

CHAPTER FOUR

Modification Strategies: Their Elements and Their Social Context

At the outset of our study, we explored several tactics that are essentially attempts to avoid the challenge of the disconfirming Other, namely, compartmentalization, the eschewal of logic where spiritual matters are concerned, and self-deception, along with the oppositional strategy that is fundamentalism. Then, in Chapter Three, we concentrated on modification strategies that attempt to meet the pluralistic challenge head-on. To the extent that these modification strategies initially appear to be successful in dealing with the challenge of the disconfirming Other, it behooves us to push further in our investigation of them. That further investigation should give us insight not only into the specifics of how the modification strategies are constructed, but also into how their constituent elements are part of the larger American culture.

Furthermore, given the fact that the phenomenon of religious pluralism is our focus, we must investigate other relationships that the modification strategies have to American spiritual and religious pluralism beyond warding off disconfirmation. On this last matter, I shall argue that modification strategies find themselves in a circular relationship with American spiritual pluralism, a relationship of reciprocal causation. First of all, the very characteristics that power the modification strategies and thus protect belief from the disconfirmation threatened by pluralism draw upon that pluralism as conditions of their own possibility. And, secondly, the modification strategies themselves add to the very pluralism that makes them necessary.

The popular modification strategies that we considered shared a number of significant characteristics. Thich Nhat Hahn, Deepak Chopra, and John Shelby Spong all embraced approaches to spirituality, and to Jesus Christ in particular, that emphasized divine *immanence* over transcendence, that focused on *experience* rather than on the explicitly reflective or the deed-oriented elements of spirituality, and that claimed that the experience of the ultimate is often *ineffable*, that is, that it cannot adequately be expressed in words. These three characteristics are, of course, tightly linked to one another: It makes sense to suppose that I might be able to experience the ultimate if it is truly immanent, whereas I might not be able to experience a radically transcendent ultimate. Furthermore, while the cognitive dimension of spirituality can, perhaps by definition, be put into words (concepts being dependent upon language), what we are here calling “experience” can be construed, especially if it is a particular sort of experience, as something that words cannot adequately express. The two professional religious thinkers whom we briefly considered in our investigation of modification strategies, namely, Karl Rahner and John Hick, present a less unified perspective on immanence, experience, and ineffability in their work, and we shall have something to say about their approaches later on.

Let us begin, however, with a more detailed investigation of what we have identified as the three defining emphases of the popular strategies that we have considered. Our first topic is immanence. It seems likely that spirituality and religion have almost perennially displayed a dialectic of immanence and transcendence. There are numerous examples to be found in the world’s spiritualities of a dynamic in which a high god, a creator god who is often believed to reside in the sky, is understood as radically transcendent, and more attention is paid to other, more immanent manifestations of the divine as a result of the human desire to be in contact with ultimate reality. For instance, we find anthropological accounts of African traditions that believe in a God that is sufficiently transcendent that this deity becomes of little day-to-day significance among its people, so that worship

and invocation are directed to intermediary forces or beings instead.¹ Along the same lines, the influential sociologist Max Weber famously speaks of the “disenchantment” of the world that he sees effected by both Judaism and Protestantism.² Judaism arises in a world where there are, among Israel’s neighbors and perhaps initially among the Israelites themselves, a host of immanent deities, manifestations of the ultimate that are found in sacred objects such as statues – recall the Israelites’ own infamous lapse into idolatry in the Golden Calf story in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 32) – and in the world of nature, as evidenced by the notion of sacred powers that fructify the earth. But Hebrew theology, at least at some point in its development, attempts mightily to oppose these radically immanent deities in favor of a more transcendent (and singular) God. Where the notion takes hold that divine reality is to be found only in the ineffable Yahweh, a God sufficiently transcendent that no human being can see him face-to-face and live and whose name, “I Am,” is essentially the mysterious refusal of a name, then the world here below is effectively bereft of supernatural realities. This is what Weber had in mind when speaking of disenchantment.

Christianity begins as a Jewish sect, but its central claim, namely, that God has become incarnate in the man Jesus offers the possibility of re-enchanting the world. Yet Jesus too can become a remote figure, as when he is depicted as the fierce *Pantocrator* (Ruler of All) who shall preside over the Final Judgment, in which a vast number of souls will be condemned to eternal damnation. It has often been observed that the remoteness of God, even in his form as the Christ if Christ be conceived as the *Pantocrator*, gave rise to the whole apparatus of sacraments and devotion to Mary and the saints that arose within Roman Catholicism, for these all suggest a more available divine. The dialectic of transcendence and immanence has here effected a move from the original Jewish emphasis upon transcendence to a much greater emphasis upon immanence: to the extent that God the Father and the ascended Son become remote and intimidating, ordinary piety turns to more immediate representatives of the supernatural.

