CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the Presence of Mystery

Modern Religion

We have seen that long ago the development of agriculture produced a cultural revolution in many societies, bringing about a new complexity of social organization and thought patterns. Primitive religion gave way to archaic religion, which absorbed the primitive beliefs into its own more complicated and hierarchical worldviews. Then came the axial age and all the primitive and archaic beliefs had to meet a new test imposed by a strikingly ambitious mode of human consciousness. These beliefs now had to fit within the all-encompassing integrated interpretations of reality proposed by historic thought, as humankind sought a perfect and eternal unity, a mysterious wholeness behind all the complexities of existence. After more than twenty centuries of historic thought, another mode of interpreting reality has emerged in Western culture. This style of thought includes and redefines the various symbols from past historic, archaic, and primitive stages of thought. That is modern culture and its religiousness.

As the Preface to Part IV warned, the word “modern” is ambiguous. Early modern thought is to a large extent a variation on classical historic thought. This systematically logical and universalizing approach was almost lost in the early middle ages in Europe (c. 500-1000 CE). But with the aid of Muslim sources it revived in the twelfth and later centuries, got an extra impetus with the translation of new Greek texts in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and eventually took off in a new direction in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Recently, “postmodernism” has challenged the universalizing rationality of modernity. We will see more about that in Chapter Fifteen.

THE MODERN CHALLENGES TO RELIGION

Religiousness in modern times does not constitute all of modern religion. There are still classical and archaic and even primitive forms of religion in modern cultures. And modern religiousness itself, like all historical developments, is far more complex than any simple description can suggest. For simplicity’s sake, however, we can identify what is modern in religiousness by looking at how religion has responded to four serious challenges posed by modern thought: 1) the new scientific worldviews, 2) an appreciation of the secular or worldly, 3) an emphasis on autonomous selfishness, and 4) the idea that all knowledge is imperfect or incomplete.

The Challenge of Modern Scientific Worldviews

The universe is a vast and strange reality. It is billions of years old with a hundred billion galaxies of hundreds of billions of stars each, exploding outward to either an eventual cosmic death or a collapse into another great explosion. The wondrous process of life on this single little planet may have been a random process, mindless and meaningless. The overall story of human life has included many instances of great evil, pain, and despair. In all this, there can seem to be little hard evidence of a divine Being guiding the universe in a coherent way toward some ultimately meaningful end. The atheistic existentialists claim that the evidence even points in the opposite direction, to an ultimate meaninglessness to all things. There also seems to be very little reliable evidence, such as we would ordinarily demand for scientific conclusions, that there is a God who intervenes in nature or in human lives to work miracles, to provide a kind of supernatural help or guidance beyond what the ordinary processes of nature already accomplish. In fact, the scientific approach to reality works well precisely because it does not accept this kind of explanation for any event.

The challenge of the modern scientific worldview to religion is this: Can a reasonable person maintain belief in a divine or numinous dimension to our existence in the face of scientific theories, evidence, and method? Modern religion says yes, but it has had to do more than just say yes; it has to work out a justification for this bold affirmation.

The Challenge of Modern Secularity

The atheistic and agnostic secular humanists have abandoned reliance on divine help. They have also turned their hopes away from heaven or any other life beyond this limited earthly one. These sixty to ninety years are ours and nothing more, say the secular humanists. It is up to us to choose how to use them well. We are on our own.

Because of that, the secular humanist claims, we ought to devote all our energies towards the needs and potentials of our fellow human beings. We ought to work to eliminate oppression, poverty, hatred, and war. We ought to learn to love one another as well as we can in ever more effective ways.
The traditional religions have usually meant well, the secular humanist continues. These religions have usually preached love of neighbor and performed great works of charity, but they have also distracted themselves from full attention to these ends by devoting many resources to churches and monasteries, resources that might otherwise have helped to develop agriculture to feed people, or helped to promote psychological research that could free people to be more humane toward one another. These religions have undercut secular efforts for human growth by relying on divine help that is at best extremely unreliable, if it exists at all. They have led people to accept unjust conditions, oppressive governments, bigotry, and war, all on the grounds that such temporal matters ultimately do not count because heaven or nirvana or such is our true home.

Altogether, then, the challenge of secularity to religion is this: can a morally concerned person devote time and energy to religion when there is so much to be done out of concern for our fellow human beings? Modern religion says yes to this also, but it has had to show how religiousness does not have to diminish the importance of human welfare but can actually sustain and promote it.

The Challenge of Modern Notions of Autonomous Selfhood
Modern culture fought its way into learning the value of individual freedom. The early scientists, then the deists and Freemasons, and eventually many others came to appreciate the value of free thought and the free speech to express it. They came to believe that it was not merely true, as Western religions had long said, that every single person was of infinite value; it was also true that every single person ought to be able to live in accordance with his or her identity as a free and equal person. Out of all of this came the ideal of responsible autonomy as authentic human existence.

The model of behavior celebrated by modern thought is that of the self-determining responsible individual. The model of behavior prized by the more traditional religious thought is that of the person who humbly submits to God’s truth as found in scriptures or in religious teaching. The religious ideal has been that of the person who uses individual freedom to submit obediently to the one truth of God.

