Chapter 5
Love

I. The self is the problem

I feel it is necessary to start this chapter with a disclaimer, as it were. In the previous chapters, I
have largely been concerned with the “material world,” and brought to its analysis a scientist’s
perspective and training, which I think I am at least formally qualified to do. But for this last
step of the journey, what is required is primarily a spiritual teacher, which is definitely not what I
am. All I can hope to achieve, then, is to show that there is a perspective from which the
 teachings of a number of different spiritual traditions actually do fit together, and to describe, as
best I can, the picture that emerges. If along the way I sound more like a preacher than a
scientist, I apologize in advance; it is just that there is no other way to speak about these matters.
In any case, very few of the words or statements on spiritual matters that follow will actually be
mine: they have all been culled from a variety of sources, too numerous to acknowledge in
detail, even if I could consciously remember them all.

We may as well start with Buddhism, first, because it is, among the great religious traditions, the
one with the strongest claim to being a purely empirical (as opposed to faith- or revelation-
based) system, and second, because it was ostensibly developed precisely in response to the
problem of suffering, with which the last chapter was concerned. In fact, by reflecting upon the
nature of all phenomena the Buddha reached essentially the same conclusions that I presented in
that chapter regarding their impermanence: everything that is composite has the potential to
come apart, and so eventually it will; everything that is conditioned by something else cannot
have a permanent, separate identity of its own; everything that arises (comes into being) also
intrinsically has the potential to cease to be. And, since everything that we deal with in the world
is like this: conditioned, composite, arisen, it follows that everything is intrinsically impermanent
—all our possessions, our life, our health, and, in the Buddha’s view, even our very selves.
Suffering then arises, fundamentally, from our failing to recognize this fact, and our
consequently clinging to all sorts of impermanent things as if they could last forever.

This much is clear; the real question is what is the proper response. That the problem is subtle
can be illustrated as follows. Suppose we summarize the situation by the statement—which is, I
believe, fundamentally true—that the source of suffering are our self-centered desires. Then it
might seem that liberation from suffering is impossible, because our very desire for such
liberation is a self-centered desire.

There are two ways to tackle this difficulty, once we realize that the problem is, in fact, the “self”
part of it. Some Buddhists appear to favor a frontal assault on the concept of “self,” declaring it
from the start to be a harmful illusion, and even going to great lengths to boast that no concept of
a self can be found anywhere in Buddhism¹. I find this attitude unhelpful for several reasons,

¹ See, for instance, Chapter VI of What The Buddha Taught, by Walpola Rahula.
including the fact that it becomes almost indistinguishable from ontological nihilism, a position that the Buddha himself certainly did not embrace.

A better way to deal with self-centeredness, I think, is simply to teach people how to live an unself-centered life, by cultivating positive mental views and dispositions, and to show them that such a life can, in fact, make them much happier than a self-centered one. There are a number of ready examples of such a life (which is basically nothing but a refined and applied version of the “universal moral code” I discussed in the previous chapter): the Eightfold Path in Buddhism, with the attendant five “Wonderful Precepts\(^1\), or the Sermon on the Mount in Christianity, for instance, provide basic templates\(^2\). It is then a fact that, as people progress along this path, the demands of their old hard, separate “self” decrease, the walls built around it gradually crumble, and the old notion of self becomes increasingly less relevant to one’s life, until eventually one may actually come to realize that the total surrender of self (which both Christianity and Buddhism ultimately require), is not at all an unreasonable request; not even, perhaps, a very difficult one anymore.

Imagine, for instance, that we have managed to rid ourselves to a substantial degree of both selfish cravings and aversions. It is remarkable, when you think about it, how much our little selves are defined by such things: by what we like and what we dislike. What (or who) we like, we typically want to possess; what, or who, we dislike, we typically view as a threat to our self or to our other possessions—not necessarily material, but also immaterial ones, such as our pride, or a certain notion of what the world should be like.

Suppose that we manage to overcome all that; suppose we truly want to possess nothing, that we do not envy or hold a grudge against anybody, that we stop defining ourselves by a party, a group, or a tendency, always as opposed to another one. What do we have left? Hopefully, we’ll retain, and even increase, a general appreciation of all the things that are good, true, or beautiful, whether we “own” them or not—an appreciation that we can share with everybody else. We will no longer call ourselves Democrats or Republicans, but we will be able to appreciate whatever good is done by anybody, regardless of his or her party. We will be able to enjoy a well-played sporting event regardless of who wins. We will celebrate anyone’s deserved success, even a competitor’s, as if it were our own.

What is left, at that point, that is uniquely, narrowly ours? Certainly, any specialized training or skills that we might have developed over the years may still set us apart from other people, in principle; but, in practice, any such skills only make sense if they are used for the good of others. If we know something that others do not, we need to share that knowledge. If we can play a

\(^1\) Called “mindfulness trainings,” by Thich Nhat Hanh; an elaboration on the five traditional Buddhist precepts introduced in the previous chapter.

\(^2\) The motivation to follow such a path, in the first place, may come either from an intellectual and moral conviction of its rightness, or from the personal experience of the spiritual misery that results invariably from following all other codes of conduct, including “self-interest” (whether “enlightened” or not), as I noted in the previous Chapter.
musical instrument, we need to play it for others. If we can write stories, we need to tell them to others. All our individual gifts and talents are meant to take us beyond our limited selves, to expand our world so that it encompasses as many other human beings as possible, to remove the barriers and reduce the differences that separate us. When I share my knowledge, or any of my gifts, with anybody, our separateness has decreased, and we have become more alike. So these things, too, cannot rightly be used as a foundation on which to build a notion of a separate self.

There is only one thing left, I think, and that is our memories. There is probably nothing else in which our sense of self is so strongly invested. And yet, memories belong to the past, which is gone, whereas life is to be lived in the present moment and for the future. At any time, what matters is to do the right thing, with the right intention. The job of our whole being, at any moment, is to support the right action, and this must then be, primarily, what memories are for as well: not to provide another object of clinging, which can only lead to suffering, not to keep us chained to what was or what might have been, but to provide us with motivation and encouragement to do the right thing, right now. And, as long as the right thing is done with the right intention, it does not matter what the memory was.

A man may act kindly towards a child because he remembers people acting kindly towards him in his own childhood, and another man may do it because he remembers people acting unkindly towards him. We may choose to avoid a sin because we remember how good it felt the last time we were similarly tempted and did not give in, or because we remember how bad it felt the last time we did give in. The memories may be different, even opposite, but that does not matter, as long as the right thing is done. The role of the memory, of any memory, at any time, is to be at the service of the right action and the right intention at that particular time. If a memory cannot do that, it has no role to play in our life.