But some forms of Protestantism continue the dialectic by disenchanting the world once more. Particularly in its Calvinist form, Protestantism eschews veneration of the saints and Mary as tantamount to idolatry.³ While it hardly negates all immanence, given its continuing emphasis upon the Incarnation of God in Christ, its actual worship practices and iconography – or perhaps more accurately, its striking lack of iconography – swing back in the direction of the transcendent.

The fact that the back-and-forth between transcendence and immanence is indeed, at least in some instances, a “dialectic” is highlighted in Mark C. Taylor’s reading of twentieth-century Christian thought:

The history of theology in the West . . . is the story of repeated “alternation” [from the Latin for “other”] between monisms in which the real is immanent, that is, in some way *present* here and now, and dualisms in which the real is transcendent, that is, *absent* or, more precisely, present elsewhere. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, these theological alternatives are not simply opposites but are dialectically related in such a way that, when either is pushed to its limit, it negates itself and turns into the other. In the course of the twentieth century, the immanence of liberalism gives way to the transcendence of neoorthodoxy, which, in turn, is negated by the death of God theology. For many religious conservatives, the death of God was symptomatic of the relativism and nihilism of the sixties. The recent emergence of neofoundationalism represents the effort to reverse this perceived decline by reasserting religious and moral absolutes.⁴

If there appears to be an ongoing dialectic of transcendence and immanence, then, in the history of religions and spiritualities, it makes sense to ask whether there are factors in contemporary cultures, especially the United States, that presently favor the note of immanence. For if there are, this would help explain the character

of the modification strategies that we have examined by establishing that the emphasis upon immanence is ready-to-hand in contemporary American culture.

Surely there are such immanence-privileging factors. We begin with the philosophical environment in which modern Christian theology came to birth. The bulk of modern philosophy, as initiated by René Descartes, is indelibly marked by the famous “turn to the subject.” According to this sensibility, philosophizing (and perhaps also theologizing) ought to start with the knowing subject rather than with what is alleged to be known. Immanuel Kant argued, persuasively for many, that we can know things only as they have always already been worked over by our mental apparatus, never as they are in and of themselves. If religious thinkers take this turn to the subject seriously, as many of them have done from the nineteenth century to the present, then our ability to know God or the ultimate will always be a knowing “from below.” God cannot in this case be absolutely other, for there must be something in the very constitution of the human subject that provides a point of contact for encountering the divine and that dictates that the divine does indeed have an immanent dimension. It is worth noting that Friedrich Schleiermacher and Johann Adam Möhler, a Protestant and a Roman Catholic respectively, turned out to be two of the most influential religious thinkers of the nineteenth century, and that both set forth theologies based upon an examination of the human subject’s inherent capacity to intuit the divine.

While Karl Barth and his followers attempted to steer theology away from the turn to the subject, American religious thought has tended, throughout the modern period and into our own time, to be guided by that historic turn and, thus, to privilege the immanent dimension of the divine over the transcendent. Hence, some of the most influential works of twentieth-century theology in America were produced by thinkers such as David Tracy and Sallie McFague, both of whom self-consciously address epistemological issues and have clearly imbibed something of the subjective turn, especially in their earlier work.⁵ It should be noted, in addition, that even postmodern thinkers who abandon the turn to the subject (thanks

in large part to Martin Heidegger's critique of the human subject's attempts at cognitive mastery and the consequent forgetfulness of Being) can continue to emphasize an immanent divinity. Witness Mark C. Taylor's equation of language with the divine milieu in which all things arise and pass away.⁶

Of greater importance than the philosophers' turn to the subject, however, is the emphasis upon democracy, egalitarianism, and individuality in American culture. There is perhaps no more paradigmatically American novel than Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), in which the protagonist is advised to be his own father, to create himself. Ellison's radically existentialist take on the human condition may well rule out a decidedly spiritual or religious perspective. But Americans who do embrace a spiritual vision will likely bring to that vision an Ellisonian emphasis upon the necessity of being true to one's own values and perspective. And, of course, it is worth noting that Ellison's full name was in fact Ralph *Waldo* Ellison, and that his namesake Ralph Waldo Emerson's championing of self-reliance ended up including the conviction that God was very immanent indeed, that the individual human being was an organ of the divine. The Transcendentalist movement, of which Emerson is the most distinguished representative, focused upon the immediacy of the divine to the human. The emphases upon egalitarianism and self-reliance that permeate American culture and that are enshrined in the thought of Emerson mean that even theologies that are not concerned with academic debates about the turn to the subject will very likely emphasize divine immanence of one sort or another. Rosemary Radford Ruether's notion of the divine as the "Primal Matrix" that embraces men and women in the down-to-earth circumstances and struggles of their everyday lives, along with the world of nature, qualifies as a significant example.⁷