All along the way, religious leaders and believers alike were in the forefront of those who opposed freedom. Traditional religious wisdom did sometimes acknowledge that every person had to follow his or her conscience in making decisions, but it also insisted that the only correct decisions were those in accord with the Bible, with religious tradition, and with the established authorities of both state and church. Those who freely went against what was correct had to be silenced or punished, or both.

The challenge the modern notion of person poses to religion is this: can religion truly promote the growth of each person toward authentic selfhood, a selfhood that exercises responsible choices in a free society? Modern religion also says yes to this, but it has had to show how promoting this autonomous selfhood is religious rather than somehow foreign to true religiousness.

The Challenge of Modern Belief in the Tentativeness of Knowledge
The fourth and final way modern thought has struck at traditional religion has been by chattering the idea that we can possess the final and correct understanding of reality. The experience of modern science fortified what many philosophers had been pointing out, that all human understanding is a way of interpreting reality, as hypothesis, theory, map, and model. It is often very reasonable and very useful knowledge, but there is always the possibility that some other different map or model might be a better tool for understanding how things probably are.

The incompleteness of knowledge makes the ideal of autonomous selfhood more important. If the truth about reality is obscure, uncertain, or changeable, then no person can rest content with tradition. Everyone must be prepared to look over new ideas, evaluate them, and accept those that seem to be both more reasonable and valuable, even if this means discarding or changing older ideas.

This means, in turn, that there will be a plurality of positions on any topic, whether in science, history, or economics—or religion. Pluralism is now a fact in contemporary cultures; there is no longer a single accepted system of thought, moral code, or religious tradition. To the modern mind, pluralism is not merely a fact but a positive value. A plurality of interpretations is necessary in order to allow for the emergence of ever better ones through free interplay and competition among them. This will also best serve the secular desire to improve the human condition through the growth of knowledge. Pluralism is a strong form of tolerance. It is not a tolerance that merely puts up with what is different. It is a tolerance that values the fact of differences, even among religious viewpoints.

Religion, however, has not often been the friend of tentativeness, pluralism, and tolerance. As we have seen more than once, religion serves to provide security in the face of life’s threats; it is a haven from insecurity and confusion. Religious people have frequently insisted that their beliefs offer security precisely because they are not tentative models of reality, but instead are the clear and firm God-given unchanging truth. Religion trusts its doctrines to be true. Classical religion trusts its doctrines to be the only fully accurate truths.

Here the challenge to religion is whether there can be a religiousness that accepts the idea that its symbols and beliefs are tentative interpretations, symbols of ultimate truth, rather than rock-like unchangeable doctrines.
there be a religiousness that sustains people in their needs but is still open to changes in belief, and to a free competition of religious symbols in a tolerant-ly pluralistic context of autonomous people? Modern religion says yes to this also, but it has to explain how.

Before looking at modern religion in some detail, it is good to remember that most religion today is not very modern. That is not necessarily a criticism. There is great value in tradition, and "modern" is not a synonym for "good." But in those areas of the world where modern ideas and values have flourished, religious beliefs have been affected. There are modern forms of Hindu thought, such as that of the Indian philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (b. 1888). Reform Judaism, originating in nineteenth-century Germany, is quite modern. Most of the examples to follow here will be taken, however, from contemporary Christianity. But first, to put modern religiousness in context, consider some contemporary nonmodern alternatives.

NON-MODERN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS TODAY

Traditional Faith with Accommodations to Modernity

In cultures around the world today, traditional religious faith predominates over both modern forms of religion and skepticism. (Chapter Fifteen, however, will outline the rather high degree of skepticism that prevails in Europe.) But in the West some of those who think of themselves as following tradition may have made more accommodation with modern thought than they notice. Though they still firmly believe in God, they expect fewer miraculous interventions than past generations once did. Though they still hope for life after death, they are willing to invest more energy in worldly social concerns about poverty and injustice. Though they believe that each person is a child of God, they also believe that we are the products of an evolutionary process. Though they believe in the importance of God's work for all humankind, they are willing to make this a matter of personal belief and individual free choice rather than accept the mandate that everyone should belong to the one true religion.

This traditional faith is often not conscious of how much accommodation to modern ideas it has made. This worldliness emphasis on justice, acceptance of evolution, and the rights of individuals to publicly disagree on religious matters were once radical ideas, considered to be misleading or dangerous. There are conservative religious groups today that are not so ready to accommodate such ideas.

Fundamentalism

The most intransigent religious style is the one that has come to be known as fundamentalism. As Chapter Nine indicated, the name came from a conservative movement among American Protestants in the early twentieth century. Against the growing force of modern thought in religion, known then as liberalism, a set of twelve volumes, entitled The Fundamentals, was published, which set forth and defended traditional Christian faith. The viewpoint was thoroughly unmodern and even antimodern, rejecting all four of the main points of the modern challenge.

Fundamentalism rejects the idea that the basic religious beliefs might be only tentative formulations, useful but never fully adequate symbols. The doctrines of the Bible are God's literal and unchangeable truths, given once and for all, says fundamentalism. Modern religion is especially wrong to call into question the reality of the many miracles described in the Bible, wrong to try to interpret these miracles as just educational stories or symbols of deeper truths. (Such scriptural literalism is a key mark of other fundamentalisms in the world.)

