limited ways but which is there nonetheless. The beliefs found in primitive and archaic cultures are not restricted to those cultures. People today still find such beliefs comforting in many ways. But there is yet another set of beliefs that has embraced archaic and primitive thoughts in a much larger and well-integrated framework. That is the style of classical or historic culture and religion, the topic of the next chapter.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Are there really any compelling reasons not to believe in magic, spirits, and gods? Describe the ones that make most sense to you.
2. Do you think that nonreligious answers can explain why all events happen as they do, and why all of reality is the way it is?
3. To appreciate the power of myth, describe some story, motion picture, television drama, or play that seemed so real and vivid to you that you imagined yourself as part of the story.
4. Do you think it is true that people think of gods or God as a superparent? If so, explain whether you think this is good, bad, or just a fact.
5. Cite any current claims you have heard that there is one correct set of social norms that is commanded or supported by God?
6. If almost everyone in history has believed in the existence of the numinous, does that make it more reasonable for you also to believe in it? Explain.

SUGGESTED READINGS


Stewart Guthrie, Faces in the Clouds, 1993. Provides extensive evidence about the tendency to anthropomorphize.

Joseph Campbell, Myths to Live By, 1972 (Ch. 2 especially). An influential work on the emergence of human culture through myths.


Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy, 1969 (Ch. 1 in particular). A now-classic statement of the function of religion to maintain social order and identity.

Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, 1961 (Ch. 4 in particular). A phenomenological approach to the history of religions.

CHAPTER THREE

A Supreme and Awesome Unity

God and Other Ultimates in Historic Religions

HISTORIC RELIGION

The Axial Age and Universalist Religion

Around the sixth century BCE, a double shift in thought took place in many major cultures, particularly in China, India, and certain Western areas including especially Greece. In these areas an intellectual elite began to use a broadly systematic logical mode of thought and argumentation. They also used this new style of thought to seek out an ultimate unity to the entire universe. For all we know, many individuals may have thought in this systematically logical way on their own in previous times, but it was not until sometime around 600 BCE or later that this thought style became publicly influential and valued. The philosopher Karl Jaspers thought this was a break-through so important that he labeled this era the axial age, as though all history revolved around it as on an axis.

In each of these major centers of civilization at least a few influential people looked beyond the individual things and events and patterns of the universe to find some final and all-embracing explanation for everything. These people created universalist philosophies and theologies. This chapter will describe some of the major religious universalist views.

There are degrees in the amount of order a person might perceive in the world. If a person looks superficially at the world, reality can appear to be just a collection of things and happenings with no particular order. Even primitive cultures, however, are able to look at reality and see some order. They see cause and effect relationships. They sometimes perceive general categories like the numinous and the ordinary, the personal and the nonper-
sional, the important and the irrelevant, the rewarding and the threatening. They usually have detailed categories for foods, plants, terrain, weather, and spirits. But their concerns are “local,” as is their religion.

Archae poltheistic cultures recognize greater and partially systematic order, represented by their great myths that connect many events into a single narrative and by their belief in gods whose power unites many parts of reality. The world does in fact look a lot like the polytheist pictures it. Reality is a mixture of little things and various/ large patterns. Trees, rocks, lakes, and clouds are all individually influenced by or are a part of large valleys or major weather patterns. The many activities of the city, the shops and the gate-guardians, the streets and the temples, the neighborhoods, the festivals, are all influenced by the king. Thus there is some large-scale order to reality, order that archaic cultures attribute to gods of the land or the weather or the city and so on. The large cities and even empires of archaic culture have what might be called a more “national” or “empire” viewpoint, embracing much more in its vision than a primitive tribe would. (The word “national,” as used of archaic religions, can be misleading: it indicates simply a large area of civilization, not a modern nation-state with well-defined borders.)

An archaic perspective, however, does not see any overall order and unity. The land needs water but the skies withhold it this season. The god of the underworld erupts through the mountain, pouring down ash and fire. The great god of the city is defeated by the god of a neighboring city in a battle where the king is killed, as nation fights against nation. Life goes on, both ordered and disordered, always a little dangerous and confusing.

Once there were only archaic and primitive cultures, with their “local” and “national” perspectives, in which people accepted reality as it appeared, partially stable and ordered, partially disordered and unreliable. This was reality. What else is there to do with reality except to acknowledge it and accept it? Neighboring spirits lived close at hand; the gods were more distant and awesome, requiring worship. Society dealt with them individually, or grouped a few of them together, hoping to keep the numinous beings happy and helpful as much as possible. Life was as it appeared. All that people could do was to scratch out as much safety and happiness from it as they could.

Then came the axial age, when human consciousness dared to go beyond how things appeared in order to discover a universal order that rose above, “transcended,” all the separate parts of reality, an order that included all those parts in its all-encompassing unity. Philosophy appeared. This included attempts to describe the ultimate principles and patterns and stuff of the entire universe at once and to show how it all logically fits together in one coherent system. Science appeared also, as part of philosophy, trying to do what philosophy in general did, to provide an all-embracing set of explana-

tions of how all things work and why. This new consciousness therefore also included a vision of how human life fit within the logically coherent system of the universe, and how life therefore might be made whole and ideal rather than torn between the conflicting forces of earthly life. This new consciousness produced a new way of being religious, one built upon the achievements of primitive and archaic forms, but one that absorbed them into a more unitary and idealizing religiousness. This is now called historic or classical religion.

Historic religion took many forms in the East and West, each form arising out of its own cultural context. But beneath all the varieties of forms and ideas are four characteristics common to historic stages of religiousness. These are a belief 1) that there is an ultimate unity to all things, 2) that the source of the unity lies beyond or beneath the complexities, changes, and limits of the world, 3) that this source of ultimate unity is a reality of total perfection, and 4) that such perfection must be an Absolute (a word that will be explained later). In briefer terms, historic religion focuses on a numinous reality that is a universally unifying and perfect Absolute. The rest of this chapter will explain what that means.

