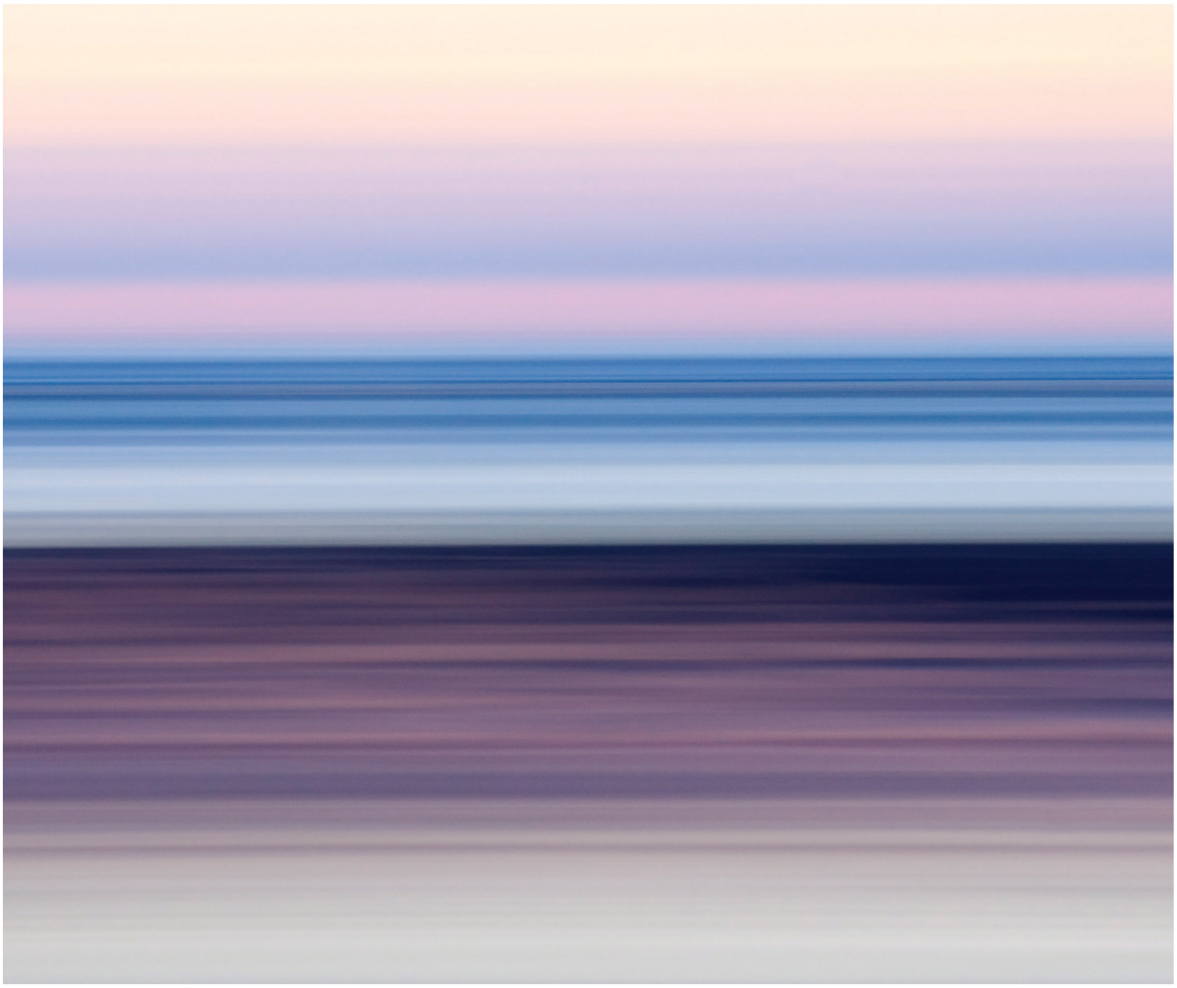
The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion



Second edition

Edited by Chad Meister and Paul Copan

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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An engaging teaching alternative to anthologies or textbooks, *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion* is essential reading for students of philosophy or religion, and suitable for anyone coming to the subject for the first time.

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Chad Meister and
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Chad Meister
Paul Copan

INTRODUCTION

Chad Meister and Paul Copan

Philosophy of religion continues to be a flourishing field. This widespread interest is manifested in the large and rapidly increasing number of monographs and articles that engage in the philosophical reflection of religion and religious ideas. This volume is designed to be a companion and guide for those interested in this burgeoning area of study, whether neophytes or students, or even scholars looking for a general overview of the relevant topics. It includes an international body of contributors who are not only leaders in their respective areas but also broad in their backgrounds and in their religious and philosophical perspectives.

We aim to achieve a number of goals through the inclusion of the various themes and chapters in this book. We wish to offer students and scholars a cutting-edge overview of the central topics in the philosophy of religion among the major world religions. The religions of the world are multifarious, and significant philosophical issues that have arisen within them are not limited to the Western traditions. Furthermore, as the plurality of religious beliefs expands globally, the importance of philosophical reflection on them – both as distinct belief systems in their own right and as each relates to the other traditions – continues to increase. Part I, then, surveys seven of the major religious traditions, both Eastern and Western, and unfolds the broad array of philosophical topics central to those traditions.

In Part II we focus on some of the key figures in the history of philosophy of religion from the various religious traditions. There have been a number of significant philosophers throughout the centuries whose insights regarding religion both marked their own times and have transcended the ages. The second part, then, includes twelve such figures from differing traditions and perspectives.

Most of the world's religions, and the central historical philosophers within the religious traditions, either imply or affirm that their claims are objectively true and thus should be accepted by everyone. But how would one go about an analysis of religious truth claims? Is such a pursuit even warranted, or is religion, at least in part, the joint product of the divine and culturally created concepts through which we structure and interpret religious experience, thus removed from rational objectification? Furthermore, for many religious adherents, their conceptions and experiences of the divine are not understood in Western, theistic terms. A more thorough appreciation of religious diversity and pluralism must take into consideration these global realities. Part III centers on such issues, for they are fundamental to understanding current discussions in both religious studies and philosophy of religion.

Philosophers of religion have spent centuries reflecting on a variety of religious concepts, but none has been more dominant than the concept of God/Ultimate Reality. It is important, then, to examine the principal topics relevant to the nature of the divine. Regarding the *theistic* concept, the emphasis has traditionally been upon the divine attributes – properties such as omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence. More recently, scholarly exploration has included issues such as incorporeality, divine goodness and hiddenness, God's relation to time, and divine action. Part IV covers these traditional and contemporary discussions as well as whether the divine attributes are coherent and mutually compatible.

Historically, philosophers of religion have been interested in knowing not only whether the concept of God is coherent, but also whether such a concept is true – that is, whether God actually exists. In Part V, then, we expound on six of the major arguments for the existence of God – also known as 'natural theology.' Although most of the arguments are quite old in nature, none of them is a philosophical relic; each one has undergone much development in recent decades. Not all philosophers of religion, however, agree that the arguments for God's existence are persuasive or even that the concept of God makes sense. To the contrary, there are a variety of responses to such claims. There are also a number of positive arguments against belief in God, so Part VI offers six different challenges to theistic belief.

Theology proper – the study of the nature of God – has benefited greatly from the work of philosophers, and such philosophical reflection has developed through the centuries about doctrines *within* the various theistic religious traditions (known as 'philosophical theology,' as opposed to the more *general* category of 'philosophy of religion'). Part VII, then, includes six chapters on philosophical theology – the first three focusing on the major Christian traditions and the latter three on recent movements and themes.

Much of the work on religion and religious ideas has historically centered on theistic concerns broadly construed, but more recently many philosophers of religion have honed in on Christian theism. It is commonplace, for example, to see feature articles in leading philosophy of religion journals and major monographs addressing such themes as the Trinity, the Incarnation, miracles, and prayer. In Part VIII we focus on these topics, which are the synthesis of recent scholarship on distinctively Christian themes.

Unlike a common caricature of the study of religion, the philosophy of religion is dynamic, and both old and new currents continue to evolve and expand in interesting and innovative directions. Part IX, the final section of the volume, includes eleven of these recent and important topics and trends.

This second edition of *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion* is comprehensive and current, covering the plethora of significant themes in the growing field of philosophy of religion. Nine new chapters have been included in this edition to fill the gaps and bring the volume up to date on the central issues discussed in the field. These new chapters are Blaise Pascal (Chapter 13), Baruch Spinoza (Chapter 14), Interreligious dialogue (Chapter 24), Death and the afterlife (Chapter 27), Incorporeality (Chapter 32), Religion and global ethics (Chapter 64), New religious

movements (Chapter 69), Religion and the environment (Chapter 72), and Religion and film (Chapter 73). We have provided further reading sections at the end of each chapter to recommend some of the most important works on the topics discussed. It is our wish that this volume encourages you in your exploration of these important themes, many of which have spanned the centuries of human reflection and dialogue.

Part I

PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES IN THE WORLD RELIGIONS

1
HINDUISM

Arvind Sharma

Introduction

A striking question emerges in relation to Hinduism in the context of philosophical issues in world religions: that whether Hindu philosophy can bring anything to the table *itself* becomes a philosophical issue. For it has been denied by some leading western thinkers that Hindu philosophy qualifies as philosophy, and this itself raises a philosophical issue in the context of world religions which may be articulated as follows: 'Is Hindu mathematics "mathematics," is Sanskrit grammar, *vyākaraṇa*, grammar? Here Rorty would concede the point of any such comparison, for in these disciplines all are agreed about *the point* of inquiry' (Mohanty 1993: 318). But Rorty would not concede this point in relation to Hindu philosophy because 'Indian philosophy is so utterly different from Western that we should not call it "philosophy"' (ibid.). The implication is that Hindu philosophy never liberated itself from myth and theology the way western philosophy was able to. This is not quite correct because *ānvīkṣikī*, as understood in the *Arthaśāstra*, clearly involves philosophical inquiry in the sense that 'it is *pramāṇair arthaprakāśanam*, examination by means of *pramāṇas* of all such objects as are known by perception and scriptures' (ibid.: 317).

A similar objection is raised by Heidegger, whose position is summed up by J. L. Mehta as follows: 'Heidegger agrees with Hegel that "philosophy" is in essence Greek-Western, asserting that there is no other, neither Chinese nor Indian, that the phrase "Western-European philosophy" is in truth a tautology' (in Mohanty 1993: 319). Additionally, 'Heidegger believed that with the end of modernity, philosophy has come to an end' (ibid.: 319). It is helpful to remember here that 'Heidegger, in an attempt to think about the totality of Western thought, characterizes it as *metaphysical* beginning with Plato and culminating in Nietzsche – a tradition which has led, in Heidegger's view, to technology as a way of will to power, of objectifying and calculative thinking' (ibid.) which is denied to Indian thought. However, this overlooks the obvious fact that 'if Western philosophical thought has operated with the subject–object distinction, so has a large segment of Indian thought' (ibid.: 320).

This controversy raises two interesting philosophical issues in the study of world religions. The first is to draw attention to the fact that although philosophy as a discipline may be associated with critical rationality, 'a system of philosophy has not merely

to put forward a theory of reality, of man and his relations in the world, of experience and cognition, *it has also to ground, validate and legitimize its theory. Philosophers have never agreed as to the norms, the criteria and the sources of such validation*' (Mohanty 1993: 327, emphasis added). This point will become clearer in the latter part of this chapter.

The second is to draw attention to what have been called the 'relativist' and 'essentialist' positions. In the usage of these terms in the present context, the 'relativist' position implies that two philosophical systems may be so radically different as to be incommensurable, while the 'essentialist' position implies that all of them might well constitute essentially the same sort of enterprise. J. N. Mohanty argues that both positions are mistaken in the context of the comparison of Indian and western thought. He believes that 'there are enough similarities between Indian *darśanas* and the Western philosophies to justify translating *darśana* as philosophy – enough differences erupting precisely where similarities first showed themselves to justify talk of *Indian* philosophy' (1993: 330).

Whether Indian – or for that matter – Hindu philosophy is philosophy or not thus emerges as a key philosophical issue in itself, compelling us to define the term philosophy itself, this illustrates the problem of comparison both in world religions in particular and in phenomena in general. There is now a manifest tendency in certain circles to include the discussion of Hindu thought on philosophical issues concerned with religion and we shall now review the situation in the light of this development (Hick 1990: chs 9 and 11).

Indian philosophy

I conceive my assignment henceforth as follows: to identify the philosophical issues that have arisen in Hinduism and place them in the larger context of the comparative philosophy of religions. One may begin by clarifying that there are 'Hindu philosophies' rather than a Hindu philosophy, as it is usually said to consist of the six systems (Zimmer 1951: 605–14). These are the schools of (1) Nyāya, often described as one of logical realism; (2) Vaiśeṣika, characterized by the doctrine of atomic pluralism; (3) Sāṅkhya, a school which subscribes to the fundamental dualism of matter (*prakṛti*) and spirit (*puruṣa*); (4) Yoga, a system which shares many assumptions of the previous school and outlines a system of praxis for achieving its goals; (5) Pūrva-mīmāṁsā (or Mīmāṁsā for short) which advocates Vedic ritualism; and (6) Vedānta, the school which ultimately became the most influential. Vedānta consists of several subschools, all of which claim to provide the correct philosophical interpretation of the section of the Vedas known as the Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣads, along with a text called the *Brahmasūtra* and the *Bhagavadgītā*, constitute the three canonical texts of Vedānta. The six systems are sometimes hyphenated in pairs on account of their strong affinities as Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya-Yoga and Mīmāṁsā-Vedānta.

The three non-orthodox schools: Cārvāka (Indian materialism), Buddhism and Jainism, should be mentioned, to complete the picture. These three are considered non-orthodox because they reject Vedic authority, which the others accept in varying degrees. According to S. Radhakrishnan, 'The acceptance of the authority of the

Vedas by the different systems of Hindu thought is an admission that intuitive insight is a greater light in the abstruse problems of philosphy than logical understanding' (in Mohanty 1993: 322).

Philosophical issues of one kind or another arise in all religions. Some arise in almost all religions (such as the existence of God), while some are peculiar to one tradition (like the doctrine of the Trinity in Christianity). Be that as it may, philosophical issues can be broadly classified into four categories when viewed in the context of world religions:

1 Philosophical issues that a tradition shares with other traditions, for instance, the question of the existence of God. Here the interest lies in any new perspectives the tradition may provide.
2 Philosophical issues that are more or less unique to one tradition, for instance, whether the Qur'ān is 'created or uncreated.' Although the issue might be unique to a tradition, this very fact might sometimes make it highly significant in a cross-cultural context, in the sense that 'only as a result of the non-participant arriving on the scene, and making novel claims and asking unanticipated questions, does the so-called authentic Other engage in acts of self-conscious representation' (McCutcheon 2006: 734n).
3 Philosophical issues which play a major role in other traditions but play a minor or negligible role in the tradition under consideration. Here interest centers on why or how the tradition has 'bucked' the trend.
4 Philosophical issues which play a minor role in the tradition but potentially acquire major significance in a comparative context.

Existence of God

To take category (1): one philosophical issue which Hinduism shares with world religions is that of the existence of God. The issue arises in Hinduism in at least three ways: First, classical Hinduism had to contend with the presence of three atheistic philosophical schools in ancient India: Indian materialism, which denied the independent existence of spirit per se; Buddhism, which accepted the idea of divinities (unlike Indian materialism) but rejected a creator God; and Jainism, which accepted the idea of perfected spiritual beings but not of God (Radhakrishnan 1923: pt. I). In this it was similar to a fourth school of Hindu thought called Sāṅkhya, which in its classical formulation likewise accepted the presence of perfected spiritual beings but rejected God as one (Chatterjee and Datta 1950: 44).

Second, classical Hinduism believes in a God who promulgates a scripture but according to one school of it, the Vedānta, the text possesses intrinsic validity and does not owe its purchase on us as the word of God (Murty 1959: ch. 2). Another school, the Nyāya, however, maintained that the Hindu scriptures called the Vedas owed their authority to being the word of God (Puligandla 1975: 183–4).

Third, Hindu thought possesses not only an atheistic but also a transtheistic element, in the form of Advaita Vedānta. This system insists on the existence of God

at the empirical level, while denying it at the transcendental level. Curiously enough, the Hindu transtheistic schools are as vigorous in their defense of the existence of God as the theistic ones (Smart 1964).

Two philosophical issues which arise in this context will perhaps particularly engage scholars: (1) that it is the sacred scripture whose authority is directly questioned, while that of God is questioned by implication, and (2) the defense offered for scriptural authority in some forms of Hinduism is such as dispenses with God.

