FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Do you take it for granted that some aspect of ourselves survives physical death, or is this an implausible idea to you? Explain.
2. When you have thought about a life after death, how have you imagined it? Is it like earth in any way at all? Explain.
3. If there were no life beyond death, would this earthly existence be meaningful and sufficient in itself? Explain.
4. Can the world be improved enough to provide adequate earthly happiness for all people? Explain. Do you think that will ever happen?
5. Does it make any sense to you to hope for some kind of beatific vision or even a dissolution of self in relation to an infinite Ultimate? Explain.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Hiroshi Obayashi, ed., Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions, 1992. Contains articles by various experts on many major religions of the world.


Carl B. Becker, Breaking the Circle: Death and the Afterlife in Buddhism, 1993.


Tony Walter, The Eclipse of Eternity: a Sociology of the Afterlife, 1996. Looks at the current decline in belief in an afterlife (but a renewed interest in ghosts and such).

CHAPTER SIX

Neither Lost nor Alone

Belonging as a Form of Salvation

When we hear the word “salvation,” we usually think of a life after death where we are saved both from the trials of this life and from death itself. Most, though not all, of the beliefs about salvation presented in Chapter Five involved some sort of life after death. The main hope was for an ideal reality or world. Although many cultures expect such a world to be an alternative to this one, achieved after death or in the future, others think of that ideal reality as a here-and-now affair. Primitives seek a here-and-now proper order. Confucian and Taoist ideas emphasize a this-worldly balance to be attained and maintained in our daily lives. Some hopes are focused on a person’s daily sense of fulfillment or worth. This chapter and the next will both be concerned with that sort of salvation, a present and ongoing salvation from threats of estrangement, achieved through a sense of personal worth and at-home-ness in daily life by relation to some numinous reality. This chapter will describe various ways religiousness provides a comforting and supportive sense of belonging.

In the course of the descriptions, three complexities will appear. The first is that “belonging” is a fairly broad word, which can include a feeling of being accepted by another person, as well as a conviction that one belongs to a whole community of persons. A person can also have a sense of belonging to something more impersonal such as a historical movement, a belief system, or a cosmic order.

A second complexity is that the notion of belonging overlaps with the topics of both the previous and following chapters. There is no way to be fully clear when salvation is a matter of finding an ideal reality and when it is a matter of belonging. These two blend together, as the concrete illustrations here will show. A sense of belonging is also part of a person’s identity—the topic of the next chapter. The categories of estrangement from the universe and others and self are a little artificial. Our life is one; our problems are one;
our salvations are also one. All is one because under all the categorized compartments of our lives is one basic reality—the human person conscious of self and therefore needing to have a sense that life is meaningful in the face of the mysteries that our consciousness enables us to perceive.

The third complexity is one created by the outsider’s perspective on the study of religion which we are taking here. The outsider can see a believer being saved from estrangement in ways the believer might not even recognize. Religious traditions sometimes tell the believer that just belonging to the tradition instead of being lost and alone is already a kind of salvation. We will see examples of this. But the outsider can see many instances where the feeling of belonging is not explicitly recognized by a tradition as a kind of salvation, even though this belonging does in fact free the believer from what otherwise would be a painfully estranged state.

As usual, there is some advantage in dividing up the topic into smaller and more manageable categories. The categories are only approximations. How many ways can a person feel lost and alone? How many ways can a person find a sense of belonging? In each case too many to count. But here are two main categories, each with subdivisions. The first involves a special one-on-one relation to a numinous being, power, or order. The second involves being part of a larger social context.

**INDIVIDUAL DEVOTION TO A NUMINOUS REALITY**

Throughout time people have devoted themselves to offering attention, praise, gifts, affection, and obedience to various numinous powers. Often these offerings are simply means of persuasion carefully calculated to bribe, flatter, or seduce a spirit or god into granting some favor. But as was mentioned briefly in Chapter Two, at times the attention paid to the gods is a way of achieving a kind of psychological salvation through a sense of belonging. This world can be a dreary and disappointing place to many individuals. Hope for an afterlife, paradise, or heaven can sustain a weary and lonely person for a long time. Years of nothing but aloneness, however, of being only marginally significant to others, of being powerless in a world where others accomplish great things, is a very heavy burden to bear. Hope for eventual joy after death might not be enough to sustain a person. During life’s long years there is a need for additional consolation and support. Devotion to a numinous reality can provide this.

**Devotion to a Personal Numinous Being**

Spirits, ancestors, saints, angels, gods, and God are not only numinous but are also personal. They are beings you can address as friendly, thoughtful, helpful, and even loving persons. Followers of the Hindu gods Shiva or Vishnu or the goddess Sri carry their statues in processions, build beautiful temples to them, and surround their statues with lights and burning incense. A small food offering, a bunch of flowers, a carved bit of wood honor the god. The many local spirits in Japan each have their own shrine, ceremonies, and day of celebration. Orthodox and Catholic Christians celebrate feast days of various saints and angels with processions and other ceremonies. All these numinous personal beings are treated with respect, affection, and praise. This is partly to win their favor, but it is also simply to rejoice in having them as benefactors with whom a person can be a friend or intimate.

The full value of having a numinous personal being as friend is manifest in the private side of devotion. Whether during a great public ceremony or in the quiet of a nearly empty shrine, each person can cherish the thought of the spirit, saint, or god whose attentiveness makes up for all the thoughtless people in life. The saint in heaven knows the innermost feelings of a person who is misunderstood by everyone else. The love given by Vishnu is not the critical and selfish love of a human partner but a forgiving and generous love. To know that Jesus loves you with enormous and divine love washes away your insignificance or failure and makes you equal in worth to the greatest person who ever lived. In fact, the gods, spirits, and God are often said to have a special love and concern for the weak, the forgotten, those who suffer in life. The same burdens of powerlessness and pain that threaten to crush people actually make them more significant, more worthy of divine care and affection. This belief is a form of salvation from feelings of insignificance and aloneness.

