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1. INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of ultimate questions is a human activity. One does not need to be a philosopher, religious person or a scientist to ask the most profound philosophical, religious and scientific question: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" This question leads to further questions about ultimate values, meaning and purpose of life, the origin and destiny of the universe, the question of God, and the nature of reality. Insofar as there are answers to these questions, they are recorded in the literature, arts, myths and stories of all human cultures. They are expressed equally in the dreamtime stories of Australian aboriginal cultures, creation stories of the various world religions, modern scientific stories about the origins of the universe, and through classical and popular cultural expressions in music, film and dance. In one sense, the question of "why anything at all?" pervades our human psyche. To be human is to seek to find an answer to this question.
2. COSMIC AND HUMAN ORIGINS

I ask "Why is there anything?"
And know I have to ask,
And hence know that this questioning
Is an appropriate task.

Therefore there is an answer to
The question I have posed:
Then I reflect: My question too
Seeks to be diagnosed.

The questioning within the whole,
How can the answer be
Within the questioning's control?
Of this it must be free.

The question will direct my grasp
Toward the answer sought.
Asking of all, the sought will clasp
The questioner: I'm caught

In an abyss of mystery
Beyond all reckoning.
Nothing of it is known to me
Save "It grounds everything."
And all desire obeys this law,
Not just desire to know:
Desiring always to be more,
The more takes us in tow.

Why anything, O anything!
The question and the prayer
Alike throw us into the ring.
Its centre everywhere.

Sebastian Moore OSB ¹

Creation Stories

The modern scientific story of how the world began with the Big Bang is one of numerous Creation Stories that are integral to cultures and religions in the recorded history of humankind. Most Australians will be familiar with the so-called creation story of the Judaic-Christian Book of Genesis [Genesis 1-11]. According to this account, God created the world in seven days beginning with light and darkness, the sun, moon
and stars, plants and animals, and finally the crown of creation, humankind, in the persons of Adam and Eve. On the seventh day, we are told, God rested. It is a story that tells of the movement from nothingness to existence, and from chaos to the order and beauty of the universe.

There is a Polynesian tale of how the entire universe, including the gods, originated from an egg. Prior to this there existed only the primordial waters plunged in cosmic darkness. According to a Nigerian myth, the world was initially a marshy swamp; the sky was the home of the gods; then the Great God, Oisha Nla, threw dirt on the marshes to form dry ground. The formation of the earth took four days and the fifth day was given over as a day of worship to its creator, Oisha Nla.

In one of several Greek creation myths, Mother Earth emerged from chaos and gave birth to her son the Sky (Uranus). From the fertility of Mother Earth and the gentle showers of the sky came plants and animals, rivers and lakes. Not for the first time in creation stories, ongoing creation depends on the incest of Mother (Earth) and Son (Uranus) leading, in this case, to the birth of Zeus who becomes the most powerful of all the gods. However, Zeus had to defeat his father Uranus in a show of power.

The Indian Scriptures contain sophisticated stories or myths of creation. One of the more interesting is called the Myth of Prajapati. In the beginning there was nothing, not even nothingness: neither being nor non-being; neither air nor sky; neither night nor day. Behind this nothingness, yet emerging from it, is the One, Prajapati. Yet, Prajapati is bored and lonely since there is no other. Prajapati desired a second
but, without a world at his disposal, has no alternative but to sacrifice himself. So Prajapati dismembers his head which forms the sky, his chest the atmosphere, his waist the ocean, his feet the earth, the moon is born of his scruples; from his glance is born the sun, from his mouth Indra and Agni, from his breath is born the wind, and so all the rest. The world, then, is nothing else but the self-sacrifice of the One, the God Prajapati. Otherwise stated, creation is the dismembered body of God. The work of ongoing creation consists in bringing together all the severed parts to re-form God's body.

Other creation myths, such as those found among Australian Aboriginal tribes, are more local to particular groups. Each tribal group had its myth to explain almost every animal feature and marking: how the emu grew long legs; why the echidna has spikes and the platypus its bill; why the koala has no tail and the snake no legs. There are stories that tell of the formation of the Milky Way and the emigration of animals to Australia. Other stories tell of the first humans to inhabit the continent. These stories are related to the Dreamtime (Alcheringa), the time of the beginning or the truly sacred time when plants, animals and humans changed from one form to another or shared elements of each. Such stories, created in the Dream world, demonstrated the kinship of all creation and provided an account of the origins of the natural world in supernatural activities outside ordinary space and time.

**Stories of Human Origin**

Many creation stories are part of larger myths telling of human origins. In the African creation story referred to above, *Orisha Nla*, having created the earth in four days, then moulds a clay human image to
which the supreme deity *Olorun* gives life. In another African story, God fashions two clay images, a man and a woman. When the two look at each other they begin to laugh. This prompts God to send them out into the world. In a native American myth, humans and nature emanate from the union of sky father and earth mother.

The Book of Genesis records two distinct accounts of human creation. In the first (Gen. 1:2:3), male and female are both made in the image of God. This myth reflects a prevailing idea that, "in the beginning," both human beings and the divinity that created them were both male and female. In the second better-known account (Gen. 2:4-25), God forms Adam from the earth's dust, breathes life into him and places him in the Garden of Eden. Since Adam is alone, God decides to create a woman "from Adam's rib" to be his helpmate and companion. This story has been used to justify the conception in many cultures that the female should be subservient to the male. However, another interpretation stresses how Eve (woman) is the very culmination of the divine creation and so makes Adam (man) complete.

The Hindu *Myth of Prajapati* shows that origin myths are often associated with a primal sacrifice or dismemberment of the divinity. Primal peoples often associated the fruits and foods of the earth with the death of a goddess to sustain human life. An Aztec myth relates how the divinity *Quetzalcoatl* descended to the world of the dead to gather bones of past generations. By sprinkling human bones with divine blood, new human beings were created. Since God's own blood gave life, the Aztecs reciprocated through their own human sacrifices.
The best-known artistic representation of human origins is Michelangelo's *Creation of Man* which adorns the Sistine Chapel, Vatican City. God gives life to Adam through the touch of his outstretched finger. In this painting, Adam is indeed made in all the beauty and strength of "God's image." It is no accident that this is a painting of the Renaissance period in which new attention was being given to human powers. In many ways, Michelangelo's work represents the divinization of human beings.

**The Purpose of Origin Myths**

Although these primal creation stories vary tremendously across the world's religious and cultural traditions, there are a number of common features. They tell of a mythic or sacred time "before the world began." Typically, such time is primordial, a time of chaos or nothingness, a time prior to the time of history and the cosmos. The world emerges from this chaos or nothingness as the work of God or the gods. This world has order, harmony, permanence and meaning because it is a divine work. This can be seen, for example, in the rhythm of the seasons and in the fertility of nature. In fact, the cosmos as a whole is an organism at once real, living and sacred.

However, this world is also soiled by human greed and tribal wars; nature itself is often destructive through floods, fire and other unpredictable happenings. Questions of vulnerability, mortality and evil present themselves. What is their origin? How are they to be negotiated in a world that is supposed to be the work of the gods? The first thing we can say about God or the gods associated with the creation of the universe is that they are not uniformly beneficent. We have already seen that the Greek gods were capable of incest and
war; other divinities apparently require human sacrifice. The big question is whether evil emanates from the creator or elsewhere. Creation stories and myths of origin provide some ways of handling this enigma.