There are two additional effects that characterize at least some of the universalizing religions. The first is what Robert Bellah has called “world-rejection.” Apparently a vision of a realm of perfection that lies beyond ordinary life makes this ordinary worldly life seem very deficient by contrast. In India both Buddhism and Hindu thought say that escape from life as we experience it is the only true salvation. In Christian tradition this world is just a “valley of tears.” A later chapter will explore such ideas. The second effect is some degree of “demythologization.” The old myths are either reinterpreted to fit with the new universalist perspectives, as Augustine and Calvin did with pagan belief in the gods. Or the old myths are rejected in favor of more abstract theologies and philosophies. We will see instances of both of these effects in this chapter.

**HISTORIC RELIGION IN THE WEST**

**A Personal Supreme Being**

According to the major Western religions, there is a universal and unifying order to reality because there is a supreme and transcendent personal Being that created, sustains, and rules the entire universe from end to end. Belief in such a Being is called monotheism. Most people in the West today would probably call themselves monotheists because they believe in an all-powerful Creator called God or Yhweh or Allah. The era of polytheism is over, it would seem. Yet monotheism is a more austere and difficult kind of belief
than we are usually aware of. It is hard to think the way a thorough-going monotheist does. A look at some history will make this more clear, and will help to refine the meaning of the word "God."

Near-Monotheism: Two Cases from History

One of the oddities of history is that a kind of monotheism appeared in Egypt for a brief period of about twenty years, long before such an idea existed in other cultures. Whether it was a true monotheism or not is still disputed.

As far back as 3000 BCE, Egypt was a united kingdom with a vigorous archaic culture. In these early times the pharaoh was an earthly presence of the highest of the gods, the sun god Ra. Through the rise and fall of many dynasties, the sun god remained supreme, though he came to be called Amen or Amen-Ra. By the beginning of the fourteenth century BCE, Egypt was attaining its greatest power, extending its rule to Mesopotamia. It was as though the sun god Amen-Ra, whose divine power was present in the pharaoh, was extending his control over the whole known earth.

But this was not yet a monotheism. Other important gods existed such as Osiris, descendant of Ra in some accounts, the god of life, especially of life after death, as well as Osiris' son Horus, also identified with the pharaoh in those times. (Yes, it is very complicated. Archaic cultures do not make all their stories neatly logical and coherent.) All these polytheistic complexities suddenly gave way to an apparent monotheism, in the reign of Amenhotep IV (or Amenophis IV in some spellings) in the fourteenth century BCE.

This new pharaoh changed his name to Ikhnaton (or Akhenaton) in honor of a new sun god, Aton. Ikhnaton's name means "the Spirit of Aton." The pharaoh declared the old gods banished, and outlawed public worship of them. Some scholars have claimed that Ikhnaton was practicing a true monotheism, with Aton as the sole god over all the universe. As long as Ikhnaton lived, Aton had to be worshiped in the public temples as the sole and supreme god. But when Ikhnaton died, so did Aton's power. The next pharaoh to ascend the throne was Ikhnaton's son-in-law, Tutankhamen, the famous "King Tut," whose name signals the return to worship of Amen as sun god, and that of all the other traditional gods as well.

If the worship of Aton was true monotheism, it was not accepted enthusiastically by the people of Egypt. The old priestly caste that worshiped Amen may have resented their loss of power under the new god Aton. The people of Egypt, like all people, probably thought that the traditional gods were better for them. They were used to the stability and security represented by the old ways. On a local level, people also may have felt that Aton was too distant to be of use to them. The gods of the river, of life after death, of fertility—each had a special function. Each of these gods was closer to hand, although still somewhat awesome, in comparison with a god so big he ruled the universe. While Aton was running the whole world, who would answer their prayers concerning their individual needs? Egypt, like the rest of the world, was not yet prepared for monotheism.

Perhaps also as early as the thirteenth century BCE, another near-monotheism appeared in Persia (modern Iran) in the form of Zoroastrianism. The people of this part of the world had long lived by animistic and polytheistic beliefs. They saw the world as full of the spirits of their ancestors as well as other spirits and gods. An unusual aspect of their belief was that the spirits were either good or evil but not both. Most of the spirits and gods people have believed in throughout history have been an ordinary humanlike mixture of good and evil. These ancient Persians, however, perceived the human world as a battleground between the forces of good and the forces of evil. The evil in the world exists not because people and spirits alike all have their unpleasant side, their moments of anger or spite. Evil is a stronger and more unrelenting force. It is the power of the evil spirits, called daeva. Good people are fortunate, though, because they can expect help against the daeva from good spirits known as ahuras.

One scholar claims that it was as early as 1300 BCE when a man named Zarathustra interpreted these older Persian beliefs in a new way, founding a religion that is known to us after the ancient Greek form of his name, Zoroaster. There are very few Zoroastrians in the world today. The last sizable group are the Parsees (Pershians) of Bombay, India. But Zoroastrianism left its mark on the other major western religions.

We do not have any of the original writings of Zoroaster, though there may be some verses from his era that still offer clues about his message. According to a seventh century BCE version of Zarathustra's teachings (perhaps a serious revision of his original thought), there is one supreme god named Ahura Mazda ("wise Lord") or Ormuzd. This wisest of good spirits was perfectly good, hating evil. He was the creator of the entire universe, originally a beautiful place of joy and happiness. But Ahura Mazda had an opposite, the evil one named Ahriman. The goodness of the world was offensive to Ahriman so he began to curse it, bringing war, disease, suffering, and death. It was Ahriman who created the daevas, and together with them tried to seduce the minds and hearts of humans to follow evil ways.