There is no purpose to human autonomy, according to fundamentalism, except to make the one valid choice of obedience to God's will and adherence to God's truth. We humans are too sinful to rely on our reason, or to be self-determining. In fact, it is a sinful pride that inclines us ever to do so.

Involvement in this world is dangerous and misguided, insists fundamentalism. The secular world of history is a contest between good and evil. Those who follow God should help others in all kindness and charity, it is true, but they should not expect that justice and love can ever reign on this planet through human involvement in social causes. Only God's power, to come in full force some day, will finally defeat the powers of evil and establish a righteous kingdom.

Fundamentalism also rejects modern science's conclusions whenever they conflict with the fundamentalist's interpretation of God's truth. This is not a vast, twelve-billion-year-old evolving universe lacking any clear plan or goal, says fundamentalism. Instead, it is a more recent product of God's creative activity; it is under the ongoing general guidance of God and is directed specifically by God through many miraculous interventions. Fundamentalists tend to be creationists, believing that God made the earth and every living thing, including the first parents of all humans, about six thousand years ago. Some creationists have tried to claim that their interpretation of this is scientifically respectable, but scientists see overwhelming evidence for an evolutionary process of several billion years' duration.

Sects and Cults

Modern thought creates insecurity and confusion. The modern emphasis on tentative truth, on a need to be autonomously self-directing, on dedicated
involvement in even the frustrating confusions of this world, and on the scientific method with its demand for honesty and self-criticism as well as its often pessimistic worldviews, has led many religious believers to cling more tightly to the security of traditional beliefs of fundamentalism. These same threatening aspects of modern thought may also have a lot to do with the intensification of sectarian and cultic religion.

Christian sects, by and large, are fundamentalist in their attitudes. Strict in defining beliefs, strict in providing moral rules, strict in expecting people to follow the single truth, they provide clarity and security. Variant or quasi-Christian sects do the same. The Mormons follow The Book of Mormon and not the Bible as such. The Unification Church reads The Divine Principle of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, loosely based on Judaico-Christian tradition. But by strictness of belief and morality they provide a refuge from the ambiguities of modern thought.

Cultic groups, some of them Hindu-inspired, as in the case of the Krishna Consciousness movement, accomplish the same thing. Behind saffron robes, shaved heads, bells and incense, are the same human needs and hopes and fears all people share, and the same desire to find clear answers to life in the midst of its mysteries. These cults generally reject the modern challenges to religion, finding no value in secular, scientific, autonomous life according to tentative symbols.

Not all members of sects or cults feel a conscious need to escape the uncertainties of modern thought and life. Many will find their religious group attractive simply because they feel at home there, because they have connections there to family or friends and because the group offers a way of life that the members can understand. This is especially true in the second and later generations of members, who have grown up in this way of life and find it so normal, they would not think of departing from it. The hidden logic of blind faith is probably at work here.

Traditional faith, together with fundamentalism and even sects and cults, are all alternatives to modern religion. The next chapter will discuss various New Age movements as well as New Religious Movements, as they are called. Many forms of nonmodern religiousness are strong today. But, finally, it is modern religion that remains to be described, as it addresses the four modern challenges.

MODERN RELIGION

Religion and Scientific Worldviews

This world as seen through the best available theories of science has little or no room for miracles, unlike the worldviews of prescientific cultures. This world also can easily appear in scientific theories as a random and aimless series of processes, rather than as one filled with divine guidance or directed towards some ultimate goal or value. There are three major categories of responses by modern Christian theology to these ideas of science: segregation, integration, and patience. You will find many different names and positions described here; they are mentioned only to illustrate that religious thinkers have found modern science rather challenging, and have proposed a variety of responses.

Segregation of Religion from Science

The first position has been to segregate religion from science, to quarantine religion in order to prevent its contamination by skepticism.

Schleiermacher's Liberal Theology

A German theologian named Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) led the way as long ago as 1799 when he published On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers. True religion, he said, is not the kind that is based on miracles. In fact, it is not dependent in any way on evidence from the world, evidence such as science depends on. This theology without miracles has been called "liberal" theology. Modern religion is very much a liberal form of religion. Modern liberal theology, in fact, is precisely what provoked a return to the fundamentals on the part of those we now call fundamentalists. Above all else, fundamentalism defends belief in miraculous revelation along with the miracle stories contained in that revelation.

True religion, claimed Schleiermacher, is not based on miraculous revelations. It is based on an inner intuition or feeling, a sensitivity to the utterly awesome mystery of the universe. Every item in the world is dependent on something else, and all things together proclaim: we do not account for ourselves. The perceptive soul will sense deeply and thoroughly that there is a God, the Other who is the Independent upon whom every person and all reality depend utterly. This is an insight or feeling, not a scientific conclusion, said Schleiermacher.