Both these points require further explanation. It should be noted regarding the first point that a non-believer is described as a *nāstika* (or one who says no) in both philosophical and popular Hinduism. In philosophical Hinduism it applies to one who does not believe in the authority of the Vedas, while in popular Hinduism it applies to one who does not believe in the existence of God. This highlights the point that, in philosophical Hinduism, acceptance of scriptural authority counts for more than the acceptance of God.

The reason for this development lies in the conclusion reached in the philosophical schools of Vedānta that the existence of God can only be established on the basis of scriptural authority. Reason, however skillfully deployed, cannot yield a decisive verdict on the issue, as for every argument it is possible to adduce a counterargument. If the proof of the existence of God can only be based on scriptural authority, then naturally it is scriptural authority which must be undermined if belief in God is to be attacked.

The counterattack to the challenge to Vedic authority produced the curious outcome that the Hindu tradition in general upheld Vedic authority without upholding the existence of God. This sundering involved a separation of the ontological, the epistemological, and the deontological dimensions of life on the part of Pūrva-mīmāṁsā, this school of thought offered the formulation that the Vedas are without a beginning, like the universe, and therefore are in no need of an author, no more than a beginningless universe is in need of a creator. The school adheres to its position so rigidly that it even compromises the standard Hindu vision of the universe as one which, although eternally existent, periodically undergoes phases of emergence and dissolution.

This pulsating view of cosmic time is replaced in Pūrva-mīmāṁsā with a linear one, according to which the world was forever as it is now and does not undergo cycles. This occultation of the ontological results from the epistemological orientation of the tradition, as it proceeded to defend attacks on Vedic authority by the Buddhists, the Jains and the Indian materialists. The Mīmāṁsā school argued that the scriptures of the Buddhists and the Jains have been produced by persons, who are liable to error. Therefore their texts too are open to error. By contrast, the Vedas have no authors as such, whose shortcomings could impugn its authority. The Buddhists and the Jains had also attacked Vedic ritual so the Pūrva-mīmāṁsā school, as upholder of the Vedic ritualism, also defended the performance of ritual laid down in the Vedas. With the Vedas thus being impeccable on account of their impersonal character, the validity of the rituals laid down by them was also no longer open to question. They were to be followed not because God had ordained them but because Vedic scriptures had ordained them.

The philosophical defense of God in the transtheistic school of Advaita Vedānta (Deutsch and Dalvi 2004) is intriguing. This school of Advaita Vedānta believes in the sole spiritual reality of an Absolute, which is beyond God. Even God in this system represents a penultimate and ultimately false reality, speaking metaphysically. To use the idiom of this school, God falls in the domain of *māyā*, or that which is less than ultimately real. Only *nirguṇa brahman* is ultimately real in this system. The creation of the world through the working of *māyā* is described in such a way in this philosophical school that it is possible to derive the whole universe without necessarily invoking God. It has thus baffled scholars why this system insists on maintaining the (penultimate) reality of God. Here again the answer may lie in the epistemological rather than the ontological sphere. There can be no knowledge without a knower and a known being involved, according to this school. This is obvious in the case of perception *in* the world. But what of the perception *of* the world? Unless God is conceived as its knower, the world would not qualify as knowable. So once again epistemology has a direct bearing on the ontology of a system.

Verbal testimony

Taking category (2): a philosophical issue perhaps unique to Hindu philosophy is that of verbal testimony as an independent means of knowledge (Hiriyanna 1949: 44–6). The point needs to be elaborated. Most schools of philosophy tend to accept two main ways of knowing: perception and reason (inference). Students are familiar with the debates between empiricism and rationalism so that their relative merits as means of knowledge could provide a point of contention, but few would deny that these could be counted as the two main ways of knowing (Hick 1990: 68–71). Hindu philosophy differs in this respect in offering no fewer than six ways of knowing, which should at least be listed: (1) *pratyakṣa* (perception); (2) *anumāna* (inference); (3) *upamāna* (comparison); (4) *śabda* (verbal authority); (5) *arthāpatti* (postulation) and (6) *abhāva* (non-cognition), although any detailed discussion might run the risk of becoming esoteric (Datta 1932).

Of special interest to us in the present context is *śabda* or verbal testimony, which should be clearly distinguished from *pratyakṣa* (perception) and *anumāna* (inference) as follows. It could be argued that verbal testimony should *not* constitute a special and independent way of knowing because it can be successfully subsumed under *pratyakṣa* or *anumāna*. Words are heard; so they could be placed in the category of perception. Moreover, their truth is to be inferred from the reliability of the speaker; so their validity could also be considered as being based on inference. To understand the Hindu position, one must distinguish clearly between words, and the knowledge conveyed by words. Let us suppose that someone comes and tells us: 'It is raining in the part of the town I am from.' Now these words constitute perception and I may believe them to be true on account of the reliability of the speaker, but the *content* of knowledge conveyed by them is independent of the words and the speaker. *New* knowledge has been conveyed through this act of verbal testimony which is *not* derived either by perception or inference on the part of the person who acquired it.

The contribution of verbal testimony to epistemology is gaining increasing recognition. It is also possible to associate it with two other ideas: the view that the justification for verbal testimony must be sought within words themselves and the further view that its acceptance on its own is a subtle repudiation of the genetic fallacy.

There has been a positive reappraisal of *śabda* or verbal testimony in recent times. Mohanty writes that the theory of *śabda* as *pramāṇa* or verbal and Vedic testimony as a particular feature of Hindu philosophy

> has been criticized as having excluded from the reaches of the Indian thinker a truly critical spirit. I myself used to think so and have not been excused by my colleagues for the severity with which I attacked the theory of *śabdapramāṇa*. Reading Gadamer's *Truth and Method* made me see that while in many details, my criticism was valid, I had not perceived the true nature of *śabda* vis-à-vis critical reason. If Gadamer is right, authentic thinking takes place from within a tradition. The theory of *śabdapramāṇa* raises this insight into a self-conscious epistemological theory. (1993: 328)

Elsewhere he expresses himself on this point as follows:

> Earlier in this essay I had asked two questions: first, can utterances of a speaker cause us to know something which we could have possibly known, given suitable circumstances, by perception (or by inference)? The second question was: is there some unique sort of object which can be known only by cognitions generated by utterances (or texts)? I have dealt with the first question in some detail in order to cast doubt on the claim that such word-generated knowledge of perceptible things is a mode of knowing *sui generis*. Even if this question is answered in the negative, the thesis of *śabdapramāṇa* is not thereby shown to be worthless. On the contrary, the main strength of the theory, and perhaps its original purpose, was to make room for a distinctive way of knowing about a domain of objects which cannot be known otherwise. There are rather two such domains: the alleged supersensible objects such as God, afterlife, soul, karma which are all allegedly real. The other domain consists of ethical duties (*dharma*). An issue far more decisive than the first question for Indian thought was: how do we know about such matters? Here the thesis of *śabdapramāṇa*, already established in the familiar cases of ordinary discourse, is found ready at hand. (Mohanty 2001: 54)

Another speciality of Hindu thought is best related anecdotally, although this does not make it any less significant. Huston Smith writes:

> In 1970, while conducting thirty students around the world for an academic year to study cultures on location, I availed myself of my professional friendship with a distinguished philosopher at the University of Madras,

> T. M. P. Mahadevan, to ask him to speak to my students. I felt awkward about the invitation for I assigned him an impossible topic, to explain to neophytes in one short morning how Indian philosophy differs from Western philosophy. I needn't have been concerned, for he rose to the occasion effortlessly. Beginning with a sentence that I remember verbatim for the scope it covered, he said, matter-of-factly: 'Indian philosophy differs from Western in that Western philosophers philosophize from a single state of consciousness, the waking state, whereas India philosophizes from them all.' From that arresting beginning, he went on to explain that India sees waking conscious as one state among four, the other three being the dream state, the state of dreamless sleep, and a final state that is so far from our waking consciousness that it is referred to simply as 'the fourth.'
>
> I pass over the fact that it is only in the last fifty years that the West has taken serious notice of the difference between dream and dreamless sleep, which difference yogis have worked with for millennia. What is important is not the time scale, but the different ways the two civilizations characterize dreamless sleep. The West does not assume that it includes awareness, whereas India holds that we are then more intensely aware than we are when we are awake or dreaming. (Smith 2000: 69–70)

A third feature somewhat unique to the Hindu tradition is its claim that memory, while it constitutes a form of knowledge, may not be considered an independent source of knowledge (Datta 1932: 24–8). This position does not seem to possess a broader philosophical significance, unlike the previous examples, although modern Hindu thinkers are beginning to question it (Olson 2006: 436).

A fourth feature of Hindu thought, however, may possess a special significance in the context of world religions. It is a remarkable feature of Hindu thought that almost all of its schools of thought possess a theory of error (*khyāti*). Thus while theories of truth are not ignored, the extent to which theories of error have evolved in the history of Hindu thought is truly remarkable (Hiriyanna 1957: chs 1–6). This may be in part due to the fact that the various schools of Hindu philosophy evolved side by side in constant debate, instead of the successive replacement of one philosophical school by another, which characterizes the history of western thought (Chatterjee and Datta 1950: 9–10). The question arises: 'If truth is self-evident and every knowledge claims truth, how does error arise? The problem of error has been discussed threadbare by every Indian school' (ibid.: 337). According to the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika school 'error always has an objective basis, and … its erroneous character lies in transferring to what is actually presented some feature which does not belong to it' (Hiriyanna 1949: 98). This happens when a rope is mistaken for a snake that has been seen elsewhere, and is technically called *anyathākhyāti*. According to Sāṅkhya-Yoga, error 'is partial knowledge of the thing or things in question which leads to a misconception about them' (Hiriyanna 1957: 29). When we mistake a rope for a snake, according to this account, we have 'stopped short at grasping its features which are common to both' (ibid.: 28); according to one school of Mīmāṁsā, error is due to 'losing sight that two

things are unrelated,' namely the rope and the snake, while according to another school it is to be 'ascribed to a wrong synthesis of them' (ibid.: 34), namely that the rope and the snake have been confused (Rao 1998).

Yet another feature of Hindu thought may prove to be of special relevance to the study of world religions. This consists of its identification of comparison (*upamāna*) as a distinct way of knowing, a claim which should not surprise comparative religionists. Jonathan Z. Smith is only refining it as a means when he suggests that it might be more sophisticated to say that A is more like B than C, instead of saying that A, B, and C are alike. The way the significance of comparison is elaborated in Mīmāṁsā (Chatterjee and Datta 1950: 325–6) may be of particular interest; it is argued there that if we come to know that a wild cow (*gavaya*) is a cow because it is comparable to a cow, the essence of the matter consists not of the realization that a *gavaya* is like a cow but that the cow is like a *gavaya*. Thus when in the study of religion we exclaim that tradition A is like tradition B, the point to bear in mind is that this implies that tradition B is like tradition A.

Faith and theodicy

The issue of reason and revelation has been a major philosophical one in the history of other religious systems, but in Hinduism the contest between them never acquired the sharp contours it did in the Abrahamic religions. This might even seem odd given the epistemological significance accorded to scriptural authority or verbal testimony (*śabda*) in Hinduism. To understand the low threshold of conflict between the two in Hinduism, one needs to appreciate the architectonics of the tradition which has consistently emphasized experience and practice (*vijñāna*) over knowledge and dogma (*jñāna*). The primacy that the tradition as a whole accords to actual realization or experience of religious truth has had its effect on the philosophical component of the tradition. One way in which this effect has manifested is the notion of *jīvamukti* or 'living liberation,' which makes philosophical truths not merely academic abstractions but realizable insights into the nature of reality. While it is true that not all schools of Hindu philosophy subscribe to the idea of 'living liberation,' many do, and even those who do not have close analogues to it. This ultimately experiential orientation of Vedantic philosophy, especially, subordinated other merely philosophical – as distinguished from experiential – means of knowing to the latter. When revelation and reason are thus combined with experience, their dyadic opposition yields to the reconciliation that while revelation may be above reason, it cannot be opposed to it (Hiriyanna 1932: 181).

Another issue which has played a major role in the history of religious thought is theodicy. The historian and philosopher Huston Smith says, for instance: 'Evil provides the primary challenge to every religious view of life and the world. Philosophies have no explanation – evil is the rock of Gibraltar on which all rational systems eventually founder and end up in splinters' (Smith 2003: 145). Hindu philosophy, however, is imbued with the notion that we live in not just a universe but in a just universe on account of the pervasive influence of the doctrine of karma within it. Karma virtually

insulates God, as it were, from having to answer for evil in the world. The following account is noteworthy in this respect:

> Deussen refers thus to the case of a blind man whom he once met during his Indian tour: 'Not knowing that he had been blind from birth, I sympathized with him and asked by what unfortunate accident the loss of sight had come upon him. Immediately and without showing any sign of bitterness, the answer was ready on his lips, "by some crime committed in a former birth."' (Hiriyanna 1949: 48–9)

Meaningful scripture

An issue which has played a minor role in the Hindu tradition, which has major importance for modern philosophy, is its view regarding what is meaningful in scripture. The point is best introduced with the help of the following citation from K. Satchidanada Murty (1959: 312–13):

> In this context the principle accepted by the Mīmāṁsā and the Vedānta schools, namely, that a religious scripture is not meant for giving us knowledge of perceptible, or inferable things, is to be borne in mind. This would mean that in a religious scripture it is in vain to seek science or history, and that (as Śaṅkara says clearly) where a scriptural passage contradicts an evident truth of perception, or inference, it is not really a scriptural passage but an *arthavāda* to be discarded. Had European theologians followed this principle, much of the conflict between science and religion could have been avoided. Centuries ago Pseudo-Dionysius said that scriptures are intelligible only to those who can free themselves from 'puerile myths.' Kumārila and Śaṅkara recognized this, and put it into practice. This, again, does not mean there can be no history, or science at all in a scripture; but that it is not what is *important* in a scripture; though, it may, for instance, tell how at a particular time in the past certain people reacted to certain historical events, and saw in them a more direct disclosure of God's activity than in other events; or, in other words, a scripture may provide us with an evaluation of history, based on faith (*Heilsgeschichte*), but not objective history (for that cannot be *saving* history).
>
> It is a great tribute to the ancient Hindu thinkers that principles of scriptural exegesis somewhat similar to theirs are now being advocated by some of the foremost Christian theologians; to wit, the powerful movement of *Entmythologisierung* [demythologizing] inaugurated by Prof. Bultmann.

This context also provides the scope for exploring another key issue: the relationship between religion and science, which has been a highly contentious one in the history of the West, while India has by and large escaped this tension. Huston Smith notes that Alfred North Whitehead called science and religion 'the two most powerful forces

in Western history, and he went on to say that the future of humanity will depend on how these two forces settle down into relationship. For five hundred years, the relationship has been a nightmare. For several centuries the Christian Church abused its power, trying to strangle science in its cradle. Once science gained the upper hand in this century, it went on the attack, trying to retire beliefs to the old folks homes!' (Smith 2003: 240). The history of Hinduism has been spared this titanic contest.

Theory and practice

An important philosophical issue raised by Hinduism in the context of the world religions is the relation of philosophy to life. Hindu thinkers have often accused western thought of being too theoretical and academic and not sufficiently connected with the spiritual life. Marx famously declared that traditional philosophers had missed the point of philosophizing: the goal is not merely to *interpret* the world, but to *change* it. Hindu thinkers would have sympathized with this orientation, even while differing from Marxism as such, as being too closely tied to only one dimension of life, namely *artha* or political economy, which counts as only one of the four goals of human existence in Hindu axiology. The other three goals of human life accepted in Hinduism are the pursuit of righteousness (*dharma*) as well as pleasure (*kāma*). To these then is added *mokṣa* (liberation or salvation) as the goal of the spiritual life. This may be an extraordinary norm as opposed to the others but is listed with them – its extraordinariness perhaps not unconnected with the 'leap philosophies' – or philosophies which emphasize a stark discontinuity between conventional and metaphysical truths – found in India (Potter 1965: chs 1 and 11).

Two interesting points emerge from this thrust of the discussion. The first is the close alliance between theory and practice which has been advocated in Hindu thought. Almost all systems of Hindu thought lay down a method for achieving the practical results which follow from the theory. This does not mean that theoretical consistency is not valued for its own sake, and that theory is sacrificed in the interest of practice. But it does mean that the theory is supplemented with a spiritual regimen. The second point emerges when Hindu philosophy is viewed in the light of Hindu axiology. This indicates the cheerful acceptance of the fact that there is more to life than logic, or metaphysics, and that religion is properly the response of the whole of life to the whole of reality.

See also Shankara (Chapter 9), Truth in religion (Chapter 20), Religious pluralism (Chapter 22), Non-theistic conceptions of God (Chapter 25), Mysticism among the world's religions (Chapter 26), The problem of evil (Chapter 42), Theology and religious language (Chapter 53), Religious experience (Chapter 70).

