faith alone.” He realized in the depths of his being that what set a person in right relationship with God was not the things he had been trying before, but simple faith—sincere belief, trust, and intention—and that this as a matter of inner attitude was available to anyone at any time. In fact, it is not really a matter of what we do at all, for faith is first of all a gift, a grace from God, always free, always poured out in love, to which we only can respond with sincerity. When Luther realized this, all else appeared superfluous and likely to confuse. For this reason he insisted also on the principle of *sola scriptura*, the Bible alone as guide to Christian faith and practice, for he felt that salvation by grace through faith was the clear and central message of the scriptures, and that its obscuring had come about through overlays of human philosophy and ecclesiastical tradition.

On October 31, 1517, Luther reportedly posted 95 theses, or points for debate, on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, which served as the university's bulletin board. This challenge started as a theological dispute but quickly escalated beyond what one would normally expect of such arguments among monks. Luther was engaged in a course that finally led to his rejection of papal authority as its logical outcome, and this in turn resulted in his excommunication by Rome in 1521. However, he had protectors among German princes, who were glad enough to have an opportunity to express their independence of Rome. Before long the Lutheran form of Protestantism had become the national religion of about half of Germany, and of the Scandinavian countries.

The most important reformer after Luther was John Calvin (1509–1564). He was French but is associated mainly with Geneva in Switzerland. Calvin's theology is based on a strong contrast between the infinite greatness and power of God and the sinfulness of humanity. God's glory fills the universe; the division between the sacred and the secular is done away with, for all is sacred. Further, Calvin held to a doctrine of predestination—all that happens is due solely to God's will, from life and death to the smallest seemingly accidental events. Nonetheless, humankind is in rebellion against God; God permits this in order that his mercy may be shown in the salvation of those whom he chooses, while divine justice is affirmed by the punishment of the rest. Those whom God chooses for eternal life do not have any merit of their own; they are recipients of his grace, which, as Luther had emphasized, must come before anything right that humans can do. The "elect," those chosen through grace, will be marked by a righteous life and a seemingly spontaneous and persevering predilection for true religion.

Today, churches known as Reformed, Presbyterian, or Congregational are from the Calvinist tradition, although Calvin's original message has been modified by them over the years. Calvinism became dominant in Holland, Scotland, and parts of Germany and Switzerland. The Puritan movement in England and America was Calvinist as well and has had tremendous impact on life in those countries and in their spheres of influence.

In England the Reformation took yet another form. The English character has always exhibited a sense of pragmatism, moderation, and appreciation of tradition as well as a thirst for reform. All of this is evident in the English Reformation. Significantly, it did not receive its impetus from a wholly engaged reformer such as Luther or Calvin, but from a rather sordid political matter. The king, Henry VIII, had been an enthusiastic defender of the old faith against the reformers, but in the early 1530s he desired to divorce his queen. This step required a dispensation from the Pope, which the latter, Clement VII, refused. Therefore, Henry called upon Parliament to sever relations with Rome and make the king supreme head of the church in his realm. The resulting Act of Supremacy was passed in 1534. After many vicissitudes, the resulting Church of England had both Protestant and Catholic features.

CHRISTIANITY AND THEOSOPHY

In the next paper we will look at other varieties of Protestantism and Christianity in the world today, and then at Christian mysticism. Even now we can consider how the many historical variations of Christianity offer different perspectives on the life and teaching of Jesus, and through him, on the Ageless Wisdom. The Catholic form

presents a sacred eucharistic rite which, because it seems to be outside of ordinary time, is like an insertion of eternity and its energies into the midst of time and our daily lives. Protestantism reminds us to keep open the inner channels, symbolized by faith, connecting us to the Christos or higher self. In all, divine grace reminds us there is help outside of ourselves.

References for Supplementary Reading

Bausch, William J. *Pilgrim Church: A Popular History of Catholic Christianity*. Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1973.

Dillenberger, John, and Claude Welch. *Protestant Christianity*. New York; Scribners, 1954.

Ellwood, Robert S. *Cycles of Faith*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003.

Ellwood, Robert S., and James B. Wiggins. *Christianity: A Cultural Perspective*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988.

Hoeller, Stephan. *Gnosticism*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2002.

Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *A History of Christianity*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953.

Ware, Timothy. *The Orthodox Church*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1963.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What was the appeal of Gnosticism in the ancient world?
2. How accurate would you say H. P. Blavatsky's interpretation of Jesus is?
3. How do you think the "triumph" of Christianity in the time of Constantine changed Christianity's character? Could Christianity have survived without Constantine?
4. What is the key to understanding the life and teaching of Luther?
5. Do you think Calvinism has often been misunderstood, and if so, how?
6. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the "radical" reformation?
7. How do you understand the relation of Theosophy and Christianity?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XIX

VARIETIES OF CHRISTIANITY AND CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

VARIETIES OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity has become not only one of the world's most popular religions, but also one of the most varied. Some two billion of the world's six billion souls are at least nominally Christian, and they are divided into thousands of subgroups. A pilgrim who experienced both the ornate liturgy of an Eastern Orthodox church and the plainness and quietness of a Quaker meeting, or the dignity of a traditional Lutheran or Presbyterian service and the effusions of Pentecostalism, with its shouting and speaking in tongues, might almost feel that she or he were visiting different religions. Yet it would not take long to perceive that, however diverse these manifestations were, all directed toward one central focus: the man Jesus Christ, who died on a cross some two thousand years ago. They all affirm in their own way that this was the central event in human history, and that power released through it can and must be appropriated now, for our healing and wholeness in this life and in the life to come. Christian worship both teaches and enacts this appropriation.

Christians differ over how this is best done. The Eastern Orthodox orchestration of symbols, such as incense, mystical music, colorful vestments, and the slowness of ancient ritual, takes one out of the one-dimensionality of the present into a kind of timeless, eternal reality in which the death and resurrection of Christ, the present, and all the Christian centuries in between become one. (The Russian envoys who visited Byzantium back in the tenth century and recommended that their people adopt this form of Christianity said that participating in its worship was like entering heaven.)

The Roman Catholic mass, which now is celebrated in a simpler, more present- and congregation-oriented way than fifty years ago, teaches that Christ is present in the consecrated bread and wine, joining and blessing his people in their lives today. The Anglican churches, such as the Church of England, the Episcopal Church in the United States, and many others in their lineage worldwide, today are likely to be centered around a Eucharist not dissimilar from the Roman Catholic, but allow for considerable freedom of expression, such as the practice of ordaining women as priests. (In the tiny Liberal Catholic church, traditionally but unofficially linked to Theosophy through figures like C. W. Leadbeater, the mass is held in accordance with the more solemn and elaborate traditional western rite, but its meaning is interpreted esoterically; see Leadbeater's *The Science of the Sacraments*.)

Churches in the main Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation traditions—Lutheran, Presbyterian, Congregational (United Church of Christ in the U.S.), and Reformed—emphasize preaching the Word of God in order to evoke a response of faith, through which the healing grace of God is received. (In these churches simplicity of decor of worship makes plain the centrality of preaching. At the same time, hymns of praise and devotion, which can also be considered a form of preaching leading to faith, are also important.) Churches coming out of the "Radical Reformation," from Mennonite and Quaker to Baptist and Methodist, characteristically call for moral perfection, and

are likely to expect piety and emotion as expressions of faith and the receiving of grace.

What lies behind this spiritual landscape? First let us recall that for the first thousand years of church history, Christianity, despite a few "heretical" groups, was essentially one, and represented an early form of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. The main worship was the Eucharist, recited in Latin in the West and generally in Greek in the East, which was celebrated with pomp and dignity (though not quite as ornately as later). Bishops and archbishops governed the church. The bishop of Rome was also called the Pope and was the effective head of the church in the West, though his powers were not as extensive or well defined as later.

Then, in 1054, the western and eastern churches separated. The Eastern Orthodox church, as it is commonly called, is very conservative and has changed little in doctrine or worship since then. It has retained a long but beautiful liturgy, unforgettable mystical music, and a spirituality that emphasizes the timeless presence of the Trinity and the resurrected Christ in the world today. (This was the church in which H. P. Blavatsky was raised, and it is worth noting that, for all her fulminations against some Christians, like Jesuits and Protestant missionaries, she very rarely has anything negative to say about Eastern Orthodox Christianity.)

The Eastern church has not changed in part because for much of its history its people have lived under unsympathetic or controlling regimes: the Mongols, the Ottoman Empire, the czarist autocracy in Russia, and communist governments. It had freedom to do little but defend and continue its incomparable worship. In the West, the situation was very different. The western or Roman Catholic heir of early Catholicism, based in the vital and expansive nations of Western Europe and then the Americas, has flourished and developed in many ways. It has been noted for strict doctrinal and moral teaching, devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints, widespread missionary activity, and centralized authority. The status of the pope grew until, at the first Vatican Council in 1870, he was declared infallible when speaking *ex cathedra* (officially) on matters of faith and morals. However, the second Vatican Council of 1962-65 sent the church in a different direction. The liturgy was greatly simplified and put in the vernacular, or language of the people (e.g., English in the English-speaking world), and an atmosphere of relatively greater freedom and innovation followed the council. The Roman Catholic Church now represents about one billion people, or half the Christian world.

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century produced basically two kinds of churches. First there were those that became state churches in countries accepting the Reformation: Lutheran in Scandinavia and parts of Germany, Calvinist in Scotland and the Netherlands, Anglican in England. (Of course there were minorities of these traditions elsewhere, such as the Huguenots or French Calvinist Protestants, and the Calvinist Puritans in England, who, following immigration of some of them to New England, had a major impact on American history.)

Second, the Radical Reformation came about. Outside the great movements of Luther and Calvin and the formation of the Anglican Church in England, and generally without the support of rulers, the Reformation stirred up the zeal of many who wanted more far-reaching changes in the church and also in society. These movements typically stressed the need for personal conversion experiences, moral perfection, and a close following of the New Testament both in faith and social life.

They included Anabaptists (indirectly the forebears of modern Baptists in England and America), who rejected the baptism of infants, insisting that Christians should have a personal conversion experience and be baptized only after it; Mennonites, who were perfectionists, pacifists, and often communalists; and rationalistic Unitarians, such as Michael Servetus, who denied the doctrine of the Trinity and was burned at the stake in Calvin's Geneva. In England, radical reform produced the Quakers in the seventeenth century, and in the eighteenth century, the Methodists, who followed the call of their leader, John Wesley, for personal conversion and acceptance of Christ, and striving for a sinless life.

In nineteenth-century America, the great frontier revivals of the Radical Reformation left religious change in their wake: the rapid growth of the Methodist and Baptist churches, and the appearance of new denominations associated with what was called the Restoration movement. Followers of the Restoration movement yearned to "restore" New Testament Christianity. The Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches, and Churches of Christ derive from it. (That spiritually yeasty era in America also saw the emergence of Spiritualism, New Thought, Christian Science, and of course Theosophy.)