That a sense of divine immanence, indeed a conviction that human beings actually participate in divinity, has been at the heart of American piety for some time is the burden of Harold Bloom's *The American Religion*.⁸ Bloom is at his best here, for, like one of his heroes, Sigmund Freud, he reaches for the big hypothesis, the grandiose claim, and spares his readers the qualifications and caveats

that punctuate the flow of the argument in much scholarly work. According to Bloom, distinctly American religions such as Mormonism, the Southern Baptist churches, and Christian Science are animated by the conviction that the human soul is older than creation: we are closer to divinity than to the finite, created order. And Bloom claims that this conviction has not been confined to religions born on these shores, but has had an impact on many traditional European religions as they have become acculturated to the American scene, even religions such as Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism. The conviction that the soul is older than creation is in the spiritual atmosphere that Americans of all stripes breathe.

We return to our earlier observation, then, that the notion of divine immanence is ready-to-hand to those who, in today's America, wish to embrace a modification strategy designed to avoid disconfirmation by the Other. And, of course, not only is the idea of divine immanence readily available to the contemporary American spiritual quester, it has peculiar strengths in dealing with religious and spiritual pluralism, as we have seen, and thus will be particularly attractive to those questers whose focal concern is to avoid disconfirmation by the Other.

An emphasis upon experience is the second hallmark of the modification strategies that we have examined. Thich Nhat Hahn goes so far as to assert that "Authentic experience makes a religion a true religion."⁹ The focus upon experience fits seamlessly with the emphasis on divine immanence: if the divine is not distant from us but, rather, close by, then we can do more than simply represent it to ourselves via concepts or behave according to moral dictates that we believe to be divine demands: we can encounter the divine more directly, specifically through our own "experience."

The word "experience" is used in so many different ways and in so many diverse contexts, however, that we need to examine it in more detail and specify its meaning as used in the modification strategies with which we are concerned here. Suppose that I am asked by a friend, "Have you ever experienced white-water rafting?" I will say "No," even though I know what that kind of rafting is and have frequently seen television and movie footage of people engaged

in it. For me to be able to say that I have actually “experienced” white-water rafting requires that I have engaged in that activity myself. In other words, “experience” suggests actual participation, and the sort of participation that is involved in the case of rafting is physical and vigorous.

By contrast, consider the case where I inquire of a friend, “Have you ever had the experience of seeing the *Mona Lisa*?” She will probably only answer my question affirmatively if she has been to the Louvre and looked at the actual painting. In this instance, however, experience is not tied up with vigorous activity, but it does once again suggest proximity, an intimate participation in something: she must have seen the original painting with her own eyes, not just reproductions of it, in order to claim to have had the experience.

If experience demands proximity to or some sort of participation in a particular phenomenon, it is even more obvious that it demands an accompanying consciousness. If I were loaded onto a white-water raft while in a coma and remained comatose throughout the raft’s journey, I would not be able to claim upon coming out of my coma that I had experienced rafting, even though one might argue that, at least in a weak sense, I had participated in it; certainly I was proximate to the phenomenon. Thus, experience in the relevant sense demands not just proximity and not just any sort of participation, but participation in the sense of being consciously involved in a phenomenon.

Our analysis of experience thus far is consistent with Kant’s definition of it as “knowledge by means of connected perceptions.”¹⁰ Both the words “knowledge” and “perception” in his formula are functions of consciousness. Perception as Kant understands it is given through sensible intuition. Whether I am white-water rafting or gazing at a famous painting, my experience will be dependent upon the five senses. But the notion of “actually experiencing” something as opposed to merely being acquainted with it from a distance often includes not just the input that is sensible intuition and the proximity to an object that sensible intuition presupposes but also certain accompanying subjective states, most obviously

what we call “emotions” or “feelings.” Thus, to “really experience” white-water rafting in the sense in which we are ordinarily inclined to employ that phrase includes the fact that braving the river produces in one a sense of excitement and adventure, or perhaps of terror. As for one’s seeing the actual *Mona Lisa*, that experience could be accompanied by a state of boredom and thus lead to the conclusion that the painting is highly overrated. But such disappointment and boredom are nonetheless part of what defines the experience.

Our authors’ emphasis on “experience” in their modification strategies suggests proximity to and participation in ultimate reality, then, along with a subjective state that the experiencer reads as consistent with such contact with the ultimate. But in the case of spiritual or religious experience, the subjective states may well take on a different and much more important role than they have in our examples of experiencing rafting and a famous painting. A cursory consideration of the experience of white-water rafting and of seeing the *Mona Lisa* suggests that the subjective states are *caused by* one’s rafting or seeing the *Mona Lisa*, though the states exist in the midst of the rafting or the viewing of a painting. In other words, I still need to have the subjective states in order to have the full-blown experiences of rafting and viewing the *Mona Lisa*, but there will be a definite causal order such that the subjective states are results of my braving the river’s currents or of my placing myself in front of the painting. But where ultimate reality is concerned, the reality that Thich Nhat Hahn, Deepak Chopra, and John Shelby Spong are all happy to call the Ground of Being or Being-itself, the object of the experience is not a physical phenomenon. I cannot touch it or see it and, as a result, be put into a particular subjective state. It seems, rather, that the subjective state or states will have to be intuitive in the relevant technical philosophical sense: those states themselves will need to be interpreted as the reception of something given to the mind, in this case the reality of Being-itself. A subjective sense of overwhelming mystery, for example, might be the way in which I claim that God or Being-itself shows itself to me, rather than simply my response to being in the divine presence.