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2
BUDDHISM

David Burton

Buddhist thought has a complex and venerable history, beginning in northern India about 2,500 years ago with its founder, Siddhartha Gautama, and spreading throughout Asia to cultures as diverse as Tibet, Thailand, China, and Japan. A common Buddhist teaching is that things have no unchanging essence, a point that can be applied to Buddhism itself, given that it has been subject to a wide variety of socio-historical transformations. Indeed, Buddhism is so internally diverse that it is difficult to generalize about its philosophical concerns. And there is a vast wealth of scriptural and commentarial literature, much of which has not yet been translated into western languages or subjected to academic study; thus our knowledge of Buddhism is incomplete.

Furthermore, there is a challenging hermeneutical issue, since Buddhist ideas are in many cases open to a range of interpretations. Moreover, the philosophy of religion has developed principally as a Judeo-Christian inquiry and so within a monotheistic rubric that does not apply to Buddhism. The very terms 'philosophy' and 'religion' are problematic as they are of western provenance, with no precise equivalents in Asian languages. With these provisos, what follows is a discussion of a number of key themes in what might be termed the Buddhist philosophy of religion.

No-self

Buddhism is a process ontology according to which the world is a complex web of interconnected events in a state of flux; all phenomena are impermanent and arise by dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpada*), meaning that they are caused rather than autonomous. Consequently, one of its most distinctive teachings is the rejection of the Hindu belief that there is an eternal self (Atman) underlying the many changes that the body and mind undergo. The Buddhists explain the person as a conglomeration of physical and mental events that perpetually change – sometimes subtly and at other times dramatically – with no fixed essence around which these alterations coalesce. In one account, the self is likened to a chariot, which is nothing more than a 'convenient designation' applied to its constituent parts, all of which are impermanent (Horner 1990: 25–8). We are easily beguiled by language into believing that terms such as 'I' and 'chariot' have referents that exist in addition to the flow of events to which these labels are applied.

The Buddhists do not deny that the person exists as a complex bundle of interactive forces that can be distinguished from other persons; they do reject, however, any unchanging substratum underlying the empirical personality. Early Buddhist sources undertake a reduction of the human being into lists of constituent processes, most famously the five aggregates (*skandhas*) of physical form, feelings, perceptions, volitional forces, and consciousness (Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995: 232). Elaborating on the no-self teaching, the Abhidharma texts developed detailed taxonomies of impermanent mental and physical atomic events (dharmas) – such as greed, alertness, tangibility, color, etc. – out of which all people, and other things, are constituted. They also provided complex explanations of the causal relations that govern these dharmas (Bodhi 1993) and their claim that the dharmas are instantaneous led to sophisticated discussions about the nature and duration of a moment (Williams and Tribe 2000: 118–22).

Buddhist texts list the ways in which a hypothetical self might conceivably be related to the observable, impermanent individual – as 'the same as,' 'different from,' or 'the possessor of experience,' etc. – and these relations are all demonstrated to be untenable (Huntington 1989: 175–9). Another frequent argument supporting the no-self doctrine relies on introspection. If one watches the content of one's mind, the Buddhists claim, one observes only transient mental states: ideas, memories, emotions, and so forth. One never perceives a stable 'I' that is having the changing experiences. However, it might be objected that the self cannot be observed but is a necessary condition for the possibility of coherent experience, because there needs to be an enduring subject as a locus for the varied experiences one has. The Buddhists reply by applying a principle similar to Ockham's Razor; the coherence of one's experience is the result of concatenations of mental and material phenomena bound together by causal laws, so that the self construed as a metaphysical entity lurking behind the empirical individual is an unnecessary postulate.

An important implication of the no-self doctrine is that, because people have no fixed essence, they can change morally, developing virtues such as generosity and mindfulness or vices such as selfishness and unawareness. Ultimately, the lack of an unchanging self means that people can transform ignorance into enlightenment (*bodhi*). However, debates arose over whether some sentient beings were incapable of enlightenment, with the consequence that they would remain forever trapped within the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*), and whether the achievements of those who were very advanced on the Buddhist path become irreversible or regression would still be possible (Dutt 1978: 106–8; Williams 1989: 98). There were also disagreements about whether women were capable of enlightenment, some Buddhists answering in the affirmative, others claiming that at best women could act virtuously in this life in order to be reborn as men and then gain enlightenment (Paul 1985).

Another controversy concerned the Pudgalavadins, an Indian Buddhist sect that asserted the existence of the person (*pudgala*) that is ultimately real and not simply a convenient label. Neither identical to, nor entirely distinct from, its impermanent constituents, it is the subject and agent of experiences that undergoes rebirth and attains enlightenment. Furthermore, they claimed scriptural backing for their

position. Their opponents accused them of virtually ceasing to be Buddhists, although the Pudgalavadins denied that the 'person' was a 'self' (Williams and Tribe 2000: 124–8). In the Mahayana traditions, some texts contradict the no-self teaching by equating the Buddha nature with the Atman, considering it to be an eternal essence possessed by all living things (Williams 1989: 98–102).

Emptiness and mind only

A very different Mahayana development was the Madhyamaka teaching of emptiness (*sunyata*), which challenged the Abhidharma dharma theory. The Abhidharma ontology was a two-tier affair, with the dharmas alone having ultimate reality. All other entities, such as mountains, selves and chariots, exist only conventionally; they are constructed by the mind on the basis of the really existing dharmas. By contrast, the Madhyamikas claimed that all entities, including even the dharmas, are empty of ultimate reality and thus exist only conventionally. They employ various arguments to demonstrate that all attempts to categorize reality into identifiable, discrete entities result in incoherence. All things are merely convenient designations used to organize experience and navigate the world. Perhaps paradoxically, the Madhyamikas make this claim self-referential, so that even emptiness itself is proclaimed to be only a convention (Huntington 1989; Inada 1993: esp. 148). The implications of the Madhyamaka emptiness concept have been a matter of considerable debate; there have been numerous interpretations, including mystical absolutism, skepticism, and nihilism (Tuck 1990).

Another major division of Mahayana philosophy is the Yogacara tradition – or set of traditions – according to which the world is 'mind only.' Many Yogacara texts explain that the world is like a shared hallucination and there are no real external objects. What really exists is consciousness, described as a non-dual stream of transient mental events. As if a dream, we experience spatio-temporal entities, but they are not really there. The Yogacarins bolster their position by attacking the intelligibility of the Abhidharma notion of physical atoms as partless, spatio-temporal building blocks of the world of matter. And they claim to give a coherent account of human experience without appealing to the supposedly problematic notion that there are objects independent of our minds. However, it can be countered that this Yogacarin denial of the material world has its own difficulties, most notably the problem of giving a plausible explanation of the experience of an intersubjective world. Here the Yogacarins frequently rely on the theory that our shared experiences occur because of the maturation of similar karma (Anacker 1984: 161–75). It has been common to identify Yogacara as a form of ontological idealism, although this reading has been contested (Luthaus 2002).

Suffering

The Buddhist explanation of the human condition focuses on suffering (*duhkha*). Given that the world is made up fleeting events, no thing can yield lasting happiness,

and attachment inevitably causes unhappiness. Cognitive error and inappropriate affective responses to the world are mutually supporting. The ignorant belief that there are discrete and lasting substances encourages craving for them, but the craving itself clouds one's awareness, prompting one to overlook the facts of impermanence and no-self. Together ignorance and craving are the cause of suffering and the overcoming of them both lies at the heart of the Buddhist soteriological project.

This analysis is open to important objections. It arguably neglects other causes of suffering, such as oppressive social and economic conditions. Moreover, the Carvakas – the materialists and hedonists of ancient India – claimed that the Buddhists were foolishly throwing away the metaphorical grain of pleasure because of the husk of pain. Certainly, attachment to things can cause suffering, but the pleasures that they yield can sometimes make the unhappiness worthwhile (King 1999a: 18). However, a plausible Buddhist response is that the eradication of craving is compatible with a non-appropriative appreciation and valuing of transient things evident, for example, in Zen aesthetics.

It is true that renunciation has been a common feature of Buddhist teaching, especially in connection with monasticism, but Buddhism teaches an ethical middle way between the extremes of self-indulgence and asceticism that need not be world-denying. Furthermore, although Buddhists seek to eradicate craving, this does not mean that desire per se is to be abandoned. For instance, the altruistic desire to help others achieve enlightenment has been widely condoned in Buddhism, most obviously in the Mahayana ideal of the Bodhisattva, the exemplar of compassion who vows not to enter the final nirvana until all have attained liberation. Indeed, Buddhism sees ethical selflessness as a corollary of the no-self teaching; the realization that one does not have an autonomous being encourages one to affirm one's interconnectedness and solidarity with others. In recent times, this has provided the philosophical justification for 'socially engaged Buddhism' (Queen et al. 2003).

Karma and rebirth

Like many other Indian traditions, Buddhism accepts that there is rebirth. For Buddhists, the set of habitual tendencies created by one's deeds passes over to the next life, but there is not reincarnation in a new body of a permanently unchanging essential core of the person. Rebirth is a causally connected process in which the being reborn is not the same as, nor unconnected with, the one who died. Ontologically, Buddhism is a middle way between the extreme views that death is annihilation and that an eternal soul transmigrates.

Rebirths are governed by the law of karma, i.e., good intentional actions have good consequences and morally bad intentional actions have bad results for the perpetrator. These consequences can occur in this or in subsequent lives and are proportionate to the seriousness of the deeds. This provides an explanation of why the virtuous sometimes suffer apparently unjustly – because of bad actions in previous lives – and those who act badly can prosper – because they are enjoying the rewards of good actions in previous lives. Buddhist ethics is thus a version of natural law theory that

sees moral recompense and retribution as woven into the fabric of the universe. There is no separation of 'ought' from 'is' and – if the law of karma is strictly construed – no moral luck. Indeed, Buddhist thinkers devote considerable resources to mapping the mechanics of karma, explaining the relative weights of various types of good and bad action and the repercussions of particular deeds (Bodhi 1993: ch. 5).

However, there are philosophical difficulties with this account. The person in the subsequent life is not the same as the person I am now and is only connected to me by shared habitual tendencies created by karma. This future person has a different body and also will probably not remember the past lives. When the link between us seems so tenuous, why should I be particularly concerned about how my actions impact on this future person? Furthermore, the law of karma can be used – or misused – to justify social inequalities and discrimination on the basis of disability, for it explains such disadvantages as the just results of previous bad actions.

There are also important questions about the extent and power of karma. For instance, the Yogacarins consider the material world itself to be simply a product of karmic forces. Alternatively, karma is sometimes construed as dependent origination functioning on the moral plane alongside other laws of causality governing inorganic and organic matter (Nanamoli 1991: 634–9). In addition, Abhidharma thinkers were much exercised by the puzzle of how karma can exert an influence in future lives, given that, like all other events, intentional actions are momentary. Elaborate competing theories were developed to solve this conundrum (Williams and Tribe 2000: 112–24). Another controversial matter is the unbending law of karma. In its most rigid formulation, karmic causality means that each individual is inalienably responsible for her own actions; there can be no escape from the deleterious effects of one's morally bad behavior because one inevitably reaps what one sows. However, some Buddhists maintain that the merit (*punya*) accrued by good actions can be transferred to others – a practice that is part of the Mahayana Bodhisattva path, for example. The implication is that those to whom merit is transferred can experience happiness that they have not earned by their own deeds, and the law of karma becomes less strict (Williams 1989: 208).

Finally, it seems unlikely that scientific evidence can provide conclusive proof or disproof of karma and rebirth. Many Buddhists ultimately rely on the scriptural testimony concerning the Buddha's own enlightenment, when he is said to have had a direct perception of his and others' past rebirths and the law of karma that governed them (Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995: 276). But ascertaining the reliability of religious experience is, of course, fraught with difficulties. Thus, some recent Buddhists have been agnostic about the traditional teaching of rebirth, often seeking to reinterpret the theory of karma to mean that our good and bad actions have positive and negative consequences respectively on ourselves in this life, our friends and family, our wider society and environment, as well as on future generations (Batchelor 1997: 34–8).

Nirvana

The *summum bonum* for many Buddhists is nirvana, the nature of which has been the subject of long-standing debates, both in Buddhism and in modern scholarship (Welbon 1968). 'Nirvana' literally means 'blown out'; Buddhists describe nirvana in this life as the extinguishing of greed, hatred, and delusion. It is the equanimous condition of the enlightened person who, having eradicated craving and ignorance, will no longer be subject to rebirth. When asked to explain nirvana after death – i.e., the postmortem state of the enlightened being – the Buddha refused to answer, claiming that the investigation of this question is not conducive to the cessation of suffering (Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995: 533–6). But it is unclear whether the Buddha did not know the answer or knew the answer but did not reveal it to his disciples. Another possibility is that the question is inherently unanswerable because the condition of the enlightened being after death does not conform to concepts and words. Indeed, many Buddhist texts depict nirvana as free from conceptualization, indescribable, and as an unconditioned reality that transcends the spatio-temporal world (Collins 1998: ch. 1). Here there is a clear apophatic tendency; the ontological status of the unconditioned remains undetermined, presumably because the categories of existence and nonexistence – like all other designations – apply only to the world of conditioned things. Nirvana is accessible only to a special gnosis beyond language, with all the philosophical quandaries that accompany such assertions of ineffability.

A common point of debate is whether desire for nirvana itself needs to be relinquished or such an aspiration can be distinguished from craving and is thus not an obstacle to enlightenment (Collins 1998: 186–8). In addition, there have been controversies about whether the attainment of nirvana is a sudden realization or a gradual process with identifiable stages (Gregory 1988). And some Mahayana texts equate nirvana with *samsara* (Inada 1993: 158), a claim that might be construed as a quasi-mystical assertion that the unconditioned reality is not transcendent but underlies the world of conditioned things. Alternatively, it might mean that nirvana is not an unconditioned reality at all but is simply the correct understanding of the conditioned world as impermanent and without self, together with the state of calm and happiness that accompanies this realization. A closely related Mahayana teaching is that the Bodhisattvas do not aspire to leave the cycle of birth and death but to achieve nirvana in the midst of *samsara*; motivated by compassion, they vow to help all suffering beings and thus intend, once enlightened, to continue to be reborn though without being subject to craving and ignorance. Given the vast number of sentient beings, and the depths of their suffering, this will be an extremely long and possibly endless task (Williams 1989: 181–4). Here we have a vision of nirvana not as an escape from this world but as an insight into its true nature, coupled with selfless service to others.

Buddha

Buddhism rejects the idea that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent creator divinity that stands outside of the universe and is responsible for its existence. An early Buddhist scripture contains a parody of Hindu creation myths, describing Brahma as mistakenly imagining that he has created the universe and all the beings in it (Walshe 1995: 75–7). Later Buddhist thinkers, such as Shantaraksita and Kamalashila, present arguments to refute the claim made by some Hindu thinkers that the cosmos originates from God as its first cause and designer (Jha 1986: ch. 2). Belief in a savior God is often considered deleterious because it discourages one from taking full responsibility for one's own actions and liberation.

However, this is not to say that Buddhism is an atheistic religion. On the contrary, Buddhist texts are replete with many types of gods (*devas*), commonly borrowed and adapted from Hindu cosmology. Most famously, the god Brahma is represented as convincing the newly enlightened Buddha to teach others the path to nirvana (Walshe 1995: 213–15). However, these gods are subject to delusion and craving, and are thus not enlightened. As the result of the accumulation of past good karma, they have extremely long lives but will eventually die and lose their god-status, being reborn lower in the cosmic hierarchy as humans, animals, or supernatural beings such as ghosts and inhabitants of various hells. Indeed, the Buddhists developed an elaborate cosmology depicting a vast universe with many physical and immaterial planes of existence, but its compatibility with modern science is a moot point (Gethin 1998: ch. 5).

The Buddhist attitude to divine beings is further complicated by the varied and complex ways in which the nature of the Buddha has been understood. The early scriptures often depict the Buddha as an exemplary person who has perfected all intellectual and moral virtues. Although he embodies wisdom, he does not claim to know everything, but promises only that he has eradicated his selfish craving and thus understands how to cut off the source of suffering. He will live out the remainder of his natural life and then, unlike the unenlightened, will not be reborn again.

The Buddha is a trailblazer; he is unique in achieving enlightenment without the aid of an enlightened teacher. This attainment is said to be the culmination of long efforts in numerous previous lives. As the primary enlightened teacher, the Buddha is worthy of respect and reverence, but as a guide rather than a savior; individuals must by their own efforts tread the path to enlightenment laid out by him. However, the Buddha is also described as having remarkable psychic powers and the ability to work extraordinary miracles. A stock phrase refers to him as the 'teacher of gods and humans' and he is described as neither a god nor a man, knowing the secrets of the universe that even the highest divinities cannot access (Walshe 1995: 175–80, 193). Unsurprisingly, early records reveal debates about the precise nature of the Buddha, with some Buddhist sects emphasizing Siddhartha Gautama's supramundane character more than others, claiming, for instance, that he did not really need to sleep, eat, bathe, etc. but appeared to do so in order to conform to the ways of the world (Dutt 1978: 71–6).