This is important, because the past can psychologically enslave us as effectively as any fetters. Feelings of shame or memories of inadequacy, grudges or regrets, all of these are things that we need to break free from in order to truly live, in the only place where life is possible—in the present moment. The notion that we can only be what we have already become, that our future is wholly determined by our past, is as noxious as any of the reductionist beliefs that we have dealt with so far, and yet it is one that we often appear to be quite determined to make true for ourselves. Of course, like all other reductionisms, this belief would make moral life both impossible and pointless, so it is not surprising that it has been soundly rejected, implicitly or explicitly, by all the great moral teachers. One of the most important differences between the Buddha and other religious reformers of his time, for instance, was his conviction that karma, the causative burden of all our past deeds, could be fully destroyed in this life—even in an instant,

1 It could certainly be argued that there is no other reason why animals should have evolved the capability to remember in the first place!

2 This general injunction against clinging to the past does not necessarily deny the intrinsic value of our life—what we have learned, experienced and shared. I would simply say, however—and I hope to make my meaning clearer later—that this value comes not from what we may remember or not, but from what God remembers: or, put less cryptically, from how successful we were, overall, at “bringing God into the world.”
“in the present moment,” as it were. Jesus, as well, was remarkable, even notorious, for taking people where he found them, quite unconcerned about their past, and setting them straight right then and there. This led more than once to quite a bit of murmuring behind his back.\(^1\)

The simple point, in every case, is that we must do what we do, not because of “who we are” (or believe ourselves to be), but just because it is the right thing to do. The “self,” our notion of a self, is at all times wholly secondary, even irrelevant. The rightness of the action and the intention are all that matters. This is certainly not a nihilistic view; rather, as I have just tried to point out, it is a liberating view. We do not have to repeat our mistakes, over and over, nor should we feel bound by any obligation to our “selves” to stick with any clearly misguided course of action we may have embarked into.

This view is quite at variance with the often-quoted bit of (seeming) Shakespearean advice, “to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man.”\(^2\) What is not often appreciated is that this is Polonius’s advice, not Shakespeare’s, and that Shakespeare is, in fact, making fun of Polonius here, as he does throughout the play. Polonius’s “wisdom” is, upon close examination, nothing more than a string of shallow and occasionally garbled platitudes. In any case, it is certainly quite possible to be true to your “self” and false to anybody or everybody else; the fable of the scorpion and the frog\(^3\) quite proves that point.

Something that might be construed also as an objection to the “no-self” approach to life, and coming from an altogether more reputable source, is the famous statement by Rabbi Susya, quoted in Martin Buber’s *The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism*: “In the world to come I shall not be asked, Why were you not Moses? I shall be asked, Why were you not Susya?” Buber brings this up to make a good point: that, in the Hasidic world view, everybody is called to serve God in his or her own special way, and that all these individualities are something to be treasured. Which is true, but it should certainly not, in my opinion, be used as an excuse to encourage an ego- or self-centered life.

The fact is that “being yourself” is something you never have to work at, because you simply cannot help being yourself, no matter what you do. Being yourself is practically the only thing that you are guaranteed to succeed at without even trying. Any words you speak will be uttered in your own tongue and with your own unique accent; anything your hands make will carry your

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2 *Hamlet*, act I, scene 3.

3 A scorpion asked a frog to help him cross a river, and promised not to sting him; however, when they were halfway across the river, the scorpion stung the frog, who, before sinking, asked “Why did you do that? Now we both shall drown!” to which the scorpion replied “I couldn’t help it; it’s my nature.” The fable (in a version in which the frog is replaced by a turtle) may be (I haven’t checked personally) in the *Baharistan of Jami*, a Persian poet and mystic (1414-1492); its popularity in current Western culture almost certainly stems from its being told in the Orson Welles film *Mr. Arkadin* (1955). I, on the other hand, probably first heard it in an episode of the series *Star Trek: Voyager*. 

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unique fingerprints. You don’t need to do anything to be yourself; so you might as well forget about it—and about your “self”—and focus on doing the right thing instead. It is a little like in a symphony: the violin player does not have to worry about sounding like a violin, because he already is guaranteed to sound that way; he just has to worry about playing the right notes. The overall result will still be richly diverse and, hopefully, ego-free as well. The ideal musician, most musicians will tell you, exists for the music, and not vice-versa: to let the music “play itself through him (or her).” I think that this is, in fact, a good analogy of the ideal goal for one’s spiritual life.

The practice of selflessness I am advocating here is, as I have already pointed out, certainly not unique to Buddhist teaching. Jesus clearly endorsed it when he said

> Whoever wants to follow me, let him deny himself, pick up his cross, and follow me.

Many other early Christian texts refer to this “denying yourself” in very radical terms, with a metaphor of death: “if the grain of wheat does not die, it cannot bear fruit;” “you must die to yourself to be born again in Christ.” The “old man,” the old self, must die. Christian mysticism through the ages testifies to that annihilation of the self that accompanies the mystical vision (and is occasionally quoted approvingly in Zen texts as well). It is true that these ideas are not emphasized in what one might call “everyday Christianity,” but I think this is a mistake: Christians really should be told that these statements are not just exaggerations for the sake of making a point, but that they must be taken seriously, literally, in fact, as far as the “self” is concerned. In the end, all Christians are called to be able to say, with St. Paul,

> It is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me.

and mean it.

This last statement is, of course, of fundamental importance, because it addresses the question of what you replace the self with. Granted that our small, greedy, impermanent selves are not reliable enough to build our lives around them, is there anywhere “something else” solid enough,
real enough, to become the true foundation of our existence, and even of our very identity? St. Paul’s statement, quoted above, is, of course, a Christian answer, but I think it is one that may be made palatable to other religious traditions if one takes the word “Christ” to be, basically, another name for “altruistic love” (or simply “love,” in the traditional Christian “agape” sense, as discussed in Chapter 1).

The point I will try to make in the next couple of sections is that this substitution makes sense from a Christian viewpoint as well; and that in fact this “love” that is supposed to take the place of our self-centered desires may be regarded as an aspect of God—one not discussed yet, and in a way the most important one: the relational aspect, and the most immediately personal one.