Whether the devotion be public or private, it can vary in degrees of intensity. For most religious people, to have devotion to a god or saint is important but not all-important. In every religious tradition, however, there are those who give their entire lives in service to a divine or numinous person. There are monks and nuns in East and West, priests, hermits, gurus and prophets, who devote their entire lives to prayer, attention, and devotion to a form of the Buddha, to Shiva or his consort Kali or to Jesus. We will see more about such people later. These find the entire worth of their lives in devotion to a numinous being.

As we have noted, there is a tendency around the world to believe that suffering somehow merits special attention from the gods or God. As though the pains in life that come to a person by themselves were not enough, out of religious devotion people will inflict additional suffering upon themselves. People have beat themselves with whips, starved themselves, lived in cold and darkness, all to show their devotion to a god or God. Some pain in life is unavoidable; at other times pain is deliberately accepted as part of a
training program; but religious movements have included people who believe that suffering is somehow pleasing to the numinous being whose attention, forgiveness, or love they seek. Religious people are sometimes masochistic in their devotion, though they would probably deny that the god or God is a sadist who enjoys seeing suffering.

There are various guesses about why this masochism appears in religion. It may be that religion is often a way of making sense of life’s sufferings. First we suffer, some of us more than others. This can make life seem unfair or senseless. Secondly, we find a way of making sense of this mystery of suffering by a religious explanation: the spirits are punishing us for violating the customs; the gods are angry at our meager offerings; the balance of Tao’s nature has been upset by our excesses; God is putting us to the test. Thirdly, we then come to think of suffering as a good thing because it helps to maintain the customs, improve the offerings, balance nature, and prove our worth. Fourthly, we go overboard and conclude that because suffering is good we should seek it.

There are other possible explanations for religious masochism. Perhaps childhood memories are unconsciously at work. When a child is hurt, parents grow very attentive and loving. Parents are sometimes angry at children until the children are punished; then the anger is gone. Perhaps suffering is a proof of devotion. We are touched by someone who makes sacrifices for us; we are sure then that someone truly cares for us. So we make sacrifices for our gods so they will know we truly love them. In any case, the greater our fears that the spirits or gods might not care for us, the greater the motivation to suffer in order to evoke their concern and merit their love. The greater a person’s sense of guilt, the more a person might believe that only suffering can restore the person to favor in the god’s eyes. If nothing else, religious masochism is a sign of the immense human need to be accepted, forgiven, and cherished. To achieve this is a form of salvation.

Devotion to the Right Order of Things

A person can live a life of devotion not only to personal beings such as spirits, gods, or God, but also to impersonal numinous order. In the previous chapter we have seen that the primitive person devotes energy to maintaining the order established at the beginning times. We have talked also about the beliefs of Confucianists, Taoists, and Hindus who believe in a sacred cosmic order. It is possible to achieve a sense of belonging by harmonizing one’s life with such order.

For some who believe in a cosmic right order, adherence to this order is only a means to a later state of salvation. By conforming to the cosmic law of karma, a Buddhist will get a better chance at eventually achieving the enlightenment that is the gateway to eternal not-being, nirvana. Yet in all cases where people believe in a cosmic order, there is also a here-and-now sense of belonging that is worth treating as a kind of salvation all by itself.

Each of us would like to be able to feel that our lives are lived well and wisely rather than poorly and stupidly. We have to make serious decisions about our life’s patterns, and we worry at times that we have made the wrong decisions. Whatever we have accomplished, whatever our work or our social success or our accomplishments, we can all have some doubts about the worth and rightness of who we are. If we are sure that there is one correct way to exist, one natural pattern to things, then we can achieve a sense of rightness to our lives by conforming to that pattern. Thus the ancient Egyptians strove after ma’at, the Stoics deliberately accepted the workings of the universe, the Taoist still seeks to flow smoothly in life with the eternal currents of yang/yin, living in a simple hut, raising a few chickens and radishes, at one with nature.

In each instance some degree of salvation from problems is achieved just for the practical reason that the one order of nature is the fact of things. People who struggle against the currents of nature and time are liable to wear themselves out and still lose in the long run. It can be good practical wisdom to learn to cooperate with the laws of reality. In addition to this practical common sense, there is also a deeper satisfaction that comes from feeling that we belong to the truth, to what is naturally correct, to what is the everlastingly right order to things. It does not matter as much then if on the surface our lives look unimportant, because the deeper truth is that our lives are at one with what alone is finally important, the cosmic order.

Devotion to the right order of things is often connected to devotion to a personal numinous being. If the ancestors or gods established and upheld the rules of living, then adherence to the rules is a form of devotion to these sacred beings. A person belongs to the god by accepting the god’s decrees. If it is a universal power such as God that has created the natural order, then the person who tries to do what is natural thereby belongs to God. The person who perceives a divine plan and follows it shows devotion to God. For many people, devotion to God is accompanied by a general belief that God has a hidden plan for all things. Whatever happens is God’s will, so to accept all things, however confusing or threatening they may be, is a way of accepting and belonging to God and takes the terror out of the universe.