Ahura Mazda immediately set about fighting to bring goodness out of all this evil. For three thousand years there would be a battle between all the forces of good and of evil. People would have to take sides, choosing to follow Ahura Mazda or Ahriman. In the end, the entire world would be destroyed in the conflict, and all people would meet in judgment. Those who had pursued goodness would cross a wide bridge into Paradise, a lovely gar-
The Evolution of Jewish Monotheism

The formal beliefs of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have usually defined Yahweh/God/Allah not merely as the most powerful being in the universe but as the absolutely, totally supreme Reality from all eternity. Creator and ruler of everything, limited in no way at all. By custom the name for this Creator is spelled with a capital letter: God. There is a history behind this belief in God, a history that can make more clear what an unqualified monotheism is.

The major formative influence in Western monotheism is the early history of Jewish monotheism, which developed out of the religious beliefs of the ancient Hebrews. These people were Semitic nomads who settled in the land of Canaan (present day Palestine/Israel) sometime in the second millennium BCE. Some of them somehow ended up in Egypt. A pivotal event in the history of Western civilization was the escape of some Hebrews from Egypt under the leadership of Moses about 1250 BCE, an event known as the Exodus. Moses returned to his kinsfolk from the Sinai peninsula where he had been living for a while, and brought them a new god called Yahweh, who would be able to protect them from the Egyptian gods in their attempt to escape.

Moses might have been a monotheist of some sort, believing that no God existed except Yahweh, though many scholars now doubt this. It is clear that Moses' Hebrew followers were not monotheists. Like all people of their time, they showed great willingness to worship any god they thought might help them. When these Hebrews eventually settled in Canaan (Palestine) they happily worshiped the local high gods, the Elohim (a word meaning simply "gods"), including especially Baal and his consort Astarte, gods of fertility and the skies. For that matter, as their scriptures attest by complaining about it, these Hebrews also believed in spirits, sorcerers, and omens. They and their descendants were polytheists and animists at heart. It probably would not have occurred to them to take seriously the idea that no god existed except one absolutely supreme God.

Yahweh was nonetheless a very important god to them. He was clearly a good war god because he had led the Hebrews to victory in many battles. In general, Yahweh was a good god for historical events like wars, escape from Egypt, the invasion and settlement of Canaan. But their Canaanite neighbors taught them that Baal was the god to worship for fertility in the family, flocks, and fields. And Hebrews and Canaanites alike would presume that when visiting in foreign countries like Egypt or Babylon, it would be prudent to pay some thought to Amen-Ra or Marduk.

A step closer toward monotheism was a belief that grew among the Hebrews, that Yahweh was a jealous god, not one to share worship with other gods. The Hebrews believed that many gods existed, but sometime between the tenth and eighth centuries BCE their leaders came to insist that they should ignore all gods except for the one that was distinctively theirs, who specially guarded and guided them and gave them their identity through their laws and customs. Scholars sometimes call this "henotheism," a word invented in 1880 by German religion scholar F. Max Müller to iden-
tify primary devotion to a certain major god among other gods in India. “Monotheity” may be a better word, meaning worship restricted to only one of the various gods. (Akhkenaton may have practiced monotheity rather than true monotheism.)

There is a famous story in the history of Israel illustrating the tendency to monolatry. In the ninth century BCE, Ahab, king of the northern tribes of Israel, had a wife named Jezebel. She came from Phoenicia where her father, also a king, had followed the royal ways approved by Baal, the main god of many Phoenicians. The ways of Baal allowed the king great powers over his subjects. The ways of Yahweh, however, coming from a time before there were kings over Israel, demanded what today could be called civil and social rights. With Jezebel’s encouragement Ahab was acting like a tyrant, contrary to Yahweh’s will.

From out of the desert appeared a wild-looking man, Elijah. He challenged the ways of Baal by proclaiming that if Ahab did not follow Yahweh’s customs, Yahweh would cause a drought. This was a striking challenge in most people’s minds because rain was supposedly under Baal’s power, as god of fertility. Eventually, as the story goes, the contest between Yahweh and Baal was focused on Mount Carmel near the Mediterranean where altars were set up, one to each god. The priests and prophets of Baal danced, sweated, sang, and cut themselves to get Baal to show a sign of his power. Nothing happened. Elijah suggested that Baal was hard of hearing or off resting. Then, at Elijah’s prayer, Yahweh sent a mighty bolt from heaven to burn up the offering and show his power. Before long, there appeared on the horizon a small cloud, “no bigger than a man’s fist.” The cloud grew quickly until it let loose a downpour. Yahweh had shown that he was God of nature’s fertile rain. For generations after this, the priests and prophets of Yahweh would often urge that other gods be ignored, that people abandon Baal and worship only Yahweh. Yahweh might not be the only god that existed, the leaders said, but he was the only one his people should acknowledge as their god. He could take care of all their needs—war, fertility, and anything else.

This attempt at monolatry was only partially successful. For the next two hundred years and more, people were still inclined to hedge their bets, catering to all gods who might have some power. Then came a catastrophe that established belief in Yahweh as a genuine monotheism. In 587 BCE Babylon conquered Jerusalem, capital of Judea. All the leading Judeans (hence “Judaism,” from whence the word “Jew” derives) were taken into captivity so they could not instigate a new rebellion against Babylon. The city walls of Jerusalem were destroyed as was the glorious temple of Yahweh built by Solomon. The Judeans were in exile, living in a foreign land ruled by the great god Marduk. Many of the Judeans undoubtedly came to the most log-}

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ical conclusion, that Marduk had defeated Yahweh. Other Judeans, however, a “faithful remnant,” reaffirmed their loyalty to Yahweh. Babylon was Yahweh’s tool, they said, used by him to test them and purify them, to teach them that Yahweh alone is God, that all other gods are but lifeless clay and sticks. Yahweh is so great a God as to be God over all the nations of the earth. There is no God but Yahweh.

This Jewish monotheism has proclaimed itself in the famous prayer, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Christianity inherited this belief, as did Islam: “There is no God but God (Allah).” Jews, Christians, and Muslims are sometimes highly conscious of the differences among them, but all three faiths are monotheistic.

