

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

By Robert Ellwood

INTRODUCTION: THEOSOPHY AND RELIGION

RELIGION

Helena P. Blavatsky, in *Isis Unveiled*, said that “Truth remains one, and there is not a religion, whether Christian or heathen, that is not firmly built upon the rock of ages—God and immortal spirit” (1:467). In the same source, there is also reference to “the remote past, during those ages when every true religion was based on a knowledge of the occult powers of nature” (1:25).

However precisely one defines these terms, the basic idea seems incontrovertible. All that is usually called religion implies “God and immortal spirit”—that is, that there is something more to both the universe and ourselves than what is plainly visible, and that this “something more” has to do with the universe’s ultimate origin, and with our own role as bearers of some common essence with the infinite source, or deepest nature, of all reality.

The universe, all religionists hold, is not merely out there, impersonal and indifferent, but is also humanly significant. Since we are children of the universe, we obviously came out of it in some way, and therefore some resemblance between parent and offspring must exist, and some form of family communication must be possible. If we have consciousness, a potential at least for consciousness must rest in the universe as a whole. If we communicate by word, sign, or symbol, we must also be able to communicate with the matrix out of which we are born, though it may take effort to crack its code.

Religion, then, is based on the awareness that we and the universe have two interlocking natures, which may for convenience be called material and spiritual. The spiritual relates to consciousness, thought, and will. On the universal scale it may be called God (or, for example, the Absolute, Ultimate Reality, the Unknown Root, or some other name). On the individual level, it may be called soul, immortal spirit, or something else; names are less important than the reality. The essential concept is that the two, God and individual, are of similar essence, and are in inward and outward contact. Thus each religion in its own way tries to teach what channels of spiritual communication are most valid or effective.

Religion means something else, too, suggested by the second quote above from *Isis Unveiled*, referring to a time in the remote past when every true religion was based on occult, or secret, knowledge of the powers of nature. A general characteristic of almost any religion is the belief that it is the custodian of a wisdom, which has come to us today from out of the past, either from a past revelation or from the immemorial tradition of the culture in which the religion is situated. This wisdom may be preserved in a sacred book, or in the lore guarded and taught by a sacred institution, or both.

THEOSOPHY

The Theosophical tradition shares the same fundamental assumptions expressed above for religion. Basic to Theosophy is the affirmation that life is more than its material, mortal manifestation in the realm of appearance. Theosophy tells us also that knowledge about the God-and-

immortal-spirit foundation of the universe and its varied life was known, at least intuitively, by the first beings who could be called human as they gazed wide-eyed upon their starry and sunlit world; that is why it is called Ancient Wisdom. But there the narratives of religion and Theosophy diverge.

Religion is the outward path. Over countless centuries, few human institutions have been more diverse and visible than the religious. Religious institutions have held immense social and political power, and at other times they have been powerless or even persecuted. The stories, exaltations, and agonies of the religious spirit have animated the literature of many nations. Religious art has dominated the painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and drama of innumerable traditional cultures in the East and West. The tenets of religion have helped billions decide how best to act when ethical choices present themselves. Buddhists ask themselves how, or if, a Buddha would go fishing or sell stocks. Christians inquire, “What would Jesus do?” Muslims may refer to the Hadith, which are texts retelling what the Prophet did in various life situations.

Theosophy has a very different place in the world, though one as intimately related to religion as inner to outer, or back to front. For it is based on what is, or was, known inwardly about the universe and our own nature—God and immortal spirit—though perhaps some of this knowledge has been superficially forgotten, in the busy years since the birth of human consciousness.

The supreme drive behind wisdom realizations, as Plato, that great philosopher of inward vision, knew, is the sense of wonder—and he added that he was sometimes made dizzy with amazement at the significance of things. Wonder can be the child’s silent awe at the beauty of a sunset or in the love of a mother’s arms, just as it can be an adult’s stillness before the majesty of a spiral nebula or the beauty of a child. But though wonder may begin beyond words, it then weaves its own webs of language and symbols. In ways relevant to Theosophy, these appear particularly in what are called esoteric forms of religion, such as the Kabbala in Judaism, Gnosticism in Christianity, the Ismaili and Druze forms of Islam, and Tantrism in Hinduism and Buddhism. (Esoteric, or “inner,” forms of religion may require special training and initiation for full access, and involve practices that communicate special knowledge not only factually, but also through mystical techniques by which they are experienced.)

The esoteric visions of hidden reality, which start with wonder and a sense of oneness, then proceed to unfold the behind-the-scenes structures that make the world, have a striking overall similarity despite great diversity in name and form. One key purpose of the Theosophical enterprise is to lift out and study that basic similarity, demonstrating its significance for understanding the meaning of human and planetary life.

COMMON ESOTERIC THEMES

Thus esoteric patterns throughout the religious world articulate the idea of a “great chain of being,” or series of emanations linking the One to the several levels of creation, from the highest gods, archangels, “Dhyani Chohans,” and logoi or creative energies, through the spirits of worlds and nature to human beings, and then on to the animal, vegetative, and mineral realms. These patterns of thought emphasize that all beings on all levels—emanations of and so not separate from the One—contain the divine spark within; however dormant or well concealed it may be, it can awaken and transform its bearer. Esoteric wisdom also tells us that human beings are “microcosms” or miniatures of the whole, containing in their nature something of all levels. Thus we have in ourselves and accessible to consciousness the material realm and also several planes of

consciousness up to the divine spark. The commonality of such ideas in the esoteric traditions of world religions, often concealed behind “exoteric,” or outward, symbols, myths, and doctrines, is a major motif in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky and other modern Theosophical writers.

THEOSOPHICAL CRITICISM OF RELIGION

Yet the relation of Theosophy and esoteric teaching to the exoteric religions of the world, which are the subject of our study, may seem perplexing. Despite the inner connection, some Theosophical writings, including many vehement passages in the works of H. P. Blavatsky, appear harshly condemnatory of outer religion, or at least of certain very important religious institutions and doctrines. There is a famous passage in Letter 88 of the *Mahatma Letters* in which a Master says roundly, “I will point out the greatest, the chief cause of nearly two-thirds of the evils that pursue humanity ever since that cause became a power. It is religion under whatever form and in whatsoever nation.” The letter goes on to decry the workings of this evil no less in India than in Europe, and to declare that “It is the sacerdotal caste, the priesthood and the churches; it is in those illusions that man looks upon as sacred, that he has to search out the source of that multitude of evils which is the great curse of humanity and that almost overwhelms mankind.”

This statement may sound surprising—even shocking—at first glance, yet a moment’s reflection will reveal its truth. It is not an attack on religion as such. Rather, it is a blunt observation of how religion, broadly defined (“under whatever form and in whatsoever nation”), far too often functions in human life.

Simple selfishness and thoughtless hedonism do not account for the greatest and most pervasive evils of history. The most terrible crimes have not been done merely when pandering to ordinary lust, hate, or greed, but for the sake of something supposedly higher, often by zealots who see themselves as having sacrificed much for the sake of their cause. The object of their fanaticism may take many forms—God or the gods, pride of tribe or class or country, the idols of ideology or faith.

In the past these causes were usually identified with religion in the conventional sense, with the will of God or of a tribal fetish. In more recent times, the names of the gods have changed to such abstractions as nation, race, or political creed. But surely such modern “religions” as distorted nationalism or ideology come under the rubric of “those illusions that man looks upon as sacred,” and surely one can find a modern “sacerdotal caste” in the propagandists and secular messiahs who served such false faiths all too well in the twentieth century. In that century, the evil brought about by plain greed, great as it was, fades beside that produced by such faiths as imperialism, Nazism, communism, nationalism, and resurgent fundamentalism within a number of religions.

Yet we must also remember that, as the Master says in the same letter, “evil is the exaggeration of good.” Religion, however defined, is not evil per se. Indeed, it may be a matter of the worst being a corruption of the best. Religion, insofar as it represents a yearning for more than mere material existence—that “something more” of which we spoke before—is an effort of the divine within to break free and be itself.

Such religion is an assertion that ultimate causes and ends are spiritual and is the impulse to truth. But how easily this aspiration becomes satisfied with partial truths, which become idols

clung to with all the passion proper to the whole truth, and becomes diverted into the evil of which religion is capable!

It must be noted that Theosophical teachings are no less capable of idolatrous and evil misuse than those of exoteric religion. The concept of root races has sometimes been employed to support despicable forms of racism, and karma has been made a justification for indifference to suffering on the grounds it is “deserved.”

It is not the content or practice of a teaching so much as the depth of understanding behind it that makes it good or bad. Any notion not conjoined with the sense of Oneness, and with the love and compassion that is the ethical expression of Oneness, quickly becomes divisive, an idol, and a potential source of evil.

CONCLUSION: RELIGION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In today’s twenty-first century world, we still see numerous and diverse religious symbols pointing, like the Zen finger pointing at the moon, toward God and immortal spirit. Indeed, in the wake of the collapse of fascism, communism, and other pseudo-religious ideologies of the last century, it may seem that, apart from sheer consumerism and secularism, religion in something like its traditional form is what is left standing. That makes it all the more important for us, as Theosophists, to understand the world’s religions and their connection to the timeless inner truths known to the wise from the beginning. But religion’s capacity for evil is no less apparent today.

Not for a long time—perhaps not since the Reformation or even the Crusades—has religion so energized and demarcated clashing masses of humanity. In the absence of any other cohesive of comparable strength after the end of the Cold War, religion emerges as divisive and war-prone as any force on earth. Its power for wickedness now seems almost as mammoth as its potential for good. Surely this is a world condition that calls for the deepest and subtlest understanding of religion in a way that is both respectful and critical.

How then do we study Theosophy and the world religions in such a situation? That is the difficult and important challenge facing Theosophists, and all persons of good will, today. In this course we will try to look at the timeless spiritual heritage — the God and immortal spirit side — of each world religion, yet also put each in context of our troubled planet and its combative cultures. More specifically, we will reflect on:

- What to look for when studying a religion in terms of its teaching, spiritual practices, and social organization.
- Finding the core experiences of each, and their doctrinal expressions. Correlating this core to Theosophy.
- Why, on the other hand, religions give people a sense of identity they often feel they need to define and defend over against others.
- How to promote inter-religious understanding and harmony.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. How would you define religion? (Be sure to distinguish between a personal definition and a general descriptive definition that covers what are traditionally or conventionally called religions.)
2. How would you define Theosophy?
3. What is the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion?
4. How can religion be capable of both great evil and great good?
5. In what sense does a secular ideology have the capacity to function as a religion?
6. Does the object of idolatry always have to be a physical object? If not, give examples.
7. What is your present understanding of the role religion has in the world today?

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WHAT IS RELIGION?

DEFINITIONS

Religion is one of those things, like love or truth, which most people think they know the meaning of until they try to define it precisely. Then they may find it surprisingly difficult to get at a definition that covers exactly what they want the word to mean, no more and no less.

To begin with, religion can be defined in an “ought” way—that is, in terms of what I think “real” religion ought to be, for myself and others. (“For me, religion is simply love of humanity,” or “I think religion should be inward, without creeds or rituals.”) Or it can be defined in an objective way that describes the religions of humankind past and present, meaningfully distinguishing between the religious ideas, practices, and institutions of different societies, whether political, cultural, or social.

In studying “Theosophy and World Religions,” we will of course concentrate on the second, descriptive meaning, since we will be looking at all sorts of religions in their social and historical settings. But hopefully this endeavor will help you to come, in the end, to a deeper understanding of what you believe personal religion should be. The purpose of the present discussion is not simply to indulge in an academic exercise, but to help you understand any religion as a total human experience, and so to look at it in connection with the deep awareness of our complex, layered nature and of the evolutionary journey that Theosophy offers.

First, we need to understand that religion centers on the theme we developed in the first paper: the awareness that human life is more than its outward, material manifestation in the realm of appearances. This “more” is presupposed by the fact that men and women are doing something to meet a need other than the immediate quest for food, shelter, or clothing. It indicates there is something more than meeting material needs that make us human, that there is another nature within us—what Theosophists might call the Higher Self or the Divine Spark—that must also be recognized and served.

Religion envisions a “split-level” self and world: the “lower” oriented to the material world, and the “higher” related to the more divine nature of the universe and the values, like love and awareness of oneness, that go with it. Furthermore, openings may be found within a religion affording communication between the two levels. The higher world makes itself known to us in manifestations of gods, angels, saviors, enlightened beings, scriptural revelations, sacred rites and institutions, and mystical experience. On our level we can approach it through belief, prayer, worship services, pilgrimage, and meditation. All these practices are the “stock in trade” of religion.

RELIGIOUS FORMS OF EXPRESSION

The basic aim of religion is to bring the followers into an aware relationship with the “Other,” the “more” to human life than the ordinary and material. The ways this relationship is expressed

are many and varied. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that religion, as usually understood, is far more than just ideas, whether about God or anything else. Dealing with *ideas* about ultimate things is philosophy, not religion. Religion includes such ideas but goes on to express them through stories, worship, institutions, art, ethics, and the historical ramifications of great movements. Today, many people, if honest, will say that they go to a church or temple not just because of its doctrinal beliefs, but perhaps much more because they like the music, the support it gives them as a community, or because of their family or ethnic background.

The forms of expression of religion can be seen as a set of interlocking circles, each linked to all the others. In “Theosophy and World Religions,” six categories of religious expression will be presented: 1) Ideas and Stories, 2) Worship, 3) Institutions, 4) Art, 5) Ethics, and 6) History.¹ Imagine a central sun—the core awareness of Otherness—with six rays, each merging into the next, streaming out from it.

IDEAS AND STORIES

All religion worthy of the name has some concept of how the universe is set up: who is in charge of it, what it means to be human, and—assuming from our suffering and frustrations that we are not always in right relationship to the universe’s true nature—how to get into that right relationship. In the first instance, these concepts are usually presented in the form of stories or narratives.

The most important are basically of two types. The creation story tells how God or the gods made the world. (Most humans assume that if we know where something ultimately came from, we will know its true nature.) This story will also frequently have a sort of second chapter, like the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and their sin and expulsion, explaining what went wrong: why we are no longer in the right relationship to the ultimate reality that was built into the original creation.

Then come the hero stories, like those of Rama, the Buddha, or Jesus, telling through the example of one mighty being how that hero pioneered the way back and how the original right relationship can be recovered by those who follow in the hero’s path. (These stories are often called myths, which may properly be defined as a worldview presented in narrative form. However, since the word myth has lately acquired more and more a negative connotation, as when people say, “That’s just a myth,” terms like *sacred story* or *narrative* may just as well be used.)

Doctrine, or the transformation of beliefs implied by these stories into abstract propositional form, usually comes later, as when the Christian church condensed the biblical narrative into the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds, and then into further doctrines like the Trinity. Similar processes can be seen in the other world religions. It is as though the theologians of the faith said, “If this is what the stories tell us God, or the gods, or the Buddha, did at this and this and this time, what can we say about them that is true all the time? What general truths come out of the stories?”

It should be added that all religions have acquired “secondary” stories and ideas alongside the primary ones: stories of particular gods, saints, exemplary converts, and crucial episodes in the

¹ The first three are taken from religion scholar Joachim Wach’s classic work, *Sociology of Religion*, where they are technically called the Theoretical, Practical, and Sociological. The last three, although inspired by the work of others, are my own additions to the list.

faith's history, together with ideas ranging from mystical techniques to local folklore. All these narratives need to be seen as conveyors of the overall experience of living in and with a religion.

WORSHIP

For most ordinary religious people, it is less the ideas or even stories alone that make an impression, but more the ways they are communicated and experienced in public or private forms of worship. The practices of human religion and their settings could hardly be more varied. There are grisly sacrifices and quiet times of meditation, the color and drama of an elaborate liturgy and the austere beautiful simplicity of a mosque, the joyous fervor of Christian Pentecostalism or Hindu bhakti, and the restrained, intellectual demeanor of a Confucian sage.

Yet, what all these practices have in common, is that they are done because of an awareness of the "more" to human life, and do not have an ordinary, "this-worldly" explanation. (Even if the worship is intended to meet some worldly need, as a prayer for rain or healing, it is using other-worldly means that imply the existence of the "more.")

Furthermore, all worship contains a "message behind the message" about how best to get in contact with Otherness and the "more" of human life. The words of the worship, of course, will probably suggest that this is best done through recourse to this god, or saviour, or spiritual technique. But there is more to it than that. For example, if it is a very elaborate, highly traditional worship service involving music, liturgical drama, the smell of incense, and perhaps touch and taste as well, the "message behind the message" is that we should get out of the one-dimensionality of the present. A very rich and transcendent worship lifts us out of the present world through overwhelming multi-sensory experience. Moreover, by taking us into a worship context that has been enacted over many centuries, it takes us beyond our own time, perhaps even back to the beginning of the faith.

On the other hand, very simple worship tells us that by taking away, as it were, all that is *not* God or transcendent reality, one can get in touch with God directly. Religion with great emotional release, like intensely devotional Hinduism, pietistic or Pentecostal Christianity, or the Islam of the dervishes, tells us that by releasing all the power that is within us we can open the way to God and open ourselves to the Holy Spirit. In looking at the worship expression of any religion, then, look for the message behind the message.

INSTITUTIONS

Religion is social and interpersonal by nature. It involves shared ideas, experiences reinforced by interaction with others. Even those who believe they have a purely personal religion must use words (like "God" or "faith") that come from the language and culture of their setting. More often, people who see themselves as religious acknowledge being part, in some way, of a religious community or tradition.

But how much these vary! They range from universal faiths adhered to by millions to tiny sects consisting of no more than two or three individuals. The institution may be the dominant religion of a society, or a small and persecuted minority. Its followers may be born into it, and the religion important for family or ethnic reasons, or they may be mostly individual converts. They may be a very close-knit group, or a highly diffused body, whose members at best see one another only once a week.

Styles of leadership and organization also vary. The leadership may be democratic or stem from a central authority. It may be routine or charismatic in nature. If the former, it will consist of persons educated, like most ministers, priests, and rabbis in our society, in schools or training programs dedicated to that purpose, who are then given posts through a regular process of election or appointment. If charismatic, it centers on persons, whether popular preachers or saints believed to be God-realized, who seem to possess an inner self-validation quite apart from any institutional sanction, and who may gather their own independent following—perhaps eventually creating a new sect or religion in the process.

In all these forms of institutional life, whether large or small, whether routinized or charismatic, there is a “message behind the message.” Is it better to get in touch with ultimate reality by being willing and able to work within a large institution consisting of all sorts of people on all stages of the spiritual path, or by dropping out and uniting with a small but presumably purer group? Is it better to count on routine processes to produce reliable spiritual leadership, or on the appearance of inner charisma? These questions persistently arise as we look at religions in terms of their institutional forms of expression.

ART

Imagine religious art as a stained-glass window. Behind is the “white radiance of eternity,” but between it and our anticipating eyes, the bright forms on glass give the light shape and color and so help us to see it in ways enabling our eyes comfortably to receive its brightness. The world of religious art, of course, goes far beyond stained glass to include painting, sculpture, architecture, music, drama, dance, poetry, and novels with a religious theme. But they all have in common that mission to bring ultimate reality closer to home and yet still make it seem like something from another world. Like a stained-glass window, great religious art should be an inviting portal between two realms. For many people, it is probably religious art in all its forms that most create their inner religious worlds.

Religious art cannot be separated from the exceedingly important role of symbol in religion. Art may present, often in stylized forms, scenes from the basic narratives of the faith. Or it may portray fundamental images, like the Jewish Star of David, the Christian cross and conventional three interlocking circles that represent the Trinity, or the form of a Buddha or Hindu deity.

What is a symbol? The theologian Paul Tillich, distinguishing between a sign and a symbol, said that the former just points to what it indicates, like a road sign, but a symbol participates in that which it symbolizes, invoking feelings and responses appropriate to the object. Thus a believer, seeing the cross on a church or the star and crescent on a mosque, will not only be informed what that building is, but may also get some feeling for all the associations it calls up: the devotion, the saving acts, the cohesion of that faith’s community.

