
Religion Without God

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	ix
1 Clearing the decks	1
2 Religion	9
3 Images of God	18
4 Why God?	31
5 Mysticism	47
6 Non-dualism in Hinduism	59
7 Buddhism	67
8 Taoism	79
9 Profane religion	91
10 Beyond good and evil	109
11 Substance without form	124
<i>Select bibliography</i>	140
<i>Index</i>	144

Foreword

In his introduction to the Salvation Army hymnbook, in which many hymns were set to the music of popular songs, William Booth asked rhetorically, ‘Why should the devil have all the good tunes?’ I wish in what follows to approach the situation in reverse: why should Christianity, Judaism or Islam lay sole claim to the transcendental? By what right are representatives of these three expressions of theism allowed to hold the stage whenever the need is felt to refer to what John Hick describes as ‘the fifth dimension’?

And hold the stage they do, both in situations with which few are involved and those which, potentially, draw everybody in. The House of Commons begins each day with prayers conducted by a Church of England chaplain from across the road in Westminster Abbey. ‘Thought for the Day’ on BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme is almost invariably given by a spokesperson for the theistic view of life. Bishops play a leading part in determining the law of the land through their seats in the British Upper House. Religious education is still a compulsory subject in state schools, and as I write the government has announced increased aid (paid for by everybody’s taxes) to church schools, where theistic beliefs can be freely broadcast without fear of contradiction.

The assumption behind all these practices is that when it comes to religion one must turn for guidance to those who proclaim the fact of God and are experts in interpreting his will. The more frequently people are reminded of him, it is assumed, the more willingly they are likely to accept whatever frustrations life brings them and live as his obedient servants; and the sooner this message is instilled in children, the better for all.

What has to be challenged is the assumption that only theists have anything authoritative to say on the fundamental nature of being, the purposiveness or otherwise of life, human nature and human destiny. Others to whom I refer from time to time are, happily, in the process of making this challenge publicly, and I simply offer my voice in support, without further pursuing that particular aspect of the situation. Those *in situ* must continue the fight, for example to have religious instruction removed from its status as a discrete

subject in school curricula and its contents taught under the umbrella of cultural studies. (My own view is that children would be far better served by being introduced to yogic meditation on a regular basis than spending time pursuing St Paul around the Mediterranean or studying the smitings and slayings of early Israel).

It is however about the nature of religious experience that I most take issue with theists. The fact is that religion is universal and natural to *Homo sapiens*, whether it be referred to as experiencing the transcendental, the numinous, the spiritual, the mystical, or the ground of being. It has the power to lift people of all types and dimensions beyond the normal state of awareness into one which may be termed *wakened sleep*. It is the state of non-dualism which we experience when in dreamless sleep, with the extra factor that we remain awake. And I am suggesting that this heightened state can be entered into in a variety of contexts and through a range of activities. Some of the contexts are in fact world religions which encourage people to enter this experience primarily through meditation. They are discussed in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. Beyond the confines of these schools are areas, described in Chapter 9, which are not normally viewed as religious, yet produce experiences of religion which are, I suggest, just as real as those described by the mystics of the theistic churches.

This is bad news for anyone who believes in God as the sole source of religion, unless, like the mystics discussed in Chapter 5, it is in the unknown, unknowable and, above all, undiscussable *Godhead* that belief is expressed. But most theists are not mystics and their God is their own construct. This issue is discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, and the conclusion reached is that this construct has long since outlived its usefulness and should be abandoned as detrimental to genuine religious experience. This will take time, but if religion is to be rescued from God we must begin to change thought-patterns in which it too felicitously occurs. In particular, we must stop introducing it to children, whether as a warning against error or as an incentive to higher achieving. We need, quite simply, to grow up; that way, we shall be more capable of being in tune with the infinite which has no form but is a state which, entered into on an occasional basis, gives meaning to the rest of what life involves.

I hope, therefore, that the argument presented in these chapters will provide ammunition to those who wish to have all reference to God removed from public life, so that, among other benefits, people may call themselves religious without feeling that they are thereby inviting others to imprison them mentally in some kind of holy straitjacket.

My indebtedness to a host of thinkers will be obvious to any reader, but I must express special thanks to my partner Hatti Pegram for her contribution to the book: not for the ideas alone (though she will recognise some of her thoughts in what follows) but for her drive. Without it, I should still be contemplating and revising the book in my mind, worried that it would

never attain the Platonic ideal. Add to that her uncomplaining acceptance of all the daily chores during the writing, and we have in her a perfect balance of the yang and the yin: a balance also shown by Mufti the cat, with her unique way of reminding me of the time to work and the time to stop. More will be heard of her elsewhere.

Note: The events of 11 September 2001 occurred as the book was going to press, and one can only guess at the further horrors which may have taken place by the time it appears in public. Suffice it to say that if, as at this point seems likely, the culprits are found to have been people whose deep sense of injustice and hatred of the USA has been fanned by religious fanaticism, then nothing that follows is affected. Genuine religion—the experience of the numinous—opens to people a spiritual dimension which both enlightens and purifies. Man-made religion creates a God with all the human strengths and weaknesses—the prejudices as well as the insights. It sees these prejudices confirmed in various man-made writings which are lifted above criticism of any kind by accepting that they are of divine origin. There is then created an indifference to the expenditure of life in this world—whether one’s own or other people’s—with the promise of a life in heaven which is both richer and infinitely more pleasurable than anything which this world can afford. Fundamentalism, in whichever Faith it occurs, is not religion but bigotry based on superstition. It is a disease which kills.