The belief that the Buddha has supramundane dimensions was developed in subsequent centuries in elaborate ways. In particular, many Mahayana Buddhists worship transcendent Buddhas who are thought to exist in celestial planes and have extraordinary powers such as omniscience. They are able to make compassionate interventions in the universe, even disrupting the laws of karma for the sake of suffering beings. However, those Mahayana Buddhists influenced by the Madhyamaka teaching of universal emptiness warn against a literal understanding of these Buddhas because even they are empty. They are conventionally true, having pragmatic value rather than ultimate reality.

Another strand of the Mahayana tradition advocates that the Buddha nature exists in all sentient beings, either as a potential or as an actuality that has become obscured by adventitious defilements. Some proponents of this idea regard the Buddha as a universal consciousness of which all individual minds are aspects. Others go so far as to claim that all beings – not just those with sentience – *are* the Buddha nature, which appears to mean that all the transient things of this world exist in an enlightened state just as they are already, rather than that the Buddha nature is an essence which they possess concealed behind their impermanent façade (Williams 1989: esp. ch. 5). Despite the aforementioned Buddhist refutations of the existence of God, some of these concepts of Buddhahood will sound familiar to theologians.

Experience, reason, and faith

The Buddha encourages individuals to test his teaching for themselves rather than assuming that it is true (Thera and Bodhi 1999: 64–7). The ultimate proof of Buddhist ideas is the enlightenment experience itself, and Buddhists generally place great emphasis on the direct perception of reality, often said to be the product of altered states of consciousness achieved by meditation techniques. Buddhist epistemology devotes much attention to the nature of perception, identifying various types and exploring the mechanics of the perceptual process (Matilal 1986). What is most significant from the point of view of the philosophy of religion is that Buddhists commonly accept the possibility of an unmediated apprehension of the way things really are, and that such an encounter is given ultimate epistemic authority. Of course, the problem of self-deception is acute here.

Furthermore, in contemporary epistemology, the Kantian-influenced trend has been to deny the possibility of an unmediated cognition of reality. The human subject is thought to be always active in formulating the experiences that he or she has, influenced by social and biological conditioning. This means that, like other experiences, the Buddhist enlightenment must itself be constructed according to the culture, beliefs, and expectations of the Buddhist who has the experience. The Buddhists offer an alternative to this 'constructivist epistemology.' Although they acknowledge that the superimposition of concepts and prejudices is typical in ordinary experience, this intervention can be halted so that a pure apprehension of reality is possible (King 1999b: ch. 8).

Although Buddhists usually contend that religious experience is of paramount authority, we have already seen that reason also plays an important role; for instance,

there are arguments refuting the self, God, and – in Yogacara Buddhism – the existence of the physical world. Operating in a cultural context that took seriously philosophical debate between rival traditions, Buddhist epistemology developed sophisticated rules for correct reasoning (King 1999a: 130–7). Arguments were advanced in order to refute the opinions of philosophical opponents. In addition, reflection on these arguments has been regarded as an important step on the path to direct perception of reality, as the practitioner trains the mind to internalize Buddhist truths.

Other Buddhists have apparently stressed the discontinuity between reason and ultimate reality. For instance, some Madhyamikas employ arguments only to refute the views of others by showing their inherent contradictions rather than to defend any philosophical thesis of their own. Even the claim that all things are empty must finally be relinquished. However, this 'no views' strategy has been contentious, with opponents claiming that the assertion that one has no philosophical views is itself a view and thus self-refuting. Less radical Madhyamikas refute philosophical doctrines that contradict the teaching of emptiness but do hold the view that all entities are empty, and, they contend, arguments should be advanced in order to establish the truth of this position (King 1999a: 139). Another example of anti-rationalism arguably occurs in Zen Buddhism, which uses meditation on enigmatic utterances (koan) to break through our ordinary dualistic modes of thinking to an insight into reality that transcends reason. However, this interpretation is disputed, with some arguing that koans and the enlightenment they foster have a rational content (Heine and Wright 2000: esp. ch. 11).

What significance, then, do Buddhists attribute to faith? In one sense, faith can be construed as equivalent to a belief that one has only until insight replaces it. That is, one has mere belief in lieu of knowledge. Faith in the efficacy of the Buddhist teaching is something one has when enlightenment has yet to be achieved. Buddhist texts describe faith as a necessary prerequisite that motivates practitioners to undertake and persist with the Buddhist training, and it is said to be especially important at the initial stages of the Buddhist path. However, Buddhists also write about faith as the affective state of confidence or trust that is perfected rather than replaced by the direct perceptual knowledge achieved at enlightenment. Confidence in the possibility of enlightenment and the Buddhist path becomes total because enlightenment by way of the Buddhist training has been attested in one's personal experience (Williams 1989: 215–17; Gethin 2001: 106–12).

Finally, faith functions differently in forms of Buddhism that focus on a celestial Buddha or Buddhas whose grace can save one from *samsara*. Here faith replaces knowledge as the primary means to overcome suffering. The dependence on a transcendent, compassionate Buddha is especially pronounced for Japanese Pure Land Buddhists, who claim that we live in a degenerate age in which selfishness corrupts any attempts to gain enlightenment by our own efforts. Thus, devotion to the eternal Amida Buddha, who has vowed to save all sentient beings, is now thought to be the only realistic way to achieve emancipation (Williams 1989: 264–76). This spectrum of views about faith demonstrates again that we should be sensitive to diversity in the Buddhist philosophy of religion.

See also Hinduism (Chapter 1), Chinese religions (Chapter 4), Non-theistic conceptions of God (Chapter 25), Mysticism among the world's religions (Chapter 26), Religious experience (Chapter 70).

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3
AFRICAN RELIGIONS

Kwasi Wiredu

Time was when the African mind was considered too elementary for so sublime a conception as that of a Supreme Being to whom the cosmos is due. Not any longer. African peoples now have a reputation for religiosity barely short of spirit-intoxication. Conceptual issues are deeply implicated in this evolution of perception. But let us start with the basic essentials of the worldview entertained in *most* parts of Africa.

The African worldview: conceptions and misconceptions

Typically, in African thought, there is belief in a hierarchy of beings and entities at the top of which is a Supreme Being. All the beings on the lower rungs of the hierarchy down to the bottom are direct or indirect outcomes of the creative activity of the Supreme Being. Of these, the ones next to the Supreme Being – for terminological convenience, let us call this being God – are an assortment of spirits, some good, some bad, others indifferent, with, roughly speaking, a corresponding unevenness of ability. Especially important among these spirits are those that are associated with physical objects, such as remarkable trees, mountains, or rivers and those that are thought of as our ancestors. Then comes the category of human beings, conceived as embodied spirits, and, below them, non-human animals, vegetation, and inanimate objects.

The obvious question is, 'What elements of this ontology have a religious significance?' The conventional answer is, in effect, 'Every one of them.' Or one might, following John Mbiti to the same effect, characterize the entire ontology as 'a religious ontology' (Mbiti 1990: 15). A certain way of seeing the relations between human beings and the extra-human spirits of the second rung of the hierarchy accounts for this characterization. The more exalted among the spirits are seen by both African and foreign students of African culture as objects of worship. People address supplications to these spirits in the expectation that they will be protected against evil spirits and other dangers. The spirits are numerous, and their preoccupations various. Some are cultivated in the interests of just a single household, but others may have spiritual sway over a whole people. These latter have been called lesser deities or gods (small 'g'). There are many procedures in African life, often called 'rituals' in English-speaking accounts, which are aimed at establishing or sustaining good relations with these spirits. Earlier European visitors to Africa called them 'fetishes' and their

functionaries 'fetish priests.' Many of these 'gods' are thought to reside in various parts of our environment or are patrons thereof.

Of equal importance in African life is the role of the spirits of the departed ancestors in the pursuit of human well-being. In Africa in general what death means is the departure of the animating spirit from the bodily frame. To the spirit itself, therefore, the death of a person, by definition, has no terrors. It leaves the body and betakes itself to a territory adjacent to the earth or underneath it where, in the capacity of an ancestor, it dedicates itself to a single objective, namely, the promotion of the well-being of the living.

Perhaps, the use of 'it' in reference to the ancestors here is somewhat of an affront to their dignity, for in African discourse they are not only spoken of as 'persons,' but also as beings possessed of a moral maturity and spiritual power superior to that of mortals. Their manner of interacting with the living betokens these moral and spiritual qualities: they are widely believed to reward good conduct and punish bad conduct. Punishment may take the form of illness resistant to all the best medicines known in the culture and may require the remedial services of spiritual 'specialists.' But whether they bless or punish, the ancestors, as a rule, retain the reverence of the living. In the eyes of a great many students of African religions, this revering of the ancestors has all the marks of religious devotion. Indeed, the early foreign students of African religions called this attitude 'ancestor worship,' and saw it as the essence of African religion. Nor is that all. The presumed likes and dislikes of the ancestors were taken to constitute the foundation of morals in African thought.

Clarifications must now begin. Traditional Africans do, indeed, believe in a whole host of spirits. But these 'spirits' are not conceived of as *spiritual* entities in the Cartesian sense. By this last phrase is meant here an entity that is non-extended, non-spatial, immaterial, as opposed to extended, spatial, material. This was, perhaps, the most fundamental distinction in Descartes's ontology. Mind, soul, or spirit is an entity that belongs to the first category, body to the second. The point now is that this distinction does not cohere with the conceptual framework of any well-known African system of thought. The fundamental reason for this conceptual dissonance is that in these thought systems existence is spatial: to exist is to be in space.

According to Alexis Kagame, the late Rwandan philosopher, poet, priest, and scientific linguist, existence is expressed in the Bantu languages, which are spoken in a great many areas of south and central Africa, as *liho* or *baho*, each of which means 'is there, at some place' (1976). The Akans, a West African people, express the notion of existence in the same manner, almost to the word. To exist, for them, is to *wo ho*, to be there at some place. Note the identical adverb of spatiality *ho* in both cases.

The afterlife

The consequences of the spatial conception of existence are widespread in African thinking. One major consequence is that notions of Cartesian spirituality fail in meaning or, at least in consistency: if to exist is to be in space, a non-spatial entity, such as a Cartesian spirit, is a nullity. What, then, do we have in mind when we

ascribe belief in great numbers of spirits to Africans? This will emerge from a short examination of the African idea of the afterlife. Consider its location. As hinted above, some say it is besides our earth; some that it is beneath it. What, next, of its inhabitants? By all accounts, they are thought to be very much like ourselves. Thus Okot p'Bitek, also a philosopher and a creative writer, speaking of the conception of the ancestors held by his ethnic group, the Luo of Uganda, insists that

> they were not spirits but the ancestors as they were known before death; their voices could be 'recognised' as they spoke through the diviner, they 'felt' hungry and cold, and 'understood' and 'enjoyed' jokes and being teased, etc. They were thought of as whole beings, not dismembered parts of man, i.e., spirits divorced from bodies. (p'Bitek 1971: 104)

Note that the sense of 'spirits' in which p'Bitek is denying that the ancestors are spirits is the Cartesian one.

This similarity between the afterlife, as conceived by Africans, and the present life, as lived by them, seems striking to some foreign students of African culture. The British anthropologist Kenneth Little notes that in the afterlife as conceived by the Mende of Sierra Leone,

> the conditions of this world are apparently continued in the hereafter, and the life led by the ancestral spirits seems to be similar in many respects to that of the people on earth. Some informants described them as cultivating rice farms, building towns, &c. It also seems that the spirits retain an anthropomorphic character and much of their earthly temperament and disposition. (Little 1954: 116)

In the belief of some African peoples, such as the Akans of West Africa, the ancestors are more staid than those described by p'Bitek, and there is far less detail on their careers than Little seems to have learned from his 'informants.' But the empirical nature of the descriptions is constant. However, though constant, it is not complete. The ancestors are, in terms of imagery, like mortal persons, but they are not perceivable to the naked eye and are conceived to be exempt from the ordinary laws of motion.

Ontologically, all the entities or forces referred to above as spirits are of this kind: they are physical in image, but not subject to all the laws of the ordinary world. Let us call them, for convenience, quasi-physical. Then it would follow from our earlier considerations that spirits are admissible in an African ontology only in a quasi-physical sense. The place of the dead would thus be a quasi-physical environment.

The idea of quasi-physical entities, let it be noted, is not peculiar to African thought. Orthodox Christian discourse is full of references to such entities. Angels, for example, are a privileged class of such entities. Again, the resurrection of the dead is anticipated as a quasi-physical process in which Cartesian souls will be combined with the quasi-physically reconstructed remains of bodies, long united with earth, to form persons exempt from the constraints of physical law. The difference between African

traditional thought and that of some very influential modes of thought in the West, such as Christian teaching, is that spiritual entities in both the Cartesian and the quasi-physical senses are accommodated on the Christian side while, on the African side, spirits are countenanced only in the quasi-physical sense. The slight touch of paradox in the notion that some spirits are not spiritual (in the Cartesian sense) is, perhaps, responsible for the neglect of the underlying distinction. Whatever the cause, its neglect has led to an exaggerated view of African religiosity.

As noted earlier on, the whole point of the African afterlife is the pursuit of the well-being of the living. The other world is thus a this-worldly institution. This is in deep contrast with the deliverances of some 'world' religions according to which this world is only a preparation for the next, which will be a scene of eternal bliss or blight, depending on a candidate's merits or demerits. The contrasting this-worldliness of the African afterlife is of a piece with its quasi-physicality and suggests doubts regarding the religious significance of the afterlife.

Actually, the idea of an afterlife does not, in itself, have any religious implications. This is illustrated in western philosophy by the example of the British philosopher John Ellis McTaggart (1866–1925), who both believed in immortality and disbelieved in God. In the African context the point is even clearer. There is no such thing as salvific eschatology in African thought about the postmortem destiny of humankind. Thus the work of the ancestors looks rather like 'business as usual,' the business being the promotion of the well-being of their living lineages of which they remain members and the enforcement of their morals. This qualification is important. The ancestors are not the enforcers of general morality. That is left to reason and persuasion. What are supposed to engage the ancestors, as well as the living elders, are the norms of behavior that are directly relevant to the fortunes of their lineages.

The ancestors, then, are a species of elders, and everybody hopes to become an ancestor in due time. If the ancestors were routinely seen as gods and as beings to be worshiped, that would bespeak a general hankering after self-apotheosis difficult to imagine.

This trend of thought must induce skepticism regarding the notion that the African mind is given to ancestor worship, and that African morality derives from the will of the ancestors. It should already be apparent that ancestor worship is a misnomer for ancestor veneration. But the ascription of an ancestor-command conception of morals to Africans requires more comment. What needs to be noted is not just that the concern of the ancestors is limited to the affairs of their lineages. Indeed, if an ancestor is a ruler, his concerns extend to all the lineages in his town or kingdom. The important consideration is that the rules of conduct that the ancestors are believed to help in enforcing are the same rules that the ancestors themselves lived by, or were expected to live by, when they lived. The justification of those rules must therefore transcend the transitory likes and dislikes of particular ancestors.

Meanwhile, similar doubts emerge concerning the religious status of the variety of spirits spoken of in African ontologies besides the ancestors. It should be easy now to understand that these beings are as creaturely as any creature walking the earth. It is true that some of them are reputed to have extra-human powers that can be tapped

for the benefit of human beings. But the procedures that have been called rituals and worship in connection with these 'gods' are, in fact, ways of establishing good relations with them with an eye to their services. These include protection against bad spirits, as hinted above, and the promotion of their more ordinary interests.

Of particular importance is the fact that, although these 'gods' are approached with respect and circumspection, they are not venerated in blind faith. The reference to bad 'gods,' for example, should alert one to the fact that the 'gods' are open to moral review. Their efficiency too is not taken for granted. Danquah (1952: 6) and Busia (1954: 205) made this last point very categorically. The former remarks that 'the general tendency is to sneer at and ridicule the fetish and its priest.' And the latter explains, 'The gods are treated with respect if they deliver the goods, and with contempt, if they fail. … Attitudes to the [gods] depend upon their success, and vary from healthy respect to sneering contempt.' A worse fate can overtake an under-achieving 'god'; he can be killed. The total withholding of respect from such 'gods,' still more, the directing of scornful attention, can drain them of all vitality. Nor are all the causes of death human-made. For example, if a river dries up, the river 'god' is no more. This is not to say that all the 'gods' end up this way, but ontologically, they can. If the 'gods' can be at all vulnerable, they can hardly be made the foundation of a religion.

