Chapter Four

The Endless Quest

The Human Basis of Belief in an Ultimate

Chapter Two described reasons why people believe in magic, spirits, and gods. Animism and polytheism offer ways of making sense out of the events of life. These beliefs provide psychological comfort and social stability. Some beliefs may have roots in our genes. Most of us usually assume that belief in a single, universal Ultimate such as God also offers equivalent mental, emotional, and social benefits. But it should be clear now from Chapter Three that monotheism and its equivalents can take a rather extreme form as belief in an incomprehensible Absolute and Ultimate Reality. Belief in a single Ultimate sounds quite simple: it is belief in one God instead of many. But this belief is actually rather complex; it claims that contrary to appearances there is a universal unity to everything. It passes beyond familiar anthropomorphisms into austere statements about infinity and incomprehensibility. In spite of this, it is a belief that has been maintained firmly and widely for many centuries. That is what needs to be explained.

God as a Merely Perfect Person

It is odd to speak of God as a "merely" perfect Person. It should be no "merely" thing to have a God who is a truly perfect Person. A perfect Person exceeds by far the gods of polytheism. Such a Person is often pictured as something less than truly infinite and ultimate. But we might be excused for not objecting to this. God as a "merely" perfect Person would seem to be preferable to an Incomprehensible Ultimate for several reasons. Hindus likewise may prefer to think of Vishnu or Shiva, and some Buddhists of Amitha Buddha, as a "merely" perfect Person, instead of attending to Nirguna Brahman or meditating on nirvana.

First of all, God as a perfect Person is totally good. No person need fear that God will be fickle, unreliable, unfair, petty, greedy, or vain. The gods suf-

fer from all these imperfections that we ordinary humans also experience, because the gods are not perfectly good as God is. At the same time, as less than the Absolute, God can be more readily portrayed in a personal way. Sometimes supposedly monothestic religious leaders or writings go too far in that direction and describe God as though God were only a god. They do this, for example, when they say that God is impatient or angry or needs attention. Monotheism intends to establish at least this minimum about God, that God's goodness is totally unflawed. This should mean, for example, that when God is poetically portrayed as a parent, the image should represent a perfect parent who recognizes that the way to respond to a child's faults and failings is by loving and supporting the child, by showing compassion and understanding, and by using corrective measures when necessary but never out of anger or impatience or to fulfill selfish needs.

A perfect Person is also all-knowing and thus will never harm anyone through mistake, inattention, or ignorance, as mere gods might do. There is no real need ever to call God's attention to problems, as must be done with the gods. Nothing that God does is aimless or useless, even if people fail to understand the purpose behind it. Of equal importance is that an all-knowing merely perfect God is one who truly understands us. Other people fail to see us as we are or appreciate what we have to offer. Others ignore us at those times we most need to be accepted. Others pressure us into play-acting our lives to earn their approval. But God sees within, knows a person fully and accurately. As all-good God does not merely know us in our inner selves, feelings, and needs, but cherishes us deeply.

Furthermore, a merely perfect Person is all-powerful. God's knowledge and goodness lead God to know and choose exactly what is best for every person. "All-powerful" means that God can also accomplish what is best; no power in the universe can stand against God's choice. If anything seems evil or chaotic, we can nonetheless be assured that it happens only as the all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God has chosen to make it happen, or at least has allowed it to happen. If human beings have any special needs for miraculous help, divine care, special guidance, or even life after death, there is no doubt that God can provide such things.

The gods of polytheism can also provide some divine guidance and care. They can even give life after death if that is needed. Miracles, divine commandments, special attention, and eternal life are not things that only a perfect God can do. But belief in God as perfect Person adds the confidence that because God is perfect as the gods are not, people can place unqualified and unhesitating trust in God. God will never fail us because of limitations such as inattentiveness, carelessness, ignorance, weakness, confusion, or emotional immaturity.
This portrayal of God (or Vishnu, etc.) as Perfect Person makes it obvious why many people have adhered to at least some limited form of monotheism throughout centuries. Belief in a perfect God can offer much more psychological comfort than belief in lesser numinous powers and beings. Whatever can be done with mana or magic or luck, God can do better, and can be counted on to do what is best. Whatever it is the spirits or even the gods can provide, God can do more and will do it with unfailing love. This same God is also a more certain reference point for social stability than the gods can be. When God delivers laws to be obeyed or provides wisdom for guidance or establishes patterns of human life, every person can be sure that these are the best possible laws, wisdom, and patterns. Conformity to them will never be wasted effort, for God knows all and has a plan for everything. Thus God can be pictured in somewhat anthropomorphistic terms as a parent or friend. God is a friendly and helpful Being rather than just an incomprehensible Absolute. God is Lord, Leader, or Lawgiver, not just an Ultimate.