The God of Western Theologies

The Jewish-Christian-Islamic God is a God we probably all think we can define rather easily. It is the Creator, Lord of the Universe. But it is not really easy to pin down what is meant by “God.” Here is a list of five major characteristics that the three main Western monotheisms have tended to agree upon. You may want to test your conception of God against these.

First of all, God is all-powerful (“omnipotent”). This does not mean merely that God has more power than anything or anyone else, such as Ahura Mazda had. It means literally that nothing exists except what God has created and sustains in being. Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE-50 CE), a great Jewish philosopher, spelled this out by saying that God creates out of nothing (ex nihilo, in Latin). Only Hindu tradition has a similar belief about the origin of the universe. Primitive folktales, archaic myths, and many philosophers all supposed that there is a primordial stuff, perhaps in chaotic form, that must be put in some coherent order by divine power. But Judaism and Christianity interpreted the first lines of Genesis, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” as a statement that before creation there was nothing at all. The Qur’an, the sacred text of Islam, echoes this Genesis statement. It also says that “God holds the heavens and the earth, lest they remove,” to use one translation from the Arabic (XXV, 39). Without the divine power upholding the existence of the heavens and earth they would be removed from existence.

God’s omnipotence also implies that nothing can happen unless God makes it happen, or allows it to happen, or empowers forces and beings in creation to make things happen. God’s control over the course of all events is known as Providence. Every lily that grows, sparrow that flies, volcano that erupts, does so under God’s providential guidance. Human beings are said to have free will. But to exist at all depends on God’s power; to continue to have freedom depends on God’s decision to make people free; and God
may influence free will very much (though different groups disagree on how much). Within Islam the reality of human freedom is an unsettled question, so strong is the Muslim insistence on God’s power as the cause of all events. There are lines in the Qur’an that have led some traditionalists to say that God determines even our choices.

Secondly, the Western God is all-knowing (“omniscient”). There is absolutely nothing that happens that God does not know. God sees all, down to the most minute detail. A traditional belief, in fact, has claimed that God knows everything that will ever happen, that God has known perfectly from before the beginning of time every event that would ever take place. Whatever it is that any person freely decides to do, God already knew about that free choice and took it into account, along with every other free choice ever to be made, as part of the divine plan. Therefore, it would seem, everything is bound to turn out exactly as God has planned all along. The control that God exercises over the eventual destiny or outcome of each person’s life is often called predestination, or sometimes predeterminism.

Western monotheism has not been consistently predeterministic. Islam has favored this view most strongly. All things happen “as Allah wills.” In Christianity a line of thought runs from St. Augustine in the fifth century to John Calvin in the sixteenth, which says that some individuals are predestined by God even before their birth to end up in heaven—or in hell, Calvin added. Jewish thought has been the least predeterministic or predeterminarian of all.

A third traditional concept about God in the West is that God is perfectly good. In the earlier parts of the Judaic scriptures, written in archaic times, God is pictured as sometimes angry and vengeful. But around the axial age the Jews began to conceive of God as utterly perfect and, therefore, utterly good. Human weaknesses such as emotional outbursts of jealousy or impatience seemed increasingly inappropriate for God. Some religious believers then and now, however, have not considered jealousy, anger, impatience, or vengeance to be imperfections. They manage to assert simultaneously that God does have something like these emotions but is also perfectly good. The idea of "good" can vary, evidently. (Chapter Eight will discuss different meanings of "good.")

A more serious problem with the concept of God as perfectly good is that there seems to be a great deal of evil in the world. One cause of evil is human free choice. People have freely decided to murder and torture one another, or to allow pain and hunger when it could be prevented. Why are people like this? The events of nature also cause evil. In the course of human existence, a billion people have been killed or crippled by disease, drought, earthquake, and flood. For the most part these have all been things that human beings were powerless to prevent. Why is nature like this? An all-good God cannot be callous or indifferent to such things. An all-powerful and all-knowing God, presumably could have arranged things to operate less destructively (unless omnipotence and omniscience are somehow compatible with incompetence).

Western religions have faced the problems posed by the existence of evil and have produced various answers. Such answers are now called "theodicies," a word coined by the philosopher Gottfried Leibniz in the early eighteenth century. (Theodicy literally means "God-justification.") One theodicy is the story of the original sin of humankind committed in the garden of Eden, as told in the third chapter of the book of Genesis. It wasn’t God but human sin that caused evil by throwing life and nature itself into disorder. Augustine expanded on this, arguing that everything that God creates is necessarily good. Evil is a kind of non-existence, however; it is the absence of a good that should have existed but does not. It is a privatio boni, a deprivation of good. And every case of privatio boni is the result of human sin—especially original sin. In answer to why God would allow this deprivation of the good at all, Augustine answered that God allowed it to bring even greater good than would otherwise have been the case. The free will that allows people to sin also allows them to love God and eventually enjoy heaven.

Leibniz himself had a suggestion along these lines. He proposed that this was "the best of all possible worlds." It is better to exist than not to exist. But only God is perfect. If there is to be a world at all, it will have to be imperfect. When God created, God must have considered all the alternative worlds that might be able to exist, and then selected the best possible out of all of these. That is this real world. So even this flawed world with its evils is better than no world at all; it is a greater good than not existing.

A different theodicy is reflected in the First Epistle of Alexander Pope’s famous poetic Essay on Man. "Whatever is, is right." Even though things appear seriously flawed to us, if we had divine knowledge we would be able to see that all events work together for God’s holy purposes, that all events are part of a plan we cannot understand. Those things that seem to us to be terrible will eventually prove to have been exactly right.

Some recent theology, like Zoroastrian thought long ago, has suggested that God has limited power and so should not be blamed for everything that goes wrong. The "process theologies" based on the ideas of Alfred North Whitehead argue that God operates only persuasively, not coercively. For centuries people have struggled with this problem of evil, producing various answers. The notion of a perfectly good God is not as simple a notion as it first seems.