Clearing the decks

Oh what tangled webs we weave when first we practise to believe.

(Walter Scott, adaptation by Laurence Peter)

‘God’ is the most abused and overused word in the English language. Other words may emerge from time to time to rival it for a while, but their popularity is ephemeral in comparison. ‘God save the Queen’, the British sing on formal occasions; ‘in God we trust’ proclaims the American dollar; ‘God bless us, everyone’, we echo Tiny Tim and, less innocently, ‘I’ll have his blood, God help me’. Natural catastrophes are termed in legal documents as ‘acts of God’; when asked a conjectural question the most convinced materialist may well reply, ‘God knows’; ‘Oh my God’, people (usually non-believers) say at crucial moments; and the film director Buñuel crowned it all by declaring, tongue-in-cheek, ‘I’m an atheist, thank God’. ‘God’ seems to be as essential to the language as salt to the sea or oxygen to the air.

Of course, this is not to say that the idea of God has been universally accepted. Although the majority of the populace may well have given their support, tacit or otherwise, to a belief in his existence (as they still do, according to all contemporary surveys), voices have been raised expressing considerable, and in some cases total, scepticism on the matter. In the field of philosophy, for instance, while some, such as Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, Spinoza, Berkeley and Kant, expressed confidence in his existence (even if the God they envisaged was not that of the theistic creeds), others, particularly over the past three or four centuries, have openly expressed doubts on the matter or have rejected the whole concept as irrational and unworthy of consideration. Among this group are Hobbes, Hume, Mill and Russell (to name a British philosopher from each of the last four centuries).

The most belligerent of God’s opponents among the philosophers was Nietzsche, with his proclamation of the death of God:

Where is God gone? I mean to tell you! We have killed Him—you and I!
...God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed Him!

(*The Gay Science*)

Whether Nietzsche coined that vivid phrase autonomously or had come across it elsewhere is uncertain. It was used in 1854 by Gérard de Nerval in his *Les Chimères* (Chimeras, or Myths):

Dieu est mort! le ciel est vide—Pleurez! enfants, vous n’avez plus de père.
[God is dead! Heaven is empty—Weep! children, you no longer have a father.]

It was Nietzsche’s use of the idea which had the lasting impact, however, even if it took nearly a century to become an in-house phrase. This happened with the Death of God controversy in the early 1960s, inspired by the impact of existentialist thought (chiefly Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre) on the English-speaking world. In that decade, writers whose background lay primarily in theology were challenging what seemed to many confused readers like kicking the ground from under their own feet. John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich, published his *Honest to God* in 1963, in which he famously rejected the concept of a God ‘out there’ in favour of ‘the ground of being’. His article in the *Observer* newspaper, ‘Our image of God must go’, presented the issue to an even wider audience. Other titles were even more explicit in their rejection of the God image. Tom Altizer published his *Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966) in New York; and in 1971 Penguin published Alistair Kee’s *The Way of Transcendence*, subtitled *Christian Faith without Belief in God*. The significant aspect of these writings is that they were penned not by disgruntled secularists or fervent materialists, but by people whose ambience, the context of their lives, was confessedly Christian. In the past decade further examples have sprung from the same stable. They include Karen Armstrong’s *History of God*, published in 1993, and described by A.N.Wilson as: ‘the most fascinating and learned survey of the biggest wild goose chase in history—the quest for God.’ Wilson himself contributed inimitably to the discussion with his *God’s Funeral* (1998)—a natural sequel to the death of God; and for a quarter of a century Don Cupitt has been exploring the future of Christianity (in particular) with such works as *The Sea of Faith* (1984), which led to the formation of a body of Christians under that name, some of them exploring how far their faith could withstand the demise of God, and *After God* (1997) which seeks, in the author’s words, ‘a new theory of the twilight of the gods’.

The historical developments which cradle and inspire these enquiries can be traced back to the Renaissance, when scholars first began to challenge across a broad spectrum the God-centred doctrines which had been the required focus of previous explorations. Wilson, in particular, has pinpointed some of the most

eminent thinkers over the past half-millennium who have tried to come to terms with life without God.

The supreme catalyst in this field has been the advance of science which, despite the affirmation by many of its pioneers that they remained believers, has effectively appeared to make God redundant by offering a naturalistic account of what had previously been held to be miraculous. We can identify three major steps in this process. The first, after the invention of the tele-scope, followed the astronomical discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo. The cosy picture of the earth as the centre of the universe, with *Homo sapiens* as its guardian under God, had to go: the solar system could be explained without the hand of God. The second, two centuries later, was the bio-logical revolution culminating in Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, arguably the most important, if most unread, book ever penned. Those who, no longer able to accept the God of 'the spacious firmament on high', had turned to the one who had made 'all things bright and beautiful' and of whom they could sing 'All things praise thee, Lord most high', were now brought face to face with Tennyson's 'nature, red in tooth and claw'; with the realisation that all its manifestations were brought about by trial and error rather than purposiveness; with Tom and Jerry rather than the lion lying down with the lamb. The effect of this teaching was to make God redundant in the evolution of species. We shall study in Chapter 9 the sense of awe, mystery and mysticism which nature evokes; but it is a sense which is totally independent of—and is in some ways repugnant to—the concept that, where nature's manifestations are concerned, 'the Lord God made them all'.