In spite of this, theologies in historical or classical religions have maintained that we all should push beyond our anthropomorphisms, beyond the comfort and security of an image of God as a merely perfect Person, on to belief that the ultimate truth is that God is infinite and incomprehensible, that there is a Nirguna Brahman beyond perfect Self, that the Tao is formless. There are philosophical reasons why the traditions have described the Ultimate this way. We will see these reasons in Chapter Eleven on the proof for the existence of God (or equivalent). Some religious thinkers say that we have semi-mystical experiences of infinite mystery upon which the universe and our lives depend. That too will be discussed in another chapter. This chapter has a more ordinary but important question to answer.

The search in the next few pages is for the way our own lives present to us a dimension of ultimateness that we cannot easily avoid. We will understand a great deal about ourselves as human beings when we understand why the rather austere and difficult notion of the Ultimate as incomprehensible Mystery has been maintained at the core of major religious traditions. What we will be looking for are the kinds of feelings and ideas that everyone might have sooner or later in life that would make a person aware of questions so big and disturbing that only belief in some truly Ultimate or Absolute reality can answer. Thousands of years ago, our ancestors set out to find answers to the many mysteries of life. They did not know it, but they were setting out on an endless quest. The human mind has such an unlimited capacity to wonder and question that it is in the very nature of humanness to live in the presence of infinite mystery. The next section will try to explain that.

**The Ultimate Questions**

There are certain questions that we are capable of asking because we have human minds, but that are odd because they can only be answered (if at all) in the way historic religion does, by talking about an ultimate reality that is relevant to the entire universe at once. These questions are not raised by everyone everywhere. It may be that most people would just as soon avoid being bothered by them. And people in primitive and pre-literary archaic cultures do not seem to ask them, at least not explicitly. Yet they are universal questions in the sense that they ask about the whole of all things at once. These questions seek the final or ultimate explanation for everything at once. In a pure monotheism or its equivalent, the ultimate explanation for everything is a single reality rather than multiple realities (as in polytheism), a single reality that is the Cause or Power or Being behind the whole of things.

Part of the reason why we ask ultimate and universal questions is that we have available to us a style of thought that makes it easier to formulate such questions. People in historic (and modern) cultures are no more intelligent than people in primitive and archaic cultures. Humankind seems to share in the same basic human intelligence everywhere. But folktales and myths are stories of specific beings and events. As narratives, these stories must provide concrete images of activities and their consequences. The axial age, however, brought with it not just certain ideas about universal order or unity but also a mode of thought better able to express such ideas. In the axial age, the old stories continued to be told, though sometimes were reinterpreted. But a new and more abstract mode of thought gained currency among the intellectual elite of various great cultures. Explicit logic, formal rules of argumentation, and highly abstract language were the tools of the new philosophy, science, and theology. They made it possible to ask the ultimate questions. Perhaps they even made it inevitable that people would ask them, though we cannot know this for sure.

There is really just one ultimate question, though it has many aspects: "Why is everything?" It will be easier here to approach the one single ultimate question by looking at three different forms the question might take:

1. What is the origin of everything (if any)?
2. What is the order or nature of everything (if any)?
3. What is the purpose of everything (if any)?

These three questions ask about the entire universe at once, where it all comes from, what it is like, and where it is going. Because we are part of this universe, these questions also appear as follows: Where did we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?

It took many thousands of years of human development before whole civ-
izations became aware of these universal questions. It is as though human cultural development preceding the axial age had not yet reached the stage in which such questions made sense. This is also true of each individual. Not until adolescence do human beings begin to achieve the capacity to recognize the significance and range of the ultimate questions. Even then we do not find it easy to exercise that capacity. It takes practice before we get used to thinking in such broad, all-inclusive, and abstract ways. Not until the axial age do we find cultures that encourage the use of this ability.

**Asking the Questions in a Contemporary Context**

From primitive times people have been asking about the origin, nature, and purpose of things. As we have already seen, primitive peoples use folktales to explain each bit and piece of reality. Literate archaic people develop elaborate myths about how the god or gods brought order out of chaos and how the present division of authority among gods came to be. Historic religion looks further, for a single unifying all-inclusive explanation of all things.