What we have here is an instance of what can be called “intuitive internal experience,” insofar as the subjective or internal states are intuitive and thus definitive of the experience.¹¹ As internal, they obviously pass the test of proximity or participation. Of course, the skeptic can immediately contest the claim that such internal experiences are intuitive rather than simply generated by one’s own mind. Or, if the skeptic is inclined to grant that such internal experiences can be intuitive, that they can present something to the mind that stands outside it, he or she will undoubtedly point out that we cannot be certain just what reality they are presenting. I don’t have to conclude, for instance, that the experience of radical mystery puts me in touch with Being-itself.

But however one decides to evaluate the trustworthiness of what we have decided to call intuitive internal experience, it is nonetheless evident, I think, that the emphasis upon piety as intuitive internal experience is, like the note of divine immanence, ready-to-hand in contemporary American culture. George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine* underlines this point. In Chapter Three, we examined Lindbeck’s notion of a spirituality or religion as a cultural-linguistic construction, a discrete world with internal principles that dictate the meaning of assertions and behaviors. We found Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach vulnerable to the disconfirming Other and, thus, not a viable interpretation of spirituality and religion for one who wishes to craft a modification strategy addressing pluralism’s challenge to belief. But while the cultural-linguistic perspective is the one that Lindbeck himself advocates, it is not the only perspective that he analyzes. He recognizes two major alternative approaches to spirituality among theologians, namely, the “cognitive-propositional” approach and the “experiential-expressive” one. It is the latter that seems to be presupposed in the writing of Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong. Lindbeck provides a useful description of experiential-expressivism, which he grants has been the regnant model in modern and contemporary theology. More specifically, he provides a description of it that makes evident experiential-expressivism’s potential appeal to anyone seeking to find unity

among different religious or spiritual traditions. Most basically, the experiential-expressivist will “locate ultimately significant contact with whatever is finally important to religion in the prereflective experiential depths of the self [this surely suggests what we have called “intuitive internal experience”] and regard the public or outer features of religion as expressive and evocative objectifications (i.e., nondiscursive symbols) of internal experience.”¹² What is more, “Different religions are diverse expressions or objectifications of a common core experience.”¹³ That is, since the core of religion or spirituality is an internal experience and religious doctrines and rubrics are simply outward expressions of this inner experience, and because such outward expressions can never do justice to the actual experience, different traditions might very well be pointing to the exact same experience despite expressing it in different words or acts.

Further evidence that, especially where the spiritual quest is concerned, an emphasis upon intuitive internal experience is endemic to contemporary American culture can be had by noting that, beginning in the 1960s, Americans have displayed an insatiable appetite for mystical religious traditions, from Hindu and Buddhist meditation-centered varieties to historic Christian mysticism as exemplified by John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich to the Jewish Kabala.¹⁴ That American questers have often, in the interest of instant gratification, watered down these classical mysticisms, sometimes to the point of inanity, is not of concern to us here: we are simply noting yet another indication of the ready-to-hand character of an emphasis upon internal experience in the spiritual journey.

The notion of intuitive internal spiritual experience is only an intellectual stone’s throw away from the claim of ineffability, which is the third distinguishing mark of the popular modification strategies that we have investigated. The writers whom we have considered appear to hold that an immanent ultimate can be given to consciousness in intuitive internal experience, but that neither the object of such experience nor even the experience itself can adequately be described via the

conceptual tools available to finite human beings. Theology is frequently a waste of time. Better simply to open oneself to the experience. Of course, much depends upon the word “adequately” in the expression “adequately described,” for, after all, if it were impossible to understand or to communicate about the experience of the ultimate in any fashion whatsoever, then there could be no books such as *Living Buddha*, *Living Christ*, *The Third Jesus*, and *Jesus for the Non-Religious*. For the ultimate to be totally ineffable, in other words, would mean that we could never encounter it, for there would be nothing for our minds to grasp. Nothing would be given to consciousness. We must be able to understand something about the reality in question even to claim that it is ultimate and (to a large extent) ineffable.