The attributes of the African God: an Akan example

So what remains of African religions? The answer is simple: belief and trust in God. But its interpretation is complex. The following many-faceted question immediately arises. Is the being we are calling God here, like the Christian God, the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, transcendent creator of the universe out of nothing? This is a deeply conceptual question. To answer it I will take into particularistic account the language of the Akans, an African language of which I have a native, first-hand, understanding.

That the Akans ascribe omniscience to their God is reasonably clear. The similarity between this attribute and the corresponding Christian one is also equally clear. God is described as *Brekyirihunuade*, and this strongly affirms that he knows everything. Similarity shrinks, however, when we come to omnipotence. In the Akan language, or more simply, Akan, the word *Otumfuor* is used in reference to the Supreme Being to indicate that his powers are limitless. He can do all things. But does this include creating a figure which is at the same time a triangle and not a triangle? Although most Christian philosophers would say no, some, such as Descartes, have said yes. On the other hand, even at the level of popular discourse, the Akan response is decidedly negative. The alleged project involves a contradiction, and, according to a communal saying, truths do not conflict (*Nokware mu nni abra*). Hence no well-defined project has been cited that the Supreme Being is unable to accomplish. From this standpoint, then, God's omnipotence consists in his ability to accomplish any well-defined project.

What sorts of projects, then, are or are not considered well-defined? The easiest approach will be by examples, and a most instructive example is the following.

Consider the question whether a law of nature can be violated. At least one Akan answer is that since the law was established by an omniscient being, it does not make sense to suggest that it might need changing. Violating a law of nature therefore is not a well-defined enterprise. Therefore, God cannot be said to be capable of doing it, and yet this implies no diminution of his omnipotence.

Some of the deepest metaphysical reflections of the Akans are in the form of riddles rendered on 'talking' drums. One such riddle, in my interpretation, expresses just the consideration rehearsed in the last paragraph. It says, 'The creator created death, and death killed him.' Not even the creator can evade the cosmic dialectic of life and death. The metaphor – a riddle is a metaphor – does not only affirm the primacy of law in the workings of phenomena; it also insists on its indefeasibility. It might be of interest to note that this thought excludes the possibility of miracles, if a miracle is conceived as involving the *violation* of a law of 'nature.' The idea of the supernatural is similarly excluded, which is why I have encumbered 'nature,' its complementary, with quotation marks. If the idea of the supernatural is faulty, then so is that of nature, since the latter presupposes the intelligibility of the former.

Indefeasible law is what defines cosmic order for the Akan metaphysician or metaphysicians responsible for the drum text discussed above. In another drum text, when an Akan metaphysician inquires what the creator created, his answer is that the creator created order, knowledge, and death (Danquah 1968: 70). Order comes first. Omnipotence inaugurates order; but it cannot displace it.

On this account, the Akan notion of omnipotence has some similarities and some differences with Christian doctrine. However, when we come to transcendence, not even basic intelligibility is to hand. The transcendent is that which transcends space and time. In ontologies such as African ones, in which to exist is to be in space, nothing existent can transcend space and time. The Akan God, therefore, cannot be called transcendent. The contrary has been supposed on the strength of a famous myth probably shared by all African peoples. Here is a simplified form of one Akan version: in very, very, ancient times God lived accessibly close above us. But an old woman, hard of correction, kept pelting him with the butt of the pestle with which she pounded plantain to prepare a favorite Akan dish. In disgust God moved himself up inaccessibly high in the sky and has remained there ever since.

This inaccessibility is what has been interpreted as transcendence. But this interpretation is not unavoidable. Nor is it in consonance with the locative conception of existence embedded in Akan and many African languages. If God exists, He will be in space, and therefore not transcendent, but he could still be quasi-physically inaccessible. In any case, a more plausible interpretation is available. The distance that is held now to separate us from God might be interpreted morally. Then the idea would be that it is our wrong-headedness that separates us from God.

The question of creation

By far the most interesting issue in the interpretation of the Akan concept of God is whether he is conceived as the *ex nihilo* creator of the universe. What has already been

said suggests a negative answer. Not unexpectedly, the ground of this rejection is the locative conception of existence. From this premise, we can easily see that 'nothing' presupposes 'something'; it presupposes, in fact, a whole world. The idea of nothing here is that of there not being anything of the sort defined by a given universe of discourse at some particular place. Suppose someone asks another, 'What is there?' and the latter replies, 'Nothing.' The conversation will have to have been about some items of interest. They are, perhaps, talking about furniture, and the remark informs of the absence of any such items in the given location. This conceptualization of nothingness is in terms of the epistemic and other interests of beings in this world. Such a relative notion could not possibly underpin a doctrine of creation from (absolute) nothingness.

Relevant here is an Akan aphorism, which, like the drum texts, speaks in riddles and paradoxes. In it the creator is likened unto a bagworm, and it is queried whether he wove the bag before getting into it or got into it before weaving it. I have argued elsewhere that the 'corresponding cosmogonic paradox is this: Either the creator was somewhere before creating everywhere or he was nowhere while creating everywhere' (Wiredu 1996: 121). That either disjunct is contradictory goes without saying, given a locative conception of existence.

To return to the talking drums, we have a drum text that takes aim at the assumption that creation can be conceived on the model of a motivated action. It runs as follows:

> Who gave word?
> Who gave word?
> Who gave word?
> Who gave word to Hearing?
> For Hearing to have told the Spider,
> For the Spider to have told the Creator,
> For the Creator to have created things?
> (Danquah 1968: 44)

'Hearing' here stands for the understanding and the Spider for creative ingenuity. The Akans are extremely intrigued by the creative genius of the spider as evidenced in the artistry of the spider's web effortlessly woven. In fact, one of the Akan descriptions for God is *Ananse Kokroko*, the Stupendous Spider. Now, then, what is the message? It seems to be the following. A motivated action is one with reasons. But a reason already presupposes the interplay of facts, events, ideas and intentions. If the reason concerns the origin of the entire universe, then, since it cannot have any basis in fact or even fiction, it could itself be met with a request for the reason of that reason and so on *ad infinitum*.

The African mind, as shown in the Akan instance, has been occupied with logical and conceptual issues regarding creation. It has been concerned also with narratives of creation. A most dramatic such narrative comes from the Yoruba. In one version creation is said to have begun in what is now the city of Ile-Ife in Nigeria. The place

was then a watery marsh and God (*Olodumare*) sent an agent called *Orisa-nla* to go and spray some dry soil upon the area to firm it up for human habitation. Coming, before all else, upon some palm wine and being thirsty, he drank of it, became drunk and fell asleep *re infecta*. Then God sent another agent, *Oduduwa*, who accomplished the task (Idowu 1962: 22). Contrary to the usual practice of interpreting this story as a message of *ex nihilo* creation, it is transparently a demiurgic metaphor.

A remarkable aspect of this account of the 'beginning' is the bringing into play of human foibles in the cosmological process itself. This is even more glaring in Dogon cosmology, possibly the most sophisticated in Africa, in which the world is the result of the precipitate breaking of a primordial egg by its male component (Griaule and Dieterlen 1954). On this showing, the history of the world is the process of remedying the consequences of this act of willfulness.

The problem of evil

One can detect no doctrine of original sin in traditional African theology, but this portrayal of the cosmos suggests the notion that the interplay of good and evil forces is intrinsic to the world order. This brings us to one approach to what in western philosophy is called the problem of evil. The problem is, 'How is it that a creator who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent seems to have created a world containing evil?' It seems to be suggested that if evil is intrinsic to reality, then no one is to blame except the specific perpetrator of a specific act of mischief. However, neither in this nor in any other attempted solution to the problem of evil has there been any consensus among African peoples or their thinkers.

Among the Akans alone quite a few different proposals are known, although almost all of them are related in subtle ways. The first is identical with the cosmologically oriented one just noted (Minkus 1984: 116) to the effect that good and evil are both intrinsic to reality. Closely related to it is the popular Akan saying that if something does not go wrong, something does not go right. There is also the contention that evil is to be blamed not on God, but on the 'gods,' that is, the refractory ones (Busia 1965: 20). Even more interestingly, there is the argument that God cannot be said to have created evil, because it is the result of the free choices of human beings. God created human beings and gave them freedom of choice. For him to *guarantee* that they will make only the right choices would be to take away that incomparably precious gift (Gyekye 1995: 127–8). Behold a free will defense, or, if you like, a free will excuse!

In a favorite Akan literary device in which wise sayings are credited to animals, we have: 'The Hawk says, "All that God created is good."' The thought underlying this saying is one that would have warmed the heart of Leibniz. Close to this is also the saying that if God gives the disease, he gives the cure. But, throwing all theodicy to the winds, Danquah (1968: 88–9) claimed that the Akan view (which he seems to have supported) is that, far from God being omnipotent, he, as the 'Nana,' is himself a participant in the struggle to overcome 'physical pain and evil.' All these ideas about evil require evaluation in the appropriate place (see Wiredu 1996). But here let us take up the question of the basis of the distinction itself between good and evil.

African communalism and morality

Because of the communalistic character of African society, there are widespread affinities in African attitudes to morality. African communalism is a kind of social formation in which kinship relations are of the last consequence. Everyone is brought up to develop a sense of solidarity with large groups of kith and kin. What this bonding means in practice is that one understands that one has obligations to a large number of people on grounds of kinship. Since this applies to everybody, it follows mathematically that each individual is the recipient of a corresponding multitude of rights coming to him as the converse of his obligations. Amid this reciprocity, it becomes clear that the principle of these social relations is the adjustment of the interests of the individual to that of the kinship group and vice versa. This, then, is a principle of the harmonization of interests to the advantage of all the individuals of the kinship group. But since one does not live in this world with relatives alone, it becomes clear also that there is need for a principle for harmonizing interests based not on the kinship standing of the other but simply on his humanity. This is the supreme principle of morality recognized in African society. Among the Akans it says, 'If you don't want it to be done to you, don't do it to others,' which is, recognizably, the contrapositive of what in Christian discourse is called the Golden Rule.

This last is the principle to which a traditional Akan would appeal in moral discussion concerning the rightness or wrongness of an action. Moral justification in terms of the will of authorities, human or divine, is left to children and infantile adults. One of the things most often said about God in Akan society is that God dislikes evil. If the Akans *defined* good and evil as what God likes and what he dislikes, this saying would reduce to the unenlightening tautology that God dislikes what he dislikes.

The African mind has been exercised by more problems about the nature of God and his relations with humankind than we have mentioned. A particularly difficult one concerns predestination and human freedom or responsibility. Questions raised are familiar in other cultures. For example, if every choice and act of ours is predestined, in what sense are we free? Are some given good destinies and others bad ones? And what would be the justice of that? Can a bad destiny be changed? (See Abraham 1962: ch. 2; Idowu 1962: ch. 13; Gyekye 1995: ch. 7; Wiredu 2001.)

On the above showing, African religions begin and end with belief and trust in God. This mind-set is not joined to any institution of God-worship or moral exhortation. There is nothing like a church of which one may or may not be a member, and so there are no *dogmas*. In consequence, in traditional Africa there was no drive to proselytism. Moreover, the trust in God is not in expectation of any special dispensation in the afterlife. This is enough to show that traditional African religions are religions only in the minimal sense of a habitual state of mind linked to the idea of a superhuman being or power or principle having control over human destiny. In this regard, more may not necessarily mean better.

See also Christianity (Chapter 6), Truth in religion (Chapter 20), Non-theistic conceptions of God (Chapter 25), Omniscience (Chapter 28), Omnipotence (Chapter 29), Omnipresence (Chapter 30), Creation and divine action (Chapter 35), The problem of evil (Chapter 42), Phenomenology of religion (Chapter 67), Religious experience (Chapter 70).

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4
CHINESE RELIGIONS

Chung-ying Cheng

Consideration of defining conditions of religion

Although there are many definitions and descriptions of what a religion is, we can project the following five conditions for defining an ideal form of religion or religious spirit; they are based on a reflection on all existing world religions:

1 Such a form of religion must provide an understanding and sometimes an explanation of how the world came into being, how life and human life began, what the purpose/end of human life is and what human death represents.
2 It must provide an idea of a good life or an ideal form of life for a human person to strive for or to rest his or her mind or heart on in ultimate peace and ultimate tranquility.
3 It must provide a way or a system of practice for achieving this good form of life so that a community of people, not just an individual, could follow and incorporate it in their lives.
4 It must provide a central authority for maintaining this system of practice which allows justified and regulated changes and improvements.
5 It must actually establish a following or a community who embody the practice and thus demonstrate and testify to the authenticity of the practice.

(Based on my survey of world religions in Bowker 1997)

The first two requirements provide a theoretical profile of a religion, while the third requires a religion to be practical. The fourth says that it must be a project or enterprise to be promoted or carried out. The last indicates an existential presupposition: a religion must not be an empty class even though a class of one member should be allowed.

These five conditions or requirements allow a system of graded realization of religion in the world's religions as we have come to know them today. A world religion must be a robust and bona fide manifestation of the spirit of religion as stipulated in these five conditions. When it meets all the conditions explicitly, we can speak of such a religion as 'explicit religion' rather than 'implicit religion,' or as 'formal religion' rather than

'informal religion.' We can also speak of a living religion which is presently practiced as a form of life and a past religion which no longer exists today. We can even speak of a formalized religion versus a latent or virtual religion which may not have the explicit form and the organization that supports a practice for a community of believers. We may further distinguish religion as behavior observed from outside a given society versus religion as belief experienced inside an individual.

These distinctions are important as they allow us to speak of religion in a collective (or mass) sense as well as in a highly individualized sense of experience of faith, trust, liberation, delivery, and awakening. It is in light of such a framework of five conditions and multiple analysis of religion that we may undertake to characterize and analyze any religion in the world. This framework obviously recognizes a pluralistic approach to religions in the world even though the position of religious pluralism may not yet be recognized in many established world religions. Theoretically, we can see that each condition above allows a pluralistic approach. In practice many religions seek to maintain a doctrinal unity while giving up unified control and management. But it is interesting to note that when religions become highly individualized and privatized in a postmodern age, even doctrinal unity can be fluid and open to change and variation. It is in light of these factors that we come to view and analyze Chinese religion as a form of life and as a system of basic beliefs with its intrinsic philosophy.

Chinese religion must therefore be considered a plurality, with overlapping identities and shared origin from a remote and yet very basic origin of human experience and reflection on the world and the human self (Cheng 2005).

We shall hold that Chinese religion as a general term denotes a whole set of systems of religious beliefs, which range from explicit, formal, or formalized structures to forms of life and practice containing implicit, informal, and latent beliefs rooted in Chinese tradition and Chinese history. They are related to a common origin of experience and understanding which are built on various overlapping perceptions and conceptions representing systematic configurations of ontological and eschatological reinterpretations. Whether Confucianism, Daoism, or later Chinese Buddhism, they all fall into this pattern of thinking and organizing and in this sense remain religious, even though individually and intellectually they also assume forms of philosophy and practical wisdom.

The Confucian classic *Zhong Yong* can be seen as holding a religion as a teaching (*jiao*) of the way that comes from the cultivation of human nature. It is significant to see that for Confucianism human nature is mandated by heaven, and hence a Confucian teaching of the way is a teaching of the way derived from reflection on and development of human nature. But for Daoism (or Taoism), as heaven (*tian*) could be also approached from observation and meditation, the teaching of the way (dao) can also include the way of heaven independently of human nature. Both approaches are founded on the tradition of the Yijing. This can be said to be the first characteristic of Chinese religion (Cheng 2002).

A second characteristic of Chinese religion as a whole is that even though Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism have been historically at odds, they are also involved in a process of attempting to find harmonization and convergence among

themselves, so that we can speak of a 'unity of three religious teachings' (*sanjiao heyi*). But this unity is not regarded as a homogeneous unity, but as a unity individually or severally exhibited in different modes of respective absorption and reinterpretation of the other two from each school of teachings. Each mode of teaching would result in a more compatible and harmonious co-existence with the other two schools of teachings. This is unity by harmonization of diversity from which respective new developments for each school are allowed and anticipated. It is an attitude of mutual inclusion, not mutual exclusion, in the spirit of a high degree of interpretive tolerance and relatedness. Hence I shall speak of Chinese religion as a multifaceted experience and a behavior-belief pattern which has an open ultimate reference as a source of decision and evaluation, and which at the same time strives for the ultimate harmony with other bona fide faiths and practices in a changing world.

Outstanding characteristics of Chinese religion as a whole

In light of these two basic characterizations of Chinese religion, we have to see Chinese religion as a holistic experience of the ultimate which is both severally and collectively significantly different from western religions. For many religionists in the West, Confucianism may not quite qualify as a religious faith but only sustains itself as a socio-political ethic. This is mistaken insofar as a deepened and widened view of Confucianism would reveal more than what socio-political ethic provides. The Confucian socio-political ethic is rooted in an onto-cosmological vision of the ultimate which justifies the value of both life and death and which provides a faith as a spiritual guide of life in such a justification (Ching 1989).