It is difficult for us to try to understand how new ideas about reality have startled people in a different culture into asking ultimate questions. We may never be able to share the sensibilities of former generations and other societies. Rather than try to reproduce the complex analyses of the Chinese, Indian, or Jewish thinkers of ancient times, we can get a better idea of how ultimate questions can arise by considering information that is part of our own era, information from astronomy about the physical universe. It is seemingly harmless information, but if any of it begins to evoke some uneasiness and stir up some uncomfortable questions in your mind, then you will know a little better how previous generations as long ago as 500 or 600 BCE felt when they stumbled across ultimate questions in their own cultural contexts.

Current astronomical theory says that the universe is about fourteen billion years old. The estimates vary and new information could change the estimates, but generally speaking this picture of the universe is a well-supported theory. About fourteen billion years ago, it says, all the matter and energy that is the universe today was condensed so compactly that less than a teaspoonful would have a mass equivalent to the entire universe. The density was so great that its energy made it explode, scattering itself outward, spinning and crashing and expanding on and on until today. The universe we live in is that explosion still scattering outward. All the stars and galaxies of stars and the matter and energy in between are clusters of stuff blowing outward since the “big bang” that began fourteen billion years ago.

Perhaps this exploding universe will expand endlessly, with everything becoming more and more scattered and spreading itself ever thinner until the universe that we know becomes dead, every bit of it lost from every other bit in the unending cold. Another possibility, one that currently looks less likely, is that the mutual gravitational attraction of every bit for every other bit will slow down and stop the expansion of the universe and then drag it back together, faster and faster, all of it falling in toward everything else until it is so condensed again that there will be another big bang and the universe will start all over again, and then again, and so on. Such a cycle would occur perhaps about every eighty billion years or so, the theory has it. It seems there could be an endless series of cycles, explosion and collapse, explosion and collapse, one after the other.

Meanwhile, we live in this continuously expanding universe. It is a very large one. To get an idea of the amount of matter and space involved, begin with a pea about one-third of an inch in diameter. Let that stand for the earth (a little less than eight thousand miles in diameter). Put the pea next to a very large beach ball, one full yard in diameter, to represent the sun (eight hundred sixty-four thousand miles in diameter). Now put the pea at one end of a football field and the ball at the far other end, about one hundred ten yards apart. That approximates the average distance between earth and sun (ninety-three million miles). The earth is quite close to the sun compared to the outermost planets. Pluto’s average distance from the sun is forty times as far as earth’s. If the whole solar system out to Pluto were shrunk to one inch, on that scale the nearest star would be ninety yards away. Our solar system is three-fourths of the way out from the center of a cluster of stars known to us as the Milky Way, a galaxy with as many as perhaps three hundred billion stars. There are an estimated hundred billion such galaxies in the known universe, each of them averaging another hundred billion stars or so. This speck of rock called earth can seem insignificant in a universe where even our entire Milky Way galaxy is lost among a hundred billion others. In a few million years our sun will follow the normal course in the life of a small to medium sized star, first bloating out into a “red giant” burning the earth raw and then collapsing and dying.

The astronomical theories have disturbing implications. They may imply that the whole universe is a rather chaotic collection of random events, that we tiny humans are the merest specks of life on a rocky mote whirling in vast emptiness as a momentary phase in the unending aimlessness of time and space. Is that the whole story of the ultimate origin, order, and purpose of the entire universe?

How should we respond to a question like that? We can ignore it and get on with the practical things of life. That is a successful tactic most of the time. We can also fall back on traditional religious beliefs and just say that no matter what the universe looks like to astronomers we are sure it is all under
God's purposeful guidance. That response works well for many people. But to understand better the human significance of ultimate questions we will have to look into them more deeply. We might even get in over our heads here and there, looking at problems we cannot answer. It will all help, though, in understanding why ultimateness, universality, infinity, and other such incomprehensibles keep intruding into human history in historic religions.

What Is the Origin of Everything?
This is the first form of the ultimate questions, the most intellectually abstract of the three. There is a dilemma inherent in any attempt to ask about the origin of everything. Neither of the two horns of the dilemma is a comfortable place to sit. One is the possibility that there is no origin, that the stuff of the universe always existed, everlasting before every person's life and, seemingly, everlasting after. Things keep on happening, one after another, every event passing away endlessly, all events and lives swallowed up eventually in an infinite series of changes.

There are puzzling aspects to this. Can the universe really go on endlessly? If it could cease to exist or if the energy that composes it could ever be extinguished, then an infinity of time already passed should have been time enough for this to happen. Inasmuch as the universe is still active, then perhaps it goes on endlessly. That would be the same, it seems, as going nowhere in particular, because wherever or however the universe ends up at some given point in time it will never stop there but go on and on and on. Our minds can circle restlessly around possibilities like these.