All religions have many symbols. There are not only the main identifying symbols, like those just named, but numerous others connected with various tenets, lives of the saints, and the like. They undoubtedly play a part in the religion’s expression in art, and so need to be studied. Most important, though, is to appreciate how important art is to religion, and to recognize its role in keeping religion alive.

ETHICS

How should we live? All religions offer some guidelines in the practical areas of human life for deciding what behavior is most in harmony with the nature of ultimate reality: honesty, family life, diet, sexuality, community life, violence and war, and dealing with crime. This expression of religion may be articulated in several ways: by codes of law and morality, the example of the teachers and founders of the faith, general principles and ideals left to the individual to apply in particular cases, rules for proper ethical reasoning, and authorities to which one can turn for help—or by all of these together. In any case, all religions recognize that how one acts in one's daily life is a crucial test of the seriousness of one's religious commitment, as well as a way in which outsiders are often apt to judge a religion.

HISTORY

Finally, it may be noted that religions express themselves through their histories. All the major world religions now have very long histories ranging from fifteen hundred to twenty-five hundred years or more. During this time they have presented themselves in a rich diversity of ways. They have held political power and been persecuted, enthusiastic devotional movements have risen and fallen, or they have often divided into many sects offering as many variations on the faith's central theme. Buddhist enlightenment has been sought through meditation and through rituals and chants that focus the mind. Christianity has been presented as both highly conservative and profoundly liberal, as based on sacramental rites and on inward faith. Islam has embraced and rejected the mystic Sufi way.

These diversities are often responses to the external situation within which a religion finds itself. But they are also expressions of any religion's need to explore all the potential within its central vision. Theosophy speaks of each religion as stemming from the presentation of the Ancient Wisdom by a master of the wisdom for a particular time and place. Even within a certain religion, that expression may vary as the religion's history unfolds, both because outer conditions change and because the fullness of the teaching given through that religion cannot be contained in a single expression.

Thus, from the Theosophical point of view, the historical vicissitudes of religion need to be received with understanding and some degree of tolerance. It is not that they are good or bad, right or wrong (though some may be perversions of what is good in the faith); it may also be they are like musical variations on a theme, developing its richness more fully. Nor is it necessarily the case that religions are purest at the beginning, and degenerate from there. Early Christians were far from perfect, to judge from the strictures in St. Paul's letters, and one would be hard put to say that such recent Christians as Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. represent a decline after two thousand years.

The historical development of a religion may be of special interest to Theosophists, since it indicates how that particular faith fits into the overall course of spiritual evolution. It is important to see where religion has been, and what appear to be its coming forms. We will return to this theme in the next chapter. To comprehend religion fully, we must be aware of all its forms of expression and how to analyze them.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. What is the relationship between the inner essence of religion and its forms of expression?
2. What would you list as religion's major forms of expression?
3. How would you describe the role of story and doctrine in religion?
4. Thinking about the worship of a religious institution known to you, how would you define the "message behind the message" in its worship?
5. Do the same for its institutional structure.
6. What patterns do you see in the history of religion?

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THE HINDU VISION

WHAT IS HINDUISM?

First let it be said that there is no such thing as Hinduism, if by that one means a religion with a distinct and definite body of doctrine or system of organization, and establishment at a definite point in history by a “founder” analogous to the Buddha, Jesus, or Muhammad. In fact, the word itself is not Hindu, but comes from the Persian name for the country whence our word India is also derived, plus the Western ending “ism.”

Hinduism thus just means “India-ism,” the “religion” or “ideology” of India—and that is as good a definition as any. In the present-day Republic of India, about 12 percent of the population is Muslim and another 12 percent is comprised of minorities of Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Zoroastrians (Parsees), Buddhists, and others. The remaining 75 percent, persons of Indian heritage and culture who do not claim a different religious heritage, can fairly be accounted Hindu.

But what a diversity that remainder is! Here are colorful village festivals of local gods replete with trumpets, processions, carnival-type events, gaudy lights around divine shrines, and chanting priests. Here are yogis in mountain or forest caves who, far from the bustle of human life, seek to still the mind and senses so as to realize the true essence beyond, or within, both mind and sense. In centers of learning there are astute professors of Vedanta philosophy who seek the same through the disciplined life of the mind. Visitors to India will never forget the great ornate temples thronged with worshippers and home to familiar deities: fierce Kali, playful Krishna, dignified Vishnu, monkey-like Hanuman, and Shiva who may be represented only by a massive pillar, the Lingam. Yet many devout Hindu householders rarely go near a temple, and instead worship the divine protectors of their family at a home altar every morning.

Common threads run through the diversity, and that commonality starts with the word *Dharma*. Traditional India would not have used the term Hinduism (just as the country itself was not India but Bharat), but would have spoken of Dharma, or *Sanat dharma*, the eternal Dharma. Dharma defies easy translation. Perhaps cognate to our word “form,” it basically suggests a fundamental form or pattern in the universe, the social order, and individual lives. In traditional Hinduism, it meant seeing society as a vast organism, like a great tree or human body, individuals being like cells and their groupings or “castes” like limbs or organs: *Brahmins*, priests and intellectuals, were the head; *Kshatriyas*, warriors and rulers, were the arms; *Vaisayas*, merchants and craftsmen, were the abdomen; and *Shudras*, or peasants, were the feet. (However, castes were and are not always occupational; more important were relative degrees of ritual purity associated with each, which determined who could cook for whom, eat with whom, or marry whom.)

Traditionally, Dharma also means righteousness—that is, action in harmony with the pattern of the universe and society. To uphold Dharma means to uphold the right ordering of things, in contrast to giving in to one’s own self-centered desires and predilections. To follow Dharma is to live in conformity with the duties of the universal moral order and of one’s place in society. It was said that it was better to follow one’s own dharma even imperfectly than to attempt someone

else's. (Today, caste is often reinterpreted to mean not just birth, but more importantly one's own innate character and disposition—to follow *this* honestly and truly would be to follow Dharma.)

Finally, Dharma also refers to ritual actions that uphold the order of the universe by “feeding” and placating the gods who sustain it. Thus it also includes basic religious responsibilities, both communal and personal.

THE QUEST FOR LIBERATION

Dharma, then, is fundamental to Hinduism. Another theme, *moksha* or liberation, is in some ways its opposite. Moksha suggests that one can “leap up and out” (the word may be related to our word “buck,” as in “bucking bronco”) of the level of Dharma altogether to live in freedom from all forms and patterns, released from the chains of *karma* (cause and effect) that usually go with life in the ordinary Dharma world. An interesting presentation of the idea is found in the Laws of Manu, an important text from around 100 CE. It says there are four basic goals to life: *kama* or pleasure, *artha* or gain, *dharma* or righteousness in this world, and *moksha* or liberation. These can lead successively from one to the other as each, except the last, is tried and found wanting.

So it was that traditional Hinduism held up the ideal of one who, after completing a worthy life as a student and then householder, retired from the world and ultimately became a *sannyasin*, or renunciant. Such a person would live as a monk, without family and possessions, wholly devoted to God and liberation. Some today still take this path. The sannyasin is free of the duties and restrictions of caste; one can go anywhere, eat with anyone, but at the same time is dependent on what is given him or her. Ideally, one lives only for the spiritual quest.

THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

How does one seek moksha? Hinduism is a broad stream and diverse currents flow with it to lead toward liberation. The Bhagavad-Gita, one of the best known of Hindu texts, spells out three basic routes according to modern interpretations: *jñāna* or knowledge, *karma yoga* or duty, and *bhakti* or devotional love. Perhaps many sannyasins would follow the first, for *jñāna* does not mean mere factual knowledge but the deep knowledge of God that comes with meditation and the giving up of all that is not God. Practitioners of it would say true knowledge is discrimination between the Real (God) and the Unreal (maya, illusion, the world seen as other than God).

Karma yoga, the yoga or spiritual discipline of activity—that is, working for Dharma-as-righteousness in the world—is a special motif of the Bhagavad-Gita. This book, really a part of the vast ancient epic called the Mahabharata, involves a dialogue between a prince, Arjuna, and the god Krishna. The prince is troubled because he must fight a war against his kinsmen. Even though his cause is just (that is, the cause of Dharma), the bloodshed that war entails profoundly disturbs him. Krishna assures him that as a Kshatriya or prince and warrior by caste, it is his duty to uphold Dharma outwardly, by force if need be. Furthermore, his righteous military dharma can be a way of liberation for him as surely as meditation for the renunciant, for by doing one's dharmic duty without attachment to the fruits of one's actions—just because they are duty, letting God work through one—one is just as pure and “renounced” as the holy man in a cave. The karma yoga ideal of the Gita sustained Mahatma Gandhi in his work for Indian independence. Of course, as an apostle of non-violence, he interpreted the war in the Mahabharata

allegorically, as representing the struggle against forces of evil within and around us toward which none of us can be neutral.

The way of *bhakti*, or devotion, is the path most congenial to many people. (Of course these three paths are not mutually exclusive; most of us probably would do well to have elements of all three in our spiritual lives.) *Bhakti* is prayerful love for the gods who in Hinduism represent the ultimate divine One with human form and face. It is the way to liberation, or *moksha*, through losing one's egocentricity in love for a chosen god. This path is quite comparable to the devotion to the Sacred Heart or the Blessed Virgin Mary found in Roman Catholicism, or to the love many evangelical Protestants feel for Jesus in their hearts. In Hinduism it can be carried to very intense degrees of feeling and expression, above all toward Krishna or a form of the Mother Goddess.

Love is, for most people, the human drive which most readily forgets self-centeredness. In moments of love, one's feelings go outside of oneself and share in the subjective life of another human being through caring and empathy. Why not, then, *bhakti* says, utilize this drive to propel the ultimate quest, for loss of self in the Divine? Through the love of gods who we can visualize and adore, but who are themselves in loving union with the Absolute, we share their oneness with the One, for we—whether human or god—become what we love.

THE GODS OF HINDUISM

Who are these gods? The devotional gods are best thought of as belonging to two families: the Vishnu family and the Shiva family. Vishnu and his religious system are somewhat like the Western concept of God, in that he is a Creator who represents not so much the cosmic totality as the forces working on behalf of order and righteousness. In his mythology, creation, and destruction are immense cycles of divine sleep and waking. Between universes, the god sleeps. When it comes time for the cosmos to be made again, a lotus grows out of Vishnu's navel, and on the lotus appears Brahma, the creator god (not to be confused with Brahman, the philosophical Absolute) who makes the world. Then Vishnu rises up and seats himself in high heaven on a lotus throne with his consort goddesses Lakshmi (fortune) and Bhudevi (the earth-goddess), and with Brahma and his consort, Sarasvati (patroness of learning, culture, and music). The supreme Lord then rules over that universe, upholding Dharma, and descends into the world as an avatar to set things right whenever Dharma declines.

The avatars (descents or, roughly, incarnations) of Vishnu are among the greatest of *bhakti* deities. There is Rama, subject of the great epic called the Ramayana, which tells of this kingly hero's battles to rescue his consort Sita, with the help of the monkey-god Hanuman, after Sita had been abducted by the demon Ravana. Most popular of all is Krishna, with his consort Radha. As a child and youth, Krishna represents God as playful, enticing, and above all loving, the supreme object of devotional love; in the Bhagavad-Gita he displays a sterner, though deeply wise, side as Arjuna's charioteer and confidant in the great war. Other avatars include the Buddha and the coming "descent," Kalkin.

In the Shiva system, God is above all simply the Absolute and so the union of all opposites—creation and destruction, male and female. Shiva and Shakti (his female energies, represented as a great goddess) have equal prominence, and the goddess, as the manifested world, displays immense force and variety. But, though the divine couple may appear in visions, it is claimed they are not usually to be born incarnate among humans. Shiva, as the Absolute personified, has different guises. He may be the Nataraja, "Lord of the Dance," whose various steps dance out the

different ages of world history, until it is time for one dance-concert to end and the Lord to rest, before beginning the dance again. As the Master Yogi, he is seated high in the Himalayas, on Mt. Kailas, where his meditations sustain the world. As the Master Teacher, he instructs through silence, simply imbuing those in his presence with wisdom. But it is as the Lingam, an abstract representation of pure being and life-force, that Shiva is most commonly portrayed: a simple pillar like a pivot on which the wheel of the universe turns.

His consort, Shakti, also takes different forms. In all of them she represents the world, the realm of time and change, in its relation to the Absolute. She can be Parvati, the world in its beauty at rosy dawn. As Annapurna, she is the bountiful mother, the goddess of food and abundance. As Durga, she rides a lion and wields a sword with which to kill demons. Finally, as Kali, dark, eyes bulging, tongue hanging out, holding a bloody sword and wearing a necklace of severed heads, receiving sacrifice, we see the mystery of the divine as terrible and destructive. Yet it is said that until Kali is fully understood and loved, one cannot truly find peace or know God, for the side of God she represents is as much the divine as that of Parvati.

Shiva and the goddess have a well-known son, Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, often prayed to as the remover of obstacles.

THE HISTORY OF HINDUISM

Where did this tradition come from? Apart from a few scholars, Hindus have not been too concerned about the religion's history but rather with it as a living presence, and so we have presented the living side of it first. A few remarks on history are in order, though. Most would see Hinduism as having two sources: the ancient Dravidian civilization of India represented by the ruined cities of the Indus Valley which date back to 2500 BCE; and the culture of the Aryans, Indo-Europeans, or Vedic peoples, cattle-herders who entered India, or arose in India, beginning about 1500 BCE. Their language was Sanskrit, related to most of the European languages, and in that tongue they recited the sacred chants, ritual instructions, stories, and great philosophical poems of the scriptures called Vedas. (They were not actually written down until much later.) Fire rituals, which had to be done precisely, were very important to them. Those aspects of Hinduism centering around Shiva, yoga, water, and mother-goddesses probably came from the Dravidian side of the heritage; Sanskrit, the Vedic rituals and scriptures, Brahmins, and the caste system came from the Indo-European side.

In the end the two sides were extensively, if not perfectly, fused together. One sign of that was the emerging philosophy called Vedanta (the "end," in the sense of culmination, of the Vedas), expressed in the last set of Vedic scriptures, the Upanishads, from about 500 BCE to 100 CE. We will discuss it in the next chapter.

Many other teachings appeared in the early centuries CE. Often they arose as Hindu responses to Buddhism, which was influential in India at that time. Thus the Buddhist bodhisattva ideal of the liberated person working for good in the world perhaps stimulated the Bhagavad-Gita's picture of karma yoga, and Buddhist images, the development of bhakti. But Hinduism was growing from within as well. It was in this period that the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (also to be discussed in the next lesson) envisioned the interior path, Tantrism began to portray a more radical "short path" to enlightenment, and the Laws of Manu explicated the Hindu vision of the ideal society. Above all, the systems of gods we have already presented were largely articulated in the early and late Middle Ages in texts called Puranas.

From the Middle Ages to the twentieth century much of India was under non-Hindu rule, first Muslim and then British. This inhibited extensive further development for centuries, though some movements, like Sikhism and the verse of the great poet Kabir, tried to fashion a spirituality beyond both Hinduism and Islam. By the nineteenth century, however, growing contact between India and the West under British rule prompted some to advocate reforms along Western lines, and others to react against the West. One example of wanting it both ways was the Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayananda in 1875, the same year as the Theosophical Society. Though Dayananda rejected what he considered “idolatrous” worship of the Hindu gods and advocated monotheism, as well as some social reforms, this movement was overall conservative and nationalistic, accepting the Vedas as the ultimate source of all knowledge. The young Theosophical Society had a fraternal relationship with the Arya Samaj, but later there was a falling-out as the restrictive nature of the Indian group became clearer.

HINDUISM AND THEOSOPHY

That brings us to the role of Theosophy in this pattern. Though wellsprings of the Ancient Wisdom can be found in all major philosophies and religions, Theosophical teachers from H. P. Blavatsky on down have particularly pointed to India as the earliest and (with Tibet) still greatest living reservoir of that knowledge. While rejecting major aspects of Hinduism in nineteenth-century practice, such as some temple worship, caste, and the role of Brahmin priests, Theosophy is full of terminology and insights from Hindu scripture, mythology, and philosophy. The Hindu ideal of the accomplished yogi and God-realized individual certainly underlies the concept of the mahatma (great soul) or master, along with the western notion of the adept. *The Secret Doctrine*'s elaborate picture of cosmic cycles and evolution owes much to the Vishnu Purana's depiction of that deity's periodic sleep and creative awakening. When the first Theosophists, Helena P. Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, went to India in 1880, they and their movement were enthusiastically received because, unlike most Westerners in the heyday of imperialism, they showed great respect for the Hindu tradition and its timeless lore. That regard was much appreciated by Mohandas K. Gandhi, spiritual father of Indian independence. An English translation of the Bhagavad-Gita was first given to Gandhi by his Theosophical friends in London.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. What is the relationship between life in this world (Dharma) and liberation (Moksha) in Hinduism?
2. What is the role of the gods in Hinduism? Going to other sources, try to understand the mythology, worship, portrayal in art, and meaning of at least two of the deities.
3. Interpret the fundamental meaning of the Hindu caste system.
4. Consider the role of *sannyasin*, or “holy men,” in Hinduism.
5. How do you understand the relation between Hinduism and Theosophy?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

By Robert Ellwood

YOGA, TANTRA, AND VEDANTA

CULTURES IN CREATIVE CONFLICT

From as far back as one can see, Hinduism has changed and grown. It has assimilated numerous new gods and ideas into its copious systems over the millennia. Much has also been rejected and thereby, too, its nature has been defined.

At the beginning, as we saw in the last chapter, this process involved the meeting of Dravidian and Indo-European cultures. One product of that encounter was the emergence in Hinduism—however far back it went before—of one of the eminent themes of Hindu thought and practice: *the realization of the divine within through yogic, or disciplined, meditation*. That emergence centered around what has been called the “interiorization of sacrifice,” an idea found in the Upanishads (the last and most philosophical of the Vedas), that Atman *is* Brahman; in other words, that the innermost essence of a human being is none other than the divine essence and consciousness underlying the entire universe.

Yoga has always been a part of India. It has a background in the mystical Indus Valley civilization that appeared in India as early as 2500 BCE. A seal from that culture shows a figure in what seems to be a yogic posture. The Indo-Europeans who arrived around 1500 BCE also appear to have had a tradition of ascetic practices making one a *muni*, or sage. At the same time, they made much of sacrifice centered on the making of a ritual fire and putting offerings, such as *ghee*, or clarified butter, into it. The rite had to be done correctly; if so, it was like a miniaturization of the universe, in sync with the whole, and so could sustain the cosmos or affect its movements.

But as the centuries wore on, Brahmin scholars and students in the “forest schools,” in which these rites and their meaning were studied profoundly, began to ask questions: What really is the fire of the sacrifice? Is it just an outward fire or can it also be the interior heat achieved through *tapas* (asceticism) or by intense concentration and meditation, such as that which is the goal of yoga? If so, this would mean that just as the fire *is* the universe in small, then so is the meditator and the divine without is unified with the divine within. Brahman is Atman, and the fire sacrifice and yoga come together in the last of the Vedas and the first great philosophical exposition of Vedanta, the Upanishads.

THE UPANISHADS AND VEDANTA

The Upanishads, technically commentaries on older Vedas composed circa 500 BCE–100 CE, emphasize this inward knowing by contemplative means:

The Self, whose symbol is OM, is the omniscient Lord. He is not born. He does not die. He is neither cause nor effect. This Ancient One is unborn, imperishable, eternal: though the body be destroyed, he is not killed.

If the slayer thinks that he slays, if the slain thinks that he is slain, neither of them knows the truth. The Self slays not, nor is he slain.

Smaller than the smallest, greater than the greatest, this Self forever dwells within the hearts of all. When a man is free from desire, his mind and senses purified, he beholds the glory of the Self and is without sorrow.

Though seated, he travels far; though at rest, he moves all things. Who but the purest of the pure can realize this Effulgent Being, who is joy and who is beyond joy?

Formless is he, though inhabiting form. In the midst of the fleeting he abides forever. All-pervading and supreme is the Self. This wise man, knowing him in his true nature, transcends all grief.