Mystical Devotion to an Absolute

The word “mystical” has various meanings. It is used at times to refer to primitive or archaic style belief in magical powers or spirits. In classical or historic religion the word may be used rather broadly as a label for any
strong religious feeling. But historic religions have also used the word for a very specific experience, of an intimate relation to the Absolute Reality, the infinite, eternal, and incomprehensible Ultimate that embraces all things at once. It is the One beyond all limits. It is God the Absolute, Brahman the incomprehensible, Allah the infinite, or the formless and eternal Tao that the mystic encounters in mystical experience.

According to the mystics themselves, this mystical encounter is not really describable because it is not experience in any usual sense of the word. It is not thinking or knowing because this experience takes a person beyond such limited states of consciousness. It may produce certain feelings or emotional states, but it is beyond mere emotions. It is not a seeing or hearing or touching, although metaphors based on sensation or sensory images can provide some poetic ways of speaking about it. The mystics attempt to describe it by saying it is a being-at-one with the One that is All. It is a momentary eternity, a few minutes or hours of identity with the Everything in comparison with which the person is nothing. It is bliss; it is nothingness. It is ecstasy; it is emptiness. It is a rapture or utter peace. Then, when they have said all these things in an attempt to describe it, the mystics finally reaffirm that it is.... Words might help point a person towards mystical union with the Absolute, but only the experience of it can let a person "know" what it is.

Such experience sounds far removed from the life of a normal person; it is rare, indescribable, strange. But each of the great historic religions has had its mystics. In each major civilization there have been those who have sought and found union with the One as the highest and fullest mode of religious devotion. This devotion is a kind of salvation. Like all people, mystics are aware of the limitations of life. They too have suffered from a sense of estrangement. Yet the union with the absolute One overrides all limits and estrangement by giving the mystic a sense of total belonging. Ordinary feelings of loneliness or dislocation are wiped out by the experience of belonging to the One in perfect union.

After the mystical experience, the limitations of life no longer give rise to feelings of estrangement, because in a moment of total mystical union, peace, bliss, love, and belonging, all earthly limitations have by comparison been made trivial and unimportant. The mystics say that this rewarding feeling is not the real purpose of mystical union. Because the One they seek is alone truly and ultimately of lasting value, it is deserving of unqualified dedication and devotion for its own sake. That, they say, is the real reason they give themselves over to this One. But the sense of belonging to this One is still a form of fulfillment. It is a kind of salvation.

**Belonging to a Sacred Community**

In many nations today religion is a relatively private matter. People have the option of adhering or not to any religious tradition. But this is a highly unusual situation. Down through history religion has been a shared social matter in a degree only suggested by what was said earlier in Chapter Two on the sociological function of religion. In spite of the option today of religious privacy and even solitude, most people still are religious in at least a semi-public way, in a community of believers. From this communal aspect of religion comes a sense of belonging.

**Primitive Religion: Local Community**

Religion, community, and individual identity are inseparable in primitive society. Each person discovers his or her identity by learning what the tribe sees as proper behavior, thoughts, and feelings. A given individual will, of course, have a unique personality, a special name, perhaps a singular role such as elder or warrior or mother of many, but these will be within the bounds defined by tribal tradition. Moreover, the traditions are right because they were established at the beginning of things by the original beings. Tribal customs are expressed and reinforced in religious ceremonies. Political, social, and economic decisions may be made with the help of the spirits who communicate by signs and through dreams.

Primitive religious communities are straightforward and clear examples of what sociologists claim when they say that religion functions to support the social order. Shared belief in spirits, taboos, and magic for healing and healing are sacred threads that tie the pieces of social custom together. Through such beliefs and practices the individual tribesperson gains a sense of belonging not only to the present pattern of tribal life but also to an unchanging and reliable order. So closely united are society and religious practices in primitive society that, as we have seen in Chapter Two, the great sociologist Emile Durkheim thought that religious rituals were actually ways in which primitive people celebrated the power of their social order to rule their lives and give them their identity (though without being consciously aware that is what they were doing).

One of the great problems for tribal societies in today's world of quick travel and easy communication is that they must contend not only with occasional new ideas but with the presence of constant newness. Primitive tribal societies are likely to have a defense against outside influences in a belief common to many tribes, that what happens to outsiders is of no significance for their lives. In tribal languages around the world, the name a tribe uses for itself is the closest word it has to say "human being." When a Yanomamō in
Brazil or a Cheyenne in the American western plains used to say "Yanomamo" or "Cheyenne," they meant "people." In tribal thought the group says, "We are people; the others are not people as we are. We know the spirits and where the mana-powers are. Others do not. We know how to follow the ways of the ancestors, make the moon rise, preserve the truth about the rivers. Others do not. We live as it is correct for people to live in this place. Others do not." The primitive person lives snugly in this unified reality and identity, happy to belong. Much of this is religious, we would say. But for the primitive person the religious element is not distinct from life as a whole. There is usually no word for "religion."

**Archaic Religion: "National" Community**

Like primitive societies, archaic cultures offer the individual a sense of belonging through identity with a social order given by the ancestors or gods. Devotion to the gods in an archaic society is the same thing generally as devotion to the city, territory, or ruling family in the land. The highest form of patriotism in ancient Rome, for example, was called piezas. The religious connotation of the word still exists today in "piety," referring to devotion to God. Roman piezas was indeed devotion to the gods, especially to Jupiter and to Janus, god of war and peace. But this devotion in practice consisted of fidelity to Roman customs. A person who upheld the traditional social and family order was the one who was called piezas. Even today, people often equate patriotism with religion, saying that God wants people to support their nation and its law and morality.