The Genesis story goes to great length to associate the beginning of evil with Adam and Eve. Different interpretations place the major blame on Adam's pride or Eve's seductiveness. What is not in question is that evil has a human origin; it is not the work or intention of the creator. A term used to describe this is Original Sin which means that the origin of evil is in human action. Moreover, this tendency toward evil is somehow built into the human psyche since the original event of evil.

The myth of Prajapati is more subtle. Prajapati is the creator of everything including evil. However, this is not to say there is evil in God since God is divine perfection. There is no original sin; but there is an original fault. Creation, the act of the dismembering of God, constitutes a universe that is only semi-divine, a universe that is not-God but is on the way towards becoming or re-making God. The Hindu perspective recognizes there is evil in the world, but such evil is as much God's doing as it is a human responsibility.

Where the Genesis and Prajapati myths coincide is in their belief that creation is fundamentally the act of God and that evil is purely provisional. Moreover, both myths accept that humans are co-creators with the divine in overcoming negative aspects of creation. Both myths also see the world and human beings as fundamentally good despite the reality of suffering and evil that need to be overcome.
All this is to say that the purpose of origin myths is to enable human beings to make sense of the world in which they live. Such myths are not scientific accounts of how the world began but stories to tell us how to live in the world as it currently exists. This is not to say that origin myths are based on wishful thinking without claims to credibility. Early Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle long ago provided explanations of why the universe must have a "first cause" or "unmoved mover," that cause or mover being God. Admittedly, this so-called cosmological argument does not prove the existence of any particular God or deity. More to the point, it does not verify any particular creation account. Nor, generally speaking, did people see the need to prove their particular interpretations. As indicated, the function of their myths, stories and legends had a different purpose to scientific accounts of our origins.

**Creation Myths and The Big Bang**

Most cosmologists and astronomers today accept the Big Bang theory of the beginning of the universe. Some eighteen billion years ago the universe burst forth. Our earth, along with the rest of our solar system, emerged some four and a half billion years ago. Evidence of bacteria, the first known signs of life, has been dated to more than three billion years ago. From these beginnings, various forms of plant and animal life evolved culminating with intelligent life in human beings. The Big Bang provides a scientific account of how things developed in the universe the way they have.

This scientific account of our cosmic and human origins may seem at first sight to contradict so-called primitive creation stories. After all,
the major consideration is empirical proof rather than the existential quest of human beings to find purpose or meaning in their lives. "Cold, hard science" appears to paint humankind as a "chance of evolution." Just as surely as human beings have emerged at a particular point on the evolutionary scale, they will also disappear to be replaced by some other, probably superior, form of life-intelligence. Far from providing us with a central place in the universe of God's creation, science seems to suggest that humankind has no especially esteemed role in the evolving universe.

This leads some modern religious people to reject the Big Bang and its evolutionary theory out of hand. These people, who cling to a literal interpretation of their own religious story of creation, are called creationists. However, most religious interpreters follow the advice of Augustine who, already in the fourth century, accepted a figurative interpretation of Genesis since, he says, "God did not wish to teach humankind things not relevant to their salvation." He specifically argues that the Bible does not instruct us on things such as the form and shape of the heavens. Is it possible then to hold a religious explanation of creation while accepting a scientific account at the same time?

Science tells us how things occur; religion is concerned with the question of why! Moreover, the scientific and religious accounts of creation do hold some things in common. They both assume a fundamental order at the heart of the universe. Even so-called Chaos Theory, the notion that the universe is heading towards fragmentation and self-annihilation, is a rational explanation of cosmic processes. However, science proceeds with its sights firmly set on natural, cosmic
and physical processes that occur in the world of space and time. It cannot tell us what, if anything, occurs at other levels of existence. The Big Bang, for example, may explain everything that comes after it in empirical terms, but it has nothing to say about what precedes it or why it occurred. Nor can science tell us why the universe evolves according to certain processes; its task is to describe how such processes occur.

Provided that religious creation myths are understood in figurative or metaphorical terms, they do not contradict scientific accounts of the world's origins. Their purpose is to provide their listeners with: (1) a sense of dependence on a greater force or power; (2) a response of wonder, trust and gratitude for life; (3) a recognition of interdependence, order and beauty of the world; (4) an appreciation of human co-responsibility for the ongoing work of creation; (5) an understanding that suffering and evil, though part of our world, are not part of the divine intention or the final reality. Such understandings do not, in themselves, require any particular cosmology, ancient or modern. Equally, modern scientists may choose to follow any particular religious paths provided they are aware that religion and science are concerned with different questions, different methods. For all that, science and religion need to be involved in ongoing dialogue.
3. EXPERIENCE AND BELIEF

The gods did not reveal, from the beginning,
All things to us; but in the course of time,
Through seeking, men find that which is better....
But as for certain truth, no man has known it,
Nor will he know it; neither of the gods,
Nor yet of all the things of which I speak....
For all is but a woven web of guesses.

Xenophanes

Do My Experiences Count?

To be human is to be born into a particular family, community or tribe with its own rituals, beliefs and culture. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger says that we are "thrown" into human history finding ourselves alive with this people, at this time, and without having had the benefit of consultation! In this sense, we are middle people. We do not begin at the beginning on the far side of human history and then, with the benefit of foresight, arrange to enter the human condition. Our first consciousness, inside the womb, is that we are swimming in
the waters of life. We did not decide to be born; more than likely we will conclude our earthly sojourn in circumstances beyond our control. Neither our beginnings nor our endings are very much our own decision. But, we have some say in what occurs to us in this interim period called life. We are middle people thrown into the world and have to make the most of it!

One question that springs to mind is whether our own human experiences count for much at all. The world is populated with people following vastly different and even contradictory worldviews. Some believe in God; others are agnostic or atheistic. Some believe in moral absolutes that can never be challenged; others believe every principle should be challenged on the basis of its impact on others. On the religious front, there appear so many belief systems it is hard to know where to begin. Politically the world is divided into variable systems each purporting to deliver the human goods in a more equitable and just way than the others. Cultural differences are noted, sometimes in admiration, too often in conflict.

What one believes seems to be so much a matter of family, culture, community, religion, nation into which one is born. One's values and attitudes are likewise moulded by the primary groups, social class, educational opportunities and the like over which one may have little control. Adolescence is typically a time when people begin to sort out their own belief systems either in agreement with or reaction to family, school, religion or culture in which they have been reared. Yet, how much of this is the result of clear-headed, rational thought-processes; how much due to emotional ties; how much due to intelligence; how much due to idealistic principles; how much due to pragmatic life-
choices? How much freedom do humans have with regard to choosing their values and beliefs? The questions multiply.

**Life as a Network of Relationships**

In what has been said so far, it is evident that to be human is to live one's life in a network of relationships. We can speak of four primary relationships: ourselves; family and friends; social and cultural institutions; non-human universe. When we examine these relationships, we find that human life is a matter of negotiating variable patterns of understanding and behaviours that are "two-way." It looks something like this.

The first, most primary relationship we all have is our relationship with ourselves. Humans are not only conscious beings, they are also self-conscious or self-reflective. This shows itself in the ability we all exhibit to "talk to ourselves" in the sense of reflecting on who we are, our attitudes, behaviours and values. We tell ourselves we must study harder, train longer, avoid certain things or people, make different friends. We are all familiar with a parent, teacher or peer telling us to "go away and think about your actions." If we do, we may decide we need to change certain aspects of our behaviour. We tell ourselves we are not very smart or (in fewer cases) how brilliant we are! In all this there is an assumption we are making: we have the power within ourselves to change ourselves. Despite our temperament, training or upbringing, there is something inside us that gives us permission to believe that we are free to become the people we wish to become.

