

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Defusing Disconfirmation: Modification Strategies*

In the first two chapters, we have considered avoidance tactics and defensive reactions to the challenge represented by the disconfirming Other in a spiritually pluralistic America. But, of course, not all spiritual practitioners react to the challenge of pluralism negatively: there are also those whose response to the disconfirming Other is to see the disconfirmation at issue as essentially a positive provocation to rethink traditional forms of faith. They venture the possibility that, if they are willing to make some strategic modifications to the traditional faiths in which they were raised, it might be possible to remove the contradictions between one's own faith and that of others. The Other might then be no longer disconfirming but, rather, reinforcing, a fellow-traveler on the spiritual journey. While the New Age seekers profiled in Chapter Five also approach American spiritual pluralism positively, their strategy is almost *wholly to abandon mainline faiths*, those stalwart belief systems represented by American religious denominations from Catholicism to Methodism to Conservative Judaism. But the topic of this chapter is about how mainline religions might compromise. It is about letting go of some of the exclusivist claims of one's mainline tradition so that a core set of theological tenets from that same tradition can be harmonized with the convictions of believers from other traditions. While the main concern among those whom we discuss will be to find a degree of consonance among Christianity and other world religions, the principles set forth will

have relevance too for harmony among non-Christian religions and spiritualities.

Anyone even remotely attuned to the violence that the clash of religions has generated around the world in recent decades, from India to Iraq to the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City, must surely comprehend the urgent need for dialogue and understanding among different religious traditions. But such dialogue and the enhanced understanding that it aims to produce ordinarily do not rise to the level of the so-called modification strategies that we shall be considering in this chapter. In his book *Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith Understanding in America*, Gustav Niebuhr profiles a whole host of activists who seek, for example, “to find common ethical principles to bridge the volatile theological chasms” that separate traditions.<sup>1</sup> But the modification strategies that we shall investigate below seek not to leap over the theological chasms and onto the relatively safe ground of common ethical principles, but, rather, to descend into those chasms and do some serious theological prospecting. The modification strategies will grapple with the apparent contradictions in theological tenets rather than with the allegedly harmonious ethical outlooks of the world religions. While one representative of Jewish-Christian dialogue is quoted by Niebuhr as saying, “This isn’t about meeting in the middle,” the advocates of the modification strategies that will be at issue in our exploration often do attempt something sufficiently radical to be deemed an attempt to find theological middle ground.<sup>2</sup>

Our investigation will be divided into four main parts. First, we shall provide two brief examples of scholarly theological proposals that hold out the promise of defusing the disconfirming power of the Other via modification strategies. Second, we shall consider two other proposals, each seeking to show that the whole phenomenon of the disconfirming Other can be sidestepped as an illusion. In the third part of the chapter, we shall look at recent popular attempts to harmonize Christian belief with one or more other world religious traditions. Finally, we shall consider the argument that, while the modification strategies under discussion appear to avoid the

problem of disconfirmation, they may in fact represent a particularly subtle variation on the theme of disconfirmation. That is, it may be that the modifications they make to traditional Christian claims about Jesus Christ give up too much: they actually disconfirm Christian belief by abandoning the “essence” of Christianity. This argument raises the possibility, in other words, that the modification strategies are simply one more example of pluralism fatally undermining belief.

### **Professional Theology and Modification Strategies**

The twentieth century produced a vigorous discussion among academic theologians about how Christianity should approach the other great world religions. It has become commonplace in this discussion to distinguish among “exclusivists,” “inclusivists,” and “pluralists.” The exclusivists maintain that Christianity is the one and only route to salvation. Inclusivists maintain that while all salvation comes through Jesus Christ, his salvific power is extended to non-Christians in some fashion. Pluralists attempt to see Christianity and other world religions as genuinely equal in the access that they provide to salvation, however that salvation may be conceived.<sup>3</sup> What we are terming modification strategies in our investigation belong in the pluralist camp. The pluralist approach is sometimes also called a “world theology” or a “theology of religions.”

We shall begin by briefly examining the positions on Christianity and other religions set forth by two professional theologians in the twentieth century, the first inclusivist and the second pluralist.<sup>4</sup> We must begin our exploration of the two classic professional theological strategies with a crucial clarification: our focus in the whole of this study is upon the effect of the disconfirming Other upon the average believer, rather than upon professional theological discussion about the fact of religious and spiritual pluralism. Thus, the point of outlining the theological positions below will be to lay bare what they might, at least in theory, offer to those workaday believers. As a result, the real

significance of the professional efforts profiled below is their potential to have an influence beyond the confines of academic theology. To what extent can they permeate, or have they already permeated, the larger cultural mindset?

Our example of inclusivism is provided by the German theologian Karl Rahner, often regarded as the single most influential Roman Catholic theologian of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Rahner, who died in 1984, was a Thomist, a follower of the philosophy and theology of the greatest of the Medieval Christian thinkers, Thomas Aquinas. But he was a Thomist with a difference, a “transcendental Thomist.”

Rahner reworked Thomistic theology with the help of Immanuel Kant’s transcendental philosophy, which sought the conditions for the possibility of all our knowing, the preset configuration of the human mind that, as prior to any particular act of knowing, forms and limits our way of knowing. But while Kant concluded that the nature of the mind rendered knowledge of God, including the bare fact of God’s existence, impossible (at least knowledge narrowly conceived, that is, “theoretical” or “scientific” knowledge), Rahner employed transcendental inquiry to a very different end: he argued that knowledge of God is not only possible, but that an implicit, subliminal awareness of God is precisely one of the preconditions of human consciousness uncovered by transcendental investigation. For Rahner, as for other thinkers dubbed transcendental Thomists, an inquiry into the preconditions for human knowing reveals the open-endedness of human consciousness, a trajectory that aims at infinite being.

Consider, first of all, the nature of human questioning. Asking questions is a crucial practice for our coming to know the world. But the human mind is set up in such a way that questioning never comes to a definitive end. The answers to our questions beget new questions. It appears that it is in principle impossible for us ever to come to an absolute end to our ability to ask questions. But this fact about the nature of our minds points, argues Rahner, precisely to the fact that those minds operate within an infinite horizon, the horizon of unlimited being, which for a Christian theologian is necessarily identified with the being of God.

Consider how, in parallel fashion, we use concepts to grasp reality, to know it. The medieval philosophers called concepts “universals,” and for good reason: our concepts – dog, tree, goodness, distress – are by their very nature universal, in that they are universally applicable. That is, the concept dog – our concepts are, of course, tied to language and the words that help make up a language – can never be exhausted. Rather, it can be applied to as many dogs as might ever come to the attention of the human mind. Concepts are universal; they are open-ended. And this means that concepts, like the potential infinity of our questioning, reveal the open-endedness of all human inquiry, the fact that it is aimed at unlimited being.

This is not the same thing as claiming that we have a fully-formed innate idea of God implanted in our consciousness. First of all, the awareness of the unlimited horizon of being is not the same thing as the idea of a discrete infinite being, the Supreme Being of traditional Christian theology. Second, the awareness of the unlimited horizon of being uncovered by Rahner’s transcendental analysis is, precisely as a horizon, not ordinarily the object of our attention. We do not consciously focus upon it. Rather, it is the context in which we think, the ever-present and encompassing setting, akin to what the ocean is for a whale. Hence, Rahner says that the constitution of our consciousness provides us with a “pre-grasp” or “fore-grasp” of the infinity of God. It is, as he also puts it, an “unthematic” awareness of the divine. This means that the infinite horizon is ordinarily not the conscious object of our reflection, yet we are subliminally aware of it. Of course, we can always turn to reflect upon this condition for the possibility of all thinking and awareness, making it a theme for consciousness as opposed to unthematic. And when we do so, we can, especially if we are schooled in Christian faith, then identify the presupposed horizon of consciousness with the God to which that faith testifies.

Though Rahner himself is not interested in developing this line of thought so as to end up with a pluralist theology, one might see the *basis* for a pluralist theology here, that is, for a theological

pluralism that interprets one's own faith as but one pathway to the same summit. After all, it follows from Rahner's analysis that all human beings have a real, if unthematic, awareness of infinite being. Might not the different world religions be simply different ways of understanding that self-same presence of the infinite, whether conceived as a substantive infinite or in terms of Buddhist or Taoist emptiness? Might not the differences between my faith and that of the Other turn out to be about relatively incidental matters of interpretation instead of about the heart of spirituality, which can here be interpreted as a deep and unavoidable connection with the ultimate reality? Might it not turn out, in other words, that the different beliefs held by the Other are not ultimately disconfirming of my own convictions, at least if I am indeed willing to employ a modification strategy that will allow me to regard certain features of my belief system as incidental to it?

Rahner's reason for stopping short of a radical pluralist position is not far to seek. He remains firmly rooted in the Christian tradition in maintaining Christ's unique, supernatural role in redeeming humanity from sin. All human beings do indeed possess, just *qua* their human way of being, an unthematic awareness of God. But each human being is also free and can use that freedom to place his or her individual being in opposition to the very God that provides the encompassing horizon for his or her existence. That is, I am always free to attempt to make myself my own god, to secure the meaning of my own being, turning my back on the encompassing presence of the real God, despite the fact that that encompassing presence is, at the end of the day, constitutive of my own true being. The reality of sin means that we are all, in fact, estranged from God and, thus, from ourselves. Some religious thinkers might imagine being extricated from such estrangement simply by coming to a fuller consciousness of God than the minimal, unthematic one with which we all begin, a goal that they imagine achievable via one's own spiritual efforts. Rahner, however, is a sufficiently orthodox thinker to depict the power of sin and estrangement in more dramatic terms and thus to require an equally more dramatic salvific role on the part of the Christ. Rahner does

depart from some elements of traditional Western Christian thought by refusing to see the redemption effected by Jesus exclusively in terms of Jesus' atoning death on the cross. But by extending Jesus' salvific work to the whole of his existence, embracing his life as well as his death, Rahner only makes the unique work of the Christ all the more essential.