More than a century later, Rudolph Otto, the German theologian who popularized the word "numinous," echoed Schleiermacher. Otto's book, The Idea of the Holy (1910), proposed that a person may experience a mysterium tremendum et fascinans—a mystery both awesome and fascinating. Both Schleiermacher and Otto defined God as Aquinas might have, as the infinite and incomprehensible Ultimate on which all things depend. But both arrived at this, they claimed, through profound inner experience rather than through philosophical argument. Otto even claimed that it is enough to have the experience in order to know that it is valid. A person who has not had
Barth was not very modern, though, in his insistence on the very traditional Christian doctrine that faith in God is an inner state created in us by the action of God’s grace working in us. No human power, not human reason as in science, nor human intuition and feeling as in Schleiermacher’s theology, can possibly bring us to faith in God. Only God can produce faith in God, said Barth. A person who shares in this Christian faith knows that the faith is a gift from God. This was the main emphasis of neo-orthodoxy.

Unfortunately Barth was never very clear on explaining how God can do this if God does not literally work miracles, because the action of God’s grace on people seems to be a kind of miracle. Moreover, Barth’s claim was open to the criticism that it is a circular argument. Barth said he believed in God because God gave him the grace to believe. But how did Barth know there even was a God to be the cause of belief in God? The followers of Feuerbach (and later Freud) were still suspicious. Maybe the belief in God’s grace is just part of the overall fictional idea that God exists at all.

Bultmann’s Existential Theology

In response to all this a German scripture scholar named Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976) proposed another way of segregating religious belief from threatening scientific worldview. He was called a Christian existentialist because he too thought that we humans “ex-ist.” The best scientific evidence, Bultmann believed, makes the universe look like an aimless process with no ultimate meaning to it. Yet we humans are the kind of being that the existentialists say we are, in need of meaning, even ultimate meaning, in order to have some direction and purpose to our lives. So we stand out as the beings whose conscious awareness makes them seek ultimate values as a ground for a meaningful life in a universe where there is no ultimate value. On the surface, therefore, life does appear to be absurd.

In spite of this existentialist interpretation of the human situation, Bultmann was a Christian because of the way he responded to the situation. What was needed, said Bultmann, was a free human decision to face down the awful implications of science and cry out, “Nevertheless.” Because we are limited and sinful we cannot grasp God, who is indeed the Wholly Other. Nevertheless, Bultmann said, I will choose to believe that there is Ultimate meaning and value. Regardless of external scientific evidence I will rely on my internal courage and freedom and stand up to emptiness, stand up to death, and believe. As a Christian Bultmann took his inspiration from the example of Jesus of Nazareth. In Bultmann’s interpretation Jesus leads the way for this great and courageous “nevertheless” by his willingness to take on even a horrible death on the cross because of his dedication to God as the ultimate meaning of life.
Bultmann was not entirely original in recommending this existential choice. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) had argued that the true Christian had to be ready to accept absurdity, as Abraham had done when ordered by God to sacrifice the very son that God had given to him and Sarah in their old age. Kierkegaard claimed that the "knight of faith" will choose to leap off a cliff, if necessary, rather than be restrained by ethical rationality. Long ignored, Kierkegaard's writings were promoted by Barth, who proclaimed in his own way that his faith was not based on rational analysis.

Eliafel's Phenomenological Approach

Kierkegaard's and Bultmann's responses have not appealed to everyone. Much more popular in recent decades is Mircea Eliade's phenomenological approach (shared most famously by Gerardus van der Leeuw, 1890-1950). This approach is part of the package of ideas described in Chapter Two that says religion is based on experiences of the sacred. Eliade got this idea from Schleiermacher and Otto. But Eliade had a very positive view of primitive religion. He claimed that primitive and archaic religious experiences of sacred places, things, and rituals were just as important as the experiences that Schleiermacher and Otto described.

Eliade also claimed that the sacred is unique—sui generis. It is not the sort of profane or everyday phenomenon studied by the sciences. Only religious involvement can lead a person to truly understand the sacred. Otto was correct, in fact, when he said that religious experience is self-validating. If you have had it, you will know it is true; therefore, religion can be legitimately segregated from rational inquiry. We will return to this topic in the Epilogue.

Integration of Science and Religion

The dualists had united science and religion by replacing traditional sacred sources such as the Bible and church teachings with human reason, and by using that reason to produce a religious view of God as Great Watchmaker-Creator. When evolutionary thought filled the intellectual air, a German philosopher named G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) set out a massively complex theory in 1807 that the universe of science was not aimless and dead but an evolution of God, of a divine Spirit evolving into greater and greater spiritual self-awareness.

By the twentieth century some French philosophers were exploring similar ideas. An English (American) Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), came to Harvard to propose a philosophy of nature that had a clear religious element, based on scientific descriptions of nature. (Charles Hartshorne, mentioned in Chapter Eleven, is one of the major proponents and developers of Whitehead's position.)

Teilhard de Chardin's Cosmic Vision

A French paleontologist and Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), integrated science with religion by an interpretation of the universe that is easier to explain here because it is close to the views of Julian Huxley, which we have already seen.

Teilhard (to use the usual brief way of referring to him) looked at the whole cosmic process of change and did not see aimlessness there. Like Huxley, he saw a process of complexification going on, as each stage of cosmic evolution produced variant forms, which then combined in more complexly organized unities—from particles to atoms to compounds to basic genetic material to life forms to cells to organisms to humans and their stages of social development. Like Huxley, Teilhard also saw this as a process with a direction toward higher and higher consciousness. This in turn was producing higher and higher levels of interpersonalness, as human consciousness led to family life, social connectedness, global communications, and so forth. The evolutionary goal of the cosmos was apparently an ever greater "personalization" of reality.