The Self is not known through study of the scriptures, nor through subtlety of the intellect, nor through much learning; but by him who longs for him is he known. Verily unto him does the Self reveal his true being.

By learning, a man cannot know him, if he desist not from evil, if he control not his senses, if he quiet not his mind, and practice not meditation.²

This tradition is also called Vedanta, the “End of the Vedas,” in the sense of their culmination or ultimate meaning. Vedanta developed into what has generally been the most prestigious school of thought in India, and the best known outside. The most influential school of Vedanta among intellectuals is Advaita Vedanta, or “Nondualist Vedanta,” supremely taught by Shankara (700–732? CE), India’s greatest philosopher. Building on the poetically expressed worldview of the Upanishads, Shankara brought home in metaphysical language that only one reality, Brahman, exists. All else—every idea, form, and experience—is “superimposed” on Brahman owing to our *avidya*, ignorance of the true nature of reality.

According to Hinduism, what we see ordinarily is *maya*, often translated as “illusion.” But illusion has to be understood in the right sense, for *maya* is an appearance of Brahman and not merely a hallucination. The illusion comes in our mistaking appearances for reality, not seeing them for what they are: creative expressions of Brahman. Shankara used the illustration of a man walking down the road and seeing something long and black lying there. He jumps back, thinking it is a snake. But looking again, he sees just a piece of rope. Something was really there, but it was misperceived, and what was actually harmless was taken as threatening. In the same way, by seeing the world as many-ness, we think we see much out there to be desired, and much to make us angry or afraid. But when we see it all as God incognito, just as we ourselves are, we realize it is none other than our own immortal self, which can neither slay nor be slain, and so the source of joy rather than dread.

AN AGE OF FERMENT

The centuries around the turn of the millennium, 100 BC–100 CE, were times of great spiritual change in India as well as in Europe. Buddhism had now reached its high point of influence in India, and the older religion had to respond. Buddhism, especially in its Mahayana form, emphasized spiritual paths to liberation available to everyone and personal saviors represented in art. Hinduism replied through the three yogas, or ways to liberation, presented in the Bhagavad-Gita—the New Testament of Hinduism, as it has been called. In fact it appeared in India about the same time the Bible was being compiled far to the west around the Mediterranean. The Gita taught *jñāna yoga*, the way of knowledge, comparable to the Upanishadic path;

² Katha Upanishad, from Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, trans., *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*. New York: Mentor Books, 1957. Copyright (c) by The Vedanta Society of Southern California.

karma yoga, the way of action in society; and *bhakti yoga*, the way of devotion. Hinduism thus capitalized on its strong points as a total religious expression: Hindu concern was not only with liberation but also with the righteous organization of society, and it taught the pluralism of spiritual paths and stages implicit in its many representations of the Divine.

The Laws of Manu also came from this period, presenting a vision of the ideal society; the Puranas, with their panorama of Hindu deities, came somewhat later. (These were both discussed in the previous chapter.) Another interesting and important book, with very ancient roots but probably prepared in its present form around 300 CE, is the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

YOGA

What would one do during the course of seeking liberation? One important Hindu answer was given in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali—another response, at least in part, to the rise of Buddhism. That new faith had emphasized introspective meditation, with analysis of sensation and consciousness; the Yoga Sutras, undoubtedly systematizing practices going back thousands of years, returned to India's deeply biological, psychosomatic understanding of human nature as the background for liberation. Thus *hatha yoga*, the physical yoga of postures and breathing exercises, plays a major role in the spiritual quest. Rightly understood, breath and body are indispensable tools. Brought under the guidance of spirit as precision instruments, they can facilitate states of consciousness that evoke the goals of spirit.

The Yoga Sutras begin by telling us that the goal of the yogi is control of the “modulations of mind”—in other words, *kaivalya*, “isolation” of *purusha* or spirit, giving independence from the anxieties and limitations imposed by interaction with the changing world of sight, feeling, and fantasy. This is done by strictly reining in the mind and body through posture and breath exercises, and then—with the physical and emotional levels no longer in the way—withdrawing attention from the outer world, turning it to the inner light.

This process is comprised of eight steps, called *limbs*. The first two, *yama* (abstentions) and *niyama* (observances), offer negative and positive moral rules aimed at a lifestyle of quietness, gentleness and purity, for one's manner of life must be consistent with spiritual attainment before yoga can hope to succeed. Indeed, combining the spiritual energy yoga can bring with an unworthy life can be dangerous both to the individual and society. The five *yamas* are: abstention from harming others, from falsehood, from theft, from incontinence, and from greed. The observances are purity, contentment, mortification, study, and devotion.

Then come the two “limbs” of *asana* (posture) and *pranayama* (breath control) in which body and mind are harnessed to the drive for liberation. The basic purpose of these physical techniques in the quest for *kaivalya* is bringing the body, and its attendant appetites and emotions and even its stream-of-consciousness thoughts, under control so that they do not impede the higher meditations needed for inner freedom. With good yogic posture and full, slow breathing, one can meditate without distraction for long periods, and prana or life-energy can be aroused and directed where needed.

After the yogi gains control of his or her bodily and emotional home in this way, *pratyahara*, the stage of the disengagement of the senses from outer things, becomes possible. This makes for acute inner and subtle ways of awareness. Just as a blind person develops an especially sharp sense of touch and hearing, so yoga tells us that when *all* the physical senses are withdrawn, other undreamed-of capabilities latent in the human being begin to stir. When they are mastered,

the yogi has awareness of things near and far and the ability to use occult forces, beside which the ordinary senses and capacities are as an oxcart to a rocket ship. The Yoga Sutras tell us how to read minds, walk on water, fly through the air, make oneself as tiny as an atom, and live impervious to hunger and thirst.

But these powers, called *siddhis* (doubtless tempting to many), are to be given up for an even greater goal—true liberation of the true self. This is the work of the last three limbs, called *raja* or kingly yoga. They are interior in nature: *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation), and *samadhi* (the absolutely equalized consciousness of perfect freedom). These interior stages reflect the classic Eastern method of meditation: “one-pointed” focus on a single object of thought (like a mantra) to stop the unbridled flow of consciousness, expanding that quietness of mind through longer and longer periods of time, then finally letting stillness rise to samadhi, in which the Self shines forth in its true nature and, according to Vedanta, no distinction remains between the individual and universal Self.

TANTRISM

Another movement starting in these early centuries CE cut across both Hinduism and Buddhism, and deeply affected the course of both. That is the complex and mysterious set of spiritual attitudes and practices called Tantrism. It is a road to enlightenment through powerful initiations, “shock therapy” techniques, the negation of conventional morals and manners, magical-seeming acts and chants, and the use of sexual imagery and ritual. Tantrism seeks through radical means to induce powerful consciousness-transforming experience, while preserving something of the technical aura of the old Vedic rites.

Tantrism's origins and teachings are hard to trace because secrecy has usually been a part of its character, and because it has often attracted persons in reaction against the current religious establishment of Brahmins, princely rulers, or Buddhist monks. It presented itself to left-out people as a secret, underground path far more potent than the official teaching, if one were bold enough to reject conventionality. If the adept does not shrink back or go mad on its “steep path,” Tantrism says, in a single lifetime it can bring him to a state of realization and power that would take countless lives by ordinary means.

Roughly, the procedures of Tantra are this. The novice is initiated into the practice of a particular Tantric path by a guru; this impartation of power is often said to be physically felt and is extremely important. Being empowered, the aspirant then seeks identity with a deity like Shiva or Kali through magical evocations of the god's visible presence; practices visual fixation on diagrams of his or her powers (*mandala*, schematic arrangements of deities in a square or circle, and *yantra*, geometric designs symbolizing gods or divine energies); and recites mantras that encapsulate his or her nature. By becoming one with the divinity, the student hopes to share the divinity's cosmic realization and omnipotence. Above all, the Tantrist wants to experience the god as the totality, the unity beyond all opposites.

To do this, one on a Tantric path may seek to liberate oneself from “partiality” by getting outside of structure—living independent of caste and morality. In some Tantric traditions, “forbidden” things, such as meat, alcohol, and sex were partaken of, either symbolically or actually, in specific rites. Sexuality, in particular, is important to Tantrism, not only because of the “shock therapy” effect of sexual rites, but also because it is a tremendous producer of energy, which the skilled practitioner can then sublimate to the spiritual quest, and a symbol and

sacrament of the Tantric view of reality. In Hinduism, the male Tantrist identifies himself with a male deity like Shiva, the Absolute, and his female partner with Shakti, who is the phenomenal universe; as the couple unites, they mystically unite the Absolute and the universe in a flash of ecstasy.

But the rite cannot be accomplished sacramentally, nor can moral reversal be spiritually efficacious, nor the sexual energies transmuted, until the novice is well advanced in a Tantric *sadhana*, or path. Unless one has truly negated self and identified with the god, sex is merely lust and not participation in divine mysteries.

Tantrism had an influence far beyond the schools that taught it in its strictest form. All Hindu worship on a serious level is now likely to show some influence of Tantra, if only in the use of yantra and the repetition of the name and mantra of the deity over and over. It has also had a substantial impact on Indian art.

The important concepts of *kundalini* and the *chakras* come out of Tantric tradition, although they are presented today in most kinds of yoga. The kundalini, or “serpent power,” is a feminine energy believed to dwell, coiled three and a half times, below the base of the spine. Through yogic techniques of posture, breathing and concentration, the kundalini is awakened and aroused to be drawn up the spinal column. In the process it “opens” seven chakras, “circles,” or lotus-centers of dormant psychic energy located along the spinal column: at the base of the spine, the lower abdomen, the solar plexus, the heart, the throat, and the forehead (the “third eye”), culminating in the *sahasrara* or thousand-petaled lotus at the top of the head.

Chakra-opening, together with the withdrawal of senses from the outer world incumbent on all yogic practice, is said to produce remarkable states of energy and awareness. The final objective, however, is only achieved when the kundalini reaches the inside of the skull where, with a psychic explosion at the crown chakra, it opens the thousand-petaled lotus that grants cosmic consciousness and God-realization. The awakening brings into the light an entire world within the head, replete with its own miniature mountain, lake, sun, and moon, and in its midst Shiva is enthroned.

THEOSOPHY AND HINDU SPIRITUAL PATHS

Vedanta, Yoga, and Tantra have all had an important influence on Theosophical terminology, concepts of the adept, and spiritual practice. They can be regarded as bearers of the Ancient Wisdom, though imperfect and corrupted when they lose sight of the overall moral significance of spirituality, and concentrate only on personal “liberation” without regard for others, or focus on the mere acquisition of *siddhis* or powers for their own sake, or even for use in black magic. Nonetheless, they tell us tremendous powers are latent in humanity, which can be realized through serious practice—and even more importantly—that we each bear within us, as in the Atman of Vedanta or the Purusha of yoga, a pure and divine nature waiting to be led forth.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. Why and how do the meetings of different cultures produce new developments in both?
2. How would you explain in your own words the central message of the Upanishads?
3. Why is it important that the way of life for a practitioner of yoga be devoted to purity, non-acquisitiveness, harmlessness, and study?
4. What is meant by the “freedom” which yoga promises? What kind of freedom is it?
5. What can be learned from Tantrism if one does not intend seriously to follow Tantric *sadhana*?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

By Robert Ellwood

THE BUDDHA'S LIFE AND MESSAGE

THE NATURE OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism is many things. On the flat Ganges plains east of Benares, it is an ancient enshrined tree, said to be a descendant of the very tree under which, on the night of a full moon, he who is called the Buddha ascended through the four stages of trance and attained full, perfect, and complete enlightenment. In Southeast Asia, it is steep-roofed temples, rich in gold and red, that house conventionalized images of the same Buddha, perhaps standing to teach, perhaps in the seated meditation posture of enlightenment, perhaps reclining as he makes his final entry into Nirvana. The images are often gilded, gleaming with transcendent golden light, and the figures' eyes are half-closed and enigmatic. Above the head a many-pointed crown or simple burst of flame may suggest this is no ordinary man. Outside the temple, saffron-robed monks of the Blessed One walk with begging bowls, seeking alms.

In the snowy Himalayas, Buddhism is a prayer wheel; a cylinder on an axle inscribed with a mantra such as "*Om Mani Padme Hum*" and set up on a roadway or near a temple to be spun by passing pilgrims. In Japan, it is an old Zen monk making tea or contemplating the rocks in his monastery garden, as well as vigorous, dynamic young people organizing rallies that combine Buddhist chanting with marching bands and rock concerts.

What is it that ties this tradition together? Buddhism is not rooted in a single culture or area, as is Hinduism, but is an international religion, a movement introduced by missionaries into every society where it is now at home. Its relation to Hinduism is similar to Christianity's relation to Judaism: each is an "export version" of fundamental values of the older faith, but centered on a single person who lived in historical times.

A distinctive thing about Buddhist altars is that, instead of portraying the archetypal hero, mother, or cosmic pillar, as do Hindu altars, the image personifies in a Buddha or bodhisattva a unified psychological state—profound meditation, warm compassion, or even unambiguous fury against illusion. Buddhist practices, too, are focused on strong and clear states of unified consciousness. Either they produce such states, or they draw power from beings who have achieved unfettered clarity. Buddhism may be said to be, on the deepest level, a psychological religion, though one which takes exploration and employment of consciousness far beyond the limits of secular versions of the science.

THE BUDDHA

The origin of the religion lies, according to its own tradition, in a single deep and unified psychological experience of one person. That individual was Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakya clan, called the Buddha, who lived approximately 563-483 BCE. Buddha is not his name, but a title which means "The Enlightened One," or just as accurately and more provocatively, "The Awakened One" or "He Who Has Waked Up." That is, he is one whose state of consciousness is to the rest of us like an awakened person is to one who is still asleep and lost in the world of dreams.

He is also called the *Tathagata*, a term used in some of the most ancient scriptures and which he may have used for himself. Tathagata is difficult to translate, meaning something like, “He who has come thus and gone thus,” in the sense of “He who passed beyond all bounds; one cannot say where he came from or where he went, but can only point in that direction.” This refers to his overcoming of all conditioned reality in his enlightenment to become “universalized.” He was seen, and no doubt saw himself, as one with the universe itself and not merely with any particular part of it—thus being “in” Nirvana, unconditioned and unlimited reality.

A person of whom such things were said must have been a very remarkable individual, and so he was if half the stories about him are true. Much of the traditional life story of the Buddha is undoubtedly legend, but is important nonetheless because the legends reflect the impact this man had on those who heard him or heard of him; they tell the way he has been perceived by the hundreds of millions, over some twenty-five centuries, to whom he has represented the supreme example of spiritual achievement.

The Buddha was born, according to that tradition, at Lumbini, near where the border of India and Nepal now lies, in the foothills of the Himalayas. His father was ruler of a tiny state. His mother, Queen Maya, who died only a week after his birth, had not conceived him in the normal manner, but in a dream in which a white elephant pierced her side with a tusk. This indicates, of course, that the infant, Siddhartha, was an exceptional being, the bodhisattva or “Becoming Buddha,” who had vowed to the previous Buddha of ages past to become the next Buddha for his own age—no matter how long it took, no matter how many obstacles had to be overcome.

A few months later, we are told, a wise old Brahmin came to the court of the king, Siddhartha's father, and recognizing from certain remarkable signs on the infant's body that he was no ordinary baby, announced that he must become either a *chakravartin*, a world emperor, or a *buddha*, an enlightened one who would show the world the way out of suffering. The royal father, more political than spiritual in orientation, preferred that his son bring undying renown to his house by taking the world ruler option. But apparently the monarch was just perceptive enough to realize that if his son saw anything of the suffering of the world, he would not be content merely to rule over the earth from a throne, but would want to bring to it the healing gifts of wisdom and compassion. The father therefore decreed that the prince should be brought up in a pleasure palace filled with all delights, including thousands of dancing girls, and surrounded by high walls to keep out any sight of suffering.

So was Siddhartha raised. He matured, married, and had a son of his own. But even unbroken pleasure palls eventually, and when he was about twenty-nine years of age he became curious about the world outside the walls, and persuaded his charioteer to take him down the road toward the nearby city. He took four trips in all, and saw four thought-provoking sights new to him: an aged man, a man suffering in agony from a hideous disease, a corpse, and finally an old wandering monk who appeared content. After this, Siddhartha saw even his dancing girls in a different light, as beings like himself of only transitory youth and beauty, like him destined for old age, sickness, and death; disturbing thoughts clouded his mind.

What is the meaning of life, he asked himself, if its initial promise of joy ends long before its dreams can possibly all be fulfilled, in tottering old age, in sickness that can reduce a man or woman full of zest and hope to the state of an animal howling out in pain, or finally to the apparently blank extinction of death? How can one be delivered from this ghastly dance of birth,

fantasy, and anguish? Amid this dance, is it possible to live a life of contentment and find tranquility of mind?

Siddhartha did not know the answer to those questions, and was honest enough to acknowledge he did not know. But he also realized that he could no longer live for anything but finding answers to these ultimate questions. The last sight, the itinerant monk with his staff and begging bowl, inspired in him the ideal of a life wholly dedicated to finding the answers he sought. Not long after, in the middle of the night, the prince kissed his wife and son farewell without waking them, and slipped off with his faithful charioteer to the banks of a river. There he exchanged his fine raiment for the coarse garb of a renunciant and proceeded off alone on the great quest.

In his search, he sampled the maze-work of paths to realization that crisscrossed the spiritual map of old India. He talked with Brahmin philosophers, who at this time were probably developing the ideas that went into the Upanishads; but this seeker from the *Kshatriya* or kingly caste felt they were only playing intellectual games and were not passionately concerned, as he was, with answers that would really change lives. He worked with teachers of trance meditation and went the route of extreme asceticism, getting down to one grain of rice a day and becoming so emaciated that his ribs and spinal column stood out as if he were a walking skeleton. But he found that neither philosophy, nor fasting and self-control, alone brought what he desired. He gave them up and went back to a moderate diet.

Then, late one afternoon, as he wandered not far from the banks of a tributary of the Ganges, he felt the time had come. Purchasing a pallet of straw from a farmer, he seated himself on it under a huge fig tree. He placed his hand firmly on the ground and swore by the earth itself that he would not stir from that spot until he attained complete and final enlightenment. All night he remained there, sunk in deeper and deeper meditation. Mara, a god of the old Vedic order, buffeted him with furious storms and sweet temptations, but a wave of the Blessed One's hand was enough to dispel them.

The Buddha's consciousness refined itself by moving through four stages of trance, beginning with the calming of the passions that concentration brings and ending with transcendence of all opposites. He also passed through several stages of awareness.

First, he saw all of his own previous existences. Then he saw the previous lives, the interlocking deaths and rebirths of all beings, and he grasped how karmic forces work; the universe became like a mirror to him. Finally, he saw with full understanding what principles underlie this spider's web of illusion and how extrication from it is possible. He saw the mutual interdependence of all things and perceived how egocentric ignorance leads sentient beings inevitably through desire to suffering, death, and unhappy rebirth. The Four Noble Truths appeared in his mind: The truth of suffering; suffering caused by desire; the end to desire; the way as the Eightfold Path.

The Buddha spent the remaining years of his life teaching this message throughout north India and gathering monk-disciples, who became the Sangha, the monastic order that has ever since been the sociological center of Buddhism. He finally died at the age of eighty, allegedly from eating tainted food unknowingly given to him by a lay follower. As he lay dying, he again passed through all the stages of trance and awareness, finally and irreversibly entering unconditioned reality, Nirvana. But we must now return to the Buddha's basic teaching, the Four Noble Truths, and the meaning of Buddhahood itself.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Four Noble Truths have been compared to a skilled physician's approach to a disease: the first gives the "presenting symptom" that there is suffering in life; the second the diagnosis, that this symptom is caused by attachment or desire; the third the prognosis of the end of desire, assuming the proper treatment is followed; and the fourth, the prescription for that treatment, living according to the Eightfold Path.

