CHAPTER FOUR
THE SPIRITUAL WORLD OF EASTERN RELIGION

THE EASTERN WORLD VIEW

Scientific humanism is a Western phenomenon, which, as we shall see, grew out of the secularization of the Medieval Man. But most of the world is not Western. Most of the world's population resides on the side of the world we call "the East," in nations such as China, India, Japan, and Indochina.

The scientific humanist, whose viewpoint will be discussed at length in Chapter 10, says that reality could be found only in the material world. But in the East, while people might not believe in the existence of a personal God (and thus be atheists from a Western point of view), neither do they believe that only matter is real. In other words, they might be atheistic, but never materialistic.

The real world is not the material world at all, they would say. The real world is not obvious like the material world. It is rather, a spiritual world that lies behind and beyond the world of the eyes and ears of human beings. This means that the physical world around us and the events that occur in that world (historical events) are no more than what the Hindus call Maya, or "illusion," and Lila, or "the play of the gods."

The Westerner tries to become rich, to become famous, to gain physical comfort. Ambition drives him or her toward the "top"—materially. Once on top, the Westerner is pronounced a "success." Des-

sire and ambition are the stuff of life. Without them people are doomed to mediocrity and failure.

According to many of the holy men of the East, however, desire and ambition create nothing but problems. In fact, our troubles are caused by our desires. So to feed one's ambition is sure to bring nothing but more misery. It will only result in pain.

Furthermore, says the way of the East, you move closer to truth and reality not by striving and great effort, but by being very quiet—by not doing anything. Taoism, for example, one of the ancient religions of China, speaks of the great Tao as the spiritual eternal reality, the thing behind and beyond everything else. But the Tao can never be found with test tubes and laboratory experiments. Rather, says the Taoist, you find it by doing nothing at all, by allowing yourself to flow with the true spiritual nature of things. It is a process called Wu Wei. By doing this (or, rather, by not doing it) one quietly gets oneself on the track of the Tao or the "way," thereby gaining access to things as they really are.

Of course, this is a completely different way to search for truth than that of the Western scientific humanist, who studies hard, works hard, experiments, struggles, and strives.

The Taoist, instead, may retreat to the countryside and seek a sense of oneness with all things. He or she seeks an end to striving. Unless one calms oneself, says the Taoist, one will never know the truth.

Another Eastern religion, Hinduism, offers the practice of yoga. Here the approach to truth lies in self-control, in pulling in one's senses like a tortoise pulls its legs and head into its shell. By closing out the outside world of illusion and looking deep into oneself, one moves toward truth.

The yogi, sitting in the lotus position, eyes closed, cuts off all stimulation from outside. The physical world disappears. The truth appears. The yogi would have little use for a laboratory filled with electronic devices, as they would show only more and more sophisticated views of illusion.

Even one's own body partakes of illusion. The Hindu holy man says that the real you is not your physical body at all. It is rather the Atman, or the "soul." There is something in you which is the infinite, ultimate reality. And by reaching inward, by shaking off everything not connected with the Atman, one is lost in the wonder of the absolute—in the true.

So, if you want to find truth, you search, not out there somewhere, in the physical world, but within. Only by excluding what is outside can you attain the depths of what is inside.

THE INTERACTION OF EASTERN AND WESTERN IDEAS

Modern China is a striking battleground between the Eastern and Western ways to search for truth. This huge country, home of one third of human-
kind, has operated historically on the basis of the Eastern view of truth. The major religions of China—Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism—all shared some of the ideas we have been discussing.

But then, suddenly, revolution came to China in the 1940s and 1950s. It was a communist revolution. No one adheres more completely to the Western technophilosophy of materialism than does the communist. He represents the pinnacle in the evolution of Autonomous Man, a way of being human discussed in Chapter Nine.

And so a group of Chinese began restructuring Chinese society on the basis of ideas learned from Westerners such as Karl Marx. These ideas were almost completely opposite to all the ancient ideas of Chinese society. The basic concept behind the new ideas was “dialectical materialism.” It held that nothing exists but matter—matter clashing with matter and creating new forms of matter. Taoism had found reality in the Tao, or the way, which, it said, was more basic than matter. But Marxism (the Chinese form of communism), said that only matter was real. Confucianism had said that ethics grow out of the “will of Heaven.” Confucius did not exactly mean “God” in the Western sense, but he did mean that there was some kind of higher plan that people were supposed to follow on earth. It was a spiritual kind of ethic. But Marxism looked to this earth alone for rules of behavior.