The other horn of the dilemma, that the universe did originate some infinite amount of time ago, is embodied in the scientific theory of the big bang. The next question, then, is why there existed any matter/energy to go "bang" in the first place. Where did it come from? The monotheist answers this easily: God created it. But the answer is not as simple as it looks. Why is there a God? Did someone or thing create God?

The traditional answer is that no one created God because God always existed. This is a troublesome response, though, as the philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) pointed out over two centuries ago. If we think the universe had to have a start, what is it about God that says God did not have a start but can start everything else? Or if God could have existed endlessly, why not the universe also? But then if the universe could have existed forever, what need is there for a Creator? If the universe has existed forever, in fact, then all the problems from the first horn of the dilemma are back with us.

Indian and Western historic religions found it necessary in the face of such puzzles to make a major shift in their idea of the ultimate reality. God or Brahman is not everlasting; they said. To last endlessly is to endure through time. The Ultimate is not everlasting, they proclaimed; rather it is eternal. The eternal stands outside of time; it is timeless. It causes time, or affects the events of time, or is the reality hidden behind the appearances of time. But in the eternal Ultimate there is only utter changelessness. There is no before or during or after. The world experiences time, so it cannot be the ultimate. That is why there must be an eternal (timeless) ultimate to account for the world's existence.

We have seen another line of thought that led to this same conclusion. In the East and West the supreme Reality is thought to be totally perfect. Anything imperfect is a limited or flawed reality like a god or great man. The reality behind all the universe must be unlimited or unflawed. Whatever changes is good or perfect in its own way perhaps (if it really exists at all), but it is not totally perfect. Whatever changes is always passing away in some respect. The totally perfect, therefore, is beyond change. What is beyond change is timeless, for time is nothing but change. So the logic went, at least. It is perhaps not water-tight logic, but it is the kind of thought that the West and East engaged in beginning in the axial age.

We may be a little intrigued by thoughts like this, or just tired and confused trying to sort it out, wondering whether it is really worth the effort. There is very little in our daily lives that makes such thoughts useful. But in the axial age about twenty-five hundred years ago this kind of thinking became an explicit part of human history. Human minds then opened wide enough to wonder about everlasting duration and timeless eternity. Ever since then, we have been asking questions that are so broad that they point toward infinite, absolute, and changeless perfection. This beginning leads to other ultimate questions, some more directly related to our ordinary life.

What Order and Purpose Is There to the Universe?
However you or your culture answers the question about the origin of everything, a further question remains unanswered: what order is there in reality as a whole?

Is there any real order at all? The astronomers' portrait of the universe as the fragments of an explosion is a hint that perhaps any kind of orderliness or pattern is just a momentary accident. In general our basic faith in the intelligibility of reality usually overcomes our doubts; we feel sure that somehow things do make sense. This basic faith, though, is always being challenged by reality. Order does exist to some degree; that much seems obvious. We can make a certain amount of sense of things. The success of science seems to be evidence that reality is intelligible and predictable.

But the order seems incomplete. Science says that nature on the whole is a cosmic explosion still chaotically fragmenting. Likewise in every person's life there is some chaos, confusion, conflict, and destruction. The simple faith
that reality makes sense may then be too sweeping a judgment. Perhaps the evidence should lead us to say that reality makes only partial and temporary and local sense, that there are everywhere conflicting forces at work, that there is no universal order as historic religions claim but only partial areas of order as polytheistic interpretations see it.

Even if we find some way to assert that there is a basic order to all things, this order may not be to our liking. Perhaps this order is just a mindless fate to which we can only submit. Perhaps it is a dead, mechanical, automatic process. The laws and patterns of nature are all rather orderly in that they follow certain basic physical laws. But the laws may just operate without purpose or meaning. Order without purpose can be as humanly empty as chaos. Everything then runs smoothly but uselessly.

A person may well reject the idea that our existence is an accident subject to uncontrolled forms of chaos, or is order but of a mindless and purposeless sort. But is it bothersome or unsettling to you to take those kinds of ideas seriously? If so, then the questions of ultimate order and purpose are important to you. We do not always notice their importance because we tend to live by the unconscious faith that reality is intelligible, that there is purposeful order to it. It is not until that faith is somehow challenged that we become aware of its place in our lives.