The first—suffering—does not mean that all of life is filled with excruciating pain. If it is true that the Buddha lived the first years of his life amid unalloyed pleasure, he of all persons could not say that. Rather, the unusual word used, *dukkha*, seems originally to have meant a wobble, like that of an insecure wheel on a cart. It means, therefore, something is unsteady, uncertain, and unsatisfactory about life as it is ordinarily lived, what Socrates around the same time called the "unexamined life." In words we commonly use today, life is full of anxiety and frustration. One also thinks of what Thoreau meant when he said, "Most men live lives of quiet despair."

This then is the condition the Buddha proposes to treat. But the next step is to know why our lives are like this. It is because they are dominated by desires—attachments, cravings, cleavings. The original word is *tanha*, literally thirst; but just as we use the word metaphorically, as in "thirst for power," the Buddha's term alludes to a whole attitude toward life. We want to latch onto so many things: objects of sensual gratification, property, possessions, persons, beliefs, ambitions, or whatever. Why do these desires cause *dukkha*? Because, according to Buddhist teaching, everything is transitory, always changing (including ourselves, all the persons to whom we relate, and all we can have or imagine having). Therefore trying to grab hold of anything is like trying to grab the water in a river flowing by—it will always leave us empty-handed and frustrated.

The objects of the desires that cause suffering range widely, from the gross physical desires to various worldly ambitions, however noble, even to desire for wisdom, sanctity, or immortal life in heaven—so long as it is fundamentally a desire centered in the ego. That is because the basic desire is not for the outward things, but for ego, for a separate individual self, and we project ego-attachment onto objects that seem to reinforce our selfhood. (If I can just get this person to love me, that means I must be a separate individual self, otherwise who would he/she love? If I can just win eternal salvation, I must be a separate individual self, or else who would be saved?)

But according to Buddhism the idea that one is a separate individual self is the foundational illusion, its opposite represented in the basic doctrine of *anatman*, "no self." While of course we have the sensation of self-consciousness, that is as transitory as everything else, always changing like the flowing river, and as stated in the Buddha's final words, all that comes together must come apart. We cannot hold onto ourselves, as though we had a hard, solid, and immutable separate ego or soul. Rather, we must let go and live life like a surfer riding the waves. This is the "Middle Way" of true liberation, of attachment neither to extreme asceticism nor indulgence, neither to life nor death, neither to being nor nonbeing.

How do we do this? First, by recognizing that attachment can be stopped. Basically, this is done by stopping the input of sensory data, including memories of past experience, which feed desire.

The way to do that is to live according to the Eightfold Path: right views, right intentions, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right meditation or concentration. The key is the last, right *samadhi*, meditation, or concentration. In good meditation, the mind is at an opposite pole from when it is conditioned by the suffering and desire syndrome. It is quiet, cut off from sensory input, allowed to take a vacation and just be itself—pure consciousness. In this state it gets in touch with the ultimate universal power of consciousness, and so is living out of a different center from the illusory ego. The first seven steps of the Eightfold Path should be seen as setting up the lifestyle and frame of mind requisite for good meditation; for if the rest of one's life is totally at odds with the peaceful, desire-free, and compassionate state of meditation, the effort to achieve it is not likely to be successful, but rather to tear the individual apart.

Buddhism as a religion is far more than just individual right meditation. It means worshipfully honoring the Buddha's supreme achievement of right meditation and its enlightening, liberating consequences, together with appropriating the power of that supreme achievement for the worshipper and the world. To understand this we need to understand what the meaning is of a World Buddha, called Teacher of Gods and Men.

WHAT IS A BUDDHA?

The Buddha, as the central focus of religious Buddhism, is of a category different from anything in Western theology, being neither God nor ordinary man. He is not the God of monotheism, for he is not Creator of the Universe, which is uncreated and eternal, nor is he of an absolutely different nature from humanity. Yet he is like God in being omniscient, all knowing, and omnipotent, able to do anything, for these are potentialities of the infinite consciousness within all of us, accessible once the barriers set up by our attachments and desires have been totally removed.

So it is that ordinary Buddhists offer prayers to the Buddha. Even though he is now in Nirvana, on his level of horizonless consciousness space and time fall away; and he is able, as he was twenty-five centuries ago, in his omniscience to know our petitions today and in his omnipotence and infinite compassion respond to them. Further, his entry into Nirvana was like an implosion on the karmic field which left a stream of good karmic energy flowing in the direction he went; by good thoughts, good deeds, and good preliminary meditation we can enter that stream and let its energies carry us further, through more good works and thoughts, toward the infinite sea.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. What do you think was the fundamental problem the Buddha was trying to solve?
2. How would you explain in your own words his basic teaching?
3. Why are so many legendary stories told about the Buddha?
4. Do you agree with the Four Noble Truths? Or do they present, as is sometimes alleged, too pessimistic a view of human life and its possibilities in this world?
5. What do you think is meant by the “right views” mandated by the first step on the Eightfold Path? (The conventional opinion is that it means accepting the Four Noble Truths as a “working hypothesis” and living as though they were true.)

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

By Robert Ellwood

CONFUCIANISM

THE WISE AND HOLY SAGE

Kong Fuzi, or the Master Kong (his name and title are conventionally Latinized as Confucius), was the most important single person in Chinese history. He inspired—or at least can be said to symbolize—the traditional social order of a third of humanity. Not only China, but also Korea, Vietnam, and Japan fell under his philosophical sway. Yet he was by all accounts a sincere, winsome, and unpretentious man, willing to listen as well as teach, sure only of one thing, that it was his duty to do what he could to make the world a better place.

We must distinguish Confucius as a man of his time from the almost-deified, impossibly wise and remote figure of the Confucian educational tradition and state cult. But at the same time we must remember why this particular man was selected as the symbolic embodiment of that tradition. Much of the traditional account of his life may be legend, but it is significant because it too tells us what kind of life this tradition has regarded as most exemplary.

Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.) lived in a time of great social disruption in ancient China. He was born in the feudal state of Lu, on the Shandong peninsula, the son of a minor official or military officer. He and his family were members of a class called *ru*, who specialized in the “six arts”—ceremonial, music, archery, charioteering, history, and numbers—and so he was trained in the classical and cultural tradition of those days. He was expected to follow his father in government service, the appropriate career for people of his class. But Confucius had great difficulty in finding a position, apparently because he was too outspoken about proper conduct on the part of rulers and seemed hopelessly to have “his head in the clouds.” He had to settle for a role that to him seemed second best but in the long run proved to be far more influential than that of government minister. He became a teacher. Among his students were young men who were successful in attaining practical influence and power over the years—and through subsequent generations over centuries became the “mandarin” elite who shaped the values and structures of Chinese politics, education, and social organization.

Confucius was revered not only for his own teachings but also because he was associated with the classical literature that was the real bedrock of the traditional culture. Five books, which existed in early form by the time of Confucius and which are the basic texts of the *ru*, are now often called the Confucian classics. These are the *Book of History*, the *Book of Poems*, the *Book of Change* (the famous *Yi Jing*), the historical *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the *Book of Rites*.

Four other books from shortly after the time of Confucius are also canonical and bear the seal of the master’s authority: the *Analects* (containing remembered words of Confucius himself), the *Great Learning*, the *Chung Yung*, and the *Book of Mencius*. (Mencius was the second most important philosopher in the Confucian tradition, after Confucius himself.)

These books are important because they reflect basic Chinese values and ways of thinking. Their tradition came before Confucius and continued after him. Confucius is not a peerless sage because he created his tradition; on the contrary, he is unequalled because the tradition “created” him, and he reflected it faithfully.

Confucius' response to the crisis of the "Warring States" (the last two centuries of the ancient Zhou dynasty, 403-221 BCE) was profoundly conservative and social: he believed that the way to get back in harmony with Heaven or the Tao was to go back to the ways of the wise sage-emperors, believed to have ruled at the beginning of Chinese history and enshrined in the classics. In their tradition, Confucius taught, the key to human well-being was a good social order, in which people recognize and act on their mutual responsibilities to one another, beginning with the family as the cornerstone of society. Hardly less important were "rites," social rituals through which people enacted right relationships and the responsibility of rulers for the welfare of their subjects.

The basic structures of society, he felt, were adequate. The needful thing was to convince people they must act in accordance with the roles society has given them. The father must act like a father; the son, like a son; the ruler must be a real ruler like those of old, wise and benevolent; the ministers of state must be true civil servants, loyal and fearless and giving of themselves.

The change to becoming what one "is" (called "rectification of names") must start within. One must be motivated by virtue, or *ren*, a typically vague but eloquent Confucian term suggestive of humanity, love, high principle, and living together in peace. It is the way of the *jun-zi*, the superior man, who, as the Confucian ideal suggests, is at once a scholar, a selfless servant of society, and a gentleman steeped in courtesy and tradition; as an official and family head, he continually puts philosophy into practice.

This noble ideal is enforced by no outside sanctions except the opinion of good men. It is based on no belief in divine rewards or punishment after death. Its sincere practice might at times lead to persecution and exile rather than honor. Yet in the end Confucian virtue provides its own reward: knowing one is upholding a great tradition, and acting in accordance with Tao or Heaven, with the way things are meant to be.

THE CONFUCIAN SOCIAL ORDER

One of the "four books," the *Chung Yung*—literally the "Central Pivot," but which could be translated as something like "Living the Balanced or Centered Life"—is attributed by tradition to Confucius' grandson and is said to summarize the Sage's teachings on personal life. It starts off by pointing to the natures we possess: our "personal nature," who we are deep down inside, the person known in full only to ourselves; and our "social nature," who we are in interaction with others.

These two sides are not unconnected. Something of who we are inwardly appears in our outward appearance and manner. Social experiences, good or bad, can affect our inner being. Yet often the two are not in harmony. We play social roles that are not true to our genuine inner self, and we repress that self rather than finding ways to express it.

The Confucian answer is not, as some traditions might have it, to withdraw from society in favor of a monastic or contemplative life. In this teaching, humans are by nature social beings, and are incomplete without social fulfillment through family and community. As one translation of the *Chung Yung* has it, "When our 'genuine personal nature' and 'genuine social nature' mutually supplement each other perpetually, then conditions everywhere remain wholesome, and

everything thrives and prospers...”³ The same version goes on to say, “Nature’s way [i.e., the Tao] is not something apart from men. When a man pursues a way which separates him from men, it is not Nature’s way.”

The *Chung Yung* tells us that the social order is based on five relationships. These are those 1) between sovereign and subject, 2) between father and son, 3) between husband and wife, 4) between elder brother and younger brother, and 5) between friend and friend consorting as equals. We may note several things about this set. First, all except the last are hierarchical, that is, one party in the relationship is superior to the other. We will see in a moment, however, that domination is conditioned by responsibilities on both sides.

Second, the five relationships refer mostly to males. Confucianism unabashedly assumes male dominance in society, and this is no doubt one of its features least attractive to many moderns. But without defending this arrangement, we might look at its ramifications. The cornerstone relation is the second—father and son. It is prior to one’s relation to the larger society, and to one’s own later marriage and family, for it is here—through “filial piety”—that one first learns love and loyalty. While filial piety includes reverence for mother as well as father, the relation to father and the line of male ancestors is central to the Confucian way of life.

Why father-son rather than mother-child? Perhaps it can be looked at this way: in Confucian eyes, mother-child is essentially biological, whereas father-son, while obviously containing a biological component, is also social; it is that part of one’s heritage which gives one a family name, and a place in society. Thus it is the foundation of what in this worldview is most important, a solid social order based on the family.

Father-son obligations are mutual. While the son is expected always to negate his own feelings and individuality in deference to the parent, and always to uphold the family honor, the father has an equally important obligation to bring up his son properly, instilling in him the proper virtues. I recall once seeing a movie from Korea, traditionally a highly Confucian society. A seven or eight year old boy had stolen some fruit from a neighbor’s tree. When his father came home and found out what had happened, he took the lad out in front of the ancestral tombs, and pulled off his belt. I expected him then to begin lashing the boy, but the father commenced lashing his own body instead, saying he was punishing himself for having failed in his obligations by raising such an unvirtuous child. One can well imagine the effect such a scene, in front of the family ancestors, would have on the young boy!

Mutuality, in fact, is a key to Confucianism. Society depends on the so-called Silver Rule: Do not do to others what you would not have others do to you. To have a good society, everyone must meet one’s responsibilities and work for the good of all.

Another key is the role of *li*, or rites. Confucianism is full of rites: for mourning after the death of a parent, for honoring one’s parents while living, for the turn of the seasons, for conducting the affairs of state. Many modern people object to ritual, thinking of it as merely artificial and insincere. Confucius’ view was very different. He saw it as humanizing, allowing the inner harmony of human society to express itself. Ritual makes the social order like a great dance rather than the law of jungle, and the dance keeps going from one stage to another. Funeral rites, for example, enable one to express sorrow in a channeled and cathartic way, and then serve to seal the rift in the family left by the loss.

³ Archie Bahm, *The Heart of Confucius*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Confucianism soon became a social order—a form of government and social organization. It dominated China for two thousand years, into the twentieth century, and perhaps still does inwardly. As stated earlier, it was based on education and the scholarly *ru* or “mandarin” class. Apart from the imperial dynasty in power, rule was in theory not by hereditary right or democratic election, but by a meritocracy based on virtue and education; one was admitted to this class through education in the classics, followed by a rigorous examination system. But rule was from above, since it depended on the Confucian virtue of those admitted to the mandarin class. And in turn, Confucian virtue had to come from within, on the basis of moral education—very much contrary to the American concept of democracy and governmental “checks and balances.” The mandarins were administrators, judges, chief ritualists, and educators, and held the vast empire together for some twenty centuries as dynasties came and went.

MENCIUS AND XUNZI

Two Confucian philosophers of a century or so after the Sage deserve mention for their contrasting views of human nature. Mencius (372-289 BCE) held what was to become the prevailing Confucian doctrine, that human nature is basically good, and is only impeded by an evil social environment. This is shown, he said, by the way in which, if a child falls into a well and is crying for help, a passerby will stop to help him, even if there is no benefit to himself in the kindhearted act. More broadly, Mencius said, humans tend to the good as water flows downhill. It can be perverted in other directions, just as one can dam flowing water and force it to back up, but this is contrary to its intrinsic nature. The perversion comes from a corrupt social environment: if rulers set a bad example, robbing and exploiting so that people cannot feed their families, one cannot expect those people to be any better. But this is contrary to the proper, natural order of things. Like most thinkers who have held that basic human goodness is twisted only by a wicked society, Mencius taught the right of revolution against unjust government; if the bad social structures can be changed, by force if need be, then natural human goodness can once again assume its course.

Xunzi (Hsun-tzu; 298-238 BCE) criticized Mencius’ view as overly sanguine, saying instead that human nature is basically bad, and can only be corrected by education and social control. The newborn child is nothing but self-centered, thinking only of its own needs as it cries out for food, warmth, and comfort. It naturally always wants what it does not have. In this, however, there is hope, since what it does not have is adult manners and morals, through which our native selfishness is made to conform to the social standards that make society livable for all. Thus the child can be taught the right values. Children want to dress up like adults, because adulthood is an experience they covet; thus they can be taught mature behavior. This is where the great Confucian emphasis on education, on proper behavior, and on rites (which were seen, especially by Xunzi, as a means of popular education and a way of safely venting extreme emotions) comes in.

NEO-CONFUCIANISM

The Neo-Confucian movement, which began in the eleventh and twelfth centuries during the Song dynasty, eventually became the authoritative interpretation of the Confucian intellectual tradition. It arose partly in response to new issues raised by Taoist and Buddhist thought, which required the rather pragmatic, worldly Confucians to ponder what their way meant in the context of ultimate metaphysical questions about the nature of the universe and humanity. Two leading

Neo-Confucianists were Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and Wang Yangming (1472-1529). Zhu Xi taught that one ultimate principle is manifested in the principles of the myriad separate things, as the light of the moon is broken onto many rivers and lakes. Through reflection on particulars, especially human morality, one can know the Ultimate. The more idealistic Wang Yangming taught that the principles are actually within the mind itself, and that the supreme requisite is thus sincerity of mind. Through such reflections as these, the spiritual and intellectual side of Confucianism was deepened. Morality became an expression of inner sincerity, the rites more profoundly religious, and the Confucian way of life even a sort of mysticism in the midst of an active life of service.

CONFUCIANISM TODAY

Although Confucianism is today less of a living tradition of teaching and rites than it was before the upheavals of the twentieth century, it remains immensely important as a source of morals and values for the third of the human race living in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, and for the many immigrants from those lands in the U.S. and elsewhere. One need only observe the continuing strong family structure, the “work ethic,” the paternalism of Japanese and Korean corporations, the sense of orderliness and self-discipline, the this-worldliness balanced by a sort of inner mysticism, to appreciate this. The People’s Republic of China, though formally repudiating Confucianism, often seems little more than Confucianism under another name, in such mottos as “Serve the People,” and in Party cadres like a new race of mandarins. Even the Tiananmen tragedy can be seen as a conflict between two pillars of Confucian tradition: the ideal of virtuous scholars—particularly students because of their relative independence from other obligations—who protest lack of virtue in government; and the other tradition, the idea that government should come down from above, in the form of officials who have gotten where they are by their own merit. 1989 was not the first time such a conflict was enacted, and student protesters quashed; a similar conflict occurred as far back as the Han Dynasty in the second century CE. It is difficult to understand this part of the world, so important to the United States in economic and political as well as spiritual terms, without understanding Confucianism.

CONFUCIANISM AND THEOSOPHY

To the best of my knowledge, there has been little active interaction between Theosophy and Confucian thought. However, that makes the prospect of making those connections now all the more important and exciting. Certainly the need is there. In both views, the strong sense of tradition combined with open-mindedness, the importance of service, and the realization of one’s true inner nature offer grounds for dialogue. Theosophy could offer the ancient Chinese tradition a feeling for greater gender and generational equality, and a worldview which puts the Great Sage into the fellowship of other Masters of diverse times and places, exploring ways in which he articulated the Ancient Wisdom for his time and place.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. How do you feel about the Confucian idea that society should be based on the family?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Confucian concept of governance?
3. Who is right about human nature, Mencius or Xunzi?
4. How do you see Confucianism and Theosophy relating?
5. Is there any future for Confucianism?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

By Robert Ellwood

TAOISM

MAN OF MYSTERY, BOOK OF WONDER

Many legends are told about Laozi (Lao-tzu), an older contemporary of Confucius. It is said that he was an archivist at the court of the Zhou dynasty, a popular fellow who kept a good table. But he eventually became weary of the grasping and hypocrisy of the world and at the age of eighty left his job, mounted a water buffalo, and wandered off to the west. At the western frontier of the empire, the gatekeeper is reported to have detained him as a guest, refusing to let him pass until he had put down his wisdom. So Laozi wrote down the short book called the *Daodejing* (*Tao te ching*), then departed in the direction of Tibet, never to be seen again in China. Some say he even made it all the way to India, where he became the Buddha! There is also the assertion that he was conceived by a falling star and spent sixty years in his mother's womb, being already an old man when he was born. What matters, though, is that to him is ascribed the *Daodejing*, that wonderful epitome of Taoist wisdom to which one can return over and over again to find fresh insight.

Most of his story is undoubtedly fable, and indeed whether "Laozi" was ever a single individual may be open to question. Laozi itself is not a real name, but just means "the old man" or "the old teacher." Many scholars believe that the *Daodejing* itself is really a collection of sayings from various sources, attributed to the "old man" in about the same way Americans attribute folklore and bits of wisdom to figures from Uncle Remus to Yogi Berra. (Perhaps Laozi could have commented with Yogi Berra, "I really didn't say everything I said.")

The book is also mysterious. Although a treatise about the Tao, it starts off with the curious statement that nothing can be said about its subject matter.

Existence [the Tao] is beyond the power of words to define:
Terms may be used.
But are none of them absolute.
In the beginning of heaven and earth there were no words.
Words came out of the womb of matter.⁴

No word adequately conveys what the Tao is. It can be rendered the Way, Existence, Nature, the Great Track, Evolution, even God—all terms which hint at something of its essence, but need to be supplemented by the others, plus a lot of experience, to say it all. The Tao is all that is, together with the realization—and experience—that this "all" is not just lying there, but is continually in process, changing and evolving, like an ever-flowing and ever-widening river, never the same from one moment to the next.

