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## Preface

This book is an introduction to religion intended especially for college students, but also for other interested readers. It offers an appreciative and critical understanding of one of the most important dimensions of human life. It is not an exhaustive survey of world religions, nor does it follow the format of those textbooks that seek to cover as many religions as possible. Instead it isolates and reflects upon what informed students of the subject take to be the essential features of religious existence. I have provided sketches of the main traditions (in Part I), but I do so in order to make room (in Parts II, III, and IV) for a theoretical and evaluative examination of the central aspects of religion.

I would like to express my gratitude to Chester Gillis for reading the manuscript and to my wife Evelyn for her many helpful corrections. Special thanks also to Donald Brophy of Paulist Press for his kind encouragement and wise editorial advice.

I should alert readers to several stylistic and structural features in the text. First, for the sake of simplicity I have not used diacritical marks in transliterating terms employed by the Asian religions. Second, I use the ecumenical designation "B.C.E." (Before the Common Era) instead of the more traditional "B.C." (Before Christ). Third, biblical citations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the *Revised Standard Version*. And finally, from the very start I interpret religion in terms of the idea of "mystery." If this notion seems too enigmatic to some readers they may wish, before proceeding too far into the text, to scan Chapter 10 where I describe at length what I mean by it.

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# Introduction

Picture the following scenes. Cave dwellers in Western Europe 35,000 years ago are burying one of the children of their tribe, taking pains to arrange the body in a deliberate pattern, and adorning it with special ornaments and pigmentation. An aged ascetic in India sits quietly in contemplation at the edge of a forest. A Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka walks effortlessly along a pebbled pathway meditating in a monastery garden. A prophet in ancient Israel announces the coming of the "Day of the Lord."

Such gestures usually go by the name "religion." And the purpose of this book is to make some sense of this amazingly diverse and persistent phenomenon. Activities like those just mentioned have been going on for thousands of years, and in spite of the modern suspicion of religion they are likely to continue for a lot longer. For years, too, scholars have been trying to understand religion, but they are still at a loss to say exactly what it is. Nonetheless, they keep trying, and the present book continues the effort to understand what is perhaps the most distinctively human of all our habits.

Why do people engage in religious activity? What do they hope to accomplish by such exceptional modes of consciousness and conduct? What good does religion do? Is it any longer an essential aspect of human existence, even granted that it has certainly been prevalent throughout human history? Is it an honest approach to life, or is it perhaps an escapist business that we can easily dispense with today? What connection does it have to morality, to the way we decide what is good or bad, to the way we behave? Are its many ideas about "another dimension" or an "ultimate reality" truthful or illusory? Is it compatible with reason and science? Does religion make us any happier than we would otherwise be? How does it link up with the rest of life? These are some of the questions we shall address in this text.

### The Distinctiveness of Religion

I doubt that I would be using the term "religion," or that the reader would have any idea of what I am talking about, unless we had already tacitly agreed that there is indeed something distinct about the phenomena to which the word "religion" seems to be pointing. But it is not easy to put a finger on exactly what this is. Literally thousands of scholars have attempted to define religion, always with less than satisfying results. No matter how carefully they "define" religion, other experts will eagerly indicate what the definition has left out.

Nevertheless, our detaching a certain type of activity from the totality of human life and labelling it "religion" is given considerable assistance by the fact that such gestures as those four listed at the beginning are already clearly different from "ordinary" ways of behaving. They stand out on their own, at least as far as our modern way of looking at things is concerned. It is difficult to avoid noticing their quality of being "set apart." Religious activity often takes place in what seems to be artificially contrived time, space or modes of consciousness. Sacred places, liturgical calendars, meditative moods, extraordinary fastings, self-denials, exceptional private or communal actions, praying, sacrificing, meditating, prophesying—all of these give the impression of being stylized deviations from normality. They have a quality of caricature, of play-acting and sometimes unnaturalness to them. They stand out so obviously from the everyday that it is difficult to avoid giving such commotion a special name. In our time this name is "religion."

Actually "religion" is a relatively modern concept. The ancient world had no word for what we are calling religion, partly because religion blended so intimately with the rest of life and did not contrast sharply with profane or ordinary life the way it does today. It was not as noticeable, perhaps because it was so pervasive. It is our modern sense of a mundane or secular sphere that makes religious activity stand forth more obtrusively to us. We want to define and understand religion more carefully than religious people of the past would have been interested in doing.

In order to arrive at any instructive interpretation of religion we need first to look at a range of "data" from which we can draw such insight. Obviously we cannot explore many of the manifestations of religion in this text. We have to be quite selective. But in order to gain some breadth, in Part I we shall look at four radically distinct groupings of religious experience as the basis for our investigations. In Part II we shall abstract four distinct "ways" of being religious from the brief descriptions presented in Part I. Then in Part III we shall begin to ask "why" people have turned to religion. There we shall see how religion fits into and grows out of other,

more "natural," aspects of human life and awareness. And finally, in Part IV we shall ask some critical questions about religion, in particular whether its reference to an "ultimate" reality or an "ultimate" kind of fulfillment is a plausible interpretation of reality and human existence. In order to sharpen these critical questions we shall bring religion into conversation with modern skepticism.

### Dialogue with Skepticism

We cannot discuss religion seriously today without being aware of the suspicion in which it is held by much modern thought. And so I shall situate my discussion of religion in the context of a "conversation" with modern secularism and skepticism. Such an approach is more fruitful than one that ignores the fact that for many people today "religion" has completely lost its meaning and appeal. Taking seriously the arguments of skeptics and critics of religion may actually lead us to a deeper appreciation of religion. This will help us in our efforts to extract what is essential to it and allow us better to discriminate the wholesome from the unwholesome aspects of it.

It is no secret that secularism now threatens religion in many parts of the world. Modern science, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment have together produced a new preoccupation with our "immediate environment," or with what some religious people might call "this world." As a result of modern infatuation with the exclusively "secular" realm, the province of "mystery" upon which religions have been nurtured seems to have diminished or disappeared altogether, and the world of immediacy, the one available to us in ordinary experience and scientific inquiry, has been enshrined as the only real one. The religious outlook seems to have

| I<br>Expressions of<br>Religion | II<br>Ways of<br>Religion | III<br>Aims of<br>Religion | IV<br>Critiques of<br>Religion |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Early Religion                  | Sacramentalism            | Reassurance                | Secularism                     |
| Hinduism                        | Mysticism                 | Mystery                    | Skepticism                     |
| Buddhism                        | Silence                   | Adventure                  | Nihilism                       |
| Prophetic<br>Religion           | Action                    | Morality                   | Humanism                       |

lost its luster for many sincere people today, especially in the academic world. Thus we cannot understand religion in a satisfactory way, even in an introductory work such as this one, without taking a look also at the modern distaste for or indifference to religion.