China, then, became a battleground between two very different ideas: the ancient idea that only the spiritual world is ultimately real and the communist idea that only the material world is ultimately real. No wonder that the friction that resulted caused the death of millions of people.

Some people believe that the old ideas in China will eventually smother the new ones, since the latter are, after all, imported into China from a foreign and hostile world.

In an earlier chapter we quoted from Wang Tao-ming, the young Chinese communist. It is striking to see how he deplored himself, striving to rid himself of all personal desires. By letting go of himself, he says, he will find the true meaning of life. He seems to be a sort of Taoist who does not believe in Taoism. His “letting go” is not a giving of himself to the Tao, but to Mao, who is a physical, political reality.

There are few Buddhists in India, not because Hinduism fought Buddhism but because it “hugged it to death.” It simply accepted and incorporated the Buddhist ideas into itself and went on its way, depriving Buddhism of any reason to continue as a separate faith. Will the old ideas in China do the same thing to communism? The communist leaders recognized the danger. That is why they have developed elaborate systems to separate children from their natural families, putting them in places where they will hear only the new ideas, hoping to raise them as new people without any sense of the reality of the spiritual world.

In the meantime, the Chinese leaders have to carry on a continuous “revolution.” Periodically it is necessary to stir up the young against the old.

Thus, during the famous Red Guard period, students were encouraged to kidnap their professors in the universities, put dunce caps on them, and march them around in humiliation. This was punishment meted out because the professors were not yet free of the old ideas.

From time to time great campaigns are mounted in China against Confucius. Although dead for hundreds of years, he is attacked in the press as though he were about to take over the country! This can only mean that the old ideas are still around and are strong enough to be considered a threat to the materialists. Post-Mao China continues to struggle to find its place between the two worlds of spiritualism and materialism. Mao himself is treated less and less like a divine being, but the tension he introduced into Chinese culture is sure to have its effect for generations to come.

In the West, the clash of ideas seems to be moving in exactly the opposite direction. Is it not curious that, while China took over scientific humanism and is trying to build a society on it, many elements in the West have decided that scientific humanism will not work and are beginning to look with favor toward the old Eastern religions? The interest in transcendental meditation, the Hare Krishna sect, the popularity of Zen Buddhism, the practice of drug-induced meditative techniques—all these represent a “looking Eastward” by the children of Western technology.

HUMAN EXISTENTIAL NEEDS: A REVIEW

Earlier we saw that the supracultural religions, the “higher religions,” exist to try to meet human existential needs—the needs that all people everywhere have always had. In beginning to study the writings of Eastern holy men, this fact should constantly be kept in mind. One should always be asking the question, “How does this particular religious concept seek to answer the basic problems of human existence?”

A review of some of these basic problems might help.

1. The sense of precariousness—religion tries to provide a sense of wholeness and stability.
2. The experience of alienation, separation, and loneliness—religion tries to provide a sense of kinship with the ultimate. As we have seen, the Eastern religions often speak of looking into one’s own soul and discovering in it the great oneness and to commune with that oneness.
3. The demand for meaning—religion seeks to fulfill this need by reordering perception, helping one to see that things are not what they seem to be. The Eastern religions teach that through meditation one learns what is illusion and what is real.
4. The right relationship with the “holy”—in the supracultural religions, this need is fulfilled through ethics, or rules of behavior, as well as through ceremonies and rites.
5. The need for joy—religion seeks to supply emotional and intellectual peace. As you read the Eastern holy writings, you can see many suggestions and guidelines, often calling for the use of exercises and meditative techniques, to attain this goal.

There are many excellent books on each of the Eastern religions. It is not necessary to repeat what has been done so well elsewhere. We will limit ourselves to a brief survey about two major religions of the East—Hinduism and Buddhism—to gain some additional “feel” for the Eastern way.

