Questions of Faith

A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity

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Chapter One

"I believe . . ."

This is a book on questions of religious faith. If one has no faith, is there any reason why one should be interested?

Leave aside for the moment the question of why one may have faith: There are good reasons why many people go through life, often very successfully, without faith. It is more difficult to see how one could fail to be *interested* in the matter. Religious faith, in whatever form, always involves one fundamental assumption – namely, that there is a reality beyond the reality of ordinary, everyday life, and that this deeper reality is benign. Put differently, religious faith implies that there is a destiny beyond the death and destruction which, as we know, awaits not only ourselves but everyone and everything we care about in this world, the human race and the planet on which its history is played out, and (if modern physics is correct) the entire universe. One can reasonably say that one does not believe in such a transcendent destiny; it is less reasonable to say that one is not interested in it. Religion implies that reality ultimately makes sense in human terms. It is the most audacious thought that human beings have ever had. It may be an illusion; even so, it is a very *interesting* one.

Most of the time, in the course of ordinary living, we assume that reality is what it appears to be – the physical, psychological, and social structures that provide the parameters of our actions. The philosopher Alfred Schutz called this "the world-taken-for-granted." There are exceptional individuals who question this taken-for-grantedness by way of intellectual reflection, individuals like Socrates or Einstein; they are quite rare. For most people ordinary reality is put in question by something that happens to interrupt the flow of ordinary living. Often what happens

is something bad – illness, bereavement, loss of social status, or some other individual or collective calamity. But the taken-for-grantedness of everyday reality can also be put in question by some very good things: an intense aesthetic experience, or falling in love, or being awed by the birth of one's first child. Either way, suddenly, it becomes clear that there is more to reality than one had previously assumed. Minimally, this is what is meant by experiences of transcendence. Such experiences are not yet religious – atheists and agnostics too become ill, get to be parents, become intoxicated by music or by love. But one could call these experiences "pre-religious": By relativizing ordinary reality they open up the possibility of a reality – or, perhaps, of many realities – that are usually hidden. One takes the step from a pre-religious to a religious perception of transcendence when one believes that the reality that lies beyond ordinary experience means well by us. Again, one need not believe this. But it is certainly *interesting* to consider the possibility.

I used to know a psychoanalyst who was a very orthodox Freudian. We had a number of conversations about religion. He found it hard to understand that an intelligent person (he generously allowed that I was such a person) could be religious. He, so he said, had been a convinced atheist as far back as he could remember, and he was sure that religion was nothing but a comforting illusion. I asked him once whether he ever had any doubts about this conviction of his. He said no, he never had any doubts. Then he hesitated and said, actually yes: He had moments of doubt about his atheism every time he listened to the choral portion of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the chorale based on Schiller's "Ode to Joy." Thornton Wilder, in his novel *The Ides of March*, puts a similar thought into the mouth of Julius Caesar. Wilder's Caesar says that he never believed in the gods (he only performed the religious rituals demanded of a public official in Rome because he thought them to be politically useful). But Caesar too admitted to occasional doubts about his atheism. This happened in some moments in the midst of battle or of some important political actions when he had the feeling that a greater power was guiding him. It also happened during the so-called epileptic aura, the acute sense of ecstasy which typically occurs just before a grand-mal attack.

On the other hand, if one has faith, why should one ask questions about it?

There are people who have faith without feeling the need to reflect about it. Sometimes one refers to this kind of faith as "child-like," but it is not necessarily something that one should look down upon. These are often people who have grown up in a social environment in which their particular faith is taken for granted, or they have had a powerful experience

which confirmed their faith and which retains its power in their memory. Or perhaps the capacity for unquestioning faith is simply a part of a certain personality type; in religious terms one could then say that such faith is a gift. The value one ascribes to reflection will determine whether one envies such people or thinks that they are missing something important. Be this as it may, most human beings (and by no means only intellectuals) feel constrained to reflect about their experiences and beliefs, if only to relate different experiences and beliefs to each other in such a way that they make overall sense. If reflection becomes systematic, one can describe this activity as theorizing. Obviously any aspect of human experience and belief can become an object of reflection. Religion is no exception. The simplest definition of *theology* is to say that it is systematic reflection about faith.

The word "theology" comes out of Christian usage and people in other traditions (such as Judaism or the religions of India) do not like to use it (often because they associate it with an overly cerebral approach to religion or because they want to distance themselves from the repressive dogmatism which, unfortunately, has been a recurring habit among Christians). However, in the simple sense in which theology has just been defined it will necessarily occur in every religious tradition, from the most sophisticated to the most primitive. A Jew might not want to attach the label "theology" to the highly sophisticated theorizing permeating the Talmudic literature, but in the aforementioned sense it is a specific sort of theologizing that goes on there (even though, with its rootage in practical considerations of religious law, it is different in character from the evolution of Christian doctrine). The same goes for the monumental theoretical edifices constructed in the course of Hindu and Buddhist history. But even in so-called primal religions – that is, traditions without sacred texts or bodies of learned religious functionaries – some sort of theorizing goes on. Thus mythology – the stories about gods and other supernatural beings – is also a very distinctive type of theoretical reflection. In other words, theology occurs whenever there is a systematic attempt to reflect about faith. For anyone who identifies with a particular tradition this reflection will be some sort of dialogue between this tradition and the individual's experience of faith. Needless to say, the present book is just such an exercise.

Scholars will differ as to the date at which full-blown theological systems first appeared in the development of Christianity – certainly no later than the time when the early Church Fathers felt it necessary to spell out their beliefs in the confrontation with Hellenistic philosophy. But there is theology – or, more precisely, a number of theologies – already in the New Testament, and not only in the letters of the Apostle Paul and the Johannine texts. Even in the Synoptic Gospels, which tell

the story of the life of Jesus, there are theological considerations that shape the telling of the story (for example, in relating events to prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures). Thus theology has been a very important feature of Christian history from the beginning. Over the centuries this process of reflection had to take account of different theoretical interlocutors: rabbinical authorities, Greek philosophers, teachers of Gnosticism and other esoteric doctrines, the powerful rival of Islamic thought, more recently the manifold theoretical expressions of modernity.

In a general way, therefore, doing theology today is not fundamentally different from what it was at any time since the early Christians had to make sense of the events around the life of Jesus. Nevertheless, there is something distinctive about the modern situation, and it is useful to recognize this: Modernity progressively undermines the social environments which support taken-for-grantedness, in religion as in everything else that people believe. This is not the place to elaborate on this important phenomenon, but the basic reason for it can be stated quite simply: People take their beliefs for granted to the extent that everyone around them does the same. Put differently, beliefs appear to be self-evident if there is a more or less unified social consensus about them. Modernity, through some of its most basic processes (such as mass migration, mass communication, urbanization), undermines this sort of consensus. The individual is increasingly confronted with many different beliefs, values, and lifestyles, and is therefore forced *to choose* between them. Choice requires at least rudimentary reflection. Religious choice, then, requires at least rudimentary theologizing.

To use a philosophical term, modernity *problematizes*. There is an old American joke (admittedly not a very good one) that nicely illustrates what is meant by this term. A soldier returns from the war. He used to be a great talker, but now he just sits and does not speak. His family is worried about him, and everything is done to make him comfortable. At the dinner table his mother gives him the food he likes best and, because she knows that he likes to put a lot of salt on his food, she places a large salt shaker next to his seat. One day she forgets, and the salt shaker is at the other end of the table. The soldier looks around, then says: "Will someone please pass the goddam salt shaker." Everyone is very happy – the returned warrior seems to have overcome the trauma that must have caused his long silence. The mother passes the salt shaker to him and says: "Son, I'm so happy that you are speaking to us again. Why didn't you speak before?" He answers: "There was no problem before."