At the beginning of the twentieth century another powerful Christian development, now of worldwide significance, appeared: Pentecostalism. This movement emphasizes a vigorous, feeling-oriented kind of Christianity that believes that the gifts bestowed on the apostles at Pentecost—tongues, healing, signs and wonders—can be experienced as much today as ever. A visitor to a Pentecostal church will probably hear worshippers speaking in "tongues," which may sound like gibberish to an outsider, but which may be "interpreted" by another worshipper, and see the minister "lay on hands" for healing, as well as hear an impassioned sermon full of prophecy and calls to repentance. Yet there probably will be an overall mood of freedom and joy in the Spirit, with the belief that one has been delivered out of the power of Satan and into the arms of divine love. Pentecostalism has been very successful in the "third world" or "southern hemisphere" countries which are rapidly becoming the real center of gravity of Christianity, and today may embrace as much as one-quarter of all active Christians on the planet.

CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM AND DEVOTION

Perhaps more than other religions, Christianity makes a clear-cut distinction between theological writing and mystical-devotional literature. Christian doctrine and thought have an objective and a historical quality that makes it possible to understand them, at least superficially, without direct experience of the divine realities that lie behind them. Many would say that one can have saving faith without the sort of experience of God of which mystics and devotees speak. In this respect, Christianity shows its difference from a religion like Buddhism, in which the equivalent of salvation would have to be the ultimate transformation of consciousness represented by Nirvana. But mainstream Christian theology and preaching is generally more concerned with a personal decision for salvation than with a mystical experience, to which not every Christian is called.

By mystical experience we mean experience interpreted as immediate contact with the Divine, very frequently expressed in the language of unity: "I felt the oneness of all things," "I was united with God." Mystical writings describe this experience and how to attain it. In contrast, devotional writing presents prayers and

meditations addressed to God or intended to lead one's mind toward union with God. Since the one who prays or meditates is still speaking to or thinking about God, a certain distance, however filled with love and feeling, remains between that person and the Divine. Devotion, on the other hand, can fall short of the mystic's experience of sheer union. That is why mystical experience is often said to be "beyond words," and mystics may shock the conventionally pious when they say that even prayer and meditation are practices to be surpassed.

The first Christian mysticism after the New Testament was deeply indebted to the terminology and philosophical concepts of Neoplatonic philosophy. The most influential Christian mystical writings of this sort are those of the writer who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite, now sometimes called Psuedo-Dionysius, and believed to be a Syrian monk of the sixth-century.

"Dionysius" was a Neoplatonist who believed that God in total fullness and infinity is beyond human knowledge and so is ultimately nameless and ineffable. Nothing we could say about the Deity is adequate to the unbounded mystery of divine being. Dionysius thus speaks of God as a "darkness which is beyond light"—though the darkness is really due to an excess of light beyond that which human faculties can handle, like the shadows that fall across the eyes when we try to look directly at the sun. The way to God is through an "unknowing" by which human intellect and feelings, too frail for this sublimest task, are stilled in mystical contemplation. "We pray," Dionysius says, "that we may come unto this darkness which is beyond light, and through the loss of sight and knowledge may see and know that which is above vision and knowledge." This "Dionysiac" Neoplatonist approach was very influential in the Christian mysticism of the Middle Ages and the Reformation.

But during the same Middle Ages, something else began stirring as well. A Christian mysticism of the affirmation of images was coming to flower. If mysticism of the Neoplatonist, "Dionysiac" type says to take away all that is not God, and so is often called the "negative way," its counterpart is the affirming way of using images in the mind and before the eyes as steppingstones to God. One example of an "affirmative" mystic was the beloved St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226).

Francis fervently promoted adoration of Jesus in the manger and on the cross, both affirmative pictures to which devotion could be affixed in mind and heart. Tradition credits the "Little Poor Man" of Assisi with making the first Christmas crèche and with receiving the stigmata, or marks of the nails and crown of thorns and wounded side of Christ on the cross, in his own flesh. The Franciscan order, which burgeoned in the late Middle Ages, eagerly carried his style of devotionalism throughout Western Europe and later to the Spanish and Portuguese New World.

Protestant mysticism began in the age of Luther himself. Lutheran and Calvinist Christianity centered on inward faith and the inner workings of grace, rather than the attainment of spiritual stages or mystical "states." However, others in the Protestant movement took things in a different direction. Sebastian Franck (1499–1542) and his disciple Valentine Weigel (1533–1588) were both Lutherans, the former a sometime preacher and the latter a pastor, and also both Dionysians. They wrote that God is beyond all notions, definitions, concepts, and thought, but is incarnate as the inner essence of humans. Another German, Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), a shoemaker, is widely considered the greatest Protestant mystical thinker.

Boehme described the divine infinity beyond words and concepts as the Original Ground; its expression is through the interplay of opposites. All this is incarnate in humans. (Weigel and Boehme are often accounted early theosophists, the latter being frequently mentioned in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky.)

Movements like seventeenth-century Pietism on the European continent and Wesleyan Methodism in eighteenth-century England so stressed the importance of inwardly felt conversion in the believer that they easily led to positive devotional focus on the catalyst of the change—Jesus Christ. The result was a highly Christocentric Protestantism, still immensely powerful, which mentally pictures, prays to, and inwardly relates to Jesus himself. This Christian style is well expressed in such hymns as "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," or "I Come to the Garden Alone" ("He walks with me and He talks with me").

Roman Catholic mysticism during and after the Reformation era reflected comparable lines of development. The Roman church's greatest mystics and spiritual writers in this period tended also to be great founders or reformers of religious orders who labored on the spiritual, intellectual, and practical levels to enable their church to meet its new challenges. In particular, this was true of the great sixteenth-century Spanish mystics: Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and author of the celebrated *Spiritual Exercises*; John of the Cross (1542–1591), monastic reformer and writer of the profound *Dark Night of the Soul*, which explores the stripping away of self and sense one must pass through to reach, through love alone, the unitive state; and Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), also a reformer and spiritual writer of great perception on the stages of gain and loss leading to union, where even God is momentarily forgotten as he is gained.

The spirituality of the Eastern Orthodox Church has remained very conservative, long adhering in its essence to the Christian Neoplatonism of the early Christian centuries, yet also remaining more deeply entwined with the lives of ordinary believers than has often been the case in the West. No country except India has had as many wandering holy men as Russia before the Communist Revolution. In some ways the Orthodox Christianity of "Holy Russia" was more Asian than Western in religious style. The *startsi*, holy monks or hermits, more often laymen than priests, familiar to readers of Dostoevsky, were venerated counselors and givers of blessing. Some remained in one place; some were perpetual pilgrims who wandered about the vast land—even as far as Jerusalem—with nothing but the clothes on their backs and perhaps a sacred book or two, begging or remaining silent unless pressed to teach. The Russian spiritual classic, the anonymous *Way of a Pilgrim*, embodies this ideal. There were also the "Holy Fools," perhaps idiots, madmen by conventional standards, or cripples, who would babble nonsense, meow like a cat in church, or castigate a czar for his sins, yet before whom even nobility might bow with humility, for they were seen as embodiments of the suffering Christ and of the irrational side of God here on earth.

CHRISTIANITY AND THEOSOPHY II

The works of H. P. Blavatsky and other classic Theosophical writings generally emphasize that Jesus was a great initiate—not an incarnation of God in any exclusive sense, but an initiate wholly open to the divine within, the transforming power of which irradiated him and all around him. A great master can transmit such power to his disciples, and thus through them to the world for many generations to come. It is

this power, undoubtedly, which countless Christians over some twenty centuries have felt and known to be real, for their salvation and that of the world. They have envisioned it, made access to it, and claimed it in diverse ways, through sacrament, faith, pietism, and wisdom, and sometimes have been too quick to assume their way is the only right way. Yet certainly the spiritual energies in Christianity are real, and perhaps will be better grasped, and more adequately applied, as the spiritual evolution of humankind continues.

References for Supplementary Reading

Balmer, Randall. *Grant Us Courage: Travels Along the Mainline of American Protestantism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

————. *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey through the Evangelical Subculture of America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Cox, Harvey. Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995.

Leadbeater, C. W. The Science of the Sacraments. Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 1920, 1997.

Melton, Gordon. *Encyclopedia of American Religion*. Detroit: Gale, various editions. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. Trans. Colm Luibhed. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987.

Smart, Ninian. *The Phenomenon of Christianity*. London: Collins, 1979.

Underhill, Evelyn. *Mystics of the Church*. London: J. Clarke, 1925.

————.*The Way of a Pilgrim*. Trans. R.M. French. New York: Seabury, 1974.

Williams, George. *The Radical Reformation*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What has been the overall thrust of Christianity's development over the centuries?
2. Why has Protestantism produced so many forms or "denominations"?
3. Amongst these many denominations, what would you say are the main "families" and types?
4. Why has Pentecostalism held such appeal in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries?
5. What is the relationship between Christianity as a religion and its mystical traditions?
6. Why has Christianity become the world's largest religion?
7. How do you now understand the relation of Theosophy and Christianity?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XX

MUHAMMAD AND ISLAM

THE MEANING OF ISLAM

Over one billion people—more than a sixth of the world's population—adhere to the faith of Islam, the youngest of the world's great religions. Despite important variations within Islam, it is also the most homogeneous of the three cross-cultural faiths: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Islam is a community that does indeed cut across many cultures. Non-Muslims often envision Islam as the faith of Arabs in desert-like lands, but only a minority of Muslims are Arab, and only a tiny minority are desert dwellers. The largest single Muslim nation is tropical Indonesia, where the faith of Muhammad is superimposed on an East Asian kind of culture. Great numbers of other Muslims are farmers and craftspeople in India and Pakistan; businesspeople in the cities of Turkey, Iran, or Malaysia; or tribal people in sub-Saharan Africa, where Islam is growing. Even in the Arab countries where Islam originated, the population is largely urban or engaged in intensive, sedentary agriculture in fertile strips like those along the Nile and the Two Rivers of Iraq. Normative Islam, in fact, has historically been preeminently a faith of citified, mobile, internationally-minded people, sometimes conquerors but more often merchant-travelers, and through them it has spread from culture to culture.

Partly because of this base, Islamic culture has visible unity as well as great diversity. From Morocco to Java, the Muslim mosque presents a distinctive atmosphere. Few would mistake a mosque for a church, synagogue, or Hindu temple. The mosque, a place of prayer to the infinite Lord, has no picture, image, altar, flowers, or candles—only a vast, clean, cool, austerely beautiful empty space. The floor may be spread with rich carpeting and the walls and ceiling or dome with delicate arabesque tracery. But nowhere will realistic representational art be found. A bare niche in the wall serves to orient prayer in the direction of Mecca; a modest seat atop a staircase serves as pulpit.

On the streets of a Muslim country, the pervasive influence of the religion is felt too. Five times a day—sunrise, noon, afternoon, just after sunset, at dark—a crier, called the muezzin (nowadays often replaced by a recording and a loudspeaker system), summons the faithful to prayer from the minaret, the tower attached to every mosque. His plaintive cry replaces the bells of Christendom. When believers hear the call to prayer, they prostrate themselves in prayer in shops and homes, wherever they are, as well as in mosques.

In public, veiled women are still observed in some parts of the Muslim world. Although the Muslim admonition against alcoholic drink is not always strictly observed, it is in coffee shops and teahouses rather than pubs or bars that one sees men gathered of an evening to discuss the affairs of the day. Finally, if one is at all familiar with the local language, one will be struck by the frequency of expressions like "If Allah wills" in daily conversation.