THE HINDU ANSWER

Here is a basic list of Hindu words:

Bhagavad Gita
Krishna
Arjuna
Caste
Dharma
Atman
Brahman
Karma
Moksha
Maya
Lila

The Bhagavad Gita is one of the most famous Hindu holy writings. In it, the god Krishna appears to the warrior Arjuna. In Krishna’s conversation with Arjuna we have one of the clearest and most concise explanations of the Hindu world view. Arjuna is upset by the prospect of killing people in war. Krishna explains to him that people are divided into castes. Certain people are born warriors, certain others merchants, certain others priests, and so on. The castes are firmly set; there is no movement from one to the other. One does not simply decide what to major in, go off to school and then get a job. One must fulfill the duties of the caste in which he or she was born. Those duties are called one’s dharma.

If, then, one is in the warrior caste, one’s dharma is to fight and kill. If one is in the merchant class, one’s dharma is to sell; if a priest, to pray and meditate, for example.

The atman is the “self” is the indestructible reality that is the real person. It is never dying and travels through several bodies, not just the one in which it dwells now. Finally, after a long, long struggle and pilgrim-

age, it manages to reunite itself with brahman, or the “ultimate.” Brahman is the eternal oneness in its purity. Brahman is God—but we must not think of the Western meaning of “God.”

The self, or the atman, goes through body after body, both animal and human, in a continual search. Finally, it is fused with brahman entirely, so that it no longer exists as a separate entity in any way.

The principle of karma is, as someone has said, the belief that “the universe keeps books.” That is, when you do good things, you generate good karma and move forward in your search for brahman. When you do bad things, you generate bad karma and slip backward. “Moving forward”

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means progressing through a series of reincarnations, with each body being a bit higher up the scale than the last. By doing well in a given reincarnation, that is, by performing its dharma well, one accumulates good karma. And good karma sends one higher up the ladder in his or her next reincarnation.

So, if a man like Arjuna does well as a warrior, he may progress upward, finally becoming a brahman (the highest caste). There, as a priest, he will enable himself to spend all his time in spiritual exercises. This will increase his chances of going into the final stage where he is not reincarnated at all, but becomes fully one with the ultimate.

This last state is moksha. It is being beyond existence, being released from one’s individuality, being fused with the oneness. The holy men say that it is like a drop of rain water falling into the sea. It no longer has any of its experiences peculiarly connected with being a drop of water, because it has become one with the infinite ocean. So humanity hopes to be free itself from the wheel of existence, from being reincarnated over and over again. Human beings hope to cease to exist—not in the sense that they become nothing but in the sense that they become everything.

One of the ways in which one achieves this state is by coming to know what it means to say “I am brahman.” To say this with true enlightenment is to say that what is real in me is the ultimate reality, the ultimate oneness. And so the holy man may sit motionless for days sitting, over and over, “I am brahman.” He will say this thousands of times, until he gradually begins to catch hold of what that means. In this way, he frees himself from ignorance.

In Hindu thinking ignorance is anything that keeps one from true self-awareness, anything that keeps one from seeing what he or she really is. And in particular, one of the worst forms of ignorance is the “illusion of multiplicity”—the idea that there are lots of things. One who has really been enlightened will know that there are not lots of things—there is only one thing. Everything is illusion except that one thing, and one must come into complete union with that one thing to be free from all ignorance.

Maya is illusion. It is seeing things wrongly, perceiving incorrectly. Maya is the curtain that hides the truth from us. When this curtain is pulled back we meet the truth face to face. And when this is done, we see and know that the world and history are nothing but but the play of brahman.

The truly holy Hindu will observe what is going on around him like a spectator at a play. He will never get involved in what happens on the stage, beyond simply watching it in a detached way. He may be slightly interested in the plot, but he realizes that what he sees is not really happening.

Twice in my life I have seen someone lose his sense of perspective at a dramatic production. The first was a college play. One of the actors, whom I knew, was an unstable and very disturbed person. By some fluke, he was given a part in the play that almost exactly paralleled his own life. According to the plot, this character gradually falls deeper and deeper into despair and at the end of the play he is left prostate on the stage, hopelessly lost.

The curtain closed and the audience began to applaud. Suddenly this fellow appeared at one of the wings and rushed to center stage. The audience thought the play had simply been provided with a brief epilogue and became quiet to hear the final lines.

But as the actor began to talk the mood changed to shock. “You just do not understand,” he said. “I’ve got to have help. HELP ME!”

