2 | Barth's Theology of Religion

Barth's Idea of Religion

Continuing with my discussion of Barth's general heading to this part of the *Church Dogmatics*, I will address the question of what Barth thinks is cancelled in religion, and what is fulfilled. To do that, I will explore what Barth means by 'religion'. Right at the beginning, he states that it is 'the realm of attempts by man to justify and sanctify himself before a wilfully and arbitrarily devised image of God' (37). There are two parts to this definition, the attempt to justify oneself and the arbitrary construction of an image of God.

This is a very idiosyncratic definition of 'religion'. Why should Barth adopt it? I think the deepest reason lies in the general approach to theology that he is adopting, with which I am in some disagreement, and which he outlines at length in volume I, part 1 of the *Church Dogmatics*.

This is an approach which begins with the observation that no thinker begins with a blank sheet, without any preconceived opinions. Everyone has learned from their parents and society a set of general beliefs and attitudes. Some of these beliefs become systematised in such a way that they form totalising world-views. There are many very different world-views, some of them contradicting others, so they cannot all be true. Some thinkers hold that world-views cannot themselves be justified, because all the justifications they might give are contained within the world-view itself, and there is no universally agreed world-view in the light of which all the others can be assessed. Different basic world-views cannot therefore be

compared. Religions, in particular, it is sometimes said, are different 'language-games', or forms of life,[1] with their own internal criteria of rationality, and though they can be criticised or expanded in various ways, they can never be compared with each other by some neutral rational criteria.

Some hold that they can only really be understood by insiders, and cannot be compared with other religions in any meaningful way.

Barth seems to have accepted that Christianity was like such a world-view, and Christian theology was a self-contained discipline that could not be justified by some neutral rational criteria, but stood as the systematic reflection on a faith that was directly revealed by God, not selected by human reasoning or choice. There was no need for apologetics as a necessary prelude to faith. Faith was directly given by the grace, the free choice, of God in Christ. As Barth puts it, revelation is 'the outpouring of the Holy Spirit … the judging, but also reconciling presence of God' (36). Theology is the work of exploring this revelation in all its implications and presuppositions.

This definition can be clearly formulated and understood, whether one agrees with it or not. It gives, to use Bertrand Russell's formulation, knowledge by description of what revelation is.[2] One does not have to agree with it to have such understanding. But to be a Christian believer one must also have knowledge by acquaintance. That is, one must actually have some experience of the outpouring of the Spirit, and of the presence of a judging and reconciling God. That is a matter of receiving grace. One does not need any philosophical preparation for this, nor can one obtain it by one's own efforts. Faith is a pure gift of God, and one is entitled to use it as a

[1] These terms come from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958). It is doubtful, however, whether he would have approved of this use of them.

[2] See Bertrand Russell, *Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description*, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Vol. XI (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910), pp. 108–28.

basis for theological thinking, for its God-given truth is more sure than any non-faith-based justification that might be offered for it.

Barth thereby distinguishes between religious knowledge by description and religious knowledge by acquaintance, though he does not use these terms, when he says that the Christian church (at least in its Reformed version) is 'the site' of God's revelation. He means that the church is not in itself the bearer of God's revelation. It may proclaim all the God-given beliefs, and yet, as a human religion, it may fail to live by them, and even undermine them in practice. But as proclaiming (perhaps among other things) the correct beliefs, it makes possible a life given and sustained by grace. It is this that makes Christianity the 'true religion'.

Barth thinks it possible to take the true religion as fundamental God-given knowledge which can have no other justification (no natural theology or proofs of God), and by which all human knowledge and activity can be judged. His discussion of religion is explicitly based on this foundation. For that reason, he distinguishes what he calls his 'theological' account of religion from accounts which he calls 'empirical', 'secular', or 'comparative'. He means by such non-theological accounts those which assume that no particular religion, or perhaps no religion, is true, or that regard Christianity as just one member of a more general category of 'religions', rather than as the religion by which all others must be judged.

This does, however, raise a major problem. For one's knowledge of God by acquaintance to be genuine, not illusory, one must have knowledge of God by description that is correct. But this is notoriously difficult to gain and to be sure of. Christian theology has from the beginning been marked by disputations, quite often violent ones. To mention some obvious ones, there are disputes about whether God is three 'persons' or three modes of being; whether Jesus is omniscient; whether God sends some to Hell; and whether good works are necessary to salvation. There are many others, and Barth has himself contributed to such debates.

In the case of the present debate, on the nature of religion, Barth proposes that religions, even Christian churches, that lack experience of the grace of Jesus Christ are all self-serving and wilful. But how does he know that? Many Christians, including me, would strongly resist this definition. It seems to impugn the sincerity and authenticity of many religions, and to restrict the grace of God to a relatively small group of people in an unacceptable way. It may be more adequate to think that many religions can be vehicles of God's grace.

I have no problem with regarding religions from a Christian point of view. But there are a number of Christian points of view, and I do not think all Christians would be able to agree with Barth's, even though they could understand it perfectly. For it is an exaggeration to say that religious views cannot be understood by those who do not believe them, or that they are not changeable and open to influence by others. Many Christians become atheists, and sometimes change back again. They understand both views perfectly well, while disbelieving one of them. I know Hindus who have become Christian, and I even know people who claim to be both Hindu and Christian (the Roman Catholic priest Raimon Panikkar being a notable example).[3]

It is perfectly possible to have a good understanding of more than one religion, even when disagreeing with many of their views – just as it is possible in politics for a conservative to understand very well what a socialist thinks, without being a socialist. Barth himself changed from a liberal view of Christian faith, and no longer believed it, but he understood it well enough. Many years of teaching theology have convinced me that it is possible for an atheist to give a better description of Christian beliefs than a committed Christian who firmly believes in Christ, but may be rather bad at theological thinking.

[3] See Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981).

Christian writers may, like Barth, be much more creative in expanding or revising Christian doctrines, whereas non-Christians will have to be content with stating what various reputable Christians have taught. On the other hand, Christian writers may also come up with doctrines that are regarded by many of their fellow believers with horror, and have often later been regarded as heresies.

So there is every reason to be sceptical of Barth's claim that 'theological' accounts of religion will be essentially different from and better than what he terms 'secular' or 'empirical' accounts. In fact I intend to show by close attention to his text that the account he gives in *Church Dogmatics*, volume I, part 2, has harmful consequences for theology, in effect confining it to the discourse of an inward-looking and fideistic sect with little real interest in world religions or scientific and moral critiques of religion, and pretending that it has purely internal criteria of rationality to which more secular objections have no relevance.