The fourth major characteristic of God in Western theology is personness. This can be a tricky concept because it can have a variety of meanings. The
This rather extreme and abstract way of thinking arose in a way that was perhaps inevitable. Once people begin to search behind the confusions and imperfections of the world for a supreme and unifying perfection, they found it hard to stop at any finite reality. "God" is the name given to the absolutely ultimate cause of everything, the final answer, the origin and goal of all else. God can be this only if God is truly ultimate, beyond which there is nothing else. If there is anything beyond God or independent of God in any way at all, then God is not the ultimate unifying cause of all that is, for there is at least some other and competing reality, such as Ahriman was to Ahura Mazda's supremacy.

A way to conceive of God as unqualifiedly ultimate is to do what a Christian theologian, Anselm, did in the eleventh century CE. He defined God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." God, therefore, is not merely a being that happens to be greater than anything else. "God" is the name for that being which by its nature is necessarily greater than anything and everything else that even might exist. "God" is the name for a reality which cannot be "second" in any way to anything. The only way to be that great, it seems, is to exceed every possible limitation. And that is to be infinite. So at least the traditional argument went. (Chapter Eleven will further explore reasons for this conclusion.)

That conclusion eliminates all anthropomorphism. In fact, it makes it hard to say anything. A finite reality can be defined; its limits are what describe it. It is like this and not like that. But if God is totally unlimited, then God is actually beyond all categories and labels. God is called a Mystery, then, not merely because God's ways are sometimes puzzling but because the absoluteness of God is always beyond what any finite mind can conceive.

In spite of this, Jews, Christians, and Muslims do describe God. They do it by a balancing of ideas. On the one hand, God is the supreme personal Creator from whom all else receives its existence, in some sense totally good, all-powerful, and all-knowing. On the other hand, God is Absolute, the infinite Mystery. God somehow is goodness, somehow personality, somehow power, but all in ways beyond human understanding.

If you find it difficult to deal with the notion of God as Absolute, you are not alone. Nonetheless, it is an idea that the human mind seems to arrive at eventually in its search to make sense of reality in the face of mystery. Most people do not feel any individual need to affirm the utter absoluteness of God. Yet in the major religious traditions some such idea occurs anyway. This is evident not just in Western monotheism but in Eastern thought also.
HISTORIC RELIGION IN THE EAST

Nonpersonal Ultimates

There are two major centers of ancient civilization in the East: India and China (and it would be legitimate to include Persia as yet another). Each of these two has a complex religious history, and they both produced religious movements that portrayed an ultimate numinous reality as nonpersonal rather than personal. The infinite and universal power in some Eastern religious traditions is not so much a Being as a Force, not a personal reality but simply a Cause. It may be easier to understand this way of thinking by beginning with a description of some less than infinite nonpersonal forces that have appeared in cultures other than Eastern ones.

Non-Eastern Great Numinious Forces

The Mexico rulers of the Aztecs of Central Mexico believed that the earth and heavens had been brought out of chaos four different times, each time ending in horrible destruction. Now, they believed, we live in the fifth and last age. The universe must be held together for there will be no other chance beyond this. If the universe collapses again, the gods themselves would fall into destruction. And so day after day, year after year, the Aztecs offered up human sacrifices on the altars. These sacrifices were offerings to the gods, but they generated a cosmic energy necessary to keep the universe in balance, gods and all. These ritual forces were capable of maintaining the coherence of the universe. (Whether this belief represents archaic or an incipient historic consciousness is difficult to say.)

In ancient Greek mythology before the axial age three numinous beings, the Fates, controlled the destinies of all people. By the axial age or during it, some Greeks came to think of the Fates as a single, nonpersonal Force that assigned situation and status in life to humans and gods alike. Therefore, one of the most foolish and dangerous things a person could do was to aspire to rise above the station in life Fate had assigned. Such desire was called hubris, pride. It was the arrogance of daring to believe that you could be or accomplish more than Fate had decreed.

Out of this belief in Fate, perhaps, came a similar notion, from a group of philosophers known as Stoics because their founder Zeno had lectured on a porch (stoa in Greek). The Stoic movement arose after the axial age had begun and believed that there was a universal and divine power that ruled even the gods. Every event in history is predetermined by a cosmic Logos or principle of rational order, they said. It is a divine Intelligence, of which human intelligences are dim reflections. Out of respect for tradition the Stoics called this principle Zeus, thereby transforming the god Zeus from a person-like being into a cosmic and divine rational Force.

Around the same time, another Greek philosopher developed a theory about a supreme force that is hard to classify as personal or nonpersonal. That is the Unmoved Mover, described by the great Aristotel around 330 BCE. He decided that there must be some continuing and primal force or being unceasingly producing motion or change in the universe; otherwise everything in the world would naturally grind to a halt. Oddly enough, Aristotle reasoned, the prime force that made everything else must itself be unmoving. If it moved, it would be necessary to look for what caused it to move. This would result in an infinite regression, i.e., an infinite series of movers moved by another mover, which in turn was moved by another, and so on. Aristotle claimed that there had to be a First Mover, itself unmoved and unmoving, for us to make sense of the continuing fact of motion in the world. (He never doubted that we could make sense of reality.)

The only kind of reality Aristotle knew about that could remain motionless yet move other beings was something desirable. An ice cold drink on a hot day can move us into action without its having to do anything except be there in front of us. So the unmoved mover must be the supremely desirable reality. This in turn meant to Aristotle that it must be perfect in every way. An imperfect reality would not be supremely desirable. The most perfect kind of thing Aristotle knew of was thought, for it is thinking that reveals to us what is perfect and eternal. So the unmoved mover must be pure thought. But there is nothing higher than the unmoved mover. If it is thought, it must be self-thinking thought, not a thought dependent on someone else’s mind. Aristotle concluded then that the ongoing cause of all activity in the whole universe is a self-thinking thought, perfectly desirable, the Unmoved Mover.