With modern skepticism we must face the fact that the story of religion has not been a uniformly edifying one. After all, religion is something done by human beings, all of whom are inclined at times to narrow-mindedness and evil. That their religious life and ideas often display tendencies toward childishness, resentment, escapism, ethnocentrism, sexism, elitism, absolutism and various forms of oppression or exclusivism should not completely surprise us. So we need not close our eyes, as we often do, to the dark side of religion. Alfred North Whitehead is correct when he says that religion "... has emerged into human experience mixed with the crudest fancies of barbaric imagination." But he may also be correct in observing that the religious vision is "our one ground for optimism," and that "apart from it, human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience." (Whitehead, 1967 a, p. 192) In other words, we may seek the wholesome, enlivening core of religion and distinguish this from its shadowier side. Indeed that is exactly what authentic religious life is all about: a search for the essence, kernel, substance or depth of any religious tradition into which we may have been born or with which we may have become associated. Genuine religiousness requires a constant search for the essence of religion. And some acquaintance with modern skepticism is today an important aspect of this search.

### Religion as Route-finding

One of the most accessible ways to understand religion in an introductory way is offered by the British scholar John Bowker. He sees religion as a "route-finding" through the severest barriers interfering with the continuity of human life. Religions formulate "ways" to move us past the most frustrating "compounds of limitations" that we have to deal with as we make our way through life. Obstacles or limits to the continuity of human life arise in extraordinarily frustrating ways at times, and religion is a response to the most unbending of the limitations that interfere with human life-ways. Many limits, of course, can eventually be hurdled or pushed back by non-religious techniques. But then the focus of religion will shift toward the *most stubborn obstacles* to the continuity of life, the obvious ones being suffering and death, the unrepeatable nature of the past, the capriciousness of fate, the feelings of powerlessness, guilt and

meaninglessness. And it is especially in connection with these apparently intransigent roadblocks that the kind of route-finding we call religion begins to take distinct form. (Bowker, 1973) Eventually religion discerns a realm of what we shall call "mystery" looming up beyond life's limits. And in various ways it seeks to connect us to this mystery in which alone fulfillment is deemed possible.

It is quite easy to recognize "religions." Their symbols, rites and teachings, though connected with the rest of life, tend to cluster in higher density around what are identified as the *ultimate* limits to our quest for perfection. The function of religions is to fortify our trust that there is some "way through" the barriers that block the road toward ultimate fulfillment. And the plausibility of religions, as Bowker points out, depends upon the effectiveness of the paths they make through the most difficult obstacles. This interpretation of religion as a kind of route-finding, even though it does not take into account every aspect of religion, cuts right to the heart of our subject. And thinking of religion in terms of the "limits" of our experience will also help us to locate it more precisely in terms of the other aspects of our lives.

### Why Study Religion?

If you have read this morning's paper, or followed the course of world events recently, you may have noticed how often the conflicts that dominate the news result directly from the high degree of importance people attribute to their own beliefs and traditions. It is obvious, but it is also worth repeating often, that people take their beliefs, ideologies and especially their religions very seriously. The conflicts between Iran and Iraq, Israel and the PLO, Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Christians and Marxists in various parts of the world, Sikhs and Hindus in India, fundamentalists and liberals, creationists and evolutionists, and countless other such battles—these would not occur unless people put great stake in preserving a way of thinking, a tradition, a set of meanings that provides the basis for their way of life. More often than not there is a strongly religious dimension at the heart of international, social and political conflicts.

If we fail to understand the religious convictions that give purpose to the lives of others and ourselves, there can be little hope for resolving many of the disputes that now endanger human life on earth. Some scholars have even gone so far as to propose that the major source of world strife is our failure to understand the religions and ideologies of others. Bowker, for example, notices that religions, like nations, are typically "systems"

possessing distinct boundaries. These boundaries, clearly defined by traditions, scriptures and doctrines, are considered essential in order to give a definiteness and stability to the religious system and to keep it from being diluted into a vagueness that would fail to motivate its adherents. Most religions have deemed it necessary therefore to defend and fortify their doctrinal boundaries. They must do so in order to ensure the transmission of their highly valued information about ultimate issues on to the next generation.

Hence religions have by and large been rather conservative bodies. They have placed enormous significance on preserving for posterity the specific sense of route-finding that they have found successful in combating the threat of disorder. For example, official teachers in the Roman Catholic Church seek to exclude certain theologians who propose disturbing new interpretations of traditional teachings. Or Islamic revolutionaries chastise religious thinkers who want to accommodate Islam to the modern world. Such reactions illustrate religion's sensitivity to the invasion of any alternative visions that appear to challenge the "successful" approach of a specific tradition. It is not surprising then that "border incidents" would arise when one view of the most important side of life brushes up against an alternative religious or secular vision. Conflicts occur largely because people take their religions so seriously. Their religions are *important* to them, and maybe we have not yet fully understood why this is so. The search for such understanding is one very good reason to study religion. (Bowker, 1988)

We have failed to appreciate the importance of religion to Muslim terrorists, Sikh militants or Buddhist pacifists, often fancying that only our own approaches can be truly successful in negotiating the limits placed on human experience. It may not even occur to us that others have defined or identified the "compound of limitations" and the most significant questions that give rise to their religious systems in a way that differs considerably from our own. And so we fail to grasp the most important dimension of their lives. For this reason alone the study of religion is perhaps one of the most important components of any serious educational process.