In such a sense, Confucianism is not merely philosophy, but a common faith and common practice for many (including most intellectuals) in the tradition. Many modern Chinese intellectuals may still subscribe to such an understanding and experience of Confucianism as a core system of values and a basic form of practice of life, particularly in a context of family and community. As a consequence of implicit Confucian sentiment and believed values, people would make life sacrifices for their parents, or for their children or their leaders or followers, and take satisfaction in a faithful commitment and trust in human nature (*xing*) or destiny (*ming*) by heaven.

Similarly, for Daoism there is also a religious aspect and a philosophical aspect insofar as we see Daoism as both a form of thinking embodied or leading to a form of life in deep harmony with the nature of reality which is the ultimate dao, and as a collective practice centered in a body of basic beliefs catering to the public and community. In this latter connection Daoism as philosophy becomes Daoism as religion, and even a highly formalized religion, as history has demonstrated. The link between Daoism as philosophy (philosophic Daoism, *daojia*) and Daoism as religion (religious Daoism, *daojiao)* is an intricate one, which has recently commanded intense scholarly attention (Fushen and Xishen 2004).

The fact is that Daoism as a classic philosophy could be linked to an even earlier understanding of the relation between man and nature and the relation between beliefs and actions which would motivate one toward realization of a desirable eternal

form of life called the *xian* (immortal person). Hence individually Daoism developed into individual schools of philosophical wisdom of the dao, while collectively Daoism became a basis for a religious movement which has often had political connotations in times of historical crisis when a wide range of life goals is threatened. For the present purpose, it is useful to note that in the Daoist case we have a good example of how a philosophy could transform itself into a religion in the formal and objective sense of the word (in contrast with the transformation of the Confucian philosophy into a political system of ideological rule). Perhaps the crucial point of the transformation is the introduction of practical methods of life-nourishing and the naming of personal deities or divinities which command popular belief and inspire personal faith (Kohn 1998).

It must also be noted that Daoism in its early forms comes from understanding and experience of the dao. Experience of the dao is an irreducible element of the formation and transformation of Chinese experience of the ultimate. It has transformed the early Chinese experience of personalized divinity such as *di* and *tian* into open, undefined and indefinable reality which encompasses different forms and various possibilities of self-transcendence and self-transformation.

It is on the basis of Daoism and Confucianism that Chinese Buddhism as a formal religion was molded into individualized sects of elevated philosophical thinking and meditation. As such, Chinese Chan Buddhism is an anti-religion as much as a religion in the sense that adherents make an ardent endeavor to be liberated from any historically ritualized form of life, even religious life; they seek freely to express their creative spirit so that it transcends and yet encompasses the whole of reality. Nevertheless it has retained a historical lineage and a traditional openness and hence appeals to a community of aspirants and practitioners (Cheng 1973).

We need to understand how Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism are regarded as systems of religious teachings. But to say that they are unified in some doctrines, as held by the Mind-School scholar and thinker Jiao Hong (1541–1620) in the late Ming dynasty, is not to say that these systems could not have radically different conceptions of reality, the supreme power, and the destiny of human beings. On the other hand, it may become a central and most challenging issue as to whether and how their convergent unity is to be argued or sustained. Nevertheless, the emergence of such a theory of unity of three religions bespeaks a unique nature of Chinese religion, which may prove to have a modern appeal and may challenge the western religions introduced into China, such as Christianity and Islam.

Historical evolution of Chinese religion and its implication

There are three foundational concepts related to the origin and beginning of Chinese religion in the broad sense. These are the concept of *di* (ruler), the concept of *tian* (heaven), and the concept of dao (the way). Among the three, the concept of *tian* stands for a primary experience of an overarching power in the world of things and people which is also the source of life and the ultimate reality of providence and sustenance (Cheng 1997). This understanding of the *tian* reflects a human

consciousness and understanding of social and political organization and its maintenance. Apparently, the concept of *tian* in the beginning was vague and ambiguous and acquired more clear reference and definite content over time.

On the basis of the texts of *Shujing* (Book of Documents) and *Shijing* (Book of Poetry), one can see that *tian* is referred to as the *haotian* (profound heaven) (in the Yaodian chapter of the Book of Documents). Human beings experience *tian* in the natural forms and events that they have come to know and sort out by observation. Hence the first thing the reputed sage-king Yao (*c*.2600 BCE) did as a ruler was to ask Xihe to organize a calendar of seasons and natural periods of the time according to the movements of the sun, moon, and planets, and then to let people know how to cultivate their lands accordingly. The natural events and times of *tian* are not, of course, the spiritual *tian* that one naturally comes to revere. For the ancient sage-kings, nature or *tian* is not simply the visible forms but the invisible spirit, which is also referred to as the supreme ruler or ruler on high (*shangdi*), or ruler of the heaven (*tiandi*).

It is possible that by the time of Yao, or even earlier by the time of Huangdi (*c*.3000 BCE), the idea of a ruling power (*di*) was introduced. In this idea of *tian* there are a will and a plan for the ruling of the people, since people are now organized into societies and communities. Those who acquired the political position of ruling would be called the *di* (emperor) or *wang* (king). It is again possible that the human ruler was called the *di* or *wang* first and then this notion of ruler was applied to the invisible organizing and creating force of all the things and life-forms in the world. This force becomes personalized and referred to as the *shangdi* or ruler on high.

As *di* is often considered the common ancestor of a people, *di* and hence *shangdi* are also often regarded as the source of life and communal values, and as the people's moral authority. Having *shangdi* as the moral authority was useful, even necessary, for maintaining social order and the status of the human ruler. Hence the idea of *tianming* (mandate of heaven) becomes the basis for political authority and also the ultimate justification for the overthrow of a corrupt rulership and the subsequent founding of a new form of political rulership. It is said in the *Shijing* (Book of Poetry) that 'The command (*ming*) of the *tian* is beautiful and without end' (Poem 267). Political power hence tends to be founded on the implementation of the mandate of heaven (*tianming*) as one can see in the *Tangshi* (Oath of Tang) in the *Shujing* (Book of Documents).

However, one still needs to see how the relation between heaven as invisible power of ordering and human political authority is to be maintained. For this we have two observations:

(1) The invisible heaven commands reverence which leads to self-watchfulness over oneself so that one would develop one's virtues in relating to others and in establishing harmony and productiveness of life and prosperity of life. This motive is how Confucianism could be said to originate: to revere heaven is to discipline oneself for harmonious communal living. One comes to an effective awareness of the interrelatedness between heaven and man through reverence for heaven, self-cultivation of virtues (care for others) in a person and the resulting harmony from family and clan to community and society. Hence it is said in the Record of Gaotao in the Yuxiashu

chapter of the Book of Documents that '[The purpose of ruling] consists in knowing the human beings and pacifying the people.'

(2) To show reverence for heaven or *shangdi*, one needs to make sacrifices to heaven as a sign of reverence. Therefore, as early as the time of Yao, and maybe even earlier, special sacrificial rites (called *leiji*) were performed. In fact, what is referred to as the 'three rites' (*sanli*) in the Yuxiashu covers rites to heaven-divinities, rites to earth-deities, and rites to human spirits.

The reverence for heaven is extremely important for the rise of the Daoist religion, for it is in performance of relevant rites that the Daoist priests are empowered to do many services for believers to help them achieve a happy and peaceful life and death.

In connection with the rise of the notion of the dao, a third aspect of the natural belief in heaven as invisible ruler on high should be mentioned. This is to do with the use of divination (*pu*) in conducting national affairs. A good example is how Pangeng, the nineteenth ruler of the Shang, appealed to divination by tortoise bones to implement his command to move his people to a new capital (see the Record of Pangeng in *Shangshu*, the Book of Documents). In the Hongfan chapter we also read how large doubts can be resolved and decisions supported by appealing to divination: 'Select and install a diviner by tortoise and a diviner by milfoil and ask them to do divination after informing them of problems at hand' (Hongfan chapter in the Book of Documents). According to this record, the results of divination have to be considered together with consultations from people and ministers and should not on their own be obeyed by the ruler. This shows how divination was used as only one means of understanding of a given situation and hence one source of information for the ruler in ultimately making a decision.

It is also important to note that the symbolic results of divination had to be interpreted by a trusted diviner who would articulate what they signified. Although no precise rules for interpretation were prescribed, natural associations learned from past experience were no doubt essential for correct interpretation. Different shapes of the cracks on the burned bones may have suggested to experienced eyes an association of natural states which offered clues for understanding a possible consequence of taking an appropriate action. The question for the ruler was to see whether these interpretations fitted with perceptions of others, including his own intuitions before deciding on an appropriate action. This suggests a rather rational and reasonable procedure for making decisions and paves the way for the emergence of the system of divination based on a cosmic map known as the *Zhouyi* or *Yijing* (Book of Changes) (Cheng 1994 and 1997).

One can conjecture that for the ancient sage-kings such as Yao, Shun, Yu and Tang, although the decision-making procedure by divination could be formally linked to the ritualistic belief in an invisible ruler on high, the actual decisions to be reached must have admitted human deliberation and considerations of consequences of actions by reflection and historical lessons.

It is against such a background of divination and general belief in a dynamic interactive relation between the invisible power of heaven (*tian*) and the human potential

for virtuous transformation that the idea of the dao rises above all, and becomes the central guiding principle for all major philosophical and religious thinking in the Chinese tradition.

Creative development of Confucianism: is Confucianism a religion?

I believe that Confucianism arises from the concern with development of a humane and ordered society that will provide peace and harmony for humanity as a whole race (Cheng 1997). It was Confucius (551–479 BCE) who started the teaching of the way of being human and becoming more human. He developed a system of virtues which has its unity in *ren* (love, care, and benevolence) and *yi* (righteousness and justice) and *li* (respectfulness and propriety). He further inherited the idea of the dao as the source of value in human life and the foundation for organizing human society and government. In this sense he continued a tradition from the time of the sage-kings Yao and Shun including in particular the tradition of *li* from the Zhou. His gradual commitment to the learning and vision of the Yijing (Zhouyi) enabled him and his disciples to articulate the insights of the Yijing in the classic commentaries on the Yi Text.

In doing so, Confucius can be said to be both a renovator and an innovator with his ideas solidly rooted in the ancient Chinese experience of heaven, nature, and man. But Confucius did not wish to found a formal religion, even though with his moral authority and fame and with his large group of disciples and followers he was better equipped than any person in ancient world history to establish himself as a founder of a formal religion. But why, then, did Confucius choose not to found a religion? The answer is that he developed a faith in human self-edification and self-enlightenment for human self-realization in which any authority apart from moral practice and virtues would be a harm and obstacle to the universal enlightenment of humanity.

In this sense Confucius remains a philosopher of religion (rather than a religionist) and a philosopher of humanity (with faith in humanity) with a heart open to learning and a moral readiness to practice and act. Thus Confucianism can be regarded as a universal morality which could be embraced by all human beings, past, present, and future. Confucianism can be seen as embodying both philosophy and religion without a religious form, but with a profound philosophy by which it can function as a human and humane religion for each person. Confucius has left a heritage which has enriched the tradition of the *yi* (change and creativity) in the Yijing and the tradition of the dao (Cheng 1997: pt. 1; Cheng 2000: ch. 1). Classical Confucianism is a tradition that has influenced Daoism and Buddhism, and that has been enriched by later Confucians, including Zisi, Mencius, and Xunzi.

Julia Ching, in her dialogue with Hans Küng, considers herself both a Catholic and a Confucian in religious beliefs (Ching 1989). She tries to bridge the two traditions in terms of the relationship of human beings to the transcendent dimension of human existence. Apparently she wants the Christian religion to learn from the Confucian concern with humanity and practice of moral cultivation in order to be more humanized, whereas she also wants the Confucian ethics to continue its original openness to the transcendently divine for its spiritual enrichment. Granted that

Christianity and Confucianism represent two systems of values for living the human life and fulfilling its potentiality, the question remains as to which approach captures the ideal form of life. There is also the question of how the two value-systems could learn from each other to form a more open and creative way of understanding life and the world.

It might be pointed out that Confucius was the first philosopher to bring out most clearly how any ideal form of life could be cultivated from one's reflections on one's pursuits and actions in life. In his own reflections Confucius stresses learning, social participation, intellectual autonomy, knowledge of heaven and destiny, compassionate understanding, and spiritual freedom. One can see that there are many dimensions of life to be realized and that all dimensions are also steps toward higher levels of life on which eventually one can be said to be one with the ultimate reality called the heaven (*tianren heyi*) (Cheng 1997).

Confucius referred to *tian* in a transcendent way, in a sense in which *tian* is above us and beyond our control, and *tian* plays the role of ordering, ordaining and determining (*ming*) many limiting aspects of our life. Yet it is the same *tian* which is manifested in a life-generating process of cosmos and nature. To be above all things and yet to relate to life in the world is the way of heaven. It is a way for transcending and yet descending, since it is an order which is immanent in things and life, and which has its independent meaning and end as the ultimate ground of life. To stress this sense of transcendence is a special feature of Confucianism, as we see in the Analects. In this sense, what is important is not the existence of heaven but the way heaven performs and presents itself in the world and hence it is the dao of Heaven which makes heaven heaven.

We must recognize that there are different senses of the word 'transcendence' (Chinese: *chaoyue*). I shall distinguish two such senses, the dynamic one and the static one. In the dynamic sense of transcendence the transcendent is simply the rising and expanding power of transcending beyond a given state of being. In transcending it is both encompassing and detaching. On the other hand, it is not separate or separable from all things which it transcends, and hence all things could be said to be part of the transcending power which also creates, sustains, and transforms. This is the transcending power of the dao as described by both Confucians and Daoists.

In the static sense of transcendence there is the transcendent object which remains separate and separable from the transcended even though the transcendent object has the power of creation, destruction, and delivery in the same way as Christians conceive of the Christian God. This distinction would save us from the endless disputes over whether there is transcendence in Chinese philosophy and Chinese religion. Overall, one can easily see how the dao is transcendent in the dynamic sense, but not in the static sense.

Tian as *tiandao* is eventually realized as nature (*xing*) and human mind (*xin)* in the human person and becomes the essential defining character of humanity; it gives human beings dignity and value and a goal to pursue and reach – namely to develop and cultivate one's nature in fulfilling the functions of life as an individual and as a social unit. One may consider this nature as constituted by the way of heaven and

dictated by the power of heaven, which forms the spiritual life and spirituality of the human self. The central function and goal of human life is to become aware and awakened to this inner spirituality of human existence, which can be said to transcend human life and yet is inseparable from human life because it is also the power to enable human life to be fulfilled.

This Confucian transcendence is important to understand by itself as it contrasts with the Christian transcendence. The latter is defined by faith in God and is derived from the conceptualization of God as an entity rather than as a process, as a transcendent divine, powerful personal being who is distinct from the universe and humanity. The biblical story portrays the human fall and sin which lead to a broken relationship between humans and God; it takes the unique sacrifice of Jesus Christ to restore this friendship between God and humans. This is unlike the Confucian view of human destiny, in which there is an awakening to a general understanding of the human person's inner nature as capable of self-fulfillment.

Daoism from philosophical naturalism to religious naturalism

With the philosophical Daoist, the transformation of the human person is more a matter of returning to nature conceived as the ultimate void, so that one can enjoy the eternal union with nature and eternal renewal of nature in a creative process of the dao. But in religious Daoism, there is a mixture of ritualist beliefs that can be traced to the original concept of the invisible nature as the supreme ruler; semi-scientific beliefs that one could achieve a better and rejuvenated life through alchemical, and now bio-medical, treatment and spiritual exercises such as *qigong*, and diet; and finally the philosophical understanding of reality as the void and the vital force (*qi*). I shall explain these in the following few paragraphs.

I take the position that Daoism as religion, or religious Daoism (*daojiao*), is a natural development of some underlying beliefs about the dao and *tian* which are rooted in ancient experience of nature and humanity. It also gives rise to the philosophical Daoism (*daojia*) of Laozi (late sixth century BCE) and Zhuangzi (*c*.399–295 BCE). In fact, the underlying conception of *tian* has provided an outlet and a foundation for the development of religious Daoism, while philosophical Daoism provides a philosophical sophistication in the concept of the dao for justifying and supporting beliefs about the *tian* (Cheng 2004; Wagner 2004).