The second significant set of relationships we experience is with family and close friends. Our lives flow into and out of these others' lives.
Sometimes the experience is more of intimacy, closeness, bondedness; other times we fell shut out or isolated from them. At least sometimes, we will admit to loving these people and being loved in return by them. Other times, they are the ones who seem to hurt us the most as we in turn may hurt them. This is not purely a matter of sentiment or emotion. Our intimate relationships change over time. But their importance in making us who we are cannot be overestimated. Likewise, we need to admit, that such relationships, at times, act to stop us becoming our truest selves.

The third set of relationships which helps shape the people we become is larger than our immediate circle of family and friends. We also belong to a community, school, parish, suburb, tribe, nation, and various sub-cultures. This relationship we experience with our social and cultural worlds is all-pervasive, often more powerful than our network of family and friends. It is communicated through television, popular culture and what is often called the "hidden curricula" of our educational and political institutions. In the Australian situation, certain values are highlighted such as the importance of sport, democratic principles, individualism and materialism. Different values will be highlighted in country towns in comparison to the city; just as different values will be emphasised in accordance with cultural and religious backgrounds. Although we may appear to have little influence on these values, we should not think of ourselves in a purely passive role. We can join political parties, religious gatherings, musical festivals or the like. In small ways we can act to influence our cultural worlds and their institutions. In this context, it is worth reminding ourselves that while society can appear repressive of human values, it may also be a wonderfully creative theatre for human action.
The fourth set of relationships we may not think about so often, but is also very real, is the non-human universe. Humans are material beings who live in particular places on the earth. The weather, geography and physical environment affect who we are as human people. Astrologists tell us we are affected by the stars. Those from tropical climates, it is said, tend to exhibit a more sunny, open character; those from colder places, a more reserved attitude to others. While we need to be careful about stereotyping people in any simplistic manner, we do need to admit that we are earth-beings affected by our environments. Equally, humans exhibit an ability to affect their physical surroundings. This is especially evident, sometimes with alarming results, in our age of science and technology.

**Human Life and Mystery**

These four sets of relationships – with ourselves, family and friends, society and its institutions, and the non-human universe – provide the stage upon which human beings both live out and question their human existence. We can say that human beings are products of their own psyches, of the enabling love and sometimes restrictive expectations of others, of the creative and repressive influences of society and culture, as well as of the geography and physical features of the natural environment. In all this, to varying degrees, humans exercise freedom in becoming who they are. Of course, this question of human freedom is most important when it comes to issues of human purpose and meaning. Without freedom, humans are simply products of their genes and their upbringing. Is there anything more?
Philosophers speak of the relationship between beings and Being. This arises from the human sense that there is something more, other, beyond, something mysterious that relates our small human world of experiences with a larger reality. Throughout human history, this has been referred to in many ways such as the More, the Whole, the Ultimate, the Sacred, the Transcendent. Whatever name we call it by, we can say there is a dimension of mystery that pervades all our life experiences. It is not another set of relationships that occurs outside ourselves, family, society and the world. It is, if you like, the depth dimension available within each network of relationships and in every human experience.

While it may be true that most humans live most of their lives with only a vague sense of this other reality, particular experiences bring it the fore. These may be the positive experiences of self-giving love, intimate communion with another, the sheer beauty of an artwork or a morning sunrise, the simple goodness of a person's actions towards ourselves or others. Often the experience will be engendered more through pain and negativity in broken relationships, moral weaknesses, inexplicable suffering and human mortality. This is to suggest that our relationship to Mystery is both ambiguous and inconclusive. It raises the question of life's meaning and purpose without providing clear-cut answers. Is this transcendent Other real or a figment of the human imagination as the psychologist Sigmund Freud maintained more than a century ago?

Whatever our mental answer to that question, the ever-abiding presence of Mystery is never far beneath the surface of human experience:
When we reach our limits, when our ordered worlds collapse, when we cannot enact our moral ideals, when we are disenchanted, we often enter into the awareness of Mystery. We are inescapably related to this Mystery which is immanent and transcendent, which issues invitations we must respond to, which is ambiguous about its intentions, and which is real and important beyond all else. Our dwelling within Mystery is both menacing and promising, a relationship of exceeding darkness and undeserved light. In this situation with this awareness we do a distinctively human thing. We gather together and tell stories of God to calm our terror and hold our hope on high.  

The Religious Response

We may delineate at least four kinds of religious response in which humans say 'yes' to Mystery or, according to many a tradition, a 'yes' to God. The religious response says that, despite all signs to the contrary, reality is trustworthy because there is a final purpose for the universe. At heart is the belief not only that life has a purpose, but that life's meaning is attained through specific beliefs and practices. However, the way in which this is understood and practised varies significantly from one tradition to another.

Primal, cosmic or earth-based traditions are associated with the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes going right back to the beginning of humankind. Australian indigenous peoples are one such example of this worldview in which there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, God and the world, human society and the land which people inhabit. The purpose of life is to experience this connection to the cosmos through ritual, dance, story-telling and song. Through such actions, the cosmos is experienced as an ordered place. Fear of
nature's destructive power is combined with a sense of praise and thanksgiving for nature's sustaining power. Around 8,000 BCE, with the advance of agriculture, new importance was given to the fruitfulness of nature and the life-cycle of birth, death and re-birth. It is at this time that the mother-goddess becomes prominent in some societies. There is also evidence to suggest that the notion of a remote father(sky)-god appears among some tribes. However, for the most part, these people give more attention to their personal gods, goddesses and spirits whose powers in the daily workings of the cosmos are undisputed. Primal traditions are not religions in the modern sense of the word; they are total ways of life.

Nor is Hinduism a religion as such. Hinduism is more a central impulse in the Indian way-of-life that seeks to make sense of the great variety and multiplicity of experiences that disconnect us from the One and final Truth, called Brahman. The Hindu Scriptures encourage union with Brahman who is the source and ground of everything that is. All we need to do is to experience our original connectedness to Brahman. This requires expanded consciousness through the practice of yoga or meditation. Salvation or liberation is achieved through our surrendering ourselves to the greater mystery. The Hindu tradition teaches: we live in a world of suffering and impermanence; we are limited by our own talents and place in society (the famous caste system of India); we suffer and face death; we find temporary joy in our relationship with the gods (some 300,000 are accredited to exist); we perform our rituals and yogas; we do what we can to improve the world. Yet, our true reality consists in our final union with the one and only ultimate reality, Brahman. All else is illusion. The purpose of life consists in this union of our true self (atman) with God (Brahman).
Although nowhere denying the existence of God, the Buddhist way is suspicious of talk about God. Although classical Buddhism does not allow worship of any kind, it is incorrect to call Buddhism an atheistic religion. The sacredness and radical relatedness of all living things are central tenets of Buddhist faith. Gautama Buddha teaches: all life is suffering; suffering is caused by desire; release from desire and suffering is achieved through right practices of thinking, acting and meditating. Buddhism teaches the importance of renunciation and silence in order that we may be purged of all desires and illusions. Life's purpose is to achieve 'enlightenment' (nirvana) which may take many life-times. Strictly speaking, the Buddhist achieves nirvana through his or her own efforts. Unlike their Hindu cousins, Buddhists do not speak of Enlightenment in terms of union with God but as a process towards self-transcendence. The achievement of Enlightenment is evident in the peace, tranquillity and compassion of the Buddhist saints and mystics.