But there are also other reasons for studying religion. One of the most important is simply that of wanting to know how far our environment extends. What are the full dimensions of our surroundings? Religions have almost universally made at least some kind of reference to "another dimension," one that we shall refer to as "mystery." They have been dissatisfied with any suggestion that the immediate environment, or the superficial world of appearances, is the sum total of reality. In one way or another they have pushed beyond whatever "seems" to be the case or whatever "seems" to limit our lives. For the most part they have not advocated a flight out of

life and into the "beyond." In fact, contrary to what many modern caricatures of religion have maintained, religions generally attempt to reconcile people to the facts of their existence here and now. But more often than not they provide this contextualization by speaking of a realm of beyondness, of mystery, of "transcendence" (from the Latin, *transcendo*, "to pass beyond") or of ultimate perfection. This transcendent realm or experience is not always a special or clearly defined "place." Nor is it always considered a scene of survival after death. At least originally most of the major religions were not terribly obsessed with personal immortality. But the great religious teachers do share a premonition that what we ordinarily perceive to be the limits to reality can "somehow" be gotten beyond. And they think it essential for our happiness or "enjoyment" *here and now* that we acquire the awareness of an ultimate environment, or perhaps an extraordinary "enlightenment," that lies "beyond" our immediate experience. As we shall see, this impression of some type of "beyond" began to dawn very early in the history of religion. And it reached its most intense pitch in the centuries immediately preceding the Common Era (somewhere around 600 B.C.E.). What are we to make today of this quest for a realm of mystery or perfection situated beyond the immediacy of the here and now?

Other reasons for studying religion may be more personal, and each individual will approach the subject matter of this book with different questions and expectations. One of the most obvious has to do with our own search for identity and meaning. Most readers probably already have some connection with one religious tradition or another, although I am not going to presume that this is true of all. And our traditions (even if they are purely

#### APPROXIMATE RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION WORLDWIDE (BY PERCENTAGE)

|                                     |       |
|-------------------------------------|-------|
| Christians                          | 24 %  |
| Muslims                             | 14 %  |
| Hindus                              | 12.6% |
| Buddhists                           | 6.3%  |
| Jews                                | .4%   |
| Others: religious and non-religious | 42.7% |

secular ones) have given us some sense of who we are and what our goals in life may be. But these aims are always in flux and never fully defined. The feeling of being "unfinished" is universal, and it may lead at times toward a wider vision of ourselves in relation to the rest of the world. There may be no better way of seeking such expansiveness than by a sympathetic "passing over" into the religious world of others. (Dunne, 1972) We may have to make our way through the firm boundaries of our own religious system at times in order to get a perspective both on it and on the others that make up our complex world. Learning to appreciate what others have identified as the basic limits on life can help us in our own efforts toward self-definition. Traveling with them as they seek religiously to transcend life's limits can be a deeply rewarding personal journey.

Finally, the serious study of religions, our own along with those of others, may itself be one of the most important ways in which the ageless religious quest wends its way forward in our own time. In fact, contemporary interest in "comparative religions" or "world religions" or the "history of religions" is itself a fundamentally religious concern and not mere curiosity. For it has been aroused by a new awareness of limitations, as have all creative religious developments in the past. In this case it is a recognition of the *limitations of our own traditions*, a new awareness that our own religious systems with their firm boundaries may in some way be confining and restraining us even while providing a needed impression of order, security, and point of departure.

### Religion as a Response to Suffering

Religions seek to provide pathways through the "limits" that interfere with the human longing for ultimate fulfillment. We can understand what is distinctive about the various religious teachings if we single out a universally troublesome obstacle, and observe how it is surmounted by the particular kind of route-finding characteristic of each tradition. And since in one way or another the problem of suffering is the concern of all religion, we shall be especially interested in how it is addressed in each case. Since each of us knows at least something about suffering, and has sought some way through it, such a focus will serve to draw us also into the circles of meaning sketched by religions as a response to the problem of pain.

The fact of death is the extreme instance of human suffering. And the entire story of religion, in one way or another, responds to this most definitive of limits. More than any other limit, our own sense of having-to-die draws us into conversation with all the religious traditions. Approach-

ing our subject in terms of the problem of suffering and death cannot communicate all the relevant features of a religion, but it may get us initially involved with it.

### Religion and Theology

Religion is not exactly the same thing as theology. Theology is reflection on religion, usually undertaken by those already committed to a religious system. Theology seeks to understand a religion in terms that will communicate its teachings to a specific audience. Depending on what that audience is, theology will take on different shapes at different times.

Religion first comes to expression in the "naive" form of symbols, myths and rituals. But because the symbolic language of religion is never completely clear, it invites constant interpretation. It is the function of theology to provide this interpretation. Symbols beg to be interpreted, and so religion inevitably gives rise to theology. Sometimes it is difficult to say where religion leaves off and theology begins, since they are so closely related. But a good sign of theological work is the "codification" of a religious system into a formalized set of teachings. These teachings are usually called *dogma*. The various "creeds" of religions are results of theological reflection. For example, the Nicene Creed recited by Christians ("I believe in God, the Father Almighty . . .," "I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord," etc.) is the end product of enormous and painful theological discussion about the meaning of the basic religious symbols of Christian faith. The "Five Pillars" of Islam and the "Four Noble Truths of Buddhism" are also the result of the codification process undertaken by theological reflection.

But theology is not only concerned with producing formulas and dogmas. It is also at times *critical* reflection on the meaning of religious symbolism and teaching. Theology is the work of religious people who like the rest of us have inquiring and critical minds and who apply their reason to the understanding of religion. Sometimes theology leads to the refinement of symbols and sometimes it leads to further confusion. But it cannot be avoided by religions. Religions demand continuing reflection and criticism, partly because of their extravagant claims, and partly because they tend at times to close themselves off from alternative perspectives.

What we are calling religion in this book includes both the primordial symbolic representations of a sense of "mystery" as well as theological reflections on and codifications of the symbols.

### CHRONOLOGY

|                    |                                                            |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| 125,000–30,000 BCE | Neanderthals                                               |
| 33,000–8,000       | Cro-Magnons                                                |
| 2000–1750          | Period of biblical patriarchs                              |
| 1750–1200          | Aryans invade India; beginnings of Vedic religion          |
| 1250               | Israel's Exodus from Egypt                                 |
| 1000               | Zoroaster                                                  |
| 800–400            | The "Axial" Age                                            |
|                    | The Upanishads                                             |
| 700's              | The classical biblical prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah |
| 500's              | Mahavira (origins of Jainism)                              |
|                    | Gautama, the Buddha                                        |
|                    | Lao-tzu (Tao Te Ching)                                     |
|                    | Confucius                                                  |
| 165                | Maccabean revolt in Israel                                 |
| 6–26 CE            | Jesus of Nazareth                                          |
|                    | The Conversion of Paul                                     |
| 60–125             | The Writing of the gospels                                 |
| 354–430            | St. Augustine                                              |
| 570–632            | Muhammad                                                   |
| 788–838            | Shankara                                                   |
| 750–1258           | Abbasid Caliphate                                          |
| 1095–1291          | The Crusades                                               |
| 1225–1274          | Thomas Aquinas                                             |
| 1483–1546          | Martin Luther                                              |
| 1491–1556          | Ignatius Loyola                                            |
| 1509–1564          | John Calvin                                                |
| 1500–1700          | Mogul Empire                                               |
| 1600's             | Origins of modern science                                  |
| 1859               | Darwin's <i>Origin of Species</i>                          |
| 1817–1892          | Bahau'llah (founder of Ba'hai)                             |
| 1962–65            | Second Vatican Council                                     |