The very heart of Islam is the idea of full and complete submission to the will of Allah, or God. (Allah is not the name of a god, but simply means "The God"—the one

and only God.) God's will for humanity, Muslims believe, was most fully given in the Qur'an, the book revealed through the prophet Muhammad. The word *islam* means "submission." An adherent of the faith is called a Muslim, one who has made the submission. So it is that the muezzin in his five-times daily cry says:

> God [Allah] is great! God is great!
> There is no god but God,
> And Muhammad is his prophet!
> Come to prayer! come to prayer!
> Come to abundance! come to abundance!
> (At dawn, he here adds:
> Prayer is better than sleep!
> Prayer is better than sleep!)
> God is great! God is great!
> There is no god but God!

That is the central motif of Islam—the greatness of God alone. Because Allah is great and sovereign, the entire world and all the affairs of humankind belong only to him. For this reason Islam does not lavishly embellish the religious sphere with rites and symbols and priesthood; if Allah is truly great, Islam says, he can be worshipped anywhere by anyone in the simple forms prescribed by the Qur'an and tradition. If God is truly sovereign, what he has commanded for all of society—law, ethics, government—is just as important as the religious commandments and inseparable from them. For this reason, Islam is experienced as a total and indivisible way of life.

MUHAMMAD

At the core of Islam lies the experience and faith of Muhammad (570–632 C. E.). He lived in Arabia and was born and raised in the city of Mecca, a commercial center already sacred to the Arabs. Its holy sanctuary, which drew numerous pilgrims, was the home of many polytheistic gods—of moon, stars, and the days of the year, chiefly—and the resting place of a sacred stone, probably meteoritic, thought to be from heaven. The area around this place of worship was a neutral zone where representatives and merchants of many tribes, often warring, could meet in peace.

Muhammad came from a respected merchant family of modest means that was part of the prestigious Quraysh tribe, who were custodians of the sacred places of Mecca. According to tradition, he became a camel driver as a young man. His caravan journeys probably took him as far as Syria, where he would have encountered many Christians and Jews. The prophet's later revelations show the strong influence of those faiths. When he was 25, he entered the service of Khadija, a wealthy widow much older than he. Before long he married her, and she bore his daughter Fatima.

Muhammad was always a serious, thoughtful, and rather withdrawn man. But until he was about 40, his life was not outwardly much different from that of the other merchants of the sacred city. At that age, however, he found himself going into the mountains more and more to devote himself to meditation.

About the year 611, Muhammad began to have a remarkable series of experiences in these solitary meditations in mountain caves. A mysterious darkness would come over him, then the luminous figure of the archangel Gabriel would appear and recite

words to him, which he could remember clearly. These words were primarily about the unity of God—that there is but one single god, the "Lord of the worlds"; that God abominates idolatry and will judge the earth on a day of fire and anxiety; and that God calls upon all humanity to accept his sovereignty.

For ten years (611–621) Muhammad implored his fellow Meccans to obey this call to acknowledge the oneness of God, but with little success. Then, in 622, he accepted an invitation from the city of Yathrib (now Medina) to teach there. His journey to Yathrib is called the Hijra. The date of the Hijra is the date from which the Muslim calendar starts; it marks the beginning of Muhammad's public and organizational work on a large scale.

Using Medina as a base, he brought all Arabia, including Mecca, under his control. He became at once the religious leader of the Arabs, their political ruler, and military commander. His divine revelations continued right up to the end of his life in 632. Assembled and recorded shortly after, they make up the text of the Qur'an, the Holy Scripture of Islam.

THE QUR'AN

Unlike the Judeo-Christian Bible, the Qur'an is not a collection of diverse material from over a thousand years. It was all delivered in a period of no more than twenty-two years to one man in the form of communications from God through an angel. It is not a book of history, or a life of Muhammad, or a philosophical treatise. It is a book of proclamation: proclamation of the oneness and sovereignty of God, of his coming judgment, of the need to submit to him. In passing, it also presents a Muslim view of previous religious history, especially of the earlier prophets such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. From time to time it gives instructions to the faithful, upon which Muslim law is based.

To Muslims, the Qur'an is a miracle—the most convincing miracle of all as validation of their faith. The exquisite beauty of rhythm and expression in the original Arabic is said to be untranslatable. That one man, illiterate according to tradition, could be the merely human author of what has been called "the Glorious Qur'an, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy," seems to Muslims incredible. They believe that the Holy Qur'an is the full and complete message from the infinite Divine Mind to humanity.

It is necessary to always bear in mind the Qur'an's purpose—to proclaim the oneness and sovereignty of God. It does not develop a philosophy or tell a story because those are not its purposes. The Qur'an is intended only to state one basic truth; it repeats itself to reinforce that one simple truth. As A. J. Arberry has put it, it is like being surrounded by a gallery of paintings all on the same subject.

The Qur'an begins with the following prayer, which well sums up its basic spirit and message:

> In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful
> Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Creation,
> The Compassionate, the Merciful, King of Judgment-day!
> You alone we worship, and to
> You alone we pray for help.
> Guide us to the straight path,

> The path of those whom You have favoured,
> Not of those who have incurred Your wrath,
> Nor of those who have gone astray.

The book continues to describe the wonders of creation; how God made humankind from the union of the sexes, out of clots of blood, and through the mysterious development of the embryo. God, it says, created man of ideal form. It exhorts humans not to deny but to show gratitude for this panorama of mercy and marvel, for when the judgment comes, wrongdoers will not be asked about their sins but will be known by the expression on their faces. The deniers of the Lord's blessings will suffer in hell, but those who have regard for the divine majesty will find themselves in surroundings fit for heroes: gardens of flowing springs, lush fruits, and dark-eyed damsels. Like the paradises of most religions, this one has the brightly colored, gemlike, antipodes-of-the-ordinary quality of dream, poetry, and sensuous youthful joy. The descriptions are taken by intellectual and mystical Muslims to be allegorical. The deeper meaning of the Qur'an's message is less reward and punishment than the inescapable fact of Allah himself:

> To Allah belongs the east and the west. Whichever way you turn there is the face of Allah. He is omnipresent and all-knowing.

The fundamental tenet of the Qur'an, then, is monotheism. Muslims believe that Islam is the ultimate religion, the complete religion. It is the religion of Adam and Abraham, the primal monotheism of the beginning, in finalized form. It is the ultimate form of religion because it is in fact the simplest and clearest. It is the essence of religion, plain and perfect submission to the absolute God in all areas of life.

The Qur'an indicates that before Muhammad a series of prophets, all of whom should be greatly honored, labored to call humankind back to this perfect *islam*. They included Abraham, Moses, Ishmael, Idris (Enoch), and Jesus. But it was through Muhammad that the final, complete message came, superseding all that went before; it was the culminating message of God for humankind.

The role of Jesus in the Qur'an and in this series of prophets usually puzzles Christians. The Qur'an makes Jesus the greatest before Muhammad. He was called to preserve the Torah of the Jews and was a wise teacher of deep inward holiness. (This last quality has made him especially beloved of the esoteric mystics of Islam.) Jesus has, to say the least, been far more highly regarded by Muslims than Muhammad has been by Christians.

The Qur'an accepts the virgin birth of Jesus and calls Mary one of the greatest among women, but it says Jesus was born under a palm tree rather than in a stable. It mentions the Last Supper, but it denies that Jesus was actually crucified. It says that people only thought he died on the cross; instead, he was taken directly to heaven. It does not make Jesus the "Son of God," because for Muslims such a concept would be polytheistic and idolatrous.

However different the life and meaning of Jesus may here appear, in looking at Islam and the Qur'an, Christians may, in the words of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "come to understand how the sun of their own spiritual world is also a shining star in the firmament of another world."

One of the loveliest passages of the Qur'an reads:

> God is the light of the heavens and the earth.
> The likeness of His light is as a niche,
> Wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass like a glistening star, kindled from a blessed tree,
> An olive neither of the east nor of the west,
> Whose oil would almost shine had no fire touched it.
> Light upon light: God guides to His light whom he will:
> God brings similitudes for men and God has knowledge of all things.

In all ways, the light of God is added to light. The final revelation is not inconsistent with what was presented by earlier prophets, even though other People of the Book (as Muslims call those who also have a revealed scripture) may have distorted their heritages. But Islam gives the final luster of a perfect glass to the light of God agelessly hidden in the lamp of the world.

Throughout, the central message of Islam is oneness: the unity of the assembly of true prophets, the oneness of final prophet and book, the oneness of the People of God, the one submission to be made, and finally the supreme oneness of God.

MUHAMMAD AND THEOSOPHY

Islam has had a mixed image in the non-Muslim world. The simple beauty of its architecture and the exquisite poetry of its mystics have been admired, but on the other side the religion is often seen as given to absolutism and violence. In the West these perceptions go back at least to the medieval crusades, when Christian knights contended with Muslim warriors over the Holy Land with appalling brutality; in India they stem from Muslim rule under the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. Negative views have been enhanced by recent events that have seemed to pit Islam against the West, and India, once again. Theosophists have sometimes been inclined to see Muslims, together with fundamentalists in all religions, as at odds with the ideal of a universal brotherhood of humanity within which all religions are seen as on some level relative.

But it is important to realize that all historic faiths have their black spots. We must also try to understand the best, the deepest ideals, of each creed as well. Annie Besant, in the chapter on Islam in her *Seven Great Religions*, offers us excellent help in this regard. She points to three basic virtues of Islam that comport well with Theosophy.

The first is the insistence on one God, which easily translates—as it does for Islamic mystics—to a vision of universal Oneness prior to all differentiation.

The second is a belief in many prophets, and the implication that "All prophets are from God; each is sent to his own people and does his own work." (208) This is quite compatible with Theosophical teaching that each religion was founded by a Master of the Wisdom for a particular time and place; this Muslims believe too, though unlike others they say that Muhammad was the last and greatest, the "seal of the prophets."

The third point, Besant tells us, is the ideal of Islam as submission to the will of God. This does not mean, in her view, being a Muslim in the narrow sense. Rather,

being Muslim means that "all men of every faith who surrender themselves to God are truly children of Islam," just as the Holy Qur'an tells us that Abraham, greatly venerated in Islam though neither Jew nor Christian, was of the true religion and not an idolater, for he lived his exemplary life in and under the supreme Oneness. (210)

We will continue the discussion of Islam and Theosophy in the following two papers.

References for Supplementary Reading

Arberry, A. J. *The Koran Interpreted*. New York: Macmillan, 1955. (The best translation.)

Besant, Annie. *Seven Great Religions*. Adyar and Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1966, 2000.

Denny, Frederick. *An Introduction to Islam*. New York: Macmillan, 1985.

Haddad, Yvonne. *The Muslims of America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Watt, William Montgomery. *What Is Islam?* London: Longman, 1968.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How would you summarize the life and central teaching of Muhammad?
2. How did he view the prophets who went before him?
3. To what extent do you think Muhammad presented the Ancient Wisdom for a particular time and culture?
4. How does the Qur'an differ from the Bible, the Vedas, and other scriptures?
5. How do you view Islam in relation to Theosophy?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XXI

THE LIFE AND PRACTICE OF ISLAM

FIVE PILLARS

The Islamic religion is not just a set of ideas or beliefs, or even just an inward, personal spirituality, though these are certainly parts of it, It is also a way of life and a society—and not just in an idealistic sense. The way of life is given form and structure by regular, definite, and visible practices—practices that demand perseverance and self-discipline. The Muslim society consists of those who follow these practices. The practice of Islam centers around what are called its Five Pillars: the confession of faith, prayer five times a day, giving of alms to the poor, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca.