Where, then, was God to be found? The later Victorians turned their attention to the inner light and identified God as the voice of their consciences. To whatever extent creation and evolution could be satisfactorily explained without recourse to a divine instigator, nothing, surely, could remove him from the inner self. Then, in the early decades of the twentieth century, arrived the psychoanalysts with, in particular, Freud's teaching about the unconscious mind, suggesting that the idea of the conscience as the still small voice of God must go, to be replaced by that of an accumulation of experiences and ideas encountered at all stages of any individual person's life, which may be forgotten but never lost.

In our own time, study of our genetic structure and, in particular, the discovery of the human genome, have thrown the question of God's place in human life into even more intense relief. If we can now choose not only what sex we wish our children to be, but also whether they should be dark or fair, tall or short, brainy or just average, healthy or taking their chances as in the past, what role is left for God?

There are two problems facing anyone who is looking for an answer to this dilemma. First, as is indicated in every opinion poll about God's possible existence, while church-going is clearly on the decline, about seventy per cent of the British population (more in the USA) express a belief in God, even if it is no more than 'a God of some sort'. As one participant in a televised teach-in on the subject stated, 'Well, there must be someone there, mustn't there, else how did it all come

into being?’—unwittingly (perhaps) outlining the cosmological argument for his existence. Belief in God’s existence is expressed more fervently in the United States than in other Western countries, frequently from the viewpoint of the conservative evangelicals or biblical fundamentalists. It is an astonishing fact that in 1999, a century and a quarter after the publication of *The Origin of Species*, one of the states of the USA (Kansas) banned the teaching of evolution in its schools on the grounds that it was anti-scriptural, alien to the so-called ‘Word of God’ (one of the most potently destructive phrases in the language, as will be illustrated later). Many other states insist that the myth of biblical creationism be taught alongside the ‘theory’ of evolution, but to ban it totally meant a return to the so-called ‘monkey trial’ in Tennessee in 1926, when a teacher was found guilty in court of propagating this scientific ‘heresy’. So to suggest—as I shall do—that the time has come for *Homo sapiens* to dispense with the idea of God *in toto*, whether we’re referring to the Jewish Jehovah, the Christian Father of Jesus Christ, or the Islamic Allah, is to court trouble. But courted it must be.

The second problem springs from the first. With an overwhelming majority of the human race confessedly believing in God (even though the percentage is considerably lower among those aged below thirty) we’re looking at not only an enormous number but also a wide range of people: rich and poor, black and white, scholarly and illiterate, sophisticated and simple, cultured and superstitious. Inevitably, with such a range of believers, the concept which is believed in varies considerably. In fact, if it were possible to gather into one volume what people mean when they express a belief in God, the cornucopia of descriptions must challenge, if not totally defy, the kind of analysis on which we are embarking. Yet some sort of analysis is essential if the discussion is to be any more than a sequence of vague generalities.

Ironically, one of the main grounds for dispensing with the word God altogether is the very fact that it is laden with such a superabundance of meanings, many of them mutually contradictory. It is possible, for example, to hear one person say ‘I don’t believe in God’ and another ‘I believe in God’ and so reach the conclusion that they are on opposite sides on the matter. On analysis, however, it could be found that the non-believer is actually denying belief in the almighty-being-in-the-sky, the heavenly father who ‘holds the whole world in his hand’, while the second is simply affirming a disbelief in any kind of God ‘out there’, but would not reject what has been termed a ‘ground of being’ in which his life is focused—that is, a basic motivation or drive which inspires him to get on with his daily duties: a belief with which the first speaker might well be in total agreement. In any other sphere of human thought such a state of affairs would be viewed as ludicrous, confusing, and even potentially dangerous: yet it seems to be tolerated in religion.

What is required, then, is not just a process of linguistic analysis—though that must be included—but an examination of what people have in mind when they speak about God—or god, or gods. Granted that many use it mindlessly—

‘my God, it’s broken’ is hardly an act of prayer or a declaration of faith—there are manifestly huge numbers of people who could give some kind of explanation both of what ‘God’ means in general and of what he means to them in particular. Further, although no two accounts would be exactly the same, a number of ideas would surely recur (it would be remarkable, with such a subject, if this were not the case) from which could be extrapolated some core concepts, which become the central themes of a valid enquiry or analysis. It may not be possible to write QED at the end of the enquiry, but it will at least be one conducted without vagueness as to terms of reference.

To make such an assessment as comprehensive as possible, a number of perspectives will be necessary. This will of course include the scientific, but this is only the beginning of the story. Over the past century there has been increased communication with the East, and consequently a deepening of understanding of the religions which have played a dominant role in creating its varied cultural traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, for example. The fact that God plays no part in a large proportion of these religious beliefs is highly significant and often overlooked by the increasing numbers in the West who are turning to these religions for some kind of insights deeper than the shallow—as they view it—capitalist philosophy which pervades the air they breathe, pollutes the water they drink and poi-sons the life-giving earth. It is often considered that to reject God is to embrace this materialist outlook because it appears that by rejecting him the unbeliever is also rejecting spiritual values in favour of earthly treasures, dedicating his/her life to what the Hindus term *maya*, illusion. This misconception must be nipped in the bud.