All of this means, of course, that, for Rahner, Jesus Christ cannot be seen as simply one clarifying lens, bringing the universal, unthematic consciousness of God more clearly into view, a lens that could have equally effective counterparts in the teaching of the Upanishads or the Buddha or the Quran. At the same time, Rahner does provide a fascinating version of inclusivism in his notion of the "anonymous Christian." For Rahner, one need not be in a dedicated and conscious faith-relationship with Jesus Christ in order to reap the benefits of Christ's saving work. Rather, someone who has never had the opportunity really to confront Christ may still attain salvation if that seeker does his or her utmost to respond to the gracious presence of God to consciousness that is the birthright of all human beings. But this person's salvation will nonetheless have been purchased by Jesus Christ, who effects the definitive, irrevocable victory of God over sin and estrangement. That the seeker in question may look to the Buddha as her spiritual guide while, unbeknownst to herself, she is actually put into proper relation to God via the saving grace of Christ means that she is a Christian despite her own self-understanding, an anonymous Christian. The anonymous Christian concept is an updating of earlier motifs in Catholic thought such as the so-called "baptism of desire."

Critics of Rahner inevitably point out that his concept of the anonymous Christian is condescending. Would a Christian, such as Rahner himself, want to be told that he is an anonymous Buddhist, only eking his way into a blessed spiritual state thanks to the work of the cosmic Buddha? Most likely not. But the problem of condescension is, of course, simply a manifestation of the fact that Rahner's position is a conservative, inclusivist instead of a radical, pluralist one.

Yet we ought not to dismiss this sort of inclusivism just yet, despite the fact that we are seeking modification strategies that can

protect the believer from the disconfirming power of the Other in a fashion that does not sink to the level of mere avoidance tactics or amount merely to a defensive reaction. For while the potential disconfirmation most directly at issue in our investigation is the straightforwardly cognitive one to which we have repeatedly returned – the Other’s beliefs, because I have no better grounding for my own, call my own beliefs radically into question – *there is also a non-cognitive type of disconfirmation that should not be overlooked at this point*. This less obvious threat of disconfirmation has to do with what we might term the disconfirmation of both the believer’s own humanity and that of the other believer. Just to the degree that spiritualities and religions are often about what their adherents consider ultimate matters, those adherents may well fear that if the Other is wrong – i.e., in this scenario we have not yet gotten to the crisis of the cognitive disconfirmation of the adherent’s own beliefs – that other may miss out on genuine fulfillment as a human being. And for some persons, a self-examination in which they find that they do indeed believe that persons with other faiths will forfeit the fullness of their humanity seems intolerable.

Indeed, just to find oneself holding this position about others may call into question one’s own humanity: What kind of person can I be if I can consign my fellows to a status of less than full humanity (not to mention some version of an eternal hell after death)? But someone who adopts Rahner’s anonymous Christian perspective will be freed of this burden. Disconfirmation of the believer’s own humanity and that of those with other beliefs will be avoided. And this may be enough for some people. That is, as long as they can trust in the ultimate fulfillment of all persons of good will, they can rest easy in their faith.

Rahner is certainly not alone among contemporary Roman Catholic thinkers in offering this particular kind of solace, what we have called freedom from the disconfirmation of the other believer’s humanity and of one’s own. Indeed, no less a figure than the German theologian Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI, puts it eloquently:

Everything we believe about God, and everything we know about man, prevents us from accepting that beyond the limits of the Church there is no more salvation . . . . We are no longer ready and able to think that our neighbor, who is a decent and respectable man and in many ways better than we, should be eternally damned simply because he is not a Catholic.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, according to the Pope,

The question we have to face is not that of whether other people can be saved and how. We are convinced that God is able to do this with or without our theories, with or without our perspicacity, and that we do not need to help him do it with our cogitations.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, at the end of the day, this solace about the Other's spiritual destiny, which is by no means insignificant, taken by itself does not confront the central challenge before us, namely, the cognitive disconfirmation threatened by the other believer. Yet, if we wish to designate this an avoidance technique, we ought nonetheless to recognize that it is an avoidance technique that deserves to be distinguished from the ones that we examined in Chapters One and Two.

There is another ramification of Rahner's position that takes us back to our main topic of cognitive disconfirmation, indeed that lets us deeper into some of the contradictions among the world's religions and, hence, the potential depth of the Other's disconfirming power. We tend to think of the disagreements between the faith of a Roman Catholic Christian, for example, and a Buddhist as about such relatively obvious topics as God and the afterlife. But some of those obvious matters, while literally of ultimate importance, are tied to some less obvious but absolutely basic assumptions about the human condition that, as such, are of hardly less momentous consequence. As our brief foray into Rahner's position has indicated, Rahner assumes, as any reasonably

orthodox Christian theologian will, that humanity's greatest challenge is the problem of sin, which estranges us from God and, hence, from the very source of our own personhood. Thus, if religious faith is to provide us with anything, it must provide us with redemption from sin.

But numerous subdivisions of Buddhism begin with very different presuppositions. For the Buddha, and for much of the tradition that follows him, the dilemma in which human beings are ensnared is not sin, not some fundamental moral failure that blunts our potential humanity, but, rather, suffering. It was the famous passing sights of the haggard old man, the diseased man, and the corpse that set Siddhartha Gautama on his quest for Buddhahood. This only goes to show that the disconfirmation that the Other potentially wields threatens to sever not only the large and immediately evident branches of the tree of my faith, but even some of its roots, underlying assumptions so basic that I may scarcely be aware of holding them.

At the same time, the spiritual assumptions of American culture continue to change, and they do so at an ever-increasing rate. It does not take a great deal of imagination to suppose that one of the assumptions that many contemporary American Christians, even the most spiritually inclined, have left behind is that we are all ensconced in sin. Indeed, anyone who has spent time in a religious studies or theology classroom with the present generation of undergraduate students can testify that the burden of sin is not taken with anything approaching the seriousness that it once was. Whatever that change may mean for the health of traditional Christian theology, it is the sort of change that makes it significantly easier to meet the otherwise disconfirming Other halfway, for it will undermine the necessity of Jesus Christ being the (unique) atonement for sin. But the topic of atonement need not be left here: it will be appropriate to return to it at the end of the present chapter.

In order for professional theologians truly to meet the Other halfway, of course, will require that they offer a theological pluralist philosophy in place of an inclusivist one. The Anglican theologian

John Hick provides us with what may be the best known pluralistic theology.<sup>8</sup> And it is worthwhile to note the paradox that, while Rahner arrives at his rather conservative inclusivism through what many historians of theology would regard as a more “liberal” theological method, Hick comes to his pluralism via what has often been deemed a more “traditionalist” way of proceeding. Using the requisite theological jargon, we can say that Rahner does his theology, in large part, “from below,” while Hick proceeds “from above.” That is, Rahner opens up our initial approach to God not by citing alleged revelatory documents or special events of divine intervention (though these are clearly essential at later points in his theology) but, rather, by analyzing the supposedly universal nature of human being. He begins down here, with us. Hick, by contrast, will appeal to special divine acts of revelation that are alleged by the various world religious traditions themselves.

This is not to say that Hick does not use philosophical analysis and argumentation in order to prepare the ground for his pluralist theology. On the contrary, he makes a clever adaptation of that previously mentioned giant of modern Western philosophy, Immanuel Kant. Kant made a distinction between the noumenal world and the phenomenal world. The noumenal world is reality as it is just in itself. The phenomenal world is the world as we filter it through our noetic equipment, that is, the world as we perceive it. According to Kant, I never really know a cow as it is in itself, but only as it appears to me, synthesized by the forms and concepts that constitute my knowing process. Hick’s claim, however, is that there is a special application for the noumenal-phenomenal distinction (one that Kant himself did not make) where God or the ultimate and its self-manifestations to us are concerned. Following the philosopher Karl Jaspers, Hick refers to an “Axial Period” in human history, beginning roughly with the Jewish prophets in the ninth century B.C.E. and continuing until roughly the fourth century B.C.E., in which relatively short time the roots of all of the great world religions can be found. Hick takes seriously the suggestion that this Axial Period represents the point in human history where human beings had become sufficiently sophisticated to receive

special gifts of revelation. There is already a oneness, then, at the very birth of the world's great religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

But what about all of the differences among those various belief systems? That, after all, is where our problem lies. Hick's proposed answer is that it is the self-same ultimate behind all of the revelations in the Axial Period. But that is, of course, the noumenal ultimate, the ultimate as it is in itself. And human beings have no access to that ultimate. Rather, the self-manifestations of the ultimate during the Axial Period must all be refracted through the lens not only of human cognitive capabilities generally but, more important here, through the very different lenses of diverse cultural milieus. Different cultures are different "worlds," after all: persons in different cultures actually experience reality differently. Hence, the revelatory light refracted through my cultural lens will inevitably look different from the light that beams through the lens of someone living in a different cultural world. Hence the payoff: I may see the ultimate in the form of the personal Supreme Being of traditional Christianity, while the person living to the left of me sees it in the Hindu Godhead named Brahman and the person living to the right of me sees it in the Buddhist Nothingness called Nirvana, but we are all seeing the same ultimate reality! The differences in what we see, which we might previously have taken to be mutually disconfirming, are not matters of contradiction at all; they are simply a function of the very same ultimate reality, in its noumenal aspect, having to traverse our different phenomenal filters.<sup>8</sup>

There are surely some attractive features in Hick's position for one who seeks a radical pluralistic theology. He seems to have succeeded in combining philosophical sophistication with an admirable cognitive humility. And, after all, humility is often taken to be one of the prerequisites for genuine piety. The spiritual quester who wants to hold onto the core of his or her traditional beliefs but who, in the humble recognition that his or her own cultural vantage point is necessarily limiting, is willing to make some compromises around the edges of those beliefs, would appear to have a useful ally in Hick. For instance, if a Christian can allow

that the human need for redemption can be conceived in a number of different ways (though all involving relation to something ultimate) and that Jesus Christ is one of several diverse avenues to that redemption, cannot that Christian hold onto the essential core of his or her Christianity while now finding that the belief of others has lost its disconfirming power?