A sociologist can say that modernity problematizes beliefs because of the high degree of *pluralism* it creates in the social environment of modern people: Where there is a plurality of beliefs, and where the individual is therefore compelled to make choices between them, a higher

degree of reflectiveness becomes unavoidable. This fact has far-reaching consequences in every area of human life. Among other things, it means that religious certainty is harder to come by. In a sense then, every reflective person, if concerned with religion at all, must become a sort of theologian. And this has yet another consequence: More than ever before, theology today should not be left to the professional theologians (even leaving aside the regrettable fact that very frequently the latter talk only to each other). Minimally, there should be a dialogue between professional theologians and others who lack such credentials. Obviously again, this book is an expression of this view.

But why should one have faith in the first place?

The verb "should" is often understood in a moral sense, as when one says, for example, that one should help people who are in trouble or that one should respect the dignity of every person. The same implication is often found in religious language: Thus one is told, in sermons or other religious pronouncements, that one *should* have faith, conversely that lack of faith (or unbelief) is a moral failure, a sin against God. This is not a very plausible proposition. If God exists, He has not made it very easy to believe in Him – the world is full of terrible things that, on the contrary, make it easy *not* to believe in Him (or at least not to believe that He is benign). What is more, assuming that God is as omniscient as He is supposed to be, He knows this, and therefore will not hold it against us if we do not manage to have faith. The verb "should" in the above question, then, is to be understood, not as a moral injunction, but simply as a request for an explanation: Are there good reasons to have faith?

There is a venerable tradition in Christian thought proposing proofs for the existence of God. The high point of this tradition can be found in medieval scholasticism, when Thomas Aquinas and other Christian philosophers put forth elegant, closely argued proofs of this kind. One can still learn from these arguments, but, at least since their critique by Immanuel Kant, it has become very difficult to accept them as the proofs they purport to be. But one does not have to be a student of Kant, or for that matter a philosopher of any persuasion, to realize that faith cannot be demonstrated like a mathematical theorem or even supported in probabilistic terms like a scientific hypothesis. If it could, it would not be faith: One believes that which one does not *know*. Unbelief is the unwillingness to step beyond what one knows with certainty or even with a reasonable degree of probability. This is not a moral failing; on the contrary, it may be a morally admirable attitude of intellectual integrity. By no means is it implied here that *faith* is a moral failing or a lack of intellectual integrity (as has been said by many critics of religion, who have

seen it as a cowardly flight from the harsh realities of life, as in Marx's characterization of religion as an "opiate"). Still, one should be able to explain why one is willing to make that step into the unknown which constitutes the act of faith.

Of course, as has been suggested before, the question does not appear in its sharpest form as long as faith is taken for granted in the individual's social environment (although in all periods of history there have been breakdowns of taken-for-grantedness as a result of either individual or collective events). The question has become very sharp in modern times. Thus it makes sense that, close to the beginning of modern history, Pascal made his famous statement about faith as a wager. We cannot know whether faith is true or not, but it is reasonable to bet that it is: If it turns out to be true, we will be gloriously vindicated; if it turns out to be untrue, we will have lost nothing (indeed, we will not be around to draw a conclusion). This probably suggests an overly intellectual understanding of faith, as if it involved the verification of a hypothesis (actually, Pascal held a much more nuanced view). But the term "wager" is helpful. Faith is indeed a sort of wager. Put simply, when one decides to have faith, one bets on the ultimate goodness of the world; conversely, one bets that annihilation is not the ultimate fate of everything one holds dear in the world.

Luther used a play of words, in Latin, when he described faith (*fides*) as trust (*fiducia*). Luther, unlike Pascal, only stood on the threshold of a modern sense of reality, and the trust he had in mind was not so much in the existence of God (which, it seems, he never doubted) but in God's grace. But we can take on his wordplay in a sharper, more modern sense: Faith is trust in the goodness of the world. In our experience there are many indications that the world is a meaningless chamber of horrors and that all human aspirations will end in an abyss of nothingness. But there are also signals of another destiny, a destiny in which one could invest hope – in the wonders of the universe and in the magnificent possibilities of the human condition. I think that my Freudian friend had something like this in mind when he mentioned Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Let me put it this way: *Faith is to bet on the ultimate validity of joy.*

Probably the most cited Biblical passage dealing with faith is from the eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews, which begins with the eloquent sentence: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." There then follows a long list of Biblical characters who acted out of faith, and the Christian community to which the letter is addressed is urged to follow their example. A little later in the chapter it is said that "whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him," yet for most if

not all the characters listed – such as Noah, Abraham, and Moses – the question was not whether God exists, but rather whether to have faith in what God told them to do. That is, God spoke to them, and their faith was a response to this divine address. With all due respect for this New Testament text, one must regretfully conclude that it is not terribly helpful to the contemporary individual who hovers between belief and unbelief (and, insofar as such individuals existed in earlier times, the text would not be very helpful to them either) – quite apart from the tension that exists between "faith" on the one hand and two other nouns in the text, namely "assurance" and "conviction": If I'm convinced, why do I need to have faith? Perhaps the author of the text intended this tension, as expressing a central paradox of faith. But this paradox can only be appreciated from within the act of faith; it is not helpful to anyone who is still contemplating the act, who asks whether one should have faith in the first place.

But that is the question that is being discussed here. It is the question of all those who find themselves in a situation where God has *not* spoken – or, if it seems that He may have spoken, one cannot really be sure about this. Put differently, the problem for faith in this situation is the profound fact of *God's silence*. I think that this silence ought to be taken with utmost seriousness, in which case the question of faith must be addressed in ways other than the one suggested by the aforementioned text.

There could be many starting points for what one might perhaps call an argument from silence. I choose a very modern author, Simone Weil (1909–43), the idiosyncratic French philosopher whom Leslie Fiedler, an American admirer of hers, aptly described as a "saint in an age of alienation": "At a time like the present, incredulity may be equivalent to the dark night of Saint John of the Cross if the unbeliever loves God, if he is like the child who does not know whether there is bread anywhere, but who cries out because he is hungry" (Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 211f). And a little earlier she writes: "The danger is not lest the soul should doubt whether there is any bread, but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry. It can only persuade itself of this by lying, for the reality of its hunger is not a belief, it is a certainty."

Perhaps only a French philosopher could have written these lines! What we have here is a sort of Cartesian reduction to certainty from within the situation of unbelief, which is the silence in which God has not spoken. Only after this reduction has taken place, Weil suggests, can a journey of faith begin. Let me quickly say that to accept Weil's starting point need not imply agreement with her description of the rest of the journey (a point to be taken up presently). But the starting point is helpful, at least for those who also find themselves in an "age of alienation."

Looking at Simone Weil's biography, one can easily see why Leslie Fiedler described her as he did. Offspring of an agnostic Jewish bourgeois family, she finished secondary school at age fifteen, was a brilliant graduate of the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure, and became a teacher of philosophy. She reflected the *Zeitgeist* to the extent of rebelling against her bourgeois background and defining herself as some sort of socialist, but even in this rebellion she took the most radical path possible. To be in solidarity with the working class, she started work in a factory, something she was singularly unsuited for. She went to Spain to join the Republican army during the Civil War, but had barely arrived there when she fell into a boiling cooking pot and had to be sent back to France. When the Germans occupied the north of France she became a refugee in the south, and worked on the farm belonging to her protector, evincing similar ineptitude. It was during this period that she became converted to Catholicism, but she refused to be baptized – not because of any loyalty to Judaism (which she never understood or was interested in understanding), but because she was offended by the in-group coziness of the Catholic community and felt that she had to remain in solidarity with all the outsiders, particularly all those who could not believe. She subsequently escaped to England, where she had a job with the Free French government set up there. She put herself on a diet corresponding, she thought, to the food ration available in occupied France, an act which probably contributed to her final illness. She died at the age of 34.