In its turn this leads to a consideration of the other key word used in this book. The word ‘religion’, even if not as broadly as the word God, has a plethora of connotations and manifestations. Mussolini described fascism as a religion; Aneurin Bevan said the same of socialism; Keats of love. These examples water the word down to such an extent that it becomes difficult to discern anything distinctive in it. If, for example, our chief interest is our religion, then we’re all religious, whether we’re football enthusiasts, physical fitness fanatics, sexual athletes or crossword buffs. I shall be trying to illustrate that being religious is a condition shared by many more than those who express a belief in God; but it doesn’t include everybody, despite Samuel Butler’s assertion: ‘To be at all is to be religious more or less’.

My primary concern lies with the essential difference between the ‘more’ and the ‘less’, and what it is that brings about the difference. Certainly, there are some human experiences with their associated activities which some people have described as religious, even though they take place in different contexts from those usually considered to be religious (such as places of worship). These spheres include, in particular, the arts and a reverence for nature. Some remarks made to Beethoven toward the end of his life illustrate how smoothly music slots into this category. His friend Karl Peters wrote to him in 1823: ‘Granted that you don’t believe in [immortality] you will be glorified, because your music [is]

religion.’ Others have expressed similar convictions about poetry, drama and imaginative literature, about painting and sculpture. For these people, to be in thrall to a work of art is, I shall suggest, a religious experience, producing a profound sense of awe. We may not be able to analyse the nature of artistic achievement (Freud described it as ‘psychologically inaccessible’), but we can learn from Henry Moore when he said of his sculpting that he could ‘really be in control, almost like God creating something’.

The same intensity of feeling has frequently overtaken people when communing with nature. Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’, which I shall discuss on pp. 101–2, suggests that the poet was undergoing a religious experience and that the poem is a religious poem. Those committed to the God hypothesis may well describe both these spheres as channels through which God reveals himself; but this is to add a superfluous concept, and I shall be suggesting that art and nature are real expressions of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as ‘the beyond in the midst’. Whatever religion is, it certainly includes a sense of the reality of this experience.

But this is already jumping several guns. We need to investigate the meaning of the word religion—no straightforward task, as sociologists and psychologists, as well as theologians, know full well. But since my purpose, indicated in the title, is to retain the religious element in human experience without recourse to God, an examination of the word and its usage is essential. The position adopted in what follows may be described as somewhere between the materialistic stance (in its strictly philosophical sense that only matter is real) and the theological, in its etymological sense as writings about, or understanding of, God. There are theologians who don’t believe in God, certainly not in the traditional sense of that phrase. Don Cupitt is one, and the organisation which he founded, the Sea of Faith, regularly explores this way of thinking in its journal. It is in fact now quite possible to study theology while remaining devoutly atheistic, which I don’t recall of any fellow-student when I first tackled the subject. But it will make for greater clarification if the word theology is used in its original sense (its *Urbedeutung*, as the Germans would say) so that its denotation can be contrasted with that of religion without causing confusion.

With this in mind, the purpose of this book can be simply stated: it is to rid religion of theology, to rescue it from God, to declare God redundant. It requires us to look anew at our cultural and natural heritage, and to appreciate that the religious experience is one that is potentially available to everyone without their having to make obeisance in the direction of the supernatural. Religion is not a gift bestowed upon grateful receivers by an act of revelation from on high: it is a natural part of human experience which embraces many more people than actually claim to be religious. I shall in fact be suggesting that belief in the God hypothesis is not per se an expression of religion at all: for many of the alleged eighty per cent who express belief in him it is no more than a superstition which, *inter alia*, indicates a lack of willingness either to think, or accept responsibility, for themselves.

There are a number of practical implications for anyone who advocates the removal of God from our thought and speech processes, and they are discussed in the latter stages of what follows. There is, first of all, the problem of what, if anything, we are to put in his place, bearing in mind Chesterton's wry comment that if people don't believe in God, they won't believe in nothing—they'll believe in anything. With the growing popular-ity of New Age concepts, and the (less desirable) proliferation of cults of various kinds, this stricture cannot be ignored. Most of the cults are directed towards a charismatic person (usually male) who seems able to achieve a remarkable control of people's minds, and who exploits this power unashamedly. The result is the phenomenon of people laying aside all common sense and abandoning themselves to outbursts of unbridled emotion which, at least for one who has witnessed such displays, are offensively subhuman. Whatever may emerge as the essence of religious experience, and acknowledging that the human faculty of reason is not broad enough in its scope to contain the whole of—or even to explain—that experience, reason must not be cast aside. Religion may be super-rational: it is not irrational, as Wittgenstein affirmed when he described his mind-blowing investigations into logic as a religious activity.

A further problem is the sociological and cultural hold that God still exerts. As already stated, parliament in Britain begins daily with prayers, seeking his blessing on the day's proceedings (a triumph of optimism over experience, perhaps). God's strength is invoked at the crowning of monarchs, and his comfort at their funerals. Societies up and down the land—Friendly Societies, Masonic Lodges, self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, school assemblies—invoke his wisdom in their activities. A larger number of people than attend church services take their offspring to church for baptism and their deceased relatives for burial; church marriages remain popular even among people whose only link with the place is that it's the particular church they stay away from; and at Christmas millions of people the length and breadth of the land sing lustily:

He came down to earth from heaven,
Who is God and Lord of all.