That is what Hick would like to have us believe, but his proposal leaves us with what some may take to be a significant unsolved problem. It is one thing to say that one person may see the divine in the form of a heavenly queen while another sees it in the form of a heavenly king. After all, the ultimate is not a physical being, so both kings and queens are simply metaphors in this case, and while the one metaphor might emphasize some characteristics of the ultimate while the other metaphor emphasizes different ones, there need be no contradiction in that. But the juxtaposition of the different belief systems represented by the great world religions presents us with much stickier instances than this.

For example, many Buddhists conceive of the ultimate not as any sort of being at all, not as any sort of God, but as incomprehensible Emptiness. Jews, Christians, and Muslims, by contrast, traditionally think of the ultimate as an all-powerful and loving personal being who created the world and who can intervene in their lives. Can one really say, as Hick must, that these are just two different phenomenal adumbrations of the same noumenal ultimate? The two different views appear to be not just different – different in ways that we can chalk up to interpretation or emphasis – but simply contradictory. And to claim that two contradictory claims are really just different interpretations of the same view might be taken to make the notion of “the same view” simply meaningless.

But whether this is in fact a fatal flaw in Hick’s version of pluralist theology turns, in the end, upon one’s assessment of his most central claim, namely, that the ultimate is so far beyond our phenomenal comprehension that we are faced not simply with each culture and religion falling short of anything like a full comprehension of the ultimate, but that that ultimate so transcends

our grasp that even our logic is inadequate to it. If the latter is the case, then our notions of contradiction may simply not apply here, and Hick's position may be potentially sound. Critics, of course, will argue that to say that the ultimate transcends even the most basic principles of our logic is tantamount to saying that we really cannot understand anything about it all or make any meaningful statements about it.

It is also worth noting that, while Hick does employ Kantian philosophical notions, however highly modified, to advance his position, the overall weight of his proposal is largely a function of faith, and of empathy toward the Other. With his aforementioned theology "from above," Hick takes for granted the basic notion of revelation, which he sees breaking forth in particularly powerful fashion in the Axial Period. And surely a great deal of the convincing power of Hick's proposal, for those to whom it is in fact convincing, is a function not of complex arguments but of the ethical appeal of Hick's openness to the potential truth and value of all of the world's great religions.

In any case, while professional theologians will necessarily be concerned with the technical soundness of the arguments set forth by Hick and his fellow pluralists, what may be more important for the non-theologians is a certain permission granted them by the vigorous discussion of the equality of the world religions among the professionals. That is, to the extent that the spiritual quester sensitive to the beliefs of the others round about him is aware of theologians' work on radical pluralism, however ignorant of its technical details, that quester is freed to believe that his or her own path is but one avenue to the same spiritual summit. The non-specialist can feel justified in holding onto the core of his faith even though he neither possesses any evidence for his beliefs that the differently-believing Other lacks nor has worked out a technical modification strategy on his own. There are people who spend their professional lives thinking about these things, and they reassure the quester that there are perfectly consistent ways to see Jesus Christ and the Buddha as equally efficacious redeemers.

Isn't this, after all, at least one way in which shifts in the country's religious mindset often in fact occur, however glacially?<sup>9</sup> Professional theologians respond to new challenges that arise, precisely such as the challenge of a potentially disconfirming pluralism, and their own shifts in attitude in the face of these challenges eventually have an effect on large segments of the rest of the religious and spiritual spheres. Seminarians are assigned particular religious thinkers to read, and when those seminarians get to their parishes, the attitudes found in those works find their way into sermons and homilies. What is more, all perspectives can now reach the larger society more effectively than ever before, given the electromagnetic information bubble in which we are nearly all enclosed.

But, at the end of the day, it is almost by definition popular religious writers who have the most direct theological impact on American religious and spiritual attitudes. In short order, we shall examine three popular religious opinion-makers, thinkers who have a more direct effect upon Americans' sensibilities about the modification strategies that we might adopt in order to find an ultimate harmony among the world religions.

### **A Technical Aside: Does Belief Require Evidence?**

Before we move on to our investigation of the popularizers of modification strategies, however, a technical aside is necessary: we need to consider an argument advanced by various Christian thinkers in the last part of the twentieth century that may seem to undercut the whole premise of the disconfirming Other. This argument suggests that religious belief cannot be contradicted by a disconfirming Other in the fashion that we have been suggesting it can. Our assumption has been that, if I have a spiritual belief system but I recognize that others have apparently contradictory ones, and I further realize that I have no stronger evidence than those others have for their beliefs, then that pluralism can be disconfirming of my own convictions. Indeed, if, with this dearth of special evidence, my belief system is only one of a large number of systems, and the

systems are genuinely mutually contradictory, then the simple mathematical odds are that my belief system is wrong.

But what if the very assumption that, in order for my beliefs to be justified they require evidence, is in error? Wouldn't that mean that, even though I have no more evidence for my own beliefs than my neighbors have for their opposing convictions, that the whole challenge of disconfirmation would not arise in the first place? Justified belief, spiritual or otherwise, just would not be about evidence, at least not in all cases. Surely I hold some beliefs without any evidence, indeed without any grounding of any sort. For example, suppose that I believe that all packages of M & M chocolate candies contain more red candies than any other color, even though I have never bothered to count the color frequencies in even one package. For motives unknown to myself, I have simply come to believe that the reds predominate. This is an irrational belief, since it has nothing to back it up, but it is also trivial and, thus, most likely harmless. Other sorts of beliefs we hold had better not be irrational, though. If, for instance, a financial planner comes knocking on my door and asks to take over the management of my investments, I had better not just hand over my money. The belief that he or she could safely manage my assets without my having gathered any evidence to that effect would, like my beliefs about red M & Ms, be irrational, but this time my irrationality could have serious consequences. For my belief that the planner can in fact handle my assets safely to be rational, I would have to go to the effort of talking to other investors, looking for information about the financial planner on the internet, and so on. Thus, we have an example of a belief that has no evidence behind it and is clearly irrational and unfounded. And we have an example of a belief that could be rational if sufficient evidence were gathered before I formed it.

But might there be a third sort of belief, one that has not been formed via the accumulation of evidence but that is nonetheless still rational? Another way to put it might be to ask, "Can there be a sort of belief that I form without gathering evidence but that is still not groundless, and thus is still a legitimate belief for me to hold?" We

get a positive answer to this question, specifically in the context of religious or spiritual belief, from Alvin Plantinga, a philosopher of religion who hails from the Reformed tradition and who concentrates on what he calls “basic beliefs.”<sup>10</sup> These are beliefs that are not formed via the gathering of evidence but yet are not groundless, and hence not irrational. This seems to hold out the possibility that, even though I do not have any better *evidence* for my spiritual beliefs than someone with competing beliefs, that other believer need not be taken as disconfirming my beliefs, for evidence is not at issue.

The expression “basic belief” suggests a belief that is at the starting point of a set of beliefs. It is basic, so that it does not have to rely on evidence. Yet it is not arbitrary, as if I should just decide to make it a basic belief of mine that red M & Ms outnumber all other colors in every package of the candies. Plantinga gives as an example of a basic belief a so-called memory belief, namely, the belief that I had breakfast this morning. I believe that I had breakfast this morning. The belief is not based on evidence: I am sitting at my desk at work now, so I have no access to evidence in the form of dirty breakfast dishes in my sink, nor do I note any remnants of egg that I spilled on my tie. But to say that the belief does not rest on evidence is not to say that it is groundless: it is grounded in my memory of having had breakfast. Basic beliefs are a particular category of belief, then, that do not rest on evidence yet are not irrational. In fact, they are perfectly justified, and we employ them all of the time. Of course, as Plantinga points out with reference to his breakfast example, if I know that my memory is defective, then my belief that I had breakfast this morning could not in fact count as basic. I have to be unaware of any defects in my experiential equipment for the belief to count as properly basic.

Plantinga’s intriguing move is to suggest that, for the genuinely pious person, spiritual or religious beliefs are often properly basic. I might believe, for example, that the God and Father of Jesus Christ loves me. There is nothing akin to ordinary evidence that I could amass to prove this to someone. But the particular contours of my life are such that I seem to experience the love of God for me in

much that happens to me, parallel to how I have a memory of eating breakfast this morning. For me, then, though not for someone for whom my experience is unavailable, the belief that God loves me is a properly basic belief. It is not based on evidence that I could present in a court of law, but neither is it groundless or irrational. Once more, for me it is quite properly a basic belief. Thus, it would initially appear that even though my neighbor holds religious beliefs that contradict my own, and even though I cannot accumulate evidence to convince a jury of my peers – I cannot even collect *evidence* to convince myself – that my case trumps my neighbor's, my neighbor's beliefs are not disconfirming, for evidence is not required to confirm my belief in the first place.

The fatal difficulty here is that while Plantinga seems accurately to have described the notion of a basic belief and shown that such a belief is perfectly rational, religious or spiritual beliefs, the very ones at issue for him, lose their status as properly basic precisely when confronted with the contradictory beliefs of Others. My belief that I had breakfast this morning based on my memory of having had it is a properly basic belief, as long as I am unaware that my memory is defective. My belief would no longer be basic if my wife reported to me later in the day that, despite what I seemed to remember, I had been running late that morning and had skipped breakfast, and if my children confirmed her story. But notice what happens in my confrontation with the religious Other. I believe that the personal God of Christian faith loves me, and as long as nothing calls into question the life experiences giving rise to this belief, it is properly basic for me. But it is a crucial, defining characteristic of that belief itself that the "God" at issue is the Lord of the Universe, the Creator in whom *all* human beings move, live, and have their being. Now when my Buddhist neighbor reports that he has very different life experiences leading to very different basic beliefs, beliefs according to which all things are embraced in an encompassing Nothingness, my experiential equipment is called into question, just as when the efficacy of my memory is called into question, and my belief is no longer basic for me (nor is my neighbor's belief for him). In conclusion, the notion of properly basic belief will not serve as a

modification strategy (nor even as a successful avoidance strategy, for that matter) to defuse the Other's disconfirming potential.

The Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck starts out from a different philosophical landscape but ends up in roughly similar territory to Plantinga's position, in that Lindbeck too calls into question the assumption that it even makes any sense for me argumentatively to defend my religious beliefs in the face of contradictory beliefs found in other religions.<sup>11</sup> Lindbeck thinks of a religion as a relatively self-contained "cultural-linguistic" world, not unlike the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of discrete "forms of life" with their accompanying unique "language games." It is not the case that Christians have religious experiences that form the particular language that they employ, but rather that their experiences are formed by the cultural-linguistic framework – in this case, the whole biblical story about life before God – in which they are trained. And just as the rules of baseball do not apply to the rules of basketball, and *vice-versa*, so the Christian and the Buddhist operate with beliefs and attitudes that are so independent of one another that there is no way to translate statements from one tradition in a way that will make sense in the other:

When affirmations or ideas from categorically different religious or philosophical frameworks are introduced into a given religious outlook, they are either simply babbling or else, like mathematical formulas employed in a poetic text, they have vastly different functions and meanings than they had in their original settings.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, it once more appears as if we have come upon a perspective according to which the Other's religious beliefs cannot be disconfirming of my own. For my beliefs are part of the warp and woof of my cultural-linguistic world, and they will ultimately not make any sense when artificially transplanted into a different world.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it seems that the very notion of contradiction between beliefs cannot arise here, for contradiction presupposes some common grammar of meaning upon which two assertions can rest.

But Lindbeck's position too falters. Note that persons within the Christian cultural-linguistic framework intend their statements about God to refer to a reality independent of any particular cultural-linguistic framework, including their own. Indeed, they will hold that the possibility of all such frameworks depends upon God's creation of human beings and his continual sustenance of them (even though this conviction itself will have to be articulated within the terms provided by their unique cultural-linguistic frame). And Lindbeck does not want to embrace the radical postmodernist position, something akin to a Nietzschean view, according to which there are no objective realities outside our frameworks and the different frameworks are simply alternative fictions. Hence, he floats the possibility that there is

a sense in which truth as correspondence [with reality as it is in itself] can retain its significance even for a religion whose truth is primarily categorical rather than propositional [i.e., for a religion conceived as cultural-linguistic system]. A religion thought of as comparable to a cultural system, as a set of language games correlated with a form of life, may as a whole correspond or not correspond to what a theist calls God's being and will. As actually lived, a religion may be pictured as a single gigantic proposition. It is a true proposition to the extent that its objectivities are interiorized and exercised by groups and individuals in such a way as to conform them in some measure in the various dimensions of their existence to the ultimate reality and goodness that lies at the heart of things.<sup>14</sup>

It follows that it may be that

there is only one religion which has the concepts and categories that enable it to refer to the religious object, i.e., to whatever is in fact more important than everything else in the universe [i.e., to what Christians call God]. This

religion would then be the only one in which any form of propositional . . . religious truth or falsity could be present. Other religions . . . would be neither true nor false. They would be religiously meaningless just as talk about light and heavy things is meaningless when one lacks the concept "weight."<sup>15</sup>

But now the problem of the disconfirming Other has simply returned in a slightly different guise, for I must recognize that many persons embrace religions different from my own, in other words, that those persons are ensconced in different cultural-linguistic religious frameworks. Yet, it is likely that only one of those frameworks, at most, can enable a way of life that corresponds to what is really the most important thing in the universe. And because we have no meta-perspective from which to compare the different cultural-linguistic frameworks with that most important reality as it is in itself, we have no way of determining which of the religions, if any, is the one framework that really does form a way of life that corresponds to that ultimate reality. The Other threatens disconfirmation of my beliefs after all.<sup>16</sup>

What have we discovered, then, in our brief detour from our exploration of modification strategies and onto the roads suggested by Plantinga and Lindbeck? Both thinkers put forth sophisticated proposals that may appear to suggest that, at least where religious belief is concerned, the problem of the disconfirming Other cannot arise. The very notion of disconfirmation, as we have laid it out, results from the believer's inability to present superior evidence for his or her own belief in the face of a contradictory belief. But Plantinga and Lindbeck hold out the hope either that evidence, superior or otherwise, is not required for my belief to be valid, or that the evidence that supports my beliefs exists within a discrete cultural-linguistic framework such that nothing arising from within a different framework can logically qualify as counter-evidence to my own. If these positions turned out to be valid, then we would, at the very

least, have to radically rethink the idea that the Other can possess the power of disconfirmation. But, in fact, we have seen that, whatever their other merits, these positions fail to defuse the disconfirming power of the other believer.<sup>17</sup>

### Three Contemporary Proposals by Popular Religious Writers

We begin with the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (Thich is not a personal name, but a title bestowed upon Vietnamese Buddhist monks and nuns). Over twenty of his books have appeared in the United States, and he is a revered figure who had the chance to enter into dialogue with both Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Roman Catholic spiritual seeker and writer Thomas Merton. Many of his publications have been on the quest for peace, inner and outer. The particular work of concern to us here, however, is his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. It presents a pluralist approach to Christianity and Buddhism from the perspective of a learned and pious Buddhist. That Nhat Hanh is not afraid of a radical pluralism is apparent in a story with which he begins his book:

Twenty years ago at a conference I attended of theologians and professors of religion, an Indian Christian friend told the assembly, "We are going to hear about the beauties of several traditions, but that does not mean that we are going to make a fruit salad." When it came my turn to speak, I said, "Fruit salad can be delicious! I shared the Eucharist with Father Daniel Berrigan, and our worship became possible because of the sufferings we Vietnamese and Americans shared over many years."<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Nhat Hanh goes so far as to embrace the possibility that one can have more than one world religion as a personal spiritual root: his own experience has led him to graft Christian spirituality, as he understands it, as a second root onto the Buddhist root that has nurtured him throughout his life (pp. 99-100).

Traditional versions of Christianity have tended to see the risen Christ as the transcendent second person of the divine Trinity and to aver that God is in heaven while we are on earth, while Buddhists have been much more apt to look within to the possibility of personal enlightenment. It is safe to say, by way of initial summary, that Thich Nhat Hanh's approach to harmonizing Buddhism and Christianity is to put more emphasis than Christian orthodoxy upon the potential immanence of the divine in Christian faith. In this way, both Buddhism and Christianity can ultimately be about finding the ultimate within one's own individual experience. It is no accident that Nhat Hahn speaks more often about the Holy Spirit, which is usually associated with the immanent side of the Christian God, than with God the Father. Yet, this will turn out not to be an idiosyncrasy in Nhat Hahn's approach: in each of the writers whom we consider in this chapter, we shall see an ongoing focus upon an immanent God, in distinction to a God who is radically transcendent.

It should also be noted from the start that Nhat Hahn modifies the usual Buddhist interpretation of *anatman*, the doctrine of no-self. It would make little sense to talk about finding the divine within if there were no "within," nothing remotely resembling what we mean by selfhood. Siddhartha Gautama can certainly be interpreted as wholly rejecting the notion of selfhood, seeing it as an illusion, attachment to which leads to our suffering. But Nhat Hahn nuances his position from the Buddhist side in a way that will open up the possibility of genuine communication with Christianity:

The Buddha did not present an absolute doctrine. His teaching of non-self was offered in the context of his time. It was an instrument for meditation. But many Buddhists since then have gotten caught by the idea of non-self. They confuse the means and the end, the raft and the shore, the finger pointing to the moon and the moon. There is something more important than non-self. It is the freedom from the notions of both self and non-self. (p. 54)

This means that there need be no contradiction between a religion such as Christianity, which clearly holds that we each have a core identity, a substantial selfhood, and the Buddha's attempt to get rid of views of the self that lead to suffering.

So too the Buddhist claim of the impermanence of all things should not be misinterpreted: "According to the teachings of Buddhism, it is important to look deeply into things and discover their nature of impermanence (*anitya*) and non-self (*anatman*). Impermanence and non-self are not negative. They are the doors that open to the true nature of reality," (183) in other words, to that which is in some sense beyond impermanence and illusion. They open to enlightenment, to the infinite or ultimate way of being that is often called Nirvana. And this is crucial for seeing the link between Buddhism and Christianity, for Nhat Hahn's claim will be that when the Christian looks within himself or herself, he or she will find the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God, that is, the ultimate beyond the impermanence and illusory character of the ordinary objects of our experience. What is more, this Kingdom of God is available in the here and now, not just in some distant heaven after death.

What the Buddhists call mindfulness is central to Thich Nhat Hahn's spirituality. In mindfulness meditation, one concentrates on the present moment. The many thoughts and emotions that constantly drift across the stage of my consciousness, thoughts and emotions that I ordinarily all-too-quickly identify with reality, including the reality of my own ego-self, are now observed as the ephemeral phenomena that they are. I am fully mindful of them simply as they appear in and of themselves, not as I am tempted to interpret and reify them. There is both a negative and a positive moment in this sort of meditational practice. On the negative side, my thoughts and emotions are emptied of their deceptive reality, and I am freed from the unhappiness and worry that often results from my emotional and cognitive attachment to them. On the positive side there appears an immediate experience of something that stands beyond these pretenders to reality, namely, the very observational perspective that is mindful of them. But what stands

beyond the pretenders to reality if not genuine reality, if not what the Buddha meant by enlightenment and what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God? Thus, experience, including the kind of experience at issue in mindfulness meditation, can provide an intuitive avenue to ultimate reality.