Awkward, stubborn, in perennial poor health, Simone Weil appears to us as a Quixotic figure, in some ways a modern incarnation of a classical Christian type, that of the holy fool. Perhaps it is just for this reason that she is paradigmatic of a thoroughly modern mind confronting faith – that is, confronting the silence of God. As the title of one collection of her writings aptly summarizes it, her basic stance was one of "waiting for God" – as she put it in a Greek phrase, *en hypomene* – "in patience" (the Greek word is stronger). It is in this stance that she finally claimed to have attained a kind of certainty. In other words, she did not stop at the minimal certainty pointed to in what I have called her Cartesian reduction. It seems to me, though, that Weil's starting point is also helpful for those who cannot replicate her entire journey.

Weil reduces the question of God to the point where the only indication of His presence is my suffering from His absence. It is, as it were, a point of double silence: The silence of God who does not speak, and my own silence in the face of His. Language cannot express either silence; both silences are speechless. The reference to John of the Cross shows that Weil was well aware of the fact that she was placing herself in a long tradition of Christian spirituality, most of it mystical in character – the so-called apophatic tradition (literally, the speechless tradition), which in

turn is related to the mode of theologizing known as the *via negativa*. The key proposition here is that God cannot be apprehended through human language or conceptual thought.

At the beginnings of this tradition stands a rather mysterious figure, that of the so-called Pseudo-Dionysius, also known as Dionysius the Areopagite. An author writing in Greek, probably in Syria around the year 500 CE, he took on the name of an individual reported in the New Testament as having been converted by the Apostle Paul in Athens (a common practice in classical antiquity, not meant to deceive but to indicate an identification with a tradition). Despite the uncertainties of his historical location and the highly controversial character of his thought (he was clearly influenced by Neo-Platonism and his Christian orthodoxy has been quite suspect), Dionysius has had an immense influence over centuries of Christian history. The opening lines of his *Mystical Theology* give a good idea of why he has been called the father of the apophatic tradition:

> For this I pray; and Timothy, my friend, my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. (Colm Luibheid, trans., *Pseudo-Dionysius*, p. 135)

Compare this with a text almost a millennium later, from the fourteenth-century anonymous Middle English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

> Though we cannot know him we can love him. By love he may be touched and embraced, never by thought . . . Let your loving desire, gracious and devout, step bravely and joyfully beyond it and reach out to pierce the darkness above. Yes, beat upon that thick *cloud of unknowing* with the dart of your loving desire and do not cease come what may. (William Johnston, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing*, p. 54f)

John of the Cross, the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic whom Weil refers to, stands in the same tradition with his famous metaphor of the "dark night of the soul." And indeed the same themes can be found in mystical traditions outside Christianity. There is the near-universal proposition that ultimate reality cannot be grasped by language or in concepts. The Upanishads (arguably the most splendid texts of classical Hinduism) expressed this in the formula *neti, neti* – "not this, not this" (that is, the ultimate reality is not this, nor that), and the same idea probably reached its most sophisticated expression in the Madhyamika philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism. Equally widespread is the proposition that the

mystical journey begins in a darkness in which all being, including the being of the self, is abandoned. It finds different formulations in Jewish and Muslim mysticism, as well as in the great mystical schools of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. But if the journey begins in silent darkness, it also ends in another kind of speechlessness, when the self has attained union with the ultimate. Speech, language, and conceptual thought are, so to speak, intermediate stations on the journey between God's absence and His overpowering presence. I think it is correct to place Simone Weil, despite her Catholic beliefs, into this context of trans-cultural mysticism.

I have several difficulties with this. First of all, given the consensus on these themes in what may be called a mystical internationale, what remains here of the distinctive Biblical God? It is no wonder that so many of the great mystics in the monotheistic traditions – Judaism and Islam as well as Christianity – were tottering on the outer boundaries of these traditions (to the recurring dismay of the guardians of orthodoxy). More important, this mystical journey may begin in uncertainty, but it ends in certainty: But what if the uncertainty persists? And equally important, a crucial part of the journey is the abandonment of self: But what if one refuses to abandon it? The discovery of the autonomous self (which is synonymous with the discovery of freedom) is arguably the greatest achievement of Western civilization, from its twin roots in ancient Israel and ancient Greece. Is that discovery to be reclassified as a gigantic mistake? But if the human self is the most precious reality in the world, is the ultimate reality to be understood as somehow less than that? If there is any claim to moral achievement in Western history, it is in the recognition of the infinite value of every human being: Can I conceive of a God who negates this value? I think not.

For these reasons, then, I would rather not follow Weil to the end-point of her thinking. I prefer to stay, at least for now, at the point to which she came with her aforementioned reduction, and to ask how one can proceed from there without embarking on the great mystical journey. I will use the first person singular – not with any autobiographical or confessional intent, but in order to make the account graphically clear.

I confront God's silence, I am determined to *bear* that silence, I refrain from trying to deny its reality by prematurely speaking into it. I too remain silent, and I wait – *en hypomene*. At the same time, I acknowedge that I find God's silence intolerable, even offensive. I refuse to deny *either* God's silence or my hunger for the silence to be broken. And then I find myself compelled to address – to speak into – that silence nevertheless. This, I suppose, could be called the primeval form of prayer – addressing the silent God, from whose absence I suffer. I'm not sure of the chronology of these two postures – the posture of my being silent and the posture

of breaking my silence; perhaps this is a sequence that repeats itself, or perhaps, paradoxically, the two postures are simultaneous.

And then I can begin to reflect, and I decide to reflect by looking at human reality without, for the moment, making any religious assumptions – that is, I will reflect *etsi Deus non daretur*, "as if God were not given." I then find that prayer, in one form or another, is a universal human phenomenon. Possibly the most comprehensive study of prayer is the great work with that title by Friedrich Heiler (*Das Gebet*). One can read it with a mounting sense of depression. Over the ages human beings have spoken into the silence – in simple words, in elaborate ceremonies, chanting, singing, dancing, offering sacrifices, beating drums, and playing on every sort of musical instrument – an endless cacophony of yearning sound. Could it be that there never was an answer? Weil is right: There is no way of denying the hunger. Could it be that this hunger is all there is?

Weil and all the mystics agree that one can proceed from such uncertain prayer to a blissful sense of certainty. Let it be stipulated that this progression has been plausible to some individuals (perhaps those whom Max Weber called the "religious virtuosi"). Most human beings have not been so lucky, and, within the present argument, I must place myself in that underprivileged company. Perhaps, at some point in my life, I too might attain certainty. In the meantime, if I am honest, I must acknowledge my uncertainty. I must cultivate what perhaps might be called an "interim spirituality." This further implies that I must reject the various alleged certainties that are on offer in my social situation, although, because of my hunger, they are very tempting.

In the situation in which we find ourselves in the modern world there is a multitude of such offers, not all of them religious. In the Christian context, there are three principal offers of certainty – by way of the institutional Church, of the Bible, and of spiritual experience. I am promised certainty if I throw myself into the welcoming arms of the Church. In principle, this could be any church, though it is the Roman Catholic Church that makes this offer in the most magnificent manner: The infallible Church provides me with an invulnerable certainty. Most Protestants do not think of their churches in this way. The great Protestant offer of certainty is by way of an inerrant Bible: If I cling to the text, my own spirituality can attain a sort of inerrancy. And cutting across all confessional boundaries is the offer of certainty by means of an inner experience – from the great ecstasies of the mystics to the conversion experiences of "born again" Protestantism (one may think here of the rich hymnody of the Methodist tradition and of American revivalism – "I know that my redeemer liveth") to the ecstasies of Pentecostalism, which is arguably the most dynamic religious movement in the world

today. It seems to me that each of these alleged "methods" toward certainty, while they could always be questioned, have been particularly put in question by modern critical thought – the Church by both history and the social sciences, the Bible by modern critical scholarship, and subjective ecstasies of all kinds by the findings of psychology: The Church is demonstrably fallible, the Bible is full of errors, and my ecstasies are highly vulnerable to psychological inquiry. If I am to have faith, that faith must not be based on what, if I am honest, I am constrained to call false or at least doubtful certainties. I think that this proposition touches on the deepest level of what the Reformers meant by saying that we are saved by faith alone – *sola fide*. Be this as it may, as I contemplate the act of faith, I do so while I still wait for God to break His silence.