A self-thinking thought, a Logos that controls our lives and keeps each of us in our place, a ritual-power, generated from human sacrifices to keep the universe moving—this is a strange miscellany. Yet each notion represents an attempt by people to make sense of reality. Each culture or thinker had become aware of some puzzle or mystery: why does the universe act as it does? What makes it go? How does it influence our lives? Is there anything an individual can do in response? The desire to make sense out of life in the face of mystery is one that no culture seems able to resist. Each tries to respond to mystery as well as it can, given its history, culture, and experiences. China and India gave their own responses also.

The Taoism of China

Long before the beginning of recorded history, the peoples of China were animists and polytheists. By historical times many Chinese worshiped a high god. In the Shang dynasty of the eighteenth to eleventh centuries BCE, the
great Ti, ruler of heavens, watched over the Shang kings. A neighboring kingdom ruled by the Chou dynasty also had a high god, one called T'ien, “heaven.” In the eleventh century BCE the Chou conquered the Shang and combined the two gods into one. Shang-Ti and T'ien became just two different names for one high god of the skies (another instance of syncretism). T'ien or Shang-Ti was a personlike god. Ancient Chinese literature speaks of T'ien as one who sees all and hears all, who blesses and protects people and punishes the wicked, who in fact created the Chinese people with their particular character. The Chou dynasty encouraged people to think of T'ien as the one who upheld the power of the king as long as he ruled wisely and benevolently, and who would overthrow a corrupt dynasty like the Shang in order to provide a new and good government for the people.

But from ancient times in China there was another belief, in a regular natural order of things. The day and the night follow one another and the seasons progress year after year. All things follow a pattern of growth and decline, everything is balanced by its opposite. The Chinese summed all of this up into one fundamental pattern—yang/yin.

There is a yang aspect to nature that is warm, dry, male, heavenly; and a yin aspect to balance it, which is cool, moist, female, earthly. The list of opposites can be extended indefinitely: active and passive, loud and quiet, hard and soft, and so on. In discovering the yang/yin, the Chinese had found a way to organize all the categories of nature into one grand scheme. Human intelligence was at work again, refusing to accept the world as a variety of disconnected happenings, forms, or things. The Chinese mind sought a higher unifying order running throughout all reality.

The yang/yin are opposites, but not antagonists. They blend into one another. They are the alternating aspects of nature. There are moments when one or the other dominates. The hot and dry days of summer and the cold and wet days of winter are such times. But these extreme days are also the moment of a return back to the mingled moderation of spring or fall when yang/yin are more evenly balanced. The moon that wanes also waxes; the seed that flowers then withers and drops new seed to the ground. Yang/yin are not good/evil, both are valuable and necessary aspects of the unity of nature. They are not gods or spirits, but the fundamental forces of nature.

From about the eighth century BCE the Chou dynasty itself fell into corruption. The rule of law broke down and no one could be sure of receiving justice in the courts, protection from bandits or from greedy landowners. It was the time known as “the warring states.” Most of the Chinese continued to pray to Ti (Shang-Ti) or the ancestors. Some Chinese, however, became skeptical about T'ien. As the centuries went by, conflict continued. It seemed that T'ien was either powerless or callous. Hope for help from the high god diminished.

Out of all this came a particular school of thought known as Taoism. Sometime between 600 and 300 BCE two writings appeared, one ascribed by legend to a figure named Lao-Tzu, another written by the wise man Chuang-Tzu. These two works are in agreement that there is one supreme force, a truly ultimate one. It includes everything that exists within the scope of its influence. It has universal power and presence. This ultimate reality is called Tao (pronounced “Dow”).

The word “tao” is a rather ordinary one. It means way, or pattern, or order. The Chinese had long sought the right way (tao) to live and to organize society. For most Chinese the ancestors and the high god T'ien/Shang-Ti had been of major importance in establishing the correct way. The writings ascribed to Lao-Tzu and Chuang-Tzu proposed something different. We all know that there is a way to nature, they said. This is the yang/yin pattern, the eternal process of the world. These are the two forces at work in the three parts of the universe: heaven, earth, and living beings. These three parts move through the four seasons, which in turn are a blending of the five elements: earth, water, fire, wood, and metal. But ultimately, behind the five, four, three, and two, is One. That is the Tao that is the way of all the universe.

“Tao bare one, one bore two, two bore three; three bore ten thousand things,” says The Book of the Tao, in its usual obscure way.

This ultimate Tao is beyond all categories of five or four or three or two. It cannot fit within any definition at all. Therefore it is ineffable, unable to be spoken. Whatever can be expressed, thought, felt, or imagined, is not Tao.

“Which that imparts form to forms is itself formless,” says Chuang-Tzu. Tao is self-existent; there is nothing that accounts for its existence. It just is. Eternal and unchangeable, it is not outside the universe but is in and through all. It is the nameless principle behind everything that happens.

Western scholars have sometimes translated the word Tao as “God.” It is easy to see why. The ultimate Tao, like God in the West, is the universal power at work in all that happens. This view is close to pantheism, a notion that all of nature is divine and worthy of worship. It may be more accurate to call Taoist belief a near-pantheism in that it considers all of the events of nature to be manifestations of the supreme power called Tao, which lies within nature, but is not identical with it.

On the other hand, the ultimate Tao is not what Westerners usually expect when they think of God. The Tao is not a supreme Person who knows what is going on in the world and who guides the path of history. The Tao does not and cannot hear or respond to prayer. The Tao is not caring toward people, but neither is it uncaring. It is beyond such categories. It simply is, eternally and unchangeably incomprehensible. It is the nonpersonal way from which there somehow emanates the yang/yin way of
nature. So says “philosophical” Taoism, at least.