The prophet Abraham can count among his descendants the three monotheistic religions (belief in One God) of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Abraham had a vision of a future in which God's promises would unfold for those who were faithful to the Covenant (God's special relationship with a 'chosen people'). Moses, Jesus and Muhammed are among the great prophets who speak to their followers of God's intentions. Albeit in different ways, each religion understands that the promises of God will be revealed in human history. They are sometimes called prophetic religions because of the importance they place on justice, both the divine justice of God that will finally reign and the human practice of justice on earth. God is also revealed as
divine love and mercy providing a blueprint for how human life is to be lived. The purpose of life is clear: one is called to witness to the pathos of Yahweh (Judaism), the sacrificial love of Jesus (Christianity) or the merciful love of Allah (Islam). However, final salvation or liberation will arrive not on account of human actions but through God's own power.

**A Humanist Response**

A person without religious belief may also share in the religious sense that reality is trustworthy and has some final meaning. To begin, there are many people who accept an at least vague sense of something akin to God even if they are uneasy about or unaccepting of the particular God of the Hindus, Muslims or Christians, to name but three. As well, many westerners today signify they are agnostics, that is, they are unsure about the God-question. Some of these, in the footsteps of the Buddha, choose to believe in a divine energy sustaining the universe without wishing to raise the issue of who God might be. Some notable Australian academics, such as Phillip Adams on Late-Night-Live (ABC Radio), declare themselves outright atheists (belief in no-God) while retaining a profound sense of the sacredness of humanity and the earth.

This raises the important issue of distinguishing between faith and belief. Evidently, some religious believers are scoundrels; some non-believers are inspirational human beings. Fred Hollows, the Australian humanist medical doctor who gave years of his life to curing the blind in Africa, springs to mind as an example of the latter. In many ways, humanism is akin to religious belief insofar as it a positive response to Mystery and life-meaning. It may be the more difficult and noble path because it is unsupported by a specific belief-structure (or
metaphysics) that gives some rational support for trusting that the universe has final truth and purpose. Most religious traditions teach that it is faith – the movement of the heart or soul – that 'saves' and gives life-meaning. Ideally, belief – what the intellect affirms – will support one's faith. But goodness, truth and life-meaning belong to a deeper reality described here as the positive human response to Mystery – whether one describes this in religious or humanistic terms.

4. HUMAN LIFE AND DESTINY

Never admit the pain,
Bury it deep;
Only the weak complain,
Complaint is cheap.

Cover thy wound, fold down
Its curtailed place;
Silence is still a crown,
Courage a grace.

Mary Gilmore 4
Why Must We Suffer?

Whatever else it means to be human, two experiences are integral: we suffer; we die. Suffering and death are the two big existential questions facing human beings. To begin with suffering, we know this takes many forms. There is the pain associated with sickness, hunger, infirmity in old age, physical disabilities and the like. There is the mental and spiritual suffering of grief, anxiety, fear, loneliness and despair. These may lead to the experience of deep psychological problems, even suicide. Then there is the suffering that human beings cause by doing harm to others, sometimes unintended, sometimes due to malice or hatred. Suffering may be less specific but no less painful, what the poets call "word-weariness," the general sense that life is unsatisfactory and contrary to one's hopes and desires. In addition, there is the recognition that all of us, in ways great or small, are victims of unjust systems, uncaring societies and imperfect families.

If we care to think beyond our immediate life-boundaries to the larger world, we are faced with pictures of mass starvation, oppressive regimes, impotent political systems, land mines, death-dealing diseases such as HIV/AIDS, human greed and lust for power, and nature's own revenge through flood, fire, drought and global warming. The list is endless. And this at the end of a century that began with the optimistic belief that medicine, education and science could wipe out most of the illness, poverty and mass inequalities of our world. This is referred to as the surd of human suffering to which there seems to be
no human solution, no divine remedy, no sense and little hope of improvement. Such suffering seems *absurd* because it kills people on massive scales, destroys whole societies, breaks the human spirit and now threatens the very existence of the earth. The evolutionary myth of human progress, born in the nineteenth century, seems dead in the wake of the twentieth century experience symbolized by the death camps and attempted *genocide* (extermination of entire cultural groups) in places such as Auschwitz, Rwanda and Yugoslavia.

The question of human suffering is closely related to the question of evil. While all religious traditions deal with these questions, we will review the approaches of two contrasting religions which focus directly on these concerns, namely, Buddhism and Christianity.

**A Buddhist View of Suffering**

We have already seen that the Buddha teaches suffering (*dukkha*) is a universal fact of life. Moreover, one's purpose in life is to overcome suffering *not* through idle speculation on its meaning *but* by choosing the path towards Enlightenment (*nirvana*). *Dukkha* has many levels. There is misery, distress, despair, agony, mental and physical ailments. Some of these spring from natural causes, others from moral lapses in thought and action. At base, there is a deeper experience of suffering due to the human desire to escape impermanence and mortality. This relates to the Buddha's second noble truth: suffering is caused by misconceived desire and ignorance. Human craving for more represents an attachment to fame, fortune, ideas, pleasures, things, and even people. Greed, selfishness and lust are the three faces of desire, the unquenchable 'thirst' at the heart of all personal dissatisfaction and interpersonal conflict.
Since *attachment* is the cause of suffering, *detachment* from self, things and persons represents the overturning of or liberation from suffering. This process by which understanding replaces ignorance, and non-attachment replaces human craving, is known as the Eightfold Path: right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right views, right wisdom. By living in such a way, one moves towards *nirvana*, that state in which there is complete freedom from suffering and bondage. The Eightfold Path is sometimes called the Middle Way, neither self-indulgence nor self-torture, but the path of detachment leading to insight, wisdom, genuine harmony and inner peace. Classical Buddhism does not lead to apathy and indifference, as its critics suggest, but to non-possessiveness in which true compassion is born.

**A Christian View of Suffering**

In sharp contrast to Buddhism, Christianity directly confronts the problem of suffering and evil not just as a problem for human beings but also as a problem for God. We recall that Buddhism, as a non-theistic religion, places the God-question to the side as unnecessary and unhelpful speculation. Since at least the time of Augustine in the fourth century, Christians have viewed the *Genesis* Creation account as the revelation that God, who is perfect, cannot be the originator of evil. Suffering and evil are directly due to the misuse and corruption of human freedom. In some Christian accounts, suffering is seen as a punishment for human sinfulness, a test of faith or as a moral teacher. The major issue, however, in a theistic paradigm, is to account for what is called the *theodicy problem*: if God is perfectly good and infinitely powerful, God will choose to abolish all evil; but evil exists;
therefore God is either not perfectly good or infinitely powerful! This is especially crucial for Christianity which claims that God is also infinitely loving.