Teilhard thought that it was scientifically legitimate to claim that there must be a force at work throughout the entire cosmos, driving it along the path toward ever more complex organization, and hence also toward ever greater consciousness, humaneness, and interpersonalness. Just as a scientist argues for the existence of the invisible force called gravity to account for the observed actions of physical bodies, so Teilhard argued for the existence of an invisible cosmic force behind the directionality of evolution toward personification. Teilhard felt it was therefore scientifically sound to claim that there must be a supreme Personness or Person that was the primary driving force of evolution. This is actually a variation of the "argument from design" for the existence of God.

In fact Teilhard felt it was legitimate to claim that the tendency of all things to unite in ever more complex and conscious ways was a sign that love, a tendency towards union, is the ultimate force behind everything. God is love, Teilhard claimed. The goal of all cosmic evolution is a final and complete union with God, a goal that is already beginning to be realized in the growth of conscious love in the human element of the cosmos.

Teilhard tried to prove too much, perhaps. He was offering an apologetic for Christianity in a scientific era. He managed to find all sorts of ways in which scientific theories could support his own Christian faith, even on many specifics concerning God and Christ and the eventual end of the world, though he had to reinterpret some traditional doctrines to make it all work.
Scientific Mysticism

Religion and science continue to intersect. The process theology based on Whitehead's thought remains highly favored among many theologians and scientists who seek to integrate their religious faith with a scientific perspective. It is a complex theology, worked out in different ways by different thinkers. It would be difficult to summarize here adequately. There are other ways in which religion and science meet today, however, that can be briefly described.

One of these is closer to a New Age mystic ism than to regular science. Various writers find religious inspiration in a holistic interconnection among matter, energy, and spirit. They speak not of quantum mechanics but of quantum mysticism. The physicists David Bohm and Paul Davies are two names associated with such thought. Mystified science does not have an apologetic intent, does not attempt to make a rational case. It has an allure to those who have religious sensibilities of the sort that Schleiermacher and Otto described. But unlike Schleiermacher and Otto, they connect their religious experience to a broad view of the cosmos that borrows from modern scientific cosmology. They call people to a kind of intuition of a religious dimension to the universe. Many science-minded people disdain this approach. These critics claim that it is not legitimate to mingle testable scientific theories with what they see as mystical mumbo-jumbo. Those who favor mystified science, however, feel that the critics have simply not had the religious experience needed.

The Anthropic Principle

The first current argument from design has been called "the anthropic principle," though it may be more informative to refer to it as the argument from fine tuning. The argument states that the universe appears to be quite finely tuned so that it would evolve from raw energy to more complex forms of matter and then to life, to conscious life, and finally to intelligent life.

The fine tuning is not easy to see at first. Given billions of years of existence and billions of galaxies in which things can happen, even the most highly improbable things will eventually occur. This seems particularly likely when one applies Darwin's theory of evolution in a broad sense to the history of the whole universe.

In the overall history of the universe, variant forms of energy, matter, compounds, and life have existed, all occurring partially through randomness. The four forces of gravity, electromagnetism, and the subatomic weak and strong forces limit the random variations of forms of matter. These forces affect the nature of quarks and other sub-atomic particles and how they interact in forming atoms. The nature of the atoms limits the random vari-
ing designed to lead eventually and inevitably to intelligent life somewhere in the universe. This is a kind of evolutionary deism, a belief in a designer God that does not intervene.

**Intelligent Design**

The other major current form of an argument from design is called “Intelligent Design” or ID theory. Most ID proponents strive precisely to identify instances of interventions by a Designer. ID proponents claim to be able to find in nature not just evidence of an initial cosmic fine tuning, but very specific instances of things that are “irreducibly complex” or have a highly “specified complexity.” The biochemist Michael Behe, for example, points to what he calls an irreducibly complex aspect of biology in the highly complicated sequence or “cascade” of chemical interactions that must occur for blood to clot. If any of the multiple aspects of this cascade were to fail, an organism would bleed to death. Therefore, argues Behe, this clotting cascade could not have been gradually produced by an aimless step-by-step evolutionary process. It would have had to be assembled all at once by an intelligent designer. To assemble this complex clotting sequence, the intelligent designer would have to intervene at a certain point in evolutionary history, after evolution had produced creatures with blood.

The ID proponents therefore conclude that scientific naturalism is mistakenly restrictive, because it deliberately excludes significant specific instances of intelligent causality intervening in natural processes. To ignore genuine causes of any sort is a mistake, a path to ignorance about those causes. Perhaps we cannot know the purposes and methods of a non-natural intelligent intererver, because these interventions are not reliable and regular like the laws of nature. Tough luck, say ID proponents; it may be true that such an intererver has been at work anyway.

The specific arguments of ID proponents such as Phillip Johnson, William Dembski, and Michael Behe are too intricate to describe here, as are counter-arguments in books by Robert T. Pennock and Kenneth R. Miller. The main point here is to illustrate ways in which a rational or scientific approach can still be part of religious apologetics today. Scientific evidence and rational analysis can provide standards for judging religious truth claims, even though not all religious people would accept these standards.