Christian theologians, in particular, have long wrestled with the challenge of how little we apparently know about God and what we can in fact say about God. They have come up with at least three possible ways to proceed. Perhaps, given God’s infinity and our finitude, we can only say what God is not. Thus, the familiar Christian claim that “God is love” really means no more than that God has no characteristics contrary to love. A second possibility is that, in addition to saying what God is not, we can say what God is in relation to us. In this case, “God is love” is not talking about the inner being of the divine, something far beyond our ken, but is describing the loving, compassionate way in which believers experience God acting toward them. The third possibility thinks of our statements about God as symbolic (note that Lindbeck links this recourse to symbolism with experiential-expressivism in the quotation above).

Of course, “symbolic” is another slippery term. Even if we confine it to just one of its possible meanings, namely, analogy, we must be satisfied with choosing one possible interpretation among others, since analogy has been variously understood by different Christian thinkers down through the centuries. Here is one representative interpretation of analogical language: to say that “God is love” means that, while we can never grasp God’s infinite and perfect love, we can say with confidence that it is at least

something like human love. Succinctly put, to say that “God is love,” then, means that God is a loving being (or the loving ground of being) akin to the fashion in which my best friend Jamie is a loving being, except that God’s love is free of any limitation or imperfection. Because the human mind cannot grasp love that is free of limitation or imperfection, analogical language about God still has a good deal of modesty attached to it.

What does all of this mean for the claim made by Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong that the ultimate is somehow ineffable? We have already suggested that they hold that the ultimate is given to consciousness in certain experiences, which experiences necessarily have an internal, emotional component. They go on to say that there is much about this ultimate, the Ground of Being or Being-itself, that escapes the conceptual tools available to finite human beings. This large degree of incomprehensibility means that the experiences through which the ultimate is given to consciousness are themselves only vaguely describable, more difficult to describe, that is, than ordinary subjective states. While we have all had experiences of inner peace, for example, these garden-variety experiences of peace do not begin to approach the power of the experience of unconditional peace that the spiritual seeker claims to have had. The latter is what St. Paul refers to as the “peace that surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7).

Just where does the phenomenon of symbolism (in the form of analogy explained above) come into play, then? Let us say that our hypothetical spiritual seeker has an experience of unconditional peace (a large component of which is the cognitively negative and hence humble experience of being unable to find any gaps in the experience of peace; our seeker can detect no portion of his or her selfhood left untouched by this experience). Let us suppose, furthermore, that the seeker in question is a Christian (so that she identifies the source of unconditional peace with Jesus Christ as the revelation, indeed the presence, of God) and that she wants to tell me of her experience. It is unlikely that she will start right off with symbolic talk: she will not look at me and blurt out “Jesus is the Good Shepherd”

(see John 10:11). Rather, she will begin speaking literally, in a manner something like the following: “I felt that I was directly in touch with Christ. An indescribable feeling of peace came over me. It was as if I was being sustained by Christ in such a way that nothing could ever harm me, or even cause me worry, ever again. The feeling was so intense, I really can’t describe it.” This attempted description makes use of language not about God or Christ *in themselves*, but of Christ’s peace-giving *relationship* to the experiencer. It is followed by the quite literal confession that the experience was sufficiently intense and unique that the experiencer has no adequate way literally to describe it.

At another moment in her Christian practice, however, the subject of this experience may well feel herself particularly drawn to the biblical affirmation, attributed to Jesus himself, that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Indeed, it may become for her the most powerful of Jesus’ “I am” statements, given its ability to suggest Jesus’ care for his followers, a care that inspires a sense of peace. Jesus’ affirmation is clearly symbolic or, to revert to the terminology we have used previously, analogical. As far as we know, the historical man Jesus of Nazareth was not a shepherd. But we are talking, in any case, about an experience not of the historical Jesus but of Jesus as the eternal presence of God. Thus, the statement, “Jesus is the Good Shepherd” is a symbolic or analogical statement in the requisite sense for our purposes: it allows the experiencer to say something about the extraordinary experience of inner peace that she attributes to Jesus Christ but does so with the noetic modesty characteristic of analogy, since Jesus Christ is not literally a shepherd.

What does all of this have to do with the attraction to analogy on the part of our advocates of modification strategies? If a Christian avers that “Jesus is the Good Shepherd” as the result of her spiritual experience and a Buddhist tells us that, given his experience, the ultimate is like a body of perfectly pure water whose glassy surface is undisturbed by so much as a ripple, the two questers need not be seen as threatening to disconfirm one another’s sense of the ultimate. In other words, two symbolic statements, unlike two literal ones, can draw on very different material without

contradicting one another in any way. If I say in one stanza of a poem that my true love is like a star shining down from the heavens and in another stanza that she is like a dew-covered rose, I can fairly be accused of writing bad poetry, but not of contradicting myself.