### A Personal Note

Recent studies of textbooks used in colleges and high schools have concluded that students usually find them intolerably dull. The main reason for this is that textbooks often simply list facts without providing any scheme for interpreting the data or without hazarding any value judgments that might pull the students into a lively conversation with the subject matter. I have found the same to be true of many introductory surveys of religion. Having used some of these in my own classes, I have often wished that in addition to presenting the important data about religion, the authors would risk some theoretical interpretation of it. I shall try to avoid here the pallid neutrality of the typical introductory text. This book will not only set forth a scheme for making sense of religion, but it will also seek criteria for determining what is and what is not authentically religious.

That I do find something "authentic" in religion will become clear as we go along. But will this favorable disposition toward religion on my part exclude the possibility of objectivity? Would not a more neutral approach, by someone perhaps indifferent to religion and personally unmoved by it, be more trustworthy? And would not a more dispassionate approach allow the data to emerge without being skewed by an a priori favorable assessment? I have to admit that a lot can be learned about religion employing such a detached method. And this text will utilize the results of scientifically disinterested studies of religion. But, important as such external accounts might be, I think that religion can be discussed more "objectively" by someone who is personally excited by it as well as willing to learn from those who are outsiders to it. I trust that students of music would not want to be instructed by a teacher who was tone deaf. People who cannot resonate with a melody, or who remain unmoved by it, might be able to tell you much about music theory or the physics of harmony. But they could not lead you very far inside the rich world of music.

Likewise those who are interested in religion only from the point of view of psychology, history, anthropology or sociology and other "scientific" approaches may not have the last word about it. Perhaps they should not have the first word either. For that reason I have gambled that students and other readers of this book, including those who will disagree with my interpretations and conclusions, will not be put off by the fact that I am generally stirred by the substance of human religious expression. In certain areas of knowledge such personal involvement is not an obstacle to, but a condition of, objectivity. Religion, I think, is one of them.

4.

## Prophetic Religion

There is another type of "axial" religion that takes a radically different approach to the problem of suffering from either Hinduism or Buddhism. And it offers a correspondingly unique interpretation of the mystery to which religions point. This type is represented by the Near Eastern traditions that originated in association with a man known as Abraham. These traditions are Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They all claim Abraham as their father, and this common ancestry is of utmost significance in shaping their distinctive character.

The name of Abraham is inseparable from the theme of divine promise for a glorious future, a doctrine held by all three traditions. The claim to Abraham by Judaism, Christianity and Islam binds them together in a shared vision of hope for the future. They all have a special relationship to the theme of *promise*. And because of the prominence in these three traditions of the figure of the "prophet" who proclaims the divine promise, they may be called *prophetic* religions.

### The Meaning of Promise

In a broad sense, it seems, most religion is characterized by the anticipation of "salvation," fulfillment or liberation. Because of the universal experience of guilt, suffering and death, people have naturally sought deliverance from their sorrow. And religions have captured people's attention because they provide "ultimate" ways to freedom from suffering. But they have not all portrayed the passage to liberation in the same way. The "way of union" typified by the *Upanishads*, for example, is not the same as the "way of renunciation" taught by the Buddha, or the "way of sacrifice"

prevalent in early religion. And in the "prophetic" religions going back to Abraham there is yet another way. We may call it the "way of *hope*."

Some kind of "longing" for deliverance is a feature of other religious types also. The kind of yearning we find in Abrahamic religions, however, opens up an aspect of mystery barely noticeable in many other traditions. This new dimension is that of the "future." And an intuition of the "futura-*city*" of the sacred sets these religions apart from prehistoric religion and, to some extent at least, from the Asian traditions. Prehistoric religion was captivated by the cycle of seasons. Its proximity to the animals and the earth filled its religious life with a symbolic and mythic consciousness based on the regularities of nature. The axial religions of Asia and China also maintained a close connection to nature's rhythms and cycles. The prophetic religions, on the other hand, represent a departure from nature-oriented religion. Fueled by unprecedented hope in a future fulfillment, they move from nature out into *history* as the sphere in which liberation may be sought. Not that they abandon nature altogether, for their followers still cultivate the earth and remain grateful for its abundance. But their God is primarily a God of historical happenings, one who holds out fulfillment in the future, who calls for trust in the divine *promise*.

The response to suffering in this religious type lies especially in the hope for future deliverance. Such looking toward the future has been called *eschatology*, and so Judaism, Christianity and Islam are also known as eschatological religions. They have all been influenced at least indirectly by another ancient eschatological religion, Zoroastrianism. The term "eschatological" comes from the Greek word *eschaton*, meaning final or last. And "eschatology" strictly speaking implies a concern about the "last things," such as death, the end of the world, and immortality. But in the broader meaning given here, eschatology designates simply the hopeful looking forward to a future salvation.

To people whose consciousness has been steeped in eschatology the answer to suffering lies in a *hope* that the future will bring deliverance. This hope for a future salvation takes the finality out of present suffering and makes it bearable. Without such hope pain might indeed be intolerable, and for that reason eschatological religions provide their followers with a rich variety of images of a future salvation. The mystery of reality here is pictured as a personal, caring God intent not only upon delivering people from suffering, but also establishing for them a realm of fulfillment and enjoyment surpassing all their present expectations. This idea of God diverts the religious instinct from its tendency to seek fulfillment in union with nature alone, and directs it toward a less secure, but ultimately more satisfying horizon of an unknown historical future. For this kind of religion the liberation sought by humans may be anticipated by hope in the

future, because it is in the realm of the future that God's reality most fully resides. The God of promissory religion has "future as his very essence." (Moltmann, 1967, 16)

The religions of promise have no illusion that the ways of liberation they set forth will be easy, and they know that people will not readily take the risk of trusting in an uncertain future. This kind of religion does not appeal to the human instinct for security. Nestling down in the sureness of nature's rhythms and regularities, or escaping from history into some "other world," might provide more immediate refuge from the hazards of living on this earth. Nature and the "next world" might provide a haven from the "terrors of history." But Abrahamic religions are not content with this clinging to the security of predictable natural rhythms, or with religious escapism. Instead they embrace the more uncertain realm of history and its future as their proper terrain.