Through extensive contacts with foreign peoples or "nations," archaic cultures are rather conscious of the differences between themselves and other peoples. Each archaic culture tends to emphasize its own worth and value and disdains other cultures. The "others" are seen as mere barbarians if they are less advanced culturally. Or the "others" are seen as weak and decadent if they are highly civilized. One's own gods and the customs they provide and protect are superior to all others. This attitude, of course, does not exist only among archaic cultures. From primitive to modern times, many people still think in parochial (local) or nationalistic terms about the status and value of other people's thought, culture, and religion. It is a normal human tendency to assert that our ways are better than their ways, whoever they are.

Many archaic societies grew very large, uniting what originally had been smaller and more primitive localities into large cultural groups. This occurred in China, India, and Mesopotamia in the second millennium BCE, and in Egypt before that. In all these places the problem was how to achieve social unity among the various localities. People of different villages could be more united politically if their customs, beliefs, and values could be united. Only a

unification of the gods, some form of syncretism, could achieve this.

The conquest of the Shang by the Chou in ancient China (c. 1100 BCE) has been mentioned here already as an example. After the conquest, the Chou king had the problem of how to consolidate his rule over the kingdom of the Shang, how to win the approval and acceptance of the conquered people, who had a sense of belonging to their own land, family, ancestors, and gods. When the Chou arrived, bringing strange gods and customs, there could have been continuing conflict between the two groups. The Shang had the difficult choice of how to maintain a sense of belonging by allegiance to the old ways without setting themselves at odds with the new rulers. The politically astute Chou king proclaimed that the Shang people could maintain devotion both to their god, Shang-Ti, and also to the new king. It was Shang-Ti, the Chou king said, who had empowered him to overthrow the Shang dynasty because that dynasty was corrupt and no longer taking proper care of the people. The Chou king proclaimed that his high god, T'ien, was the same god as Shang-Ti, but under a different name. Therefore, all the peoples of Chou and Shang territories could join together in allegiance to one and the same high god. All who lived in the new unified kingdom could share a common sense of belonging.

The caste system of India provides one of the most monumental examples of complex social organization and unity based on religious belief. The caste system originated in archaic times when the conquering Aryans from the North imposed their rule on the people of the Indus valley and later on other parts of India. At first, perhaps, there was simply the division between the Aryan conquerors who began to arrive around 1500 BCE and their new, darker-skinned subjects. The caste system gradually grew more complex, and was eventually absorbed into the historic-style religion of later centuries and has lasted up until today.

In the usual simplified account there are four basic castes. At the top are the Brahmins, the priests in charge of the rituals. Because they deal with sacred things, they are not supposed to make contact with anything unsacred. Next are the nobles or warriors (the nobility around the world were originally military leaders strong enough to grab territory and rule it). Third are merchants and landowners. At the bottom of the four castes are the many who labor at various tasks. As centuries passed, each caste subdivided. The most exalted Brahmin family might be twenty stages above the lowest Brahmin family group. None would think of being on casual terms with any person more than ten subcastes below his or her own. None would allow marriage to anyone more than four or five subcastes lower. Every person by birth belonged to a very precisely defined level of society with its rules, dietary customs, social privileges, and obligations.
Among the lowest caste some of the work was and is considered so demeaning that it renders the person performing it "untouchable" to those of higher castes. They were once known as "pariahs." Pariahs are not "outcastes." They simply belong to a very low caste. Mahatma Gandhi called them "Harijans," meaning "Children of God," a name that has gained currency. (The British and then the Indian government classified them as "scheduled castes.") A person who is born into a family that washes other people's dirty laundry is of very low caste, but not so low as those who empty latrines. Laundriers will not wash the clothes of latrine-workers.

For centuries the people of India cooperated in maintaining this social structure. In every generation there were many individuals who tried to elude the restrictions of the system by pretending to belong to a caste higher than the one they were born into. The sacred writings of India predict severe consequences for those who dare to rebel in this way against the rules that assign them to a specific place in the social order. Every person by birth has a basic dharma (duty, set of obligations) to accept his or her place in society and fulfill the role appropriate to it. This dharma is not just a social rule; it is part of the cosmic order; it is the fundamental truth of things. For one born a merchant to seek to become noble is a grave offense against dharma. The person who rebels against the place assigned by birth will thereby deserve to be born the next time to an even lower caste or as a dog or worm. The only way to rise to a higher caste is to perform one's social role so well in this lifetime that it merits rebirth in a higher caste in the next lifetime, in accordance with the cosmic justice called karma. Even in a person's lifetime, though, it is possible to become a true outcaste—to have done something so terrible that the person has no social status whatsoever, not even of the lowest caste.

**Historic Religion: Universal Community**

Primitive, archaic, and historic societies alike all provide the people with assurance that the social order they belong to is correct for them, because that order comes from the numinous power or powers that guide them. Historic religion, however, gives a special interpretation to this.

Historic religion tends to universalize. It proclaims that there is one underlying unity behind the various aspects of nature, and one supreme cause of that unity. There is but one Brahman, one Tao, one God. If there is a divinely approved way, or a way that fits the nature of the supreme numinous reality, there is only one such way. There is but one ideal social order, one correct way to be human, one valid and morally proper behavior pattern, one true human identity.

If there are people in the world who do not follow that one true path, there are two basic ways a historic religion may treat them. One way is to fall back into a primitive or archaic exclusivism and to believe that the others are less than fully human. This is easy for any culture to do, historic or not. The basic tendency to favor one's own clan or people over others is probably innate, always there in tension with whatever historic universalism the culture or religion promotes. We have seen that the Yanomamo and Cheyenne think of themselves as people and others as not quite people. The Chinese always knew foreigners were inferior barbarians. The Europeans who first invaded South and Central America were so startled by the strange ways of some of the more primitive tribes there that they debated whether those tribespeople had souls as full humans do. Once you have decided that the strange people are naturally inferior, you can then justify conquering and ruling them. After all, God or some power made them inferior and thus it is divinely established that they are fit to be ruled by their superiors; or else some enormous sin of theirs merited them this lowly and flawed condition, and such great sinners do not deserve much concern.