However, even if God has not spoken to me in the way in which, supposedly, he spoke to Abraham or Moses, I can find in human reality certain intimations of his speech, signals (unclear though they are) of His hidden presence. These signals are not "proofs," but they are indications that, *if* I have faith, I can relate that faith to a number of powerful human realities. I have previously mentioned the experience of joy – that joy, mightily expressed in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which seeks eternity. There are other signals – the human propensity to order, which appears to correlate with an order in the universe beyond humankind (a man locked up in an attic can do mathematics and, as he looks out from his attic, he finds that the universe is mathematically ordered), the immensely suggestive experiences of play and humor (especially the experience of the comic as a metaphor of redemption), the irrepressible human propensity to hope (which implies a rejection of the finality of death), the certainty of some moral judgments (which imply a moral order beyond the relativities of human history), and, last but not least, the experiences of beauty (I would propose that the landscape of, say, Lake Como is an argument for the existence of God). I have long argued that one could construct an "inductive theology" that would begin with an analysis of these "signals of transcendence" (which could also be called glimpses of the presence of God in human reality). But that is another story.

These considerations do not lead to the temple of faith in a direct, incontrovertible manner. But they place me in a sort of antechamber of that temple. It is in that antechamber that I confront the traditions that claim to be revelatory of God, including that tradition that spans Sinai and Calvary. Augustine had an interesting formulation in this connection: *Nullus quippe credit aliquid, nisi prius cogitaverit esse credendum* – "no one indeed believes anything, unless he previously knew it to be believable." In other words, there is a movement from the *credendum* to a *credo* – reflection as an antecedent of the act of faith. Barring direct experi-

ences such as the mystics rightly or wrongly claim, this *credo* comes out of my response to a particular story that is communicated to me by other human beings, some living, some long dead. The story comes to me as a sort of rumor of God. I hear the story and, in an act of faith, I respond to it by saying "yes!"

As far as Christian faith is concerned, this story comes to me through the tradition that begins in ancient Israel, a tradition I may encounter by reading the relevant texts or by hearing it through the spoken words of preachers or other interlocutors. I will say "yes!" to it insofar as it connects with the rest of my experience of reality, though that connection will never be beyond any possible doubt. Eric Voegelin, in *Order and History*, his work on the philosophy of history, made the rather strange statement that Israel discovered God. Looked at in empirical terms, that is a startling but accurate statement. In the perspective of faith, however, it is evident that this discovery could not have occurred unless God had allowed Himself to be so discovered. This implies that God chose to reveal Himself, not everywhere, but in particular places and at particular times. One can then say, however hesitantly, that God's silence has not been absolute.

Chapter Two

". . . in God"

When the Apostles' Creed affirms belief "in God," of course, it has a very specific divinity in mind – in classical Christian diction, "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." That was by no means to be taken for granted in those early days of Christian history when, probably in the cosmopolitan milieu of Rome, the Creed was first formulated. Then as now, a host of other gods are on offer in the religious marketplace. The question, then as now, is quite simple:

How does this God relate to all these other gods, and why should we believe in Him over against all the others?

Christianity emerged in a situation, at the height of the Roman empire, which was remarkably similar in its religious pluralism to our situation today, at least in the large cities of the empire. Then as now, belief in the God of the Biblical tradition could not be taken for granted (by contrast to some later periods of Christian history, when the Church had established a more of less efficient monopoly, so that its faith had acquired a taken-for-granted quality). Arguably, though, religious pluralism today is unique in both its intensity and its extensiveness. There is nothing mysterious about this. It is the result of all the powerful forces of modernity – urbanization and migration, throwing people with the most diverse backgrounds into close proximity with each other, together with mass literacy and the media of mass communication, which allows access to the beliefs and values of people virtually everywhere. Thus every major bookstore in Europe and America, and increasingly elsewhere, contains inexpensive books giving reasonably reliable information about the major religious traditions of human history. And the electronic media, capped

by the Internet, provide even easier access to every conceivable religious phenomenon. This situation has thrown down a serious challenge to every institution with an absolute truth claim. It also presents both a great opportunity and serious difficulties to reflective individuals struggling to locate themselves in this emporium of religious possibilities. An author describing the explosion of new religious movements in Japan in the wake of World War II called it "the rush hour of the gods." This phrase can serve to describe the present religious situation, not only in Japan but in the countries that used to be thought of as belonging to "Christian civilization."

Both Protestant and Catholic theologians have paid increasing attention in recent years to this challenge, and ecclesiastical bodies (including the World Council of Churches and the Vatican) have set up agencies to engage in a sustained dialogue with other religious traditions. By now there is a large literature dealing with this issue, and it cannot be the purpose here to give an overview of this literature. It has become conventional to distinguish between three major theological approaches to the issue, labeled (not too felicitously) "pluralist," "exclusivist," and "inclusivist." The "pluralists" have gone furthest in renouncing Christian claims to absolute truth; the "exclusivists" continue to assert these claims in more or less feisty tones; the "inclusivists" (surprise!) take an in-between position, insisting on the unique character of Christian faith but remaining open to the truth claims of other traditions. Let me say right off that, if pushed to the wall, I must place myself with the "inclusivists," though I don't like the label (quite apart from its sounding like the political rhetoric of American liberalism, it suggests that nothing at all is to be excluded and that is a recipe for terminal mushiness). But before I spell out what I would regard as a reasonable version of "inclusiveness," it would be useful to take a closer look at the "pluralists," since they represent the most radical but also the most intellectually stimulating response to the multiplicity of religious options available today.

Probably the most prominent representative of the "pluralist" school is the British theologian John Hick, who, coming out of a Protestant background, has worked out in an impressive number of publications a "theology of religions" which leaves every kind of Christian orthodoxy far behind. Hick calls for a "Copernican revolution" in theology: We must accept, he proposes, that our own tradition is not the center around which all reality revolves; rather we must see the center as being the ultimate reality itself, fully perceived by no single tradition, though the traditions revolve around this center, each providing a specific though limited vision of the center. We must recognize that (as the title of one of his books has it) "God has many names." All religious traditions affirm a transcendent and benign reality. That is their common core, but they

approach it in very different ways. For Christians this approach is by way of Jesus, though Hick insists that the incarnation is a myth and that the trinitarian doctrine that has expressed it theologically must be abandoned (except perhaps as a heuristic tool). Christian faith, then, must be resolutely non-absolutist.

To make these points, Hick makes use in an interesting way of a concept derived from Buddhist thought – that of *upaya*. The Sanskrit term is usually translated as "skilfull means," an awkward phrase. The intention, though, is quite clear: An *upaya* is an aid, be it an experience or a conceptual tool, which is helpful on the path toward ultimate reality. It is, as it were, a crutch for those who are not yet very advanced on this path; as such, it can be freely left behind when one has acquired the skill necessary for moving on further. I don't want to be unfair to Hick, but he seems to say that the entire Biblical tradition, all of Judaism and Christianity, should be understood as an *upaya* – useful to those who, through an accident of birth, have become accustomed to this tradition, but by no means to be taken as a definitive affirmation of truth. Hick himself confesses that he could not imagine himself as ever giving up his particular Christian *upaya* – a surprising statement from someone who has spent many years in trying to enter into the universe of discourse of non-Christian traditions. Hundreds of thousands of Western converts to Buddhism, not to mention converts to Christianity and just about every other faith, suggest that the accident of birth is not as compelling as Hick makes it out to be. Even the central Biblical affirmation that God is a personal being, a being who speaks and acts, is not definitive in Hick's view: He recognizes the sharp divergence among religious traditions on the question of whether the ultimate reality is to be understood in personal or impersonal terms, but that question too should be, as he says, "shelved."