The Christian answer to this challenge is to focus on the greatest evil, namely, the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on Calvary. Christianity understands that Christ is the very "Son of God," or "God in human flesh." In one sense this is not so much an "answer" to evil as an expression of God's identification with human suffering along with the promise of the eventual overturning of evil into good. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead, a central tenet of Christian faith, shows that evil, suffering and even death do not have the last word. God's love is the most powerful reality and will eventually destroy all forms of human misery. In the meantime, Christians are to live with this powerful symbol of God on a Cross to which they can turn in their own anguish as a source of hope and life: the one who is perfect has shared our sufferings; now we know how great God's love truly is. This "law of the Cross," as it is sometimes called, is the Christian response to evil and suffering. Simply stated, God is with us in our lives, especially when we confront evil and suffer.

**Human Mortality**

Closely linked to suffering and evil is the reality that we are mortal beings who will die. We live always in the face of death, whether our own or that of others. Western cultures have been critiqued for repressing the death-question; other cultures see death as a more natural part of the human cycle, yet another adventure of the human spirit. Long ago, the Greek philosopher Plato argued that human activity is largely prompted by the desire for immortality – including
procreation, the desire for fame, the generation of enduring works, or the performance of deeds that will be remembered by future generations. Religious traditions also speak of the human desire for heaven or eternity described in a multitude of ways. The question remains: what happens beyond death?

**Personal Immortality**

Most religions and cultures until present times certainly understood death as a passage from this life to some other world. The "spirits of the ancestors" or the "saints in heaven" continue to live in another world while maintaining influence on this one. This was often explained in terms of the personal *immortality of the soul*: unlike the perished body, the soul or true self somehow survives the death-experience. Ancient Indian traditions often ascribed to belief in the soul's heavenly existence in fellowship with the gods, an existence which lasted forever. Older Greek teaching, based on the Platonic idea of the two spheres of spirit and matter, understood that the soul, unlike the body, is uncreated and indestructible. The destiny of the soul is eventual union or reunion with the Absolute. The modern Spiritualist movement refers to the "soul" as the "astral body" which separates from the body at death and progresses through a series of spheres to the ultimate sphere, union with God.

Another popular idea associated with life after death combines the understanding of the soul's immortality with the *resurrection of the body*. Although belief in this idea springs from the Jewish tradition, it was not universally accepted by all Jews. Even at the time of Jesus (2,000 years ago), there was a dispute between the Pharisees, who accepted bodily resurrection at the end of time, and the Sadducees
who firmly rejected such a notion. On this occasion, the Scriptures report that Jesus sided with the Pharisees. Following the death-resurrection experience of Jesus, Christians came to believe that Jesus' body and soul were united in his "glorious ascension" into heaven, a belief with which many Muslims also concur. However, contemporary understandings of personal immortality among Jews, Christians and Muslims display an amazing variety of interpretations.

Christianity was heavily influenced by both Jewish belief and Greek philosophy. One popular conception understands that body and soul are separated at death. The disembodied soul is immediately judged and may go straight to heaven (life with God), to an interim place called purgatory (a Catholic vision of a place where souls are purged of imperfections and sins) or, indeed, to hell which is the destiny of the wicked. However, on the Last Day (the end of the world), body and soul will be reunited. The understanding of this resurrection of the body also varies. Some see this as the literal resurrection of the physical body; others understand it to be a new, spiritual body. Either way, there is expectation that God will raise the whole person to everlasting happiness in heaven where "we shall see God and live" (St Irenaeus, second century).

Although traditional Jewish, Christian and Islamic beliefs include these notions of heaven or paradise for the righteous (the elect or those who die in grace), and ideas of hell or gehenna for the damned (those who fail to repent or die in mortal sin), modern theologians have questioned whether the notion of a loving God is compatible with teachings of eternal punishment. Some theologians suggest that, in fact, God saves everyone. Others see hell as a metaphor for life on
earth lived without hope or love. Some argue it is a state of non-being or nothingness which awaits those who freely and knowingly refuse God's offer of love and salvation. To say 'No' to 'God' and 'Goodness,' it is argued, is to say 'No' to 'Being.' This way, God respects human freedom without resorting to the role of a divine tyrant. Equally, modern theologians stress that we are unable to say very much about life-after-death, a mystery that awaits us all. The important thing is to love God and neighbour in this life. However, one way or another, these three monotheistic faiths are the strongest defenders of the notion that our human destiny is somehow best envisaged in terms of personal life with God beyond death, that is, personal immortality.

**A Different Kind of Immortality**

Westerners and Christians in particular will find the idea of non-personal existence in the afterlife somewhat of an enigma. This is not the absence of belief in immortality; it is the rejection of belief in personal immortality. Stated differently, it is belief in rebirth or reincarnation, a notion that is widely misunderstood in the west. Reincarnation or belief in the transmigration of souls is not, for example, a way in which the individual ego or human psyche continues in existence after the death of the body. Whereas western philosophy stresses individuality, eastern thinking seeks liberation from individuality. Hindu and Buddhist beliefs in what does survive beyond death are complex, subtle and varied.

One Hindu view is that the human soul (atman) is an eternal, unchanging reality which shares in the same nature as Brahman. Beyond the "wheel of appearance," this world of suffering, pain and ignorance, is the only one divine reality, Brahman. Ignorance of this
reality leads humans to chain themselves to this illusory world of change. Consequently, upon death, the soul transmigrates from one body to another, a process which may take numerous births and rebirths. However, the ultimate goal of human life is to be released from the endless cycle of birth and death. The process assumes that one is liberated from individuality or separateness in the final death and re-birth through total union with Brahman. Here, nothing of the illusory self survives since there will be, in the end, only Brahman.

Buddhist teaching on reincarnation shares Hindu belief in karma: good actions lead to good births; bad actions lead to less fortunate rebirths. This law of karma governs the universe – and the universe, for Buddhists, includes many worlds apart from this one. So, while Buddhism rejects the notion of the survival beyond death of any ego, psyche, self or atman, it understands that human actions in this world continue to affect our life in this world as well as all other lives and worlds. Everything is interconnected. The goal of human life is the achievement of nirvana which is the complete negation of desire and individuality. Nirvana is nothingness, emptiness, the void. Nirvana, the enlightened way of life without desire, suffering or ignorance, is achievable in this world. When the enlightened person dies, this is the end to the wheel of rebirth and suffering. Beyond this, the Buddha taught only silence: we cannot understand nirvana, the state of perfect bliss, with the ordinary categories of human thought – and human ignorance.

Some kind of belief in reincarnation is as natural for many Eastern religious traditions as belief in personal immortality beyond death is for followers of the Monotheistic religions. Despite their differences,
both kinds of "life beyond death" myths share a common belief in the
divine destiny of human persons. They also assume that human
destiny is related to the good or evil deeds that one performs in this
life. There is a sense that the whole universe is interconnected and
that one's life has purpose, meaning and destiny in light of this
connectedness. To what extent these beliefs are understood literally or
metaphorically is a matter of immense variation not only from one
religious group to another, but also among theologians within the
same tradition.

5. HUMAN IDENTITY AND FREEDOM

*With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall no cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

T. S. Eliot 6
**Who Am I?**

We have already seen that one's identity is largely determined by the network of relationships we all experience in different ways among ourselves, our intimate human contacts, society and its institutions, and the physical world. Moreover, each of these relationships is shrouded with varying degrees of mystery. Even with all the wisdom of the religions and the insights of science, human beings remain a mystery to themselves. Modern psychology affirms that our conscious knowledge and activity represent but small islands of knowledge within a sea of unconsciousness. The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung speaks of the "collective unconsciousness" through which the shared experiences of all persons, cultures and the entire cosmos are somehow stored in the personal unconsciousness of each individual. Who I am is certainly more than my own conscious thoughts and desires.