A survey of the beliefs and practices of many human cultures shows that there are widespread human beliefs in a more valuable or ultimate spiritual reality, but many varied beliefs about how this reality should be described. Speaking of a judging and reconciling God, and an indwelling Spirit, as Christians do, is just one of these descriptions. It is unjustifiable to ignore different descriptions in a discussion about 'the world of human religion', which Barth must be intending to give if he is to provide a Christian theology of religion. It suggests that only one set of descriptions is correct, and even if that is true, how could one know that without investigating others?

I applaud Barth for his commitment to the Lordship of Christ and his opposition to allying Christian faith with totalitarian or repressive political ends. But, in an age when it is important to build up understanding of other cultures and their belief systems, Barth's method of regarding all world religions as wilful and arbitrary seems alienating and harmful.

More importantly, it seems in marked tension with believing that God is a being of unlimited and universal mercy and love, which is

widely thought to be the teaching of Jesus. If God's mercy is unlimited, it might seem that God's grace would be given in some way to all cultures. If so, it is important to explore how this could be, and to understand why so many different views of an alleged spiritual reality have come to exist. Barth's 'theological' method of regarding all religions as wilful and arbitrary seems extremely unhelpful. It is not obvious that Christian revelation compels such a conclusion. It might be more appropriate to see if there is something more positive to be said about religions from within a properly Christian theology. That is one thing this book is intended to show.

One would certainly have to investigate with care whether non-Christian faiths are 'abominated by God', or whether they may show signs of God's love and grace. It would not be enough to ignore them completely.

I do not have a problem with seeing that religious believers can describe other belief systems while being loyal to their own revelation, which in the Christian case is what I think Barth means by giving a properly 'theological' account. But we must be very careful to describe such systems and religions accurately and sensitively, and try to see what indications, if any, can be seen in them of God's presence and activity.

This is what a theological account, on Barth's own terms, requires. Unfortunately, although Barth gives brief accounts of some forms of Buddhism and Hinduism, and thus is clearly dealing not just with Christianity, but with world religions as a whole, there are many internal problems of consistency, coherence, and sectarian bias in his treatment of religion, as I endeavour to show.

The Limited Scope of Barth's Idea of Religion

For a start, although he defines religion as concerned with imaginary and wilful ideas of God, many religions (Buddhism is the obvious example) do not particularly concern themselves with ideas of God at all. They obviously have no concern to justify themselves

before a God in whom they do not believe, and would have no idea of what it means to sanctify themselves before such an imaginary figure.

So Barth, in this definition, is only concerned with the group of religions which are theistic, which see a need to 'justify' themselves (declare themselves innocent of offence?), and which care about being sanctified ('made holy') by or before God. Such religions have a God who assesses their conduct, probably finds them guilty, and maybe then has a way of reconciling them to God.

This sounds as though it is already confined to some versions of Christianity. Jews and Muslims, for example, do not generally consider themselves morally guilty before God, even in the best actions they perform, and before they have done anything. Such a thing sounds like a doctrine of total depravity, which is characteristic of some Protestant theologies. The doctrine holds that humans have been so depraved by the 'fall' of the first humans from grace that they can no longer do anything which will make them good (righteous) enough to be acceptable to God. They therefore stand in need of some saviour-figure who can reconcile them to God. Jews and Muslims typically consider that humans are mixtures of good and bad, and if they do their best to obey God, that is all that can be required of them. They have no notion of 'original guilt', and no notion of 'original sin', seen as a total inability to please God, which is somehow inherited from Adam and Eve.[4] They can accept that humans find it very difficult to do what is right, and that they often lack any sense of the presence of God. Jews might also say that many of the sufferings of human life are the results of a 'fall', a turning from God and towards egoistic and harmful behaviour that occurred in the earliest days of the human race. But there is no notion of personal guilt for something that they themselves did not do. Humans may need divine help to do what is right and to

[4] The reader can confirm this by looking up 'original sin' on any reputable Jewish or Muslim website.

come to know God, but that help will be given by God as a result of prayer and trust in God. There is no need of some figure who suffers in order to pay for their sin. Indeed, such an idea may even seem ludicrous to them.

Jews and Muslims are, like Christians, concerned with righteousness, with justice and compassion. They do recognise that humans continually fail to live up to their moral ideals. They do believe that God needs to forgive them and help them to be more just and compassionate, and that God will do so. They are not seeking to justify themselves, but they think that God will justify them if they turn to God in trust and obedience.

There may, from a Christian point of view, be something lacking if there is no idea of God sharing in the human condition, but there is no lack of trust in God, and there is no attempt at self-justification. Such accusations would be rejected by most Jews and Muslims, and so the accusations cannot be seen to show real understanding of Jewish and Muslim belief. They are only, sad to say, repetitions of the calumnies that Christians have made of Judaism and Islam throughout most of history. It is sad to see Barth supporting them, when I am sure that he had no intention of doing so.

So Barth seems to be only considering religions with a morally judging God who might nevertheless provide some sort of help to overcome their moral failures. That may already seem a very paradoxical view of God. We might understand that there could be a God who judged human lives in the light of very high moral standards. But if, because of some inherited tendency in their make-up, they actually could not meet those standards, we might think that even a moderately reasonable God would not condemn people for what they could not help. If a theologian goes on to say that God does condemn everyone, but then forgives them, this may well seem totally unreasonable. It would be more just to say that, when people cannot meet very high moral standards, through no personal fault of their own, then this is a mitigating circumstance which will make total condemnation inappropriate. People should only be

condemned for what they did that was wrong, but that they need not have done, though they knew it was wrong. That is a first principle of justice, in most legal systems. There will be punishments for evil, but the punishments will be proportioned to the seriousness of the crime, and they will probably be finite.

Jews, in fact, may not believe in any sort of afterlife in which punishments could take place – the Sadducees at the time of Jesus took this view, and many Jews today would do so too. For them, punishments would probably take the form of disastrous consequences for the family or society of which the wrongdoer was part. Muslims almost all believe in a life after death, and in a Hell where punishments take place. But they passionately believe that repentance and faith will mitigate those punishments, and many think that most punishments will be finite, and can be relieved by, for example, the intercession of the Prophet.[5]

Divine forgiveness is an important feature of both Judaism and Islam, but it is a general principle of justice that a judge should not just forgive people because he feels like it, even though they deserve condemnation and punishment. Barth calls such forgiveness 'grace', and applauds the thought that forgiveness is given freely and out of divine love and compassion. But the fact is that, however compassionate forgiveness without regard to the nature or action of wrongdoers may be, it would seem to many people to be simply unjust. Forgiveness is always difficult, but is usually only possible if the wrongdoers repent and are prepared to do something to make amends, where such a thing is possible. So in Judaism and Islam God will forgive the truly penitent, if they are prepared to act in a way that shows a genuine desire to act righteously, and if they turn to God in faith.