Hick is somewhat uneasy about what appears to be an equal acceptance of any and every expression of human religiosity. He would not like to bestow the status of *upaya* to, say, the Mesoamerican cults of human sacrifice. He then proposes what is essentially a moral test: Religious traditions are more or less "true" to the extent that they help human beings to overcome self-centeredness and to become open to love others. Thus he proposes that the major traditions are "more or less equally fruitful in saintliness, producing extraordinary men and women whose spirit and lives make God more real to the rest of us" (*Disputed Questions*, p. 155).

What is wrong with this argument?

The metaphor of the "Copernican revolution" in our thinking about religion is immediately appealing. It implies a rejection of fanaticism and of all parochial views of the world, and no one would want to quarrel with this attitude. However, what is wrong is the notion of truth that is

also implied in Hick’s approach. There appears to be the assumption that just about any “planet” can serve as a platform from which to contemplate the “sun” of the ultimate reality (with the possible exception of Aztec sacrificial altars). But what if, to stay within Hick’s metaphor, some of the “planets” are not facing the “sun” at all? What if they are looking the other way and mistakenly identifying the “sun” with a passing meteor? Put simply, Hick’s approach is too “inclusive” and, in this, it relativizes the conception of truth to the point where it becomes meaningless. He clearly sees this problem and for this reason introduces a criterion for distinguishing “true” from “untrue” religion – the criterion of whether a tradition induces its adherents to cultivate selflessness and altruism. But this is a purely moral criterion, which reduces the notion of “truth” to a sort of social utilitarianism. The historical record shows that some of the greatest religious figures engaged in morally dubious behavior – some were downright monstrous – while agnostics and atheists have been morally admirable. To see the weakness of Hick’s criterion, all one has to do is to transfer it from religion to, say, physics: Is one to accept or reject a discovery in physics on the basis of a physicist’s moral qualities? Does the theory of relativity depend on Einstein’s having been a nice man? If religion has anything to do with *reality* – a reality that transcends the human world, as Hick strongly insists – then the test of its being true does not depend on the “saintliness” of its representatives.

Perhaps the trouble here comes from the experience described by Hick in an autobiographical piece in which he describes how he moved to his present position from a narrow Evangelical Protestantism. It was the experience of coming into contact with all varieties of non-Christians in an increasingly pluralistic Britain – Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and so on. Many of them were morally admirable people, and so Hick found it increasingly impossible to view them as heathen, existing in some sort of metaphysical darkness. He felt compelled to say *yes* to he traditions to which they adhered. Again, no one would want to quarrel with the inter-religious tolerance and respect that often comes from such encounters. It is morally much to be recommended. But it is *not* a criterion of truth. I would argue that in inter-religious dialogue it is just as important to know when to say *no* as when to say *yes* – and it is possible to say *no* without for a moment giving up respect for the interlocutor to whom one is saying it.

“Exclusivism” has become a relatively rare stance, at least in academically respectable circles in Western countries, though it continues vigorously among academically unaccredited conservative Protestants and Catholics. In twentieth-century theology the individual most often cited in support of this stance is Karl Barth, though the relevant citations come mostly from his earlier period – he mellowed considerably in his later

years. Occasionally, though, there are theologians who take an "exclusivist" position, though they will usually give at least a nod in the direction of inclusivity. A good example in recent years is Carl Braaten, a Lutheran theologian, who in 1992 published a book with the programmatic title *No Other Gospel! – Christianity among the World's Religions*. Braaten is certainly no fanatic, but the titles of a sequence of his chapters give a good idea where he stands: "Absoluteness is a Predicate of God's Kingdom"; "Christ Alone is the Heart of the Church's Message", and – here comes the nod toward inclusivity – "Christ is God's Final, not the Only, Revelation." (This last phrasing is strongly reminiscent of the classical Muslim position on other religious traditions: They too had their prophets, but the Quran is the "seal of prophecy.")

Let me confess that I have a lot of sympathy for this type of robust assertiveness. It is more appealing than the fixed smile of ecumenical politeness. But, and here I must agree with Hick, this assertiveness becomes progressively implausible as one seriously encounters the traditions of others – not because their representatives are nice people, but because one is impressed by the insights into reality which these traditions embody. It also becomes implausible as one comes to understand the empirical conditions under which one's own tradition was formed. This latter challenge to religious absoluteness is the massive consequence of modern historical scholarship (of which more in a moment).

The theologians most often cited in support of an "inclusivist" position are the Protestant Paul Tillich and the Catholic Karl Rahner. I would not identify myself fully with the approach of either one: I have great difficulty accepting Tillich's notion of God as the "ground of being," and Rahner's "inclusion" of other traditions by calling their adherents "anonymous Christians" strikes me as being patronizing (though I'm sure that this was not Rahner's intention). I would, though, identify with the spirit in which these positions were constructed. Be this as it may, my purpose here is not to engage in detailed exegeses of this or that theologian. I will presently outline my own understanding of inclusivity. Before I do that, I want to emphasize that the issue of other truth claims is far from new in the history of Christian thought, however pressing the issue has become in the pluralistic situation of contemporary religion.

A great drama in intellectual history took place in the nineteenth century, with a veritable explosion of historical scholarship on the origins and development of religious traditions. At the core of this drama was Biblical scholarship, which made it more and more difficult to look upon the Biblical texts in the terms of Christian and Jewish orthodoxy. Rather, the immense contingencies under which these texts were produced became very clear. This is all the more impressive when one reflects upon the fact that much of this scholarship came out of Protestant theological

faculties, especially in Germany. It was a unique event in the history of religion, with scholars turning all the tools of critical inquiry on the sacred texts of their own tradition – an act of impressive intellectual courage. The inevitable result of these endeavors was to relativize the authority of these texts. This was especially troubling to Protestants, who had made the Bible the sole authority for Christian belief and life (the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*). Catholics were more troubled by what historical scholarship discovered about the origins of ecclesiastical institutions.

Ernst Troeltsch was a German Protestant theologian for whom this challenge (he called it that of "historicism") was at the center of his work. In 1901 he published a very influential work with the telling title *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions* (an English version was published in 1972). Troeltsch devoted himself to other topics (notably the work best known in the English-speaking world, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*), but the always returned again to the issue discussed in *Absoluteness*. Just before his death in 1923 he wrote a lecture (it was to be delivered in Oxford and was published posthumously) under the title "The Place of Christianity among the World Religions," in which he somewhat modified his view of the distinctiveness of Christianity.

Troeltsch lucidly summed up the question posed by "historicism": "How can we pass beyond the diversity with which history presents us to norms for our faith and for our judgments about life?" (1972 translation of *Absoluteness*, p. 61.) His answer to the question was highly sophisticated, but it came down to a key proposition: Christianity was unique as a "personalistic religion" – that is, as a religion that had at its core a view of God as person and that consequently gave ultimate validity to the personhood of human beings. As he put it: Christianity gives "the only depiction of the higher world as infinitely valuable personal life that conditions and shapes all else" (p. 112). It should be observed that Troeltsch was aware that the same could be said about Judaism and Islam; he claimed Christianity as superior to them for reasons that are not convincing but that need not concern us here. What I find most important in his approach is, precisely, the insight that the Biblical tradition emphatically validates the infinite worth and dignity of the human person. Needless to say, this insight has had immense moral consequences, but it is not only a matter of morality. Rather, it is an insight into the relation between the human condition and the ultimate constitution of reality. It was summed up by Luther in his statement that God addresses man and that man exists as long as God continues to address him. In other words, there is an ontological antiphony between the personhood of God and the personhood of human beings. And I think that Troeltsch was correct in seeing *this* as a crucially distinctive quality in Biblical religion.