Words can get in the way of the fullness of this realization. Even the greatest words, like God or Tao, may point to the infinite object but also come out of the finite experience of the one using

⁴ From Witter Bynner, trans., *The Way of Life: According to Lao Tzu*. New York: John Day Co., 1944. Citations in this paper from this source.

them. It helps to realize that the vast universe, including the sun and planets and the old earth itself, were there long before any names, at least in our human language, were there to label them, and managed very well to be what they are without such labels. Words (the text says) “came out of the womb of matter”—or, more literally, “being named [the Tao] is the mother of the ten thousand things.”⁵ In other words, because we live in the world of matter and multiplicity, we create words to distinguish one of the ten thousand things from another, but they were not named—or seen so separate one from another—in the beginning.

The first chapter of the book goes on to say that the core and surface of life, the inner and the outer,

Are essentially the same,
 Words making them seem different
 Only to express appearance.
 If name be needed, wonder names them both:
 From wonder into wonder
 Existence [the Tao] opens.

The way to know the Tao, in other words, is not to argue about words or philosophy, much less to claim that something deep within us is more “real” than the world of infinite nature we see around us (for they both express the Tao in different ways), but to recover the sense of wonder we may have had as a child, and just truly to see the awesomeness of existence itself.

Nonetheless, we must live in this world of separateness and finiteness, so we had better learn how to do so gracefully and with a minimum of mistakes. For one thing, we need to learn to avoid making too many comparisons and to receive everything that comes our way as an experience to be savored, not something to be held onto with an iron grip—above all the honors and status that from time to time pass through our lives:

People through finding something beautiful
 Think something else unbeautiful.
 Through finding one man fit
 Judge another unfit...
 Take everything that happens as it comes,
 As something to animate, not to appropriate...
 If you never assume importance
 You never lose it.

There is a side to the *Daodejing* that is anti-Confucian, or at least pokes fun at the sometimes heavy-handed moralizing of the Confucianists. With rich satire, we are told that

When people lost sight of the way to live
 Came codes of love and honesty.
 Learning came, charity came,
 Hypocrisy took charge;
 When differences weakened family ties
 Came benevolent fathers and dutiful sons;
 And when lands were disrupted and misgoverned
 Came ministers commended as loyal.

⁵ See Jonathan Star, *Tao te Ching: The Definitive Edition*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2001, p. 100.

What for the Confucianists was the very soul of true civilization, for the Taoists was decay and hypocrisy. To them, true virtue, like that of nature or a child with eyes full of wonder, could never be forced by bookish ethics. The Taoists thought that by getting rid of formalized learning and imposed duty, people would be a hundredfold happier and would do the right thing naturally and spontaneously—that they only resist because they are told to do it.

The *Daodejing* also provides instructions for rulers. But the Taoist leader, needless to say, is not like other leaders. Taking seriously such maxims as “If you never assume importance, you never lose it” (v. 2) and “Without being forced, with strain or constraint, good government comes of itself” (v. 3), he will walk the walk more than he talks the talk: “When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they [his people] will all say, ‘We did this ourselves’” (v. 17).

His state might become like the village described near the end of the book. There few mechanical inventions tempt people to eschew hard labor, even reading and writing have been discarded as superfluous and records are kept on knotted cords, and food is plain but hearty and clothes simple and unostentatious. “Yet even though the people of this community can hear the dogs of the next village bark, none wish to leave their humble paradise for they know theirs is the good life, close to the earth and to the Tao” (v. 80).

THE TAOISTS

The first and greatest Taoist writer after Laozi was Zhuangzi, or Chuang-tzu (died c. 300 B.C.E.). Little is known of him apart from his book. Zhuangzi wrote in a vivid, fanciful, and sometimes humorous style, using many devices to bring the reader into a world of expanding horizons. First he tells of strange marvels, like in the world of Sinbad, such as an immense fish thousands of miles long that changes into a bird just as large and flies to a celestial lake in the south. He then compares this fantasy with the tiny motes in the air that make the sky blue, and with a mustard seed to which a teacup is an ocean. As the reader’s imagination is wheeled violently from the unimaginably large to the microscopically small, from a fairy tale world to the homey, one gets a sense of mental vertigo. The mind is spinning, and things are coming unfastened.

This is what Zhuangzi wanted one to feel, for his mission was to shake the reader loose from ordinary ways of seeing things—above all, from one’s own prejudices, partial views, presuppositions, and from viewing everything in terms of oneself. To this Taoist, man is *not* the measure of all things. The way the universe happens to appear to a biped six feet tall is no more the way it is than the way it appears to a fish, a mote, an eagle, or a star. Only the Tao itself is the measure, and it is infinite.

Nor is one particular state of consciousness more “real” than any other. Zhuangzi said he once dreamed he was a butterfly, and when he awoke he was not sure whether he was Zhuangzi who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly who was now dreaming he was Zhuangzi.

Unlike the sober Confucianists, Zhuangzi and other Taoists delighted in the worlds of fantasy: of fabulous birds and fish, or wizards who could fly over the clouds, and islands of immortals. In their reaction against ordinary conventions of thought and behavior, and their affirmation of the power of wonder and imagination to expand one’s consciousness, they soon found it easy to affirm the most extraordinary ideas: the possibility of deathlessness, the reality of supernatural forces and secrets.

A later Taoist thinker, Ge Hong (283-343 C.E.), put it plainly enough. One of his writings consists of a fictional debate between a Taoist and a Confucianist on the possibility of immortality. The rationalistic Confucianist argues that every living thing anyone has ever heard of dies, and therefore belief in immortality is untenable nonsense. But the Taoist responds there are exceptions to every rule, and we know so little of the vast universe we can hardly say that the life cycles of the things we know tell us all there is to know about life. In effect, the Confucianist says, “You can’t prove immortality,” and the Taoist, “You can’t prove there isn’t immortality.” For the Confucianist, the instinctive response is the safe, rational, common-sense answer, and for the Taoist, the romantic, speculative approach open to nonrational, even sensational possibilities. This opening shows the way Taoism went: it became the philosophy and religion of poets, artists, alchemists, magicians, popular cults—and immortals.

RELIGIOUS TAOISM

The Taoist religion of China presents a rich and colorful face. Perhaps no religion in the world has had a vaster pantheon of gods—many said to have once been human beings who became immortal and finally reached divine status. The supreme deity was the Jade Emperor, a personal high god. Around him was his court: the Three Pure Ones—Laozi, the Yellow Emperor (mythical first sovereign of China), and Bangu (the primal man); the Eight Immortals, very popular in art and folk tales; and gods of literature, medicine, war, weather, and other attributes. The gods and immortals lived in numerous heavenly grottos, in Islands of the Blessed to the east, and the Shangri-La of the Mother Goddess in the west, deep in the mountains.

The priests of this faith were a varied lot, affiliated with several different sectarian strands and possessing different specialties. Some were celibate and monastic; others married. Some were contemplative, concerned above all else with harmonizing themselves with nature or perfecting in themselves the seeds of immortality; there were Taoist hermits rumored to be hundreds of years old. Some were custodians of lavish temples with huge and ornate images of the Jade Emperor and other deities; to these temples believers would come to receive divination, have memorial services performed on behalf of their departed, and worship at important festivals, which were also occasions of community carnival and feasting.

Behind all this lay the affirmation of immortality and of immortal entities, a very important theme of religious Taoism. For, believing that the Tao is immortal, this faith held that if one could harmonize oneself perfectly with the Tao, one could share in its immortality. That meant, first of all, completely balancing within oneself the yang and yin energies, the male and female forces that make up the Tao and which in the Great Tao of the universe are totally harmonized. To achieve the ultimate goal of harmony and deathlessness, religious Taoism offered three main avenues: alchemy, yoga, and merit.

Alchemy referred to the preparation of elixirs supposed, in combination with spiritual preparation, to circumvent death through manipulation of yin and yang and the five traditional Chinese elements: earth, wood, water, fire, and metal. The central motif of Taoist yoga was holding the breath to circulate it throughout the body inwardly, awakening the gods of various physical centers, and finally uniting it with the semen to produce an immortal “spiritual embryo,” which emerged as new life within the self. The old mortal shell then fell away like the chrysalis of a butterfly. Diet based on yang and yin considerations, and sometimes sexual practices of the Tantric sort to balance yang and yin through exchange of bodily fluids, were important supports of this process.

The masses, which had less access than elite adepts to alchemy or yoga, might strive toward immortality through accumulation of merit by the performance of good deeds—merit which could be wiped out in the eyes of the stern judges of the underworld by even one misdeed. Some popular temples had a large abacus or calculating machine in full view to remind the faithful of the reckoning to come.

The image of immortality was as picturesque and concrete as the means toward it. Immortals, often portrayed as wise, white-bearded sages, as wizened ascetics, or even as portly, clowning wise-fools, might live in out-of-the-way corners of this earth as well as in heaven. Taoism consistently hovered between the deep natural wisdom of Laozi and the delightful fairy-tale atmosphere of its innumerable legends; perhaps the two sides are not as far apart as one might think, for the tradition well recognized that the fullness of human life and wisdom requires a touch of fantasy and color as well as rigorous thinking.

Today, Taoism flourishes on Taiwan, and reportedly there are also some active temples and monasteries on mainland China, despite repression of religion earlier in the communist era. Taoism is a culture as well as a religion, and is also expressed both in China and abroad in painting, poetry, various occult arts, and in countless folktales, some of which are now popular movies. Taoism has a vogue in the West as well, manifested in brisk sales of the *Daodejing*, the popularity of the martial arts and the Taoist yin-yang symbol, and even the common use of the word *Tao* and *Taoist*, as in books like *The Tao of Pooh* and *A Taoist on Wall Street*. Whatever the future of the religion, the Taoist mystique will doubtless live on.

TAOISM AND THEOSOPHY

Taoism and Theosophy have resonated with each other in several ways. Theosophical thinkers have long appreciated parallels between the cosmology of the *Daodejing* (“First the one, then the two, then the three, then the ten thousand things”) and that of *The Secret Doctrine* and other esoteric sources. A translation of Laozi’s and an essay on Zhuangzi by the Theosophist Walter R. Old was published by the Indian Section of the Theosophical Society as early as 1894.

More broadly, Theosophists may appreciate parallels between the Taoist immortals and the masters or adepts of Theosophy, regular human beings who by dint of great dedication and spiritual effort attained higher initiations, who may live in this world as quiet but powerful helpers, or have chosen to ascend to the inner (heavenly) planes, but in any case are pioneers of human evolution.

Theosophists today also have come to appreciate the ecological and lifestyle admonitions of the Taoist tradition. As we have learned the importance of simple living in harmony with nature, and of respecting the ebb and flow of natural cycles, we have realized the Laozi and his spiritual kindred had a similar vision over two thousand years ago. But it is a lesson to which we can continually have recourse; the *Daodejing* has been translated into English more often than any other book except the Bible.

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Questions for Consideration:

1. How do you feel about the legendary elements in Taoism, starting with the legend of Laozi himself?
2. Are comparisons always bad? Why or why not?
3. In what way do you think immortality should be a goal of spiritual practice?
4. How do you see Taoism and Theosophy relating?
5. What would an ideal Taoist society be like? Would you want to live in it?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

By Robert Ellwood

THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES AND ZOROASTRIANISM**A UNIQUE SCRIPTURE**

The Hebrew Scriptures, called the Old Testament by Christians, are like no other sacred book or collection of books in the world. To begin with, they are far more varied in content and genres of writing than the Vedas, the Buddhist sutras, or the Qur'an. They contain history, law, ritual, poetry, philosophy, and the special genre of "prophetic" books. Even more remarkably, one does not find a single consistent message in them. These writings contain main themes, but also what have been called "minority reports" concerning God's dealings with humanity, or even questioning whether there is a God like the God of other parts of the Bible.

If the mainstream of biblical books teaches God's righteousness, wrath, love, and judgment, Job in his anguish is prepared to ask whether God is really righteous at all. If the Psalms present powerful poetry of faith and doubt, the Song of Songs is erotic love poetry in which God is never mentioned. Nor, contrary to what many may expect from a sacred source, is life after death taught much in the Hebrew Scriptures. All the profound issues they raise of hope and despair, love and death, right and wrong must generally be worked out in this world and in this life, or in future generations on earth.

THE HISTORY OF A PEOPLE AND THEIR GOD

Let us begin by looking at the main historical narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures, basically contained in Genesis through Nehemiah, excluding the Law parts. It is the story of the creation of the world, Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood, the patriarchs Isaac and Jacob, and Joseph and the descent into Egypt. Later in this narrative comes the call of Moses at the Burning Bush, the Exodus with its miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, and the conquest of Canaan by the Hebrews. Judges and Kings ruled that the "Promised Land" and many dramatic events transpired: the battles of Israel, its "captivity" under the Babylonians, their unexpected and joyous return from Babylon to their homeland, the rebuilding of the temple in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Theirs was, in other words, a relation to God defined by linear time, developing in the context of human history.

The main theme of these historical narratives is the varying and oft-troubled relation of Yahweh, or God, to the people of Israel. According to the Abraham story, this God made a covenant, establishing a special relationship, with the first patriarch and through him with his descendants. They were to worship him exclusively and keep his commandments, and in turn he would give them their own land and fight with them against their enemies. (But, as the Jewish children of Abraham have learned well over the centuries, this special relationship is not necessarily only one of favoritism; it also means unparalleled demands and persecutions. It was an agreement not easy to keep on either side.) The relationship with God can be seen as a graph, the points rising and falling as the people are more or less faithful to God.

The Babylonian captivity represented one such swing from a low point to a high point. When, in 538 BCE, Cyrus of Persia took Babylon, allowed the exiles to return and the temple to be rebuilt, it seemed a marvel beyond hope or belief, a victory of God when all was darkest. It is sung about in Isaiah 58:8:

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you,
and the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

Or in a psalm, like Psalm 126:

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy.

THE PROPHETS

As a kind of backdrop to this dramatic history—almost like a Greek chorus—rise the words and songs of the prophets, persons who labored throughout to proclaim the word of God regarding what was going on in their times. This lineage begins with prophets very active in the historical books, such as Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha. Then come the separate “books” of the four major “writing prophets,” Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel; and of the twelve “minor prophets,” including the well-known books of Hosea, Amos, Jonah, and Micah.

Prophets are today conventionally thought of as persons who foretell the future, and certainly some words of the prophets have been taken by Christians to predict the coming of Christ, and even events in our own time some 2,000 years after Christ. But the word *prophet* really means “forth-teller” rather than “foreteller,” and the great concern of those ancient seers was, in the jargon of the 1960s, to “tell it like it is”—to point to evil fearlessly in the courts of kings and in the population at large, whether their words were welcome or, as was understandably often the case, were not.

For example, they frequently declared that God was displeased even when his tribes seemed successful. His chosen people mixed pleasant pagan practices with the worship of the God who had brought them out of Egypt, or forgot the side of the Law calling for justice and mercy. In prosperity they might, as Amos said, be too much “at ease in Zion” and sell the poor for a pair of shoes. For as God also declared through the prophet Isaiah in chapter one, alluding to the rituals and sacrifices of the temple cults,

I have no desire for the blood of bulls,
of sheep and of he-goats. . .

Rather what pleases the Lord of heaven and earth is that we humans
Cease to do evil and learn to do right,
pursue justice and champion the oppressed;
give the orphan his rights, plead the widow’s cause.

In the course of such prophecy, the “forth-tellers” often referred to coming events, linking them to the “graph”—that is, saying that disaster would follow as divine punishment if evils were allowed to go unchecked. But these were often events that, like the invasion by Babylon, did not necessarily take supernatural power to anticipate, and the focus of the prophet was

always on the present. Like many another commentator, he might say, “If this evil practice continues, then I can assure you such-and-such will be the result—so you must stop the evil practice *now*.”

Yet the prophets were no mere political pundits. They were persons of deep faith who believed God had called them and was speaking through them. Thus they could also look far ahead, to the consummation of all things in linear time, to the “Day of the Lord,” in order to put the problems and prospects of the present dramatically against the most awesome possible backdrop. Chapter 11 of Isaiah, in a passage favored by many Theosophists and vegetarians, inspires us in our struggles today by setting the violence around us against a time when

The wolf shall live with the sheep
and the shepherd lie down with the kid;
the calf and the young lion shall grow up together,
and a little child shall lead them. . .
They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain;
for as the waters fill the sea,
so shall the land be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.

In the words of God in Isaiah 65:

For behold, I create
new heavens and a new earth.
Former things shall no more be remembered
nor shall they be called to mind.
Rejoice and be filled with delight,
you boundless realms which I create. . .

ZOROASTRIAN INTERLUDE

A word should be said here about the ancient Zoroastrian religion, because its influence on Western monotheism can be felt in words like these. Some scholars have pointed out that passages in the Hebrew Scriptures involving such themes as cosmic war between God and Satan, the consummation of linear time in divine judgment, the defeat of Satan, and the resurrection of the dead in a new heaven and earth are only in the later parts of the Old Testament, or even do not appear in Judaism until the three centuries or so between the Old and the New Testaments.

To be sure, these themes are important in the New Testament, and to Christianity and Islam. (They may be considered gifts of the Magi, the “wise men” who visited the infant Jesus, for that word refers to Zoroastrian priests.) But the themes begin their biblical appearance only during and after the Babylonian exile. This was a time when Zoroastrianism, which had long held concepts like these, could have influenced the biblical tradition. Remember that the exiled Jews had contact with the religion of the ancient Persians, and were rescued by Cyrus, the great Zoroastrian emperor.

The Persians were cousins of the Aryans who entered India (the word Iran is a variant of Aryan) and like them were cattle herders. Among them, some time before 600 BCE, arose the prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster in Greek), who like Isaiah was repelled by animal sacrifices and the rest of the traditional cults. Instead he saw, in a great vision on a mountaintop, that one God, Ahura Mazda or “Lord of Light,” reigns over the universe. Ahura is in cosmic battle against Ahriman, the Lie, the evil force. Humans must choose, out of free will, which side they are going to be on. This is not a ritual matter but a moral choice: are we going to serve Truth and Good or

the Lie? Whenever we choose the good, we strengthen Ahura Mazda and weaken Ahriman. Moreover, after death those who chose good will be rewarded in heaven, those who chose the Lie will suffer punishment in hell.

In the end, on the Last Day, Ahura Mazda will defeat evil. He will purify the entire world and reign over it. All persons will be raised in a general resurrection; the souls of the wicked, having been purified along with the earth, will be brought out of hell with their sentences terminated. Together, all will enter a new age in a new world free from all evil, ever young and rejoicing. Just before the Last Day, it was said, Zoroaster would return in the form of a prophet, conceived of a virgin by his own seed stored in a mountain lake.

To what extent parallels between motifs in Zoroastrianism and later Judaism, Christianity, and Islam represent borrowings, and to what extent they represent independent religious realizations, the reader must decide.

WISDOM LITERATURE

The remaining category of works in the Hebrew Scriptures is that of the so-called wisdom books, treatises neither historical nor prophetic but poetic and philosophical. They include the books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Job contains the story, told in magnificent poetry, of a man who believed he had suffered unjustly at the hands of God. The Psalms, poems originally used in temple worship, express with great vividness and depth the vicissitudes of the spiritual life and the human condition, from exaltation to desire for vengeance to despair, focusing always in the end on God; they have been staples of Jewish and Christian worship over many centuries.

Proverbs is a collection of sayings about life. Many seem little more than moralistic but some passages, especially those in chapters one and eight in which Wisdom is personified as a woman of cosmic importance standing beside the Creator, are rich in philosophical meaning. Ecclesiastes is an essay on life attributed to King Solomon. It is the “minority report” in the Bible *par excellence*, speaking of all as emptiness and folly, and mentioning God only perfunctorily. Of itself it could lead to extreme pessimism—unless of course “emptiness” is understood in a Buddhist way!