Who I am is less a state than a process, journey or adventure. To be human is to be an explorer, not just of the external world but also of the inner world. Again, Carl Jung perceives that human travels across the seas to other continents and across the skies to other galaxies are symbolic of the spiritual quest for personal identity. Scientific fiction stories, for example, may be written or filmed for entertainment, but underlying such stories is the classic search for human identity in an often hostile environment. *Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?* These are the existential questions that underlie human personhood and life adventure. Unsurprisingly, they are also the questions at the heart of the world's religious traditions.

There are many ways to describe the human search for identity. Here we will follow a classic approach in which humans seek order, truth,
beauty and goodness. These human impulses are not confined to the religious traditions but represent ways in which all humans seek to make sense of their lives and world. They are not necessarily reasoned positions (ideologies) but are more properly described as fundamental human attitudes (myths) in response to the mystery of life and personhood.

**Trust: The Impulse to Order**

Despite life's chaotic turns and daily stories of human and natural tragedies on our TV screens, humans tend to cling to the notion that the world is ordered and trustworthy. Even though mistrust, suspicion and cynicism sometimes overwhelm people to the point of mental illness, murder or suicide, most humans carry on their lives with a sense of the fundamental trustworthiness of reality. Story-telling, myth-making, song-writing, poetry reading are all ways in which humans seek this sense of order at the base of life's apparent chaos. The sociologist, Peter Berger, describes everyday human activities such as laughing, playing games, cleaning the house, doing the gardening, organising the office or arranging social activities as "signals of transcendence" or, what we may call, signs of some larger life-pattern.

What this impulse says is: "I am connected to a larger world"; or "I matter because I am part of a network of relationships." Telling stories of one's beginnings has long been acknowledged as a way of grounding one's identity in the present world. Such stories are not necessarily religious. They may be stories of family or cultural origins. This has become an important aspect of emigrant communities not
least in modern Australia. On the wider level, stories of European settlement in Australia become a kind of map to read current black-white tensions and the search for an Australian identity. Despite the chaos and devastation that European settlement brought to Aboriginal Australia, there is a hope, optimism or trust that rituals of reconciliation will bring harmony, cohesion and order to our lives.

In fact, it is the primal religious traditions and indigenous communities who, above all others, celebrate the fundamental order of the cosmos through their beliefs and rituals. The question of human identity is closely aligned to the notion of cosmic harmony. If the gods are angry, disorder will be felt at all levels of existence. To appease the gods through sacrificial offerings, right action or what many a tradition will simply call a 'holy life,' is the goal of human life, the path to inner peace, the purpose of human existence. Personal identity is a divine vocation, a response to some greater call. Individuals matter when they perceive their lives in terms of their place in the cosmos and their relationship with all creatures.

**Enchantment: The Impulse to Truth**

Human identity has long been associated with the search for truth. Jesus, for example, is reported to have said "the truth will set you free." In western cultures, the notion of truth has been stripped of its original sense which was more the "love of wisdom." It is more than a movement of the mind (*intellectual truth*); it also embraces the movement of the heart (*existential truth*). This is the impulse for human authenticity. The problem, of course, is that we find ourselves in a world with diverse, often contradictory, claims to truth. As the caption goes: "There are so many kinds of voices in the world."
Indeed, there are! The genuine truth-seeker, however, will not be impressed with an approach that says only one voice is true and all the others wrong. He or she will be more concerned to find truth in every voice, and to hear the harmony of the many voices brought together in song. To change metaphors, there is a place for all the colours of the rainbow. If there is only one truth, such truth finally eludes us. Eastern philosophy prefers to say that there is only one reality and many expressions of truth. Moreover, it is stated that "truth is not something we possess, but something that possesses us."

In the religious traditions, the truth-seeker is typified by the contemplative monk or the Indian sanyasi. This is not to say that anyone cannot be a monk at heart. Anyone can pray; contemplation is open to all; meditation today is practised by millions, East and West, both within and outside the religions. The human impulse at work here is the desire for union with the divine power, cosmic energy, spiritual force or ultimate reality that sustains our existence. Another expression for this impulse is enchantment with the unknown. This is evident not only in the mystical search for union with the divine, but also in drug-induced experiences leading to ecstatic states of transformed consciousness. Use of drugs is not unknown in some religious traditions as a way of promoting ecstatic or mystical states of consciousness. From a purely sociological perspective, the very success of the religious traditions testifies to the universal human impulse to find one's identity through mystical, ecstatic or transformed states of mind, what the religions refer to as "inner conversion."

On a psychological and spiritual level, the mystical search for the oneness of truth is an attempt to find coherence or unity within the
great variety and diversity of experiences. In terms of the religious traditions: God is one; all is Brahman; love is all. We want to be united with that which is the source of all life, being, truth. Life is more than a series of disconnected moments and broken fragments. Quite evidently, this is also the aspiration expressed in romantic love – the desire to become one with the beloved even at the risk of losing one’s identity. Does not Catherine say in Wuthering Heights, “I am Heathcliff!” Or, from the Song of Songs, “I and my beloved are one.”

**Adventure: The Impulse to Beauty**

“Our hearts are restless” (St Augustine) and so we search for some new experience that will allow the beauty of life to show itself. We go on holidays, do a retreat, change jobs or schools or friends. We need some new adventure "to stir the soul" and make us alive to our human identity. The requirement of adventure is that we leave our familiar world. While the human spirit needs order and familiarity, it also needs a little chaos, the moments of surprise, the experience of the different and the 'other.' The desire for adventure may be expressed in religious or non-religious terms but it is, at heart, related to the human desire to overcome pain, suffering, boredom and disillusionment. Many people feel today as if they are cogs in the machine of life. They feel the need for something new, a total metanoia, a complete change of mind, heart and spirit. This is evident in the way that new religious and new age movements are springing up around the world.

This is also the place for silence and fasting symbolized in the hermit or ascetic of the religious traditions. The hippie may be a modern-day equivalent. Here, the approach to mystery is less one of mysticism and contemplation than silence and emptiness. It may involve both a
personal and cultural experience of what St John of the Cross called “the dark night of the soul.” If the sense of the divine mystery, by whatever name, is being lost from contemporary experience, there is a sense in which we need to experience that alienation and sense of loss. As many a tradition or philosophy will say, we are beings in solidarity with every living creature and the whole of creation. This may not be the time for God-talk but a time to experience the abyss or silence of God. In Christian terms, we need to experience the reality of the Cross in order to also experience the beauty of Resurrection.

In Australia, this impulse is experienced as a reticence to speak of God, a kind of metaphysical silence before the great questions of life. There is something about Australians that prefers to speak in silences rather than in words. We feel safer with the ultimate things being left unsaid. At its best, the beauty of the sacred is held in silence – in much the same way as one appreciates the beauty of a morning sunrise or a rose that has just bloomed. This way of silence can be understood positively as an expression of the distaste for any too narrow vision. We need to ‘let go’ our too familiar and over-comfortable ideas of what reality is and who God is – to let things ‘speak’ for themselves or, indeed, “to let God be God!” (Meister Eckhart, a medieval Christian mystic).