The other alternative that historic religions have before them is to judge that all people are in fact equally human. This belief is more consistent with the universalizing attitude of historic religion, and is the actual position most take. It means that all people should live by the one true way for human beings. They should, for example, all worship the one true God, follow the one universally valid set of moral rules, and adapt themselves to the customs of those wise and virtuous people who have already accepted the one true way.

It may sound arrogant for a religious group to claim to have the truth for everyone in the world, but there is also a kind of logic behind the claim. If in fact there is one Tao and one yang/yin order throughout the universe, or if the only real salvation for anyone is dissolution in Brahman, then it would be very wise and most practical for everyone to share these beliefs. If polytheism is true there is no single unifying order or truth to all reality. If atheism is true there is no ultimate meaningful order to human existence at all. But if monotheism or its equivalent is true, then there is one, true, all-encompassing plan or order to reality. Logic then implies that there is one basically correct vision of life that is valid for every human being. On these grounds the Roman Catholic Pope Boniface VIII declared in 1302 that because the Pope is head of the church and the church contains the sole truth for all humankind, therefore all people on earth were subject to the authority of the Pope who ever they knew it or not. On these grounds a good Muslim knows that the Qur'an provides the final truth for all people everywhere and should be the universal religion of humankind.

There is usually not only logic but also compassion behind the universalizing claims of historic religion. If people believe they possess the truth that can set all humankind free from estrangement and give them salvation, it
would be ungenerous to keep that truth to themselves. Buddhist missionaries went forth for centuries to gently preach the wisdom of the Buddha, out of compassion for all people, though in the third century BCE the emperor Ashoka imposed Buddhism on most of India by force. Islamic forces have waged jihad, holy war, to overthrow the kings and armies that oppose Islamic belief, in order to allow people to choose submission to Allah. It would be a great benefit to the whole human race, a Muslim believes, to have all people submit to the holy and divinely wise laws of the Qur'an in a worldwide house of Islam. Christian missionaries have traveled the world to teach people the only way to escape eternal damnation. The missionaries have usually brought with them helpful medicine and education, but they have also accompanied military conquerors. In all of these cases, the outsider can perceive a religious imperialism, but the believer can do no less than share what he or she takes to be a true blessing for all peoples.

A further consequence of the logic of historic religion is to maintain an alliance between church and state. We who live in contemporary industrialized societies are accustomed to think of religion as private and separate from the public structures of government and civil laws. This is a rather modern notion. Boniface VIII would have said it is a foolish and evil idea. One of his later successors, Pius IX, explicitly agreed, listing it among major basic errors of modern times, as he saw it. If the religious authorities have God's sole and universal truth, including divine laws governing all aspects of life, then of course the government should be guided or ruled by the church or by the religious authorities. Belief in a separation between government and church was not officially accepted in the Roman Catholic Church until the 1965 declarations of the Second Vatican Council.

In many Islamic countries it is still maintained that the government must follow the rules laid down in the Qur'an. In the 1970s the ayatollah Khomeini in Iran agreed emphatically with this. He established a ruling council of religious leaders who can reject or revise laws that go contrary to God's will as expressed in the Qur'an. Saudi Arabia is governed by strict religious laws. The governments of Afghanistan and Pakistan have tried to do the same. Such religious rule over the government is called a theocracy. Islamist movements promote theocracy wherever there is a Muslim majority.

This historic tendency to impose a single correct way of life appears in nonreligious forms also. Since the thirteenth century, Neo-Confucian philosophy was the basis for all governmental and family patterns in China. Marxism aspired to become the sole socio-political form of government for people everywhere. The historian Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in a 1992 book that democratic liberal society was the end point of all human history. Some religious groups in modern industrialized nations still also insist that the governmental laws should uphold the basic moral laws established by God about sex or marriage or abortion and so on. The collection of movements known in the U.S. as the "Religious Right" is such a goal. Their goal is not a full theocracy. But they do share a desire that at least some civil matters conform to their religious values.

A historic religion tends to promote its own dominance rather than accept peaceful co-existence with other religions. Religious pluralism has been unappealing to many historic religions. Antagonisms are common, not only between two rather different religious traditions, such as Christianity and Islam, but even within a general religious tradition.

In Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, for example, the divisions among various Christian groups in the wake of the Reformation led to vicious religious wars. Europe learned religious tolerance as much out of exhaustion as out of any high moral ideal. Tolerance came very slowly. The first development was segregation, as each ruler made his or her territory officially Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Anglican. Tired of internal strife, France tried to achieve mutual tolerance between Huguenots (French Calvinists) and Catholics. The Edict of Nantes of 1598, allowing people religious choice, did not prevent continued hostilities. The dominant Catholics slowly squeezed the life out of the Edict with both military attacks on Huguenot cities and with legal restrictions in the early eighteenth century; later in the same century the Edict was abolished.

Similarly, differences within Islam created mutual antagonisms. In the period after Muhammad's death disputes erupted on who should follow as his successor, or "caliph." The leadership position first went to one of Muhammad's "generals," but Muhammad's nephew Ali thought he should be leader. Eventually Ali ruled but then was assassinated. When his younger son Hussein later tried to become caliph, he and his followers were massacred. Hussein's followers were dispersed but remained powerful in what is now Iran and Southern Iraq and a few other places. The word for "partisan" in Arabic gives rise to the name of this group: Shi'ites. They developed what is sometimes called a clergy, though it is more like a rabbinate, because like Jewish rabbis these are leaders by virtue of their education, not through ritual power (a distinction that will become clear in a later chapter). Those rejecting Ali's claim still constitute the majority of Muslims (perhaps eighty-five percent) and their practices are closer to original Islam. They are called Sunni (Sunna = tradition).