**Patient Moderation Concerning Science and Religion**

Some have severely divided religion from science; others have made them fit together very intimately. A third approach has been one of patience and hope. This middle ground is taken by those who do not claim to have the answers about the eventual interplay between religious beliefs and scientif-
ic theories, but who will nevertheless trust that in the long run good science and reasonable religious faith will prove compatible.

Such a position is sometimes a generally nonmodern or traditional faith that has adapted slowly to a few aspects of modern thought. Modern religiousness easily takes a position of cautious hope because it accepts science, secularity, human autonomy, and the tentativeness of knowledge. It is willing to insist that faith should be a reasonable choice of a free person concerned with the temporal welfare of all people.

On the whole, this position accepts science rather than rejects it. It accepts the scientific notion that claims about what is true or not true should not be merely a matter of individual inner experience, obedience, or commitment, but also, at the very least, a publicly defensible position. Science corrects its own tendencies toward prejudice, bias, or premature conviction by insisting that all people who are willing to try should be given a chance to test the evidence and study the reasoning behind any conclusions. This process of public debate is one that many of the patient moderates are willing to engage in concerning their own religious beliefs as well.

In general, it is safe to say that modern religion tries to be honestly reasonable. It shares humanism’s trust in human reason; it trusts also that religious claims about life’s meaning have not been invalidated by the methods or conclusions of science. A later section will say more about all of this.

**Religion and Secularity**

Modern religion also trusts the world. Schleiermacher, Teilhard, Barth, Bultmann, and moderates in between are all modern in their willingness to live without expectation of miracles, without specific interventions by God to control individual events or give directions on how to act. That means that this religiousness is not primarily a means to get help and guidance from God. It has a more secular purpose. The secularity that arose in recent centuries often advocated a total secularism, a denial that there is anything at all to existence except the ongoing problems of life, a denial of any numinous or divine dimension. But in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modern religion has begun to see secular interest in this world as part of its own purposes.

As the Infinite, God is a symbol of all that has yet to be done, of the more that is always possible. Meditation on God is reflection on goodness to be achieved. God is the one who calls and empowers people to do everything of value that can be done. In the modern style of thought this is a symbolic way of speaking to represent a human trust that the divine reality is somehow where behind our efforts to live life for one another, even if we cannot know just how that divine presence works. This trust is a basis for taking charge of human life in this world in order to make it as good as can be.
Bishop Robinson’s Secular Theology

Traditional historic religion in the West views this world as fallen, a source of sin, unable to be improved (unless it is first destroyed). The “secular” theologians of the 1960s disagree. The Anglican bishop John A. T. Robinson (1919-1983), sums up a rather modern religious appreciation of this world in his small book, *Honest to God*. The world is not ungodly, but a sign of God’s presence, says Robinson. God is not “up there” or “out there,” Robinson declares, not a figure in the sky as though divine realities were removed from worldly ones. Instead the infinite divine Mystery is the ground and source of all creation, especially the ground and source of personness. To find the presence of the mystery of God, look to what exists around us, to creation and especially to other persons.

To Robinson, these are not just traditional pius thoughts about the presence of God in all things. They have implications for how to be religious. Robinson recommends a secular religiousness, a “worldly holiness” as he calls it. This means a deep and consistent involvement in all that touches us in the world. Concretely it means that concern for political freedom, social equality, psychological well-being, physical health, and other desirable aspects of human life are ways of involvement in the presence of God.

This is especially secular because Robinson and others like him do not say much about a life after death as salvation. The salvation they are mainly concerned about is a worldly one. It is a continuous healing of the world’s wounds, a constant attention to the needs of personness, which he regards as being of ultimate value here and now.

Though the label “secular” was popular in the 1960s and 1970s among theologians, few of them today would use the word. Many, in fact, are trying hard to recapture a stronger sense of the sacred. Yet many of these same theologians still have great concern to attend to the problems of this world.

Liberation Theologies: Black, Feminist, Latin American

Striking examples of this secular religiousness can be found in the various Christian liberation theologies, as they are called. Black liberation theology is a theology that interprets human existence in terms of the experience of oppression. To understand and feel what it is to be oppressed is the foundation of an approach to life that works for a transformation of earthly conditions—material, political, economic, social, and psychological. Black liberation theology sees this work as the basic meaning of the idea of building God’s “kingdom” on earth. It is not enough to pray for liberation, says the theologian James Cone (1938- ); it must be brought about through the thoughts and actions of the oppressed.

Likewise, women’s liberation theology brings to the fore the reality of domination through power, of a division of people into the higher and lower, then rejects these as a model for human existence. Equality, cooperation, and mutual supportiveness are the ideals of feminist theology, not just as useful virtues but as the key images for interpreting where life’s ultimate values and meaning lie.

Similarly, the Catholic social-political movements of Latin America all claim that the most immediately imperative religious project is not getting to heaven at some future time but of transforming earthly conditions as much as possible now in an ongoing way. Trusting that God will take care of the ultimate destiny of people’s lives, these liberation theologians respond to God as the God of the poor and oppressed, the God of those who live under stifling oppression. The oppression itself and all the social, economic, and political structures that support it are the “sin” that these religious liberationists attack.