Primitive, archaic, and historic peoples have all felt the threat of chaos, but it is the historic religious traditions that have worried and reflected most deeply about it. They have found ways to express their faith that in the end chaos is not victorious. The Taoist is confident that all moments of disorder will be balanced out in the long run by the Tao. The Western monotheist claims that even seeming disorder is part of a divine plan. God somehow maintains a meaningful order to everything even if that is not apparent to us. In India the Shankara school neatly eliminates disorder by declaring that all the events of the universe are not truly real, but only "maya." In each case the supreme reality must be of such power to assure that every event in the universe is assimilated in some way into an ultimate order or perfection.

It is an awesomely massive and complex universe to bring under a single order. There is an enormous extent of time and of real events and possible events, of countless billions of happenings even under a single jungle rock much less in a whole forest, continent, planet, solar system, or galaxy. Is there a God or cosmic force that can and does bring the events of one hundred billion galaxies into a coherent and meaningful order on each of a billion days? Questions like these have helped sustain the historic religions in their belief that the one God or Ultimate must not merely a Perfect Person or Self but the infinite Absolute, able to encompass the immensity of the universe within its eternal power.

What Order and Purpose Is There to Our Lives?
All the thoughts about the universe, about its origin, order, and purpose, would be mere academic speculation were it not that the order and purpose to our lives are bound up in such questions. We do not often experience the connection. Our implicit faith in the intelligibility and value of life usually remains strong. We believe that to live and act and choose, to work and to plan and to love, are all somehow deeply meaningful.

Once in a while, though, reality falls apart in front of us and lays bare a frightening emptiness. Most of us only catch glimpses of this emptiness and comfort ourselves with the thought that it is not really there. Very few become convinced that emptiness is the final truth; some may be fortunate enough never to perceive it at all. Yet most people eventually get a brief look behind the seeming order and purpose of life into mysteries that can upset their natural faith in life.

The Unfairness of Life
One major way that reality challenges human faith that life is meaningful is by its "unfairness." By definition life would be fair if every person could expect to get out of life exactly what he or she deserves. If life were fully fair, the innocent would never starve to death or suffer a long and painful disease. If life were fair, those who conscientiously work and sacrifice to help those they love would never lose everything to flood or earthquake. The fact of reading this book probably means that by accident of birth you have received food, shelter, and education during your life; enjoyed the luxury of not having to worry about intestinal parasites, or about being killed in a revolution; and expect to live a reasonably long life. These are luxuries in the sense that most people in history would consider them true privileges. Have we done something wonderfully meritorious to have deserved these privileges? Probably not. Life is not fair.

It is one of the peculiarities of our contemporary situation that life appears basically fair to us, because we are protected against its many deadly uncertainties. And yet we are aware that the security of these comfortable conditions is tenuous. We too can be crippled by disease or made blind. Our children, our parents, our loved ones can suddenly die in a senseless accident.

The Fact of Death
There is a second major aspect of life that can stir up a deep uneasiness about the ultimate meaning of life. That is the fact of death. During our lives we build up a pattern of goals and accomplishments. We live towards the future, to enjoy, to do, to create. And then one day we discover that most of our future is behind us. There is a time limit. We all die. We will never enjoy all
that we hope to enjoy. We will never find all the love, success, happiness, fulfillment we once hoped for from life. For a brief moment, the moving forces of the universe have produced the particular spark of life that is our identity, a brief candle glowing brightly and then sputtering out.

The fact of death easily becomes a symbol of our finiteness. Every person's life is a quick flash of hope, burning among a billion others, passing away like a billion others to be replaced by another countless billion. People leave behind families, monuments, great books and works of art, philosophies, nations, even religions. But everything is limited, partial, passing. In ten thousand years all but the very greatest or very worst will have been forgotten. A million years from now, a brief time on the cosmic scale, little will be left. "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die," said the Christian apostle Paul, mocking what he thought to be the Epicurean philosophy of life. If death brings an end to everything, then there is no lasting purpose to anything. In the infinite immensity of time, all things turn to dust.

Religious Answers to Death and Life's Unfairness

There are various ways to avoid the challenge to life's meaning. Some people manage to ignore the challenges. Others manage to maintain their basic faith in the worthwhileness of life out of some inner optimism. For most people, however, it is their religious beliefs that meet the challenges.

Historic or classical religion has a special power to overcome the threats of death and unfairness. The belief that there is an ultimate Being or Power is already a belief in a final order, in spite of apparent conflicts and contradictions in life. Belief in a God, for example, is a belief that the disorder of unfairness is conquered finally in some way by the ordering power of divine Providence. Belief in Brahman is a belief that the disorder of unfairness and death is only part of "maya" (illusion). Belief in the Tao is a belief in a transcendent order that reconciles all temporary disorder in some way. Likewise, belief that death is not just a passing away but a meaningful incorporation into an eternal reality beyond this life is a belief common to most historic religions.