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Thus far, this chapter has provided the occasion to look at the defining emphases of the modification strategies advanced by Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong in some detail and to note the ready-to-hand character of those emphases in the larger American culture. Before we move on to a consideration of some additional ways in which these same emphases are connected to pluralism, i.e., ways beyond simply warding off the disconfirmation threatened by spiritual pluralism, we need briefly to return to the two professional religious thinkers whom we also considered in the previous chapter. Karl Rahner set forth what we categorized as a spiritual inclusivism, while John Hick provided an example of a pluralist theology. To what extent is their thought too driven by the elements of immanence, experience, and ineffability?

The philosophical foundations of Rahner's theology that were of concern to us displayed all three with great clarity. What God could possibly be more immanent than Rahner's God, who makes himself present to us as an *a priori* condition for the possibility of any human mental act? This God is, in the words of the Quran, closer to us than our jugular vein (50:16).¹⁵ And while we did not go on to discuss the sort of religious experience that Rahner attaches to so-called "special revelation," the thematic revelation he believes was provided to humanity in Jesus Christ, the ever-immanent God who communicates himself in the constitution of our consciousness is also ever an object of our experience, albeit unthematically. Every waking hour, we possess a pre-grasp of the being of God. And, finally, Rahner is emphatic in his assertion that this same God who is ever-present to all human beings is "holy mystery," an infinite far beyond our means of comprehension. That is, Rahner avers

that, where Christian theology is concerned, an emphasis upon immanence need not rule out an equally ardent emphasis upon transcendence.

John Hick presents a bit more complex case. According to the scenario that he suggests, during Jasper's "Axial Period," the ultimate presented itself in several cultures around the world. On the one hand, Hick does appear to assume that this meant that the different spiritual seers behind the various world religions did indeed each have an *experience* of the divine. They did not simply philosophize about the divine or draw conclusions about human responsibilities implied by the existence of the divine. On the other hand, he does not accept the claim that, at root, all of these experiences of ultimate reality were one and the same and that the differences among the world religions resulted from subsequent choices about how to express this single experience of the ultimate. Instead, he argues that the experiences had by the original seers were themselves different, because the seers came into the presence of divinity already conditioned by the multi-faceted characteristics of their diverse cultures. Hence, for example, some prophets and seers experienced the divine from the beginning as personal, while others experienced it as an impersonal Absolute.

Of course, at the end of the day, this contrast with the one-experience-many-expressions formula at the heart of our three paradigmatic popular modification strategies may be a distinction without a difference. For Hick goes on to claim that the different cultural lenses that the religious pioneers brought to their encounter with the ultimate meant that they were not experiencing the ultimate as it is in itself – the noumenal ultimate – but only the ultimate as it appears through those lenses – the phenomenal ultimate. Therefore, despite the religions' different foundational experiences, all of those experiences were in fact of the same ultimate reality. As a result, Hick too can finally claim that the contradictory theologies of the different world religions are not really fatally contradictory after all, for – and this is a move that connects Hick's discussion with the notion of ineffability – those theologies are merely phenomenal adumbrations that, as such, may

contradict one another with regard to their phenomenal claims without actually being in disagreement about the noumenal reality to which they point.

Hence, it appears that the familiar emphases on experience and an element of ineffability are both present in Hick's proposal. However, one possible interpretation of Hick's approach is that the experiential element was really only of definitive significance for the founders of the various traditions: these founders had their religious experiences and then formed systems of belief and ritual based upon those experiences. And this might mean, in turn, that for the followers down through the ages, in distinction to the founders, internal, intuitive experience of the ultimate does not really come into play. Rather, these followers' lives are formed by the belief and ritual systems handed down to them. Of course, the beliefs and rituals inspire experiences in the followers, some of which are no doubt powerful, but these experiences might well be interpreted as emotional responses to the beliefs and rites, not intuitive phenomena via which the ultimate is given to consciousness. If this be the case, then experience is not as important a player in Hick's version of things as it is in the thought of Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong.

But what of the remaining characteristic, namely, immanence? Once again, it is possible to read Hick in a way that does not put the same emphasis on divine immanence that our other authors have. For, to the extent that the ordinary religious person's piety is largely determined by the belief system that has been handed down to him or her and not to his or her own intuitive experience of the divine, it is quite possible that that very belief system will emphasize divine transcendence at the expense of divine immanence. Remember our observation in the previous chapter that Hick's theology proceeds largely "from above" rather than "from below." The divine seeks out prophets who can communicate something of divine reality to the larger human community, rather than the divine being ever-present to each and every human being given the very constitution of human nature. Of course, the formative prophets themselves must be able claim that God was immanent for

them, at least at those moments in which they were receiving their purported revelations.