The Song of Songs is another “minority report,” though one with a different feel to it, for it is essentially a love poem full of sensual overtones. It suggests the view that the “this-worldly” life is sufficient if lived passionately enough, for “love is strong as death . . . fiercer than any flame” (8:6). Whatever one thinks of these books, it seems wonderful that they are included in the scriptures, for they allow the Bible to reflect the whole range of human experience.

UNDERSTANDING THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

How can we understand these diverse, sometimes disconcerting and sometimes splendid scriptural writings? A number of possibilities have been voiced in the past, and new ones are still being expressed.

First, take the texts as historical documents (exactly how historical remains a matter of sometimes fervent debate). Fundamentalists view them all as literal truth. Fairly conservative scholars may discount the literal truth of Genesis and even Exodus and the conquest of Canaan as presented, though they are likely to believe some historical reality lies behind those accounts, and to

say the subsequent narratives in Judges, Samuel, and Kings are basically reliable. More radical scholars today claim there is no evidence that even the stories of David and Solomon are anything more than pious fiction, and rely on the historicity of little before the return from the exile.

But if one focuses on the scriptures as history, however one reads it, what does this say about God and humanity? In particular, how does one understand the terrible texts therein, such as when Yahweh seems to order his people to commit genocide against their enemies?

One way, favored by literalists, is to take them as what Martin Luther called the “strange work of God,” by which God does things beyond human comprehension, or to show that he is at first a God of wrath and power, even though at the end his love will wipe away all tears.

Another more moderate way is to see the history as the story of a “God who acts,” in which the all-too-human story of ancient Israel is a means through which God is working out his plan for the salvation of the human race through human history. This is a God who, because he is truly involved in human life as it is, acts *in* and *through* this process (messy though it is), not just in some metaphysical realm.

Still another way, favored by theological liberals, is to say that the story is not really about God, who stays always the same, but about growing human understanding of God—from the tribal protector of a particular people to the universal God of the great prophetic visions.

Second, beside the historical emphasis, is what might be called the illustrative or metaphorical use of the scripture. Forgetting the difficult historical problems, one looks most at how one can apply the meaning of these luminous passages to one’s own time. For example, African-Americans leaving slavery via the underground railway often found inspiration in the account of the escape of the Israelites from Egypt.

Third, there is a symbolic meaning to these texts. Many Jewish Kabbalists, often mentioned in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky, found what they regarded as the deepest meaning of the text in the symbolic and even numerological values of its Hebrew words and letters. They were followed by Christian writers of similar disposition, such as Emanuel Swedenborg, and later, Mary Baker Eddy of Christian Science and Charles Fillmore in his *Metaphysical Bible Dictionary*. Often this kind of reading produces values quite different from the surface meaning of a passage. For example, Fillmore tell us that Moses represents growing divine wisdom, while the Red Sea is the fixed human thinking that must be crossed or transcended as wisdom grows.

A fourth way to understand the Hebrew Scriptures is through mystical interpretation. Both Jewish and Christian mystical writers have dealt extensively with ways the biblical narrative parallels the deep inward experiences of the mystical path. For example, for them slavery in Egypt is slavery to the material world, the Burning Bush the beginning of the path, the crossing of the Red Sea the dark night of the soul, Mt. Sinai and entry into the Promised Land the vision of the God and attainment of the unitive state.

THEOSOPHY AND THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

In its breadth and depth, the Theosophical worldview offers still more possibilities for understanding the Hebrew Scriptures. First of all, the idea of a divine plan running like a golden thread through the ancient history of Israel suggests the Theosophical idea of a universal divine plan for the evolution of the earth. Second, the Theosophical idea of many planes and universes

may hint that some parts of this history, while not literally historical or physical on this globe, may reflect events we cannot fully comprehend otherwise on the astral plane, or even in parallel worlds.

On the other hand, some Theosophical writers on scripture like C.W. Leadbeater and Geoffrey Hodson have developed their own version of allegorical or metaphorical reading. For example, Hodson, in his classic *The Hidden Wisdom in the Holy Bible*, tells us that the crossing of the Red Sea represents the evolution of consciousness through and out of the realm of matter under the guidance of an adept (Moses).

In the end, the Hebrew Scriptures (more mysterious every time one looks at them) are simply there—open to an almost endless spectrum of reactions, feelings, and ways of understanding. Perhaps that is what they are intended to provoke.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. How do you feel about the variety of material in the Hebrew Scriptures, including the “minority reports”?
2. How important is the question of historicity in the scriptures to you?
3. What would you say is the main message of the historical books?
4. What would you say is the main message of the Prophets?
5. What would you say is the main message of the Wisdom books?
6. As a Theosophist, how would you look at the Hebrew Scriptures?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

By Robert Ellwood

JUDAISM

JEWISH UNIQUENESS

Every religion is unique in its own way, but none perhaps is as distinctive or has as remarkable a history as that of the Jews. Judaism seems always to be the exception to every rule of history, just as Jewish thought or even the mere presence of the Jewish community has so often pointed up the limitations of whatever “universal” truth and practice someone else has tried to lay out. Toward the ancient empires and polytheisms, toward Eastern mysticism and Christian Salvationism, toward modern nationalism, dictatorship, communism, mass culture, and atheism, Judaism—or at least some segment of Judaism—has said, “Yes, but . . .”

It has not opposed all these things. Judaism has had mystical systems like Kabbala that compare with those of India; it has also had its share of skeptics; and it has sometimes been, as it is today, expressed in nationhood. But it has been wary of making an “ism” out of them and then saying that mysticism, skepticism, or nationalism is the end of meaning and truth. Jews have a tendency, fired by centuries of living as a minority different from the majority culture of whatever nation they happen to inhabit and honed by centuries of hard study of their law, to say, “Yes, but perhaps there’s another side. If the majority worldview leaves us out, it’s not the complete and final truth.”

These questions have not always been put verbally. The mere presence of the Jewish community as an all-too-visible exception to a nation’s spiritual and cultural homogeneity has stated them more eloquently than words. Needless to say, such questions, whether verbal or implicit, are not always welcomed by those who prefer to leave the waters of mystical or cultural unity unruffled. Jewish “differentness” and the awkward questions it raises for others have given Jews much suffering. But they have persisted in making the questions felt and have thereby pressed humankind as a whole not to settle for partial truths.

JEWES AMID ANCIENT EMPIRES

In the last paper, we discussed the early history of the Jews. After the return from the Babylonian Exile, the land of Israel remained a province of the Persian Empire, often locally ruled by favored Jews like Nehemiah. In 331 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered Persia, and with it the homeland of the Jews. After his early death, Alexander’s empire was divided among his leading generals, Syria, and later Palestine going to the house of Seleucus. In 168 BCE, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV, seeking to impose Greek civilization on all his people, desecrated the Temple and prohibited the practice of Judaism.

This led to a rebellion celebrated in Jewish lore. The Maccabee brothers mounted a successful campaign to drive out the oppressor. Then, in 165 BCE, they relit the lamps of the Temple, a joyous event commemorated in the festival of Hanukkah (a Jewish holiday occurring at around the same time as the Christian Christmas). For over a century thereafter, from 167 to 63 BCE, Judea existed as a tiny and precariously independent state under the Hasmonean house, descendants of the Maccabees who increasingly combined kingly and high priestly functions. Then, in 63 BCE,

the region was annexed by the Roman Empire, which ruled sometimes directly by governors like the notorious Pontius Pilate, or sometimes indirectly through subordinate kings like the no less infamous Herod the Great and his successors.

During those difficult years, Jewish religious tradition was consolidated by distinguished rabbis such as Hillel, Gamaliel, and the school known as the Pharisees, who composed precedent-setting commentaries on the Law. Eventually such writings, together with folklore and much else, made up the great multi-volume text known as the Talmud. It is a source to which all learned Jews turn for illumination of the tradition's thought on virtually any issue.

Jewish Orthodoxy does not mean the kind of direct, unmediated adherence to the Bible claimed by Christian fundamentalists. Rather, it acknowledges both scripture's divine inspiration and its legitimate interpretation and application by a recognized succession of rabbis, beginning with the Talmud and continuing down to today. Like a court of law, their judgments are bound to honor precedent, whether in the Talmud or by later jurists.

The Temple was still in operation, but because of the Exile and the increasing dispersion of Jews throughout the ancient world, in practice the religion became more and more a matter of worshipping the Law in personal life and in local assemblies called synagogues, combined with occasional pilgrimages to Jerusalem and the Temple—the picture of Judaism presented in the New Testament. Then, in 70 CE (AD), the Temple was destroyed by Roman troops in the brutal suppression of a Jewish rebellion, and most Jews in Palestine were slaughtered or exiled to many different lands.

The Temple was never rebuilt. Ever since, Judaism has been centered in the synagogue and the Law. The “Fence of the Torah” set Jews apart and gave their scattered communities cohesion. One who followed the Law seriously could only with great difficulty live apart from the community, marry outside it, or even eat with non-Jews. Thus Judaism survived as the faith of a distinctive people. In the Middle Ages, they were often persecuted throughout Europe, yet in many communities, especially in the burgeoning cities, Jews thrived. As they did so, they developed patterns of Jewish life that have lasted into the present and new forms of Jewish spirituality arose.

THE KABBALA AND HASIDISM

One form of Jewish mysticism, called the Kabbala, had its supreme expression in the Zohar, or Book of Splendor, probably composed within a developing tradition by Moses de Leon about 1275. Based on finding deeper, allegorical meanings in the words and letters of the Hebrew Torah that point to metaphysical realities, it held that God in himself is infinite and incomprehensible, but his attributes provide windows of insight into the divine majesty as it relates to humanity. In Kabbala, certain basic attributes of God drawn from the scriptures are arranged into patterns of male-female polarities and put on different levels in the hierarchy of spiritual things—the “kabalistic tree.” Meditation on their dynamic interaction provides a subtle and often profound spiritual path.

Kabbalism had many areas of influence, from magic to messianic movements. The most important is the popular form of Jewish mysticism called Hasidism. This is a pietistic movement that started in Eastern Europe during the eighteenth century through the teaching of Ba'al Shem Tov (1700–1760). Hasidism was a feeling-oriented reaction against over-emphasis on learning, legalism, and stifling social conditions; it teaches Jews to follow the Law but also to make it an

expression of fervent love for God. The colorful stories through which its venerated teachers explained the meaning of love for God and the symbolism of ritual law are deeply dyed with Kabbalistic lore. They emphasize pious love and innate wisdom in persons of simple devotion. Music, dance, and even uncontrolled ecstatic behavior are frequently part of Hasidic worship. Small but vigorous groups of Hasidic background, such as the Lubavitcher movement, which has done much to encourage a return to Orthodox practice, are still active in Israel and America.

Another strand of modern Judaism, the liberal and rationalistic, has roots both in certain ancient schools and in the thought of the medieval philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), whose commentaries on the Talmud and law codifications made use of Greek philosophy and present a smooth, logical face to the faith. It was not until the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, however, that this lineage exercised its full influence on Jewish life. Particularly in Germany, Jewish leaders and thinkers such as Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) emphasized acculturation to non-Jewish European life and the critique and defense of Judaism through philosophy. In the end—although this was not Mendelssohn’s intention—many Jews in Western Europe (as did countless Christians of the same period) became more or less secularized and more interested in the mainstream of European culture than the Law and the synagogue.

MODERN JEWISH LIFE

Modern Jewish life, then, is a mix of several forces. It has been touched by traditional Orthodoxy, Hasidism, and Enlightenment liberalism. This complex heritage is reflected in divisions within the religion. American Judaism is divided into four main groupings. Orthodox synagogues teach the full following of the Law, or Torah, and are quite traditional in Talmudic scholarship, theology, and forms of observance. Reform Judaism, which calls its places of worship temples rather than synagogues, has roots in the German Enlightenment. It is liberal in attitude, oriented more to the prophets than the Law, and believes the essence of Judaism does not involve following the Law strictly, but is more a matter of ethics and community life. Conservative Judaism, which regards the Law seriously as a guide to life but believes its provisions can and should be adjusted to modern living, takes a middle ground. Reconstructionist Judaism, rooted in humanism and the most radical version, holds that Judaism should be ever-evolving to meet the challenges of the contemporary age.

These distinctions indicate that no one set of doctrinal beliefs defines Judaism as a whole. No dogma is as significant to most Jews as adherence to the Jewish community, a relationship many feel is better expressed through practice—participation in Sabbath worship, festivals, and traditional customs—and through a living sense of being part of the Jews’ long history than in creedal affirmations.

Many religious Jews, however, would probably agree on at least three points: That there is a God or divine force who is creator of the universe and its underlying reality; that this God reveals himself *within* time and history; and that in this revelation, the Bible, above all the Law given to Moses and the insights of the prophets, has a special place.

Modern Jewish theologians have developed these themes in interesting ways. Martin Buber (1878–1965) spoke of the importance of an “I-Thou” relationship to God and others, based on the biblical relationship of individuals to a personal God. Buber made the I-Thou concept a keystone of all authentic interpersonal relationships, in which the “other” is not simply an “it” to be used like an impersonal object, but a “Thou” full of inwardness and subjectivity like that of

the “I.” Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), a Jewish thinker of mystical bent, saw Jewish practice as sanctifying the whole of nature and life, in particular the sanctification of time through Judaism’s view of God’s revelation in history, the succession of holy days throughout the year, and the consummation of linear time in the coming of a Messiah or messianic age. Judaism as a religion does not center itself in doctrine or metaphysical realities, but in time, i.e., tradition out of the past and hope for the future.

JEWISH OBSERVANCES

The cornerstone of Jewish practice is the Sabbath. This period of 24 hours from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday commemorates the Lord’s Day of rest after the work of creation, and it is intended for the rest and refreshment of both flesh and spirit. On the Sabbath no work is done, and there is nourishment and celebration for body, mind, and soul, at the Sabbath meal and at synagogue or temple. Far from being an onerous burden or a time of negative prohibition, the classical Jewish literature sees the Sabbath as a bountiful gift to God’s people, as a lovely bride to be welcomed eagerly.

Traditional Sabbath observance begins with concluding one’s ordinary business, bathing, and putting on fresh garments reserved for that festive day on Friday afternoon. After sundown, the previously prepared Sabbath meal is eaten, with traditional dishes and blessings.

Worship takes place the next day. Aspects of worship vary from one tradition to another. Considerable Hebrew will be heard in Orthodox liturgy, and swaying and dancing observed in Hasidic Centers. But the most important object in any Jewish place of worship is the Torah, the scroll of the Law, found in a large ornamented box called the Ark and located at the front of the hall. A lamp continually burns before it. Opening the door and curtains in front of the Torah, and finally removing it from its case for reverent reading, are major actions in the drama of the service.

Besides the regular Sabbath worship, several festivals mark the Jewish year. Although not really as important as the weekly celebration of the Sabbath (only the Sabbath is mentioned in the Ten Commandments), many Jews today observe chiefly the “High Holy Days” in the autumn, which mark the beginning of the Jewish year, and Passover in the spring. The High Holy Days consist of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur, the “Day of Atonement,” when according to tradition God reckons up the sins of every person for the previous year and sets their fate accordingly for the coming year. While for many this is only a metaphor, it is a time of solemn reflection on the state and meaning of one’s life.

Passover, or *Pesach*, recalls God’s sparing, or “passing over,” the firstborn of the Israelites and the hurried meal the people ate before leaving their enslavement in Egypt for the great events of the Exodus. It is therefore an occasion for the celebration of freedom. Other holidays include Sukkot, a colorful harvest festival; Purim, a carnival-like commemoration of how the Jews were saved by Queen Esther (told in the biblical book bearing her name); and Hanukah, already mentioned.

Jewish boys undergo certain rites of passage: circumcision, performed as a religious act when they are eight days old, and Bar Mitzvah, around puberty, when the boy first reads publicly from the Hebrew scriptures and begins entry into manhood. It is often an occasion of gala celebration. In many American temples and synagogues a parallel festival for girls, Bat or Bas Mitzvah, has been introduced.

Jewish dietary laws have played an immense role throughout the centuries in keeping the faith alive and its people together. No restrictions govern food from plants; the law deals only with killing and eating sentient life. The basic rules are that animals eaten must have a split hoof and chew the cud; this includes cattle and sheep but excludes swine, reptiles, horses, carnivores, and most other species. Of sea creatures, only those with fins and scales may be taken; of aerial creatures, birds of prey and insects are forbidden. Furthermore, meat must be slaughtered and prepared in special ways to be kosher, or edible, by those keeping the rules. The rules also forbid the eating of meat and dairy products together, and expect that separate pots and plates will be used for each.

Today, the observance of the dietary rules varies immensely. Some follow them minutely, some give them only token honor such as refusal to eat pork, some feel they are irrelevant to the modern world and observe them not at all. An increasing number of contemporary Jews have become vegetarians, partly because that practice automatically makes all one's meals kosher.

Judaism has the highest regard for marriage and the family; ideally, Jewish life revolves around the home even more than the synagogue. Centered in family and community, it is a tradition highly conscious of living in the context of a long history and of having a special mission in the world.

JUDAISM AND THEOSOPHY

Theosophy has sometimes been accused of being associated with anti-Semitism, or anti-Judaism, but this seems grossly unjust. In fact, H. P. Blavatsky paid Judaism the tribute of considering the Kabbala, its great mystical system, to be a supreme vehicle of the ancient wisdom, a recognition accorded no Christian philosophy except Gnosticism. H. S. Olcott, in his *Old Diary Leaves*, mentions a learned Jew who had studied the Kabbala for thirty years. After discussing its lore with Blavatsky, he said that in all this time his researches "had not discovered the true meanings that she read into certain texts, and that illumined them with a holy light." (*First Series*, 477) Moreover, in *Isis Unveiled* Blavatsky praises the Jews' unity, despite differences of opinion, and notes "how faithfully and nobly they have stood by their ancestral faith under the most diabolical persecutions." (Vol. 2, 526). If she sometimes attributes Judaism to even more ancient sources than the scriptures, and criticizes superficial readings of that faith, she does no more than many Jewish and other scholars and Kabbalists past and present. Judaism remains a significant conveyor of the ancient wisdom and a mediator between East and West.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. What is your understanding of the special role Jews have had in history?
2. Do you believe that God acts in history and reveals himself through it?
3. What is the role of Kabbala in Theosophy?
4. What is the meaning of time in Judaism? Compare the role of the weekly Sabbath, the holy days, the revelations in and through history, and the future hope.
5. What is your understanding of the relation of Judaism to Theosophy?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

By Robert Ellwood

JESUS AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

DREAMS AND DESPAIR

It was around 30 CE that Jesus, the central figure in Christianity, first came into public view. He appeared in distant provinces of the sprawling Roman Empire, though his homeland was one of the Roman Empire's most troublesome jurisdictions. The people of Judea and neighboring Galilee had proud memories of when they had meant something in the world, under kings like David and Solomon. But now they restlessly endured subjugation under harsh governors like Pontius Pilate, or puppet kings like Herod, and dreamed of liberation.

The dreams took differing forms. Some, called Zealots, urged and often practiced direct armed resistance against the occupying Legions. Some urged spiritual renewal among the Jewish people. A revival preacher called John the Baptizer declared that God was about to judge the world and punish the wicked. He offered a symbolic washing away of sin through immersion in water to those who repented. Another voice, that of the party called the Pharisees, advocated strict following of the Law as the path to religious purity. Either way, the hope was that God, pleased with his people's new but sincere piety, would hear their cries for freedom. Still others, particularly some among the Jewish elite associated with the temple in Jerusalem, believed that discrete collaboration with Rome was in the best interests of the defeated nation.

Hovering in the background of all this spiritual and political agitation was the growing power of religious apocalyptic ideas. Apocalyptic teaching, or *apocalypticism*, from the Greek for "disclosure" or "revelation," offers secret knowledge of dramatic events to come as a result of direct divine intervention. Examples can be found in the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation. Characteristically, these colorful narratives predict a time of unprecedented troubles, followed by sudden, decisive action by God to defeat evil and establish righteousness. Needless to say, apocalypticism is likely to be especially rife in periods of great anxiety, and among subjugated peoples who can hope for no rescue except by supernatural means.