However, he also proposed that this core insight cannot be held immune to the relativities of history: "Faith may regard Christianity, therefore, as a heightening of the religious standard in terms of which the inner life of man will continue to exist. But we cannot and must not regard it as an absolute, perfect, immutable truth . . . The absolute lies beyond history and is a truth that in many respects remains veiled" (p. 115). I suppose that one could call Troeltsch's position a sort of "relative absoluteness" – an oxymoron which, nevertheless, expresses his nuanced view of the matter. I find this position eminently plausible, even if, almost a century later, Troeltsch's language and conceptual apparatus would need some modifications (for example, in his rather cavalier treatment of the other two great monotheistic traditions).

But the problem of how to relate the God of the Biblical tradition to all the other gods is much older than the troubles of modern theology. It recurs in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. It preoccupied the early apologists for Christianity. I will mention only one of those, indeed one of the earliest – Justin Martyr, who wrote in Greek in the second century CE. His question, *au fond*, was how the truth of Socrates could be reconciled with the truth of the Gospel. To answer this question he coined the suggestive concept of the *Logos spermatikos* – loosely translatable as the Logos who sows His seeds. Already the Gospel of John, in its preamble, made the immense jump of appropriating for the Christian faith the Stoic idea of the Logos, the universal reason upon which the world is based, identifying it with the cosmic Christ. One could say that, in doing this, the author of the Gospel incorporated not only Greek philosophy but the entire world of Greek religion – all the gods were, so to speak, sucked into the gigantic work of redemption centered in Christ. This Logos has been present from the beginning of creation and, while He was revealed most fully to Israel and in Jesus, there is no corner of reality in which He is not present and has always been present. For Justin the "seeds" of this Logos are also "seeds" of truth. Thus, by way of the *Logos spermatikos* Socrates in some way knew Christ or, more precisely, participated in the truth of Christ. It is not implausible to extend this metaphor to "include" all the manifold worlds of human religion.

But be all this as it may, there still remains the basic question:

If our situation forces us to choose between the gods, since no god can any longer be taken for granted, why should we choose the Biblical Good?

The word "choose" will grate on the ears of believers. Within the perspective of faith it is *God* who chose *us*, and our choice is a feeble response

to His. But in this argument we are not yet in the perspective of faith; we are still asking how and why we should enter this perspective. This replicates the position outlined in the preceding chapter. It is the position of all those to whom no direct access to transcendent reality has been given – that is, those to whom God has not spoken directly. To proceed as if He had (which is the procedure implied by most advocates of orthodox or neo-orthodox schools of religion) is to base one's religious existence on a lie. It seems plausible to propose that, if God exists, He would not want us to lie.

The sacred scriptures of the three great monotheistic traditions are full of stories in which God speaks directly to human individuals. It is safe to assume that, for these individuals, the question of why they should choose this God would have been an absurd one. They *knew*, with overwhelming certainty, that *God* had chosen *them*. Thus we must assume that there was no doubt in the mind of Moses as he heard the voice coming out of the burning bush, of Paul as Christ stopped him on the road to Damascus, or of Muhammad as the angel spoke to him on Mount Hira. There is no way in which historical scholarship can ascertain "what really happened" on these momentous occasions; the historian can only record their enormous consequences.

The rest of us – the metaphysically underprivileged, as it were – can stand in awe of these apparent manifestations of divine presence. But we must also acknowledge that God has not spoken to us in such a direct manner. His address to us, if that is what it is, comes to us in a much more indirect manner. It is always *mediated*. It is mediated through this or that experience (the sort that I have subsumed under the heading of signals of transcendence), and most importantly it is mediated through encounters with the scriptures and with the institution that transmits the tradition. It is the latter mediations which give meaning to our own experience. For example, I stand in wonder as I look upon a particularly beautiful landscape and say to myself, in the words of a well-known Protestant hymn, "the hand that made thee is divine." But it is unlikely that I would say this if I had not previously encountered the idea of creation in the Bible or in the worship of the church. What happens then is that a *nexus* comes about between my own experience and the tradition.

I'm not sure that "nexus" is the best term to use here. But it tries to describe what I consider to be a very important step in the development of faith. It comes close to what Paul Tillich called "correlation," but that term suggests a rather cerebral process, and that would be misleading in the present argument. It also comes close to what Max Weber called "elective affinity" (using the term *Wahlverwandschaft*, which comes originally from Goethe, who meant by it an emotional affinity between individuals), but that is too broad a concept for what I have in mind. Perhaps

I can put it this way: The nexus comes about when I relate the tradition to my own experience and am compelled to say, "*yes, yes* – this fits!"

Now I must assure the reader: I'm not handing back my credentials as a sociologist. I'm well aware of the relativities of time and space, of my location in a particular history and a particular society. Thus my nexus with the Biblical tradition would probably not occur if I were, say, a Tibetan monk looking upon this impressive landscape. In that case, this or that Buddhist interpretation would come to mind, and it would have nothing to do with the idea of creation. However, as I have proposed before, one should not exaggerate the irresistibility of the accident of birth. Many Christians have become Buddhists, and vice versa. In the contemporary situation of widespread religious diversity, Buddhism is *available* to Christians or Jews in the Western world as it has never been before; conversion to Buddhism is an empirically real possibility, and with this conversion a very different response to the beautiful landscape becomes an option (it might, for example, be seen as a temptation to desist from the renunciation that leads to enlightenment). But in any case genuine insights are not necessarily invalidated by placing them in a historical or social context. We can say confidently that Einstein would not have revolutionized modern physics if he had been born as a contemporary of the Buddha or as a Tibetan peasant. This proposition, though, does not invalidate Einstein's contributions to physics.

All these references to choices may suggest the idea that there is a near-infinite range of such choices. That is not the case. A contemporary American Christian or Jew may choose to become a Buddhist, may even choose to become a Tibetan monk (if only in California), but is very unlikely to choose adherence to the bloody gods of ancient Mesoamerica. If one goes back far enough in the religious history of every human culture, one comes upon an interesting fact – that everywhere there is a remarkably similar substratum of experiences and ideas that I would call the mythic matrix. I'll come to that in a moment. However, in terms of what I would call intellectually serious religious options, there are two pivotal choices – between two mighty streams of religious development, one coming out of south Asia, the other out of west Asia. One may use shorthand terms for this: The two pivots are Benares and Jerusalem – the holiest city of Hinduism, on the outskirts of which the Buddha preached his first sermon, and the city where the Jewish temple stood, where Jesus died and was resurrected, and from which Muhammad ascended to heaven. I deliberately use here the language of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faith, because seen from the vantage point of Benares these three traditions are so close to each other that they appear as one single counter-option. To say this is in no way to overlook the important

differences between these three west Asian traditions, and it will be necessary to return to these at some point. For the rest of this chapter, though, the fact that I stand in the Christian tradition is more or less irrelevant; I think that a Jew or a Muslim could identify with my argument without much strain. The three traditions embody what Richard Niebuhr aptly called "radical monotheism," and as such share a common perspective on the nature of God, on the world as His creation, of history as an arena of His actions, and, last but not least, on the human condition and the nature of the self. And in all of this they are highly distinctive in comparison with the great traditions which originated on the Indian subcontinent.

Both streams of religion emerged out of the mythic matrix in what Eric Voegelin, in his great and finally incomplete attempt to write a comprehensive philosophy of history, called "leaps in being." The mythic matrix perceives reality as a unified whole. The boundaries are fluid and permeable between what we would call the natural and the supernatural, between human beings and the spirit world, between human beings and animals. In this mythic reality the human individual experiences and understands himself as being part of the cosmic whole. Religious rituals are designed to restore the connection with this cosmic harmony whenever it is disturbed. It would be a mistake to see this worldview as being left behind once and for all. It is curiously replicated in the development of children – every child lives in a mythic world before being socialized into what we now consider reality – and it also resurfaces in certain forms of psychosis. But it is also available to adults with perfectly respectable psychiatric profiles. Throughout history, in all cultures, the mythic matrix has again and again reasserted itself, typically to the great annoyance of the guardians of the official definitions of reality. In the contemporary Western world, much of what has come to be called New Age spirituality is such a resurgence of the mythic matrix. Its attractiveness lies, precisely, in the aforementioned perception of human existence as part of a sheltering cosmic harmony, in which all tensions and contradictions are resolved.