We gradually came to the terrible realization that these were not lines in the play. The actor had lost his identity in that of the character he had played. He was that person. The plot had been real. The real world had slipped away, and the stage had taken its place. The poor fellow had to be carried away, sobbing and calling for help.

The second incident occurred in a movie theater where the film Easy Rider was being shown. This film builds up in the last few moments, carefully manipulating the audience into a frenzy of hate. When the climax occurred a young man behind me jumped to his feet and began to curse and flail his arms at the screen. He had forgotten that he was only watching a movie.

The Hindu holy man would say that the young man’s mistake is the one made by all unenlightened people, who do not realize that all the events around them are but charades being acted out by the gods, mere images flickering on silver screens. People are foolish when they treat the things around them as though they are real. People are wise when they learn to be witnesses and not players, spectators and not actors.

Hinduism’s attitude of tolerance is well known. There are, say the holy men, many ways to salvation. Any of them will eventually work, although some will take much longer than others. This is why most religious that have tried to enter India have eventually been “hugged to death.” Instead of being resisted, they are simply accepted as also valid, though perhaps inferior ways to reach out for brahman.

The three classical paths of Hinduism are karma marga (the path of works) in which the believer wins moksha by performing the caste duties well; jñāna marga (the path of devotion), in which the believer devotes all of life to brahman, or perhaps to one of brahman’s incarnations such as Krishna; and bhakti marga (the path of knowledge), in which the believer meditates until enlightenment comes.

There are, of course, thousands of other paths, but the Hindus believe these three to be particularly successful. And whatever path one chooses, a person will find the practice of yoga very helpful in traveling along it.

Yoga is a highly developed series of physical and psychological exercises designed to help one shut out the unreal outer world and get into oneself. It is truly amazing what the master yogi can do with his body and mind. He can control muscles that we ordinarily think of as involuntary.
He may gain so much control over his stomach muscles, for example, that he may form a perfect letter "I" by simply tensing certain muscles and relaxing others. He can cause them to move up and down, back and forth, even round and round. There are also the psychological exercises, which develop the ability to control the mind's activities.

Most of us have very little mental control. This fact can be illustrated by the following little test: For the next thirty seconds, do not think of a white bear.

Were you able to do it? I doubt it. Even though you had not thought of one in ages, just being told not to think of one makes it very hard to keep a white bear from popping into the mind, no matter how hard we try.

The yogi, on the other hand, can cast all thoughts from his mind, bringing it to perfect rest. There is spiritual value in this, say the holy men, for it enables one to avoid the illusions that fill the mind and frees the soul to commune with the real.

Before we move on to look at Buddhism, remember that, just as there are over four hundred kinds of Christianity, there are also hundreds of kinds of Hinduism. We have generalized, and any serious student of this religion, or any other, must dig much deeper to really understand.

THE BUDDHIST ANSWER

Buddhism begins with the story of its founder, Siddhartha Gautama. Siddhartha was born about 563 B.C. in India. He began life with every material advantage. Born into a very wealthy family of royal blood, he married a beautiful girl, they had a beautiful child, and, according to legends, lived in three beautiful palaces.

Siddhartha was purposely shielded from anything unpleasant or evil. He never saw anyone sick, anyone suffering, anyone old, anyone poor, anyone dead. One day, however, he ventured out into the streets. There he saw a very old man, then someone suffering, and then a corpse.

He was stunned. For days he struggled with this revelation of evil. Finally he decided that he must go out in search of answers. He took a final look at his beautiful wife and family, lying asleep, left them a note and slipped away to seek for what is real and true.

Siddhartha tried several things, including a stint with a group of ascetics so extreme in their self-mortification that their fasting and discipline almost killed him. Finally, down to skin and bones, he decided that, while such men knew a great deal about bringing their bodies into subjection, they really knew no more about the truth than anyone else.

For many years he wandered from guru to guru, always searching, but never finding an answer. Finally one day he sat down beneath the bodhi tree. There his own inner struggle took place. Before he arose again he had received the Enlightenment. He understood now the nature of the world and the answer to the question of how to live.

Buddhism is the religion that developed from Siddhartha Gautama's teachings following his Enlightenment. It arose in India and flourished there for a thousand years. In many ways the Hindu roots of Buddhism are obvious. Eventually Indian Buddhism disappeared as a separate religion, but by that time the faith had spread widely into other countries and cultures. Today the major concentration of Buddhism is Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand), Japan, and China.