Despite Hick's standing as something of an "odd man out," however, we must recall that his noumenal/phenomenal distinction allows one to avoid the disconfirmation with which religious pluralism threatens the believer. Indeed, he imagines a profound degree of convergence among the world's religions in the future, so that the differences among traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity come to be seen as akin to the relatively mild differences that exist among so-called Christian "denominations" today.¹⁶

What is more, the suggestion that perhaps the elements of immanence and experience are more applicable to the founders of religions in Hick's view than to their workaday followers raises an additional issue that ought at least to be mentioned here. If there is such a thing as an "average" believer – not to be confused with our ideal type of the traditional Christian, the individual who is on the quest of faith seeking understanding and thus is anything but average – say, an average Christian who finds himself or herself sitting in church on most Sunday mornings, isn't it likely that this person's sense of divine immanence and experience of the divine, including its ineffability, will most likely all be fairly mild? Our hypothetical average Christian will indeed have the experience of feeling closer to God in church than he or she does while at the office during the work week, but the sense of immanence and its accompanying experience will probably be less dramatic than what writers such as Thich Nhat Hahn, Deepak Chopra, and John Shelby Spong describe. The upshot of this is that the seeker who goes to the trouble of adopting a modification strategy because that seeker is troubled by the disconfirming Other is, generally speaking, more intensely involved in the spiritual life than most. It is these latter persons, in other words, whose sense of immanence and personal experience of the divine may be characterized by the intensity suggested in the thinking of Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong.

Pluralism has been at the heart of our entire investigation up to this point. Specifically, we have been interested in how religious persons deal with the threat of disconfirmation that spiritual pluralism wields. When it comes to modification strategies that attempt to face that threat head-on, we have seen how those strategies rely upon immanence, experience, and ineffability as essential motifs. A bit of further investigation, however, will reveal that two of these all-important motifs have a circular relationship with pluralism. More exactly, they exist in a reciprocal causal relationship with pluralism. We shall begin with the paradoxical fact that an emphasis upon immanence and experience, which the modification strategies use as tools for warding off the threatening aspect of pluralism, is itself the product of American society's spiritual pluralism. Then we shall consider how the modification strategies add to that same pluralism.

How is it that writers such as Thich Nhat Hahn, Deepak Chopra, and John Shelby Spong can so effectively appeal to the notion that the ultimate is immanent and that spirituality is built around individual experience? They can do so, at least where their American audiences are concerned, because, as we have seen, these notions are already firmly ensconced in American culture. As Harold Bloom has suggested, the American spiritual seeker believes that the soul is older than creation. It is always already intimately tied up with ultimate reality. But the nearly taken-for-granted status of divine immanence and immediate experiential access to divinity in America is the result of spiritual pluralism. In noting the ready-to-hand character of these motifs in America we have cited the importance of figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. We need to remind ourselves that historically influential American spiritual questers who emphasized immanence and individual spiritual experience such as Emerson and his fellow-travelers, from Mary Baker Eddy to Madame Blavatsky, are potent examples of American spiritual pluralism. That is, the historically most effective spokespersons in this country for immanence and experience in the life of the spirit frequently stood outside the walls of mainstream religion and contributed decisively to the diversity of American spiritualities.

Of course, divine immanence has ever been one pole of the traditional Christian dialectic of immanence and transcendence, and we recall that revivalism and Christian fundamentalism both put a premium on an emotionally-charged experience of Jesus Christ as their savior. But the emphasis on immanence and the closely-connected notion of individual experience of divinity are taken much further by Emerson and his ilk than most orthodox Christians would be willing to go. One need only think here about traditional Christianity's opposition to the notion of private revelations. That is, traditional church theology, both Catholic and Protestant, has held that, while the individual believer can feel God's presence and be guided by God in making decisions, no insight into the divine nature itself that is not already a part of the orthodox deposit of revelation will ever be vouchsafed an individual, a principle that Emerson clearly transgresses. Recall that this was, in fact, one of the sticking points between Martin Luther and the so-called "radical reformers." For Luther, radical reformers such as Andreas Karlstadt went far too far in allowing for the possibility that God can speak directly to the individual believer. Hence, Luther's famous dismissive observation that Karlstadt had "swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all."

Note that the tie to pluralism here is not only a function of the fact that the movers and shakers in American history who put special emphasis upon immanence and individual spiritual experience frequently stood outside the religious mainstream. It is also the case that those favored themes of divine immanence and the individual's experiential access to divinity are themselves inextricably tied up with pluralism, for they empower the individual quester to follow an idiosyncratic spiritual path, thus encouraging the creation of a multitude of unique spiritualities. Hence, we find that the very motifs employed by the modification strategies to block pluralism's potential threat to belief are themselves (before they are taken up into the modification strategies) a result of and even productive of America's history of vigorous spiritual pluralism.