Thich Nhat Hanh's program for harmonizing Buddhist and Christian spirituality is furthered by his contention – it is not an unusual contention for a Buddhist, at the same time that it bears some resemblance to Hick's claims about the ultimate – that the ultimate is largely beyond our saying. The ultimate is beyond theology. "Discussing God," Nhat Hahn avers, "is not the best use of our energy. If we touch the Holy Spirit, we touch God not as a concept but as a living reality" (p. 21). Obviously, to steer as clear as possible of conceptual formulations and to focus instead upon experience helps to avoid disconfirmation. It is beliefs, after all, articulated in verbal formulations, that clash with one another and via which different believers cause the most trouble for one another. At the same time, we must be careful not to rush too quickly into the appealing arms of an alleged trans-conceptual religious experience. For philosophers have often pointed out that experience too requires concepts. For my experience to be an experience *of* something, for it to have any character as an experience, there must be interpretive categories in which it is formed, and that will require conceptuality. With this caveat noted, we can push a bit further into Thich Nhat Hahn's treatment of the underlying ultimate reality that he believes is opened to the quester by both the Buddha and the Christ.

It is a truism among contemporary New Testament scholars that the center of Jesus' message was the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Of course, debates continue to unfold about just what he meant by the Kingdom. While Jesus may, according to one translation of Luke 17:20, have announced that in his ministry "the Kingdom of God is among you" (the rendering found in the New Revised Standard Version, the translation to which we refer throughout this book), there is also a familiar interpretation of that same verse according to which "the Kingdom of God is within you" (as in the King James translation), and it is the latter that best suits

Nhat Hahn's purposes. Of course, he adduces much more than that single verse to make his point. For example, he explains that

Matthew described the Kingdom of God as being like a tiny mustard seed. It means that the seed of the Kingdom of God is within us. If we know how to plant that seed in the moist soil of our daily lives, it will grow and become a large bush on which many birds can take refuge. We do not have to die to arrive at the gates of Heaven. In fact, we have to be truly alive. The practice is to touch life deeply so that the Kingdom of God becomes a reality. This is not a matter of devotion. It is a matter of practice. The Kingdom of God is available here and now. Many passages in the Gospels support this view. We read in the Lord's Prayer that we do not *go* to the Kingdom of God, but the Kingdom of God comes to us: "Thy Kingdom come . . ." Jesus said, "I am the door." He describes himself as the door of salvation and everlasting life, the door to the Kingdom of God. Because God the Son is made of the energy of the Holy Spirit, He is the door for us to enter the Kingdom of God. (p. 38)

The ultimate is not a wholly other, radically distant reality. Indeed, the Christian Eucharist, in its own way, points us inward:

The body of Christ is the body of God, the body of ultimate reality, the ground of all existence. We do not have to look anywhere else for it. It resides deep in our own being. The Eucharistic rite encourages us to be fully aware so that we can touch the body of reality in us. Bread and wine are not symbols. They contain the reality, just as we do. (p. 31)

Jesus' importance, then, is not principally as an extraordinary God-man who died on the cross to atone for human sin. Rather, he is a seer in whom God is powerfully present and whose teaching shows us how to find the presence of God, his Kingdom, within our

own hearts. And, as Nhat Hahn points out above, this will not be a function so much of devotion to Jesus, of worship, but of following the practices that he teaches. And that, of course, sounds very Buddhist. The Buddha is not a being to be worshipped, but a teacher who shows the way to ultimate reality, to enlightenment.

At the same time, the Mahayana Buddhism that Nhat Hahn favors understands the Buddha, like Jesus, to be a teacher who is also the embodiment of the ultimate to which he points, an ultimate that one might go so far as to designate the “ground of being”:

After the Buddha passed away, the love and devotion to him became so great that the idea of Dharmakaya changed from the body of teaching to the glorious, eternal Buddha, who is always expounding the Dharma. According to Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha is still alive, continuing to give Dharma talks. If you are attentive enough, you will be able to hear his teachings from the voice of a pebble, a leaf, or a cloud in the sky. The enduring Buddha has become the living Buddha, the Buddha of faith. This is very much like the Christ of faith, the living Christ. Protestant theologian Paul Tillich describes God as the ground of being. The Buddha is also sometimes described as the ground of being. (p. 51)

Especially if one can conceive the ultimate to which both the Buddha and Jesus point as essentially a matter of a higher form of experience that transcends theological categorization, then the Buddha and Jesus Christ do become strikingly similar figures here. “Christian contemplation includes the practice of resting in God,” Nhat Hahn explains, which he goes so far as to say “is the equivalent of touching nirvana” (p. 154). Hence, “I do not think there is much difference between Christians and Buddhists. Most of the boundaries we have created between our traditions are artificial. Truth has no boundaries” (154).

At some points, Nhat Hahn is willing to leave the realm of esoteric experience and look for harmony amidst more conceptually

constricted and apparently difficult differences between Buddhism and Christianity. He observes, for example, that “recent polls show that nearly one-fourth of all Europeans and North Americans believe in some form of reincarnation” (p. 131). And, he suggests, given the Christian belief that a soul must become incarnate in a body, the notion of reincarnation is not as inconsistent with Christianity as most Christian leaders through the ages would have us believe (p. 132). Finally, of course, the attitude that we have been outlining here makes it unsurprising that Thich Nhat Hahn is willing to see a degree of harmony not just between Christianity and Buddhism, but among all of the world’s religions: “Only their manifestations are different. Authentic experience makes a religion a true religion. Religious experience is, above all, human experience. If religions are authentic, they contain the same elements of stability, joy, peace, understanding, and love” (p. 194). And yet, having said all of this – and despite his comment about fruit salad that we quoted at the outset – Thich Nhat Hahn does not look for some future amalgamation of religions. Rather, he expects that each individual can live happily in the religion of his or her birth, and live happily beside fellow-seekers in other traditions.

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The second popular work that we shall examine is Deepak Chopra’s *The Third Jesus*. Like Thich Nhat Hahn, Chopra is a prolific author. One might initially assume, however, that his many books and talks put him more in the category of a New Age therapist than that of a religious thinker, of however popular a bent, seeking unity among the world religions. But Chopra has a long interest in traditional Indian and Buddhist spirituality as well as the figure of Jesus. Indeed, he has written fictional accounts of the life of the Buddha and of Jesus. And we shall find that his argument in *The Third Jesus* overlaps with Thich Nhat Hahn’s position in *Living Buddha, Living Christ* in instructive ways.

Given that Chopra himself is schooled in the Asian spiritual traditions, it should probably come as no surprise that his manner

of harmonizing Jesus with Buddhism and various strands of Hinduism entails making Jesus more Buddha-like than making the Buddha more Jesus-like, at least where traditional understandings of Jesus and the Buddha are presupposed. Who, precisely, is the “third Jesus” of Chopra’s title? The first Jesus is the actual historical figure Jesus of Nazareth, a man about whom we can never hope to know very much. The historical sources simply do not exist that would allow us to come to anything resembling a reasonably thorough biography of Jesus. The second Jesus is the Jesus Christ of the Church’s ongoing theology, the Jesus of the creeds and theological tomes. For Chopra, as for numerous critics of Christianity at least since the nineteenth century, this second Jesus is almost wholly the Church’s creation. But there is a third, real Jesus, or so Chopra, along with so many other questers, is convinced. Chopra, however, has a particularly provocative point of entry into his discussion of what he takes to be the real Jesus, for he claims that the problem with the first and second Jesuses is not just that they are essentially fictional, but that the frameworks provided by the first two readings of Jesus actually make Jesus’ teachings impossible to follow. As a result, they appear to turn Jesus himself into a failure as a spiritual and moral guide.

It has been recognized since the inception of Christianity that dicta of Jesus such as “Love your enemies” (Luke 6:27) and “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also” (Matthew 5:39b) strain credulity regarding human moral capabilities. Various interpretations have been proposed. In the heyday of Christian monasticism, it was suggested that Jesus intended these most stringent of his teachings only for the monks. The teachings were known as the “evangelical counsels” and were not meant to be seriously imposed on lay Christians struggling to live in the difficult world outside the monastery. Some twentieth-century scholars proposed that Jesus’ words represented an “interim ethic.” That is, Jesus expected the imminent, literal end of the world, and while in ordinary life-circumstances one could not possibly maintain the rigorous standards he was proposing, a tiny community of believers huddled together who expected the end at

any moment could in fact muster the ethical fortitude to respond, at least to one another, according to Jesus' dictates. But Chopra takes a different tack. What the Christian tradition has so consistently overlooked is that Jesus' moral teachings make sense only in the context of a wholly new iteration of human nature. Jesus had in mind a radical transformation of consciousness, one thoroughly foreign to our everyday perceptions of reality. That the transformation at issue is indeed a radical one is evident in the fact that the world we perceive via ordinary consciousness is essentially an illusion, akin to the Indian notion of the world as *maya*. At the heart of that illusion is the notion that the essence of each of us is something called the ego, a separate entity, a tightly bounded discrete self. Yet, even the most ordinary among us from time to time sense that our true being is something that transcends an ego-self:

We are aware of beauty and truth. We feel led by intuitions and insights. In scattered moments we sense something beyond. None of these experiences is ego created. In fact, they are its enemy. Anything that gives a hint of life's wholeness, any experience that transcends "I, me, mine," threatens the ego's claim to dominance. This is because by definition, "I" is a separate entity. It wants certain things and not others. It wants to make friends out of some egos and enemies out of others. The one thing it can't abide is the reality that separate egos don't exist, that everything comes from a single source. Jesus brought just such a message to earth, and although he labeled it "God," in keeping with the language of his time, words aren't the same as experience.<sup>19</sup>

There is much here that sounds like the *Advaita Vedanta* tradition, the non-dual philosophy in Indian thought. And there is also much that sounds like what we heard in Thich Nhat Hahn's *Living Buddha, Living Christ*: the ultimate is an encompassing oneness beyond conceptual distinctions; this is the oneness that Jesus had in mind when he talked about God and about God's

Kingdom; it is a oneness that is to be attained in the here and now, not in the bye and bye of heaven; and this ultimate is something that we encounter via a particular kind of experience, with experience always a more accurate guide than theologizing. In Chopra's own preferred vocabulary, the experience of unity at issue here is tantamount to the attainment of "God-consciousness," and the more fully developed one's God-consciousness, then the more fully one has moved beyond the illusory world of the everyday.