One could also call the mythic matrix a "polytheistic" view of reality, but this term is slightly misleading because the experience of a cosmic whole antedated the arrival of the gods. Still, the mythic matrix was well caught in the exclamation of the early Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus – "The world is full of gods!" Against this, the very heart of the west Asian religious experience is in the passionate assertion that "God is one!" In the early stages of that experience (still traceable in the oldest layers of the Hebrew Bible) the existence of other gods was not denied outright, but the one God, who had revealed Himself to Israel, allowed no competition from them and was infinitely more powerful. Eventually

the very existence of all other gods was denied. The oneness of God is affirmed in the basic Jewish confession of faith, the Shema – "Hear, oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." Christianity did not recant this faith, and a central concern of the christological controversies in the early Church was to ensure that the affirmation of Christ's divinity not be understood as undermining the monotheism of the Jewish tradition: Whatever else it may be, the doctrine of the trinity does *not* propose the existence of three gods. Islam, arguably more singlemindedly than the other two monotheistic traditions, insists on the oneness of God and repudiates any idea that might throw doubt on it.

What is the nexus here? It seems to me that it emerges from two experiences. One is the result of perceiving the world as reflecting a tremendous creative intelligence, which can only be ascribed to a single creator. The other is the result of detecting the same voice as it comes to me through the tradition, a voice that can only come from one single source. Needless to emphasize, this nexus does not have the quality of a "proof" – no nexus does – but it mediates between my experience of reality and what the tradition says about it. On the other hand, to affirm the oneness of God – be it in Jewish, Christian, or Muslim terms – does not necessarily lead to the proposition that all the experiences and ideas associated with the mythic matrix are pure illusions. The one God who created the world is free to manifest Himself in any part of His creation, and the mythic consciousness may therefore contain valid perceptions of His presence. Once more, the idea of the *Logos spermatikos* could be useful in what one might call a theology of the mythic matrix. Perhaps luckily, this cannot be a task for this book.

As the monotheistic traditions confront what I have called the Benares option, they will above all encounter the mighty streams of Hinduism and Buddhism (the latter incomprehensible without the background of the former). This is by no means to disparage the other great traditions of eastern Asia, notably Confucianism, Taoism, and Shinto, as well as the primal folk religions that underlie all of them. But I don't think that these raise questions for Jerusalem that are not raised, mostly in a more interesting way, by Hinduism and Buddhism. And a key question is the following:

Why should one conceive of God as a person?

Conceptions of the ultimate reality as a personal God and as an impersonal entity are to be found in all religious traditions. But it is a fair generalization that the traditions pivoted on Jerusalem greatly favor the former, those pivoted in Benares the latter. Is God a person, who therefore speaks and can be addressed in personal terms? Or is the divine a

reality beyond all personhood, neither speaking nor reachable by human speech? This is a very fundamental question, and it cannot be "shelved," as John Hick suggests. Nor is it helpful to say (as some religious thinkers have said) that He, or It, is both or is neither. Of course the ultimate reality cannot be captured in humanly constructed categories such as "personal" or "impersonal," but I want to know whether this reality is in any way capable of interacting with me in a way that does not negate my own personhood (in which, understandably, I have a considerable stake).

If God is a person, I can assume that He can address me and that in turn I can address Him. An impersonal ultimate reality is beyond any such "I/thou" relationship (as Martin Buber called it); it can only be reached if I leave behind all vestiges of my empirical self, and this is precisely what all religious teachers of this viewpoint (notably many of the great mystics) have strongly advocated. This viewpoint negates what I have earlier described as the primordial religious gesture, that of *prayer*. If the ultimate reality is impersonal, I can try to reach it through meditation, through all sorts of spiritual and even physical exercises, but it makes no sense *to pray* to It. The urge to pray is so powerful that it can be found in all traditions, including those whose most sophisticated representatives taught that the ultimate reality is impersonal. Thus Vedanta, arguably the most sophisticated form of Hinduism, conceived of the ultimate reality as impersonal, but masses of ordinary Hindus have continued to pray to this or that personal deity (in Hinduism the generic term of this type of personal devotion is *bhakti*). Thus the central schools of Buddhism have taught that the ultimate reality (*nirvana*, often described as "nothingness" or "emptiness") is utterly beyond personhood, but masses of ordinary people, especially in Mahayana countries, pray to very personal redeemer figures (the *Bodhisattvas*, who have attained enlightenment but have forgone the move into *nirvana* out of compassion for all "sentient beings" left behind). Both in Hinduism and in Buddhism one can observe this dichotomy between (in Max Weber's terms) the "religious virtuosi" and the "religion of the masses." In the west Asian traditions the conception of God as person is central on both levels. Ernst Troeltsch was correct in seeing this feature as distinctively Christian (though, it should be added, it is just as distinctively Jewish and Muslim). The Biblical God both speaks and listens. And the ultimate destiny of human beings is an eternity of this interaction, not an ocean of divinity in which all selves are dissolved.

I will tell a personal story here (I have told it elsewhere, but I do not assume that readers of this book have read other writings of mine!). On my first trip to India I was in Calcutta, on my way to visit a religious scholar, when I encountered a Hindu funeral procession. It is a shocking

sight for a modern Westerner, since there is no coffin – the corpse, in this instance an old man, lies exposed on a wooden plank. There was a rather small number of mourners in the procession, and some of them were chanting. When I reached the house of the scholar, I told him of the experience, and something made me ask him what they would be chanting on such an occasion. He said that it would probably be a passage from the second chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which he then proceeded to recite, first in Sanskrit, then in English. I had been familiar with the passage, but I had not known that it was used at funerals. When I returned to my hotel room I looked it up in a copy of the *Gita*, which the hotel management had put in the room along with a Gideons' Bible. The passage goes as follows:

> Even as a person casts off worn-out clothes and puts on others that are new, so the embodied Self casts off worn-out bodies and enters into others that are new. Weapons cut It not; fire burns It not; water wets It not; the wind does not wither It. This Self cannot be cut nor burnt nor wetted nor withered. Eternal, all-pervading, unchanging, immovable, the Self is the same for ever. This Self is said to be unmanifest, incomprehensible, and unchangeable. *Therefore, knowing It to be so, you should not grieve*. (my italics; Swami Nikhilananda, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita*, p. 20)

It is clear what this "It" is – the innermost self, the *atman*, which Vedanta Hinduism identified with the *brahman*, the ultimate and impersonal reality. The two are identical, as the famous formula of the Upanishads put it: *Tat tvam asi*, "you are that." The truth, which is supposed to console any mourner, is that this *atman* travels from one incarnation to another, none of which finally matters, until (if the proper acts of renunciation are followed) it merges with the *brahman* – as all streams end in the ocean.

I reread this passage in my hotel room and was once again impressed by its power. But I also reflected that, if I had been one of the mourners in the funeral procession, I would not have been consoled. I asked myself why. Then I thought of one word from the Greek New Testament, the word *ephapax*. When I was back home I looked it up in a concordance. It means "once and for all" and it occurs in the Letter to the Hebrews, where it refers to the "once and for all" quality of Christ's redemptive sacrifice. But I hadn't thought of Christ at all in my Calcutta hotel room. Rather, I thought of the infinite worth of *this* person, *this* body, *this* world. And I would not be consoled by a religious message – indeed, would not be personally interested in it – unless it recognized the unique value of these empirical realities. Which is why I thought of a word from the New Testament, which contains the message of the personal God, who created

this world and this embodied individual, and who promises that both have an eternal destiny that does not negate them. In other words, I found myself saying *no* to the consolation of the *Gita*, and in this *no* I found a nexus with the Biblical tradition.