THE FIRST of the Five Pillars is to profess, "There is no god but God (Allah), and Muhammad is the *rasul* (Prophet or messenger) of God." This statement sums up in a few words the simple Muslim faith.

It is also expressed in weekly worship. At noon on Friday—the Muslim Sabbath—one can see the faithful line up rank on rank, bowing and prostrating in unison in the mosque, and spilling over into the plaza in front of it. This is a common sight in Islamic lands that never fails to impress visitors. It expresses eloquently the unity and devotion of Islam.

Equally impressive is THE SECOND Pillar, the five-times-daily prayers said regularly every day by believers wherever they are. Islamic law carefully prescribes the manner of saying these prayers and preparing for them; their combination of legalistic form and tenacious, fervent faith is close to the spiritual heart of Islam. Five times a day the faithful Muslim's mind and heart, prompted by the muezzin, turns away from the things of the world to prayer. The times are:

1. Early in the morning, when dawn has become bright but before the sun has well risen.
2. Noon or early afternoon.
3. Late afternoon.
4. Directly after sunset.
5. Night, between darkness and dawn; usually about two hours after the sunset prayers.

If the worshipper cannot perform the prayers at the time they are called, they may be done any time until the next prayer is proclaimed.

The prayers begin and end with the petitioner standing upright but include bowing and prostration. They are said in Arabic, the language of Muhammad and the Qur'an, rather than in the vernacular language of the one who prays.

The Muslim first stands to say *Allahu-akbar*, "God is greater [than all]." Then, still standing, he or she recites the *al-Fatiha*, or opening verse of the Qur'an

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful
Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Creation,
The Compassionate, the Merciful, King of Judgement-day!
You alone we worship, and to You alone we pray for help.
Guide us to the straight path,
The path of those whom You have favoured,
Not of those who have incurred Your wrath,
Nor of those who have gone astray.

and another short chapter of the scripture. He or she then bows and says thrice or more, "Glory to the Lord, the Exalted." Then standing up, the worshipper says, "God hears him who praises him. Our Lord praise to you." And then he or she kneels, touching the forehead to the ground, to say, "Glory to my Lord, the most High," thrice or more. Finally the petitioner stands, saying again Allahu-akbar. This whole procedure, called a *raka*, is concluded by a prayer not from the Qur'an, asking God to exalt and bless Muhammad and his followers.

The five-times-daily prayers and their performance provide an intimate perception of Islam as it is lived and practiced day by day and an incomparable view of its spirit. For the devout, they are a welcome expression of faith and an added dimension to daily life. They remind the believer that he or she is a Muslim—one who worships and serves God before anything else.

Furthermore, they remind the person who prays that to be a Muslim means to be a part of the worldwide community, which, like any real community, has its traditions, its rules, and its center. One expresses this identity by doing one's prayers not haphazardly, but at the same time, in the same way, and facing toward the same center, as one's comrades in the community, The prayers, then, rank with the hajj in creating a deep sense of Muslim identity. It may be noted that, although one may say the prayers with a special intention for some personal need and may pray at any other time on behalf of one's personal petitions, there is no prayer here for individual needs, such as for daily bread or for personal favors. The Muslim knows that one's relation to Allah should be first of all one of faith, praise, gratitude, obedience, and identity with the Islamic community, and that God knows one's special needs before one can ask.

THE THIRD Pillar is almsgiving. The fundamental obligation is to give a relatively small but variable percentage of one's wealth to the needy within the Muslim community; expanded, it covers good works and attitudes of kinship in general, a helping hand and friendly smile for one's neighbor.

THE FOURTH Pillar of Islam is the fast of Ramadan. Ramadan is a lunar month of about twenty-eight days in the Muslim calendar; during this period the faithful are to neither eat nor drink between daybreak and dark, but to give attention to prayer and religion. Commonly, family and friends will gather at night to dine as soon as it is permitted, and there are traditional Ramadan dishes. Often the meal will be combined with reading aloud from the Qur'an and prayer, and will continue far into the night. Traditionally, the daylight hours were for rest and further prayer. However, many modern Muslims—including many living in the U. S. and other non-Muslim countries must continue to work days during Ramadan, adding another test to their faith. At the end of Ramadan there is, as one might expect, a festive

celebration that commences when the first sliver of a new moon indicates the end of the month of fasting and the beginning of the next month.

Because the Muslim calendar is lunar, the occurrence of Ramadan moves progressively through the seasons. When it falls in the short, cool days of midwinter, it is relatively easy to endure, but amidst the long summer days of a hot, dry climate, going without food or even a sip of water provides a stern test of Muslim loyalty. For innumerable devout Muslims, Ramadan is a strenuous test of faith, softened by support from culture and tradition and the "we're all in it together" mood of a Muslim society's observance. For many, the opportunity for a deepening of one's life of prayer and Qur'anic study is genuinely welcome. Visitors to Muslim countries, and friends of Muslims, often comment on the special atmosphere of the month of Ramadan.

THE FIFTH Pillar is one known to almost everyone who has heard anything about Islam: the pilgrimage to Mecca called the hajj. Mecca, the holy city and birthplace of Muhammad, is the focal point of Islam. As though aligned like the rays of the sun, Muslims at prayer face toward this vale in the Arabian Desert, and once in a lifetime their feet are obliged to take them down that ray to the holy place. Every year a million or more Muslims gather at Mecca in the month of pilgrimage; this assembly affords, like nothing else, that sense of unity and identity for which Islam is famous.

Of course, not all Muslims make the pilgrimage even once. Minors, the elderly, the infirm, and those without financial means are among those exempted from the obligation. For those who do go an the hajj, the rewards are substantial, not only in spiritual fulfillment, but in prestige within the Islamic family. In Muslim communities—from Mauritania to Indonesia—the returned pilgrim may add the title hajji to his or her name and will be afforded special honor.

The pilgrimage, supposed to be made in Dhu-al-Hijjah (the last month of the Muslim calendar), is thus a meeting of sacred ultimates—a return just before the beginning of a new year to the place where Islamic history began. It is said that Abraham, under God's instruction, built the cubical shrine—the Ka'ba—at Mecca with the help of his son Ishmael, ancestor of the Arab people. The Black Stone, brought from heaven by the angel Gabriel, was placed in the corner of the Ka'ba, or Holy House, which is now the center of the great open-air mosque of Mecca and is the real focal point of all Muslim worship. (Other mosques have a niche in a wall facing in the direction of Mecca.) The Ka'ba itself is covered with black and gold cloth and has a gold-encrusted door that is seldom opened, but with the sacred Black Stone still being visible. Around the Kab'ba is a broad marble pavement where pilgrims circumambulate the shrine, and beyond this, platforms for prayer.

In Muhammad's day the Ka'ba contained 360 images of heathen gods (so far had the faith of Abraham declined) but the prophet had these destroyed. Now the Ka'ba holds nothing but a few lamps. Yet for Muslims, whose faith is in the infinite God alone, in its emptiness the shrine is all the more holy. The Ka'ba is said to be an exact replica of the house of God in paradise around which angels circle as the faithful on earth circle the earthly Ka'ba.

The hajj is marked by many prescribed rituals. As the pilgrim approaches the city, probably from the seaport and airport city of Jiddah on the coast, he or she stops to withdraw from the ordinary world by performing ablutions, as before prayer, and then dons special white garments. Thereafter, until the rites are completed, he or

she must abstain from killing human beings, beast, or plant, from sexual activity, and from cutting hair or nails.

Upon arriving at the sacred site, the pilgrim kisses (or if that is not possible because of the crowd, touches) the sacred Black Stone and then circumambulates the Ka'ba seven times.

Next the pilgrim runs seven times up and down a colonnade between two hills about 450 yards apart. The usual explanation is that this commemorates Hagar's run to look for water for Ishmael.

The then pilgrim proceeds outside Mecca to Mina, where he or she probably finds quarters in a vast tent city with a temporary population of a million or so; this gathering in itself gives pilgrims an experience of the power and unity of Islam. The next day the pilgrims all proceed to Mount Arafat, upon which they must stand between noon and sundown. There, seated on a camel, Muhammad gave his farewell sermon on his own last pilgrimage to Mecca.

This "standing at Arafat" is the culminating act of the hajj, and the one act that cannot be omitted. It is the archetypal assembly of the faithful as a united army drawn out of all peoples and tongues in submission to God. Like Muhammad's followers, they will listen to a sermon by an eminent Muslim scholar as they stand at Arafat. The assembly is said to bring to mind the gathering of all peoples for judgment on the Last Day, and it repeats the first assembly that Muhammad himself commanded so heroically.

After this, the final rites represent a process of desacralization. Returning to Mina, the pilgrim throws rocks at three stone pillars said to represent devils, recalling the three temptations of Satan that Ishmael rejected.

On the last day of the formal sacred pilgrimage, the pilgrim will sacrifice a ram or goat in a certain field; part of the meat is supposed to be given to the poor. On the same day throughout the Muslim world, an animal is similarly sacrificed. Its head is pointed toward Mecca, and the Muslim cuts its throat, saying, "In the name of Allah." This recalls the ram that was substituted for Ishmael in Abraham's rite.

Next, in Mecca, the pilgrim has his or her hair cut. The hair, a token of oneself, is left behind as a sign of dedication. The pilgrim circumambulates the Ka'ba a final time.

Most pilgrims will then proceed on to Medina, although this is optional. There, in this second most sacred city of Islam, they visit Muhammad's mosque and tomb. Some Muslims desire to come to Medina to die and be buried there with the prophet and his family.

JIHAD

Out of the community ideal of Islam comes the concept of *jihad*, or holy war, which is designed to defend Islam and allow its social practice, though not to force individual conversions, which is forbidden by the Qu'ran. Occasionally called a "Sixth Pillar" of Islam, jihad is one of the aspects of Islam most disturbing to outsiders. Since Islam in principle is a community as well as a religion, presumably only an absolute pacifist would be able to reject the theory of jihad out of hand, since other communities also fight to defend or expand their ways of life. However, participation

in jihad is not an obligation, and on the deepest level many Muslims interpret the jihad as an allegory of the spiritual struggle against enemies of faith within oneself.

SUNNI AND SHI`A ISLAM

We shall now examine some of the variations of belief and practice within Islam. The most important division today is between the Sunni and Shi'a traditions. Sunni Islam is the normative Islam of most places except Iran. Shi'a Islam, the official Islam of Iran, is dominant in southern Iraq, and is represented by minorities in Lebanon, Pakistan, India, Yemen, and elsewhere.

Sunna means "well-trodden path," and refers to the consensus of traditional legal and social practices of the majority Islamic community. The 85 percent or so of the world's Muslims who are Sunni maintain considerable overall homogeneity of belief and practice without a centralized organization. The fundamental authority, after the guidance of the Qur'an, is Muslim law, interpreted not by a single individual but by the consensus of learned men who base their decisions on tradition and analogy.