### Abraham

It is hardly a coincidence that this promissory vision of existence began in the dreams of a semi-nomadic people. Semi-nomads are required by seasonal changes to move their herds and families constantly in order to find water and food. Abraham, the father of prophetic religion, was a "wandering Aramean" who made his livelihood by transferring family and livestock from one place to another in search of sustenance. In the consciousness of such a wanderer there is never any final settling down securely into one spatially limited location. The nomadic life breeds a spirit of restlessness, stirring families and tribes from place to place in quest of greener pastures. In such a context the future becomes the dominant focus of attention. And in such a setting the religious "way of hope" was born.

As the story goes, there was a man from Ur of Chaldea (in Mesopotamia) named Abram who lived in the early part of the second millennium B.C.E. He apparently travelled along the caravan routes linking Ur, Haran, Damascus, Shechem, Hebron and Egypt, in what has been called "the Fertile Crescent." According to the biblical accounts Abram experienced a summons from God to leave his ancestral home and go forth to a new life of promise. We do not know exactly what happened, for the biblical stories are colored over with the hopes and ideals of later periods of Israel's history. But it is hardly stretching things historically to assume that Abram felt the mystery of life as a future promise beckoning him to an adventure into the uncertainty of a whole new way of existing. The calling and the promise are put this way in the book of *Genesis*:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you the families of the earth shall bless themselves. (*Genesis* 12: 1-3)

In the course of his long life, according to biblical portraits, the promise of God to Abram was repeated over and over. "To your descendants I will give this land." (12:7) "All the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants forever." (13:15) "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your descendants be." (15:5) "Behold my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations." (17:4) And when Abram was ninety-nine years old, to signify the transformation of his life into one of fidelity to the promise, his God bestowed on him a new name:

"No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." (17:5-8)

We do not have to attribute all of these promissory experiences literally to the historical Abram, since they sometimes express the sentiments of later stages in the history of Israel. The point here is to notice the distinct quality of the kind of religion expressed in these passages. What stands out is the promise of *future* fulfillment, and this is the essence of the religious "way of hope." This is the emblem of "prophetic" religion.

If we keep before us the extravagance and utter gratuity of the divine promises made to Abraham, we will begin to gain some insight into the specific character of prophetic religion. It is one shaped from its very origin by the invitation to adventure, to trust, to open oneself to the mystery of the future. Like the Buddha, Abraham was invited to risk all for the sake of finding his goal. He had to leave his ancestral home and

journey into unknown parts. Abraham, too, followed a "path of renunciation," but one colored over by promise and hope.

Ultimate reality according to Abrahamic religion is conceived of not simply as the ultimate One behind appearances (like the Hindus' *Brahman*), nor as a *nirvana* that extinguishes desire (as in Buddhism). Ultimate reality is thought of as a personal God who makes and keeps promises. Abraham did absolutely nothing to merit the promise that came to him. It arrived out of the blue, completely unanticipated, bestowed as sheer gift, without conditions. Later theology has called this abundance by the name "grace" (from the same root as "gratuitous," implying completely free, with no strings attached). And it has given the name "revelation" to the events and verbal interpretations that unfold this promise. Revelation is not the transmission of "information" from heaven to earth, but something much less frivolous. It is simply the gift of God's future, made vivid in the sense of promise and the many images of hope that abound in prophetic religion.

In response to God's promise of a glorious future all Abraham is expected to do is to remain "faithful." That is, he must continue to believe, trust or hope in the fulfillment of the promise. Trust in God's promise, after the model of Abraham, is the core of authentic religion in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

We saw in our brief look at Buddhism that the story of Gautama provides an exemplar of persistence on the path toward final freedom from suffering. Such a story communicates enormous courage to his followers. Likewise for Jews, Christians and Muslims Abraham's enduring faith in God's promise is a model of endurance. Like Gautama with his temptations to cease struggling for ultimate peace, Abraham had many reasons not to continue his own adventure. For example, the infertility of his own wife Sarah hardly boded well for one who was promised so many descendants. But Abraham continued to trust, even when his own character flaws and the hostilities of others seemed to stand in the way.

His faith received its severest challenge when he was commanded, by the same God who had given him the promise of enormous progeny, to sacrifice his own son Isaac. In spite of the irrationality of such a demand, Abraham kept faith. He was about to comply with the horrifying directive to slaughter his own son when he was suddenly relieved of the obligation. The point of the story will be missed if we focus on what to us is the obvious barbarity of child sacrifice (just as we miss the point of the Buddha's "renunciation" if we dwell only on his "irresponsible" abandonment of wife and child). The story intends simply to show the ruggedness of Abraham's trust, that God remains faithful to the promise no matter how absurd the circumstances, and that no frustrations may legitimately cause

us to lose heart either. As such, this baffling story expresses the very soul of prophetic religion.

## 1. Judaism

Sometime between 1750 and 1250 B.C.E. a people known as the Hebrews lived in slavery in Egypt. Toward the end of this period a man called Moses rose up in their midst and led a revolt against the pharaoh's regime. Crossing over the "Sea of Reeds," he brought a band of followers into the Sinai desert, and from there they made their way to the land of Canaan. There they merged with the inhabitants and eventually became the biblical people of Judah and Israel. Moses himself never reached the "promised land," but his liberating efforts and his fidelity to the "promise" have made him the central ancestral figure in the religion known today as Judaism.

**Exodus.** Judaism traces its existence as a distinct nation or people not only to the remote figure of Abraham, but more immediately to the events surrounding the life of Moses. Judaism looks back again and again to the event of deliverance from Egypt known as the "Exodus." (This term comes from the Greek *ex* = out and *hodos* = way; once again we see how the metaphor "way" or "path" lies at the heart of a religion.) Accounts of this deliverance are given in the biblical book of *Exodus*. As in all religious narratives they appear highly exaggerated if we view them simply in terms of historical standards. Actually there may have been only a small group of people summoned to a new land and a new life of promise, but the book of *Exodus* makes it into a cast of thousands. It would be misreading the meaning of *Exodus*, though, if we concentrated only on the question, "did it actually happen that way?" For the book's purpose is to arouse trust in the future, and it looks back to the past liberation of the Hebrew people in order to provide a basis for our hoping here and now.