Hence, for Chopra, "What made Jesus the Son of God was the fact that he had attained God-consciousness," indeed essentially a perfect God-consciousness, so that Jesus could say, "the Father and I are one.' He knew no separation between his thoughts and God's thoughts" (p. 3). Now to claim that what made Jesus the Son of God was his perfect God-consciousness rather than his possessing a divine nature (along with a fully human one), as asserted by the Church's Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. or his being the one who could atone for human sin by dying on the cross, seems to add weight to the previously offered observation that Chopra's Jesus is cast in an Asian mode. Yet it is striking that to define Jesus' sonship to God in terms of his perfect God-consciousness echoes the Christology of the nineteenth-century German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, who is perennially tapped as the "father of modern Protestant theology."<sup>20</sup> And it should be unsurprising, given the common focus of Schleiermacher and Chopra, that both award special prominence to the Gospel of John, since its Jesus is indeed much more of an enlightened teacher, frequently discoursing on something akin to God-consciousness, than is the Jesus of the so-called "synoptic Gospels" (so named because they tend to "see together," i.e., to view Jesus in the same light), Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Thus, while we shall continue to note the Asian motifs that Chopra finds in his version of Jesus, we ought not to go too far in arguing that he is offering something terribly radical and unprecedented in his interpretation of Jesus.

According to Chopra, the real Jesus, then, sought to save humankind not by offering himself on the cross as a sacrifice for sin, but, rather, "*intended to save the world by showing others the path to God-consciousness*" (p. 10; emphasis in original). Chopra admits that

Indians are scornful of outsiders coming in to skim the cream of ancient Vedic teachings, turning yoga into a weekend exercise class. Westerners are scornful of outsiders coming in to claim Jesus as a teacher on the order of Buddha and Muhammad instead of seeing him as the one and only Son of God.

Once we move outside the boundaries of dogmatic Catholicism and Hinduism, both positions can be seen to have deep flaws. Consciousness is universal, and if there is such a thing as God-consciousness, no one can be excluded from it. By the same token, no one can lay exclusive claim, either. If Jesus rose to the highest level of enlightenment, why should he be unique in that regard? Buddha may be his equal (hundreds of millions of followers believe so), along with Vedic rishis like Vasishtha and Vyassa, who didn't happen to have religions named after them. (p. 20)

Chopra's position clearly represents what we are calling a pluralist theology, then, a modification strategy that seeks to allow a hypothetical Christian to acknowledge the Other's beliefs – with the Other in this case being a Buddhist or Hindu – without those beliefs necessarily proving disconfirming to what that Christian regards as the essential core of his or her own belief system.<sup>21</sup> Of course, a crucial component in the success or failure of such a modification strategy will be the Christian's decision about just what does constitute the nonnegotiable, essential heart of her faith. We shall return to the concept of the "essence" of Christianity later in this chapter.

What is most distinctive about Chopra's pluralist theology is the previously noted emphasis on our ordinary consciousness as illusory. In the everyday mode of consciousness, it is genuinely impossible to follow Jesus' most stringent commands, such as returning love for hate or refusing to resist evil. But in the transformed mode that Chopra calls God-consciousness, the impossible becomes possible: "to the extent that you rise toward God-consciousness, evil withdraws, leaving you invulnerable" (p. 27).

“Evil is everything when you are susceptible to it; it is nothing when you aren’t” Chopra avers (p. 27). If Jesus was not quite as explicit about how this all works as we might like, Chopra thinks that we can fill in some of the blanks by drawing upon the world’s various wisdom traditions. For example, consider what those traditions teach about meditation:

Sit every day and find the silence insider yourself. In this silence, there is peace without anger. There is no evil, no attachment to revenge or righteous indignation. With practice, you learn to identify yourself with this place. It becomes natural to master anger, an energy like any other. When this happens, evil begins to release you from its hold. (p. 27)

Again,

When you fear evil, you are certain that it must be real. This certainty forces you to engage in the eternal struggle between good and evil. No amount of passive resistance will extricate you . . . . But if you can see that the war between good and evil is nothing but a play of light and shadow, your certainty about the existence of evil will fade away. (p. 28)

Chopra goes so far as to assert that

despite its intensity, pain is only temporary. Evil depends on our forgetting this fact. If it couldn’t inflict pain, evil would have no power at all . . . . Realize that there is a reality beyond our present misery. You are that reality, and you will return to it as your suffering lessens. (p. 29)

Just as Thich Nhat Hahn happily appropriates Paul Tillich’s expression “ground of being” for God, Chopra is willing to claim that that reality with which we ourselves are one, and to which Jesus

guides us – the Gnostic Christians made this especially clear – is nothing less than “Being itself,” which is another of Tillich’s formulation for the divine (p. 89). At the same time, lest we suppose that Chopra and Nhat Hahn are in perfect agreement, we should note that Chopra is not nearly as interested in the political implications of spirituality as Nhat Hahn is. Chopra’s contention that Jesus taught that not just the ego, but the whole of physical reality, is in some sense illusory contradicts Nhat Hahn’s conviction that even though the Kingdom of God announced by Jesus is within us, life in that Kingdom ought to spur us to ethical and political activism in the messy outer world, such as Nhat Hahn’s own activism in matters of war and peace.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, Chopra sounds as if perhaps he must simply be classified as a New Ager when he goes so far as to say that “the world ‘out there’ responds immediately to the world ‘in here’ – in other words, outward reality mirrors the self” (p. 209). Or, again, “God-consciousness creates its own reality” (p. 25). But, to be fair to Chopra’s approach, it should be noted that it does allow him to offer a consistent interpretation of Jesus’ extraordinarily puzzling declaration in Matthew 6 that we ought not to worry about where our food or clothing or shelter will come from, since God will simply provide these things for us if we seek the Kingdom of God (pp. 63-64).

Our brief consideration of Thich Nhat Hahn’s *Living Buddha, Living Christ* and Deepak Chopra’s *The Third Jesus* finds both of them interpreting Jesus Christ in such a way that genuine faith in Jesus is not threatened by believers from other traditions, at least not from the Asian traditions upon which these two authors principally draw. What is more, there are important commonalities in how they avoid the problem of other faiths being disconfirming to the Christian’s own belief system. For one thing, both authors emphasize the Ultimate or God as something encountered primarily within the depths of the self rather than as a radically transcendent being, and the inner experiences described by the world’s religions have much more in common with one another than their conceptual descriptions of ultimate reality. Furthermore, given their

focus upon experience and the concomitant de-emphasis upon conceptualization that goes with this inward-looking piety, these authors steer us away from the arena in which disconfirmation can even be at issue: disconfirmation is a function of propositions, and thus not of the sorts of experience that are allegedly largely ineffable. That is, the content of Hinduism, for example, that appears to contradict what Christians believe lies in what Hindus *say* about the ultimate; it lies in propositions. It does not lie in inner experiences. The very notion of disconfirmation has to do with a proposition or set of propositions contradicting other propositions. If I claim that  $2 + 2$  equals 3, while you say that  $2 + 2$  equals 4, we are contradicting one another. And to the extent that you can show me the flaw in my computation, you have disconfirmed my claim. But if I am feeling sad while you are feeling happy, we are experiencing different emotions, but it would be odd to say that we are contradicting one another, and even odder to say that you are disconfirming my emotional state.

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But what of a popular take on our topic from the Christian side? For a Christian work aimed at a popular audience that has the potential to blunt the disconfirming effect of the Other, we look to Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong's *Jesus for the Non-Religious*. Spong is a controversial figure within his own denomination. He has never hidden his vigorous, some might even say vitriolic, conviction that many of the theological trappings of traditional Christianity are no longer viable. Indeed, one of the constituent elements of historical Christianity that Spong is convinced collides with the sensibilities of our age is what he calls the theistic notion of God, which God he defines as a supernatural being "dwelling outside this world and able to invade the world in miraculous ways to bless, to punish, to accomplish the divine will, to answer prayers and to come to the aid of frail, powerless human beings."<sup>23</sup> There are echoes here of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's call for a religionless Christianity, as well as of Nietzschean and Freudian claims that

traditional Christian piety is a function of weakness and immaturity, the desire for a cosmic father figure to deliver us from the slings and arrows of our finite fortune.

Yet, despite his enthusiastic denunciations of the tradition, Spong is equally enthusiastic in his claim that God is genuinely and powerfully met in the person of Jesus. As a result, his position is a strong candidate for the sort of modification strategy we are seeking, namely, one that presents the classic Christian claim that God was in Christ in a way that is not vulnerable to disconfirmation by the beliefs that constitute other world religions. This despite the fact that he himself does not wrestle with the implications of the clash of religions. Nhat Hahn explicitly juxtaposed Christ with the Buddha. Chopra sought what he took to be the real, but largely unknown Jesus, and this Jesus turned out to have much in common with Hindu and Buddhist traditions, traditions to which Chopra made explicit reference. Spong, though he does not confront his faith in Jesus Christ with the claims of other religions, tends, like Nhat Hahn and Chopra, to radically immanentize the reality of God, to make our contact with God much more a function of experience than of conceptualization, and it is of course the clash of concepts that is primarily at issue in disconfirmation. Furthermore, Spong focuses upon a Jesus who empowers this God-experience rather than upon a Jesus who becomes a sacrifice to God the Father on behalf of human sin. Given that Christian tradition ordinarily pictures the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for our sin as an absolutely unique event that he alone can perform, deemphasizing that part of Jesus' significance also lessens the tension between devotion to Christ and the claims of other religions. And while Spong does not make the relationship between Christianity and other religions his focus, it does come up in his book, and his position on the matter is clear:

For even Jesus, I submit, is not an end in himself, as Christians have so mistakenly assumed. Jesus is but a doorway into the wonder of God. The first followers of Jesus were not called Christians, as if knowing Christ was their goal; rather, they called themselves "the followers of

the way,” as if Jesus was himself but part of their journey. The Christ path was a path toward wholeness, a journey into that which is ultimately real and for which no words have yet been devised. *All religion must ultimately flow into this same mystical reality.* (p. 137, emphasis mine)

There is a sense in which this quotation from *Jesus for the Non-Religious* summarizes Spong’s entire case, a case that can be broken down into three main contentions: (1) Encountering Jesus provides the opportunity to experience God. (2) This experience of God means, concretely, that the one who has the God-experience moves toward wholeness as a human being. And (3), we have no words that can adequately or literally express this experience, and that is why mythic tales about healing, bodily resurrecting the dead, and walking on water began to be told about Jesus.