[5] There are Hadiths which say as much, and the Qur'an 7, 29 – 'soon will thy Lord raise thee to a station of praise and glory' – is interpreted by Islamic scholars to be addressed to the Prophet, and means that he will successfully intercede for the release from Hell of many on Judgment Day.

The claim that Barth seems to make, that God at the same time both totally condemns all human acts, however good they may seem, and totally forgives them, without regard to the merit or actions of the wrongdoers, can seem irrational and unjust. The thought that this is possible because God, in human form, pays the penalty for sin (for something God did not do) is no help. Many people, not only Jews and Muslims, would say that only the wrongdoer can pay the penalty for wrongdoing. If God is all-powerful and compassionate, it would be better and easier for God just to forgive the wrongdoing anyway, and ignore the penalty.

That is how it would seem to a Jew or Muslim, and I think it has to be said that their objections are not unreasonable, and in no way show a desire for self-justification. It is still God who forgives, but God forgives the moral failures of humans insofar as they repent and desire to make amends. And God, after perhaps some form of punishment for their misdoings, makes it possible for them to achieve conscious fellowship with the divine by giving them divine help.

Obviously Christians would not completely agree with Jewish and Muslim accounts. But they should also say that such accounts have nothing to do with self-justification or rejection of God. They give a rather different account of God's nature and the nature of judgment and forgiveness. For Christians, it may seem to be an inadequate, and to that extent wrong, account. But it is not wholly wrong, and it is surely not, as Barth puts it, an abomination to God. I would go so far as to say that it is an account which puts genuine question marks to some Christian accounts of the matter, and it is an honest attempt to worship God in sincerity and truth.

I think that what Christians can stress is an insistence that God is a God of love, and so one with whom a relationship of love can be established; a belief that God can be imaged in a human life which gives this love a human face; a perception that human sin causes God to share in human suffering; a faith that the Spirit of Christ is given to humans in the community of the church; and a vision of the goal of the cosmos as a loving and creative union in Christ. Jews

and Muslims would not put it like this. But they could say that God is loving and compassionate; that God reveals a way to turn to God; that God promises that a community of peace and justice is the goal of human existence; and that this goal will, by God's power, be realised, whether in this world or beyond it.

In light of this, it seems almost self-contradictory of Barth to say that the Jewish and Muslim ideas of God are 'wilful and arbitrary'. Moreover, the Jewish idea of God as a moral creator who makes an unbreakable covenant with the Jews is recorded in a book which Christians call 'the Old Testament', so the revelation of the Torah to Jews must be at least part of the revelation of God to Christians. Muslims inherit this tradition of divine revelation and covenant, though they universalise God's covenant to the whole human race. So theirs must be the same God too, even if slightly different things are said about God. It follows that either the Christian idea of God is wilful and arbitrary too, or that Jewish and Muslim ideas of God, together with the God of other Abrahamic religions, are on the whole correct.

Differences will remain, just as differences remain among various Christian traditions. Religions will be misused to support tyrannical political powers and to encourage violence and hatred. But it is better to look for the elements which promote friendship and a sense of sharing in a spiritual quest for goodness and well-being in the world, rather than to suggest that all religions are vain quests for self-justification and barriers to divine revelation.

Buddhism

In thinking about religion, I have so far only mentioned religions that originated in the Eastern Mediterranean, and form what is often called the Abrahamic tradition. But there are many other types of religion in the world, and many of them are so unlike Christianity that the question of self-justification scarcely even arises. It is impossible to deal with them all, and in a book of this nature one

cannot give a fully adequate account of any world religion. But it is important to raise the question of whether all the major world religions (oddly, including Christianity) are abominated by God, as Barth claims. I will aim to give necessarily rather general accounts, which will be enough to suggest that there are many more positive things to be said about many religions than Barth allows.[6] I will refer in each case to one or two major strands of the traditions I discuss, and I will begin by choosing two which Barth mentions, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Buddhism in particular can look very unlike Christianity, and some versions of it can seem to have nothing in common with Christian faith. But the situation is very complex. There are many groups which practise a union of Buddhist and Christian beliefs and meditation techniques, and it is not too difficult to find affinities between them.[7]

There is obviously no question of seeking to justify oneself before a personal creator God, since there is no such God in the Buddhist way. But there is a central search for holiness, or liberation from egoism and from the 'three fires' of hatred, greed, and ignorance. Christians might speak of holiness as full obedience to the moral law, devotion to a personal God, and being filled with Christ's love and the power of the divine Spirit. Buddhists are not going to use such terms. But the Eightfold Path, which is the heart of Buddhist practice, involves commitment to a morality of compassion for all beings which is much greater and wider than much traditional Christian practice. Christians tend to speak of love for other human beings, but have often been insensitive to the welfare

[6] I have given much fuller accounts of Buddhism and Hinduism in a five-volume series, each headed *Religion and …* (four with Oxford University Press 1994–2000, and the fifth volume with SCM, 2008). A one-volume account is in my *Images of Eternity* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 1987), later retitled as *Concepts of God* (London: Oneworld, 1998).

[7] See the essays in Gavin D'Costa and Ross Thompson, eds., *Buddhist–Christian Dual Belonging* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016).

of animals. Christians have even been accused of thinking that all other beings exist for the sake of humans, and that animals and the earth itself can be used in any way at all if it promotes human interests. Thomas Aquinas wrote, 'The whole of material nature exists for man',[8] and some have taken this to mean that humans can treat animals as they wish. This is not wholly fair – St Francis did, after all, exist, and the first chapters of Genesis begin with the story of humans tending and caring for the Garden of Eden.[9] But it is true that compassion for all beings certainly includes concern for the welfare of animals, and also for the flourishing of the environment and the whole planet. Buddhism arguably has a better record than Christianity in this regard.

In Buddhism there is no God who commands obedience to divine law and judges humans by that law. But there is a cosmic law of karma, according to which all thoughts and actions have consequences for good or ill. That law is interpreted in many ways, but it is certainly not thought of as a purely human invention or convention. It is more like a law of nature, ensuring that any form of selfish desire, in either thought or action, will generate suffering. Any thought or action of compassion will generate happiness or contentment. To use a rather crude example, if I hate another person, that hatred will cause unhappiness both in myself and in others, as I interact with them.

The goal of Buddhist practice is to escape suffering or discontent. To do this I have to eliminate such things as hatred, and practice thoughts and acts of compassion and loving-kindness. Some sceptics about Buddhism have said that this is a selfish goal, since it is aimed at personal happiness. But that is a real misunderstanding. The goal is to eliminate suffering from the world, not just from oneself.