When people face death and unfairness, belief in a God who is a merely perfect Person turns out to be helpful but not always enough. As long as each person thinks mainly of his or her own experiences of life's unfairness and of the approach of death, the person may be satisfied with a God who is guaranteed to be perfectly fair and loving and able to give everlasting life to that person. But larger questions can intrude. The death of millions through civil wars and the unfairness of children dying hungry can cause doubt about ultimate meaningfulness. The questing consciousness of human thought can begin to nose around the edges of infinity by asking where it all comes from, whether it all hangs together in some way, whether there really is some ultimate purpose to all things that can never be swallowed up by millions of years of time or by an endless sequence of happenings.

It is in answer to such thoughts that the historic religions have proposed there is an Ultimate that is more than even a merely perfect Person (though in Western monotheism the Ultimate is also somehow the infinite perfection of personness). As a result, there are whole theological libraries devoted to comprehending and speaking about the incomprehensible Ultimate.

In all these libraries of thought about the Ultimate is another topic, half-hidden, one a little closer to our lives than abstract discussions of the Ultimate. This is our own human orientation to the Ultimate or the infinite. From the first pages we have talked about our orientation to mystery and even about our capacity for the infinite. Our simple ability to think about the kinds of universalist questions we have been pondering is of very special importance and needs to be addressed more explicitly.

AN OPENNESS TO THE INFINITE

Our Peculiar Kind of Consciousness

The ultimate questions represent something odd about human life: that we are unsure about where we fit in reality. Where do we come from? What are we part of? Where are we going? We do not always know for sure; at least, the human race has had a hard time trying to answer those questions. The most significant thing is that we are aware that these questions exist and can be asked, and that we do not always have satisfying answers. We are the consciously uncertain animal.

Once again compare a human being to any animal. Those animals are simply a part of nature. Each is aware of its environment, the air and smells and moisture in it, the earth and mud and rocks, trees and shrubs and stumps, rivers and rain, birds and insects and mammals. None of the animals, however, consciously names these things and wonders where they came from or what their purpose is. Animals are born, develop, live and die, in accordance with the patterns evolution has produced so far, and they do this without thinking about it. They do not ponder the meaning of their lives or ever worry about their future success. They simply live, from moment to moment, meal to meal.

We humans have some things in common with those animals. We also are born, live for a while, and die. We also have moments of pleasure and pain. But we can also reflect on these things. On any given day it may be that we are consciously aware of feelings of excitement about someone we are going to meet or frustration over falling to achieve something we hoped for. To be aware of having these feelings is a special consciousness, an ability to say
about oneself "I am excited" or "I am feeling frustrated." We simultaneously
ly remember times when we were less excited or frustrated. We can make
conscious comparisons in our minds and feel better or worse through these
comparisons. We can also consciously picture to ourselves others we know
or have read about and use this mental picture as a basis of comparison. We
can even consciously imagine possible future conditions for ourselves in
which our excitement is spoiled or our frustration is overcome. We can make
ourselves happy or sad by our memories, imaginations, and comparisons. We
can create worlds of possibilities by which we measure what we actually
have or lack.

This is an extraordinary ability; it is self-awareness. We can consciously
possess our own selfhood by being able to say, "I am." It is also called self-
transcendence. When we look at ourselves, at our lives, actions, and options,
we are rising above (transcending) our ongoing existence, as it were, in order
to look it over and reflect on it. In this lies our power of self-determination.
Because we can rise above our ongoing life and look it over, we are in a posi-
tion to direct that life, to choose in various ways what it will be like. This
capacity for self-transcendence is therefore our freedom. It distinguishes us
from all other beings. It is what makes us so distinctly human.

The Experience of Limit and Estrangement
Because we can consciously remember, imagine, reflect, compare, and see our-
selves in a thousand ways, we can also stand in front of a mirror and say, "I
wish that I could be..." We all have the kind of consciousness that allows us
to dream of being as strong, good looking, intelligent, free, courageous,
wealthy, famous, healthy, loved, and loving as someone else, real or imagined.
We all know that wishful thinking is not very profitable except about things
that we can accomplish by hard work and training. We know that much of life
must simply be accepted and endured. We know that the right
attitude about what is can bring us happiness, instead of misery about what
is not. We learn to deal with our consciousness of what might be, with our
imagination and dreams. The significant thing about humans is that we must
learn to deal with life's possibilities. Life is not automatic; we are not born
into a programmed pattern of behavior to fit into a special niche in nature.
We are adrift in reality, struggling perhaps to find a place, a home, a center
of security and identity; or working to establish a direction, a set of goals that
we can trust to guide us in our decisions.