From among the Shi'ites in Iran (Persia at that time), another movement gradually emerged, now called Sufism. The Sufi sought to experience mystical union with Allah, and elaborated their ideas in both poetry and philosophical form. Many of them formed monastic communities of different sorts. Sufism spread throughout the Muslim world. Most Muslims in the
Sudan, for example, adhere to one of several forms of Sufism there. Among all these groups some degree of mutual intolerance is common. In Saudi Arabia a rather strict form of Sunni Islam arose in antagonism to aspects of Sufism. Shī`ite Iran found it natural to go to war with the Sunni-dominated populace of central Iraq.

Mutual tolerance among groups whose religion is historic is not the norm. We human beings do not seem very ready to follow whatever instructions historic religions may pass on to love one another or respect all life or have compassion for even the stranger and foreigner. We will return to this topic in Chapter Twelve.

Holiness Communities

In various religious traditions, some people feel called to belong to a special holiness community within the larger religious context. If not everyone will strive to live perfectly, at least these few will try.

From early archaic times, the priests or prophets of the temples were sometimes set aside from ordinary people and lived as a holiness community within the larger community. The historic traditions have produced the greatest number and variety of holiness communities. Here the historic ideal of perfection finds an appropriate style of life. The core of traditional Buddhism, for example, is the life of the sangha, a community of monks. Buddhism teaches that the cessation of all desire and attachments is the way to salvation. But the ordinary lives of people distract them from salvation by involving them in countless concerns for family, job, friends, entertainment. So life in the sangha is the best way to achieve release from desire. The monk leaves all possessions behind except simple clothes and a bowl with which to beg for food each day. Avoiding all attachments and physical comforts and especially the gross distraction of sex, the monk devotes time to meditation on what alone is eternal and worthwhile: release. In the Orthodox and Catholic communities of monks and nuns the details of dress and food-gathering have been different, but the rest is very similar. The goal in all of these is to step aside from the distractions of worldly concerns, to leave behind the world, the flesh, and the devil, and to devote oneself entirely to God.

The explicit goal of a traditional monastic life has been to prepare for an eternal salvation: nirvana or heaven. But this life also provides the person with an ongoing sense of belonging. The monastery is a community of people who share the same vision of life and confirm one another's lifestyle. They pledge themselves to live in harmony and mutual kindness. And as the community is thought to be close to the divine or numinous, it is especially uplifting to be able to belong to it. The lifestyle of holiness communities also prepares a person to enter into mystical contemplation of the Ultimate.

SEPARATION OF SOCIETY AND RELIGION

The human desire to maintain a unified sense of belonging to family, culture, and religion all at once is very strong, but no person will find total belonging in all aspects of life. There is always some disjointedness, some estrangement. While religion usually helps to overcome such estrangement, occasionally it is a cause of estrangement from some aspects of family or society. Sometimes religion demands that a person make a choice between belonging to the family and society that have nourished that person, or to a religious movement that challenges the family values and societal order.

Possibilities of Separation of Society and Religion

Until modern times, all aspects of life—politics, economics, medicine, family, social class, and so forth—were so intricately tied up in the threads of religious beliefs and values, as we have seen, that any distinction between religion and society has been limited. The cultural context provided each person with religious beliefs that became so familiar as to appear to be the obvious and only truth. The religious beliefs in turn provided the justification for the various cultural patterns. That, at least, is how things most often have been.

Modern experience has made us more aware, though, that religions and culture can diverge or contradict each other. We live in a pluralistic society where many religious traditions exist side by side, and none of them is totally in harmony with all aspects of the culture. From this vantage point we can look back in history and around the world and recognize various modes of separation between religion and society.

Primitive and Archaic Religion

A primitive religion cannot be separated from its social context. The social rules on marriage, for example, could be called religious rules, in that they carry a burden of taboo for the person who violates them. Similarly, the tribe's diet may be dictated partly by the fact that some animals are tribal totems. Religion and society are one. To lose attachment to one is to lose attachment to both simultaneously. As was mentioned, the primitive person's world is a "one-possibility" thing. The person must belong to this social-religious pattern or belong nowhere at all.

Archaic societies also see their social order and their religion as one, but these societies are internally more complex than primitive societies, offering each person alternative roles to play. Archaic societies segregate the roles of priest, king, merchant, landowner, and peasant. The gods are somewhat segregated from daily life also, to the extent that they are more distant than local spirits and mana-powers. All of this creates the possibility that one aspect of
society can be in explicit tension with another. The power of the king, for example, cannot simply exist; it must struggle against the individual powers of landowners who do not always want to support the king. Each side in a struggle may claim that the gods are on its side. Because the gods are sometimes fickle, they may even be bribed to change sides.

**Historic Religion**

Historic religion can be both an intimate part of a social order and a critic of that order at the same time.

Unity between religion and society is easy to find. Hindu thought supported the caste system, Islamic law forbids carved or painted images. Christian tradition declared chaste celibacy to be superior to married life. In each of these cases, religion formed the culture or vice versa, so that they blended into a unity a person could belong to without inner division. Yet the perfectionism of historic religion contains within itself the element of separation from society.