Let us consider each of these contentions in turn. First, what does Spong mean when he claims that encountering Jesus can be tantamount to encountering God? The infinite reality of God transcends all boundaries, and such transcendence of boundaries comes out concretely in the Jesus that we meet in the Gospels. In order to see how this is so, it is essential, Spong points out, to know a fair amount about the Jewish culture of Jesus’ day. Spong has the deepest appreciation for that culture; he in no way wishes to denigrate it as narrow or legalistic. But we do need to acknowledge that, just as with all other cultures, including our own, the culture in which Jesus lived had its prejudices. For example, the Jews held the neighboring Samaritans in extremely low regard. Again, Jewish religious law dictated that a man could easily be ritually polluted by contact with women, for instance if a woman was menstruating. It is against this background that Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan and his seemingly total openness to women – even including total strangers, such as the woman at the well with whom he converses, who was a Samaritan to boot (John 4:7-27) – demonstrate that Jesus broke through such prejudices. In Jesus’ concrete acts of interpersonal transcendence, we encounter the unlimited power of God. Like Chopra, Spong is happy to identify this God with Paul

Tillich's "Being itself" (p. 11) (recall that Nhat Hahn embraced the parallel Tillichian formulation "ground of being").

The notion that in Jesus one encounters the power of God as Being itself provides a segue to the second contention. To see God as Being itself is to recognize God as the one who not only grants me and all other things their bare existence, but also offers me the possibility of fullness of being. While Nhat Hahn and Chopra tend to see such fullness in terms of my consciousness merging with God, Spong takes a more decidedly Western approach: he thinks in terms of psychological wholeness. The God met in Jesus offers me the opportunity to break free from the prejudices and pettiness that hold me back from the fulfilled humanity that I am meant to experience. At the same time, we ought not to draw an overly sharp distinction between what Spong has in mind in his talk of the God experience with what Nhat Hahn and Chopra intend. For as the quotation above from Spong reminds us, to experience God is to enter a "journey into that which is ultimately real and for which no words have yet been devised."

The third contention, namely, that there are no words adequate to describe the God experience is a position that Spong clearly holds in common with Thich Nhat Hahn and Deepak Chopra, but Spong adds a twist. Once again emphasizing that it is essential to understand the Jewishness of Jesus and his followers in order to decipher the Gospel accounts, Spong maintains that the early Christians and the Gospel writers reached for the literally unsayable by employing symbolic and mythic motifs fashioned from events in the Hebrew Bible and the larger Jewish tradition. For example, to say that Jesus could miraculously feed five thousand people with only a few loaves and fishes is to recall how God provided manna in the desert for the ancient Israelites, and to claim that Jesus was the "lamb of God" who miraculously removed the sins of the world is to think back both to the Paschal lamb of the Exodus and to the ritual offering of lambs in the Temple in Jerusalem. It is as if Spong wants to take us back behind Rudolf Bultmann's famous project of demythologizing the New Testament and show us how the Jesus events were mythologized in the first place. The myths and symbols are by no means simply the overenthusiastic results of the early Christians' embellishment of the Jesus stories, and they are surely not

mere falsehoods. Rather, they arose because they were the most effective means at the disposal of Jesus' followers to reach beyond the inadequacies of ordinary language and its inability to communicate the *tremendum* of the Jesus encounter.

Given this summary of Spong's position, it seems that the title of his book, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, fits his message: The Jesus that he describes, and the God met in this Jesus, can be appropriated by those who are "spiritual but not religious," which means that this Jesus is not tied to some (or perhaps any) of the specific claims of traditional, institutional Christianity that clash with central claims of the other world religions. There is no threat of disconfirmation here, since embracing Spong's Jesus does not entail holding Jesus to be the one and only atoning avenue to God, the sole door through which one can walk to spiritual fulfillment.

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As we have proceeded in our explorations of Thich Nhat Hahn, Deepak Chopra, and John Shelby Spong, we have noted significant common features in their approaches: each thinker emphasizes the immanence of God more than God's transcendence; each holds that this immanence means that spirituality is a highly experiential undertaking; and each avers that the experience at issue cannot adequately be expressed in words.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that these three interpreters were picked not because of these overlapping emphases, but simply because of their salience on the popular spiritual scene. Hence, we ought eventually to inquire about what is behind these common features, something we shall do in the following chapter.

### Definitions, Essences, and Other Conundrums

By way of conclusion to the present chapter, however, there is another topic that deserves our consideration. We noted in previous chapters that, beginning several decades ago, academic commentators upon religion began to question the possibility of

objectively defining religion, or whether any discrete phenomenon even exists that can be summed up under the word “religion.” Jonathan Z. Smith’s contention that religion is not a natural category has become the emblematic expression of this hesitation about the attempt to define religion.<sup>25</sup> The objection here is ordinarily not to the practical undertaking of stipulating a definition of religion to be used in a specific discussion, a contingent definition that simply highlights what is of greatest interest to a particular investigator, but in holding that it is possible to uncover some genuinely objective and irreducible essence corresponding to the word “religion” or “spirituality.” The objectors claim that the ways of being to which we attach labels such as Judaism and Buddhism do not have some special set of features in common that we can self-evidently choose as the key to defining a phenomenon called “religion,” a phenomenon that scholars in the past, such as Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, took to be thoroughly *sui generis*, impossible to understand except on its own, essentialist terms.<sup>26</sup> But according to today’s objectors, to talk of the essence of “religion” would be to run roughshod over the particular practices of diverse traditions.

There is both a political and a more purely academic dimension to this concern. The political concern is that, ever since the undertaking was begun in the early modern period, the thinkers who have attempted to define a general phenomenon called religion have tended to be white male Europeans or their intellectual offspring. As a result, when the general category “religion” is used as a grid to lay over individual traditions, there will be an unavoidable evaluative component in the investigation, so that when elements of Buddhism, for example, don’t fit neatly into what is inevitably a biased investigation, those elements will be undervalued, if not condemned. Such use of a general, overarching definition of religion is, in the postmodern jargon, “totalizing.” The academic concern, while generating less controversy, is closely related: if we begin with a definition of a general phenomenon and then use it as a grid to lay over individual traditions as a key to their meaning, we shall inevitably miss out on some of the distinctive features of those traditions.

As was mentioned in an earlier chapter, the world has been confronted in recent years with what some have called the “return of religion.” And this means not just that advocates of secularization hypotheses have what appear to be counter-examples on their hands in the upsurge of traditionalist Islam and evangelical Christianity around the world. Rather, it is also the case that theorists who have been opposed to employing general, potentially totalizing definitions of religion may find their well-wrought objections simply swept away in a simultaneous resurgence of traditions from various parts of the world that suggests to the casual observer, at least, that these traditions are somehow part of a single phenomenon, that they are all instances of something that we can in fact put under the common heading “religion.”

What is of interest for our purposes here is how the modification strategies that we have explored in this chapter seem to have something to offer to both sides of the argument over whether there is anything out there answering to the general category “religion.” On the one hand, the whole impetus behind the modification strategies, namely, the awareness of the problem of the disconfirming Other, comes down on the side of those who want to respect the individual differences among traditions. To be troubled by the fact that my neighbor holds convictions different from my own and that I have no firmer evidence for my convictions than she has for hers is to be sensitive to the uniqueness of each tradition. If one began with the conviction that all those traditions that we call the world religions are just variations on an essentially common theme, there would be no problem of the disconfirming Other in the first place. On the other hand, the goal of the modification strategies is precisely to discover commonality, indeed a sufficiently significant commonality among religions or spiritual traditions so that one can conclude that what lies outside the circle of that commonality is not, finally, of overriding importance.

The debate about whether it is possible to define the term “religion” or “spirituality” so as to uncover an irreducible, common essence is replayed one level down, as it were, when we ask whether it is possible to define a particular religion such as “Christianity” or

“Buddhism” in such a way as to get at some “essence,” at some set of characteristics without which the phenomenon in question would simply not be Christianity or Buddhism. This particular debate is relevant to our exploration of modification strategies in that there will certainly be those who will hold that the harmonizing of Christian faith with other traditions undertaken by Hick, Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong has been accomplished at the unacceptable price of throwing the essence of Christianity overboard. If this charge is valid, then the approach to the disconfirming Other that we have labeled modification strategies, far from avoiding the feared disconfirmation, unintentionally abets it. Spiritual pluralism is destructive of belief in one more way, then, in that the boldest attempts to escape its disconfirming power actually destroy the individual faith that they are meant to protect.

One possible response to this complaint, a response alluded to above, is to say that we do not have to worry about the thinkers we have surveyed recasting Christian faith in a manner that destroys the essence of Christianity for the simple reason that there is no such essence. We lump together many different movements and designate them all instances of Christianity, so the argument might go, not because of some common theological core at the center of each of them, but simply because they all look to Jesus Christ as their gateway to spiritual fulfillment. Just how they understand Christ’s role as this gateway varies tremendously from church to church.