Shi'a is different in tone and more complex. Shi'ites believe that after Muhammad a hereditary succession of Imams, divinely appointed and authoritative teachers of Islam, was to guide the faithful. The first was Ali, Muhammad's cousin, and after him All's eldest son, Hasan, and then Ali's second son, Husain. There were then nine others in the lineage, down to the twelfth, who was born in 869.

All of these, except the last, died mysteriously. The twelfth Imam is said to be still living but invisible. In the fullness of time he will reappear to bring justice to the earth, sometimes under the title of *Mahdi*, or "Guided One." Subsects of Shi'a recognize only part of the lineage, or variations of it. Understandably, colorful claimants to the title of Mahdi have appeared from time to time in Muslim history.

Shi'a devotion puts emphasis on Husain, the third Imam and according to them, the most worthy and tragic of all. In the sixty-first year after the Hijra—the flight of Prophet Mohammed from Mecca in 622 C.E.—Husain and his companions were killed by the forces of the Caliph Yazid in a great battle at Karbala, in southern Iraq. Shi'a has made the death of this young hero into an event that demands eternal recompense by fervent mourning and reenactment. Husain's shrine at Karbala is a mighty place of pilgrimage.

ISLAM AND THEOSOPHY II

While the content might be different, perhaps many Theosophists would profit from following a spiritual life as regular and disciplined as the Islamic ideal, even to the extent of fasting or incorporating other dietary disciplines, an occasional hajj to important Theosophical centers, and waging jihad against evil forces within oneself. The Shi'a concept of hidden teachers is also of interest, showing that the Theosophical concept of occult masters is often reflected in the religions of the world.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Christopher, John. *The Islamic Tradition*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

Long, David. *The Hajj Today*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1979.

Martin, Richard. *Islam: A Cultural Perspective*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982.

Morgan, Kenneth. *Islam: The Straight Path*. New York: Ronald Press, 1958.

Vol, John. Islam, *Continuity and Change in the Modern World*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994.

von Grunebaum, Gustave. *Mohammadan Festivals*. New York: Schuman, 1951.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How do you think it would feel to practice the Five Pillars of Islam regularly?
2. What is the inner meaning of the centrality of Mecca and the hajj to Islamic life?
3. What value is there to the fast of Ramadan?
4. How do you see the difference between Sunni and Shi'a Islam?
5. What further thoughts do you have about the relation of Islam to Theosophy?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XXII

ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

THE INNER LIFE OF THE FAITH

A discussion of Islam would be superficial if it dealt only with its outward, official history and practices while failing to mention its mystical wing, which has frequently given the faith of Muhammad another face. This tradition is known in the West as Sufism and its practitioners as Sufis. Their God is the same God as that of the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition. They seek, however, not only to follow his external commandments but also to know him intimately and even to lose themselves in ecstatic love within the depths of his being. Around the Sufis' mystic quest have clustered a number of auxiliary practices, many of great beauty: the following of spiritual masters, parables and wisdom tales, spiritual fraternities, schools of meditation, and techniques of attaining ecstasy through music, chanting, and dance.

Sufis believe their approach is grounded in the inner experience of the Prophet himself Muhammad clearly prayed deeply and knew God intimately, even experiencing trance and rapture. Certain verses of the Qur'an, such as this one cited in an earlier paper, support the mystics' quest for awareness of God everywhere: "To Allah belongs the East and the West. Whichever way you turn there is the face of Allah." (2:115)

Another verse (17:1-2) suggests the esoteric side of things. The Qur'an relates that Allah took his servant from a holy mosque to a farther mosque to reveal certain Divine signs. According to some traditions, this last passage refers to God mysteriously transporting Muhammad in a single night from Mecca to Jerusalem, and then taking him up into heaven to show him sights not seen by other mortals. Second-hand accounts of this journey probably helped inspire Dante's Divine Comedy.

Thus many Sufis believe not only that their way is that of Muhammad himself; but also that Sufism is really a timeless path known to the wise in all generations, just as, in a sense, Muhammad's declaration was but a restoration of the true primordial faith of Abraham and of Eden. Doubtless there is truth to this, represented historically by the parallels and possible influence between Sufism and Asiatic shamanism, Greek Neoplatonism, Christian monasticism, and the lore of Hinduism and Buddhism. But within Islamic history, Sufism became visible as a movement about a century after Muhammad. For some, Sufism was a reaction against the luxury and corruption, the loss of original desert simplicity and pure faith, which many serious Muslims saw overtaking the newly triumphant Islamic world.

The origin of the word "Sufi" is disputed, but the majority of scholars attribute it to the Arabic word for wool, *suf*, alluding to the coarse wool garments worn by ascetics seeking a more inward way. This garment distinguished them from those content with mere outward conformity to Islam.

The most important belief of the Sufis is one's personal relationship of faith and love to God, a love that was its own reward. Never has this attitude been more

eloquently expressed than by the mystic Rabi`a al-Adawiya of Basra (?713–801), a former slave who had been trained as a flute player. At night she would pray thus:

> Oh my Lord the stars are shining and the eyes of men are closed, and kings have shut their doors, and every lover is alone with his beloved, and here am I alone with Thee.

She said also:

> I saw the Prophet in a dream, and he said to me, "O Rabi`a, dost thou love me?" I said, "O Prophet of God, who is there who does not love thee? But my love to God so possessed me that no place remains for loving or hating any save Him."

And again:

> It is a bad servant who serves God from fear and terror or from the desire of a reward.... Even if Heaven and Hell were not, does it not behoove us to obey Him?

This is a pure essence of the Sufi spirit echoing down through the ages. As time went on, this sheer love of God came to be more and more organized, with particular practices and doctrines and societies shaping the lives of those who followed its path.

WOMEN IN ISLAM

Perhaps the mention of Rabi`a, the former slave-girl who became one of the first and, for many, the best and most beloved of Sufi mystics, would be an appropriate place to digress for a moment to talk about the place of women in Islam. This is an issue which inevitably comes up in discussion of this religion, although it must be remembered that few if any of the great historical religions have very good records in this respect, especially in terms of modern concepts of equality and interchangeable gender roles. Moreover, all have quite different patterns in different places and cultural settings.

Muslims themselves insist that Muhammad greatly improved the status of women in Arabia. There are passages in both the Qur'an and the *hadith* (traditional sayings of the Prophet) which affirm the equality of women and men. Others, however, seem to require a superior role for men, e.g., that men are of worth more as witnesses in court, and that men are to serve as women's protectors while women are to be obedient. The Qur'an does permit polygamy—up to four wives, provided they are treated equally.

Many Muslims today interpret such passages benignly, saying these provisions actually served to honor and safeguard women under the difficult conditions of early tribal society. They would not deny that later circumstances in the Islamic world have been much harsher toward women, restricting them to the home, severely limiting their education and participation in public life, forcing them to be fully covered and veiled. But they would say these practices are cultural, not truly Islamic, and should now be done away with. (It should be added that some Muslim women have declared that they prefer the traditional modest dress and veil, saying that it gives them the freedom *not* to be treated as just a sex object.)

The situation is very much in flux in the Muslim world today. I have myself known devout Muslim women who are well educated, fully in control of their lives,

and active in such professions as medicine or education. Women have been Prime Ministers of such Muslim countries as Pakistan and Bangladesh. At the same time, I have seen totally covered and restricted women in Afghanistan, and have read, as I'm sure we all have, appalling accounts from some such parts of the Islamic world. But atrocities toward women are not limited to Islam. The example of Rabi`a tells us that women have also had valued and important spiritual roles in the faith.

EARLY SUFISM

To continue, another early Sufi, Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 874), described the stages of the spiritual life leading up to *fana*, the complete passing away of the separate individual self into God. The fana state was often manifested in ecstatic spiritual intoxication. In that state, al-Bistami, hardly knowing whether they were his or God's words, did not shrink from such expressions as "I am your Lord," "Praise be to me, how great is my majesty," or "My banner is greater than that of Muhammad." The conventional were duly shocked.

Finally in 922, one of these God-possessed persons of uninhibited rapture, al-Hallaj, was executed at Baghdad for saying, "I am the Truth"—"Truth" being an attribute of Allah. The tragic al-Hallaj had taken Jesus (considered by Muslims to be the exemplar of the inward mystic) as his model of the God-incarnate man, and he was accordingly sentenced to the same fate as Jesus—crucifixion.

At the same time, a reaction in favor of a more orthodox Sufism set in. Junayd of Baghdad (d. 911) emphasized that the claims of mystical experience cannot be given priority over normative moral and customary demands of religion, and that the nature of love itself demands, even in the mystic's "identity" with God, that there be also a difference between him and God.

The great al-Ghazali (1058–1111), who had been a conventional Muslim scholar until he experienced and then sought to interpret the mystic path, made Sufism a respectable part of Islam. He interpreted Sufi inwardness as an attitude to accompany the outward acts and bring them to life.

The philosopher and Sufi master Ibn al-Arabi (1165–1240), a spiritual follower of al-Ghazali, moved in the direction of a pantheist philosophy as the intellectual expression of what the Sufi "knows" and enacts. For him, God was not only the source of all, but the sole reality. Within the divine, however, are gradations; between the human and the Divine is a realm of images that reflect the human imagination—angels, the Day of Judgment, and so forth—and religious visions and events are grounded in these images.

SHAYKHS AND SAINTS

The Sufi way has made much of *shaykhs* (spiritual teachers and masters) and *wali* (saints). Drawing initially from Shia sources, Sufis also have talked of hidden holy ones and of a coming *mahdi*, or apocalyptic teacher-savior. According to Sufism, the saints are different from the prophet Muhammad but are in their own way nearly as great. For a Sufi, to attain sainthood, (becoming a "friend of God") was a goal equal to submission in the outward expression of Islam.

Indeed, by the tenth and eleventh centuries the twin goals of sainthood and submission came together, as the notion gained force in Sufi circles that one should

submit to one's shaykh. The shaykh (called a *pir* or *murshid* in Islamic regions further east such as India) was more or less an Islamic parallel to the Hindu guru. The very self-abnegation of submitting to his commands "as a dead body in the hands of its washers" was an experience of egolessness that bore its own spiritual reward, whether the guide was truly wise or not.

Many *were* wise, and their wisdom was often expressed in peculiar tales and gnomic wisdom. We are told, for example, that a certain man fell down in a seizure on a street of perfume sellers. People tried to revive him with the various sweet odors of the tradesmen, but to no avail. Finally, someone thrust sharp, pungent, ammonious ordure before his nose, and he arose. The implication is that only by the different, even the disconcerting, can the "walking dead" be brought to life. Shaykhs have employed the methods of differentness with their paradoxes and their chanting, dancing, and trances.

Since the labors of al-Ghazali, Sufi masters generally have emphasized doing the normative devotions of Islam, but with a special mind to the inward, as well as the outward aspects. Beyond that, there are particular ecstatic techniques for knowing God that the shaykhs taught: practices such as *dhikr* (or *wird*), reciting the beautiful names of God on beads; or even whirling dances like those of the dervishes, or feats of shamanistic fervor like rending garments, eating glass, or cutting oneself without pain to show one's Divine absorption.