No wonder Nietzsche commented:

God is dead: but considering the state the species Man is in, there will perhaps be caves, for ages yet, in which his shadow will be shown.

The question arises: what do we tell the children? Many parents feel that religious education is valuable for their offspring, not for its theoretical content but because there seems to be no other viable context for the laying down of moral guidelines—yet the alleged link between God's will and moral behaviour has been challenged for centuries, not just by philosophers but by churchmen. A noted example is Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh, who has embarked into this battlefield—which for some remains a minefield—with his

book *Godless Morality—Keeping Religion out of Ethics* (1999). There is nothing new in this aspiration, of course: Hume was saying the same a quarter of a millennium ago; but its implications must be re-examined in the present context.

All this stripping away needs some kind of forecast of its implications for the future of God-centred religion. Difficult though it is to play the prophet in this sphere, some attempt must be made if this book is to be more than a mere expression of hope, pious or otherwise, of what might be. Day-dreaming will not do in a world where we are constantly charged to ‘get real’. There have been plenty of analyses of past developments and current trends where God is concerned, often expressed in words and with references which only the initiated can understand. Here, I wish to express, as simply as possible, what religion really is, and encourage many who had not thought of themselves as religious to view at least some of their experiences of life in that way. The key requirement in this process is to remove the concept of God. We need mysticism without theology.

Chapter 2

Religion

A man's religion is the chief fact with regard to him

(Carlyle)

Like all words which relate to human experiences and accomplishments— art, education, philosophy, politics are typical examples—religion does not lend itself to any kind of simplistic definition. It can, of course, mean a particular system of belief or worship, such as Judaism, Buddhism or Shintoism, but if that were the whole story it would be a relatively simple matter to attain a picture of what religion ‘means’: one would merely have to describe how each religion operates, describe its beliefs and practices, perhaps compare and contrast one with another, and emerge with a reasonably comprehensive delineation of religions as we observe them. But this would be too facile a process: it gives, perhaps, an account which can be readily understood, but only because the field is kept too circumscribed. It may produce a meaning of religion, but only one of the many that would emerge if the field were extended and the terms of reference broadened out. To study formal religions as they present themselves may, in fact, not even draw out the most important meaning, or meanings, of the word because religion is not just a system, but a personal experience involving some kind of commitment. As C.G.Jung wrote:

So long as religion is only faith and outward form, and the religious function is not experienced in our own souls, nothing of any importance has happened.

(*Psychology and Alchemy*, 1953)

This begs the question, which will be discussed in Chapter 11, of the meaning of the ambiguous word ‘soul’, but Jung provides a clear signpost for this enquiry: religion is personal; it is within us, consciously *or otherwise*.

Etymologically the word derives from the Latin *religio* (adjective *religiosus*): but with what is that word connected? The link is often made with *religare*, meaning to bind, but even that is ambiguous: bound to what, to whom? One could say that anything to which a person is *bound* will play a dominant role in his or her life. Thus the pursuit of learning could be one man's religion, and numerous scholars might well concur: but, by the same token, the cultivation of idleness could be another's. For some, it is the desire to 'pass our days in rest and quietness', as the Prayer Book puts it; others prefer the whiff of battle in their nostrils, another mountain to climb, a new cause to champion. For countless members of the human race, football is then a religion, sex is a religion, helping the poor and the distressed is a religion, war is a religion, making money is a religion: anything, in fact, which a person thinks about most in his or her spare time.

Clearly, whatever definition, or definitions, of religion we settle for, it can be taken as a factor that plays at least a compelling part in the life of anyone who pursues it, and perhaps an all-absorbing one. It would be not a little odd for anyone to say, 'Music is my religion, but I hardly ever listen to it', or 'Alcohol is my religion, but I only drink on Saturday nights'. But is it enough to content ourselves with this loose, even amorphous, definition? If all obsessions, enthusiasms, areas of deep personal commitment constitute a person's religion, why have the word at all? Would we not be wiser, if only for the sake of linguistic accuracy, to dispense with it altogether, as W.C. Smith proposed in *The Meaning and End of Religion*, written in 1964 while the 'Honest to God' controversy was raging? This might offer the relief of a reprieve, but the respite would surely be brief. The fact is that a fair percentage of the human race accept (most of them tacitly, to be sure, but that will suffice to make the point) that there is a distinction to be made between the religious experience and the experiences that accrue from the enthusiastic pursuit of pleasurable activities. Even though I shall from time to time be suggesting (especially in Chapter 9) modifications in this vox pop distinction, Smith's recommendation that 'religion' be declared redundant on the grounds that its interpretations are too numerous seems to be a case of throwing out the gold dust with the grit.

Even Smith made one exemption, *personal piety*, from the features which he wished to exclude from any association with religion. But piety will hardly do, since it simply raises further questions with regard to its nature, its manifestation and, above all, its direction. With what, to return to *religare*, is piety *bound*? It will show itself in the exercise of self-control (from the Greek *egkrateia*, meaning, literally, making oneself thin, or holding oneself in) which would appear to exclude from the arena of religion anyone who has a lust for life. This seems, at the very least, anti-evolutionary.

It may help if we return to the first definition outlined on p. 9 and explore the characteristics frequently associated with a religion. This won't tell us comprehensively what it is to be religious, but it should help to shed some light on what Ovid termed the 'rough and disorderly mass'.