Or perhaps the reason that the many different church traditions that we call Christian share that designation is, again, not because of some profound common essence, but because of Wittgensteinian family resemblances. I might say of the Smith children, “You can always spot a Smith; all of those kids are unmistakably related.” But this doesn’t mean that the four Smith children each have the same physical characteristics. The first Smith child and the second might share a distinctive nose and unusually dark eyes; the second child and the third might share the distinctive nose and a unique grin; the third and the fourth might have the unique grin and curly black hair. Note that in this scenario, the first Smith child and the fourth have *no* characteristics in common, yet both are still unmistakably Smiths

because of the way in which specific characteristics overlap among the four children. Perhaps versions of “Christianity” are all “Christian” for the same reason. In this scenario too, there is no need to posit some common essence, and thus there is no sacrosanct set of essential principles that the authors we have explored have abandoned. Certainly the versions of devotion to Jesus set forth by Thich Nhat Hahn, Deepak Chopra, and John Shelby Spong have at least some characteristics that overlap with other forms of devotion that have, over the long haul of history, been designated “Christian.”

What may be more significant than such defenses against the destruction-of-essence charge, however, is to recognize that the challenge posed by spiritual pluralism changes the significance of the very notion of the essence of Christianity, or of any other faith. Most persons with an investment in the idea that Christianity has a discernable essence, something that endures over time despite external changes, have a potent interest in the truth question. That is, they are Christians who believe that the Christian faith is a function of divine revelation and a secure pathway to salvation. The concern is that if one deviates from the essence of Christian belief, one falsifies the Christian tradition and loses contact with the divine truth that genuine Christianity has to offer. If the modification strategies outlined above have abandoned the essence of Christianity, they have also forfeited its truth.

But we need to recall the nature of the pluralistic challenge. I might begin with confidence that the Christian faith I embrace is unquestionably an expression of some discernable essence of Christianity. But when I recognize that those of other faiths have convictions that contradict my own and that the grounds for those convictions are every bit as solid as what grounds my belief, I face disconfirmation. Whether or not my version of Christian faith captures what I have hitherto confidently embraced as the eternal essence of Christianity, I confront the mathematical odds to which we have so frequently referred before: the odds are that my faith convictions are false.

If follows from this that the loss-of-essence problem must take second place to the challenge of the disconfirming Other. But

suppose that I identify a modification strategy that I am convinced meets the Other's challenge. If I have taken that all-important step, surely *then* it is reasonable to examine the Christian faith with which that modification strategy leaves me and ask whether it is sufficiently close to the faith with which I began that this modified faith is worth holding onto. Without reentering the fray about whether notions such as the essence of Christianity make sense, there is one particular question that many a Christian who contemplates the modification strategies represented by Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong will surely ask themselves: Is it acceptable to abandon the theme of Jesus Christ's atoning death on the cross as God's once-and-for-all conquest of human sin?

Granted, atonement for sin is not the only task that traditional Christianity equates with the role of Jesus Christ. The contemporary *Catechism of the Catholic Church* lists the following reasons for the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ: "in order to save us by reconciling us with God," "so that we might know God's love," "to be our model of holiness," and to make us "partakers of the divine nature" (the last phrase is quoted from 2nd Peter 1:4).<sup>27</sup> There is no surprise, however, that atonement or "reconciliation" leads this list. The other tasks associated with the Christ's incarnation appear, at least at first blush, to be shareable with other redeemer figures, especially if one recalls Nhat Hahn's willingness to interpret Buddhism, which is usually taken as non-theistic, as offering something akin to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual quester. But can one who wants to maintain his or her identity as a Christian adopt a modification strategy that foregoes the cross as atonement? It would seem unlikely, and if it in fact cannot be done then pluralism will indeed prove a challenge to belief: without a modification strategy, pluralism pits religions against one another so that they essentially cancel each other out. But with a modification strategy that overcomes pluralism's threat of disconfirmation, one's faith may end up being unrecognizable and perhaps no longer worth affirming.

At the same time, however, changes in American culture over the years have rendered the notion that we are caught up in sin

much less salient, even for pious Christians. Thus it is that the psychologist Karl Menninger could ask, as early as 1973, in the title of a book, *Whatever Became of Sin?*<sup>28</sup> Could it be, then, that tasks other than atonement assigned to Jesus Christ by the Christian tradition, tasks that appear to be kept intact in the modification strategies of Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong, will be sufficient for many Christians? One would be unwise to bet on such a scenario. Indeed, it is advisable to recall one of the Christian tradition's most venerable insights about how it crafts its theological doctrines, namely, that the *lex credendi* follows the *lex orandi*: the law of believing, of doctrinal affirmation, follows the law of praying. That is, the Christian church's central theological doctrines were not spun out by theologians (nor revealed to them) with the Christian liturgy faithfully following and expressing those doctrines. Rather, it more often works the other way around: the concrete, day-to-day worship practices of the faithful stimulate theological reflection and explanation. Christians were baptizing infants before theologians worked out the details of infant baptism as a sacrament that washes away the effects of original sin.

Now consider the fact that the central worship practice of Christianity's largest body, the Roman Catholic Church, is the sacrifice of the Mass. The Catholic liturgy is built around Jesus' sacrificial, atoning death on the cross. Thus, even if contemporary Christians are less likely than their foremothers and forefathers to dwell on the idea that the human condition is constantly threatened by sin and guilt, it is hard to imagine casting aside Jesus' role as the sacrificial lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Every time a Christian, Roman Catholic or otherwise, participates in Holy Communion, which most Protestant Christians too consider a sacrament initiated by Jesus himself, Jesus' identification with atonement is reinforced.

On the one hand, it would be foolish to suppose that there is absolutely no way in which the traditional emphasis upon Christ's sacrificial role can be integrated with the picture of Christ that follows from embracing the modification strategies. For instance, one might begin by noting that in all of the world religions, the

world is regarded as somehow “out of joint,” as the Buddhists put it; there is something fundamentally wrong with the way in which human beings relate to reality. Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong all lay out their proposals in a way that allows us to look at reality at least quasi-theistically. Hahn’s comments on the Kingdom of God and the Holy Spirit make it clear that even a Buddhist can make sense of theistic language, though perhaps it would be most accurate to say that God-language can be taken by a Buddhist such as Nhat Hahn as symbolic speech that can be translated into language more familiar to Buddhists. In any case, given this general commitment to the meaningfulness of God-language, it is possible to view the world’s being out of joint as tied up with human estrangement from God. The various spiritual quests that the world religions preach would not need to be so difficult, so rigorous, and so constant if we were not separated from the divine ground of our being. Therefore, religion and spirituality must offer some way in which to overcome this separation.

A goodly number of rabbis will tell us that such reconciliation is in our own hands: no matter how sinful we are, we can take comfort in the teaching about *teshuvah* or “turning” back to God: we always have it in our power to turn back to God, no matter how badly we have lived our lives. Most other world religions will probably agree with this sentiment, or at least with some variation upon it. Again, symbolic translation may be required when a religion such as Buddhism or Taoism encounters this sort of God-language. In Taoism, for instance, the “estrangement” is that of the human self or ego from the Way of the universe. One can overcome this estrangement by emptying oneself of one’s egotistical projects and harmonizing oneself with the Tao so that one’s actions are a function of the Tao flowing through the self.

As it turns out, the traditional Christian must also engage in some symbolic translation if he or she wishes to embrace both the modification strategies and the notion of Christ’s death as an atoning sacrifice. That is, he or she must be able to take the traditional language of atonement and see it as having dimensions beyond its most unimaginative, literal meaning. But perhaps this is

not quite as difficult a maneuver as it first appears. For the problem actually lies with one particular interpretation of that atoning sacrifice that has been worked out in Western Christianity. By far the dominant interpretation of the cross is based on the famous argument set forth by Anselm of Canterbury in his *Cur Deus Homo?*<sup>29</sup> That argument suggests that the atonement was an objective process, something akin to a legal proceeding that took place between God the Father and God the Son, rather than an event that effected a subjective process, a change within the human heart. Human beings are debtors before the Father in as much as the Father has been done a grave injustice by human sin. Christ the Son gives himself to the Father as a sacrifice that pays that debt. In the Anselmian picture, Christ's sacrifice is a thoroughly unique, one-time intervention on behalf of all humanity that provides for the possibility of human salvation from sin. Hence, given the Anselmian model, it appears to be impossible to square Christ's role as savior from sin with the perspective derived from the modification strategies emerging from the books by Hahn, Chopra, and Spong.

But the Anselmian interpretation of the cross is not the only interpretation available. For instance, in the twelfth century, the century following Anselm's own, the theologian Peter Abelard proposed what is often called the "moral influence" theory of atonement. Here, the atoning power of the cross is not to be found in a supernatural transaction between God the Father and God the Son but rather in a straightforward interaction between Christ and individual human beings. Christ is the preeminent revelation of God, and he brings the message of God's love for humanity. Because Jesus Christ is himself God in the flesh, the cross makes apparent the extraordinary lengths to which God will go in the name of this love for us. The individual seeker, contemplating this demonstration of unconditional divine love, will be moved to accept God's offer of grace which will allow him or her to live in obedience to God and in fellowship with other human beings.

If our hypothetical twenty-first-century Christian adopts Abelard's view of the cross, then he or she can also embrace the

modification strategies. First of all, the picture of the cross as an instrument that reaches deep into the human heart and turns estranged humans back to God can easily be integrated into the modification strategies' notion of the ultimate and the centrality of our consciousness of it. Second, because Jesus' death on the cross now need not be regarded as an essential, one-time transaction between the Father and the Son on behalf of all of humanity, the claim of its absolute uniqueness can also be abandoned. Hence, the cross might be regarded by Christians as one powerful way in which God penetrates the human heart, a way that is not in competition with other ways in which the ultimate breaks down our hardheartedness, such as the teachings of the Buddha or the yogic paths offered by Indian religion. In this way, it is only the claim that the cross is a unique necessity that is left behind. The cross is an extraordinarily powerful way – one way among several others – via which our inadequate God-consciousness, the source of our sin, can be repaired.

In any case, the proposals set forth by Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong are sufficiently suggestive with regard to our primary topic, the threat of the disconfirming Other, that we need to analyze the three motifs that their work shares – the immanence of the ultimate, the importance of experience in knowing that ultimate, and the ineffability of the ultimate – in greater detail and to push deeper into what their proposals portend for pluralism. That will be the task of the next chapter.