**Morality: The Impulse to Goodness**

Humans also demonstrate an aspiration toward moral goodness. This is what we call *conscience*, that innate sense of right and wrong experienced as desire to do the right thing or guilt when one has done wrong. Of course, humans are not only attracted to goodness; they are also attracted to evil. Different traditions place different emphases
on this fundamental orientation toward goodness or evil; they also differ in the way in which they interpret moral goodness. Religious traditions have often been criticised for their narrowness of vision in regard to ethics and morality. Western culture generally can be criticised for an over-emphasis on privatized morality and individual conscience at the expense of social and political ethics. Nonetheless, there is little dissent from the fundamental idea of a human moral aspiration toward goodness at least in terms of an ethical ideal. And as is often said, “there is honour even among thieves.”

Moral perfection may elude us, but to be human is to live with the experience of dislocation between who we are and who we feel called to be. Moreover, we know that our call to be other is a call to be-for-others: we feel at least some responsibility for shaping the world in which we live, to make it a better place in which people can live in justice, love and peace. The impulse toward goodness is, then, an aspiration to love others, even those who may not love us in return. Self-sacrificing love is epitomized in all the great religious leaders and reformers without neglecting the secular saints who were prepared to live their lives, and even to die, for the sake of some greater good for society and humanity at large. In our judgment, these people may have been misguided in their particular visions for a better world; but we do not doubt their witness to the human urge to overturn inequality, promote justice, defend liberty.

Expressed more concretely, this is the way of action and hope. Jesus becomes the “Man for Others”; Buddha becomes the source of compassion for all living creatures; Allah is the one who inspires merciful praxis; Marx is committed to the liberation of the proletariat;
even liberal capitalism wants to promote the wellbeing of the individual. We hear now of option for the poor, solidarity with others, co-responsibility in the human enterprise. All these are metaphors which express the moral aspiration toward social and political ethics. At base, they represent the urge of the human spirit to transform the world. The prophet – in religious or secular guise – is the pre-eminent spokesperson for this way of ethical justice.

**Human Freedom**

All religious traditions speak of liberation, freedom, deliverance, salvation. Indeed, religious beliefs, rituals, yogas, doctrines and commandments are understood as paths or ways by which this liberation or freedom is achieved. Nonetheless, we need to acknowledge that the cry of the French Revolution – "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" – represents a new understanding of freedom at the beginning of the modern era. In the twentieth century, existentialism and similar philosophies re-define the human person in terms of the call to freedom. The *United Nations Charter of Human Rights* emphasises the close connection between human dignity and freedom. Whereas older religious and political systems emphasise tradition, authority and duty, the modern worldview stresses the new secular values of tolerance, pluralism and democracy. However, what, if anything, has changed in terms of the fundamental experience of human freedom?

At one level, behavioural sciences demonstrate that people's freedom is curtailed by all kinds of life-experiences, genetic make-up, family influence, cultural values, social customs and the like. Freedom is not something that can be assumed as the fundamental starting-point of
human reality. If anything, freedom is a goal of human life, something we grow towards in the movement from childhood to adulthood. We are all familiar with the many ways in which human addictions – drugs, alcohol, sex, to name three – impinge on people's growth towards freedom. It appears that many people achieve only a limited degree of freedom in the process of their lives. At another level, there is the realisation that freedom is both a gift and a burden. The French existentialist novelist, Albert Camus, spoke of human beings "condemned to be free." Insofar as we are free, we are also responsible for the use of that freedom, a responsibility that many find a burden. Many of the characters in Camus' novels and plays are driven to madness! Freedom is not easily or lightly achieved.

Cultural and religious perspectives on freedom also differ enormously. Western conceptions stress freedom-to-do what I will; Eastern approaches focus on freedom-from-willing what I do. The notion of human freedom will differ according to how we understand the human person and the goal of human life. In secular philosophies of the West, ultimate freedom tends towards the widest possible range of values, beliefs and actions from which to choose. Freedom is personal choice. In the East, there is the law of karma which states that my freedom is achieved through the alignment of my will to the greater cosmic forces. Western Christianity and the monotheistic religions generally also understand that ultimate freedom cannot be achieved without reference to God who is both the creator of all things and the author of human freedom. Moreover, that freedom can only be exercised through the help of divine grace.
It is helpful to understand freedom as both *freedom-from* and *freedom-for*. Humans seek *freedom from* sorrow, despair, hopelessness, lack of freedom, oppressive and alienating ties, selfishness, egotism, pain and death. They seek *freedom for* life-purpose, happiness, joy, peace, justice, liberating relationships, gratitude, healing, fulfillment of self and others, commitment to overturning all kinds of slavery and evil. Some will find these freedoms in and through traditional religious, cultural and family ties. Their freedom will be grounded in their sense of belonging. Others will move beyond family, church, mosque, temple and tribe in search of freedom in more exotic places. All will find their freedom is a life-journey never perfectly won – at least in this life.

6. AUTHORITY AND CONSCIENCE

*Let us dance and sing now.*
*We are purged of old beliefs.*
*This history of ours has burnt us clean.*
*What dogma based on Christ or Freud or Marx Can move us, after all that we have been?*

*Hal Colebatch* 7
Who Shall Govern?

Few commentators on the human condition disagree with the proposition that humans are social creatures who need structure and authority in their lives to achieve any measure of harmonious co-habitation. [For the records, those who disagree are called anarchists.] Human life needs a degree of order and routine in both personal and social terms. However, the problem of who and how to govern has been a constant preoccupation since the beginning of human society. Every conceivable form of political government seems to have been tried and continues to exist in the world today: oligarchies, chiefdoms, monarchies, republics, democracies. And there are multiple forms of each particular system.

In traditional religious understanding, God or the gods ruled the universe. Human society was to be a replica of the divine pattern which governed the cosmos. In the Middle Ages (1200-1500 CE), for example, Christians understood Christ to be King. It was a small step to arrive at the conclusion that the monarch of a particular people was the earthly representative of Christ. This is the basis for the notion of the absolute power and divine right of kings. In one sense the king's power was absolute – but only insofar as king and people accepted that all final authority comes from God. The entire Christian world at this time envisaged itself as the Christian Kingdom (Christendom) set up by divine authority. The Pope and bishops also came to be seen as earthly princes exercising divine authority in the name of Christ. In the Middle Ages, it needs to be realised that the separation of religious and secular powers did not exist in the way they do today. This comes to an end with the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.
The French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century signals the beginning of modern democracies: "government of the people, for the people, by the people." Many of the ideas of modern democracy owe their origins to the early Greeks who set up councils and systems of decision-making on the basis of citizenship and voting. The major difference was that, for the Greeks, these democratic systems operated in small city-states. Every citizen could come to the marketplace and have his say (women were not considered full citizens and so were not among the speakers or voters). Modern democracies, such as we have in Australia today, require a more sophisticated form of representative election and decision-making. However, the basic principle is the same: authority comes not from God, but from the people (the demos).

**Authority and Freedom**

The question of God and freedom has already been addressed. How, though, is the exercise of authority to be understood in a pluralistic society where there is no universal acceptance of a religious worldview? Moreover, how is it to be exercised in a secular society which values human freedom so highly? One answer, accepted by most, is the pragmatic value of law and order. Most Australians, for example, are accepting of the need for a police force and a court system on the basis of the importance of law and order. Other laws are equally required for the smooth running of society.

Beyond this there is general acceptance that governments need to tax the rich in order to provide for the poor. There may be much debate about how this should be done, or to what extent, but the principle of
some equalization of resources is acceptable to most. Interestingly, there is greater acceptance of a government role in this in Scandinavian countries, for example, or even in Australia, than there is the United States of America which is more committed to philanthropy (support of people and projects by the rich) as a means of assisting the poor. The more radical solution is the communist one which reduces freedom for private capital (and many other freedoms as well) on the basis that State-control is the best means of equalizing wealth.