Having made their escape, Moses and his followers gave thanks to the deity who had brought them to freedom. Their name for this divine liberator was *Yahweh*. At the time of the Exodus (approximately 1250–1220 B.C.E.) the religious consciousness of the Hebrew people had not yet developed the axial period's intolerance of a multiplicity of deities, and so we cannot assume that "Yahweh" was originally the "one and only" transcendent being that he was later to become. Initially *Yahweh* was possibly the name of a tribal deity adopted by the Hebrews. But as their religious consciousness became transformed during the tumultuous centuries that

followed in Israel and Judah, the name "Yahweh" took on a more comprehensive character. And finally, during the axial period, Yahweh became for the children of Moses not only the liberator who fashioned them as a distinct people, but also the creator, savior and ruler of the entire world. Strict monotheism, intolerant of the existence of a plurality of deities, came into being in the history of Israel probably somewhere around the sixth century B.C.E.

**Sinai and the Covenant.** The book of *Exodus* tells of how, after the deliverance from Egypt, Moses and his people continued their relationship with the God of promise. In the desert, at Mount Sinai, Yahweh made a covenant with them. Once again the theme was that of promise. Yahweh offered the Hebrews a new life in a new land, and the Hebrews on their part were expected only to trust in the future fulfillment of this promise. They would express their trust by turning away from idols, which were incapable of giving them freedom, and placing their faith in Yahweh alone. The "Ten Commandments" given at Sinai as part of the covenant agreement are simply the unfolding of what it means to turn away from slavery to idols and toward a life based on the hope for future fulfillment.

As the Exodus journey continued, the Hebrews "murmured" in the desert, despairing of the promise and allowing their original trust to sag. They fell back into idolatry and gave up the dream of freedom. Moses struggled to have them remain faithful to the promise, but the people longed to return to Egypt, even to be slaves again, because in slavery there is a kind of security, while the call to freedom and the unknown future is full of risk. But in the end they reached their destiny, the promised land.

**The Prophets.** And after that the struggle against idolatry continued. The people consorted with the gods of nature and fertility. The fulfillment of history's promise always seemed too far off, whereas the gods of nature provided immediate satisfaction. But *prophets* rose up, individuals who spoke authoritatively on behalf of the God of Abraham and Moses, challenging the people to trust in the promise without hesitation. In the heat of their allegiance to Yahweh the prophets protested any flirtation with gods of nature, and they questioned the establishment of a monarchy that would tempt people to settle down in the false security of political power. For the prophets religion was anything but a rule of safety. Rather it was the quest for a perfection too grand to be contained in the present moment, a vision that only the uncertain future is adequate to hold.

The prophets called for a continual widening of what it means to be a

### THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

And God spoke all these words, saying,

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you.

"You shall not kill.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's."

Exodus 20: 1-17, Revised Standard Version.

community of hope by not allowing people to forget the poor and society's outcasts. Societies that exclude certain groups for the sake of homogeneity would lose their vitality, and so the prophets forbade such narrowing of social consciousness. They refused to let the children of Abraham forget the dark side of history, the forgotten sufferings of the past, the poverty of their own origins. The figure of the prophet stands out most clearly in its representation of the ideal of *justice*.

In the eighth century B.C.E., a young herdsman named Amos from the southern kingdom of Judah (which by that time had split off politically from the northern kingdom of Israel) experienced a "calling" to journey to Israel and speak out in the name of his God about the social injustice that had become rampant at the time. He considered himself only a humble farmer and had not sought the burdensome life of a prophet. But he was grasped by a compulsion for justice that he could not resist, and he must have concluded that nothing less than Yahweh himself could be the basis of his hatred of injustice. His words rang out with such divine authority that they were gathered by his followers and eventually recorded in the biblical book of *Amos*.

The prophet Amos observed that the Israelites "trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted." (2:7) He harangued them for presuming that their election by God amounted to a guarantee of safety. They had failed to keep their side of the Sinai agreement, and as a consequence the promised "Day of Yahweh" (one of many Israelite symbols of future fulfillment) would be for them a day of doom rather than joy. The divine promises made to Abraham and Moses were not to be taken lightly. They required that the people adopt the same concern for the needy as Yahweh had done in choosing Abraham and the Hebrews in the first place. But the people of Israel had failed to follow the encompassing and deepening implications of the election and covenant, and had greedily turned back onto themselves. Their neglect of justice had been a serious violation of the religious heritage of hope.

In Amos' prophetic outcries we see another instance of "axial" religion's critique of a piety based exclusively on ritual and sacrifice. About the same time that the *Upanishads* were growing weary of the Vedic rites, and the Buddha was reforming religion in India, the prophets of Judah and Israel were lamenting the superficial religiosity that warmed people's hearts without having anything to do with overthrowing social, political and economic evils. Perhaps nowhere in the classic sources of religion is there a more thunderous indictment of ineffective religiosity than in the book of Amos. Amos' God reproaches the people whose religious life revolved mainly around sacrificial rituals:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (*Amos* 5: 21-24)

Prophetic religion cannot separate worship of God from concern for the needy. Hope for the future must include the dreams of all, not just the aspirations of an elite minority. In the prophetic concern for justice we witness a standard that has been cherished by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. At the same time, though, we are forced to wonder how well the followers of these traditions have lived up to this ideal.

## 2. Christianity

From among the long line of prophetic figures in Israel's history, one in particular has had special significance for Christianity. His name is Jesus of Nazareth, and although there are many different ways of approaching him, here we situate him among the company of the prophets. For he too was a son of Abraham and Moses. He dwelt within the horizon of a religious consciousness molded by the sense of promise. In his ruminations on the idea of a God of promise he reached radical conclusions about the depth of this God's justice and compassion. After what appears to have been a long struggle (represented as a "desert experience" in the Christian scriptures), he arrived at his own version of "enlightenment." For Jesus it took the form of a vision of ultimate mystery as "loving father." The Aramaic term he used in reference to God was "abba," a term of endearment and deep familiarity. So intimate did this expression and Jesus' talk about God appear that it seemed to some of his contemporaries to be blasphemy.