Religious Environmentalism

A final secular interest of modern religion is ecology. Traditional Christianity had a number of ideas that went contrary to a concern to preserve the earth. Apocalyptic-minded Christians even today have said that God will destroy the earth before long, so that attempts to preserve the earth are foolish.

Christians who look to heaven as the only true home may also lose interest in caring for the planet. And the scriptures tell its readers to subdue the earth; they do not explicitly say to protect and preserve it. But some modern Christians claim that the first concern should be for this universe, which is God’s creation, and which deserves to be cherished and respected. These Christians take it as their God-given responsibility to care for the earth as stewards rather than masters, preparing it to be a better place for the generations still to come. “Deep ecology” is the name sometimes used for ecological concern based on a religious respect for the earth.

Religion and Autonomous Selfhood

Modern thought values individual freedom very highly, emphasizing that the capacity for self-determination means that each person is personally responsible for all of his or her values and for his or her choices. Traditional religion in the West has also held each person responsible for her or his choices. But there is nonetheless a difference between modern and traditional views. That difference lies in the amount of confidence placed in human ability to do what is good.

The most conservative form of traditional Christianity describes us humans as fallen, weak-willed and confused. We are fallen people in a fallen world, unable to reason clearly, whose autonomy leads to sin, whose sec-
ular involvement is a mistake, and whose science is not to be trusted when it conflicts with revealed truth. The modern humanistic evaluation of the person, on the other hand, maintains that our capacity for autonomy is to be trusted and encouraged for the sake of making constructive and creative decisions for improving temporal existence, sometimes with confidence in science as the best way available to judge what is probably the truth.

In response to this conflict modern religion has become more humanistic. A number of theologians even perceive a religiousness within secular humanism, a religiousness that is also intrinsic to science, secularity, and a concern for autonomy. Various persons have recently supported this idea in similar ways, including Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984), Karl Rahner (also 1904-1984), and Schubert Ogden (1928- ). The names are not important here; a general presentation of the basic idea will do. To have a handy label we can call it the implicit-faith position.

The main theme is that there is a genuine religiousness that is part of any trust in human responsible autonomy; although it may be a hidden or implicit religiousness. When human persons take the burden of using their own human efforts in science, for example, to determine what is true, or the burden of making their own decisions about love and loyalty to others as the most basic value of their lives, they are making implicit acts of faith that there is ultimate meaning and value in human life.

We have seen that whenever a scientific inquirer pursues knowledge through the human method of investigating and theorizing and testing, that inquirer is showing faith that reality is intelligible. This has turned out to be a highly reasonable faith; it works exceedingly well in practice. The inquirer is also making an act of faith in her or his own intelligence and responsibility. This also is a reasonable faith. The human scientific enterprise has worked. We have some reason to trust our powers of understanding and commitment to truth, in spite of our many failures.

Most important, there is a fundamental faith at work in science that it is really worthwhile being a knower, being a person in pursuit of understanding. Atheistic existentialism challenges religion to show that ultimately anything makes sense. Without answering that challenge directly, even seemingly nonreligious people pursue knowledge through science as though it really were ultimately worthwhile. They thereby act as though they had an implicit faith that it really does make sense to be a human person, using one's intelligence to learn and to develop new knowledge.

The same implicit faith appears when we love one another or give deep loyalty to others or bring children into this world. We thereby act as though we trust that life makes sense. This manifests an implicit faith that our selfhood, our consciousness, our ability to learn and choose and love are ultimately meaningful. All this can be seen as faith in the value of autonomous selfhood because it is precisely our ability to learn and choose, to think for ourselves, and to make responsible choices that constitutes autonomy.

The implicit faith position argues that in principle this faith in ourselves is not ultimately valid if in fact the ultimate truth about life is that it is a meaningless accident in an aimless universe. Our selfhood is ultimately valid only if somehow rests upon a source or ground of ultimate meaning and value. Belief in God as Personal is a belief that personhood is grounded in Personhood. The Hebrew scriptures expressed this by saying that every person is made "in the image and likeness of God." In this belief every person is therefore a symbol, a re-presentation, of the Ultimate.

Notice that in this implicit faith a person does not believe in God on the basis of an outside authority instructing the person to do so. Belief in a personal God is instead based on a prior act of self-affirmation. Theism thus becomes a reasonable way to spell out and affirm a person's basic faith in the ultimate worth of being a person. This implicit-faith position supports the idea of faith as a reasonable commitment.

The Christian theologians who argue this way go a step further. They claim that belief that Jesus of Nazareth is the presence of the mystery of God in history helps to express and maintain this faith in personness. Similarly for the Jewish religious philosopher Martin Buber, every time we encounter someone else on a personal level, as a "thou," to use Buber's language, we encounter the presence of God. In these theologies the modern emphasis on individual and free personness is not found to be unreligious but intrinsically religious.

In the next chapter we will see a new challenge to this emphasis on autonomy. The challenge is from those who say that their religious tradition helps to highlight an excessive individualism inherent in the modern idea of the autonomous self. Modern thought may well be right in seeking to develop fully the capacity of the person to reflect and choose. But modern thought often overlooks what is most worth choosing, which is positive relations with other people, in family and community. Such relations require giving up at least some of each person's autonomy from moment to moment. Love of family and friends and strong social bonds in a larger and meaningful community are highly important aspects of life. Many religious traditions remind people of the importance of community for individual fulfillment.