As a start, I shall use a well-known list of characteristics of religion offered by W.P. Alston in his book *Philosophy of Language*. He makes nine suggestions:

- 1 Belief in supernatural beings (gods).
- 2 A distinction between sacred and profane objects.
- 3 Ritual acts focused around sacred objects.
- 4 A moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods.
- 5 Characteristically religious feelings (awe, sense of mystery, sense of guilt, adoration, etc.), which tend to be aroused in the presence of sacred objects and during the practice of ritual, and which are associated with the gods.
- 6 Prayer and other forms of communication with gods.
- 7 A world view, that is, a general picture of the world as a whole and of the place of the individual in it, including a specification of its overall significance. [Alston presumably includes in this characteristic a belief in some kind of continuing existence after the end of this life, or, in Hindu terminology, cycle of experience (samsara).]
- 8 A more or less total organisation of one's life based on the world view.
- 9 A social organisation bound together by the preceding characteristics.

To these, and thinking along similar lines, I should wish to add:

- 10 The acceptance of certain texts as being inspired by God, so that they exemplify the distinction made in 2; may be seen as the main source of the knowledge of 4; are read publicly in the context of 3, and privately as an expression of 6.

Two points can be made immediately. First, some of the world religions either treat as unimportant or disregard entirely some of these characteristics. Only the theistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) accept that there is a connection between how I feel I ought to behave (4) and obeying the will of God. In India, Jainism and Buddhism, particularly in the Theravada expression, and in China, in Taoism and Confucianism, the idea of God is either ignored or rejected, and with it much of what is included under 5, together with 2 —the distinction between sacred and profane objects. This is a point of view shared by arguably the most religiously advanced (though that value judgment must be discussed later) system in Hinduism, Advaita Vedanta. Though teaching that the union between the self (Atman) and the ground of being (Brahman) is the moment of enlightenment, Vedanta does not view this as a supernatural experience, but rather as the end of all *human* endeavour, and therefore as a thoroughly natural, though not universally experienced (at any rate not in this life) happening. (The word supernatural is another of the vague terms which must be examined in more detail later.) Zen Buddhists and, among Christians, Quakers and Salvationists have only a modicum of ritual in their religious activities, and numerous hermits, mystics and other contemplatives over the centuries have had little to do with any social organisation, often being treated

with suspicion by those who do. It seems that the manifestation of the characteristics which Alston outlines has been a pick-and-mix affair so far as the world's religions are concerned.

The second area of discussion arising from the list springs from the fact that a host of people belong to organisations which would normally be categorised under the umbrella of secular rather than religious, yet still evince many of the characteristics that Alston describes. These include bodies or clubs whose interests focus on the academic, political, social, cultural and sporting. Let's take just one example—the supporters' club of a professional football team. Fans may not believe in the God as proclaimed in local churches, but will treat the key members of their team—and with some clubs like Manchester United *all* its members—as at least demigods. Souvenir programmes, especially those gained in exotic places or on occasions of great triumphs, together with other memorabilia of the club, are treated with a reverence which would seem to reflect a sense of the sacred. Club meetings will follow a certain invariable pattern which becomes fixed and ritualistic—a ritual which is continued on the terraces as club choruses, even hymns, perhaps—are chanted by the devotees. Supporters will be expected to be suitably deferential in their attitude to club personnel and property, and—though this is often less obvious—to behave themselves on the terraces. Awe towards the club and its history, adoration of its players and manager, guilt at failing to support the team on certain occasions, reflect the 'characteristic religious feelings'. Prayer is expressed in the voluble support for the team during a game, prayers of exculpation when they lose and of thanks-giving when they win, so that a liturgist could well use their emotions as a case study. The world view is simple and basic: the team is the best in the land or—if we are to refer again to Manchester United—in the world. Genuine fans will spend virtually all their spare time either thinking or talking about the club, or attending meetings, or going to matches near and far; and will gladly sacrifice all their spare cash in the process. The club is the social organisation, and the club's magazine (fanzine), together with newspaper reports about the team's doings, provide its scriptures. Thus we find all the characteristics of a religion (some, admittedly, more obvious than others) in a football club. It seems that we must conclude either that Alston's list, especially No. 9, is too broadly based (or is frankly wrong) or that our view and definition of religion must be changed.

It should help the enquiry if, as a working hypothesis, we could achieve by a process of elimination some kind of consensus as to which of the ten features are a *sine qua non* of religion and which can be included on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. On this basis I think we can immediately exclude three of Alston's suggestions (Nos 2, 3 and 4), together with the one that I added. It is not essential to distinguish between sacred and profane objects; otherwise, to give one small but significant example, the Quakers, members of the Society of Friends, could not be described as religious. Their rejection of the sacraments of baptism and holy communion springs from their conviction that everything in life is sacred,

and that to state otherwise is to fall into ‘the scandal of the particular’: the view that some things, and some people, have a special hold on sacredness which separates them from others of their kind. For that reason they have no priests, believing instead in the priesthood of all believers. If no distinction is made between the sacred and the secular, it follows that there will be no ritual focused on sacred objects. The centrality of this characteristic of religion is, in fact, more widely rejected than the first, since there are plenty of people who assert their religious convictions without engaging themselves in any kind of related communal worship. Zen Buddhism actually warns its devotees that ritual is generally harmful to real religion, since outward observances can easily be mistaken for inner meaning or reality; and Hinduism, in its triumvirate of major *obstacles* to the attaining of *moksha* (enlightenment) includes *dharma*—religious rules and observances—alongside *artha* (wealth) and *kama* (desire). It has been well said (though the pun is not so effective in Sanskrit) that many a man prays on his knees on the Sabbath and on his neighbours for the rest of the week.