Buddhism exists in two major branches (compare Western Christianity's Protestantism and Catholicism): Theravada Buddhism, more prevalent in the southern countries, and Mahayana Buddhism, more prevalent in the northern countries. To taste the flavor of Buddhism we will look at one of the sacred books of Theravada Buddhism called the Dhammapada.²

Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha was not interested in metaphysical speculation. He was interested in life and in getting some hold on it. So he says to a disciple,  

Therefore, consider carefully, Malunkaputta, the things that I have taught and the things that I have not taught. What are things I have not taught? I have not taught that the world is eternal. I have not taught that the world is not eternal. I have not taught that the world is finite. I have not taught that the world is infinite. I have not taught that the soul and the body are the same. I have not taught that the soul and the body are different. I have not taught that the liberated person exists after death. I have not taught that he does not exist after death. I have not taught that he both exists and does not exist after death; that he neither exists nor does not exist after death.

Why, Malunkaputta, have I not taught all this? Because all this is useless. It has nothing to do with real Dhamma. It does not lead to cessation of passion, to peace, to supreme wisdom, and the holy life, to Nirvana. That is why I have not taught all this.

And what have I taught, Malunkaputta? I have taught that suffering exists, that suffering has an origin, that suffering can be ended, that there is a way to end suffering.

Why, Malunkaputta, have I taught this? Because this is useful, it has to do with real Dhamma, it leads to the cessation of passion, it brings peace, supreme wisdom, the holy life, and Nirvana. That is why I have taught all this.

Therefore, Malunkaputta, consider carefully what I have taught and what I have not taught.

To make the same point, the Buddha tells a story. People who always want to deal with philosophical questions are like the man who was shot with a poison arrow. When people came to aid him he would not let them touch his wound. Instead, he wanted them to explain to him what kind of arrow it was, where it came from, what kind of poison was on it, the motivation of the person who shot him, and dozens of other similar questions.

None of those questions is important, says the Buddha. The important question is, how can I remove the arrow and stop the suffering it causes? Those who seek the Enlightenment will deal only with that question.

The right path, he says, is the middle one between sensuality, the indulgence of the body, and extreme asceticism, the torture of the body. To his followers he says,  

Avoid these two extremes, monks. Which two? On the one hand, low, vulgar, ignoble, and useless indulgence in passion and luxury; on the other, painful,

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Ignoble, and useless practice of self-torture and mortification. Take the Middle Path advised by the Buddha, for it leads to insight and peace, wisdom and enlightenment, and to Nirvana.

Nirvana is the goal of the Buddhist. The Theravada Buddhist describes it as a state in which all the flame of desire has been blown out. The Mahayana Buddhist calls it a state of being so full of the infinite that the loss of the finite is of no consequence. Nirvana lies beyond all concrete state of existence.

But where is the Buddha? Here or there? Neither here nor there, sire.

What do you mean, respected Nagasena?

Supposing, sire, the flames of a great fire are extinguished, where do they go? Here or there? Where?

Neither here or there. They disappear.

So, when the Buddha achieved Nirvana, sire, he became neither here or there. But you may know him by the Dhamma, for he taught the Dhamma, and left it behind.

So we see that the Buddha is beyond existence now and has left behind only his teachings as a guide for others to follow him. The Buddhist holy man, says the Dhammapada, is  

Like a bird invisibly flying in the sky,
He lives without possessions
Knowledge his food, freedom his world,
While others wonder.

Like a bird flying invisibly in the sky
While others wonder, he lives, the saint
Without passions, indifferent to food,
AWARE OF THE MEANING OF FREEDOM.

In this poem we can see clearly the detachment so common to Eastern spirituality. The key to the Buddhist life-style is mental self-possession:

We are what we think
Having become what we thought...

Clear thinking leads to Nirvana

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3Ibid., p. 34.
4Ibid., p. 31.
5Ibid., p. 39.
6Ibid., p. 32.
The Wise Man meditates, he preserves,
He works hard for the incomparable freedom
and the bliss of Nirvana.

A disciplined mind is the road to Nirvana.

We can see that the rewards of Buddhism come from what one does for himself. Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha has left good advice and enlightened teaching, but the believer will gain nirvana only through his own efforts.