[8] Thomas Aquinas, *The Light of Nature* (Bedford, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1991), sect. 148.

[9] Genesis 2, 15.

The truth is that a central doctrine of Buddhism is the doctrine of anatta or 'no-self'. There is no continuing or immortal self. A person is a flowing succession of thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and intentions. They are causally linked, each one existing only for an instant, and causing another to arise, either in the same or in another flow. There is only the flow. There is nothing permanent underlying the flow. All is transient. The notion of 'I', as a continuing entity, is an illusion.

We say in ordinary life that persons continue to exist from being babies until they die. But a Buddhist would say that the person who dies is different from the baby he or she used to be. It is no doubt part of the same flow of perceptions, but every element of that flow has changed innumerable times. Once you see this, you see that egoism is impossible. What I think of as my future self is a different section of a constant flow. I am a different person every day, even every second, as the flow which I call 'me' continues.

My egoistic thoughts, intended for the good of a future me, in fact, by the law of karma, generate unsatisfactory feelings in some future flow. But that is not 'me'. It is just some part of a sentient flow. So my thoughts and acts do affect the future, by changing the flow of experiences in some future being.

That is why there is a Buddhist saying that we neither live after death, nor do we not live after death.[10] Something continues after my body dies, but it is not a continuing 'I'. It is no longer me. The Buddhist teaching is not that I should be unselfish. It is that I am not a self – so I cannot be selfish. Buddhists might in fact accuse Christianity of being a form of long-term prudence. A concern for personal salvation, and for the endless existence of my continuing self, can sound rather self-interested. Of course Christians might reply that their concern is not for the individual self, but for the continuing selves of all humans. Those whose lives have been

[10] See Majjhima-Nikaya, I, Discourse 4, in David Evans, trans., *Discourses of Gautama Buddha* (London: Janus, 1992), p. 27.

curtailed by illness and marked by years of slavery will be able to find fulfilment and happiness in a continued life beyond death. Such a concern for others cannot be called selfish. But one can see the Buddhist argument that if there is no continuing self to be interested in, that is a sure way to combat self-interest.

This argument could continue, but what is clear is that the Buddhist view of what a human being essentially is will be very different from a Christian one. Most traditional Buddhists would not have personal immortality as an ultimate goal. They would look for liberation from samsara, the round of rebirths in a world of suffering. They seek a fading away of the sense of a personal self, and entrance into a supra-personal state of nirvana, a state which is indescribable, but is neither a continuation of some finite personality nor a simple annihilation of existence.

Since these beliefs about human nature and about the ultimate goal of existence are so very different in most forms of Buddhism and of Christianity, at least one of them must be false, and perhaps both of them are. But what Barth seems to be saying is that it is not just a question of which is false. It is a question of whether one is a damnable form of rebellion against divine truth, and the other is the only one which genuinely promises liberation from sin and a final fulfilment of human life.

That is an opposition which simply does not exist in reality. Buddhists would not damn or condemn the honest holding of a false belief. They would have compassion for those who, in their opinion, are deluded about the nature of human existence and about the way to end suffering. But they would believe that there will be many lives in which people can come to learn the truth. Damnation is temporary (though there are said to be as many as eight Hells), and is only for those who are attached to self-regarding and other-harming ways of life. Theoretical questions about such things are discouraged, and what matters is the lessening of self-regard and harmful action, and the attainment of mindfulness, or freedom from passion. There is no rebellion against divine truth, since the existence

of a God is regarded as a purely speculative question which has few, if any, implications for how the way of non-attachment can be effectively pursued.

I think Christians have much to learn from this prioritising of how one lives and how one overcomes attachments to desire over theoretical questions about whether there is a God. Many Christians are seeking to learn from Buddhists, and Buddhist techniques of meditation and mindfulness are now being practised by some Christians. They obviously do not think that Buddhism is a damnable and faithless rebellion against God. It would be more accurate to say that the question of God is simply not of great interest to Buddhists. They would regard the interminable, and often violent, arguments between Christians about such things as how God could become man, or whether God is three or one, or whether people are saved by works or by faith, as unresolvable and almost wholly irrelevant. What matters is whether one lives selflessly and dispassionately, and without hatred, greed, and ignorance.

Revelation and Buddhism

But, Christians may say, if God is of little interest to Buddhists, how can their religion be considered a form of divine revelation? There is no divine revelation in many of the more traditional forms of Buddhism, in the sense of gods speaking or appearing to human beings. Buddhism is a human search for truth. It is committed, however, to a view that thoughts, perceptions, and feelings are the basis of all knowledge and of reality itself. The idea of materialism, that ultimately there is nothing but physical objects in space-time, is foreign to Buddhism. The law of karma subordinates the laws of physics to a law of moral causality – where thoughts cause suffering or bliss. This causality is not apparent, or to be blunt, is not present, in the physical world, and so it must be taken to operate in other realms, or over many lives (rebirth). There must also be a

more basic and non-physical form of cosmic order (in the tradition, there are also many Heavens). The goal of enlightenment is also a non-material goal, which is believed to liberate humans from the physical world, and transform them in a non-physical or spiritual reality.

This may sound more like a philosophy than a religion, and for that reason some writers refuse to call it a religion. But it is not just a philosophy, based on reasoning and logic. It is based on meditative experience, and the Buddha, the enlightened one, is believed to have passed beyond physical existence and beyond suffering and rebirth, and to have shown the way to others. It has an authority, based on the experience of one who has overcome disordered desire and suffering. And it has a spiritual practice, a discipline of meditation and moral striving, which leads to the end of suffering.

This is a search for spiritual truth and human fulfilment, inspired by people believed to be enlightened, who have discerned the nature of reality, and conquered self-centred desire.

From a Christian viewpoint, is that search self-justificatory? Is it damnable? Or is it a genuine seeking for a reality and a way of life which will alleviate the unsatisfactory nature of human existence? It seems both ignorant and abusive to deny the sincerity of this spiritual search. It is also hard to believe that it is a way that has completely failed.

What it claims to have discovered, through personal discipline and experience, is that human life is disordered because of undue attachment to transient and unsatisfactory things. This is very like what Christians would call a sense of sin. It has discovered that the overcoming of attachment and the arising of universal compassion brings liberation from this human condition. This is very like what Christians call following the way of the cross, in self-giving love and compassion, in order to experience the way of resurrection, in a new and freer life. Buddhists believe it is possible to transcend this physical and embodied life, and pass into a greater realm beyond, which has the nature of intelligence and bliss, but is not further

describable in any human language. This is very like what Christian mystics have said about the possibility of eternal life.