II. Love is all you need

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of love in the New Testament. When asked about the commandments, Jesus recast the entire “Law and the Prophets” in terms of a double commandment to love (Matthew 22:37-40; see also Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28):

[when asked by a pharisee what the greatest commandment in the law was] he said to him: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

In the corresponding passage in Luke 10:25-28, Jesus illustrates the kind of love he had in mind through the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. This makes it clear that he was not talking about some kind of sentimental love, but about a serious, demanding concern for the well-being of every other human being, even, as was the case for the Samaritan, a foreigner and a potential enemy. In John, 13:34-35, he calls this “a new commandment” and makes it the standard by which a Christian is to be known:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

What makes the commandment “new” in this passage is that, in fact, the standard has gone up: we are now to love one another “even as Jesus has loved us.” This is coming from the same Jesus who, a few lines later (John 14:9) tells Philip that “he who has seen me, has seen the Father.” So, in effect, what we are called to do is to love one another in the same way that God, Jesus’ Father, loves us. This point is made more explicitly in Matthew 5:44-48 (see also Luke 6:27-38):

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you
may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.\footnote{To keep this section flowing smoothly, I am approaching it entirely from a Christian perspective, but I should also point out that a commandment to love one’s enemies can also be found in the Buddha’s teaching, for instance, in this famous passage from the \textit{Majjhima Nikaya} (21.20: the simile of the saw): “Monks, even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding. Even then you should train yourselves: ‘Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic, with a mind of good will, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading these people with an awareness imbued with good will and, beginning with them, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with good will — abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.’ That’s how you should train yourselves.”}

This makes an important point about God’s love: it is given freely, regardless of “merit.” “He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” God’s love is like the sun or the rain: \textit{a universal, non-discriminating, life- (or existence-)} \textit{affirming principle}. It is not something that comes easily or naturally, a point made by Paul in Romans 5:6-8:

While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

A number of parables of Jesus, including the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-15), make again the point of the apparent unfairness of God’s non-discriminating love.

Finally, in a series of passages in the first letter of John, we are told that this “love” is God’s own essence. This, in some sense, answers the difficulty raised above, of how we could raise to this level of generosity and selflessness required to fulfill Jesus’s commandment. By letting God into our hearts, by “abiding in him and he in us,” it is God himself loving through us:

\begin{quote}
Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. (1 John, 4:7-8) 

No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John, 4:12) 

So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. (1 John, 4:16)
\end{quote}

We have so far worked from a definition of God as the “first cause,” tracing the various causal
agents of the world back to him as the ultimate source. Clearly, love, in its worldly manifestations, is a causal agent; what is perhaps not immediately obvious is that it is not reducible to other agents we have already considered. Merely as a feeling, motherly love is certainly at work in the animal world, and anybody who’s ever owned a dog\(^1\) can testify to the existence of other forms of “unselfish love” among nonhuman animals, presumably arisen as a result of normal evolutionary processes. There are, in fact, many scientific studies devoted to the development of altruistic behavior among animals, and I have even acknowledged earlier that we humans, as social animals, may be genetically inclined to altruism in some degree. It is tempting to put this together with our potential for self-awareness and “reduce” love—even the “un-self-centered love” considered here—to biological altruism combined with an intellectual awareness of “the other” as “somebody like me,” another “center of awareness”—my “neighbor,” in short.

This sounds plausible and may go a long way towards explaining love as a feeling, but when confronted with the Biblical texts I have quoted above we must think of love as being, at the core, more than a feeling: an act of the will. The love that Jesus and the New Testament writers attribute to God is primarily, as I said above, a life-affirming act of the will; we may then wrap this up in feelings in any number of ways, but without this core we do not have love in the New Testament sense; and this core is itself irreducible, for it boils down to the very principle by which the whole world came into being. The “proof” that God is love, defining love as I just have, is almost obvious: it is merely the fact that the world exists at all.

The world “comes into being” from the first cause, and its existence is maintained by this same mysterious principle. Therefore, the “first cause” is “an existence-affirming principle”: the universal, non-discriminating love described by Jesus as being characteristic of the Father, and by John as God’s own essence.

Of course, all this could be dismissed as mere wordplay if it did not have any practical consequences. A place to start looking for them is again the text of 1 John, which raises the possibility that this fundamental, one might say “foundational” love is something we may experience, and as it were, “channel”: bring into our lives, and allow to work through us. Here, one has the testimony of countless Christian saints and mystics that this is, in fact, and at a minimum, a psychological reality.

The perception of love as merely a feeling might lead one to question the possibility that God, “the first cause,” could experience it. How could God “love” if he does not have a physical brain, a heart, glands of various sorts? But this is a little like asking “How can the world exhibit mathematical order, if God does not have a physical brain with which to think mathematical thoughts?” The answer is, of course, that we do not know, but the order is unquestionably there. We only perceive it with our brains as mathematical order; but it would be there even if our brains were not there, and it would be—whatever it is, in its fundamental essence. In a similar way, it is not unreasonable to postulate that God’s love is there, as whatever it fundamentally is,

\(^1\) And maybe even a cat…
and we just perceive it as (mostly) a feeling, with our “feeling equipment.”

It is perhaps not a bad analogy to explore further, that we may be “receivers” (as in “radio receivers”), “tuned in” to this mysterious thing that we call God’s love. If this is the case, the “instruction manual” for how to operate the equipment is to be sought in the writings of the saints and the mystics, the great religious figures of the world that have had, and pursued, this notion of God as love. This is certainly not limited to the Christian tradition; I pointed out Hindu and even Buddhist examples back in Chapter 1, but it may probably, without unfairness to other religions, be described as a most characteristically Christian notion.

Certainly, an essential part of what is needed is, as I argued earlier, to get the self out of the way. God’s love is universal and non-discriminating; our limited selves are precisely the opposite. In order to let God’s love, and hence God himself, act through us, we need to become essentially transparent to God; remove all of our our self-centered notions, prejudices, desires and fears. Christianity asserts that this is at least one way to understand the claim of Jesus’ divinity: he effaced his own self to such an extent that he had, for practical purposes, no “will” of his own but the will—which is to say the love—of God, so he truly could say “he who has seen me, has seen the Father.” To the extent that a follower of Jesus accomplishes the same feat, he can then say with Paul “It is no longer I who lives, but Christ—that is, God—who lives in me.”

Once again, I need to point out, this is not a nihilistic idea, but rather an empowering one. What is at stake is the possibility to “become one” with the very power behind the existence of the entire material universe. Paul again expresses this succinctly, in Philippians 4:13:

*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*

This is, in a way, the ultimate statement of Christian omnipotence. It is borne out in the example of all the saints and the martyrs of the Church, as well as countless other Christians who left behind the record of a life devoted to the service of their fellow human beings, to helping and empowering others. In union with Christ, filled with the love of God, there is no obstacle that cannot be overcome, no fear that cannot be conquered, no suffering that cannot be endured. As Paul again puts it, in another memorable passage (Romans 8:31-39):

*What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? [...] Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? [...] Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The last words in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (Paradiso, canto XXXIII) are “L’amor che muove il sole e l’altri stelle”: “The love that moves the Sun and the other stars.” This is the power to
which Christians are called to entrust (and, in a way, surrender) their life.