This *no*, however, need not imply that the experience underlying the worldview of the *Gita* is simply an illusion. The experience in which the self loses itself in an ocean of universal being is found not only in Hinduism but in mystical movements throughout all religious cultures. It would be both presumptuous and implausible to propose that this experience is nothing but several millenia's worth of illusion. Similar to the aforementioned question about the epistemological status of the mythic matrix in the light of Biblical faith, the question here concerns the status of this particular experience. The question was asked again and again when mystical movements arose in the context of the monotheistic traditions. Meister Eckhart, arguably the greatest Christian mystic, distinguished "God" (that is, the personal God of Biblical revelation) and "Godhead" (that is, the impersonal divinity of mystical experience). The latter had priority over the former, in Eckhart's view: "God becomes and disbecomes." This view, understandably, led to the condemnation of Eckhart by the medieval Church authorities. Other Christian mystics, like John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila, were more cautious. Analogous questions were raised in response to Jewish and Muslim mystics. And interestingly one finds similar questions in other traditions, whenever an impersonal cosmic divinity was counterposed to personal redeemer figures. In Mahayana Buddhism, where there has been the ongoing problem of reconciling devotion to personal *Bodhisattvas* with the impersonal goal of renunciation, there arose the idea of the "two bodies" of the Buddha – the *rupakaya* ("body of form"), which is the form taken by Buddhas of personal redemption, and the *dharmakaya* ("body of truth"), which is the form in which a Buddha attains the ultimate impersonal reality. The terminology suggests that the original intention, similar to Eckhart's, was to give the higher epistemological status to the latter form. However, there have been Buddhist schools, possibly those closer to the "religion of the masses," who took the opposite position. In other words, it is possible to assert that both experiences are true – the experience of the personal God who speaks and in doing so bestows ultimate validity to the human self, and the experience of the impersonal ocean of divinity in which the human self dissolves. The question then is which of these two experiences has primacy.

I have suggested that, in the context of Biblical faith, there must be something like a theology of the mythic matrix. There is also the need for a theology of mystical experience. There are rich resources for this in the history of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thought. It seems to me that

a key insight for this reflection will once more have to be the silence of God. Perhaps the impersonal speechlessness of the mystical experience will then have to be understood as the silence before God speaks – or, if you will, the vastness of the universe waiting for God's word. I will have to leave it there.

If an essential nexus between the Biblical tradition and my own experience is the veridical status of the self, then the most radical challenge to this comes indeed from Buddhism. This is not only because the ultimate reality in most Buddhist schools of thought is impersonal (*that* Buddhism shares with most traditions building on mystical experience), but because one of the core doctrines of Buddhism is the denial of the reality of the self. Thus selflessness is not only a moral imperative – "lose the love of self so as to be open to love others" – but an epistemological thesis: "begin the path to enlightenment by perceiving the self to be an illusion." (This distinction, incidentally, helps to see the fatuous character of some recent efforts to construct a universal ethic in which Buddhist "compassion" is equated with Christian *agape*. I would argue that, despite some similarities on the level of practical activities, the two have very little to do with each other , indeed are almost opposites.)

The first step in the enlightenment of Gautama Buddha was the understanding of what Buddhist tradition called the Three Universal Truths. In the words of the Pali canon (the basic text of the Theravada school) these are *a-nichcha* (all reality is impermanence), *dukkha* (all reality is suffering), *an-atta* (all reality is non-self). What was taken for granted here was the Hindu cosmology of *samsara* – the endless cycle of rebirths and thus the endless repetition of suffering. The Buddha was by no means the only Hindu teacher who saw redemption as the escape from this dreadful cycle; so did, for an important example, the Vedanta school. But his view was more radical, especially in its denial of the reality of the self. The Three Universal Truths served as the starting point of his program of redemption. The cause of suffering is desire, he taught, that desire which creates *karma* (the cosmic law by which every deliberate action has consequences that stretch far beyond any particular incarnation), which in turn leads to imprisonment in the cycle of rebirths. Only the extinction of desire can bring about the extinction of suffering and thus escape from the horror of *samsara*. The Noble Eightfold Path is the basic program for the attainment of this goal, a careful discipline of renunciation. At its conclusion one achieves *nirvana*. However that final state is interpreted (there are different Buddhist versions of it), it is marked by the complete abandonment of self.

It is important, I think, to understand the liberating quality of this program. One encounters it very quickly in any contact with Buddhist spirituality. It is characterized above all by tranquillity. It can be found in

the stillness of the Buddhist shrines of the Deer Park outside Benares, especially if one arrives there from the tumultuous religious life on the banks of the Ganges – the noise of the three-hundred-thousand gods of the Hindu pantheon giving way to a profound Buddhist stillness. Perhaps the most impressive expressions of this stillness are to be found in the Buddhist aesthetic of Japan – in the stone gardens of Kyoto, in the tranquil gestures of the tea ceremony, in the quiet concentration of Zen meditation halls. I think it is this quality, more than any other, which has attracted converts from the all too busy West.

To give up the tensions and contradictions of the self is a great emotional relief. But the Buddhist doctrine of *an-atta* is also attractive intellectually. I would go further than that: If one abandons the hypothesis of God, *etsi Deus non daretur*, this doctrine becomes eminently plausible. It seems to me (this is not an original observation) that modern psychology and modern neurology have put in question the notion of the autonomous self, which has been widely perceived as, among other things, the crowning achievement of Western civilization. This self is, of course, more than an idea. It is also a lived experience and, in the biography of every individual, an ongoing achievement. Early in the twentieth century the Austrian philosopher Ernst Mach declared that, in the light of modern science, the self is not "salvageable." I think that nothing that has happened since has falsified Mach's proposition. This does not deny, of course, that millions of people continue to believe in and to experience themselves as autonomous beings. And, of course, this has vast social and political consequences, as in the international movements for human rights and democracy. This does not necessarily falsify the proposition that all of it is based on a great illusion. Western Buddhists in particular are struggling to combine their religious beliefs with a commitment to human rights and democracy. It is a strain, because it is difficult to see how an illusionary self can have rights. Be this as it may, a recurring theme in Western thought for the last hundred years has been the attempt to salvage the self which Mach pronounced to be unsalvageable.

I'm not alone among those for whom both the idea and the experience of the self is central to the sense of reality, not least because of its moral and political implications. For people of my generation this attained the status of certainty in the compelling necessity to say *no* to totalitarianism and to its monstrous inhumanity. This means saying *no* to every denial of the autonomous self, because that is tantamount to a denial of the reality of freedom. This *no* must then be said to every version of freedom-denying scientism; it must also extend, with all due respect, to the Buddhist understanding of *an-atta*. And here is yet another vitally important nexus between the Biblical tradition and my own experience.

In the perspective of Biblical faith the self is not an illusion, neither is the empirical world, because both are creations of God. It is possible to affirm this faith in a threefold *no* to the Buddha's Three Universal Truths: All reality is *not* impermanence, because at its heart is the God who is the plenitude of being in time and eternity. All reality is *not* suffering, because God's creation is ultimately good and because God is acting to redeem those parts of creation, especially humanity, where this goodness has been disturbed. And all reality is *not* non-self, because the self is the image of God, not because it is itself divine but because it exists by virtue of God's address. As to this self, its destiny is not dissolution in some cosmic impersonal reality, but rather a journey toward God.

Historical scholarship will never be able to establish just what occurred in the deserts of the Middle East, when some tribes of Semitic nomads encountered a God who was radically different from all the gods of the surrounding cultures. In the act of faith one is constrained to say that God revealed Himself to Israel in a unique way, and out of that revelation came whatever followed in later centuries. To say this, however, is not to deny *a priori* that God may have revealed Himself at other times and in other places; on this, Troeltsch had it right. Drawing the boundaries of revelation is a perilous business. And I don't think that it is an urgent task. It is sufficient to be grateful for what has been given to us in this particular tradition, and then to remain open to whatever may come to us from other sources.