We may also ask how philosophical Daoism becomes ideologically related to religious Daoism. The answer could be made on two fronts. On the first front, one can see that in both Daodejing and Zhuangzi there are aspects and messages which suggest practical measures for achieving identity with the dao such as breath control and meditation. On the second front, one may also see that the ideas of *tian* and *di* and other natural forces gradually came to be personified and to be conceived as mythological figures. Perhaps the Buddhist tradition in naming Buddhas has also inspired the Daoists to follow suit. Hence the power of the beginning of the world is called the Primal Respected One (*yuanshi zengjun*), the power of development of dao is called the Supreme One of the dao (*taishang daojun*), and Laozi the person was then

simply called the Supreme Old One (*daode laojun*) (Kohn 1998). The generation of Daoist divinities and their relations follows a logical structure and at the same time integrates legendary local human figures who achieved the status of immortal deity by Daoist practices.

We may thus come to see the essence of the Daoist religion as a practice aimed at the immortalization of life so that the living state can be extended indefinitely and death can be avoided. One may indeed inquire into the theoretical basis of this practice. It is often described as consisting of four steps: exercise of the *jing* (essence) into the *qi* (vital force), then exercise of the *qi* into *shen* (spirit), then exercise of the *shen* into *xu* (void), and finally exercise of the *xu* to fit with the dao. One may regard *jing*, *qi*, *shen*, and *xu* as different grades of *qi*, which contains the seeds of life and which is eternally regenerated as physical life in the dao – the ultimate source of life and spirituality (Fushen and Xishen 2004: ch. 2). For the religious Daoists this is a theory which can be put into action by following certain practices that affect the formative elements of human existence: essence, vital force, and spirit. As a dao-cosmic life-genetic theory is assumed to explain the rise of the human being, it is believed that by exercising the inner medicine of self-transformation one can reverse the dao-cosmic life-genetic process, so that a new embryo of the human self can be created (Xitai and Shichuang 1999).

Religious Daoism in contrast with Christianity

At this point it may be interesting to ask how religious Daoism (*daojiao)* compares or contrasts with Christianity as a religion. It is obvious that for Daoism the most important belief is that, because of his understanding of the dao, a human person could transform himself into an existentially individualized state of the dao (the state is called *xian*, the immortal) where his own identity as an individual person would also endure forever. The *xian* state of the person would enable the human person to wander, to explore, and to live permanently in freedom and happiness. In this sense the limit and finitude of human life would be transcended and death overcome by one's immortality, which was achieved in one's own self-formed inner transformation (transformation by inner medicine or *neidan* which one develops in one's own body) (Fushen and Xishen 2004: divisions 4 and 5; see also Tianshi 2000: pts 1 and 2).

By contrast Christianity affirms strongly the separation between the human and the divine: the human has no power of his own to overcome his finitude and limitation, experienced ultimately as death. He has to rely on God to save his soul and to give him new life in eternity. While people can put faith in God or Jesus Christ, who is believed to be born to save humanity, essentially one could not know God as he knows himself or others like him. It is also interesting to see that although before the modern period Christianity adopted a fixed cosmology and view of the physical world, now some Christian theology would separate science from faith. Thus, no matter how much people have come to know the physical world or how capable they are of transforming their lives or prolonging life by bio-genetic medicine, there is an aspect of the human person which requires God and depends on God for salvation and perfection. And this

is the spirit and spiritual life; however, broadly speaking, the Christian Scriptures do emphasize a transformed physicality of redeemed humans (bodily resurrection) and of the entire creation (new heaven and earth) that is rooted in the redemptive work of Jesus.

In this sense God is transcendent and separate and human spirituality is also transcendent and separate, in Christianity. By contrast, the religious Daoist would hold that human existence starts as an original unity of essence (body), vitality, and spirit like the dao, but becomes organically differentiated in birth and actual life. The Daoist would also believe that it is humanly possible to reunite the body, vitality, and spirit into a creative oneness of voidness in dao. There is no absolute dualism or dichotomy of soul and body because there is an underlying force in a person; through this one could raise oneself – one's body and soul – to the level of the divine or to full creativity by one's own efforts and exercise of one's native power. However, if one cannot achieve such status, one must be reconciled to merging with the dao without continued individualization of one's life. The difference between religious Daoism and Christian theology is one between religious naturalism and religious transcendentalism.

Religious Daoism provided the initial impulse for pursuing knowledge of things and biologic life, but failed to maintain it in an objective pursuit for scientific knowledge. It was known that after many deaths due to alchemical poisoning during the pre-Tang period, latter-day religious Daoists tended to stress a more inner medicinal approach so that a person's transformation became a full spiritual exercise of *qi* and *shen*. In this regard the religious Daoists have reverted to classical Daoist philosophy except that they are more practically minded and better trained in body and mental exercises. The great difference between Christianity and Daoism still remains: instead of a transcendent God there is the immense and profound dao, which the Daoist could appropriate and approach, whereas for the Christian there is always a God to rely on whether one masters transformation of one's life by the exercise of science or not (Cheng 2001: 34–7). For the Daoist, one's ability to master one's own life leads to supreme harmony in dao, which will preserve what is natural among other things. But for the Christian, successful scientific mastery of oneself and others could overturn the belief in God and lead one to play the role of an arbitrary God at the expense of the dao of nature and life.

Chinese Buddhism as dao interpretation of the *Dharma*

We come to Chinese Buddhism as the last of the three major traditional ethical-religious teachings. Although Buddhism was not native to the Chinese tradition, it has become acculturated by way of intense and active interaction and engagement. Before we can have a clear understanding of Chinese Buddhism as a religion, we must ask how Buddhism contrasts with Christianity and Confucianism and how this contrast reveals the close proximity between Buddhism and Daoism as seen from the perspective of Confucianism. In the first place, Buddhism comes from a deep reflection on the essence of human life after seeing its phases from birth to death. Like in

Daoism, the problem of death is to be confronted and overcome. But unlike Daoism, the Buddhist solution to the problem of death is not to prolong and transform life but (at least according to certain versions of Buddhism) to reduce life to illusion and emptiness so that death does not function as a real problem.

In this regard Buddhism is also radically different from Christianity in that it takes life in the common sense seriously and in that it would require the individual to transcend life and death by his or her own understanding and insight into the nature of human existence. No external God is presupposed or deemed necessary. On the contrary, a conception of God and the like would pose an obstacle to, rather than a help for, the final salvation in the form of *nirvana* (Mitchell 2002). The way toward salvation is therefore a matter of training or disciplining one's mind and body into understanding the empty nature of all things and thus the emptiness of the human life and human mind. The mind which realizes the emptiness of all things would eventually empty itself into emptiness.

By such mental and spiritual disciplining one is better prepared to bear the vulgar and secular life and to render death not an object to fear but a state to transcend and jump over. It is clear that there is no transcendent object recognized nor transcendent subject recognized, but an inner or innate nature which is described as the Buddha nature and which is capable of being realized through one's awakening to nothingness. Although as a popular religion Buddhism would allow images of Buddha and Bodhisattava in organized and individual worship, these images must be regarded as means and aids for awakening one's true nature and reminders of one's efforts to transcend into emptiness.

In the actual historical development of Chinese Buddhism, one can see how once Indian Mahayana Buddhism was introduced it was open to the Chinese interpretation in the context of philosophical Daoism (Xianzong 2003). Hence we see how the Sanskrit word *sunyata* was first translated as *wu* (void) in Chinese and how *dharma* was conceived as the dao. But the Buddhists strove to assert their distinctiveness by identifying *sunyata* as nothingness and non-clinging-ness from the void, which carries a certain onto-cosmological meaning. As far as the term *dharma* is concerned, it was eventually translated into Chinese as *fa*, which stands for both law and entity (Chan 1963: ch. 20; also Cheng 2006a).

Whereas Daoism stresses self-cultivation of one's mind and nature, body and form, Buddhism would reject the Daoist outer medicine as irrelevant and its inner medicine as impure. Instead, for the Buddhist the important thing is to engage in a deep meditation (*samadhi*) in order to be free from images and passions of the world. It is by means of such practice that one would come to break down one's conception of life and death and reach a state of complete extinction known as *nirvana*.

There are six schools of Chinese Buddhism which need to be mentioned and identified according to their respective religious significance (Cheng 2006c; also Mitchell 2002: ch. 7). In the first place there is the Sanlun School which duplicates the Indian Madyamika of Nargajuna (100–200 CE) in stressing the ultimate emptiness of all things. But this school did not last for the reason that to the Chinese mind it is perhaps too negative and provides no justification for any human effort and human

achievement. Then there is also the Indian School of Yogacara of Asanga (410–500 CE) and Vasubandhu (420–500 CE) which was introduced into China through the efforts of the famous monk Xuanzhuang (596–664 CE). But again this school did not last, for it is known to be too subjectivist in that it went against the commonsensical and practical sense of reality which Confucianism and Daoism would share and converge in agreement.

Hence we come to four well-known positivist schools of Chinese Buddhism, which were formed and developed by the Chinese scholar-monks on their native soil. I refer to the Tiantai School, the Huayan School, the Chan School, and the Jingtu (Pure Land) School. The Jingtu School was founded by Hui Yuan (333–416 CE) in the Jin Period in the year of 402, while the other three Chinese Buddhist schools were founded and flourished in the Tang Period (618–907 CE).

After the Tang Period, both Tiantai and Huayan declined. In their place Chan Buddhism and the Jingtu School have continued to expand. In modern times in China, Taiwan, and Japan, one can see how Chan (Zen in Japan) and Jingtu (Jodo in Japan) are still very alive among Buddhist communities and large masses of people. There is a tendency in Chinese Buddhism to revive itself because of the impact of Christianity and at the same time to exert its influence on Christianity through the practice of meditation and self-development.

I offer some very brief statements on the position of each Chinese Buddhist School. Beginning with the Tiantai School, the following insight has developed: every individual being has a nature which is germane to salvation in becoming a Buddha or in becoming enlightened and liberated from this world of *samsara* (impermanence) (Zongsan 1982). For the Huayan School, a human individual could come to perceive and realize harmony and peace among all things by showing how we could conceive that different things could be integrated in a whole with each other and with the underlying principles (*li*). The highest understanding and thus awakened intuition leads to the state of harmony of harmonies, which exhibits itself in the free existence of things, free existence of principles, and harmony among all free things and among principles.

Coming to Chan Buddhism, its development and growth are rooted in the realization of mind and the nature of human existence, which is regarded as an embodiment of the ultimate truth and the ultimate good. It takes a resolute mind and a persistent spirit of pursuit to reach the point where total enlightenment becomes possible. The total enlightenment is also a creative act of self-understanding that is not hindered or helped by anything else, although mental preparation and concentration are often required. What is presented as important is the inner creativity of human existence which can be conceived as the Buddha nature or the nature which is the seed of enlightenment (Cheng 1994).

This philosophy of total and sudden enlightenment as stressed by Hui Neng in his Platform Sutra (Tanjing) gives a person a definite direction of pursuit and a clear sense of achievement. It is also interesting to note that for the Chan Buddhist enlightenment is not once and for all but requires constant attentiveness and unceasing practice (Cheng 2000). This also means that once enlightened one can live a

meaningful robust life of activity while enabled and empowered by a holistic vision of dynamic comprehension and understanding. This sense of life and vitality of decision-making toward action boosts one's sense of reality and sense of destiny, so that for once mind could be said to be set free from fears and the anxieties about mundane matters and death.

Finally, I must mention the Jingtu School, which is more closely tied to the idea of a personal God or heaven than any other sects of Chinese Buddhist religion. In a sense it has revived the ancient belief in heaven as an all-comprehensive and all-benefiting power of creation and salvation. But it no doubt goes beyond it and has thoroughly explored the power of belief and faith as a way of salvation. It has been pointed out that whereas other sects of Chinese Buddhism have relied on self-efforts of intelligent reflection and meditation for transcendence and achieving the wisdom or insight (*bodhi*) of freedom, the Jingtu, on the other hand, speaks directly of the power of faith in Amitahba Buddha as a universal savior.

Of course even here the Jingtu School also speaks of the importance of one's own strong and sincere desire to become reborn in the World of Supreme Bliss (*jileshijie*) that is the Pure Land (*jingtu*). This means that it takes a synergy of self-reliance and reliance on the merciful power of the Buddha to make it possible that every person, even an evil person, could be redeemed and reborn in the Pure Land. Certainly this belief is not incompatible with the ancient Chinese belief in heaven as a creator and a ruler over all things in the world. This shows that for common people the intellectual intuition and efforts of meditation of the other schools may not be feasible or available. However, with a strong and living faith, combined with the practice of compassion and kind action, one could reach the soteriological end of a religion.

The question has been raised whether the Pure Land School as a religion approximates a theistic position like Christianity. Although there is no definite answer because of different historical contexts, one can see that to have faith, to strongly desire and to act for compassion, is closely comparable to the Christian belief in powers of faith, hope, and charity. On the other hand, it may also appear that the Pure Land School seems to concentrate on the desire for rebirth in a land of bliss, whereas Christianity takes faith in eternal life as a support for living a valuable present-day life. Yet there is no reason why the Pure Land School may not be activated to become a more positive and activist religion for engaging with modern life and the modern world. What needs to be done is often an effort to reform and to put reform into action, as Christianity has done, historically.

All in all, we may come to see how various Buddhist schools enliven the native sense of religion and life which one finds in both Confucianism and Daoism under the auspices of the spirit of Yijing: the spirit of creativity, seeking oneness and indefiniteness, going beyond without absolute transcendence, transformation without abandonment of one's true nature, and achieving the universal being in oneself without separating heaven or God from the human person – or the human person from heaven or God.

Concluding remarks

One can see that a philosophy of Chinese religion begins with a historical and empirical understanding of the rise of Chinese systems of religious thought and belief and ends with becoming a Chinese reinterpretation of what a religious belief is. This transformation may be regarded as a Chinese model for religious experience and religious belief. What is involved here is that the nature of religious concepts based on a philosophical reflection and interpretation determines what they refer to and what they signify, and what they offer to meet the ultimate concern of the human person. To explicate and analyze what those beliefs and notions are and how they are applied is to understand them in a comparative framework of other religions. Philosophy of Chinese religion becomes Chinese philosophy of religion insofar as the religious experience of the Chinese is philosophically understood.

Historically, it is the Chinese religion that is philosophically explicated, but philosophically it is the religious values and references which are historically experienced by the Chinese. The question is whether we have a universal framework in which we could speak of Chinese experience of religion together with other traditions such as the Jewish, Christian, or Hindu experience of religion. As humanity shares a common basis for its problems and concerns and anxiety, perhaps we could speak of different experiences and different interpretations of religion as a shared horizon of human nature, human finitude, and human aspiration to fulfill human nature and overcome its finitude. On the other hand, there could not be one single set of historical concepts which could serve as the ultimate universal reference for all historical experiences of relativity; there are only general concepts of the ultimate needs and modes of satisfaction and achievement which could be said to define human life and human values.

In this sense we could no doubt speak of a general religious language or universal religious framework for fulfilling a pluralist function. What is obvious in such a religious framework is not the Christian God or the Daoist dao or the Hindu Brahman which would dominate either semantically or epistemologically or ontologically. There must be an underlying recognition of a general background of religious ambiguity and creativity which can be seen behind all different forms of religions, and which would come out one way or another in different religious or cultural traditions. How each tradition appropriates this source of religious ambiguity and religious creativity could be seen as the most significant problem in a philosophy of religion.

In conclusion, an inquiry into the philosophy of Chinese religion has to become a Chinese philosophy of religious experience, which in turn has to become a philosophy of both Chinese and non-Chinese religious experiences. The interaction and eventual interfusion between the two signifies how theory and action must be unified dynamically as two aspects of the same thing, namely the dynamic humanity which is experienced as limited and yet profound, ambiguous and yet creative.

See also Buddhism (Chapter 2), Christianity (Chapter 6), Religious pluralism (Chapter 22), Non-theistic conceptions of God (Chapter 25), The problem of evil (Chapter

42), Theology and religious language (Chapter 53), The Incarnation (Chapter 56), Sin and salvation (Chapter 58), Heaven and hell (Chapter 59), Faith, hope, and doubt (Chapter 61), Phenomenology of religion (Chapter 67), Religious naturalism (Chapter 68), Religious experience (Chapter 70).

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5
JUDAISM

David Shatz

In many respects, the contributions of Judaism and Jewish philosophers to the philosophy of religion parallel the contributions made by Christianity and Islam. The concepts and problems addressed by thinkers in the three religions are largely identical: for example, the existence of God, the problem of evil, foreknowledge and free will, the status of divine command morality, creation, and providence. Furthermore, the responses promulgated by Jewish philosophers often converge with responses propounded by Muslim and Christian counterparts. This is hardly surprising, since in the tenth through twelfth centuries it was exposure to Islamic thought that gave rise to the whole Jewish enterprise, and subsequently, in the later Middle Ages, Christian scholasticism exerted significant impact on Jewish philosophy (Berger 1997; Rudavsky 2003).