To think wrong thoughts is to remain separated from nirvana. The kinds of thoughts that are wrong are those that agitate the mind, that prevent the mind from being quiet and calm, like a bird flying invisibly in the sky. In particular, there are four kinds of thoughts that must be purged from the mind: 
- possessiveness
- anger, hatred, and lust
- Right thoughts, those that contribute to gaining nirvana, include detachment and compassion. It is best to love other people and to never return evil for evil. This ensures mental tranquility.

And as for the world around, one must simply think to oneself.

The world is a bubble, the world is a shadow.

Buddhism seeks to relieve men of suffering. And before this can be done the believer must come to understand the truths that Siddhartha himself received under the bo tree: the four noble truths.

The first noble truth concerns suffering.

For there is suffering, and this is the noble truth of suffering—birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful, lamentation, dejection, and despair are painful. Contact with the unpleasant is painful, not getting what you want is painful.

One must then, first recognize the condition of human beings, that they are in anguish.

The second noble truth concerns the origin of suffering.

Suffering has an origin, and this is the noble truth of the origin of suffering—desire creates sorrow, desire mixed with pleasure and lust, quick pleasure, desire for life, and desire even for non-life.

Why do people suffer? They suffer because they desire. It is desire that creates sorrow—even the desire for life, even the desire to not live.

The third noble truth concerns the end of suffering.

Suffering has an end, and this is the noble truth of the end of suffering—nothing remains of desire. Nirvana is attained, all is given up, renounced, detached, and abandoned.

We want something but cannot get it. We are miserable. We blow out the flame of desire. We are no longer miserable.

Suppose that you see a very attractive member of the opposite sex and immediately fall deeply in love. But the love you feel is not returned. You become miserable, caught in the web of an unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire. Either you must end the desire, and gain peace, or resort to force, and bring even more unhappiness on yourself.

Some years ago a student told me about a bizarre incident in which the second alternative was used. Deciding that her relationship with her boy-friend had no future, she broke up with him. He was grief stricken. Determined to have her, he came to her apartment with a pistol and forced her to come with him to an adjoining state. There he kept the gun in her ribs while a judge, unaware of what was happening, married them.

She did not dare let the judge know what was happening, so she said her vows with a forced smile. But as soon as the ceremony was over and the couple got back to the groom's apartment, she forcefully administered a lamp to his head and called the police before he regained consciousness.

Now she is happily married to someone else and, unless her violent suitor has blown out the flame of his desire, he presumably still lives in misery!

But the real misery, says the Buddha, is not that we do not get what we desire; it is the desire itself that makes us miserable. The only sure escape comes when all desire is given up, renounced, detached, and abandoned.

And when desire is gone, so will suffering disappear.

The fourth noble truth provides the practical plan for attaining nirvana.

And this is the noble truth that leads to Nirvana—it is the Eightfold Way of right views, right intentions, right speech, right action, right profession, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

It all boils down to this: one must free oneself from craving. Only in this way comes peace.
Craving is like a creeper, it strangles the fool. He bounds like a monkey, from one birth to another, looking for fruit.

When craving, like poison, takes hold of a man, his sorrows increase like wild grass.

This is my advice: “Root out craving! Root it out, like wild grass is rooted out. Do not let death destroy you As river waters destroy reeds.”

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE RELIGIONS OF EAST AND WEST

Now we are ready to make some general comparisons between the religious ideas of the East and West. The following chart should help focus our thinking.

**Contrasting Eastern and Western Religions**

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<td>1. Broad tolerance</td>
<td>1. Exclusivism</td>
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<td>2. Reality monistic and imminent</td>
<td>2. Reality dualistic and transcendent</td>
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<td>3. World denying</td>
<td>3. God acts in history and nature</td>
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<td>4. Passive acceptance of human condition</td>
<td>4. Active attempt to change human condition</td>
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<td>5. Highest goal: union with the ultimate</td>
<td>5. Highest goal: true personhood</td>
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First, the religions of the East are more likely to assimilate new ideas than to fight them. One may easily belong to several religions at the same time. One Japanese woman told me that she would “be married a Shintoist, live as a Confucianist, and be buried as Buddhist.” In the West, acceptance of one faith has traditionally meant rejection of all others. The Gospel of John quotes Jesus as saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except by me.” This exclusivism is a characteristic of the other major Western religions as well.