Practices such as these were developed by the great Sufi orders that spread throughout Islam after the tenth century. They still exist, although their power has significantly diminished over the past 100 years. For the most part they were not celibate monastic orders, though in some instances an inner core of devotees or leaders might—whether officially married or not—exemplify a level of commitment comparable to that of monks or abbots in other faiths. But for the bulk of lay adherents, the orders were more like lodges: One would receive a formal initiation by a shaykh or pit of the order, and then would practice its devotion corporately at periodic meetings and otherwise privately. Some Sufi orders, especially in the Ottoman Empire, had political and revolutionary overtones. Modern Islamic governments have suppressed some of the orders because the whole Sufi attitude was considered by modernizers to inculcate a medieval, superstitious, nonproductive mentality; ironically, at the same time Sufism has enjoyed great popularity upon discovery by many outside of Islam.

Sufi orders with their saintly masters were—and are—a great proselytizing force for Islam. It was primarily in its gentler, more mystical form that Islam entered India and Indonesia. It is easy to speculate that, without its empathetic presentation by such mystic Sufi saints, Islam might have had but little success in these cultures. Today, Sufi orders are succeeding in spreading Islam in Africa.

The prestige of the shaykh made much of Islam into a cult of personalities. Shaykhs became saints who had cosmic as well as temporal meanings. It was said to be the saints who kept the world together generation after generation Varying degrees of saints made up an invisible hierarchy: "successors," "pegs," "pillars," and finally the *qutb*, the "pole" or "axis" of the universe. There is only one *qutb*, according to a popular tradition, in every generation and when one dies another replaces him. The members of this hierarchy are the true pivots upon which the world in its inner life turns. They may not be known to the general public—indeed, a saint in his

humility may not even know himself that he is a saint, much less an axis of the world—but should he fail in the mysterious work his inward sanctity enables him to do, the social order and the earth itself would fall apart. Finally, Sufis spoke of the enigmatic leader of the saints themselves, al-Khidr, "the Green One," a generally invisible but immortal and ever-youthful guide who appears at time of need in the dreams or waking sight of the sincere quester on the mystic path.

PILGRIMAGE AND MIRACLES

The Muslim public knew well the reputations of the more visible saints. It flocked to their presences and—after their deaths to their tombs. In the heyday of popular Sufism (the twelfth through nineteenth centuries), legends of saints abounded and pilgrimages to their holy places rivaled Mecca in popularity. Many of them are still much frequented. In Shi`a areas, the shrines of imams, like that of Husain at Karbala in Iraq, are thronged by reverent admirers. Countless village mosques contain tombs of local saints, unmarked by image or picture, but well known and visible because of their coffin shape, inscription, and the many colored flags on buildings.

In the Bamian valley of Afghanistan—famous for its ancient Buddhist monastic caves but whose population is now strongly Muslim —I once came across a shrine of an "ice-burning saint." According to the local legend, this mystic came with his disciples into the valley and begged for fuel with which to cook food for himself and his band. But the villagers, not recognizing him for what he was, hardened their hearts against his request. The saint then sent a disciple into the nearby mountains to get some ice, and by a miracle he caused the ice to burn and then used it for firewood. Thereupon the awestruck villagers believed in him and besought the holy man to stay, which he did. When he died, a shrine was built over his tomb—a modest domed edifice of mud with a wall around it, all festooned with red banners. I saw bearded men of the village circumambulate the tomb inside the walls muttering chants as they went; in setting out, each stooped to pass under a table holding the Qur'an.

I sensed here both the devotional power of popular Islam and the basic similarities of the central Asiatic myths and culti of men of power, whether in shamanistic, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, or Christian forms—for the "wizard saint" has been a constant in all the many faiths that have swept across the wild mountains, deserts, and forests of that vast area of the earth.

Islam generally believes that the saints have power to perform miracles. Muhammad performed none, the miracle of the Qur'an notwithstanding. But the saints have a different calling from that of the public envoy of God. Their calling is at once more arcane yet more popularly appealing. They must work wonders to show the transcendence of spiritual attainment over the material and do works of mercy that help hold the universe together. They are masters of the realm of archetype and dream—a realm that lies above this world and below God, as written in the philosophy of al-Ghazali and Ibn al-Arabi. The *baraka*, or numinous power of the saints, rests eternally over their tombs and relics, and for this reason pilgrims to these sites are often healed and blessed.

ISLAMIC MYSTICISM AND THEOSOPHY

The relationship of Islamic mysticism and Theosophy is evident. They share not only the general idea that certain experiences or states of consciousness genuinely bring one in touch with higher realities, but also a familiar specific pattern: secret fraternities, mystic initiations, an invisible hierarchy of adepts governing the spiritual world. Having traveled extensively in Muslim lands, H. P. Blavatsky was certainly aware of these realities on both the outer and inner planes. We owe much to both the example and the beauty of the best of Islamic spirituality.

REFERENCES FOR FURTHER READING

Arberry, A. J. *Sufism*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970.

Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975.

Shah, Idries. *The Sufis*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964.

Smith, Margaret. *Rabi`a the Mystic*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1928.

————.*Readings from the Mystics of Islam*. London: Luzac, 1950.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Identify some of the main themes found in Islamic mysticism.
2. Why has Islamic mysticism sometimes been in conflict with mainstream Islam or modernizing Islamic societies?
3. How do you feel about the role of women in Islam? In other traditional religions?
4. Why has Sufism had wider appeal outside the Islamic world that other aspects of Islam?
5. Can you think of some other examples that relate Theosophy to Islamic mysticism?
6. Why has Islamic mysticism sometimes been in conflict with mainstream?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XXIII

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

SPIRITS RISING

The worldwide religious scene is like the weather—change is always in the wind. The "great religions" on which our study has heretofore been focused may look, at least superficially, like granite outcroppings able to withstand cultural buffeting and erosion for centuries, or even millennia. But as we have seen from some of the previous study papers, world religions modify themselves over the years (in practice, if not in theory) to meet new and ever-changing conditions. Internally, they may even be quite fissiparous, producing new denominations and movements as profusely as Buddhism did in Kamakura, Japan, or as Christianity did at the time of the Protestant Reformation, and as it does even today in the "Third World."

Some groups have appeared that warrant the name "new religion." In other cases, the line between a new religion and a new denomination (within a particular older religion) is not always clear. For example, should the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (Mormonism) be considered a Christian movement, as it claims, or a new religion, as some of its adversaries allege? Should Baha`i be branded a new religion, as it wants to be regarded, or a sect within Islam, as its critics assert? What about Pentecostalism, that twentieth-century version of Christianity—so radically different from what the ancient faith has generally meant before—that has swept the world and now embraces as many as one quarter of active Christians, especially in the non-western world? In any case, the *content* of the faith is what really counts, not the label. In this paper, we will consider distinctively new religions as well as innovative movements within the older traditions, which sometimes appear to function *as* a new religion in terms of doctrine and practice.

We have mentioned several examples that should be familiar to many readers: Pentecostalism, Mormonism, and Baha`i . Others from the nineteenth century in our own American society include Swedenborgianism, Spiritualism, and, in the eyes of some historians, Theosophy. More recent examples, broadly springing from the 1960s generation and its radical spiritual experimentation, would be the "Hare Krishnas," the Unification Church ("Moonies"), Scientology, and the many-faceted Neo-Pagan movement. These and others are, of course, controversial and are often called "cults." That term, however, should be used cautiously since it has become highly pejorative in the news media and popular discourse—stereotyping and distancing the group from the speaker. (Certainly there are religions that, by ordinary standards, become destructive to the full personal development of individuals within them, hi my experience, though, this may vary considerably between individuals in the group and over the life of the group's existence. In any case, one should be careful about the criteria one uses to define a "cult," and be sure it is applied fairly and on the basis of accurate information. Otherwise, it becomes simply a prejudicial term.)

A great variety of new religious movements have appeared around the world. The "new religions" of Japan—Tenrikyo, Soka Gakkai Buddhism, Konkokyo, the notorious Aum Shinrikyo, and many others—have received much publicity. So have

"spiritist" movements based in Latin America, such as Cuban Santería, Haitian Voudon ("Voodoo"), Brazilian Umbanda and Macombo. Out of India, numerous yoga and meditation groups have appeared under the leadership of particular gurus, part of that tradition within Hinduism yet also, especially as they have come westward, virtually independent: Transcendental Meditation, the Self-Realization Fellowship, Sivananda Yoga, Integral Yoga, the Ramakrishna Mission ("Vedanta Societies"), and the Brahma Kumaris (the last one of the few religions with both male and female members but exclusively female leadership). New movements of Islamic background include Subud, Sufi groups, and the Nation of Islam ("Black Muslims"). The list could go on and on, to include the "Cargo Cults" from the South Pacific, some 8,000 new religions reported in Africa, and important Chinese, Korean, Russian, and other developments.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

The first thing to emphasize is that for a new religious movement to "work" successfully, it must have two features. First, it must be sufficiently continuous with traditional religion in teaching and practice that ordinary people do not find it too alien. Second, it must be sufficiently new that it suggests an interesting fresh option, one that perhaps meets new conditions better than an older faith embedded in the past. In other words, there must be just the right degree of tension with the existing spiritual environment. (This was the case with the founders of the "great" religions: Jesus said he did "not come to destroy the law and the prophets," but to reinterpret and manifest their meaning in new ways, especially in his own death and resurrection; the Buddha exemplified a style of teaching and holiness familiar to ancient India, but in a way that established his independence from Vedic and Brahmanic traditions.)

The new movement must also be sufficiently simple so that ordinary people can easily grasp it, offering in its combination of teaching, practice, and social expression a single sure key to saving and enlightening insight. It must provide—at least to some—experience intense enough to justify leaving one's traditional faith and facing the problems that may result: possible tension with family and community, readjustment of one's psychological structure, and perhaps even persecution.

New religious movements will, of course, meet these desiderata in various ways and to various degrees, some much more successfully than others. Potential adherents, naturally, are quite different too: some will be attracted to a religion that repels others. But that is why the spiritual world is so diverse.

Let us now look at the characteristics of new religions in terms of the three forms of religious expression presented at the beginning of this course: the theoretical (teaching, doctrine, myth), practical (ways of worship), and sociological (styles of group and leadership).

TEACHING

The teaching of a new religious movement is likely to show some continuity with the spiritual background, and at the same time show significant differences. In the Judeo-Christian West, for example, new movements refer to God, but may present a more impersonal, monistic version than the familiar God the Father, against which some westerners may react. Eastern religions in the West, despite the "Hare

Krishnas," may stress the impersonal Brahman or Buddha-nature rather than their rich theistic heritage of devotion to Vishnu, Krishna, Shiva or Amida Buddha. (At the same time, Christian or indigenous movements in the East, like Tenrikyo in Japan, may offer a warmer, more personal image of God—Tenrikyo speaks of *Oyagami*, "God the Parent.")

But as though to compensate for the impersonality of ultimate reality, these alternate spiritual worldviews in the West tend to populate thickly what might be called the middle range between the human and the supreme—as does the popular piety of many religions with their saints and local gods. Here, in this middle ground, are the spirits of Spiritualism, the Masters of Theosophy, the avatars, buddhas, bodhisattvas, and God-realized saints of Eastern religions in the West. One might also mention the revived gods and goddesses of modern Paganism. From the objects of religion and spirituality one often wants both transcendence and intimacy, and these needs are constructed—or discovered—in different ways.