Yet, despite the overlap just described, ancient Jewish texts and later Jewish philosophers sometimes contributed incisive ideas, arguments, and approaches that advance discussion and which it would be unfair to label redundant. In addition, certain issues that Jewish philosophers addressed, primarily in the modern period – for example, the meaning of 'chosenness,' the bindingness of Sinaitic imperatives, Jewish identity, and Zionism – were endemic to Jewish thought. Notwithstanding the salience in modern times of these more particularistic topics, in what follows the emphasis is on a highly select group of issues that occupy a place in all the theistic religions and are the stuff of analytic philosophy of religion.

Talk about God

The Bible, as is well known, speaks in anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language. God walks through the Garden of Eden, descends onto Mount Sinai, stretches out his arm; he also becomes angry and sad and the like. The rabbis or sages of the talmudic period added to the stock of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic descriptions, by, for example, speaking of God as wearing phylacteries, shedding tears, and suffering as Israel goes into exile. Such depictions of God challenged the philosophical sensibilities of medieval philosophers. They found anthropomorphism problematic because all bodies are divisible while God is metaphysically one. Anthropopathism was objectionable because it contradicted the doctrine of divine immutability. In

response to the conflict between the Bible and philosophy, medieval philosophers generally maintained that the biblical language is meant for the masses only – quoting the Talmud (and investing the phrase with new meaning): 'the Torah speaks in the language of humans.' Sometimes, however, Jewish philosophers maintained that the biblical terms had multiple meanings and the correct one in the problematic contexts carried no anthropomorphic or anthropopathic implications.

As with many other issues, discussion of God talk revolves around Moses Maimonides (1135/8–1204), the most prominent of all Jewish philosophers. A fierce opponent of anthropomorphism, anthropopathism, and univocal predication (the thesis that terms as applied to God mean the same as terms when applied to human beings), Maimonides divides the attributes of God into two groups: attributes of action, and attributes of essence. The attributes of action actually are psychological attributes like being compassionate, gracious, and vengeful. In these cases, owing to concerns about immutability, Maimonides – like Anselm, Aquinas and others – interprets the attribution as follows:

> God is compassionate $=_{df}$ God does actions such that if a human being were to do those actions we would ascribe to that person the feeling of compassion and call the individual compassionate.

Though he does the action, God does not have the 'inner' emotion. Hence the psychological predicates really refer to divine actions alone (Maimonides' examples of which are workings of nature), not mental states. God is impassible (Maimonides 1963: 123–8).

Attributes of essence include knowing, existent, powerful, eternal, one, incorporeal, living, and willing. Maimonides argues that to ascribe all of these, in fact any of these, to God in the normal way is to introduce multiplicity into a being who is a metaphysical unity. Not only can he not have a plurality of attributes; he cannot have even a single attribute because subject–predicate compositionality introduces multiplicity. Because of this objection to a univocal construal of the attributes, Maimonides subscribes to negative theology (Maimonides 1963: 111–47). That is, to say that God is knowing is to say that he is not not-knowing, and so forth for the other attributes. But – and this is a critical clarification – this negation is to be understood like the negation in 'the wall does not see.' What is being negated is the entire determinable, the general category of knowing/being ignorant. The true upshot of negative theology, then, is that God lies beyond our conceptual repertoire, and 'Silence is praise unto Thee' (Ps. 65: 2). We are left with no way of describing God.

Levi ben Gershom (Gersonides, 1288–1344) saw grave difficulties in Maimonides' negative theology (*via negativa*). First, if the meaning of the attribution of P to God is ultimately that the entire category P/not-P does not apply to God, what difference does it make where we start? 'God is ignorant' is just as good a starting point as 'God is knowing.' Second, our ability to draw inferences from or to truths about God is impaired. For example, 'God is incorporeal' can no longer be used to prove that 'God cannot be divided into parts,' for we can draw this inference only if we assume that

'incorporeal' means the same when applied to God as when applied to humans, a contention Maimonides emphatically denies. (Indeed, Maimonides' argument that since God is One, no multiplicity exists in Him would be invalid given the equivocity of 'One.') Given these problems for the *via negativa*, Gersonides denies that predicates ascribed to God are completely equivocal. For Gersonides, there is commonality between what the predicates mean in the case of humans and in the case of God – albeit God possesses, say, knowledge and power to a higher, more eminent degree than humans do (Gersonides 1987: 107–15). Also, 'God is P' can mean that God causes P in humans. Aquinas's assessment of negative theology and his alternative proposal is strongly similar to Gersonides'. (Maimonides' view is problematic for other reasons: how could people worship a God of whom they have no concept? What is the point of saying 'God exists'?)

In Christian and Jewish theology today it has become fairly common to question the medieval thesis that God is immutable and its alleged consequence that God has no emotions (Berkovits 1959; Heschel 1962; Wolterstorff 1988). *Inter alia*, an immutable God could not be affected by prayer. Many quest for a new, dynamic understanding of God. People seeking such an understanding might turn to Kabbalah (Jewish mystical teaching) as a resource.

To round out the picture, it should be noted that recent Jewish thought encompasses other approaches, such as the naturalism of the Reconstructionist rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (Kaplan 1934) and the non-cognitivism of Isaiah Leibowitz (Leibowitz 1992).

Evil

Any discussion of Jewish perspectives on the problem of evil must begin with the Bible. Not only the book of Job, but also Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and several prophetic books (Jeremiah, Isaiah, Habakuk) raise the problem. Unlike modern philosophical challenges, the 'objections' raised in these texts do not seek to show that God does not *exist*. Rather they cast doubt on his goodness or justice. And these texts also differ from modern discussions in that instead of asking why any evil exists, they ask why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper: a formulation which presupposes that a true theodicy would have to be cast in terms of reward and punishment.

For the most part, the biblical books raise the question without providing an answer. Nevertheless, one message of the book of Job is, arguably, that suffering can improve a person spiritually and morally. For (a) Job comes to see God only at the end of the book – intimating a sharpened religious perception created by suffering – and (b) at the end of the book he prays for his friends, and does not (as previously) act for his family alone. On this approach, which may well be criticized for viewing the book as interested in theodicy rather than phenomenology (see Carmy 2004), the book expresses a claim that is integral to the 'soul-making theodicy': suffering promotes virtue. The Bible's version of soul-making, however, if it indeed exists, sees God as sometimes actively inflicting suffering on select individuals, whereas most forms of the soul-making theodicy today posit a universe in which God (passively) lets natural law

operate for the sake of giving all people chances to improve their characters. Some philosophers would resist the modern version because it portrays God as leaving his creation alone, contrary to the doctrine of individual providence.

In the Talmud we find an almost bewildering array of approaches to evil. It is interesting that when one sage explicitly states that 'there is no death without sin, and no suffering without transgression,' his view is rejected (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 55a–b). Various sages propose other theodicies. For instance, at the time of a plague an innocent person might die along with the guilty. There is also the idea that the death of the righteous atones for sin. Especially interesting is the idea of 'tribulations of love' (*Berakhot* 5a), most often taken to mean that God allows the righteous to suffer in this world to increase their reward in the next. But 'tribulations of love' could also mean that the righteous are given the opportunity to exemplify virtue of the highest order. This in turn could mean either that by remaining faithful through suffering, the person is privileged to *exemplify* the virtue of faith and not merely possess it dispositionally; or that when people are righteous, God imposes suffering so that they can improve their character by bringing their dispositions to a new level.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik made an important and interesting point about the entire enterprise of theodicy (Soloveitchik 2003: 86–115). The problem with asking why God allows evil is not simply that we don't know (though in fact we don't). The problem is that the better the explanation we have of evil – the more beautifully evil is thought to fit into and contribute to a whole that is good – the less reason we have to engage in moral and social action to fight evil or react to it negatively. Theodicy and moral responsiveness (behavioral or attitudinal) are in conflict.

The Holocaust (often referred to as the *Shoah*) deserves separate mention in this discussion of theodicy. Even though theoretically the horror that was the *Shoah* could be subsumed under the general heading of evil, its scope and horrific character lead many to find all theodicies unsatisfying. Post-Holocaust theology ranges from 'Death of God' theories to 'limited God' accounts, to theories which see *hester panim* (the hiding of the Divine face/presence as integral to Jewish experience), to free will theodicies (Katz 2005).

Divine command and reasons for the commandments

The question of whether God's commands conform to an independent standard of rationality and ethics can be traced back to Plato's *Euthyphro*. Judaism needed to consider not only whether 'ethical' laws were commanded because they are independently right, but also whether ritual laws were independently rational or were instead unrationalizable divine fiats.

A classic text found in the Talmud and Midrash (e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Yoma*, 67b) distinguishes two categories of laws or *mitzvot* ('commandments'; singular, *mitzvah*). The commandments in one class are such that 'had they not been written, they ought to have been written.' These laws are called *mishpatim* and they include prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, theft, murder, and adultery. The sages' characterization of *mishpatim* as 'had they not been written, they ought to have

been written' clearly implies that these commandments have merit independently of their having been commanded. How different this sounds from Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov, who declared that 'if there is no God, everything is permitted!' The sages clearly accepted the idea that certain precepts are binding without divine decree, or, at least, are rational in the sense of having social utility. To be sure, the text does not make clear whether we could have arrived at these precepts on our own. Perhaps we appreciate their wisdom or utility or ethical force only once presented with them (just as one might appreciate the brilliance and cogency of a mathematical proof or scientific theory without being able to arrive at it on one's own). But the drift of the passage at least is to establish a non-revelational grounding for certain revealed commands.

According to an important study (Sagi and Statman 1995) Jewish thinkers did not accept 'divine command theories' in an ontological form, but only an epistemological one. Almost universally, Sagi and Statman claim, Jewish thinkers denied that 'right' means commanded by God and 'wrong' means prohibited by God. Rather, they held that an act is commanded by God because it is (independently) right and is prohibited by God because it is (independently) wrong. Nevertheless, the authors of the study argue, Jewish tradition has its share of epistemological divine command theorists, that is, of theorists who maintain that without divine revelation we cannot *know* of certain actions that they are right (or alternatively wrong).

Saadia Gaon (882–942), the father of medieval Jewish philosophy, offers an interesting middle ground between those who say we can know ethical truths without revelation and those who say we cannot (Saadia Gaon 1948: 145–7). For Saadia, the general ethical truth that it is wrong to steal is known to reason, but to apply this precept we need to know what constitutes acquisition of property. Given that several criteria are possible, divine guidance is needed to furnish this knowledge. Similarly, although 'adultery is wrong' is known to reason, we need divine guidance as to what constitutes marriage, or else we cannot apply the law. It is not clear whether for Saadia the details that supply the guidance are backed up by some logical argument, albeit one we cannot come to on our own, or whether the details as to what constitutes ownership or marriage are arbitrarily selected; social cohesion requires that some choice be made, but not that a *particular* choice be made. Interestingly, Maimonides, a great champion of the law's rationality, maintained at least in the case of certain rituals that details of the law might be picked arbitrarily because there is no good reason to prefer one alternative to the other – a Buridan's ass situation, in which a donkey starves to death because he can't decide between two equally appetizing bales of hay. He asserted that rationality requires at times selecting a particular alternative with no reason (Maimonides 1963: 508–10).

So much for *mishpatim*, the first category of *mitzvot* considered by the sages. The second category is *hukkim* (generally translated as 'statutes, decrees'; singular, *hok*), defined alternatively as laws such that 'Satan challenges them,' or 'the evil inclination challenges them,' or 'the nations of the world challenge them.' Examples include the laws against wearing garments containing both wool and linen, the law of the red heifer used in ancient times to purify those who had come into contact with the dead,

and the law of the goat sent (in the times of the Temple) to the wilderness on Yom Kippur to carry the Israelites' sins.

The aforementioned definitions of *hok* are ambiguous. The nations, Satan, or the evil inclination challenge these commandments because they seem to lack rhyme or reason. Are they right that the commandments have no reason? Or do they have a reason we cannot fathom? Or, perhaps, a reason that most people cannot fathom but a select few can?

The great medieval biblical and talmudic commentator Rashi (1040–1105) held that *hukkim* have no reasons and are simply 'decrees.' But among the giants who resisted this view were Moses Maimonides and Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270). The latter insisted that to the extent the sages called certain laws (the *hukkim)* 'decrees,' they did so not in the sense of 'arbitrary fiat,' but in the sense that a king may issue a decree to his subjects *for a reason* even though his subjects do not understand and appreciate the reason (Nahmanides 1971–6, II: 294–5 [Lev. 19: 19]). Maimonides' rejection of the 'no reason for *hukkim*' view was based, *inter alia*, on a Plato-like argument that God, on the view in question, seems to be acting arbitrarily and irrationally. Divine command theorists might think that this state of affairs elevates God (it celebrates his power and liberty), but Maimonides thinks it demotes God by portraying him as irrational and having no purpose behind his commands (Maimonides 1963: 523–4). This argument assumes that wisdom rather than will is the key attribute of God; classical divine command theorists, in contrast, have made will and power central (Idziak 1979: 8–10).

Some Jewish philosophers held that all *hukkim*, while rational, have reasons that are inaccessible to the human mind, others that the reasons were knowable at least by the elite. Numerous explanations have been constructed for ritual laws: these laws place God before one always and lead to a life of holiness; they bring one closer to God in a mystical sense; they and all their particulars symbolically convey metaphysical or ethical truths (see Hirsch 1981; Stern 1987); they – this is a theurgic Kabbalistic explanation – improve the cosmos by uniting different aspects of the Godhead; they force you to learn discipline, thereby making you more fit to observe the ethical laws. Some of these explanations imply that only a particular set of ritual laws can effect the desired end. Others suggest that any set of laws will do. There is a difference, then, between explaining why there are any commandments at all, and explaining why *these*.

The explanations canvassed so far have in common the fact that they are intended to provide the true or real reason behind the commandment: to pinpoint what God had in mind. In the twentieth century, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik questioned the feasibility of this task. According to Soloveitchik, we cannot know 'why' God issued a certain command, or 'how' commandments like purification rites work, but we can answer 'what': what moral I can extract for myself, what meaning the commandment has for me. Advocates of Soloveitchik's approach might wish to refine it by placing limits on what can count as an appropriate subjective reason (Soloveitchik 1986: 91–9; 1989: 91–9).

Returning to 'ethical' laws, the reader may have noticed that I conducted my discussion without reference to the most famous argument that God might issue

immoral commands. I refer to the evidence of the narrative of the *akedah*, the episode in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22). In *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard understood the story as affirming that God might command the immoral, though Kierkegaard was not a divine command theorist (he couldn't be, since he sees Abraham as experiencing a *conflict* between religion and morality). Kierkegaard's understanding of the narrative as a conflict between divine command and human morality, however, confronts certain problems. One is that at the end of the story Abraham is commanded not to go through with the sacrifice. The other is that Abraham may not have seen a moral conflict: child sacrifice was common at the time, and the practice makes a certain sense: to be devoted to God is to be ready to sacrifice your most precious 'possession.' Hence the *akedah* text does not support Kierkegaard's reading. The point of the narrative may well be, precisely, that God does not want child sacrifice – because it is immoral (Levenson 1998).

Free will

The challenges to belief in free will and responsibility boil down to four, two emanating from religious teaching and two emanating from secular considerations. The four are: divine foreknowledge; divine planning (preordaining); environmental causes of behavior; and biological causes of behavior. The Bible seems indifferent to such conundra, but philosophers are not.

With regard to divine foreknowledge – the question of how S can act freely if God knows in advance how S will act – Jewish philosophy presents, as is to be expected, a range of theories, including, for example, the idea that God is outside of time and the thesis that rather than God's knowledge determining our actions, God knows what he knows *because* of our actions. Maimonides held that divine knowledge is different in kind from human knowledge, dissolving the problem. Levi Gersonides, as we saw earlier, objected to the doctrine of equivocal predication. Instead, Gersonides proposed a bold solution that God does not (fore)know 'future contingents,' statements about future human free choices; indeed they are unknowable, even lack a truth value in the present. God is still omniscient because he knows all that is know*able* (Feldman 1987: 80–5; Gersonides 1987: 89–137). (For a different and carefully argued reading of Gersonides, see Manekin 1998; for a modified use of Gersonides' view, see Cahn 1967.)

With regard to divine planning, a *locus classicus* is the story of Joseph and his brothers. Since God had foretold to Abraham that 'your posterity will be strangers in another land' and would be afflicted there (Gen. 15), God's plan required that Jacob's sons descend to Egypt. The brothers meet up with Joseph; they throw Joseph in a pit; eventually he falls into the hands of Egyptians; then, through a series of seeming coincidences, Joseph becomes viceroy of Egypt and his brothers come down to Egypt to procure food during a famine. After Joseph reveals his identity, the entire family ends up in Egypt, the eventual result being the realization of the prediction revealed to Abraham. Now given there was a divine plan, it would appear that the brothers were influenced by God to throw Joseph into the pit and to cause his being sold,