Religion and Tentative Knowledge

Fundamentalists strive to maintain a strict adherence to what they see as the single truth delivered by God. Even those of a more accommodating but traditional faith attach a high degree of certitude and permanence to their religious beliefs. In contrast, a result of modern reflection on science and histo-
Modern Religion and Other Stages

Religion will continue to take many forms. This is true partly because there are many traditions, each with its own symbols. It is also true because even if there were but one religious tradition in the world with one set of symbols, different people would still interpret them in different ways.

Each of us has some primitive-style memories and feelings and thoughts, a sense of meeting and sharing in something mysterious and even numinous. Each of us has some archaic inclinations to see reality as an arena of conflicting finite powers, some of them numinous perhaps. Each of us has some exposure to the historic style, the universalizing impulse to believe in an overall unity, a single truth, the one right way to be and to act, perhaps expressed in a belief in one God. And each of us has been touched by modernness in some ways.

Historic religion did not eliminate primitive or archaic ideas. Instead, it transformed them by taking them under its universalizing umbrella. Modern religion will certainly not eliminate or replace primitive, archaic, or historic thought. What it will probably do is exert a continuing influence on the great historic syntheses by relativizing them.

The absolute doctrines of historic thought will be tempered by the modern sense of tentativeness. The historic passion for perfection beyond this world will be diluted by an involvement in the less than perfect ambiguities of this world. A patience with science and an enthusiasm for its method of honesty will counterbalance the historic desire to affirm final answers once and for all. A modern appreciation of autonomy will guard against the historic temptation to make all people follow the one true path.

A constant temptation modern religiousness faces is to become impatient with other styles of religiousness and to abandon them. This would be foolish. The other styles, primitive, archaic, and historic, are part of the life of each of us. It is unwise to try to ignore part of one’s own life story. The other styles are also an endless source of riches. Without all the symbols, moral codes, and belief structures of the past, modern religiousness would be an attitude without specific expression, an orientation without concrete form.

Modern religion faces its own special danger, however, the danger of increasing vagueness of belief and values and direction in life. Where historic religion offers clear and precise beliefs, where archaic style religion provides inspiring myths to symbolize the meaning of life, modern religion is open to so many stories and to so many interpretations of beliefs and so forth that it can lose all focus. That will be one of the issues of the next chapter.

Summary

This chapter has reviewed the main challenges of modern thought to reli-
gion, and the responses of modern religion. Most religion today is not all that modern. Fundamentalism rejects the modern orientation entirely. Much of traditional faith has accommodated itself to modernity in some way. There is, however, a religiousness that is rather thoroughly modern in that it has come to terms with scientific world-views, has a secular orientation, promotes responsible autonomy, and lives by an openness to new ideas and changes. Modern thought in religion will never replace earlier forms, but it will continue to influence them as well as draw upon their heritage.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Which of the challenges of modern thought to religion are the most serious: the challenges of science, secularity, autonomy, or tentativeness of belief? Explain why.
2. Is it legitimate and possible to maintain traditional faith in these modern times? Why? Why not?
3. To what extent does your religious faith rest mainly on inner experience or choice rather than on external evidence?
4. Why should the three liberation theology movements cited in this chapter—black, feminist, and Latin-American—be taken seriously?
5. Are other people worth loving because God says so, or because they are of intrinsic value? Explain.
6. How useful is a religion that cannot guarantee the stable permanence of its beliefs and moral rules and so forth?
7. How much more must a religion do for people beyond affirming its basic faith that there is ultimate value in being a person in the world? Explain.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
The Future of Religion

Religion in the Twenty-First Century

THE VITALITY OF RELIGION

The Secularization Thesis
Chapter Thirteen described the growth of various forms of nonreligious secular evolutionary humanisms (Recall that there is also a religious humanism.) In the twentieth century many became convinced that religion would continue to diminish, especially among the educated. Secular ("worldly") forces would replace religion. One of the more famous books on the topic of secularization was mentioned in Chapter Seven, *The Sacred Canopy*, by sociologist Peter Berger. As a sociologist, Berger interprets religion as the product of human social processes. We humans, unfinished animals, need some social norms and practices in order to have stable identities and patterns of life. These norms and practices are developed over hundreds and even thousands of years of cultural evolution. This is "the social construction of reality."

But we have now become consciously aware that we produce society. Berger continues, including perhaps even the religious beliefs which support society. This means that we think that religion comes at least partly, perhaps even entirely, from us rather than from God or the supernatural. This undermines religion's legitimacy. We are in a position to evaluate social and religious patterns, and perhaps choose to modify them or even replace them entirely. So whether we like it or not, says Berger, we can expect the process of secularization to continue. Another sociologist, David Martin, has called this "the secularization thesis."

It was not just sociological theory that led Berger and others to predict the continuing diminishment of religion. Earlier attacks on belief in miracles by deists, and on religion in general by critical skeptics such as Comte, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and Dewey undercut the plausibility of religion, at least for those educated in such skeptical ideas. As a result, in some