In actual practice most of those who call themselves Taoists today acknowledge the reality of the ultimate Tao but do not devote much time or attention to it. This is partly because the Tao is nonpersonal and cannot care for people or listen to them. Most Taoists are involved on a daily basis with the spirits and the ancestral beings that are personal. They are also attentive to the many spirits and concerned with the lesser nonpersonal power in omens, mana-filled rituals, and various quotidian forms of yang/yin. This is often called “popular” Taoism. If ordinary people pay scant attention to the supreme Tao, it is probably because this ultimate Tao, like all ultimate realities, is a little too hard to grasp, too general or abstract or philosophical to evoke ongoing interest. Yet belief in it shows again how far the human mind can reach.

The Ultimate Reality in the Religions of India

It is impossible to easily represent the range of religious thought that has developed in India. Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain religious traditions had their origins there. Hindu thought alone can count many different theological schools as well as hundreds of local traditions. But we can describe a few particularly significant Indian themes about the ultimate.

There is, for example, the extremely austere theme of earliest Buddhism. The Buddha, prince Siddhartha Gautama, was a very practical person in his own way. He proposed that human salvation consisted in achieving nirvana, a sort of self-extinguishing (more about this in Chapter Five). The condition of nirvana was the ultimate reality, according to the Buddha. What was nirvana like? Do not ask, the Buddha replied. No one can know. There is no use wasting time on empty speculations. This answer did not satisfy all Buddhists, however. Eventually, many Buddhists began to describe Buddha-nature as a kind of supreme divinity, once manifested in the prince Siddhartha as well as in other earthly and godly beings. Yet beyond even Buddha-nature lies the state of nirvana, the true goal ultimately of even Buddha.

Buddhism came out of an older and still enduring Hindu tradition, one that in India reabsorbed Buddhism into itself. In this there are two lines of thought about the ultimate that have converged at least partially and have had major influence. One originally concerned the power of ritual; the other was about a search into a person’s innermost self.

The best starting point for discussing these ideas or any Hindu traditions is the Vedas and the Upanishads. By around 500 BCE, perhaps earlier, two sets of sacred writings were assembled. The first of these is the Vedas, four major collections of the ritual prayers of very ancient Hindu practices, but containing all sorts of information, instruction, and even magic. The second is a set of somewhat philosophical interpretations. In the sixth century BCE, the axial age, a late segment of Vedic literature appeared, known as the Upanishads, a set of commentaries on certain passages in the Vedas, especially the collection known as the Rig Veda. Until this time Hindu belief and ritual had been polytheistic, but the Upanishads (and a very few lines in the tenth book of the Rig Veda) added something important. They struggled with questions about the ultimate cause of all things, and how the entire universe fit together. The two lines of thought, about ritual and about the self, appear in the Upanishads. (There will be more on Vedic literature in Chapter Nine.)

From very ancient times the priestly caste, those whose right and duty it was to perform the ritual, had emphasized the importance of ritual power. A word for ritual-power (sometimes translated as “prayer”) begins with the letters brhm. The priests therefore were called brahmans and the mana-like power generated by the ritual was called something like “brahman.” The Upanishads re-interpreted the notion of brahman. They proclaimed that Brahman was not just a power, but was the single Ultimate Power in the universe. A number of Hindu thinkers asserted that there is one supreme and ultimate reality, infinite and incomprehensible, that lies behind the entire universe, a reality to be called Brahman. It is the ocean of Being, the fullness of Power, the Really Real.

This idea eventually intersected with another ancient tradition, belief in the Atman or “Self” (a word to be used cautiously). As early as the time of the Upanishads, some Hindu thought had begun to turn inward away from the outer world. The world we live in is one of confusion and pain, of unreliable things that come and go. To find some peace a person must try to close off the world and retreat into the inner self. One of the Upanishads compared it metaphorically to falling asleep to the outer world in order to find something else inside the person.

In dreams or special states of consciousness a person perceives a reality that is not subject to the usual limitations imposed by time and space. Dreams are partial freedom from the world. In deep dreamless sleep a person goes a step further, beyond even the dream-reality into a kind of no-self, a state of non-consciousness as though the self had disappeared for a time.

But this is a temporary no-self. The inner self of a person actually lasts through this dreamless sleep, as is evident when the person wakes up. The dreamless state was just a temporary freedom from involvement in the passing jumble of events in life. To attain a fuller freedom a person must go even deeper, beyond even dreamlessness, to get totally beyond individual self. It is not easy to take this metaphorical journey beyond waking and dreams and dreamless sleep into full no-self. The path to it is not through actual sleep (Chapter Five will describe the path). Few ever achieve it. But the path leads
to the ultimate Self. It is called Atman, a word that originally meant just inner self or spirit (recall “atmosphere”). It is the infinite and universal Self, the truly ultimate reality. At times it is called pure consciousness as befits a Self, or pure bliss as a kind of state of consciousness. Yet because it is truly the Ultimate, it is also eternal, unchanging, and unbounded. It is a consciousness and bliss utterly beyond what we can comprehend. Each person’s inner self/atman is not truly an individual self; it is really a drop in the infinite ocean of Self/Atman.

Different Hindu thinkers responded to ideas about Brahman and Atman in different ways. Many decided that since each was said to be ultimate reality and there could be only one truly ultimate reality, it must therefore be that Brahman was Atman and vice versa. To some this meant that Brahman-Atman was and is pure Consciousness, as though Brahman-Atman were the ultimate Self or Personess. Another school of thought pushed the ideal of ultimate truth all the way. The truly ultimate is that beyond which there can be nothing else. As ultimate, it must therefore be the infinite. As infinite, it must therefore be beyond all categories, even the categories of consciousness and bliss. Brahman-Atman then must be Nirguna Brahman: Brahman without attributes. This is all certainly confusing. But it is difficult to think clearly about a reality that lies beyond the ability of thought to grasp it.