Second, in the Eastern faiths reality is monistic; that is, everything that is, is one. Multiplicity is an illusion. And this great Oneness is *here*. Everything that is real is a part of it. But the West thinks of reality as *dualistic*; that is, both matter and spirit exist, both God and the world. So the ultimate reality is “there” (transcendent) as well as “here” (immanent).

Third, Eastern religion is basically world denying. We have seen this illustrated in various ways in our earlier discussion. In contrast, the religions of the West understand God to be active in nature and in history. Nature and history have not been abandoned by the Ultimate; nor are they Ultimate in some mystical way. Rather, they are the arena in which God acts. He is separate from them, but works within them. So, instead of denying and withdrawing from them, one looks for God within them.

Fourth, the East tends to accept the human condition passively. The Hindu doctrine of karma attempts to explain why humans suffer (as punishment for bad karma in a previous life). The Buddhist holy man detaches himself from his suffering by ridding himself of desire. In both cases suffering is inevitable, and men must simply learn to live with it. In the West, people actively attempt to *change* the human condition. Rather than learn how to accept starvation with calm resignation, they fight for something to eat. They try to alleviate suffering by filling the need rather than by quenching the need. This difference in approach helps to explain why movements for social and economic change have generally begun in the West.

Fifth, the greatest goal of Eastern religion is to be fused with the Ultimate, to *become* the Ultimate, to lose one’s individual identity. One no longer exists in any way separate from the Oneness. One is like a drop of rain water that has fallen into the ocean. For the Western faiths, true personhood is the goal, the attaining of one’s fullest potential by being oneself in the most complete way possible.

Sixth, for the East, history is cyclical. That is, history spins around and around, like a wheel. But this movement is not like that of a wagon wheel that is going somewhere. Rather, it resembles the movement of a wheel attached to the side of a barn, simply turning around and around, going nowhere in particular. What has happened will happen again. There is no pattern, simply the idle repetition of similar events. Western religions have a linear view of history. That is, they conceive of history as moving forward all the time, as looking more like a straight line than a circle, as moving more like an arrow than like a wheel.

It is time to remind ourselves again about the difference between a normative definition and a descriptive one. The normative definition of a given religion is what that religion *should* be when it follows its own best
lights. A descriptive definition deals with the same religion as a historical phenomenon. Usually the practice of a religion is far inferior to the highest ideals of the founders of that religion.

Few Indians, even the most pious of them, reach up to the highest standards of the Hindu view of life. When one sees Buddhist monks in Southeast Asia leading demonstrations and becoming actively involved in political intrigue, one may think, “Isn’t detachment? Shouldn’t they be off in a quiet monastery somewhere meditating?” These things should not be surprising. All religions are one thing in the ideal and another when they actually work out in life situations.

That fact is apparent in the history of Christianity. During the middle ages men were burned at the stake in the name of Jesus. But there is nothing in the teachings of Jesus about burning people at the stake. This is an example of how his teachings have not been worked out in Christian societies, just as Hindu teachings have not been worked out in Hindu societies, or Buddhist teachings in Buddhist societies.

But in fairness we should never judge the ideals of a religion purely on the basis of its historical record—the ideals cannot be blamed for the failures of those who carried the name of those ideals.

So, just as we have looked for the best in the religions of the East, we will do the same for the religions of the West.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE RELIGION OF ISRAEL

THE ACTS OF GOD IN HISTORY

The scholar Edmond Jacob summarizes very well the essence of Biblical religion in this brief statement: ¹

The special characteristic of biblical revelation is that God binds Himself to historical events to make them the vehicle of the manifestation of his purpose.

The Infinite, the Transcendent, the Other, has come down and become involved in the imminent, the now, the historical, the material world.

The Bible begins with a story that maintains that the human race in its present state is fallen.² By “fallen” we simply mean that, due to disobedience, self-assertiveness, and unwillingness to live according to the created order of things, people have created an enormous gulf between themselves and the Ultimate Reality—a gulf for which they have only themselves to blame.

²Read Genesis 1–3. This account underwent considerable interpretation by Christian theologians. Our use of the term “fallen” should not necessarily be identified directly with traditional Christian doctrines of the depravity of the human race.