III. The personal God

If we can feel God’s love “inside us,” as it were, we can also bring it to other people, and reciprocally, we can also receive it from them. Either way, we have a personal relationship, in which God—who, as we have postulated, is not essentially different from his love—is directly involved.

This, I think, is the minimal, as well as the most fundamental sense, in which God may be said to be personal. We encounter him as love, as a life-affirming will, in a personal way, both in our innermost being and through our relationships with other human beings.

The teachings of Jesus and his followers strongly emphasize this relational nature of God. A key passage is Matthew 25:31-40:

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him… [he] will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'

That is, whatever we do unto another human being, we do unto God himself. God is, potentially, on both sides of the relationship: in the parable of the good Samaritan, he is both in the Samaritan and in the wounded Jew. But, most basically, we could say that God is—or can be, provided we let him in—in the relationship itself. Any relationship may (or may not, depending on our choice), be conducted “according to God’s will,” letting God in, bringing his love into the world. The basic requirement is that at least one of the parties see the other one as a person and not as an object.

In Matthew 18:20, Jesus makes the point explicitly:

Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

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1 This is, according to Kant, a fundamental criterion for moral action. Here I would like to say that this is also a necessary condition for faith in a personal God to be meaningful. It makes no sense to say that we believe “in a personal God” and then go around treating other people as objects.
but many other passages of the Gospels, and indeed the whole early development of Christianity, point to it as a religious movement based on fellowship. God is considered to be especially present at a fellowship meal, the Eucharist; and, symbolically, in the journey to Emmaus passage (Luke 24:13-35), the disciples recognize the risen Christ in the familiar act of the breaking of the bread, after they sit down to eat. I have also already commented on the passage of John 13:35: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This “relational” aspect of God, which we see is most directly associated with the character of Christ, “the Son,” completes the Christian trinity, as I have developed it in the course of this book. The three traditional “persons” of Father, Holy Spirit, and Son, correspond, in this scheme, to the three different ways in which we experience life and the world. There is an “external” (to my consciousness) world of material objects that I can handle and study with little or no personal involvement; there is the “internal” world of my consciousness, where I, as a subject, encounter my own ideas and feelings; and then there is the recognition that the external, material world contains, as it were, other beings like me, beings that are not just objects but subjects, too, “centers of consciousness,” as I am myself; beings with which I can enter into a unique sort of reciprocal relationship than I cannot have with anything else in the world.

The Father, Holy Spirit, and Son correspond, in first approximation, to the three “faces” of God—of the ultimate Reality—that we encounter in these three realms of our experience. As I have tried to describe here, the main, irreducible facts that we encounter are, in the external world, the combination of order and unpredictability that I have called “the creative freedom of the world;” in the sphere of our own consciousness, our ability to conceive of, and relate to truth; and, in the relational sphere, the subjective awareness of a virtually limitless source of love, courage and strength for living, that we feel called to share with all other human beings. All of these are “doors” to a mysterious reality that surpasses our understanding, even as it stands as the foundation of it.

In somewhat more traditional philosophical language, we could say that the Father corresponds to the wholly transcendent aspect of God, the Spirit to the wholly immanent, and the Son to the relational one. Christianity acknowledges all three as aspects of the same fundamental, ultimate reality. How this integration is to be understood is itself a mystery, but it is not hard to see, for instance, that there is a close connection between “the Son” and “the Spirit,” since, as I have pointed out above, one of the two ways in which we can experience God’s love is directly, internally, usually as part of the (itself deeply mysterious) phenomenon of prayer; hence, even in canonical Christian literature, it is not easy to tell the difference between “meeting Christ” and “being filled with the Holy Spirit.”

The Spirit is most traditionally associated with truth and discernment, as in the following passage from John 16 (12-15), which nevertheless still insists on the fundamental unity of the three “persons:”

1 As an extreme example of this, some Christian scholars have suggested that the mysterious reference in 1 Corinthians 15:16 to the risen Christ having appeared once “to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time” may be a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2:1-4.
I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

The traditional lists of “gifts of the Holy Spirit” (such as Romans 12:6-8) also include both intellectual gifts (teaching) and “loving” ones (encouraging, showing mercy). As for the Father and the Son, I have already covered many of the statements that emphasize their fundamental identity. I may further point out that the first chapter of the Gospel of John refers to the Son as “the Word”—which has both intellectual and relational connotations—, and also states that “all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3). This gives the Son a role in the creation of the world as well, which is perhaps best understood by again thinking of the creation itself as a fundamental act of love, a love that is the essence of God himself.

All of the above points to the fundamental unity of these three “manifestations” of God, even if the separation in terms of the three basic spheres of our existence sketched above remains, I think, a natural one. In fact, the postulated unity of God can be taken to indicate that the three spheres of our existence themselves also can, and must, be properly integrated; for instance, we must not let our concern for truth or justice overrule our compassion, or our love for God prevent us from using our minds to pursue the truths of science; and we must relate to the material world, the world of “objects,” in a reverent and loving way as well. The well-known injunction of Micah, 6:8

He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

can then almost be read as a trinitarian formula (recall the close relation between “justice” and “truth” that I discussed in Chapter 3).

Equally intriguing, I think, is the fact that the quote from Swami Vivekananda which I introduced back in Chapter 1 also maps well to the trinity I have introduced here:

The soul does not love. It is love itself.
It does not exist. It is existence itself.
It does not know. It is knowledge itself.

(Recall that “the soul” stands here for the Atman, or Universal Soul, that is, God himself.) I have already tackled the second line: “existence” clearly does not “exist” in the same way as contingent beings do, but it is nonetheless a fact, a fundamental one, and our first glimpse into God in his “first cause” aspect. “Knowledge,” if understood as our ability to discern truth, maps
to the Spirit (the very tricky question of how God “knows” will be postponed for another Section or two). And “love,” of course, is the relational aspect represented by the Son.

One may in fact distinguish two aspects of God’s love, as one may distinguish two kinds of “creation,” and there is also an interesting parallel here. On a fundamental level, there is the universal, one might say “undifferentiated,” fact of God’s primordial love, an “act of the will” that causes existence itself, at its most basic; and then, there is God’s love for individual contingent beings, which manifests itself through contingent beings—namely, ourselves. Similarly, there is a fundamental act of creation by which the “order and freedom” of the universe are brought into existence, and then, we can say, God continues (or proceeds) to create all contingent beings through the creative freedom that he has given to those same contingent beings.