With equal confidence we can sideline two related characteristics: the moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods, and the acceptance of supernaturally inspired texts which are held to be the main source of instruction as to the code’s content. There are enough thinking and concerned people in the world, and enough non-religious societies—humanist, secular— among whom moral and social values are subjects of deep reflection and even anguish to make these the most easily dispensable of all allegedly religious characteristics. Many committed members of the theistic religions, in fact, find no problem with this dispensation, as is illustrated in Bishop Holloway’s stance, already mentioned. Eastern religions are quite indifferent to what has been termed in the West ‘the morality of divine commands’. For example, at the heart of the moral teaching of the Chinese philosophy of Taoism is the admonition not to obey the will of God (or of the Tao) but to be natural. Confucius, while often referring to ‘the way of heaven’, uses the phrase as a synonym for the best as we understand it; and Hinduism and Buddhism both offer their moral injunctions as guidelines rather than a formal code, a piece of advice from those who are aware of the moral pitfalls ahead rather than a take-them-or-suffer-the-consequences set of injunctions from a God who, having made the rules up, has the absolute authority to lay the law down.

The rejection of divinely inspired texts is a corollary of the view that ‘I ought’ means ‘God wills’, and it is the theistic religions which face the tallest hurdle here. The treatment of their scriptures as the word of God has been their rock in more senses than one: a rock can both give a firm foundation and destroy whatever and whoever founders on it. True, the Hindus have their Vedas, Buddhists their Dharmapada, Taoists their *Tao Te Ching* and Confucians the Analects. However, the authority of these classics lies not in their origin but in the length of time (up to four millennia for the Vedas) that they have proved inspirational to their readers. But to be inspirational is different from being supernaturally inspired, otherwise the cricketers’ *Wisden* or the ‘big book’ of

Alcoholics Anonymous must be given equal status. Both these issues—the link between morals and religion and the importance of sacred texts—are important for our enquiry and will be considered at greater length in Chapter 10; for the present it is enough to deny that they are essential to a religion, in the sense that without them it would lose its *raison d'être*.

The characteristics outlined in the middle block of Alston's list cannot be assessed so straightforwardly. Clearly, his description of religious feelings (5) could be dispensed with if he had implied that they tend to be aroused *only* in the presence of sacred objects or during ritual since, as we have seen, these factors are not viewed as essential to a religion. Nor should it be retained if the examples of the relevant feelings imply obeisance and humility before a God such as the theistic religions proclaim (the sense of guilt and adoration are the examples Alston uses). However, whatever the ultimate definition of religion may be, it is unlikely to exclude the subject's feelings. It would be difficult to take seriously any person who confessed himself to be religious, but felt nothing in particular about it (along the lines described by a student of mine who began an essay on yoga with the words, 'My aunt has no problem with her yoga: she fits it in between her sauna and her bridge'). No doubt there are adherents of all the world's religions who are dispassionate to the point of being soulless (if that word doesn't beg too many questions at this stage) about their religion, but they are seldom likely to be more than also-rans in the religious stakes. A sense of awe and, especially, mystery seem natural concomitants in this field: it is, after all, an indication of the mysterious nature of the subject that makes any exploration into its meaning, such as this present exercise, both tortuous and hazardous. It seems reasonable, therefore, to retain some of Alston's 'characteristic feelings' (the sense of awe and mystery) as essential to religion, together with cognate feelings such as wonder, fascination and, perhaps, ecstasy. But these should be accepted without reference to specific places, objects or events designated as sacred as opposed to profane, which are suggested in the other half of Alston's categorisation.

The next characteristic presupposes a belief in 'the gods', or, presumably, God. As it stands, it must therefore be excluded from the list of essential features, since neither Taoism, Jainism, nor several schools of Buddhism generally refer to either God or gods or, if they do, pay little or no regard to him/her/them. This feature could be less contentiously incorporated if we broadened the word prayer to include meditation and contemplation. Prayer always implies an approach to someone else, whether this be God, another human being, or a court of justice. Prayers can be answered, ignored, or turned down. The process is two-way. Meditation, on the other hand, requires no second party. It is a deliberate turning away, physically and mentally, from the daily round of duties and engaging in the process of reflection. Unlike prayer, which can be a public, communal activity, meditation takes place in seclusion. 'Nowhere,' wrote Marcus Aurelius, 'can man find a quieter or more untroubled retreat than in his own soul.' Whether meditation should be viewed as simply an exploration of oneself, as Descartes

affirmed in his *First Meditation* by describing it as ‘holding converse only with myself, or whether it means seeking a state of absorption in something beyond oneself—the void, the ground of being, the Tao—will be discussed later: for the present it seems sufficient to say that a person’s religion, even where this is expressed primarily through social or political involvement, will probably include times of meditation or reflection if only to avoid being burned out. That, at any rate, is the counsel offered by the yin-yang philosophy which we shall explore in Chapter 7. So, with another (major) modification to Alston’s description, we retain his characteristic 6.