A fairly extreme and widely held philosophical position is that of the Hindu thinker Shankara. He lived and wrote in the early ninth century CE, relatively recently, and he claimed to be bringing to completion what was already in the Vedic writings, especially the Upanishads. He argued that Brahman is indeed the incomprehensible, infinite, ultimate Reality. It has the fullness of reality and infinitely so. That means that in some sense nothing is really real except Brahman’s eternal and changeless “reality.” At this point, other thinkers concluded that because the world is real it is therefore part of Brahman. Not Shankara. He concluded that the world we live in and perceive and take to be real is just the opposite. It is a shadowy, insubstantial thing. It is “maya,” a word sometimes translated as “illusion.” Like those concerned with the inner self and Atman but in his own way, Shankara turned away from the world. Brahman-Atman alone is real, he declared, in its infinite incomprehensibility.

This is the extreme expression of a belief in a nonpersonal Ultimate. The Tao is nonpersonal and ultimate, but the Taoist values this world and its yang/yin order as manifesting the universal influence of the Tao. The Brahmanist who accepts Shankara’s ideas claims that nothing is truly real except the infinite and incomprehensible Nirguna Brahman. The world has no true existence. Nor do you and I have any true existence, except that we have within us beneath our individual selfhood the Self (Atman), which is actually even beyond Self, for it is ultimately identical with Nirguna Brahman.

**TALKING ABOUT THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE**

It is difficult to try to make sense out of a position that says that we are not real the way we think we are, and that the best way to think about the Ultimate is to recognize that it is unthinkable. But within the complexly woven threads of Hindu tradition there is a basic thought common to East and West. It is that beyond or beneath the various events and realities of life as we experience and comprehend it, there is a single and infinite incomprehensible reality: God as Absolute, the formless Tao, Nirguna Brahman. In the West, in China, and in India, three major historical centers of world civilization, religious thought passed beyond animism and polytheism, beyond even everyday monotheism, in search of the ultimate unity to everything. The search has led to a great mystery, the incomprehensible and absolute Ultimate.

These different civilizations followed different clues towards the Ultimate. Western religion pursued the idea of a personal Creator-God. By asking who created everything, it arrived at the notion of the Absolute from whom somehow reality comes. Chinese Taoism looked to the yang/yin order of nature as its best clue to the ultimate, and discovered a nonpersonal Cause of the patterns of nature. Hindu Brahmanist thought speculated both on the Atman-Self within a person and on the nonpersonal sacred power in rituals in order eventually to find the ultimate Brahman-without-attributes. The differences among these three approaches deserve books of their own, but what is the same is this: all three discovered an Ultimate, a reality that transcends or exceeds all boundaries and all comprehension. All three concluded that to understand that which we cannot really understand is the most valid understanding. All three concluded that the Ultimate is Mystery.

If the religious traditions had stopped at that and insisted firmly on nothing but that, these traditions might quickly have lost strength among most people. Ordinary religiousness includes more than an awed acknowledgment that the Ultimate is Mystery. Mystics may relish contemplating the infinite Mystery. Most people, however, seek something else in their religion.

These traditions remained alive for two reasons. The first is that most religious believers have not worried much about these rather abstract conclusions. In India, for example, most people worship one or more gods rather than focus on the absolute Being of Brahman-Atman. Each of the gods is said to be a lesser symbol of the supreme divine Self (Atman), which in turn is somehow a mode of presence of Brahman. But most believers do not worry too much about that. It is enough to worship the gods. Similarly, in China Taoism takes a less abstract and popular form, attending to the ancestors, manipulating magic powers, and dealing with spirits. Most Taoists do not
break their heads over the formless Tao. In the West people are usually happy to speak in somewhat anthropomorphic ways about God. Jews, Christians, and Muslims will say that God is a Mystery and certainly not an anthropomorphic being like Zeus. Yet they will also speak of God’s love or mercy or God’s plans and activities the way we all speak of human persons, without worrying much about how precisely correct this is. Religious traditions do not usually insist that all believers hold to the most austerely proper and rigorously logical forms of speaking about the supreme numinous reality, be it God, Tao, or Brahma.

The second reason why religious traditions have been able both to claim that the supreme reality is an incomprehensible Ultimate and to have it still remain important to them is that they have found workable ways of talking about the incomprehensible. They do this by focusing on the clues to the Ultimate. The existence of persons, the order of the world, reflections on ritual-power and on the inner layers of one’s self—these point in the direction of the Ultimate. In the Western historic religions, for example, God is said to be personal. This is taken to mean that when we understand what a person is—life and consciousness, freedom and love—we are then orienting ourselves in the direction of what God is rather than away from God. It is legitimate, therefore, to call God personal, although it must always be added that the ultimate nature of divinity is personhood in a way utterly beyond all limitations and therefore in a way that cannot be comprehended. (If you find such a philosophical qualification too technical and intellectualist to want to include it as part of your daily religious thoughts, the religions traditions will not insist upon it.)

Summary
This chapter has provided a survey of the various ways different religious traditions have agreed that behind the diversity and conflicts of life there is a single unifying Ultimate Reality. Because it is ultimate, it is also beyond our human ability to describe it adequately. Each culture has its own perspectives about the Ultimate. Each perspective provides a different view of the value and reality of human personness, of nature, of the universe.

It is striking that we humans should find it possible to believe in and care about an ultimate unity to all things. It is doubly striking that we should maintain this belief even if it leads us into ultimate incomprehensibility—the Mystery. The next chapter will explore the human condition to see what it is about us that perpetuates such belief as the core of historic religion.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION
1. How disorderly does this world appear to you? Do you find it plausible that there is an ultimate unity to all things? Does the religion you know best claim that there is such a unity? Explain.
2. If you had to describe the main characteristics of God, would you agree with the image presented here of the Judaic-Christian-Islamic God? Why? Why not?
3. Would you call the nonliving Tao by the name “God”? What about Atman-Brahman? Explain.
4. Where do you look for the best clue as to what is truly ultimate? What clues or clues are most meaningful to you?
5. What value can you see, if any, in saying that God is an ultimate Mystery?

SUGGESTED READINGS
Karl Jaspers, The Origin And Goal of History, 1953. Chapter 1, on the axial age.