PRACTICES

The practical expression of religious movements varies considerably. Older groups such as the Spiritualist and New Thought churches, or the Self-Realization Fellowship and the Vedanta societies, offer "symbols of continuity" with forms of Sunday-morning worship that basically resemble liberal Protestantism, such as Unitarianism or the New England Transcendentalism, that first introduced the Eastern and "mind-cure" (New Thought) kinds of faith to America. Newer groups, from the 1960s generation on, tend to be more like Eastern religions, often suggesting a total break with the local environment by simply centering on chanting, meditation, or exotic rituals at times other than Sunday morning.

Either way, the practical expression of alternative spirituality usually centers on a single practice or activity, a readily accessible key to the power and realization that religion offers, whether it is mediumship, positive thinking, ceremonial magic, meditation, yoga, chanting, or study. This practice may be lifted out of the vast storehouse of occult and Eastern techniques, but it alone is the main practical focus.

The reasons for the single focus are obvious, A new religion, without the social supports—family, ethnic, community—of the dominant faith, must offer an experience of sufficient self-validating intensity to counterbalance their natural pull, and compensate for the cost many will feel, in giving up or commingling the faith of their forbears, for a possibly unpopular minority religion.

The new faith, therefore, cannot merely present general truths. It must center on a practice that can be counted on to give some people prompt and tangible results, in the form of peace of mind, prayers answered, or a new sense of power and purpose.

SOCIOLOGY

Similar messages accompany the group's sociology. First, the new religion is likely to be centered an charismatic leadership, especially in its first generation. It may be centered on one person who is the founder, the communicator of a special revelation or initiation, the authoritative teacher of the group's special practice, or the heir of a unique spiritual lineage in this world or the worlds of spirit. Some examples of such charismatic leaders are the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of Transcendental Meditation, L. Ron Hubble of Scientology, Mary Baker Eddy of

Christian Science, and many others. Very often the leadership includes persons who, because of gender, race, limited educational opportunities, or social status would have had little opportunity for leadership in the established religions of their time and place, yet obviously possessed outstanding gifts pertinent to that role. Such was certainly the case with the women in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century America who became Spiritualist mediums, or found equally important roles in Theosophy, Christian Science, or the burgeoning New Thought churches like Divine Science, Unity, and Religious Science. In any case the charismatic leader gathers a band of disciples; for them she or he is above all a personal center of spiritual life, ultimately more important as a personal embodiment of the religious reality than as the promulgator of any particular doctrine or practice.

The new group of teacher and disciples at first is relatively small but intense; again, it must compensate as a surrogate family or community for the natural attractions of former bonds. Tension with the surrounding religion and society may generate pressure toward internal conformity and evoke symbols of separation from the outside within the group, for example in dress, diet, or occupation.

New religious movements, however, are continually in a process of change and development. Of particular importance is the transition from the first generation (that of the founder or founders) to the second, when that initial charisma must be passed to a successor generation. Inevitably this means that it must be made routine, packaged in rites or standardized teaching rather than the spontaneous continuous flow of grace of the first formless years around the founder. The transition requires an institutional structure, with officers and programs and regular meetings or services. Only by such means can a new religion avoid the fate of the many that have not survived their first generation, and make itself a force felt through the ages.

At the same time, the view of the religion on the part of the "outside" may change too. A group that once appeared bizarre and threatening may turn out, as a result both of its own changes and of others' getting used to it, to be just ordinary neighbors who happen to have a somewhat different religion. A remarkable example of this is the Mormons, who a hundred and fifty years ago were viewed as the epitome of the "dangerous cult," but now are seen by many as the epitome of conservative, "middle America" spirituality. Much the same could be said of other once-controversial groups, from Adventism to Zen. However, new "dangerous cults" keep appearing, and same of them, like the suicidal "Heaven's Gate" and the murderous Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, really are dangerous. But most, probably, just mature and settle down, like once-rambunctious adolescents.

TYPES OF NEW RELIGIONS

We will look at types in two different ways: first, the ideological categories of those in America, and second, the structural types of new religions worldwide.

The United States has produced a vast number of religious movements from its beginning, often to the amazement of the rest of the world. But the first example definitely separate from Christianity was Spiritualism, which began in 1848 with the "rappings" heard by the young Fox sisters in upstate New York and became a vogue sweeping much of the nation in the 1850s. More recently, it has, in my view, reappeared as the UFO religions of the 1950s and after, since mediumistic communication from the "space brothers" had an important role in them, and in New

Age "channeling," which though usually from high teachers rather than deceased relatives, seems but mediumship under another name.

The Ancient Wisdom Group includes Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, modern Gnosticism, and derivatives of Theosophy such as the Alice Bailey groups, Anthroposophy, the "I Am" Activity, and the Church Universal and Triumphant. They emphasize modem recoveries of ancient wisdom, and usually a hierarchy of masters based on Theosophical experience. Initiatory Groups, like Scientology and those based on the teachings of George Gurdjieff, delineate often-demanding processes for self-transformation and awakening inner centers. On the other hand, Neo-Pagan groups, including ceremonial magic and Native American spirituality, have a more romantic flavor, presenting often beautiful and elaborate temples and rituals evoking a sense of wonder, "otherness," and spiritual power.

Eastern Religions in America, both those whose main adherents are immigrants and those that function as new religions in their attraction for occidental seekers, are varied, ranging from Vedanta and yoga to bhakti groups like Krishna Consciousness, and from Zen to Tibetan Buddhism. For westerners they may have the appeal of the different, and combine monistic thinking with impressive ritual or inner technique.

Worldwide, other categories may be used. One set may be called Restoration Movements: groups that seek to recover a culture being destroyed, often by colonialism or western expansion. A poignant example is the Ghost Dance of the Great Plains in the 1890s, when many Native Americans believed, following a prophet, that by doing a certain dance the great herds of buffalo destroyed by the whites would return, along with the ghosts of their ancestors. The Cargo Cults of the Pacific were similar.

Another set may be called Accommodationist. They adapt to changing circumstances by preserving indigenous culture in a new format, like African movements that combine Christianity with numerous native features condemned by mainline churches, such as polygamy, ancestrism, spirit-drums, and quasi-magical healing.

New Revelation religions depend on teachings delivered through a particular individual, a prophet or seer, who is able to bring enough people into the mystique of his or her newly revealed world to start a religion around them. Magical and Spirit religions do not depend so much on an individual as on a practice—such as the ceremonial evocation of gods and goddesses by certain magical orders in the U. S. and Europe, or trance-possession rites like those of Voudon or Santería—to evoke a comparable mystique of entering another magical world. Like those latter examples, based in the culture slaves brought from Africa and reconstructed in the New World, their founding may be lost in folklore and not traceable to a single individual, but they retain their power today.

Millennialist Movements stress the anticipated coming of a savior, a dramatic reconstruction of the world, and a paradisal future age. Adventist forms of Christianity have had this character, and so have Restoration movements insofar as they look to the future as well as the past. Theosophy had millennialist aspects during the years of the Krishnamurti enthusiasm.

THEOSOPHY AND NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

It is clear that the Theosophy of the Theosophical Society as a modern spiritual movement, though not strictly a religion, has a place in the pattern discussed. Indeed, it has been an inspiration for many of the new movements. The experience that many Theosophists have had of finding a new and congenial vehicle for their inner life, even at the cost of other separations, may help them to understand the like process in others. While Theosophy is still branded negatively in some "orthodox" circles, it is well past any adolescent crises, and has come into a mature role of imparting the wisdom it has—quietly but persistently—to a world much in need of any wisdom it can get. Theosophy would do well to build links with other religions, new and old, that have the vitality of the enthusiastic, visionary minority able to look toward a better world.

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Ellwood, Robert S., and Harry B. Partin. *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America*, 2d ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988.

Melton, 3. Gordon. *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 7th ed. Detroit: Thomson, Gale, 2003.

Simpson, George E. *Black Religions in the New World*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1978.

Puttick, Elizabeth. *Women in New Religions*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Wilson, Bryan. *Magic and the Millennium*. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Why do you think there are so many new religious movements?
2. What kind of person do you see as the founder of a new religious movement?
3. How would you categorize the types of new movements? In the U. S.? In the world? Don't hesitate to differ from the categories given in this paper.
4. How would you categorize the types of new movements? In the U. S.? In the world? Don't hesitate to differ from the categories given in this paper.
5. How do you see Theosophy in terms of the new religious movements in the world?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS
Chapter XXIV

THE RELIGIOUS WORLD IN THE 21ST CENTURY

RELIGION 2000

We have studied many styles of faith over the past two years, and virtually all of them are represented on the planet today. But their roles now, and in the decades to come, are not the same as in the past. The religions of today's world are unequal in role, vitality, and geopolitical influence. Let us look at the specifics. First the most important: half the world's population of six billion at the beginning of the twenty-first century belongs, at least in broad cultural terms, to two of the world faiths. Christianity claims two billion souls, and Islam one or a little more. These, together with Judaism—whose influence is far greater than its numbers—constitute the three Abrahamic faiths, and are at the center of today's religious/political ferment.

The Christian third of the world is in a remarkable position at present. Its numbers have more than doubled in only half a century, due partly to natural population increase and partly to rapid evangelization, especially in Africa and parts of Asia. Both forms of growth have occurred in traditionally Catholic Latin America as well. There, and elsewhere, rapid population growth—together with changing religious patterns induced by urbanization and an upsurge of Pentecostal and other new movements—have brought revitalization to Christianity. What all this means is that the Christian "center of gravity" is moving to the southern hemisphere, to what is sometimes called the "Third World."

That move is abetted by the relative decline of Christianity's onetime heartland and historic power-center, Europe. Today, for all their wonderful artwork and centuries-old heritage, the great churches and cathedrals of Europe are largely empty, the population of Europe itself is declining, while Christian numbers are growing—sometimes explosively—elsewhere in the world. To see thronged places of worship and vital Christian faith, one must go to Nairobi, Seoul, or Sao Paulo rather than London, Paris, or Rome. The latest theological vogue out of Oxford or Switzerland does not transfix the intellectual believing world as it once did.

To be sure, the number of active Christians in the United States remains impressive, but at some 225 million in 2000, they represent only a little over 10% of the Christian world, and that percentage will decline as the twenty-first century advances. By 2025 half the world's Christians will live in Africa and Latin America; by 2050, only about one-fifth of the world's three billion Christians will be non-Hispanic whites, whether in Europe, North America, or anywhere else. That augury may be startling to conventional images of Christianity as "white man's religion." But Philip Jenkins, in noting the religious-demographic projections in *The New Christendom*, comments that "Soon, the phrase 'a White Christian' may sound like a curious oxymoron, as mildly surprising as 'a Swedish Buddhist.' Such people can exist, but a slight eccentricity is implied."

So it is that, for all its worldwide success, Christianity is in a difficult phase as it slides from one way of being in the world to another, from being the religion of one people to that of another. Tensions have often arisen between more liberal Christians in Europe and North America and their co-religionists in other places, who are for

now likely to be more conservative. The role of Christianity is confused by this "split-level" presence it has in the world, where, as the nominal religion of the majority of the planet's "advanced" societies, it is mixed with post-Christian culture as well as of much of the struggling but immensely populous other world.