In the tradition of the prophets Jesus interpreted God's love as all-inclusive, and to make his convictions known he consorted freely with the outcasts of society, with lepers, prostitutes and tax-collectors. Partly because his conduct and ideas offended those in power, and partly as the result of a complex set of social and political circumstances, he was eventually executed as a common criminal. Christians, however, have interpreted his death by crucifixion, the most potent symbol of a failed life available at

the time, as their own way to salvation. Jesus' death (the "way" of the cross) is their access to freedom.

The Gospels portray Jesus as one who spoke to all, including the poor and the outcasts, about his conviction that they are cared for in an unimaginably loving way by the mystery of God. He put his conviction of God's unwavering fidelity to humans into the form of "parables" in order to startle his listeners into his novel frame of reference. Such stories communicated the content of his religious sentiments in a way that no other medium could. One of the most familiar is the parable of the "Prodigal Son":

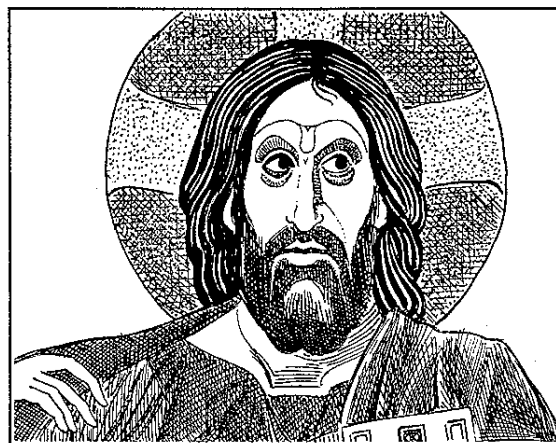
There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father. 'Lo, these many years I have

served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' (Luke 15:11-32)

Though this parable is well known, it is worth pointing out its continuity with the theme of divine extravagance and inclusiveness that we see in the story of Abraham and the prophets. It was impossible to sink any lower in society than to be a swine-herd and want to eat with the pigs. But the father in the parable is utterly non-judgmental toward the son whose life had disintegrated as the result of "unethical" behavior; the father even goes out to embrace the deviant son while the latter is "yet at a distance." In Jesus' teaching the "Kingdom of God" strains to the breaking point the boundaries of social reality in order to incorporate those elements that we normally exclude. The elder son represents an exclusivity at odds with Jesus' prophetic message. The father, however, embraces the lost son without conditions, requiring no apology and no expiation, and refusing to let him grovel in self-hatred. In this parable Jesus is apparently attempting to give his listeners a vivid sense of the nature of ultimate mystery as all-inclusive love.

**Christology.** Christians, like Jews, believe that God has been disclosed to them by way of a word of promise that makes possible for them a



*Christ, the  
All-Sovereign.  
Mosaic  
from the  
Church of the  
Dormition  
in Daphni,  
Greece.*

**Life of hope.** The obvious difference is that for Christians the person and life of Jesus are the decisive manifestation of God's promise. The Christian, then, cannot appropriately conceive of God without thinking of the man Jesus. Because of this religious requirement a complex theology, called "Christology," has emerged within the Christian religion. Christology looks upon Jesus as the Christ, the "anointed of God" (hence the name "Christianity"). Jesus, according to Christian teaching, is the "Word of God," the "Son of God," the fulfillment of the hope of all the ages. In the life and person of Jesus Christians perceive the very revelation of God's own being. Hence they speak of the "divinity" of Christ.

**Resurrection.** For Christians the death of Jesus is not a reason to despair but the beginning of a new hope. This hope is given expression in the accounts of Jesus' appearances to his followers after his death. The stories of these "appearances" in the *New Testament* (which together with the Jewish scriptures, the so-called "Old Testament," constitute the sacred writings of the Christian faith) are similar in style to the manifestations of God that we read about in the Jewish scriptures. That is, like God's appearances to Abraham and Moses, they are *promissory* in essence, opening up the sense of a new future for all who trust in the power of God to conquer even the threat of death. The Exodus from Egypt through the Reed Sea and into a new land is for Jews the perennial landmark on which they build their hope for the future. Christians add to this set of events the "exodus" of Jesus through death to new life as the basis of their hope.

### 3. Islam

In the seventh century after the birth of Jesus, the youngest of the world's great religious traditions, Islam, was born. It sprang from the same eschatological hope in the future that we have already seen in Judaism and Christianity. And though it is in serious conflict with them on some major doctrinal issues, it is linked to both by its adherence to the spirit of promise that goes back to Abraham. Its continuity with the great patriarch is traced through Abraham's son Ishmael rather than Isaac, but it is still the same Abraham, the one who remained faithful to God's promises. Thus Islam also exemplifies the religious "way of hope" and falls under the heading "prophetic religion."

Islam (which means "surrender" to God) developed as a reaction to the animism and polytheism that prevailed in the tribal existence of seventh century Arabia. As is often the case in tribal societies, the individual's

uniqueness was submerged in the identity of the tribe, and kinship ties overrode considerations of justice and the dignity of personality. Moreover, such a situation made for bitter conflict between and among the various kinship groups competing with each other in commerce. In the territories around Mecca ethnic and racial self-exaltation, slavery, greed and other forms of injustice prevailed. This chaotic situation awakened a prophetic figure named Muhammad (born around 570). And at the age of forty, after receiving revelations from his God, Allah, he dedicated the rest of his life to protest what he considered to be the source of the chaos, namely, idolatry.

Idolatry is the raising of something finite to the status of the infinite. In Arabic it is called *shirk* (=association). This term designates the act of "associating" two or more things with each other, placing them on the same level, when in reality they do not belong together. Muhammad observed that his contemporaries at Mecca had raised kinship, wealth and other specifically cultural factors to the status of utmost importance in their lives. Devising thereby to secure their existence, their idolatry had only produced a pathetic enslavement of individuals and unnecessary conflict among the various tribes. After his revelations Muhammad publicly proposed a "way" that would provide lasting freedom from the anguish that results whenever people define themselves in terms of superficial ethnic and economic criteria. He taught that the solution to this suffering lies in belief in the One God, Allah, who rules all of history. Only in commitment to Allah could there be freedom from all the obligations to idols invented by popular religious piety.