The exercise of individual freedoms is also evident in the many forms of people power we witness in simple demonstrations or, in some cases, violent protest. Ideally, people exercise their power at the ballot box (although not all forms of government have regular elections – a system that leads to immense frustration in some Middle East and African nations). However, when enough people feel that governments are insensitive to important issues, the principle of "taking to the streets" with placards or protest songs is a long-accepted and world-wide strategy – even in those countries that may be crushing of the smallest signs of rebellion against "official policy." The ending of the war in Vietnam in the 1970s was certainly influenced by such protests; so too were the overthrows of the Marcos (Philippines) and Soharto (Indonesia) regimes in the 1980s and 1990s; less successful was the Chinese protest for democratic change in Tiananmen Square in the early 1990s. Individual rights and freedoms always remain in tension with the use (or misuse) of authority.

**Natural Law and Conscience**

Philosophers, religious and otherwise, have long engaged in debate about "natural law," another idea which owes its origins to the early
Greeks. Natural law theory says there are certain precepts, values or laws which underlie human existence and which humans can come to know. Christians who accept this understanding (notably Catholic thinkers) relate it to the biblical notion that "the law of God is written in the heart." Such laws are understood to be universal to human life. They include such notions as: the prohibition of murder, stealing, cheating, drunkenness; and the promotion of human values such as dignity, respect, truthfulness. Secular theorists adopted the principle of natural law theory in devising the *United Nations Charter of Human Rights* which is understood to apply to all people and cultures.  

The problem with natural law theory is, first, that it assumes there is a *universal* human nature that is in some way separate from particular cultural expressions. Some Eastern thinkers, for example, think that the very notion of "human rights" is a Western construct and, as such, imposes one understanding of human personhood on all peoples and cultures. The second problem is that any particular law, such as the prohibition against murder, cannot be universalised: there will always be the exception such as defence of one's own life. "Respect for life" might be a good general principle that all peoples may accept, but when it comes to any particular issue – contraception, abortion, euthanasia, the death penalty – it seems unlikely that humans will ever come to agreement. Hence, it is argued, even if there are underlying principles that should guide human behaviour, human interpretations will remain divided. Consequently, they say, natural law theory is of little use.

Closely related to natural law theory is the matter of human conscience. While modern emphasis on conscience arises from the
personalist understanding of human freedom, most religious traditions appreciate that the human person is called to see, understand, judge and act according to the best insights available in a particular set of circumstances. It is generally accepted that one may act falsely but "in good conscience." However, the matter does not end there.

Conscience is not simply a 'given'; it needs to be developed over time so that one's judgments and actions become positive acts of human freedom in conformity to the divine law. Conscience is intimately connected to belief in the reality of good and evil. In the religious traditions, the church, mosque, temple or synagogue has a role to play in the formation of people's conscience. Ideally, this does not oppose personal freedom since freedom is always related to a deepening appreciation of what is true and good.

The Catholic Church, which has a developed theory of the formation of right conscience, still insists that the human person is bound to follow one's conscience – even in circumstances where Church doctrine or law teaches otherwise. In the final analysis, God is the ultimate authority before whom one stands and by whom one will be judged. In secular society, there is similar allowance for people to act contrary to the law of the land in certain circumstances. The best example is the "conscientious objection" clause by which pacifists – those who do not believe in war on religious or other grounds – are not coerced, though they may be required to perform other kinds of service. In many Eastern cultures, which place less emphasis on personal freedom, there is less attention given to the 'rights' of individuals to believe or act in a manner contrary to accepted religious laws or cultural norms. Attention to the "rights of conscience" is a good example of how religious institutions respond to prevailing cultural thinking.
Religious and Secular?

Western societies and many Eastern societies as well are founded on democratic and secular principles. India is a good example of where secular structures and religious worldviews operate together. The secular foundations of India were deliberate as a means of overcoming the historical divide between the Hindu and Muslim religions. In large measure, this has been successful. Australia, on the other hand, did not choose secular and democratic principles on account of religious intolerance – even though historically the division between Catholic and Protestant was not a minor problem. Australia is heir to the principles of democracy that swept most of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

People often assume one is either religious or secular. For the most part, this is a false division. While attendance at Sunday services and the like may be declining in secular democracies such as Australia, belief in God and even in the divinity of Jesus remains surprisingly high. Many others are ambivalent about belief in a deity, but there is a new awakening to spirituality that people are discovering in new religious movements, new-age movements or in other forms. None of this is surprising to anyone who understands the central role of religious belief throughout human history. Religion is not a static thing; nor is it devoid of corrupt practice. Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Shankara and Martin Luther are but a few historical examples of reformers who challenged religious corruption in their own time. The first Christians were dismissed as "pagans" for their more radical religious beliefs. Religion is constantly changing.
7. CONCLUSION

Without wishing to predict the way religion will develop in the third millennium, it may be enough to suggest that human beings, despite their weaknesses, seek what is noble, true and good. *Insofar* as religions provide ways for people to enter into relationship with Mystery, to be spiritual paths, they will continue to exercise influence and authority over the lives and consciences of people. The traditional religions have great resources and resilience when it comes to adaptation to new cultural and political situations. This is not to suggest that many people will not choose other means to achieve their human fulfillment. However, secular ideologies, humanistic philosophies and democratic processes do not finally seek to answer the *ultimate questions* of human life. Nonetheless, the reverse is also true: the religious traditions will need to tell their stories and visions of *another reality* in a manner that secular, humanistic and democratic humanity is able to hear and understand.
Note: “Ultimate Questions” by Gerard Hall was originally published as Chapter 9 in Maurice Ryan & Peta Goldberg, eds., Recognising Religion: A Study of Religion for Senior Secondary Students (Katoomba, NSW: Social Science Press, 2001), 269-299. This is an authorised and modified version of that text which was originally entitled “The Human Quest”.


5 St Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:55.


8 The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (10th December 1948) specifies the right to life, freedom, safety, humane punishment, equality and fairness under the law, trial if criminally charged, presumption of innocence until proven guilty, privacy, reputation, national and international travel, seek asylum in another country, nationality, marriage and family, ownership of property, freedom of thought and belief, express opinions in public, assemble peacefully, take part in government, fair salary, equal pay for equal work, join a union, rest and leisure, adequate food-clothing-shelter and medical care, insurance against sickness-disability-old age, free education, enjoyment of the arts and benefits of science.

9 Catholic Church teaching on conscience, as presented by Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (1965) states:

In the depths of their conscience, human beings discover a law which they have not laid upon themselves, but which they must obey. Its voice, always calling them to love good and avoid evil, speaks from their heart: do this, shun that. For human beings have in their heart a law
written by God; their dignity lies in obedience to this law and they will be judged by it. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person alone with God whose voice echoes from within. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbour. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with other human beings in the search for truth and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the lives of individuals and in society. The more a correct conscience holds sway, the more persons and groups turn aside from blind choice and strive to be guided by the objective norms of morality. It often occurs that conscience errs through ignorance which it cannot overcome, without thereby losing its dignity. This cannot be said of the person who cares little for truth and goodness, or for a conscience which by degrees grows practically sightless through the habit of sin. [n. 16]