ISLAM AND JUDAISM

Islam is also undergoing a time of change in its world role, though one quite different from Christianity's. A century ago, Islam was the faith of societies considered backward, even by themselves, societies that were either parts of sprawling "Christian" empires—British, French, Dutch, or Russian—or such Islamic but decadent empires as the Ottoman or Persian. Today those nations are nearly all independent and revitalized, sometimes with the help of oil wealth, and with it the religion is feeling a new confidence as well as resentment from former humiliations. The Islamic faith is also trying to define itself in the modern world, in ways that have run the gamut from violence to a literary renaissance. More and more, Islam appears now to be going through a process comparable to the Protestant Reformation in Europe, which also spawned wars and persecutions as well as new religious thought, but in the end helped wrench Europe from one age to another.

Judaism, though remaining comparatively small in numbers, continues in its historic role of sparking intellectual life and serving as a catalyst for a good deal that happens in other religions and world history. Both the dreadful Nazi Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel have profoundly shaped contemporary Jewish self-consciousness, and have had a large role in the shaping of recent Christianity and Islam as well.

SOUTH ASIAN AND EAST ASIAN RELIGIONS

Hinduism does not have the worldwide spread of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, although its direct and indirect influence worldwide—through Vedanta philosophy, yoga classes, and Gandhi, who inspired-nonviolent action in others like Martin Luther King, Jr. is not to be. discounted. On the other hand, as India, which is 75% Hindu, becomes the most populous nation in the world during the twenty-first century, that religion will certainly remain a major force. Just as the liberal Christianity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is no longer the religion's most conspicuous face to the world, Hinduism now seems to be represented more by conservative and confrontational voices like those of the Bharat Janata Party, recently in power in India, than by the liberalism of such persons as Vivekananda or Gandhi. Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism are all religions with greater numbers than ever before, yet they are also religions in a precarious transitional position, and so some of their leaders and adherents are prepared to present a militant face to the world.

What about Buddhism and the Chinese religions? Because of their great losses in China as a result of the Communist revolution, neither has the numbers on paper they had before 1949. The relative ease with which they succumbed to the alien ideology, to sheer secularism, or (to a remarkable extent in Korea) Christianity suggests serious decline in vitality. But Buddhism retains some strength in the southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist countries and even in modernized Japan, as well as in the West, where a number of spiritual seekers have discovered the Dharma.

The present fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet (1935 -), perhaps the most prominent world spiritual leader after the Pope, has brought the religion wide visibility and respect. But despite his role as spokesperson for the oppressed Tibetan people, one cannot say that Buddhism has the geopolitical significance of Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism. It remains to be seen whether that ancient pathway to Nirvana will continue to diminish as an institutional religion (though of course its historical and intellectual legacy will carry on regardless of such a structural decrease), or whether it finds a way to keep alive its temples, monasteries, and lineages despite the "decline of the Dharma" over some three millennia (which the Buddha himself predicted).

Less sanguine hopes can be raised for the Chinese religions, Confucianism and Taoism. A few Confucian temples and rites are nostalgically maintained in Korea and Taiwan. Taoism as a folk religion is more widespread (exactly how widespread it is difficult to say) in Taiwan, among the Chinese diaspora, and in the People's Republic of China. There seems little hope, though, for effective institutional revitalization. What is of greater interest is the continuing *non-institutional* influence of these traditions. Confucian values regarding family, work, the individual in relation to the social order, and the state, continue fundamentally to shape culture in China, Korea, and Japan alike whether under Communist, corporate, or even Christian guise. One could almost say that Chinese Communism is Confucianism under another name, its mottos like "Serve the people" reflecting the ancient sage's virtues of beneficence and mutuality, and the Party cadres like the elite mandarins of old. Japan's hierarchical society and paternalistic corporations present a capitalist version of the same, and Korean Christianity offers a Christian version.

As for Taoism, it too seems to be perpetuated mainly in the form of attitudes perhaps not even consciously attributed to the religion. One could make a case, in fact, that Taoism has really had more influence in America than any other eastern religion! Consider how many more martial arts studios there are than explicitly Buddhist or Hindu, not to mention Taoist, temples; how many surfers wear the yin/yang symbol; how many people talk about the "Tao" of this or that, or "going with the flow"; and how much cultural influence the *Star Wars* movies have had, their concept of the "Force" clearly based on the *chi* or *ki* of the martial arts. (Fundamentally, despite Buddhist and Confucian influence, the martial arts are out of the Taoist tradition.)

NEW FORMS OF RELIGION?

What about the possibility, in the millennia to come, of religion taking new forms, perhaps forms unrecognizable to us as religion and almost unimaginable now? Will those forms perhaps be related to new forms of consciousness transcending the present human state, the spiritual component of beyond-the-horizon developments such as virtual immortality, implanted bio-computers linked to the brain, or a true global consciousness created technologically by implanted "radio-telepathy" devices enabling all minds to work as one?

On a more modest timescale, will the present religions, or at least the most vital of them, manage to "reinvent" themselves and perpetuate their lives centuries or millennia longer? Or will new religions arise to start the cycle over again? On the other hand, might the future bring—as some idealists hope—a universal syncretistic religion, perhaps "mystical" in tone, made up of the "best" of all present faiths?

This is not a prophecy paper, and we will not pursue these prospects extensively, beyond pointing out that history very often does the unexpected. As Philip Jenkins rightly points out in *The New Christendom*, the rapid growth of Christianity in the post-colonial southern hemisphere was not at all what many anticipated. There were those who thought that missionary Christianity was so closely linked to European soldiers and governors that, when they departed, so would their faith. Yet Christianity has grown *more* rapidly in post-colonial Asia and Africa than ever it did under European flags. Apparently dark-skinned peoples were able to discern the difference between the religion of Jesus and its often-nominal European/American cohorts more clearly than some gave them credit for.

Could a new religion under a new founder suddenly mushroom with unanticipated success, sweeping across nations and continents in the wake of imminent social, communications, and consciousness changes as far-reaching as the similar socio-historical changes that threatened or galvanized the earlier set of founders? Could the Axial Age be reenacted with one or several new religious founders? Certainly there is no lack of candidates for that awesome role. Over the last century or so, many thousands of prospective founders have started just as many new religions. Some of them have drawn adherents in the millions. Yet, thus far none of those claiming to be entirely new religions, rather than novel movements within older faiths, has shown real promise of becoming a dominant religion in one or more important culture areas, much less playing the role of the traditional Great Religions.

Serious barriers stand in the way of such large-scale religious innovation today. First, the very spiritual individualism brought by the first wave of Great Religions, now interpreted widely as individual freedom of religion as opposed to state compulsion, would challenge the imperial role that makes a new religion world-class. Under present-day political conditions, the religion of the king is not necessarily the religion of the people, and the most advanced societies are likely also to be the most pluralistic in faith. A new religion may, of course, have such an appeal as the key to contemporary spiritual conundrums as to sweep a lot before it, but it is hard to imagine it sweeping everything, unless consciousness changes so much that we don't even recognize it as religion in the traditional sense of the word.

Moreover, it is a concern that the sort of exposure afforded public figures today by the mass media would make the charisma of a new founder, and the world viability of his or her movement, harder to establish now than it was two thousand years ago. The mystery, the glamour of a personality seen only by some, and reported in writing only years after his or her departure, in an age when myth as a vehicle for meaning readily intertwined with literal truth—this is no longer accessible to us. Imagine a Jesus, a Muhammad, or a Buddha in modern dress, featured regularly on the evening news, and subject to the labors of investigative reporters. Perhaps they would remain intact as great and good persons, as have a few contemporary heroes of the spirit. But whether they would, in our kind of world, retain that numinous aureole that makes them the subjects of theologies and the central symbols of the Great Religions that swept the earth is, to my mind, more doubtful. I am not sure our age could or even should receive a founder as cultures did in former times of religious change. Our lines of communication are not right for the handling of new gospels and saviors; depending on how one looks at it, they are too dense or too thin for such a burden. The best they can do is keep the word flowing about those already established.

The nature of the established religions also impedes a new religion of their kind displacing them. What they displaced was basically local, preliterate, charismatic folk religion. What they replaced that with was religion of a new type: historical, universal in claim, articulately philosophical or theological, elaborately ethical, highly institutionalized. That kind of religion resists replacement in kind by making the stakes for salvation high and because the institutional structure in place is very strong. The new religion would probably have to be as much a new *kind* of religion as the Axial Age religions were to their predecessors. So far, this sort of competitor has not appeared.

SUMMlNG UP

But if there are no dramatic new movements, it may be that the world in the twenty-first century will continue as it has started out: a mix of both good and bad indicators, lurching from one crisis to another, but without any one apocalyptic event. In that case, statistically, in 2050 Christians should number 3,051,564,000; Muslims 2,229,282,000; Hindus 1,175,298,000; all other faiths—together with the officially nonreligious—would comprise less than a billion each out of a world population of nearly 9 billion. [Melton and Baumann, vol. 1, p. xxx]

In conclusion, let us note that patterns of religious history, though suggestive of probabilities, are not deterministic. Just as any one person can at any time decide to defy the statistical probabilities and join a religion highly anomalous to his or her social setting—and this happens all the time—whole populations could unexpectedly do the same all together, and have. Needless to say, the larger the numbers of people involved, the lower the probability that they will all move in the same direction at once—until group dynamics come into play. When sufficient energy is built up for a change, that in itself can draw in the laggards and enhance movement. So nothing about the spiritual future is set in stone.

THEOSOPHY AND THE FUTURE

How does Theosophy fit into the big picture? It is a very small movement, and one not likely to increase in anything like the dramatic growth of some larger faiths. But Theosophy does not measure its influence in terms of numbers. Theosophists understand that they have been given a worldview, a vision of the spiritual-evolutionary future, and a set of tasks that will not be fully accepted by more than a few, but which can affect the minds and work of many others, and have. In today's world of religious ferment and volatility, nothing is more important than Theosophy's view that the world religions were works of masters of the Wisdom for particular times and places. They are not of themselves absolute, but important parts in a larger overall scheme of the evolutionary development of consciousness. They each need to be appreciated, but not absolutized. If we can live and labor thus in today's complex spiritual world, we will have done our part.

BOOKS FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING

Barrett, David et al, eds. *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Ellwood, Robert. *Cycles of Faith*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003.

Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Melton, J. Gordon, and Martin Baumann, eds. *Religions of the Wo*rld. 4 vols. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clio, 2002.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. What do you think is the fundamental meaning of what is happening in world religion today?
2. How do you see the future of Buddhism? Of other South and East Asian religions?
3. Do you think it possible that a new "great religion" could arise today?
4. How do you see Theosophy's place in today's spiritual scene?

MISSION STATEMENT

The Theosophical Society in America encourages OPEN-MINDED INQUIRY into world religions, philosophy, science, and the arts in order to understand the wisdom of the ages, respect the UNITY of all life, and help people explore SPIRITUAL SELF-TRANSFORMATION.

For more information on Theosophy or the Theosophical Society, contact:

Department of Information
The Theosophical Society in America
P.O. Box 270
Wheaton, IL 60189-0270

Phone: 630-668-1571
Fax: 630-668-4976
E-mail: info@theosophical.org
Web: http://www.theosophical.org