There is no sense of a personal God, or of the power of grace, or of the need for forgiveness. Those things are not spoken of in that way. There is, however, a sense of a supreme reality beyond the physical, into which an enlightened person can enter, in a life beyond suffering and ignorance. There is a sense of a calling to renounce the world, and follow a difficult path to spiritual perfection, and hopefully towards increasing insight into the bliss of the liberated state. And there is a sense of a gradual overcoming of greed, hatred, and ignorance as one turns from attachment.

This may not be enough for Christians, who wish for a loving relation to God, experience of the Spirit helping their endeavours, and forgiveness for their continuing moral failures. But that is no reason to condemn the Buddhist religion. Christians want to speak of a personal God who actively relates to us, and brings about a loving communion in which we can participate. Traditional Buddhists speak rather of a human search for a liberating spiritual experience. It may be the case that both approaches are needed to gain a fuller insight into the human condition.

In Christian tradition, there are many who insist on an apophatic understanding of God, in which every positive attribute is denied of the divine being itself. Even for Aquinas, God is *esse ipsem esse per se subsistens*, 'self-subsistent being itself', unchanging and simple and impassible.[11] This does not sound like saying that God is some sort of person, or is a grossly magnified human-like being. Is it so clear that the state of liberation in Buddhism is completely different from union with a reality which cannot in any way be changed by that union, and which can never be literally described or fully understood?

I understand that Barth would be suspicious of any monastic practice of asceticism and meditation, regarding it as part of

[11] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Pars, various translators (London: Blackfriars, 1966), 1a, 4, 2.

a 'religion of works', and so opposed to salvation by faith alone. In doing so, he would be condemning many orthodox Christians, which is rather strange for a theologian. Yet Barth, as will be noted in due course, holds that good works are to be pursued as a discipline, though only after and in response to the prevenient forgiveness and grace of God.

Buddhists would not speak of the prevenient grace of God. They might indeed stress that liberation is to be obtained by personal effort, by what is often called 'own-power'. However, if forgiveness is regarded as a declaration of freedom from penalty, then Buddhists can be freed from the penal consequences of their harmful actions by the law of karma. It is not accurate to say that they free themselves by what is completely within their own power. For their power is given to them with their existence; it is not generated by them alone. And it is the karmic law which ordains that the exercise of their powers will cause good or bad effects, which ensures that specific actions will eliminate 'bad karma', or freedom from penalty for harmful acts. Liberation is produced by effort; but that it does so is not of their making. It is part of the objective nature of things, part of the moral ordering of reality. There is not so much difference between saying that God forgives freely, but only sanctifies when creatures obey God's laws, and saying that the bad effects of harmful actions are cancelled when persons obey the moral laws of the universe.

There is, it is true, no sense of a personal God who forgives and establishes a personal relationship with humans. But there is a sense of an objective moral order which makes possible actions freeing humans from suffering, and is capable of leading them to a perfected state. Even that perfected state, nirvana, is not of their own making, but is part of the nature of things, and the ultimate goal of spiritual life. If there is a moral order in the universe, which ordains that goodness and compassion are to be pursued, and that there is a goal beyond suffering which is possible of attainment by all, how different is that from saying that there is a God who ordains such things?

There are differences, obviously, and I do not want to deny them. I only want to suggest that making one simple contrast between Buddhism and Christianity is misleading. There are many different strands in each 'religion'. Many Christians, including the most orthodox, do not view God as a person or even as a personal being. They regard the moral law as not arbitrarily commanded by God, but as a necessary part of the ultimate nature of things, perhaps of the divine nature itself. And they regard eternal life not as a continuation of this life, but as a wholly different and changeless order of being that we cannot now imagine.[12] That is pretty near to the Buddhist view.

Many Buddhists do not take the rather severe view of Hinayana Buddhism to which I have mostly referred. They have a place for devotion to gods and Bodhisattvas, beings in Heaven who have delayed their own liberation in order to help their devotees on earth. Barth himself makes remarks about the Japanese Buddhist school, Jodo-Shin-Shu, which talks of entry to the Western Paradise by a simple declaration of faith and devotion to Amida Buddha, who has created that Paradise. This, Barth says, comes very close to Christianity indeed. I shall discuss this later, but the fact is that Barth rejects this movement just because it does not speak of Jesus Christ. He apparently does not consider, at least in this stage in what he wrote, the possibility that the grace of God could be given in more than one way, even if, as Christians think, Jesus is a uniquely normative expression of grace.

The fact is that virtually all religions have adherents who regard their faith as the only acceptable one, so that all others should be eliminated. Barth is not in favour of elimination, but he does think Protestant Christianity is the only acceptable faith. That does seem a rather dangerous view in the modern world, where believers in non-Christian faiths are passionately committed to them, and it seems to limit God's grace in a very severe way.

[12] I take such a view in *Christianity: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Oneworld, 2000).

An alternative view is to see one's own religious way as one spiritual path among others. Some doctrines of many faiths may be regarded as false. But some doctrines and practices may be seen as having affinities to one's own, even stressing insights that are not present in one's own tradition. Many religions may be seen as being honest attempts at seeking the truth about spiritual reality and establishing positive relations with it, in a world where certainty is hard to attain, and differences might actually stimulate and increase understanding.

Hinduism

There is one religious tradition that seems to me to have a much greater positive affinity with Christianity. It is one that Barth also refers to, though he is very dismissive of it, as we shall see. It is the tradition of devotion to Vishnu or to his eighth avatar, Krishna, which is often influenced by the teachings of Ramanuja, the twelfth-century Vedantin.[13] It is impossible to speak of Hinduism as one religion, as within it there are a great many different *sampradaya*, or what might be called sects. One important part of the Hindu tradition is Vedanta, which means a meditation on the Vedas, early sacred writings, but is mostly based on the Upanishads. There are many different schools of Vedanta, ranging from the view of an early theologian, Sankara, that there is only one spiritual reality, Brahman, of which all things are parts, to Madhva's defence of a dualism of spirit and matter, which both together form Brahman. This diversity of interpretations is a central feature of what is called Hinduism, and it confirms the opinion that the internal diversity of each religion is often at least as great as the diversity of what we call 'religions'. That is a major reason for refusing to divide the 'world religions' into separate blocks of beliefs and practices which have clear and

[13] An excellent introduction to Ramanuja is: Julius Lipner, *'The Face of Truth'* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986). See also my *Concepts of God*, chapter 2.

unchanging boundaries. That will in turn throw doubt on Barth's practice of calling all religions faithless except for one version of Christianity, which can be clearly distinguished and separated from all the others by being the only vehicle of the grace of God.