The era of monolatry in ancient Israel provides a very early example of the high moral ideals usually found only in historic (and later) religion. In the eighth century BCE, the prophet Amos felt called to speak in Yahweh’s name against social injustices. Amos saw abuses all around him. He saw widows and orphans in poverty; he saw rich people and religious leaders condoning oppression of the poor; he saw people bought and sold into slavery. Amos shouted out that Yahweh rejected these customs and would punish all who “sold the innocent for silver.” He declared that the standard religious offerings in the temples were useless, what Yahweh desired was compassion and justice. Historic religions usually treat compassion and justice as universally valid ideals. Such religions tend to be perfectionist. We have seen that historic religion arose when the human mind became accustomed to thinking about the universal and the perfect. But this world is highly imperfect. There is often a conflict between historic ideals and social reality. Every time people take to the streets today protesting in God’s name against injustice, they are demonstrating the kind of tension that inevitably exists between historic religious ideals and society. Archaic religions can do this too, but historic religions by their very nature, by their ability to dream of perfection, are meant to be social critics.

As we have seen, perfectionism can also lead to world-rejection. For some Hindus the world is maya—illusion. For traditional Christianity the world is a vale of tears, made good by God but so corrupted by sin as to be no longer a fit home for humankind. Such thoughts make a person feel he or she does not belong to earth or any part of it, not even to earthly society and culture. No lasting compassion or true justice can be achieved in this world. All earthly things pass away; in comparison with eternity they are neither lasting nor of value in themselves. A sense of detachment is the proper attitude. Belong to heaven, to the eternal, to the otherworldly. Do not put your trust in princes. Do not store up treasure where it can rust. Join a holiness community perhaps.

Ordinarily the religious believer will feel enough at home in the society not to reject or criticize it; it is still true that social and religious belonging usually merge together. After all, it is usual that the society a person grows up in provides and even reinforces the religious beliefs. But when a time of conflict comes, when a person becomes angry at human failure, or is uncomfortable with a social pattern, or cannot accept a cultural value, then religion provides one way of justifying a separation from earthly society. It is not one’s true home; it is not where one really belongs.

Some sociologists employ three terms to illustrate how historic (and sometimes archaic) religiousness can function in relation to society: “church” (and sometimes also “denomination”), “sect,” and “cult.”

**Church**

A church is an organized body of religious believers that is very closely tied to its cultural context. Like any historic religion, it has some sense that its patterns of belief and practice belong to the divine order rather than the earthly. Yet every religious group is made up of people, and people make up society. So the normal state of affairs is that the same religious people who feel that their practices, morals, and beliefs link them to the eternal are the people whose practices, morals, and beliefs are actually closely linked with society. The word “church” is used by the sociologists to label this normal condition, that of conformity between religion and culture. The strongest form of this is the “established” church, one that is the official religion of the state, as the Lutheran Church is in Norway and the Anglican Church in England.

We see conformity between culture and religion every day: As long as a culture says that only men can be leaders, no women can function as priests. When the culture changes to admit women to leadership, religious groups conclude that it would have been right all along to eliminate any discrimination against women. For centuries Christianity and Islam both condemned usury—lending money at interest. Yet as commercialism increased in Europe, the Catholic Church decided that charging interest on loans was sinful only if the interest was excessive. People who have a sense of belonging to their own society and culture as well as to a historic religion, one that supposedly represents the one universal way of things, will ordinarily find ways to integrate these two forms of belonging. Religion and society blend together on the whole, with moments of tension passing into some workable accommodation. Most religious people today find it easy to blend social and religious belonging.
Sect
Sociologists define a sect as a religious movement that derives many of its ideas from the same dominant religious tradition as the churches, but whose members adhere more fervently and strictly to their beliefs than the average church member. In any society some individuals discover that they are not comfortable with the social reality they have learned from family and neighbors. Some find society to be too immoral, too chaotic, or too uncertain about its beliefs. Others find regular churches to be much too casual and lighthearted about basic matters of rules, roles, and purposes. Sects are a kind of non-monastic holiness community. (The holiness communities in Orthodox and Catholic Christianity have functioned all along as sectarian elements, practicing the religion in its purer and stricter form apart from the general society.)

In the United States there are a number of vigorous sects. The Seventh Day Adventists believe firmly in the Bible, as the other Christian churches also say they do, but they are strict observers of a code of behavior that includes a ban on the use of tobacco, nicotine, and meat. Their rules separate the Adventist from the rest of society to some extent. They reinforce a sense that the real purpose of life is not to conform to society but to prepare oneself for the end of the world. Likewise, the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah’s Witnesses derive many of their beliefs from the larger Christian tradition, but add further interpretations and usually expect a more rigorous adherence on the part of the believer than the mainstream churches do of their members.

Cult
In popular usage the word “cult” is often used to indicate that a certain group has bizarre beliefs or is under the dominance of an unstable leader. But sociologists want to be cautious about classifying unusual behavior as bizarre or charismatic leaders as unstable. What seems strange or erratic to one person may appear quite meaningful and sound to another. For this reason some sociologists would prefer to avoid the word “cult” entirely. To those who do use this language a cult is usually any group that defines itself in terms that are significantly foreign to its cultural context.

In North America and Europe, for example, the Hare Krishna movement is a cult in sociological terms because its roots are in India, and it is quite different from Western religions. It invites people to live in a strict community of believers who give up ordinary earthly attachments in order to devote themselves to praise of the Lord Krishna, whom they believe to be the major form of the Ultimate divinity. In clothes, food, methods of prayer, and a dozen other ways, the Krishna follower abandons Western culture and absorbs the belief and lifestyle of a devotee imbued with a form of Hindu-inspired ideas. In the community house, the ashram, the believer finds a sense of belonging in a new identity and social pattern.