So it was that, under the heavy hand of Roman tyranny, whispers swirled around the homes, marketplaces, and synagogues of the Jews that God, in his own all-powerful way, would soon drive out the oppressor and reestablish the Jewish kingdom, God's kingdom. This would be done, they said, through the agency of a Messiah who would easily disperse the foe. (Messiah means "anointed one"; anointing with oil was the ritual used when making someone king in ancient Israel. Christ, *Christos*, is a literal Greek translation of the word.) Some said that nature also would respond to the messianic victory, and crops would grow a hundredfold more abundant than before. Some even claimed that the coming apocalyptic events would lead on to the End of Days foreseen by ancient prophets, when God would judge the world and create a new heaven and earth. It was often speculated, or declared, that the hoped-for Messiah would be a descendent of David, as would befit him who was to restore David's house, and that this sublime hero would undergo various excruciating trials and magnificent triumphs suggested in the ancient texts.

THE MESSIAH AND THE KINGDOM

Among those who received baptism from John around 30 CE was the young man from Nazareth whom we call Jesus (a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name Joshua). Not much is definitely known about his background. The stories later told of his descent from David, miraculous conception, birth in Bethlehem, and childhood are difficult to corroborate historically and are generally accepted or not on the basis of one's religious outlook; for Christians, they embody important religious truths about Jesus.

Shortly after Jesus' baptism by John, John was arrested and later executed. This arrest did not give Jesus the leadership of John's movement directly, but apparently did inspire him to gather disciples and start a ministry of his own, which was in some ways parallel to John's, but came to develop distinctive characteristics.

Like John, Jesus began by proclaiming in his preaching that the Kingdom of God was at hand. The "Kingdom" meant the paradisiacal rule of God that would follow the apocalyptic distress and judgment. The Kingdom as a concept was intimately tied up with the work of the Messiah, who would inaugurate it. Jesus also taught that people should repent of their former ways and, in preparation for the Kingdom, live now as though in the Kingdom. The principles for this way of life are assembled in the Sermon on the Mount in chapters five, six, and seven of Matthew's Gospel. The essence is to practice forbearing love and nonresistance of evil, because God will shortly be dealing with it in judgment, and to be perfect even as the God who is to rule is perfect. By comparison, John's moral message was one merely of repentance and following justice.

Unlike John, Jesus did not baptize, although his followers did. His work of healing was the major sign in his ministry of the power of the coming Kingdom, just as baptism had been John's major sign. His miracles of healing the sick, the insane, the blind, and the paralyzed, and his other miracles such as feeding 5,000 people with five loaves and two small fish, are presented as signs of the Kingdom's arrival. Healing was often understood as the exorcism of evil spirits from the disturbed. Jesus said, "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). He also reportedly performed nature miracles, like walking on water.

The nature miracles and healings bring to light another special feature of Jesus' ministry: his aura of authority and his mingling with both sexes and with all classes of society. Jesus taught everywhere, not only in synagogues but also by the lakeshore and in open fields. Instead of using argument or extensive scriptural analysis, he used stories, parables, and simple but acute aphorisms to make his points or, better, to captivate the hearer with his vision of the Kingdom's nearness—so near its power is already breaking through and is within reach of those who see its rising light.

The Kingdom was for everyone—although in a special sense for the poor who had so little—and Jesus brought its message to everyone. He numbered among his associates fishermen, prostitutes, revolutionary zealots, despised tax collectors, and (though he also harshly upbraided them) members of the strict religious party, the Pharisees, thereby brilliantly combining in one movement all the diverse and quarrelsome factions of occupied Palestine. He did not advocate extreme asceticism but rather was known as the teacher who came eating and drinking, and his illustrations show a sympathetic awareness of the ways and problems of ordinary life with its sorrows, joys, and innocent festivities.

After only a year or two of this life, however, the young wandering preacher and charismatic wonder-worker of the Kingdom left Galilee, his homeland, and went down to Jerusalem shortly before the Passover, when Jews traditionally made pilgrimage to the holy city. He clearly intended this journey, which God had laid upon him, to be a climactic appeal to Israel to accept the incoming Kingdom and to reject perversions of religion. To this end he made certain dramatic gestures: he entered the pilgrim-thronged holy city in a sort of procession (which has come to be commemorated as Palm Sunday), and he caused a disturbance by overturning the tables of the currency exchangers and the chairs of the sellers of birds and animals for sacrifice in the temple courtyard. He and his disciples then withdrew for a few days to live in suburban Bethany and to teach in the temple precincts.

But in the edgy political situation, these gestures combined with news of Jesus' popular appeal in Galilee understandably came to the concerned attention of Roman and Jewish authorities alike. They perceived revolutionary political overtones in the young prophet's activities and appeal. How far this perception was justified is much disputed by historians, but there is no doubt there were those among both supporters and opponents of Jesus who expected him to be at least the figurehead in an uprising against Rome, and perhaps against the collaborating Jewish elite as well. This was a situation neither the Romans nor the Jewish leadership wanted. Before the end of the week the decision had been taken and carried out to dispose of him.

Jesus was arrested with the help of Judas, a disgruntled radical among his disciples, and hastily but decisively tried by the various authorities concerned, ultimately before Pontius Pilate, the harsh Roman governor who throughout his tenure had shown no pity to protesters against Roman rule. (Indeed, Rome finally recalled him for excessive cruelty.) On Friday in Passover week, Jesus was executed by crucifixion—nailed to a structure made of two crossed beams set upright—the slow and agonizing death that Rome awarded to troublemakers of low class. But, of course, the story did not end there.

THE EARLY JESUS MOVEMENT

The tragic death of one so young, beloved, and appealing to many inevitably worked deeply into the minds of those who had been committed to his movement and caught up in his vision of the Kingdom. They tried to find ways to understand the man and the event in categories familiar to them. Some, mindful of the tradition of a coming Messiah, conjoined that image with the poignant passages in Isaiah about the “suffering servant”—the hero who saves his people not by military victory but by undergoing extreme torture, baring his back to the smiters, his cheek to those who plucked out the hairs.

Some thought of the words “Son of Man” in connection with the enigmatic and unforgettable man from Galilee, a term that was used for Hellenistic kings and deities alike, or even of philosophical concepts like Logos (“Word” or “Principle”) or Sophia (“Wisdom”), describing the creative power of God at work in the world. As to exactly how he thought of himself and his mission, who can say? Almost all we know of him, including the words he is reported to have spoken, comes to us through the hands of those who saw him in light of categories and concepts such as those just mentioned. Beyond all the words, however, there is mystery—the mystery of one whose charm and sternness, magic and endurance of torture, empathy and remoteness, combined to make him both unknowable and unforgettable. He had the combination of mystery and clarification of all great religious images and symbols.

Soon enough he had become a supreme symbol of the ineffable mysteries of life, death, and God, all of which he somehow seemed to bring into focus. His form and the instrument of his suffering were reproduced in gold, silver, and gems around the world. He had often applied these words to himself, words that his hearers would have recognized, in apocalyptic expectation, as referring to the mysterious judge who was to descend on clouds on the last day. It was frequently ambiguous whether Jesus meant the title to refer to himself or to another who was still to come, or if he meant both at the same time. Others, closer to the Greek religious tradition, thought of the title “Lord.”

This kind of thinking took hold in the community of Jesus’ disciples and followers. Christianity, which has never been a purely individual religion, was communal even before the crucifixion. The disciples, leaving job and family, had formed a new social group around Jesus, and it was in the context of this group, especially formed in expectation of the Kingdom, that the teachings about the Kingdom and the wonders that foreshadowed it were imparted. The disciples were always at hand for Jesus’ preaching and miracles, and it was they who were told the inner meaning of parables and signs.

On the Friday that Jesus died on the cross, this community was dispirited and scattered. But on the first day of the next week, word of a new event brought the community together again. It was reported by Mary Magdalene, a woman close to Jesus and the disciples, and then by Peter himself, that the tomb was empty and Jesus was walking in the garden where he had been interred. More such accounts quickly spread: he had joined two disciples walking to Emmaus, and when they broke bread together he was known to them; the disciples were in a room with the doors shut, and he appeared in their midst; they were in a boat, and he appeared on the shore and cooked breakfast for them. He seemed the same and yet different in these post-death appearances, as though partly in a different dimension. He ate. “Doubting Thomas” was able to touch Jesus’ wounds to assure himself that Jesus was really the crucified one and not a ghost or imposter. Yet this Jesus was able to pass through shut doors and appeared or disappeared unexpectedly and by no pattern discernible to mortals. Finally, forty days after the first appearance in the garden, the resurrected Jesus appeared to them, we are told, in familiar Bethany. There, as they talked, he took them out to a nearby hill, blessed them, and was taken up into heaven.

By now, the nascent Christian community—the disciples, certain women such as Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, and peripheral followers—was vitalized and enthusiastic. The series of mysterious resurrection appearances, which came only to members of the community, greatly reinforced its thinking about who Jesus was along the lines of the categories and concepts discussed above. The supreme event came when, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost fifty days after Passover, shortly after his ascension into heaven, those who were gathered in an upstairs room suddenly felt tremendously shaken by a spiritual force they were certain was the Holy Spirit of God, mentioned in the Old Testament and whose coming was remembered to have been promised by Jesus.

After receiving the Holy Spirit, the apostles, as the inner core of the group were now called, began preaching in the streets to the many people who crowded into the holy city. They preached basically that Jesus who had died was risen from the dead, that this event confirmed that he was and is both Lord and Messiah, the Christ, and that all the scriptural prophecies about both the Jewish and universal roles of the Messiah and the Last Days were fulfilled or would be in him.

Many heard and believed. Most were Jews, but some of the earliest converts to the truth and significance of this new happening in Judaism were Greeks, probably of a class called “prose-lytes,” who, without undertaking the whole of the Jewish law, admired Judaism, worshipped its God, and accepted as much of its teaching and practice as possible. The incipient universalism of the Christian sect, with its proclamation of a new age when the reign of the Jewish God would be evident everywhere, and was now already present in Christ, must have greatly eased the spiritual plight of such people.

PAUL

Presenting Jesus as a manifestation of God who welcomed Jew and Greek alike was given preliminary definition by the council of the apostles described in Acts 15, where only a minimal adherence to the Jewish law was required of non-Jews. But it was in the work of Paul, the most notable convert and missionary in the days of the early fellowship, that this universalism in Christ fully came through.

Paul, a Hebrew who was a Roman citizen, was originally called Saul. He was a strict Pharisee and a persecutor of the new Christian sect. But while traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus in his anti-Christian efforts, he unexpectedly fell to the ground in a violent rapture. He experienced a vision of Jesus the Christ appearing to him and saying “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Although he did not immediately begin his public missionary work, Paul was a great if controversial advocate of the new faith between about 45 and 62 CE and Christianity’s first theologian. His labors on its behalf took him through Asia Minor, Greece, and finally to Rome. More and more he saw himself as the apostle to the Gentiles (non-Jews), and his calling was to show that, in these days after Jesus, the Gentiles had been “grafted” into Israel as an alien branch onto an old tree, and so when they prayed in the name of Jesus, they had all the privileges and responsibilities of being God’s people that had formerly been Israel’s alone. But this did not mean, for Paul, that they had to follow the Jewish Law. They had only to believe the Gospel, or “Good News,” about Jesus and have trust in him, and they would be brought into his oneness with God—not on their own merits but as a free gift of God transmitted even as they were grafted into old Israel through Jesus Christ. Jesus’ death on the cross, Paul said, broke the sway of sin and death in the world, and his rising again brought new life. By joining oneself to Christ by faith (not just belief, but commitment of one’s whole self) and by the acceptance of baptism (the ritual immersion in water representing initiatory rebirth), one received new life in Christ and was no longer of this world, which is passing away, but had entered into the everlasting reign of God.

THEOSOPHY, JESUS, AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Among the several ways of interpreting this remarkable figure, Jesus, and the Christian movement, the Theosophical approach is certainly as valid as any. H. P. Blavatsky and many other classic Theosophical writers have regarded both Jesus and Paul as initiates, like other masters and founders, who encapsulated the Ageless Wisdom in forms appropriate to their time and place.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. How would you summarize the life and central teaching of Jesus?
2. How would you place him in the context of his times?
3. How do you think the Ancient Wisdom could best be presented in a time and a social situation like that?
4. What is the key to understanding the life and teaching of Paul?
5. What, if anything, do you see in Jesus and early Christianity hinting that this could be the start of a major world religion?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

By Robert Ellwood

VARIETIES OF CHRISTIANITY AND CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

VARIETIES OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity has become not only one of the world's most popular religions, but also one of the most varied. Some two billion of the world's seven billion souls are at least nominally Christian, and they are divided into thousands of subgroups. A pilgrim who experienced both the ornate liturgy of an Eastern Orthodox church and the plainness and quietness of a Quaker meeting, or the dignity of a traditional Lutheran or Presbyterian service and the effusions of Pentecostalism, with its shouting and speaking in tongues, might almost feel that she or he were visiting different religions. Yet it would not take long to perceive that, however diverse these manifestations were, all directed toward one central focus: the man Jesus Christ, who died on a cross some two thousand years ago. They all affirm in their own way that this was the central event in human history, and that power released through it can and must be appropriated now, for our healing and wholeness in this life and in the life to come. Christian worship both teaches and enacts this appropriation.

Christians differ over how this is best done. The Eastern Orthodox orchestration of symbols, such as incense, mystical music, colorful vestments, and the slowness of ancient ritual, takes one out of the one-dimensionality of the present into a kind of timeless, eternal reality in which the death and resurrection of Christ, the present, and all the Christian centuries in between become one. (The Russian envoys who visited Byzantium back in the tenth century and recommended that their people adopt this form of Christianity said that participating in its worship was like entering heaven.)

The Roman Catholic mass, which now is celebrated in a simpler, more congregation-oriented way than fifty years ago, teaches that Christ is present in the consecrated bread and wine, joining and blessing his people in their lives today. The Anglican churches, such as the Church of England, the Episcopal Church in the United States, and many others in their lineage worldwide, today are likely to be centered around a Eucharist not dissimilar from the Roman Catholic, but allow for considerable freedom of expression, such as the practice of ordaining women as priests. In the tiny Liberal Catholic Church, traditionally but unofficially linked to Theosophy through figures like C. W. Leadbeater, the mass is held in accordance with the more solemn and elaborate traditional Western rite, but its meaning is interpreted esoterically; see Leadbeater's *The Science of the Sacraments*.

Churches in the main Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation traditions—Lutheran, Presbyterian, Congregational (United Church of Christ in the U.S.), and Reformed—emphasize preaching the Word of God in order to evoke a response of faith, through which the healing grace of God is received. (In these churches simplicity of decor of worship makes plain the centrality of preaching. At the same time, hymns of praise and devotion, which can also be considered a form of preaching leading to faith, are also important.) Churches coming out of the “Radical Reformation,” from Mennonite and Quaker to Baptist and Methodist, characteristically call for moral perfection, and are likely to expect piety and emotion as expressions of faith and the receiving of grace.

What lies behind this spiritual landscape? First let us recall that for the first thousand years of church history, Christianity, despite a few “heretical” groups, was essentially one, and represented an early form of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. The main worship was the Eucharist, recited in Latin in the West and generally in Greek in the East, which was celebrated with pomp and dignity (though not quite as ornately as later). Bishops and archbishops governed the church. The bishop of Rome was also called the Pope and was the effective head of the church in the West, though his powers were not as extensive or well defined as later.

Then, in 1054, the Western and Eastern churches separated. The Eastern Orthodox Church, as it is commonly called, is very conservative and has changed little in doctrine or worship since then. It has retained a long but beautiful liturgy, unforgettable mystical music, and a spirituality that emphasizes the timeless presence of the Trinity and the resurrected Christ in the world today. This was the church in which H. P. Blavatsky was raised, and it is worth noting that, for all her fulminations against some Christians, like Jesuits and Protestant missionaries, she very rarely has anything negative to say about Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

The Eastern Church has not changed in part because for much of its history its people have lived under unsympathetic or controlling regimes: the Mongols, the Ottoman Empire, the czarist autocracy in Russia, and communist governments. It had freedom to do little but defend and continue its incomparable worship. In the West, the situation was very different. The Western or Roman Catholic heir of early Catholicism, based in the vital and expansive nations of Western Europe and then the Americas, has flourished and developed in many ways. It has been noted for strict doctrinal and moral teaching, devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints, widespread missionary activity, and centralized authority. The status of the pope grew until, at the first Vatican Council in 1870, he was declared infallible when speaking *ex cathedra* (officially) on matters of faith and morals. However, the second Vatican Council of 1962-65 sent the church in a different direction. The liturgy was greatly simplified and put in the vernacular, or language of the people (e.g., English in the English-speaking world), and an atmosphere of relatively greater freedom and innovation followed the council. The Roman Catholic Church now represents about one billion people, or half the Christian world.

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century produced basically two kinds of churches. First there were those that became state churches in countries accepting the Reformation: Lutheran in Scandinavia and parts of Germany, Calvinist in Scotland and the Netherlands, Anglican in England. Of course there were minorities of these traditions elsewhere, such as the Huguenots or French Calvinist Protestants, and the Calvinist Puritans in England, who, following immigration of some of them to New England, had a major impact on American history.

Second, the Radical Reformation came about. Outside the great movements of Luther and Calvin and the formation of the Anglican Church in England, and generally without the support of rulers, the Reformation stirred up the zeal of many who wanted more far-reaching changes in the church and also in society. These movements typically stressed the need for personal conversion experiences, moral perfection, and a close following of the New Testament both in faith and social life. They included Anabaptists (indirectly the forebears of modern Baptists in England and America), who rejected the baptism of infants, insisting that Christians should have a personal conversion experience and be baptized only after it; Mennonites, who were perfectionists, pacifists, and often communalists; and rationalistic Unitarians, such as Michael Servetus, who denied the doctrine of the Trinity and was burned at the stake in Calvin’s Geneva. In England, radical reform produced the Quakers in the seventeenth century, and in the eighteenth

century, the Methodists, who followed the call of their leader, John Wesley, for personal conversion and acceptance of Christ, and striving for a sinless life.

In nineteenth-century America, the great frontier revivals of the Radical Reformation left religious change in their wake: the rapid growth of the Methodist and Baptist churches, and the appearance of new denominations associated with what was called the Restoration movement. Followers of the Restoration movement yearned to “restore” New Testament Christianity. The Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches, and Churches of Christ derive from it. (That spiritually yeasty era in America also saw the emergence of Spiritualism, New Thought, Christian Science, and Theosophy.)

At the beginning of the twentieth century another powerful Christian development, now of worldwide significance, appeared: Pentecostalism. This movement emphasizes a vigorous, feeling-oriented kind of Christianity that believes that the gifts bestowed on the apostles at Pentecost—tongues, healing, signs and wonders—can be experienced as much today as ever. A visitor to a Pentecostal church will probably hear worshippers speaking in “tongues,” which may sound like gibberish to an outsider, but which may be “interpreted” by another worshipper, and see the minister “lay on hands” for healing, as well as hear an impassioned sermon full of prophecy and calls to repentance. Yet there probably will be an overall mood of freedom and joy in the Spirit, with the belief that one has been delivered out of the power of Satan and into the arms of divine love. Pentecostalism has been very successful in the “third world” or “southern hemisphere” countries which are rapidly becoming the real center of gravity of Christianity, and today may embrace as much as one-quarter of all active Christians on the planet.

CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM AND DEVOTION

Perhaps more than other religions, Christianity makes a clear-cut distinction between theological writing and mystical-devotional literature. Christian doctrine and thought have an objective and a historical quality that makes it possible to understand them, at least superficially, without direct experience of the divine realities that lie behind them. Many would say that one can have saving faith without the sort of experience of God of which mystics and devotees speak. In this respect, Christianity shows its difference from a religion like Buddhism, in which the equivalent of salvation would have to be the ultimate transformation of consciousness represented by Nirvana. But mainstream Christian theology and preaching is generally more concerned with a personal decision for salvation than with a mystical experience, to which not every Christian is called.