Ramanuja is one of the major theologians of India, and has influenced millions of devotees. It is well known that Sankara held that the phrase *Tat tvam asi* ('Thus are you', or, as it is often more archaically expressed in English, 'Thou art that'), which is central to Vedantic teaching, means that you and all things are identical with Brahman. Brahman is a reality of consciousness, intelligence, and bliss, and it is the only reality. Yet it appears in illusory form as a physical universe of many things, including many gods and intelligent souls, some of whom are human. For Sankara, all these forms are illusory, or like dream images, and the truth lies in seeing through the illusion, and apprehending the unity of the one Self which has taken many illusory forms. This view is known as Advaita, non-duality, for reality is one, and all the things and people we know are illusory appearances.

Ramanuja takes a very different interpretation of the same phrase, *Tat tvam asi*. He too holds that reality is one, and that all things, the universe and all intelligent souls, are parts of that one reality. Yet the universe and finite souls are not just illusions. They are real. But they are real as parts of Brahman. One of his most distinctive doctrines is that the universe is 'the body of Brahman'.[14] Parts of the body are real, but they are not distinct from the body.

This may seem to conflict with a typical Christian view that the created universe is not part of God. God creates distinct individuals, and some of those individuals – namely, human beings – have sinned. So they are definitively not parts of God, who cannot sin. As always in religion, it seems, there exist more rigid and more flexible interpretations of these different views. The rigid interpretations

[14] Ramanuja, *The Vedanta Sutras*, trans. George Thibaut, in *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XLVIII, ed. Max Muller (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962), p. 95.

say that humans are, on the one hand, completely identical with Brahman, the supreme Self, or on the other hand that they are completely separated from it. More flexible interpretations focus on the various possible meaning of the phrase 'is part of God'. It might not mean total identity, associated with Sankara, and it might not mean total dissimilarity, a view associated with Madhva.

Ramanuja's view is a more flexible one. There is only one reality, but it has distinct parts. An analogy of Ramanuja's view might be that a cell is part of my body, but not strictly identical with it. This catches the sense that the physical universe and the many intelligent souls could not exist and be what they are apart from the supreme Self. It also implies that souls, being intelligent and creative, have the same nature as the supreme Self, and can share in the most intimate communion with the supreme Self.

Put like this, the difference between Vedantin and Christian views is not so great. Human souls have individual creativity, and they have sinned or fallen into self-centred ignorance and become estranged from communion with the Self of all. It is as if some cells of the body have become diseased. But they can be reconciled and re-establish such communion. That is their true nature, and its realisation is their true goal. After all, the Christian Scriptures say that all things will be united 'in Christ',[15] that the church is 'the body of Christ',[16] and that 'in God we live and move and have our being'.[17] Since Christ is the divine being, this implies that souls can become parts of the divine being, that at least some created souls are already parts of the divine being, and that the world is in some sense part of God.

Traditional Christians in the West (the Latin tradition) have been hesitant to take talk of being 'the body of Christ' seriously. The more Idealist philosophy of much Upanishadic thought suggests

[15] Ephesians 1, 10.

[16] 1 Corinthians 12, 27.

[17] Acts 17, 28.

the idea that all things are parts of the divine, and that God is not just other and apart from the cosmos. In modern philosophy, such a view is sometimes called 'panentheism' (that the cosmos is part of God, but God is more than the cosmos).[18] To see human beings as sharers in the divine nature, as indeed some parts of the New Testament suggest,[19] seems to me a more positive way of looking at them than seeing them as miserable worms and damned sinners.

If we are prepared to take a flexible interpretation of beliefs, it becomes much more difficult to oppose religious doctrines to each other as rigid oppositions. The use of the term 'sublation' or 'sublimation' can be usefully employed to turn rigid oppositions (we are parts of God, or we are not) into a mediating synthesis (we are, or can be and should be, in close union with God, without losing our individual identities). Barth uses the term sublimation of one religion, but does not see that it could usefully qualify the oppositions between different religions. It will not resolve all differences into one vague and confused mess, but it could lessen the hostility different religions could feel for one another if they felt each was just being derided as false or even as idolatrous by the other. Regrettably, this opposition and hostility is what Barth seems to be attributing to all religions, since he does not use his concept of sublimation to seek mediating interpretations which might, if not achieving agreement, at least negate the necessity of hostile oppositions.

Ramanuja disagrees with Sankara by denying that there is such a thing as Nirguna Brahman – the supreme reality in itself without qualities, which is the only true reality. Sankara's is an almost totally apophatic view of the ultimately real. It holds that there are no distinct properties that the supreme Self has; it is wholly 'simple' (non-complex). Ramanuja rejects this view, since that of which nothing can be said cannot even be said to exist, which sounds very odd,

[18] The term was originated by the German philosopher Karl Krause in 1828 to describe the views of Hegel.

[19] 2 Peter 1, 4.

since we are presumably referring to it. Instead, he says, the supreme Self has the qualities which belong to a perfect consciousness – wisdom, bliss, power, and all other personal perfections. It can therefore be regarded as a personal being, and can be revered and loved.[20]

The concept of sublimation can be employed to reject a total opposition between an unknowable Reality and an anthropomorphic notion of God as a person. The mediating synthesis would then be a reality beyond the possibility of literal human description in its essential nature, yet truly describable as perfectly wise and loving in relation to finite beings. This idea reflects the dialectic within Christian theology between the unknowable and the personal God, and sublimation transforms an oppositional dispute into a polarity of images which are both needed to grasp the nature of the Supreme.

This could easily be seen as an instance of the dialectical theology for which Barth is famous. The idea of the Absolute Self as truly relating in love and personal interaction with human beings is actually more unambiguously formulated in Ramanuja than it has been in much traditional Christian theology. For many Christian theologians, the idea of God has been deeply influenced by Aristotle, who held that a perfect being would have to be changeless and simple. Strange though it may seem, such theologians have then held that God loves us, becomes incarnate, answers our prayers, and even includes us in the divine life, without ever changing or being affected by our existence in any way. That is not very different from Sankara's view that the world, though real on its own level, is at best a half-real realm of appearances which has no effect on the ultimately real. In that case, to know the Real we would have to know the Unchanging, of which we ourselves are only transitory and even illusory appearances.

Ramanuja's view is rather different. He sees the Real as a loving, changing, relational, complex Lord. That is nearer the heart

[20] Ramanuja, *Vedanta Sutras*, p. 4.

of the Biblical tradition, and also nearer to Christianity than 'the God of the philosophers' scathingly mentioned by Blaise Pascal.[21] It is certainly not an arbitrary or wilful idea which is opposed to the 'real' God of Christian faith. Despite what Barth says about the banality of Hindu thought, Ramanuja's is in fact a sophisticated and thoughtful exploration of the nature of the supreme being.