Other groups may be classified as cults even if they are only half foreign. Scientology has been influenced by a European adaptation of Buddhist ideas, by Freudian thought, and by modern technology. This movement uses electronic E-meters to determine where mental blocks are inhibiting the release in the person of the basic spiritual or mental power we possess. (There will be more on Scientology in the next chapter.)

The Unification Church (“Moonies”) is also difficult to classify. It teaches a system of thought that is somewhat Judeo-Christian. Jesus tried to initiate the ideal human family, says the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, but failed. Now it is up to the Unification Church to create the perfect worldwide family and bring unification and total peace to all. It aspires to transform society eventually according to its beliefs and so become no longer a cult or sect but a mainstream church in a society made compatible with its beliefs. The differences between categories of church, sect, and cult are often blurred in reality, but they provide useful guides, nonetheless, for perceiving patterns of religion.

Those who join cults may do so because they find their own society, family, and culture unsatisfying. They may feel so little at home that only a radically different perspective appeals to them. But sociologists find that the main reason people join cults is for social involvement. It is most often friends and family of cult members that join, usually after a period of socializing with members of the cult. Eventually the beliefs and practices that seemed a bit strange at first become familiar. The cults also tend to have a rather high turn-over in membership, indicating that people who join still maintain their own perspective, enough to make a decision to leave the group eventually. Claims by outsiders that cults practice “brain-washing” are often exaggerated or unfounded.

Belonging as a Source of Intolerance
The great human need to find a home in a social community has a dangerous side. The need to belong can produce a fierce sense of loyalty to one’s own group that goes beyond loyalty and passes over into the intolerance mentioned earlier in the chapter. There are various causes of intolerance. One is a psychological fear of anything that calls into question the rightness, the validity, the true worth of the community a person belongs to. If our ways are correct, why should anyone refuse to follow them? If other communities do not follow our ways, are they suggesting that our ways are wrong? The more a person feels insecure about the validity of the group he or she belongs to, the more that person may be tempted to attack anyone or anything that threatens it. Intolerance, hatred, bigotry, even physical attacks can result, as we see in
the history of the Ku Klux Klan, Nazis, and other such groups. We will see more about this in relation to the problem of identity in the next chapter.

Evolutionary psychologists think that bigotry may just be the flip side of what they call "kin-favoritism." Evolutionary psychology claims that we have a genetic inclination to favor those with whom we are raised. The theory is that in doing this we are carrying out instructions from certain helper-genes we carry in us, instructions to aid copies of those helper-genes, copies that exist in people around us. The genes in us cannot really know where their copies are. (The genes in fact know nothing; they are just chemical recipes for producing proteins.) But if a person has a tendency to help whomever he or she was raised with, it is likely that there are kin among those people, and kin have some of the same helper-genes. So helping kin, to survive and to reproduce eventually, helps copies of the helper-gene to survive and get reproduced.

Even when they are not bigotryed, community members easily fall into patterns of mutual reassurance in which they praise their own ways and mock demeaning jokes or comments about outsiders. At times this takes the more charitable form of condescension. If the community has the truest and best pattern for human life, then a person can sympathetically speak of the depraved, ignorant, or misguided outsiders who must still suffer the lack of what believers have now been blessed, wise, or humble enough to accept. Of course, this is all perfectly logical. Jews see themselves as God's chosen people. Christian tradition has insisted that outside the church there is no salvation. Islamic faith declares that only members of the House of Islam can expect to reach paradise right after death. These ideas can tempt the believer to look down upon the outsider.

These religions, like all historic religions, assert that all people are of equal worth before God or the Eternal. All people share in one human community. We are all brothers and sisters. We are all equally deserving of compassion and love and support. Occasionally a great leader inspires people to see through differences and to cherish everyone. In this century Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., led crusades for freedom and justice. Yet both insisted firmly and repeatedly and at great personal risk that even the oppressor must be protected against harm. Both required nonviolence from their followers on the basis that all people, even the oppressor, are to be loved. Both tried to maintain a sense that Indian and British, black and white, all people, are part of one human family. This is the ideal that historic religions preach; but we humans have a very hard time learning to accept it and live by it.

Summary
This chapter has described the ways in which feeling of belonging is itself a kind of salvation. As an answer to a feeling of estrangement, of being adrift without a true home or acceptance, religions can offer a God to belong to, a natural order to conform to, and most especially a community of companion believers. Usually society as a whole has been the religious community people belong to. But in historic cultures sects, cults, and holiness communities may stand aside from the mainstream of life and provide special and separate opportunities for belonging. (We will speak later at greater length of the religious pluralism of modern culture.)

When we have found where we belong, though, we might still feel uneasy about ourselves. Are we truly all right, secure in our selfhood and truly worthy? That is the topic of the next chapter.

For Further Reflection
1. Do most people find it very important that there is a God who understands, loves, and forgives them? Why do you think this is so?
2. Would you find it comforting to feel that you are part of a cosmic unity? Why? Why not? Is it true that whatever is natural is good?
3. Identity the community of people you feel most thoroughly at home with. Do you belong to many communities? Which of them are religious communities in any sense?
4. Have you ever supposed that your community's way of life is the best one for all humankind? Why? Why not?
5. Are there standards for life that are or should be the standards that all people everywhere live up to? What are they?

Suggested Readings
Robert Carter and Sheldon Isenberg, eds., The Ideal in the World's Religions: Essays on the Person, Family, Society, and Environment, 1997. Some chapters in this are relevant to the other two chapters in Part II here.
Gibson Winter, Community and Spiritual Transformation: Religion and Politics in a Communal Age, 1989.