By mystical experience we mean experience interpreted as immediate contact with the Divine, very frequently expressed in the language of unity: “I felt the oneness of all things” or “I was united with God.” Mystical writings describe this experience and how to attain it. In contrast, devotional writing presents prayers and meditations addressed to God or intended to lead one’s mind toward union with God. Since the one who prays or meditates is still speaking to or thinking about God, a certain distance, however filled with love and feeling, remains between that person and the Divine. Devotion, on the other hand, can fall short of the mystic’s experience of sheer union. That is why mystical experience is often said to be “beyond words,” and mystics may shock the conventionally pious when they say that even prayer and meditation are practices to be surpassed.

The first Christian mysticism after the New Testament was deeply indebted to the terminology and philosophical concepts of Neoplatonic philosophy. The most influential Christian mystical writings of this sort are those of the writer who called himself Dionysius the Areopagite, now sometimes called Pseudo-Dionysius, and believed to be a Syrian monk of the sixth century.

“Dionysius” was a Neoplatonist who believed that God in total fullness and infinity is beyond human knowledge and so is ultimately nameless and ineffable. Nothing we could say about the Deity is adequate to the unbounded mystery of divine being. Dionysius thus speaks of God as a “darkness which is beyond light”—though the darkness is really due to an excess of light beyond that which human faculties can handle, like the shadows that fall across the eyes when we try to look directly at the sun. The way to God is through an “unknowing” by which human intellect and feelings, too frail for this most sublime task, are stilled in mystical contemplation. “We pray,” Dionysius says, “that we may come unto this darkness which is beyond light, and through the loss of sight and knowledge may see and know that which is above vision and knowledge.” This “Dionysiac” Neoplatonist approach was very influential in the Christian mysticism of the Middle Ages and the Reformation.

But during the same Middle Ages, something else began stirring as well. A Christian mysticism of the affirmation of images was coming to flower. If mysticism of the Neoplatonist, “Dionysiac” type says to take away all that is not God, and so is often called the “negative way,” its counterpart is the affirming way of using images in the mind and before the eyes as stepping-stones to God. One example of an “affirmative” mystic was the beloved St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226).

Francis fervently promoted adoration of Jesus in the manger and on the cross, both affirmative pictures to which devotion could be affixed in mind and heart. Tradition credits the “Little Poor Man” of Assisi with making the first Christmas crèche and with receiving the stigmata (marks of the nails and crown of thorns and wounded side of Christ on the cross) in his own flesh. The Franciscan order, which burgeoned in the late Middle Ages, eagerly carried his style of devotion-alism throughout Western Europe and later to the Spanish and Portuguese New World.

Protestant mysticism began in the age of Luther himself. Lutheran and Calvinist Christianity centered on inward faith and the inner workings of grace, rather than the attainment of spiritual stages or mystical “states.” However, others in the Protestant movement took things in a different direction. Sebastian Franck (1499–1542) and his disciple Valentine Weigel (1533–1588) were both Lutherans, the former a sometime preacher and the latter a pastor, and also both Dionysians. They wrote that God is beyond all notions, definitions, concepts, and thought, but is incarnate as the inner essence of humans. Another German, Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), a shoemaker, is widely considered the greatest Protestant mystical thinker. Boehme described the divine infinity beyond words and concepts as the Original Ground; its expression is through the interplay of opposites. All this is incarnate in humans. (Weigel and Boehme are often accounted early theosophists, the latter being frequently mentioned in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky.)

Movements like seventeenth-century Pietism on the European continent and Wesleyan Methodism in eighteenth-century England so stressed the importance of inwardly felt conversion in the believer that they easily led to positive devotional focus on the catalyst of the change: Jesus Christ. The result was a highly Christocentric Protestantism, still immensely powerful, which mentally pictures, prays to, and inwardly relates to Jesus himself. This Christian style is

well expressed in such hymns as “O Sacred Head Now Wounded,” or “I Come to the Garden Alone” (*He walks with me and He talks with me*).

Roman Catholic mysticism during and after the Reformation era reflected comparable lines of development. The Roman Church’s greatest mystics and spiritual writers in this period tended also to be great founders or reformers of religious orders who labored on the spiritual, intellectual, and practical levels to enable their church to meet its new challenges. In particular, this was true of the great sixteenth-century Spanish mystics: Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and author of the celebrated *Spiritual Exercises*; John of the Cross (1542–1591), monastic reformer and writer of the profound *Dark Night of the Soul*, which explores the stripping away of self and sense one must pass through to reach, through love alone, the unitive state; and Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), also a reformer and spiritual writer of great perception on the stages of gain and loss leading to union, where even God is momentarily forgotten as he is gained.

The spirituality of the Eastern Orthodox Church has remained very conservative, long adhering in its essence to the Christian Neoplatonism of the early Christian centuries, yet also remaining more deeply entwined with the lives of ordinary believers than has often been the case in the West. No country except India has had as many wandering holy men as Russia before the Communist Revolution. In some ways the Orthodox Christianity of “Holy Russia” was more Asian than Western in religious style. The *startsi*, holy monks or hermits, more often laymen than priests, familiar to readers of Dostoevsky, were venerated counselors and givers of blessing. Some remained in one place; some were perpetual pilgrims who wandered about the vast land, even as far as Jerusalem, with nothing but the clothes on their backs and perhaps a sacred book or two, begging or remaining silent unless pressed to teach. The Russian spiritual classic, the anonymous *Way of a Pilgrim*, embodies this ideal. There were also the “Holy Fools,” perhaps idiots, madmen by conventional standards, or cripples, who would babble nonsense, meow like a cat in church, or castigate a czar for his sins, yet before whom even nobility might bow with humility, for they were seen as embodiments of the suffering Christ and of the irrational side of God here on earth.

CHRISTIANITY AND THEOSOPHY

The works of H. P. Blavatsky and other classic Theosophical writings generally emphasize that Jesus was a great initiate—not an incarnation of God in any exclusive sense, but an initiate wholly open to the divine within, the transforming power of which irradiated him and all around him. A great master can transmit such power to his disciples, and thus through them to the world for many generations to come. It is this power, undoubtedly, which countless Christians over some twenty centuries have felt and known to be real, for their salvation and that of the world. They have envisioned it, made access to it, and claimed it in diverse ways, through sacrament, faith, pietism, and wisdom, and sometimes have been too quick to assume their way is the only right way. Yet certainly the spiritual energies in Christianity are real, and perhaps will be better grasped, and more adequately applied, as the spiritual evolution of humankind continues.

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QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. What has been the overall thrust of Christianity's development over the centuries?
2. Why has Protestantism produced so many forms or "denominations"?
3. Amongst these many denominations, what would you say are the main "families" and types?
4. Why has Pentecostalism held such appeal in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries?
5. What is the relationship between Christianity as a religion and its mystical traditions?
6. Why has Christianity become the world's largest religion?
7. How do you now understand the relation of Theosophy and Christianity?

THEOSOPHY AND WORLD RELIGIONS

By Robert Ellwood

MUHAMMAD AND ISLAM**THE MEANING OF ISLAM**

Over one billion people—more than a sixth of the world’s population—adhere to the faith of Islam. Despite important variations within Islam, it is also the most homogeneous of the three cross-cultural faiths: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Islam is a community that does indeed cut across many cultures. Non-Muslims often envision Islam as the faith of Arabs in desert-like lands, but only a minority of Muslims are Arab, and only a tiny minority are desert dwellers. The largest single Muslim nation is tropical Indonesia, where the faith of Muhammad is superimposed on an East Asian kind of culture. Great numbers of other Muslims are farmers and craftspeople in India and Pakistan; businesspeople in the cities of Turkey, Iran, or Malaysia; or tribal people in sub-Saharan Africa, where Islam is growing. Even in the Arab countries where Islam originated, the population is largely urban or engaged in intensive, sedentary agriculture in fertile strips like those along the Nile and the Two Rivers of Iraq. Normative Islam, in fact, has historically been preeminently a faith of citified, mobile, internationally-minded people, sometimes conquerors but more often merchant-travelers, and through them it has spread from culture to culture.

Partly because of this base, Islamic culture has visible unity as well as great diversity. From Morocco to Java, the Muslim mosque presents a distinctive atmosphere. Few would mistake a mosque for a church, synagogue, or Hindu temple. The mosque, a place of prayer to the infinite Lord, has no picture, image, altar, flowers, or candles—only a vast, clean, cool, austere beautiful empty space. The floor may be spread with rich carpeting and the walls and ceiling or dome with delicate arabesque tracery. But nowhere will realistic representational art be found. A bare niche in the wall serves to orient prayer in the direction of Mecca; a modest seat atop a staircase serves as pulpit.

On the streets of a Muslim country, the pervasive influence of the religion is felt too. Five times a day—sunrise, noon, afternoon, just after sunset, at dark—a crier, called the *muezzin* (nowadays often replaced by a recording and a loudspeaker system), summons the faithful to prayer from the minaret, the tower attached to every mosque. His plaintive cry replaces the bells of Christendom. When believers hear the call to prayer, they prostrate themselves in prayer in shops and homes, wherever they are, as well as in mosques.

In public, veiled women are still observed in some parts of the Muslim world. Although the Muslim admonition against alcoholic drink is not always strictly observed, it is in coffee shops and teahouses rather than pubs or bars that one sees men gathered on an evening to discuss the affairs of the day. Finally, if one is at all familiar with the local language, one will be struck by the frequency of expressions like “If Allah wills” in daily conversation.

The very heart of Islam is the idea of full and complete submission to the will of Allah, or God. (Allah is not the name of a god, but simply means “The God”—the one and only God.) God’s will for humanity, Muslims believe, was most fully given in the Qur’an, the book revealed through the prophet Muhammad. The word *islam* means “submission.” An adherent of the faith

is called a Muslim, one who has made the submission. So it is that the muezzin in his five-times daily cry says:

God [Allah] is great! God is great!
There is no god but God,
And Muhammad is his prophet!
Come to prayer! come to prayer!
Come to abundance! come to abundance!

[At dawn, he here adds:]

Prayer is better than sleep!
Prayer is better than sleep!
God is great! God is great!
There is no god but God!

That is the central motif of Islam—the greatness of God alone. Because Allah is great and sovereign, the entire world and all the affairs of humankind belong only to him. For this reason Islam does not lavishly embellish the religious sphere with rites and symbols and priesthood; if Allah is truly great, Islam says, he can be worshipped anywhere by anyone in the simple forms prescribed by the Qur'an and tradition. If God is truly sovereign, what he has commanded for all of society—law, ethics, government—is just as important as the religious commandments and inseparable from them. For this reason, Islam is experienced as a total and indivisible way of life.

MUHAMMAD

At the core of Islam lies the experience and faith of Muhammad (570–632 CE). He lived in Arabia and was born and raised in the city of Mecca, a commercial center already sacred to the Arabs. Its holy sanctuary, which drew numerous pilgrims, was the home of many polytheistic gods—chiefly of the moon, stars, and days of the year—and the resting place of a sacred stone, probably meteoritic, thought to be from heaven. The area around this place of worship was a neutral zone where representatives and merchants of many tribes, often warring, could meet in peace.

Muhammad came from a respected merchant family of modest means that was part of the prestigious Quraysh tribe, who were custodians of the sacred places of Mecca. According to tradition, he became a camel driver as a young man. His caravan journeys probably took him as far as Syria, where he would have encountered many Christians and Jews. The prophet's later revelations show the strong influence of those faiths. When he was 25, he entered the service of Khadija, a wealthy widow much older than he. Before long he married her, and she bore his daughter Fatima.

Muhammad was always a serious, thoughtful, and rather withdrawn man. But until he was about 40, his life was not outwardly much different from that of the other merchants of the sacred city. At that age, however, he found himself going into the mountains more and more to devote himself to meditation.

About the year 611, Muhammad began to have a remarkable series of experiences in these solitary meditations in mountain caves. A mysterious darkness would come over him; then the luminous figure of the archangel Gabriel would appear and recite words to him, which he could remember clearly. These words were primarily about the unity of God—that there is but one

single god, the “Lord of the worlds”; that God abominates idolatry and will judge the earth on a day of fire and anxiety; and that God calls upon all humanity to accept his sovereignty.

For ten years (611–621) Muhammad implored his fellow Meccans to obey this call to acknowledge the oneness of God, but with little success. Then, in 622, he accepted an invitation from the city of Yathrib (now Medina) to teach there. His journey to Yathrib is called the Hijra. The date of the Hijra is the date from which the Muslim calendar starts; it marks the beginning of Muhammad’s public and organizational work on a large scale.

Using Medina as a base, he brought all Arabia, including Mecca, under his control. He became at once the religious leader of the Arabs, their political ruler, and military commander. His divine revelations continued right up to the end of his life in 632. Assembled and recorded shortly after, they make up the text of the Qur’an, the Holy Scripture of Islam.

THE QUR’AN

Unlike the Judeo-Christian Bible, the Qur’an is not a collection of diverse material from over a thousand years. It was all delivered in a period of no more than twenty-two years to one man in the form of communications from God through an angel. It is not a book of history, or a life of Muhammad, or a philosophical treatise. It is a book of *proclamation*: proclamation of the oneness and sovereignty of God, of his coming judgment, of the need to submit to him. In passing, it also presents a Muslim view of previous religious history, especially of the earlier prophets such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. From time to time it gives instructions to the faithful, upon which Muslim law is based.

To Muslims, the Qur’an is a miracle—the most convincing miracle of all as validation of their faith. The exquisite beauty of rhythm and expression in the original Arabic is said to be untranslatable. That one man, illiterate according to tradition, could be the merely human author of what has been called “the Glorious Qur’an, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy,” seems to Muslims incredible. They believe that the Holy Qur’an is the full and complete message from the infinite Divine Mind to humanity.

It is necessary to always bear in mind the Qur’an’s purpose: *to proclaim the oneness and sovereignty of God*. It does not develop a philosophy or tell a story because those are not its purposes. The Qur’an is intended only to state one basic truth; it repeats itself to reinforce that one simple truth. As A. J. Arberry has put it, it is like being surrounded by a gallery of paintings all on the same subject.

The Qur’an begins with the following prayer, which well sums up its basic spirit and message:

In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful
Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Creation,
The Compassionate, the Merciful, King of Judgment-day!
You alone we worship, and to
You alone we pray for help.
Guide us to the straight path,
The path of those whom You have favored,
Not of those who have incurred Your wrath,
Nor of those who have gone astray.

The book continues to describe the wonders of creation; how God made humankind from the union of the sexes, out of clots of blood, and through the mysterious development of the embryo.

God, it says, created man of ideal form. It exhorts humans not to deny but to show gratitude for this panorama of mercy and marvel, for when the judgment comes, wrongdoers will not be asked about their sins but will be known by the expression on their faces. The deniers of the Lord's blessings will suffer in hell, but those who have regard for the divine majesty will find themselves in surroundings fit for heroes: gardens of flowing springs, lush fruits, and dark-eyed damsels. Like the paradises of most religions, this one has the brightly colored, gemlike, antipodes-of-the-ordinary quality of dream, poetry, and sensuous youthful joy. The descriptions are taken by intellectual and mystical Muslims to be allegorical. The deeper meaning of the Qur'an's message is less reward and punishment than the inescapable fact of Allah himself:

To Allah belongs the east and the west. Whichever way you turn there is the face of Allah. He is omnipresent and all-knowing.

The fundamental tenet of the Qur'an, then, is *monotheism*. Muslims believe that Islam is the ultimate religion, the complete religion. It is the religion of Adam and Abraham, the primal monotheism of the beginning, in finalized form. It is the ultimate form of religion because it is in fact the simplest and clearest. It is the essence of religion, plain and perfect submission to the absolute God in all areas of life.

The Qur'an indicates that before Muhammad a series of prophets, all of whom should be greatly honored, labored to call humankind back to this perfect *islam* (submission). They included Abraham, Moses, Ishmael, Idris (Enoch), and Jesus. But it was through Muhammad that the final, complete message came, superseding all that went before; it was the culminating message of God for humankind.

The role of Jesus in the Qur'an and in this series of prophets usually puzzles Christians. The Qur'an makes Jesus the greatest before Muhammad. He was called to preserve the Torah of the Jews and was a wise teacher of deep inward holiness. (This last quality has made him especially beloved of the esoteric mystics of Islam.) Jesus has, to say the least, been far more highly regarded by Muslims than Muhammad has been by Christians.

The Qur'an accepts the virgin birth of Jesus and calls Mary one of the greatest among women, but it says Jesus was born under a palm tree rather than in a stable. It mentions the Last Supper, but it denies that Jesus was actually crucified. It says that people only thought he died on the cross; instead, he was taken directly to heaven. It does not make Jesus the "Son of God," because for Muslims such a concept would be polytheistic and idolatrous.

However different the life and meaning of Jesus may here appear, in looking at Islam and the Qur'an, Christians may, in the words of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "come to understand how the sun of their own spiritual world is also a shining star in the firmament of another world."

One of the loveliest passages of the Qur'an reads:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth.
The likeness of His light is as a niche,
Wherein is a lamp, the lamp in a glass, the glass like a glistening star, kindled from a
blessed tree,
An olive neither of the east nor of the west,
Whose oil would almost shine had no fire touched it.
Light upon light: God guides to His light whom he will:
God brings similitudes for men and God has knowledge of all things.

In all ways, the light of God is added to light. The final revelation is not inconsistent with what was presented by earlier prophets, even though other People of the Book (as Muslims call those who also have a revealed scripture) may have distorted their heritages. But Islam gives the final luster of a perfect glass to the light of God agelessly hidden in the lamp of the world.

Throughout, the central message of Islam is oneness: the unity of the assembly of true prophets, the oneness of final prophet and book, the oneness of the People of God, the one submission to be made, and finally the supreme oneness of God.

MUHAMMAD AND THEOSOPHY

Islam has had a mixed image in the non-Muslim world. The simple beauty of its architecture and the exquisite poetry of its mystics have been admired, but on the other side the religion is often seen as given to absolutism and violence. In the West these perceptions go back at least to the medieval crusades, when Christian knights contended with Muslim warriors over the Holy Land with appalling brutality; in India they stem from Muslim rule under the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire. Negative views have been enhanced by recent events that have seemed to pit Islam against the West, and India, once again. Theosophists have sometimes been inclined to see Muslims, together with fundamentalists in all religions, as at odds with the ideal of a universal brotherhood of humanity within which all religions are seen as on some level relative.

But it is important to realize that all historic faiths have their black spots. We must also try to understand the best, the deepest ideals, of each creed as well. Annie Besant, in the chapter on Islam in her *Seven Great Religions*, offers us excellent help in this regard. She points to three basic virtues of Islam that comport well with Theosophy.

The first is the insistence on one God, which easily translates—as it does for Islamic mystics—to a vision of universal Oneness prior to all differentiation.

The second is a belief in many prophets, and the implication that “All prophets are from God; each is sent to his own people and does his own work” (208). This is quite compatible with Theosophical teaching that each religion was founded by a Master of the Wisdom for a particular time and place; this Muslims believe too, though unlike others they say that Muhammad was the last and greatest, the “seal of the prophets.”

The third point, Besant tells us, is the ideal of Islam as submission to the will of God. This does not mean, in her view, being a Muslim in the narrow sense. Rather, being Muslim means that “all men of every faith who surrender themselves to God are truly children of Islam,” just as the Holy Qur’an tells us that Abraham, who was greatly venerated in Islam though neither Jew nor Christian, was of the true religion and not an idolater, for he lived his exemplary life in and under the supreme Oneness (210).

REFERENCES FOR SUPPLEMENTARY READING:

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- Haddad, Yvonne. *The Muslims of America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
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- Watt, William Montgomery. *What Is Islam?* London: Longman, 1968.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

1. How would you summarize the life and central teaching of Muhammad?
2. How did he view the prophets who went before him?
3. To what extent do you think Muhammad presented the Ancient Wisdom for a particular time and culture?
4. How does the Qur'an differ from the Bible, the Vedas, and other scriptures?
5. How do you view Islam in relation to Theosophy?