In some of his writings, Thich Nhat Hanh has referred to “The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha” as the “Buddhist trinity.” Here, “Dharma” means basically “teaching,” and “Sangha” is the community of followers. The reference is to a very ancient formula by which one formally became a disciple by “taking the three refuges”: “I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha.” To the extent that these refuges have a divine aspect to them, the Sangha clearly reflects the “relational” aspect of God, the Son, we might say; the Dharma corresponds to the Holy Spirit, the spirit of discernment and truth; and the Buddha has elements of both: on the one hand he is a historical person to whom we can relate in a personal way, and who can even now be experienced personally by his followers as a source of compassion and hope, and on the other hand he is also the source of the teaching, the “body of the teaching,” the Dharmakaya.

What one does not find in this formulation is an explicit reference to the “Father” aspect of God, most traditionally identified with the Creator in Western tradition. In *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Hanh proposes the identification of the Father with Nirvana (the un-created and un-conditioned; recall the discussion in Chapter 1), and borrows terminology from the Christian theologian Paul Tillich to refer to it as “the ground of being” and “not less than a person.” This probably already pushes conventional Buddhist doctrine to the limit, so any further questions about how, or even if, all the “ultimates” of Buddhism—concepts such as Nirvana, the Dharmakaya, and the karmic order, for instance—are “related” should probably be discouraged, as they might only lead to the kind of counterproductive metaphysical speculation that the Buddha often warned against.

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1 Often called “the Three Jewels” in traditional Buddhist lists.

2 The Dharmakaya is today considered primarily a Mahayana Buddhist concept, but it has clear roots in the Pali canon: explicitly in the *Digha Nikaya*, 27, implicitly in the famous statement of the *Samyutta Nikaya* 22:87 (reminiscent of John 14:9) “Truly seeing Dhamma, one sees me; seeing me one sees Dhamma.”
IV. Suffering revisited

The statement that the creation of the world was a fundamental act of love may still appear questionable, given the vast amount of suffering in the world. The previous chapter pointed out that the objective causes of suffering—what may be called “natural evil”—are unavoidable in any universe that allows for the existence of independently acting, self-aware beings, and hence it seems that the alternative to creation is either non-existence (which is, one might say, a non-option), or existence without awareness, which subjectively amounts to the same thing. Still, the appropriateness of calling the creation an act of love, given this seeming inevitability of suffering, may well be called into question.

There are a couple of points that can be made in reply, of which perhaps the principal is that the same God that gives us existence, with its attendant suffering, also gives us the means to overcome suffering, and hence subjective suffering cannot truly be said to be inevitable. There is a way to “the cessation of suffering” (this is the fourth of the Buddha’s “Four Noble Truths”), and it is in principle open to everybody. It is also not substantially different from the teaching of Jesus; and, even though it may not have been expressed in quite as developed a form, it has, indeed, been rediscovered many times throughout human history. The core of it—the denial of self, and replacing it with un-self-centered love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity—is, in some way or another, available to everybody as an experience at some point or another in their lives: one can find the seeds of it in the way a mother loves her children, for instance, or the friendship among comrades working together for a common purpose. And once the path has been glimpsed, God is available to help us follow it, and grow in it.

Of course, no suffering does not mean “no pain”. But it does mean pain—or disappointment, or failure, or loss—that is accepted without resentment, without anger, and without despair. Most importantly, this personal serenity or peace does not in any way translate into a lack of concern for others, but, rather, quite the contrary. In Buddhist terms, the highest state of spiritual practice is one that is carried out both for one’s own benefit and the benefit of everybody else. In Christian terms, love calls to be shared, and the suffering of others calls out to our own

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1 Because we really do not know anything, directly, about an afterlife, I am deliberately leaving any consideration of it out of this, but I contend that, when it comes to the teachings of both Jesus and the Buddha, this is not a distortion of their message, since both of them clearly envisioned the ideal state to be attained after death—whether Nirvana or “the kingdom of Heaven”—as essentially a continuation of a state that could, and should, be experienced already in this world (see, for instance Luke 17:20-21).

2 I am deliberately putting a Christian spin on this. I realize that this is not a strictly accurate description of the Buddhist practice, but, as countless sutras testify, it is very definitely a result of the practice.

3 Anguttara Nikaya, 4.95. The Mahayana tradition goes even farther: “Individuals may purify themselves and thereby escape the miseries of sinful existence, yet the salvation of anyone is imperfect so long as and so far as there remain any who have not realized the universal spiritual communion, i.e., who are not saved. To save oneself by saving others is the gospel of universal salvation taught by Buddhism” (M. Anesaki, History of Japanese Religion, quoted in The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha, edited, with commentary, by E. A. Burtt; Mentor Books, 1955)
compassion. Either way, basically, we are called to first put out the fire within ourselves to at least a sufficient degree that we can attend to the fire that is consuming others.

There is, in a sense, a double standard at work here. The saint, or the boddhisatva in Mahayana tradition, does not care for his own pain, yet cares deeply for everybody else’s. But there is a fundamental difference between the way a religious and a non-religious person (say, a committed materialist) may engage in acts of service to others. The religious person understands that tending to the material needs of others may be in many cases necessary, but only as a first step, a sort of emergency first aid; for the true way out of suffering is not material but spiritual, and no amount of material aid or even comfort can provide for that.

What people truly need, once their most immediate physical needs have been attended to, is precisely the love that the saint carries in his or her own heart. It is to know that they are loved, that they matter. This is what makes, say, the sacrifice of Father Damien of Molokai meaningful, and perhaps a big part of the reason why the saint does not despair or renege of God even in the face of monstrous human suffering. How could the saints give up on God, when they can feel him inside themselves, loving the the poor and suffering, asking to be carried out to them, to be shared with them; trying to reach them and help them, comfort them and hold them in the saint’s own arms? Whatever else the saints may or may not know or understand about God, they know the reality of this love as surely as they know the reality of life itself.

The saint, therefore, does not think of asking “Why doesn’t God do something to help these people?” not necessarily because he is convinced, by the intellectual arguments presented in the previous chapter, that the question makes no sense, but rather because he knows, with absolute certainty, that God is, in fact, trying to help those people, through himself and other human beings, and the question therefore reverts on him: it is his responsibility to allow God’s love to act in the world. This inner certainty of God’s love and concern—which arises, at least in part, from the saint’s experience of his own delivery from suffering—is the subjective answer to the “problem of evil.”

Some people might be a bit put off by the implication that the answer to the question “so what is the subjective answer to the problem of evil?” should be “become a saint.” Yet this is not, I contend, an unreasonable proposition. Either you do not really care about the problem of evil, in

1 In fact, the deepest, darkest cause of suffering and despair is simply sin; which is why the true spiritual path has to be above all a moral path. The message is conveyed in a number of Gospel passages in which Jesus, when confronted with a victim of some physical ailment, begins by addressing them with the words “your sins are forgiven.” The physical healing that follows is clearly a symbol, or visible sign, of the more important spiritual healing brought about by the sufferer’s encounter with Christ.