The similarity to Christian views is even closer than that. Christians speak of God present within the heart (the Holy Spirit), as a particular person who is the image of the Eternal (the Son), and as a cosmic all-including being of consciousness, wisdom, and bliss (the Father). That is echoed in Ramanuja by the ideas of the 'self within', Krishna as the personal face of the supreme reality, and the cosmos as the 'body of the Lord'.

I am not suggesting that these are the same ideas in different dress, but that there are significant affinities between these two spiritual paths. Christians today often feel that in traditional Christian theology not enough emphasis has been given to the work of the Spirit, and I think that encounter with Indian spiritualities, even when they have been rather transfigured by Western ideas, has helped to generate within Christianity a greater stress on the 'God within'.[22]

Devotion in Hinduism and Christianity

Ramanuja was a Sri Vaishnavite, a devotee of the god Vishnu, and his work is a main doctrinal resource of the bhakti tradition in Hinduism. That is a richly devotional tradition, which holds that the goal of human existence is the passionate love of God and of course, therefore, of all that God has created. It is not held that devotion

[21] See the 'Memorial', found sewn into the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal's clothing after his death, recording a vision that occurred on 23 November 1654.

[22] For some years I was chair of the governors of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, and I found a fascinating interplay between the 'Western' philosophies of Idealism and the 'Eastern' philosophical traditions of Vedanta.

is the only way to God, but it is a way to which many feel called, a particular human vocation. This resonates with the Christian way of devotion to Jesus, who is seen as the human face of God. Bhakti clearly requires faith in the Supreme Lord, trust in his ways, and obedience to his will.

Ramanuja wrote an influential commentary on the Indian devotional work the Bhagavadgita, the Song of the Lord. That work celebrates the love of Krishna, an avatar or earthly manifestation of Vishnu. Many Indian religious communities are devoted to Krishna or Vishnu, and Ramanuja is a major theologian for those traditions. Though there are differences between the idea of an avatar, who is the Lord appearing as a human, and the idea of Incarnation in Christianity, they both believe that the Supreme Lord can appear in human form, and is a proper object of devotion and loyalty.

There are, naturally, other differences between the Hindu and Christian traditions. There is little or no idea of a suffering God in Vaishnava thought, since the Lord is perfect in bliss.[23] And there is no thought of Krishna as a sacrifice for sin, since as the Lord he is beyond suffering. Christians generally think that God shares in the sufferings of creation, and that a divine saviour gives his life to liberate humans from evil and suffering. This is not a major element in Vaishnavism, any more than it is in Islam.

There is no doubt, however, that Vishnu promises his devotees a joyful and loving relation in the spiritual realm, and that Krishna came to save people from the hardships of this world. Devotion to Krishna will bring them close to him, and it is his love which saves them from evil.[24]

This may be a case where sublimation can play a part in relating religions more sympathetically to each other, as the Vaishnava emphasis on the joy and love of relationship with a playful and mischievous

[23] Ramanuja, *Vedanta Sutras*, p. 610.

[24] 'I promise you will come to me, because you are to me so dear', *Bhagavad Gita*, 18, 65, trans. Geoffrey Parrinder (London: Sheldon, 1974), p. 101.

avatar mitigates the sometimes rather sado-masochistic wallowing in the blood of a dying Christ on the cross that is prominent in much Western art and devotion. Whether this is possible or not, it is not hard to see bhakti as an authentic spiritual path to sanctification, and to see its idea of God as a revelation of the divine love. It is hard to see it in Barth's terms as a faithless construction of little worth.

I suppose it is the seeming polytheism of Hinduism which most annoyed Barth. It cannot be denied that there have been hostilities between devotees of different gods, which means that Hinduism is not as peaceful and tolerant as some Western admirers have thought. But in principle the gods are more like Christian angels or saints than they are like the Christian God. Devotees can choose gods that appeal to them – but when they do that, it is usually said to be because they feel the god 'call' to them. It is not at all a matter of random selection. It is a response to a spiritual reality which calls them.

For theologians like Ramanuja, the gods are different aspects of the one reality, Brahman. Just as there are many avatars of Vishnu, there are other gods like Shiva or Kali, but all of them are finite if glorious beings which are aspects of the one supreme Self. If Vishnu or Shiva are said by some to be the supreme God, that is because they are felt by their devotees to be the most adequate images of the nature of the Supreme. And those gods themselves can appear in many different ways – as Krishna does in chapter 11 of the Bhagavadgita.

Christians may find this odd. Yet there are many different images of Jesus, and the rather Anglo-Saxon one that appears in many Western contexts is unlikely to resemble the historical figure of Jesus, whose appearance is never described in the Bible. It is also possible that God may be incarnate on alien worlds, in many different forms. The Indian traditions have much less trouble than Christians have had in thinking of the universe as unimaginably vast in space and time, and in thinking of multiple avatars (incarnations?) of the Lord. In this respect, even though Hindu thought did not have scientific knowledge of the universe and of cosmic evolution, it did have a much less human-centred perspective on the

nature of reality, and therefore a wider vision in many ways of the grandeur and power of God.

Christians can say that stories of Krishna are probably not founded on historical fact, while the story of Jesus is founded on events that happened in recorded history. Yet Hindus can reply that the history is not important in itself, but as a sign or manifestation of spiritual truth. Even if Krishna was not a historical person who danced with milkmaids or balanced a mountain on his fingertips, he is a symbol of a loving and joyful spiritual personality which is real and enduring. They may add that some stories about Jesus may also be legendary, and were recorded to convey spiritual truths rather than to be diaries of events. Debates of this sort may not be, as a Buddhist might say, profitable for salvation or enlightenment. It is plausible to think that both Krishna and Jesus can be taken to show that devotion to a personalised image of the Supreme Lord is an authentic way to union with the divine.

I do not suppose that there is any way in which Hinduism, in any of its many forms, will agree entirely with Christianity. But then Christians do not even agree among themselves. Agreement is not the goal of positive and creative interaction between religious traditions. The goal is a widening of understanding that is prepared to learn from other traditions. There are many religious communities where this is happening. The Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths founded an ashram (a monastery) in India, where Christian thought is shaped by Indian sages like Sankara and Ramanuja rather than by ancient Greeks like Plato and Aristotle.[25] There are many other enterprises of the same sort in many parts of the world. These are the creative points of religion. Christian thought is being shaped by global interactions which are focussed on the meeting of different particular traditions, not on facile generalisations about systems which are viewed as alien and inferior, and which exclude any real sharing of life between them. That is why

[25] Bede Griffiths has written many books; one on this theme is *The Marriage of East and West* (London: Collins, 1982).

general condemnations of religion like Barth's are not helpful in trying to bring peace and reconciliation to the world – even though that is surely one of Barth's major concerns. Those concerns are shown in some of his later works. But they are not shown in volume I, part 2, of the *Dogmatics*, and that has given rise to unfortunate uses of Barth's theology when some Christians consider the world religions.