Like Yahweh of the Hebrews, Allah had originally been one tribal deity among many others, but in Muhammad's religious revelation Allah is given the status of universal Creator and Lord of all. It is hard for us to fathom how radical Muhammad's monotheism must have appeared to his contemporaries, for it announced nothing less than a complete social and religious revolution. By challenging the status of various deities it undermined the authority of tribal leaders and the ways of life that had been legitimated by their gods. Muhammad's prophecy that there was only *one* God, Allah, proved in fact to be too innovative. And as a result of his revolutionary message he was forced to flee from Mecca, with his newly established community of believers, to Medina, about two hundred and fifty miles to the north. Here he hoped to receive more favorable treatment. His famous flight from Mecca to Medina is known as the *Hegira*. It took place on September 24 in 622, the first year of the Muslim calendar.

At Medina things did not go as smoothly as expected. But with patient endurance as well as some use of military force, after a considerable struggle Muhammad triumphed over his enemies, took control of Medina,

and eventually returned to Mecca and conquered it for Islam. He purified the city's shrines of their idolatry, declared an amnesty for those who had resisted him, and returned to Medina, where he died in 632. As in the other great traditions, the story of Muhammad's struggles, disappointments and eventual victory is the source of great strength and rejoicing to his followers in their own life journeys.

**The Five Pillars of Islam.** The deposit of Allah's revelations to Muhammad and Islam is recorded in the Qur'an, a book of recitations approximately the size of the Christian *New Testament*. The Qur'an unfolds what it means to be a true believer. Much of the appeal of Islam, like that of Buddhism with its four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path, is the relatively uncomplicated nature of the directives it sets forth in its "Five Pillars." The Qur'an indicates, without considerable detail, that the religious life of Muslims takes shape around five easy to learn (though not necessarily easy to follow) articles: faith, prayer, fasting, almsgiving and pilgrimage.

**I. Faith.** The true believer is one who can say in complete trust: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet." The daily repetition of this formula binds one to the community of other true believers, and it provides constant protection against the temptation to idolatry.

**II. Prayer.** There are no priests in Islam, so the individual's prayer provides the primary access to God. At least five times a day a Muslim (the name given to a follower of Islam) turns toward Mecca in prayer of gratitude and petition. This gesture provides not only a sense of intimacy with God, but also a feeling of oneness with fellow believers who in prayer are all oriented geographically toward the same location. The life of prayer, of course, is not limited to these five occasions, and there is an enormous body of devotional writings that Muslims can draw upon in order to intensify their communion with Allah. Like the other traditions we have seen, Islam has developed significant mystical and meditative ways to promote the sense of mystery.

**III. Fasting.** During *Ramadan*, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, the Qur'an prescribes a fast in honor of the revelations of Muhammad and his battle against idolatry. As a reminder of the plight of the poor, and as a way of purifying desire, all healthy adults are required during this month to abstain from food, drink and sexual activity from sunrise until dark. Such fasting might easily be interpreted as unnecessary self-punishment, but this discipline has a positive meaning for Muslims who see it as a "way" through unnecessary distractions, and toward a deeper union with God and suffering humanity.

**IV. Almsgiving.** In gratitude for God's gifts, the Muslim is instructed to give generously to the welfare of others. Islam considers care of the needy central to authentic religion. As in the other prophetic religions the ideal of justice is given expression in the special concern for the down-trodden that comes through clearly in the Qur'an and other Islamic texts.

**V. Pilgrimage.** Travelling to sacred shrines is characteristic of religions everywhere. Indeed even non-religious people often feel a need to visit cities and monuments that embody their ideals. Such places possess a special power to renew our lives. Among the great traditions probably none has made pilgrimage so special as has Islam. The Muslim is encouraged, if at all possible, to make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca at least once in a lifetime. Such an extraordinary act would solidify one's identity with Islam in a profound way.

### ALLAH

He is God;

There is no God but He.

He is the knower of the unseen and the Visible;

He is the All-merciful, the All-compassionate.

He is God;

There is no God but He.

He is the King, the All-holy, the All-peaceable.

the All-faithful, the All-preserver,

the All-mighty, the All-compeller,

the All-sublime.

Glory be to God, above that they associate!

He is God;

the Creator, the Maker, the Shaper.

To Him belong the Names Most Beautiful.

All that is in the heavens and the earth magnifies Him;

He is the All-mighty, the All-wise.

*The Qur'an*, LIX 23-25, reprinted from *The Koran Interpreted*, translated by A. J. Arberry, Allen & Unwin, 1955.

### Conclusion

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all "prophetic" religions. In the traditions descended from Abraham the figure of the prophet holds the prominent place that the shaman or priest had in earlier religion, or that the "teacher" or "seer" has had in shaping Asian religions. Not that the prophet is the sole religious authority, for there are still priests, kings, rabbis and other divinely sanctioned dignitaries. But in these three traditions the prophet stands out distinctly as the chief spokesperson for God. The prophet has the special function of summoning people to trust in God's promise and live in conformity with hope.

In prophetic religion the authentic life of trust requires a special commitment to the ideal of justice. Moses, Jesus and Muhammad all invite their followers to trust in the promise that they are cared for by God, that they have a future. Such trust, if it is sincere, has the effect of liberating people from self-preoccupation. And in the trust that they are already cared for, people can be free to live for others. So in the prophetic traditions there is the constant conviction that true religion comes to expression in concern for the social well-being of one's fellows. Sacrificial offerings to God are less important than a life offered to the promotion of the good of others. "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings." (*Hosea* 6:6) "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction . . ." (*James* 1:26) And the Qur'an states: "Didn't [God] find you as an orphan and shelter [you], find you in need and make you rich? Therefore you shall not do violence to the orphan, nor shall you assault the beggar." (Sura 93, 6-9; in Küng, *et al.* 1986, 9)

In remaining faithful to the divine promise prophetic religion adopts an outlook that never allows it to take the past or present as prescribing the limits of reality. Hope in a promise opens reality out toward the novelty and complexity of a wider fulfillment than has yet been attained. This hope is touchingly expressed in a rabbinic expectation of the Messiah: "Even though he tarry, yet shall I wait for him." It comes out in the eucharistic prayer of Christians: "We hope to enjoy forever the vision of Your Glory." And it is manifest in the Qur'an's vivid picture of the life to come: "Therein they shall hear . . . only the saying 'Peace, Peace!' (56:25)