2 As I argued before, it is God’s own nature that defines what God can or cannot do, not our more or less fanciful expectations. Whether this includes what are commonly called “miracles”—and if so, what kinds of miracles, and so on—is not quite the issue at this point. Rather, the objective fact is that God must have, historically, provided all the saints with plenty of what they considered to be satisfactory evidence of the reality, and the power, of his love. It does not matter in practice whether this evidence included things that somebody else might, by some criterion or another, consider “true miracles” or not.
which case you do not really care about whether there is an answer or not; or you really care, and then you should be prepared to do whatever is necessary to experience the answer (because this is an answer that can only be experienced). And, anyway, all Christians are called to become saints, just as all Buddhists should aspire to become arahants. There is really no sense in living the spiritual life halfway.

One can actually turn the question around and argue that the extent to which one still experiences suffering as a source of negative emotions in one’s life—resentment, anger, or even despair—is in fact a measure of the spiritual distance one still has to cover; a measure of the depth of one’s remaining attachments, one’s pride, self-centeredness, or lack of love. Of course, the bad things that happen to us as a direct result of our bad actions already carry a clear moral message, but from this perspective even “undeserved” suffering can be said to have a positive aspect, as it presents us with a challenge and an opportunity: to grow in selflessness when it strikes us, and to grow in love and act with love—to bring God’s love into the world—when it strikes our neighbors.

This “positive” view of suffering can also, interestingly, be found in the Mahayana tradition. In *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*, for instance, Thich Nhat Hanh devotes a chapter to explaining his view that a world without suffering would also be a world in which compassion, the highest virtue in Mahayana Buddhism, would not have a chance to arise.

There is certainly wisdom in all these positions, but I would prefer not to read too much purpose in random suffering, nor to give it too much of a theological or ontological importance. Sometimes bad things just happen, as explained in the previous chapter, and the important thing is simply how we respond to them. The point is, bad things are not special in this regard: good things, unexpected and undeserved, that may befall us, also provide us with a challenge and an opportunity: the challenge not to cling to them, the opportunity to share them with others, for instance.

Christianity brings a unique perspective to the problem of suffering, also, through the Passion of Jesus himself. The idea of the “suffering God” it evokes has a tremendous power, and works (when it works, that is) on a number of different levels. At a minimum, it is certainly an

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1 It is in this sense, I think, that one must understand Jesus’s otherwise somewhat disturbing statement, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” (John 9:3)

2 The parable of the man who was forgiven a great debt (Matthew 18:23-35), and the parable of the man who was invited to the king’s son’s wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1-14), provide examples of people who failed to respond appropriately to an undeserved stroke of good fortune.

3 Note that the notion I am implying here, that sometimes good or bad things “just happen,” and it is up to us to, with God’s help, turn them into an opportunity to grow closer to God (either by “dying to ourselves” a little more, or bringing God’s love to somebody else, or both), is in practice indistinguishable from the conventional idea that God sends everything that happens to us for a purpose—since the purpose can only be the same as I have just stated, and the proper response is to be discerned in the the same way, namely, through prayerful meditation. The conviction that with God’s help we can successfully face (always in the above sense) anything at all that might befall us is, in my opinion, the correct way to think about God’s omnipotence.
admonition (and an example) to any Christian expecting to have a “easy” time of it in this life, for, as warned in Matthew 24:10, “A disciple is not above his teacher.” Beyond this, many people find comfort in the idea (already present in the Old Testament, but made especially dramatic by the Jesus story) of a God who shares our suffering, while others find a strong deterrent for sin in the notion that our sins continue, even now, to add to Jesus’ suffering.

Again, all of this is good, and almost all of it can be rationalized in a minimal way\(^1\) (or, at worst, a metaphorical one), but it also needs to be remembered that the notion of a god that must undergo suffering as a sort of ritual to achieve something is not at all a Christian, but a pagan one, and that any “god” that is, in his own nature, subject to suffering cannot possibly be “the real God.” Most importantly, the foundational story of Christianity is not one of suffering triumphant, but of triumph over suffering. The Christian hope is ultimately summarized in the statement of Jesus (John 16:33):

I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!

It is remarkable that this statement is placed by John at the last supper, a few hours before Jesus is to be arrested, tried, and executed. How, on the face of it, can one then justify the claim “I have conquered the world”?

Some scholars believe that most of the discourses in John 14-17 are, in fact, post-resurrection speeches. At a minimum, it seems clear that they were recorded with an eye firmly set on the resurrection events. It is essentially impossible today to figure out what those events were, in any kind of reliable way; but it is safe to say that, whatever they were, they persuaded the disciples of the truth of the above statement. It is in this truth that Christians continue to believe today, and in Paul’s formulation: “I can do all things through Christ that lives in me.” It is not fundamentally different from the Buddha’s conviction that any kind of suffering can be completely destroyed, and the holy life can be lived on earth; and remarkably (and also reassuringly), the way to do so, the path to follow, is essentially the same according to either tradition.

It is natural to wonder about what may lie at the very end of this way. As I have pointed out above, Christian mystics (and mystics from all other religious traditions of humankind, as far as I can determine) testify to an experience essentially impossible to describe in words, so that even common terms like “joy” barely seem appropriate. In seeming agreement with the basic ideas laid out at the beginning of this chapter, also, this happens upon, or is accompanied by, a total surrender or annihilation (again words are probably inadequate here) of the “self.”

Whatever happens after death, however, it should probably be emphasized that even partial

\(^{1}\) For instance, we may agree with Aquinas that God as God, that is, “in himself” does not really “suffer”, but that God incarnate does; that is, God suffers “through us,” much as he creates and loves through us.
progress along the spiritual path, right here in this life, is far better than the alternative. The Buddha made this point effectively in a series of sutras collected in the *Samyutta Nikaya*, describing what a “stream-enterer” (one of the lowest rungs of accomplishment in the Buddhist practice) may expect as a result from their efforts. In sutra 13.1, he picks up a bit of dust with the tip of his fingernail, and compares it to the whole earth, then declares:

> In the same way, monks, for a disciple of the noble ones who is consummate in view, an individual who has broken through [to stream-entry], the suffering and stress that is totally ended and extinguished is far greater. That which remains [...] is next to nothing: it’s not a hundredth, a thousandth, a one hundred-thousandth, when compared with the previous mass of suffering. That's how great the benefit is of breaking through to the Dhamma, monks.

One can find a glimpse of this as well in the letter of Paul to the Phillipians, probably written under house arrest in Rome, a few years before he was killed, and when this eventual outcome may have already appeared very nearly inevitable. Paul admits to “not having quite attained the goal yet” (3:12), but claims that “I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content” (4:12), and closes with a wonderful exhortation:

> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

If we could all experience this peace, and, like St. Francis of Assisi, help bring it to a troubled world, we could bring an end to *all* suffering. This is what religious faith, properly understood, has to offer, to each of us, and to the whole world.