But the modification strategies that have been under investigation here not only encourage a variety of faiths in the sense

that they privilege the divine presence within each individual and each individual's experience of the divine: they also encourage further pluralism in that they offer the possibility of any number of different combinations of exemplars of the ultimate. For instance, Thich Nhat Hahn is explicit about his having grafted the figure of Jesus onto his already existing reverence for the Buddha. But others are free to privilege Jesus and the Quran, or Jesus and Krishna, or Jesus and the Tao, and on and on. Thus it is that the modification strategies, in countering the threat of disconfirmation represented by spiritual pluralism, draw constituent elements from that same spiritual pluralism and even contribute to its expansion.

That the modification strategies draw upon and even enhance that spiritual pluralism the disconfirming power of which they are meant to parry suggests a circular, reciprocal causal pattern. But is this circle vicious and destructive? Thich Nhat Hahn and Deepak Chopra suggested that belief in Jesus as the presence of God is consistent with Buddhism and with much of what goes under the heading of Hinduism, and Spengler implied as much. And if commitment to Jesus is consistent with these, it surely ought potentially to be consistent with Christianity's sister religions, Judaism and Islam. The suggestion, in other words, is that the modification strategies can disarm pluralism's threat of disconfirmation when the pluralism in question is that of the major world religions. Thich Nhat Hahn and Deepak Chopra, in particular, suggested that this was the case by grappling with specific tenets of Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. They did not grapple, however, with specific tenets of the endless number of smaller spiritual movements, from ancient preliterate traditions to Zoroastrianism to Scientology. No doubt it is most often the other great world religions that a believer finds most challenging: reflective Christians are troubled by the fact that their convictions appear, on the surface, to be contradicted by the other world religions and that they have no stronger basis for their convictions than do the adherents of those other world religions. By contrast, they may lose little sleep over their lack of any definitive epistemological edge over Scientology. But is this untroubled slumber justified?

The arguments set forth by Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and indirectly by Spong, as well as the position staked out by Rahner, did not aver that, simply as a function of mere chance, there are profound, underlying similarities among the world religions. Rather, they engaged in theological or spiritual anthropology: they analyzed the human way of being and the quest for the ultimate that follows from it, and they found certain features that they hold to be universal. It is part of being human to have a relationship to the ultimate or infinite in which the latter is potentially immanent in the former; it is part of the human way of being to be able to connect with this infinite or ultimate via a particular kind of experience; and the spiritual experiences that we have, as well as the reality to which they point, are often ineffable. Undeterred by postmodernist strictures against the notion of human nature, the thinkers we have profiled did attempt to describe the universal human condition, and they found the relevant forms of immanence, experience, and ineffability at its heart.

As a result, the Christian believer who is willing to modify the orthodox outlines of his or her belief system can regard adherence to the figure of Jesus Christ as perfectly consistent with what is going on in the other world religions; there are no contradictions after all and, hence, no problem with the fact that those other traditions too appeal to phenomena such as divine revelation to back up their claims. If the Christian believer, having adopted the sort of modification strategies we have been investigating here, can feel at home among the other world religions rather than in danger of being undone by them as competing belief systems, a great deal has been accomplished indeed. Far from a confrontation with the other world religions sowing seeds of doubt about one's own convictions, the underlying unity among them, based on the universal phenomena represented by immanence, experience, and ineffability, obviously enhances the plausibility structure undergirding those convictions: there is strength in numbers.

So what, then, if traditions such as Scientology, without the worldwide impact of those commonly regarded as the great world religions, do not share the emphases upon immanence, experience,

and ineffability found in the most venerable world religions? Does the specter of the disconfirming Other now simply arise from new quarters? It need not. Not only does the now-apparent underlying agreement among the vast majority of spiritual questers in the world, the members of the world religions, provide a potent plausibility structure that may well allow the Christian simply to disregard hundreds of smaller spiritual movements that may still contradict his or her convictions: that Christian (or Buddhist, or Hindu, or other devotee of a world religion) can disregard them in good conscience precisely because, as contradictory, these movements must be assumed not to be putting proper emphasis upon the unifying motifs of immanence, experience, and ineffability.

The worldview pushed by writers such as Nhat Hahn and Chopra asserts, as we have seen, that these motifs are built into the nature of human being. Hence, for a smaller movement such as Scientology to contradict my own convictions by underplaying immanence, experience, and ineffability is a function of it failing accurately to read the human condition. In other words, in contrast to where the believer found herself when first confronted with the potentially disconfirming power of the Other, that believer now possesses clear convictions about how immanence, experience, and ineffability inform her beliefs and about their presence within the other world religions, and thus, this time around, the believer does in fact possess criteria that ground her convictions, criteria that are presumably lacking in spiritual movements that contradict those convictions.¹⁷

This is not the last word on spiritual and religious pluralism, however, nor even upon their potentially destructive effects. For we have yet to examine a portion of American spirituality where pluralism might be said to run wild, and where anything resembling the traditional world religions is conspicuously absent: it is time for us to turn to an investigation of New Age spirituality.