East Asian Religions

Although Barth does consider Jodo-Shin-Shu, which is a Japanese form of Buddhism, it is a very unusual form of Buddhism, which manages to include devotion and faith in a form of religion which traditionally has no belief in a personal, supreme God. Barth does not consider the main forms of East Asian religion at all, which include most forms of Buddhism, but they are genuine forms of religion, and so ought to fall under his condemnation of them as self-justifying and having a wilful notion of God. Such condemnation seems inappropriate, however, because they are in general not concerned with self-justification or with God at all.

It would be absurd to try to treat of East Asian religions in any depth, but it is important to note how very different they are from the sorts of religion Barth talks about. It may seem much more difficult to find the presence and activity of God in them, but I will sketch some points which may make it seem less difficult.

In China, Taoism, for example, does not have the idea of one personal creator, who has a positive moral purpose for creation. It does have the idea of a spiritual or non-material basis for the universe, but it is not considered to be morally or even ontologically perfect. That is, it is not a sort of sum of all admirable qualities. It is the ineffable Tao, or Way; 'The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao.'[26] From it all things derive, but they are not generated for the sake of producing goodness. Heaven and earth contain both good and bad, both Yin and

[26] *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1953), 1, 1.

Yang. The Tao itself is 'empty'; it does not seek to dominate things, but is a source of many forms of finite being, of life and death, of good and evil. Nevertheless, nature, with its joy and suffering, is the expression of the Tao, and the Taoist way is one of harmony with nature.

Harmony with the ways of nature is commended, as is an acceptance of pleasurable and unpleasant experiences without joy or resentment, with inner stillness. One chief characteristic of a Taoist life is *wu-wei*, acting without acting, or letting things be themselves, without interfering. However, many forms of Taoism embrace devotion to 'Heavenly Masters' who may be said to express the Tao, and it is often permissible to worship many gods or even one Supreme Lord, Laozi, or revered ancestors, though all these beings are subordinate to the Tao. It is more like a form of life than like a credal faith, but it has temples and rituals, can take many institutional forms, and has been considered part of the single functioning system of the religious life of China, which comprises Taoism, Buddhism, especially Ch'an (or Zen) Buddhism, and Confucianism.

A major Chinese religion, Confucianism, is very different in many ways, being much more concerned with social harmony, the importance of family, and living according to strict moral standards.[27] But it too shows little interest in one creator God, although *tian*, Heaven, is sometimes given a personal form, and life is to be lived in conformity with the 'way of Heaven'.

One might say that, philosophically speaking, these religions are not so much concerned with gods as with the right way of living in accordance with nature (Taoism), or an objective moral order (Confucianism), or a right view of the transience of all things (Buddhism). But devotion to personal Immortals or ancestors as well as local deities are important in practice, and there are many stories of 'revelations', visions, and possessions by exalted spiritual beings. So in Chinese religious traditions one can find anything from silent meditation to fortune-telling and rituals to bring good luck.

[27] See the *Analects of Confucius*, available on many websites.

This is a very different religious world from that of Abrahamic religions, which tend to be much more exclusive and doctrine-centred. Apart from all the local cults of gods, ancestors, and Immortals which tend to be combined with the great traditions, the emphasis is on living in harmony with the 'way of Heaven' or with nature, seen as the manifestation of the Tao. Techniques of meditation and ceremonial rituals are taught systematically.

Apart from the monastic orders in Buddhism and Taoism, religion tends to focus on private devotions and visits to various temples. There is no great emphasis on sin or redemption, though there is an awareness of an unnameable spiritual basis for all things, and the cultivation of inner stillness and good-heartedness in personal life. This is just about as different from Christianity as religions can get. Yet overall, East Asian religion cannot be called self-centred, nor can it be accused of arbitrarily inventing fantastic pictures of God. On the contrary, it seeks to conform the individual self to a cosmic or social order, to speak of gods as revealed, appearing in visions to devotees, and to subordinate the gods to an ineffable supreme reality.

If one takes a Christian view that God wills all humans to achieve happiness in loving the divine, one would have to say that this is not the focus of East Asian religions. But one could say that in seeking to follow the 'way of Heaven', or of the Tao, there are disciplines of training which lead to an openness to a transcendent spiritual reality, and a preparedness to live in accordance with what is perceived to be its nature. That may well be enough to be at least a preparation for life with God. It does not seem to be, as Barth's view would suggest, a self-centred and arbitrary opposition to goodness and truth, worthy only of condemnation by a good and loving God.

Religious Diversity and Salvation

As one looks at the variety of religious paths in the world, it seems that there is a general human concern with a spiritual, non-material, basis of existence. Humans can have some awareness of this, but

they will describe it in ways which differ largely because of differences in the basic values of their culture.[28] Some will think of a personal, rational, wholly good, supreme being. Others will think that the supreme reality must be more than personal, be the source of evil as well as goodness, and not be limited by the constraints of human rational thought. Some will think that the world is a realm of greed, hatred, and ignorance. Others will think that the world is an expression of creative love. Some will think that the world is destined for destruction, and that escape from it is desirable. Others will think that the world is destined to realise a loving communion, and that it can be transformed by human endeavour.

These differences in basic human attitudes are found within virtually all religions. But various traditions stress some attitudes more than others. Barth's theology emphasises the existence of a personal God of severe judgment, gracious forgiveness, and sovereign and predetermining purpose. He finds this expressed (though admittedly ambiguously) in Protestant Christianity, and to be exclusively revealed in Jesus Christ.

A central question with which this book is concerned is what such a view has to say about the huge diversity of religious and philosophical beliefs in the world. Barth thinks that it will condemn all beliefs, including even the true ones, apparently. But then it will select some, and only the Evangelical Protestant ones, to be both true and efficacious for salvation. I suggest that, whatever one thinks about this, it is not morally or spiritually acceptable to say that one has to be an Evangelical Protestant to be saved. Maybe one does not even have to be a Christian. Perhaps Barth would agree with this, and what happens to the rest of the world is left open. But no plausible mechanism for procuring the salvation of those in all the 'false' religions is made clear.

[28] I have given a fuller justification for this claim, and an account of the variety and types of religion, in *The Case for Religion* (London: Oneworld, 2004), especially in part II.