Alston’s next two suggestions—the holding of a world view and the commitment of one’s life to it—seem axiomatic in this context. To declare oneself to be religious is to make a metaphysical statement, which is to hold a world view (for a start, that there is such an entity as metaphysics). But there is nothing specifically religious in holding a world view, or a philosophy of life; the majority of the world’s citizens have probably pondered on ‘the meaning of life’, even if they have concluded that it has no meaning in the sense which that phrase implies.

How deeply a religious person’s life should be committed to his or her religion is a moot point: Alston uses the ambiguous phrase ‘more or less’ and we may accept that vague expression. It seems reasonable to expect a religious person (and what that means has yet to be determined, of course) to spend a fair amount of his or her time, energies and possessions in religious activity, but it seems unnecessary to require more. This characteristic adds little to the overall picture.

So far, then, I have suggested the following as essential to religion: the expression of certain feelings, some form of meditation or contemplation, together with what may be termed a philosophical approach to the world and the understanding of one’s place in it; and the hint that these are likely to play more than a minor role in a religious person’s existence. What must be obvious is that the basic issue has not been mentioned. It is Alston’s first, and is pivotal to our theme.

If we are to take Alston’s words at their face value, we could relegate this first-mentioned characteristic from the level of a requirement to that of an optional extra. Belief in supernatural beings, or gods, (to which the singular ‘God’ must clearly be added) certainly plays a major role in many religions; but by no means all, and not in the thinking of some affiliates of those where it does. Taoism speaks of ‘immortals’, but these are mythical figures whose longevity reflects their faithfulness to the Tao, the way; Confucius refused to speculate on such matters, arguing that people have enough trouble coping with the problems of the here and now, without speculating about anything beyond this dimension. Buddha was agnostic about the gods, suggesting that if they did exist, their condition was lower than that of those who had achieved Nirvana. Jainism rejects the concept of gods altogether, replacing belief in them with the assertion that any human being who reaches the highest level of spiritual achievement, which is the realisation of him/her-self as pure knowledge (*jiva*), experiences all

that could possibly be ascribed to a deity: perfect wisdom, perfect serenity. It is never possible to generalise about Hinduism, of course, since it embraces numerous systems and writings over at least two millennia, but in the teaching of Advaita Vedanta the view is expressed that the Atman (the self) and Brahman (the ground of being, or sustaining force of the universe) are essentially one and the same, and that the moment of moksha (enlightenment) is when this truth is understood. Thus the great non-dualistic affirmation *tat tvam asi* ('thou art that', where 'that' is the universal and eternal spirit) can also be translated 'I am that', or 'all this is that', or 'there is nothing but that'. It would be far too simplistic, and alien to Hindu thought processes, to translate this statement as 'I am God'; but it is not so outrageous a claim in the Hindu context as it would seem in that of Western theism, where it would be considered megalomaniac if not psychotic, its perpetrator a candidate for the asylum.

I have already quoted books by Christian authors who maintain religious beliefs, but reject the idea of and necessity for God as a feature of their religion. This rejection together with other religions' agnosticism on the matter, suggests that what Alston terms supernatural may not have to depend on the concept of a God or gods to justify its reality. And once this possibility has been accepted, we are engaging ourselves in a totally different form of thought from that which evolves from the God concept. We are, in fact, releasing ourselves from the theological perspective—one which begins with the idea of a supreme being or beings, capable of being analysed, if not anatomised in the process of specialised discourse—and are entering into a universe of spiritual experience which is made real to us not by academic debate or idealised images reflecting the perfect being or beings of our aspirations, but simply through the experiences we undergo. I am suggesting that the first characteristic offered by Alston is essential to religion, but only if we exclude any reference to God(s). The leitmotiv of this book is that he, she, it, or they belong on the discretionary list; but that does not mean that the spiritual dimension suggested by Alston's first characteristic is similarly re-legated: quite the contrary, in fact. It is difficult to conceive of a religion, or of a person who describes herself as religious, in which, or for whom, there is no *spiritual* dimension. I shall discuss later (Chapter 9) whether this is the correct word to use, since I shall be introducing it into areas beyond those normally associated with religion, but it may suffice for the moment. At this stage, it is enough to make two affirmations. First, that human experience over the millennia suggests—some might say indicates—that the world of metaphysics is a reality, not a fantasy, much less an aberration; and, second, that metaphysics does not require theology—literally, knowledge of God—in order to find a rationale.

I know that many people who still refer, or defer, to God in the religious dimension of their lives do so without the personalised images associated with its more primitive or fundamentalist manifestations, and are therefore likely to describe the above not as a new perspective, but as one with which they have lived and to which they have adapted for decades or more (with the implication

that no more needs to be added on the matter). To anyone who thinks along such lines I would simply put the question: if it is the case that whatever they deem to be the value of religion is capable of being expressed without reference to God, are we not more likely to achieve a modicum of enlightenment in the situation if we dispense with the word altogether and speak instead of what we know to be real? Martin Buber, in his book *I and Thou* boldly stated, 'When you get to the Thou, God is no more', a perspective which will be directly explored in Chapter 9. Buber was perhaps unwittingly building on the *Tao Te Ching*, written some two and a half millennia earlier, which begins with the immortal line:

The Tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao.

What that means must be explored later. Our task now is to turn to the concept of God or gods in order to be clearer about what exactly people who have expressed a belief in him (them) have had in mind, and why the idea of his, her, or their existence has been so important to them.