V. Some open questions

Up to now I have been doing what might be called “empirical theology,” relying mostly on the parallels offered by the accounts of the personal experiences of the saints of two great traditions that were born and developed far away in space and time. In this section, however, I am about to engage in speculative theology instead.

First, however, I would like to point out that what I have developed so far might be called “minimal theism.” It has been presented, unquestionably, with a strong Christian bias, but I think that it should not be too hard for people from other religious traditions to make the

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1 It’s 3,000 miles from Jerusalem to Benares, where the Buddha preached his first sermon, roughly 500 years before Jesus’ birth.
necessary adjustments to describe their basic beliefs. The good news, as I see it, is that this very minimal set of notions I have introduced, centered around the possibility of experiencing personally the love of God (whether one chooses to call it that or not) may already contain in it all that is needed to start the practice of what, in religious terms, would be called “the holy life,” and this practice is self-reinforcing: if things are done properly, love, it will be found, brings forth more love, and imperfect peace begets ever more perfect peace.

On the other hand, it is clear that the doctrinal content of “real world” religions goes far beyond what I have so far discussed. Much of it, of course, is empirically unverifiable; but some other important beliefs may at least be partially supported by a slight (albeit admittedly speculative) extension of some of the notions developed here.

A central question about which a great many other things revolve is that of God’s knowledge, which I have deliberately postponed until now. That the point is a very difficult one is apparent from the fact that four “questions” (Part I, q. 14-17) are devoted to it in Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, for a total of 31 articles of extremely dense reading.

There seems to be no difficulty in principle with the minimal assumption that God, in as much as he can be imagined to be “incarnate,” that is, acting at specific points in space and time, knows contingent things through contingent beings, just as we have postulated earlier that he creates separate, contingent beings through the actions of those beings, and loves them through them as well. The difficulty is in trying to imagine to what basic attribute of God *as God* (that is, “in himself”) this “knowledge” corresponds.

More specifically, the difficulty is with the assumption we made at the very beginning that God must be “absolutely simple,” as opposed to “composite” in any way. Now, while it is at least possible to abstract a notion of “simple” (or “undifferentiated,” not broken up into parts) existence, and even “simple” or “undifferentiated” love (as a fundamental, life-affirming act of the will, as described in previous sections), the concept of knowledge appears to be *intrinsically* complex, for knowledge “as we know it” is always knowledge of specific, separate things; and our minds work in such a way that it is virtually impossible to imagine “knowledge” being possible at all without this separateness of the objects of knowledge. Yet, as Aquinas himself points out, that which is known exists, in some sense—even if only as a representation—in the one who knows; so it seems that we are led to imagine the existence of “separate parts” in God, corresponding to his “representations” of the objects of his knowledge.

In more modern terms, we tend to identify knowledge with information, and information with something that needs to be physically stored somewhere. So where does God store his information?

There seems to be really only one way out of the difficulty. By pursuing the “information” analogy, we may think of the way a computer stores data, for instance, a picture of a tree. In the
computer memory, this is just a bunch of zeros and ones. But this is very different from the tree itself, or even from my own visual representation of the tree—which itself, as a “thing,” is also a very different thing from the tree itself.

The natural postulate, then, is that, when it comes to God, for him there is simply no “representation” of a thing as distinct from the thing itself. To use somewhat fanciful language (and because I can’t really think of a better way to express it), all of Reality is, itself, God’s “memory bank.” “For a thing to exist” is the same as “for that thing to be known by God”; or, simpler still, the statements “A exists” and “A is known by God” are the same.

It seems then that the notion of God’s “knowledge” does not really add anything to the basic fact of existence, but that is not necessarily the case. Let me backtrack a moment to consider why it is even necessary to address this issue. The basic reason, in terms of the ideas presented here so far, is that, back in Chapter 3, I argued that our ability to “know that we know” is not reducible to “lower-level,” algorithmic causal processes, and as such it must be directly traceable to the “First Cause,” that is, to God himself. Hence, there must be something about God that has to do with this ability.

What goes, then, into “knowing that we know”? Suppose I claim to know that a quadratic polynomial always has two complex roots, for instance. What do I mean by this? It means that I am aware that this bit of knowledge corresponds to a basic truth about quadratic polynomials; I am aware of a correspondence between “reality”—the reality of a quadratic polynomial, what it really is, the properties it in fact has—and a certain representation or formulation of a fact. And, in fact, the correspondence is perfect: the formulation “always has two complex roots” is a part of the reality of a quadratic polynomial. So perhaps the ultimate, irreducible fact that I am trying to grasp at is simply this: an awareness of (limited) Reality, of things-being-as-they-are.

Only for mathematical objects can we possess such a perfect awareness, for only these creations of our minds can we truly know “as they are.” For everything else, including all the natural sciences, we only have models that more or less resemble the real things. But we are still aware of the relative truth of our knowledge—we know that we know the model, which is typically a mathematical one, and we are also aware of its relation to empirical data.

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1 Not even that, really; it is a bunch of voltages that can be read as zeros and ones.

2 A possible but very imperfect analogy, inspired by the Pauline quote, “in him we live and move and have our being,” might be the way the ocean’s water knows a fish that is swimming in it. Not only there is a “hole” in the water, shaped like the fish, where the fish is, but there is water also inside the fish, and even in every one of its living tissues; also this “knowledge” the water has of the fish does not affect the water’s own basic simplicity. Even so, this “knowledge” is clearly imperfect; the analogy could be improved perhaps by replacing the water by something both more ubiquitous and less material, like, say… spacetime itself. There “is” spacetime both “outside” and “inside” the structure that we call the fish, both in between and “in” its very atoms, and moreover, according to the general theory of relativity, spacetime is “bent” by the fish’s matter, so it may be said to “know” that the fish is there. Again, though, this is an imperfect analogy; for one thing, to imagine God’s knowledge in these terms one would still have to add one more dimension to “physical” spacetime, the “dimension of meaning” discussed in Chapter 3, where God could be imagined as providing the background or framework in which ideas and concepts exist—and “knowing” them all as well in a similar manner.
What I am clearly heading for is that, if we try to abstract from all this something applicable to God, we seem almost compelled to say that God’s knowledge, “at God’s level,” means a perfect awareness of Reality (“perfect” because there is no “mental representation” separate from the thing itself).

The notion of God’s awareness is, of course, a huge one. Granted, it was always implied before, as an attribute of “God incarnate”—God acting, loving, creating, even suffering through us—but to assume that something like awareness exists at the most basic level of reality, the level of the First Cause itself; that something like awareness is implicit in Existence itself, is a very far-reaching one.