Nothing is a greater blessing or advantage than our power to imagine what
does not yet exist, to work with our minds, comparing options and reflecting
on possibilities. Out of this has come our language, civilization, art, and
humor. The uncertainty and desires that arise because of our kind of con-
sciousness gives us our openness to change and the motivation to grow. But
there is a price we pay. While our consciousness makes us the animal that is
most fully alive, that same consciousness also makes us the only animal that
foressees its own death. The consciousness that makes us desire wholeness
and happiness also gives us a sense of limitation and makes us estranged.

Estrangement is an unusual word with a simple meaning: to be separate. In
romantic context the word "estrangement" is used to describe a change from
a feeling of affection to one of indifference or separation. Philosophers and the-
ologians employ the word at times to reflect something of the romantic mean-
ing in a new way. Human existence is like the tragic condition of two lovers
who sought happiness with each other but somehow find themselves lonely
and frustrated. The unity they once thought they had has turned out to be an
illusion and mockery. Where they hoped to find meaning there is now noth-
ing. It would be too painful to think about this often, so they do their best to
forget or ignore the bright wholeness they once had. But there is now a feeling
of restlessness within, a deeper, unnamed sense of wrongness to life, a state of
separation or estrangement, a frustrating experience of limit.

The historic religions often declare that our whole lives are basically ones
of estrangement from some ideal reality or some perfect Ultimate. The
human ability to look at the conditions of existence and discover basic prob-
lems in life reached its greatest strength precisely when the human mind
became able to dream of perfection. The same consciousness that allows us
to dream of an ideal unity to things, of perfect goodness, knowledge, and
love, also thereby allows us to recognize that in this ordinary life things fall
far short of such perfection.

In the historic religions that arose in India and the West there is a sense of
estrangement from the conditions of human life. These historic religions
have described life as fallen, corrupt, sinful, or illusory. They see it as flawed
beyond repair. (It will not be until the rise of the modern stage of religion
that an appreciation of life in this world will regain strength.)

Forms of Estrangement
A modern theologian, Paul Tillich (1886-1965), distinguished three types of
estrangement. A review of these kinds of estrangement can help a person
today see the sort of thing historic religions have said about life all along.

First of all, we can feel estranged from the natural universe and the limits
it imposes on us. We are cosmic orphans, as one person expressed it; we have
no clear and settled place in nature. Physically we are natural beings, yet our
minds allow us to step back from nature and look at it and decide whether
to accept it or reject it, enjoy it or avoid it. We often like to see ourselves as
part of a grand natural order. Yet that natural order includes our death. We
like to admire the grandeur of nature, yet nature is so immensely grand that
perhaps it is only a cosmic collection of accidents with no particular place for
human consciousness. In the midst of nature's beauty there is also nature's
destructiveness through disease and drought and earthquake. Perhaps
nature is not a home for us but just a meaningless randomness.

Secondly, we can be estranged from one another. Every human being has
a strong need to belong, to be accepted, to be loved. Each of us can look at
the person next to us and recognize a common humanness in a common
need to be close to someone. Yet there is probably no person who has ever
lived that achieved so full and lasting a relationship that all loneliness disap-
peared for good. Communication between any two people is always imper-
fect. Misunderstandings arise. Lack of trust and openness is part of life.
Jealousy, hatred, insecurity, boredom, irritation, possessiveness, bigotry—all
leave little scars on the skin of life, making us tough enough to survive but
also tough enough to be separate from one another in self-defense. Every one
of us needs acceptance and support. Every one experiences some rejection
and abandonment. We dull our minds and harden our feelings a bit so that
we are not too painfully aware of it. We find the courage to live with it, but
we are still estranged from one another.

Thirdly, we are even estranged from ourselves. Each of us as a child was
taught what we must not be. We found ways of talking, dressing, laughing,
and playing that earned approval from family, teachers, or friends. We did
not always feel comfortable with some of these roles. We often faked it. We
still do. When we were children, people occasionally told us that we were
selfish or jealous and we felt like saying, “No, I’m not,” because we had been
taught that good little girls or boys were not like that. Without really being
conscious of it, we have all learned to lie to ourselves about some of our true
feelings in order to preserve our own self-esteem. A young boy walks to the
seashore with his father and is frightened by the big waves. The father says,
“You are not afraid, are you?” The child learns from this to pretend, even to
himself, that he is not afraid. A teenage girl has feelings that are sexual but
denies it to herself because someone has taught her that makes her dirty-
mined. These kinds of examples are endless because they are so ordinary.
There may be someone who lives comfortably without pretense of any kind;
there may be someone who does not lie to himself or herself in hidden ways,
but such a person would be very rare.