We can then say this. Taken by itself, the assertion of God’s existence, as Existence, simply reduces, empirically, to the observation that the world exists. The assertion of his love also reduces to that, but adds a suggestion of a will behind the bare fact of Existence. The assertion of his knowledge is identical to the previous ones but also adds something, a suggestion, now, of an awareness as well.

The last two assertions can be further developed by referring to our own personal experience, as I have done earlier in this chapter, by arguing that it is possible to experience God’s love personally, as a source of love, strength, and ultimately life. In a similar way, we may see in our ability to conceive of, seek, and ascertain truth, a manifestation of God’s own awareness.

Let me go a little bit farther. Unquestionably we experience many feelings, and we have a will of our own. I have claimed that it is possible to “align our will with God’s will,” and to get our love, as it were, “directly from God” (where these two seemingly different ideas probably refer to one and the same thing). But how could we know that this is in fact the case? The basic criterion, to know that we are doing God’s will, loving with God’s love, would seem to be the nature of God’s love as elucidated earlier: universal and life-affirming. Anything that is not like that is not “the real thing.”

It seems that we might then also speak of “aligning our knowledge with God’s knowledge,” or perhaps even of getting our knowledge “directly from God”—where again the two expressions might really end up referring to the same thing. How could we tell this “God-assisted knowledge” from any old notion that might otherwise occur to us? Again, there appears to be a ready basic criterion, for what characterizes God’s knowledge is simply its fundamental identity with Reality; or, in simpler terms, “knowledge” is “from God” simply if it is true. In the act of

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1 For one thing, it opens up the possibility of a “subjective” form of immortality, by, first, assuming that something like awareness is possible even in the absence of a physical body, and, second, allowing for the possibility that God—that is, the Ultimate Reality—may also “remember” our earthly existence, in a way that might preserve it, as it were, for eternity. (Note that I am using the word “awareness,” not “consciousness,” which, to my mind, suggests something more complicated; I am also not talking about “self-awareness,” since the notion of “self,” as discussed before, has problems of its own.)
“seeing things as they truly are,” God himself is present—as he would be in a true act of selfless love, in the compassion of the Samaritan of the parable.

We may still distinguish, in practice, between a kind of knowledge that appears to come directly from God, and one that we build up for ourselves, laboriously, out of the data of our perceptions; as we distinguished earlier between the love of God that we experience through another human being, and that which we experience internally, intimately, in the mysterious action of prayer. But, whichever way a particular bit of knowledge has been arrived at, the basic question we need to answer about it is simply whether it is true, whether it conforms to the reality of things-as-they-are. If it does, it is ultimately from God, whether directly or indirectly. If it does not, then it is not—regardless, of course, of any claims of “divine inspiration” that might come attached to it.

In Matthew 16:17, Jesus answers Peter’s declaration that he, Jesus, is the Messiah, with the exclamation “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” In the Majjhima Nikaya, 12:2, a monk who leaves the Buddha’s order complains that “the recluse Gotama teaches a Dhamma (merely) hammered out by reasoning, following his own line of inquiry as it occurs to him,” implying that the Buddha’s “knowledge” is merely human, as opposed to what the commentary calls “transcendental wisdom.” Jesus’ statement to Peter clearly points to that kind of transcendental wisdom, and the Majjhima Nikaya clearly implies that the Buddha’s wisdom is indeed also of that nature. But in either case, the fundamental question is not “where” the wisdom in question comes from, but whether it is actually true. This is why the Buddha himself repeatedly encouraged his disciples to not take anything on faith, but to test everything they were taught and verify it for themselves.

An essential part of all theistic religions is the concept of “Divine Revelation.” The above considerations provide, I think, a reasonable empirical way to approach the concept, as well as the closely related notion of “being chosen by God.” As to the first one, the basic standard, as indicated, is simply truth (whenever this is ascertainable, of course), although it needs to be kept in mind that for spiritual purposes what matters is really whether the text in question expresses a valid spiritual truth—not necessarily a scientific or historic one.

As to the second one, for practical purposes the notion of having been “chosen by God” for a particular task may simply reduce to the realization on the part of a person that there is a task to be done and that he or she is the person to do it—regardless of how the realization may have come about, but provided, of course, that the fundamental insight turn out to be true. This is, of course, the tricky part, for there may be sometimes no way to tell ahead of time. For every Moses or Joan of Arc there is a Simon bar Kokhba. In any case, the Buddha’s advice to investigate every claim carefully remains a good one, as is Jesus’ “by their fruits you shall know them” (Matthew 7:16).

In one of the very few (in my opinion) false notes struck in his book Living Buddha, Living Christ, Thich Nhat Hanh appears to take issue with the late Pope John Paul II for referring in a
speech to Jesus as “the only Son of God,” with emphasis on the “only.” And yet, there is no question that a fundamental fact about Jesus’ understanding of himself was his filial relationship to God, what we may call his awareness of his sonship. It is through this sonship that he defined himself: it was his whole identity, his very life, and everything about him that might be called “a sense of self.” First and foremost in Jesus’ mind, God was Father, and he was Son, and the purpose of his life, his whole being, was to do the Father’s will.

It is therefore not unfair, I think, to call Jesus “the Son of God,” in a way in which the term could not really be applied to any other human being. The key question, of course, is whether Jesus was right—that is, whether his belief was true—or just deluded, and this largely depends, I think, on precisely how we define “sonship.”

This is a problem for the professional theologians, but I cannot resist pointing out that at least as a “self”—or rather, as a sense of identity to substitute for our small, impermanent self—“sonship” is something that all Christians are invited, indeed called, to share. A basic requirement appears to be, as pointed out earlier, the total renunciation of our finite self, and absolute surrender of our will to the will of God, that alone can result in the transparency that Jesus claimed for himself when he said that “he who has seen me has seen the father.” Ultimately, again, every one must decide for him- or herself whether Jesus met this requirement or not.

For me, I must admit, the decision is easy. Even in the darkest times of my life, the times when I may have doubted the existence of God (or perhaps I should say, the reality of God’s love), there was no doubt in my mind that there ought to be a God, and that He ought to be, essentially, just like the Jesus of the Gospels. Theologically speaking, of course, it is clearly not that simple, but I hope I have at least managed to show here, however imperfectly, that such a wish is not necessarily fundamentally unreasonable.

Ash Wednesday, 2009

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1 Certainly it is not a term the Buddha, for instance, would ever have used for himself, since he never envisioned God as a Father, nor even, apparently, had any use for the notion of a personal Creator.

2 In which case we could say, as above, that his (self-)knowledge was “from God “; perhaps even to say that it was God’s own knowledge.