We do not have a ready-made identity. We must search for one as the years
pass, creating it as we go. It is never ideal. We dream of who we might be.
We look for unity with others and sometimes try to please them so they will
like us. We hope always for an at-home-ness with the universe, others, and
self, but it never works completely right. Most importantly, we are conscious
of that. Because we can imagine what a more ideal life might be like, we are
conscious of life’s actual limits.

Overcoming a Sense of Estrangement
Sometimes we hope to overcome life’s serious limits by human effort.
Perhaps someday we will learn to understand ourselves, each other, and the
universe, and from that understanding develop techniques for eliminating
the sources of estrangement. Perhaps medicine can eventually prolong life so
that no one need die until death finally looks appealing as a permanent rest
or a transition to a new condition. Perhaps psychology, sociology, and other
fields of study will enable us to grow up happy and satisfied, loving and
open and supportive toward one another.

If we achieve such a marvelous state, however, perhaps we will become
restless again by wondering what the point of it all might be, what the ulti-
mate purpose or value is in living, however pleasant it might be. Now we
can become restless because our minds enable us to look past present condi-
tions to something better. Even in some supposedly ideal state our minds
will still have the power to imagine, wonder, and dream. Even the smallest
flaw, the humbled question about purpose, the slightest bit of unfairness,
could make us wonder again and worry. The fact of limits may still haunt us.
Human minds have been dreaming of perfection at least since the beginning
of the axial age. Perhaps such dreams and the estrangement they can bring
will never be eliminated unless we eliminate our ability to think.

Again, it is the historic religions that have often decided that earthly life is
fundamentally flawed beyond correction. The new world or other realm can-
not be one that only improves on current life. Some historic philosophies
such as Stoic thought, proposed that we learn to accept the world as it is,
adapting to its order. In recent centuries a modern style of religiousness has
sought simply a deeper harmony with cosmic order. But at least some of the
great historic religions pass a much more negative judgment on this world.
They say that it must be transformed, destroyed, or abandoned completely
in favor of a different kind of existence. Because historic religion is a reli-
gious consciousness of those who ask universalist questions, it is a con-
sciousness that can dream of absolute unqualified perfection. Our human
power of conscious awareness gives us an inner ability to seek that which
transcends all limitations and overcomes all estrangement totally. In the fol-
lowing chapters we will see this more concretely.

Summary
This chapter has reviewed aspects of our existence that lead us beyond local
spirits, magic, powerful gods, and great mana forces, behind the finite and
comprehensible, to wonderment about what is ultimate and beyond all limitation. There are many specific issues that do this: the general ultimate questions, the problem of life’s fairness and of death, the forms of estrangement. The power of these issues to take us beyond the finite is a sign of our own human capacity for the infinite. It is this capacity in the last analysis that leaves us always open to the infinite Mystery that goes by all the names described in Chapter Three.

END OF PART I

We are not at an end yet in talking about the stages in the development of religion. There is still the modern (and even a “postmodern,” as we will see) stage. But that stage is so recent that it is as yet only a tiny part of the overall story of religion. The following chapters, therefore, will explore more of the ways in which primitive, archaic, and historic or classical religions have dealt with the mysteries of life. That will provide the background to understand better what is happening to religion today.

Very likely in the course of this study you will eventually discover that you are a modern person in some ways but, like most people, also partly historic and archaic and even primitive to a degree, with all of it mixed together in the flow of your life, thoughts, and feelings. The kinds of salvation from estrangement that appeal to you or make sense to you will provide some clues to this. That is the topic of Part II which follows.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Express as clearly as you can the difference between a merely perfect Person and an Absolute Ultimate.
2. How do you feel about making the idea of a merely perfect Person only a way of imaging or symbolizing an Absolute Reality? Explain.
3. Is it possible that in five hundred years or more we humans will have learned to overcome the major forms of estrangement? Explain.
4. Describe the most significant limits, flaws, and failures in life you are aware of.
5. In what ways do you see yourself as a being with a capacity for the infinite? Explain.
6. Describe fully some example of a way in which our minds can ask questions so big that not even belief in God as a Perfect Person is adequate to answer them.

SUGGESTED READINGS


