Comparative Hypotheses

Cosmological Categories for the Human Condition

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8.1 Introduction

Our concluding hypotheses are prefaced by some preliminary remarks that are both explanatory and evaluative in character. We begin by summarizing and evaluating the main lines of argument that we have been prosecuting and end by explaining the organization of our concluding chapters. In between we take stock of our project's progress and explain the limitations on our results.

8.1.1 Three Lines of Argument

This chapter and the next aim to conclude three lines of argument that have run throughout this book. First, and most fundamentally, our project has been conducted in the name of a particular theory of comparison. This understanding of comparison grounded the seminar discussions during the year devoted to the human condition; it is described in the preface, introduction, and first chapter, and is examined from many different angles in Ultimate Realities, chapter 8. Its implication in the actual discussion is analyzed in Wildman's Appendix A and it has influenced the
purpose and presentation of the specialists’ work presented in chapters 2–7. The theory of comparison defines the essential connection between those specialists’ chapters and these conclusions. Chapters 8 and 9 aim to consolidate our argument on behalf of this theory of comparison by explicitly enacting the dialectic of vagueness and specificity that relates our hypothetical comparative categories and the religious phenomena analyzed in this book. The structure of these chapters, described later, reflects this goal.

Second, we have proposed a categorical scheme for facilitating comparison between the six religious traditions we have examined. Other schemes might have worked as well, as we have said in the preface, especially in view of the dynamic way that schemes are understood within the operative theory of comparison. Nevertheless, these concluding chapters aim to confirm the usefulness of the scheme we have adopted in two ways. On the one hand, the scheme registers many of the comparisons that are well established in the extant literature on comparative religion; if those comparisons seem obvious to our readers, then so much the better for our case. On the other hand, the scheme’s categories permit new comparative hypotheses, interesting paths of comparison that have not already been well traveled.

Third, we are trying to make comparisons between the ways the human condition is viewed in a number of texts and subtraditions of the six religious traditions we have chosen. At this level our argument is twofold: that the comparisons we are making are important ones and that the comparative judgments they express are true. It is especially at this level that our comparative hypotheses are sometimes quite tentative. But since our goal in this book is not to present definitive comparisons but rather a snapshot of an ongoing, self-correcting process of comparison, we boldly take the risk of describing in this volume where we have come after one year. Our subsequent work has already taken us much further, resulting in corrections to what we present here. But that is a topic for future volumes.

8.1.2 Evaluating the First Year of the Project

Chapters 8 and 9 present an opportunity for us to evaluate in public how far we have come in establishing our three lines of argument. And what is the executive summary of the progress report? In brief, we are confident that the theory of comparison has been strongly confirmed by our work. We are relatively less confident about the value of our scheme of categories but still pleased with how it has handled and been enriched by the data and tests to which we have exposed it. And we are simultaneously delighted and anxious about the specific comparisons we have advanced.

It is at this point especially that our work is most clearly in its early stages. The reasons for this ambivalence with regard to the specific comparative hypotheses we make here need to be described in some detail and much of this introductory section will be given over to that purpose. Those partly evaluative and partly explanatory remarks also will serve to orient readers who plan to read this book backwards, though we strongly advise against that approach to trying to understand what we are up to in this project.

We have said that the examinations made in chapters 2–7 are highly selective. And we are aware that every one of the comparative hypotheses we suggest here can be shown to allow exceptions. Sometimes it has seemed that any comparative judgment can be put to death by a thousand qualifications. Nevertheless, however tentative and needy of further nuance, the hypotheses we can propose about the six religions’ ideas about the human condition are broad in their sweep and suggestive in their indications for further study. They have the authority of having arisen from the project and are hence ready for correction. They are a particular constructive phase in the dialectic of comparison. To be more precise, they reflect much development of the comparative categories on the one hand, and much analysis of different ways of specifying the categories on the other, acknowledging that future study might correct both the categories and how we specify them.

In constructing our hypotheses we have often moved far from the terms of earlier discussion. In fact, none of the previous chapters has much sustained discussion of how to shape the categories or how the specifications differ from one another and these concluding chapters have more sweeping generalizations than the seminar had hoped. We recognize that this expresses the seminar’s experience of a painfully steep learning curve as we tried to master the skills necessary to work the dialectic of vagueness and specificity. Specialists had to learn to make comparisons and to be explicit about the categories presupposed in those comparisons. Generalists had to learn to slow down and pay attention to details. Graduate students got to watch and contribute to this process of mutual retraining, learning how to do it themselves. We moved a long way in these regards in the first year and have come still further since that time. But we clearly recognize that the distance between our comparative hypotheses and the terms of earlier chapters expresses the level of our corporate skill at an early stage.

8.1.3 Selectivity of the Study

Our hypotheses are vulnerable to correction and improvement in several ways. The most obvious kind of vulnerability is that our own project
might falsify them. Are the comparisons proposed made impossible by material contained in chapters 2–7? Or is there other evidence that would sustain them? In principle, everything said in chapters 2–7 should be interpretable as either specifications or vaguer categorizations of the comparative judgments proposed here. The most important kind of vulnerability is that the judgments we propose need to be sustained (or reformed) by the careful treatment of many texts, motifs, and traditions other than those studied in this book. So it is important here to reexamine the selectivity of our study and the diversity of our approaches.

Each of the religions has been approached on the one hand in terms of some of its ancient core texts and motifs about the human condition, and on the other hand in terms of certain later key texts interpreting those more ancient elements. Our judgments about both elements are provisional on being sustained when the core texts and motifs and the selected key texts are further interpreted from other angles. Every one of the specialists, with the possible exception of Haq in chapter 7, approaches his or her subject with the deliberate intent to confound expected comparisons as reflecting the bias of Western conceptions of religions. This is precisely what makes these comparisons good test cases for the comparative method, even if they give rise to unusual representations of the religious traditions.

So, Kohn more than the others provides general representations of Chinese religions, and from a predominantly Daoist point of view, with muted presentations of Confucianism or Chinese Buddhism. The texts she examines in detail are not the familiar ancient Daoist classics but medieval Daoist practical treatises. Moreover, more than the other authors she presents her general representations as core motifs rather than core texts.

Eckel begins with the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths but moves quickly to a scholastic sixth-century text by Bhavaviveka from Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamaka school, emphasizing a kind of epistemological middle way between plain reference and subjectively determined fancy, all controlled by soteriological motives. This selective emphasis thus subordinates, perhaps even denies, such cosmological themes as karma, Buddha-worlds, world-ages, and the Pure Land that many assume are typical Buddhist affirmations. In the particular Buddhist line that Eckel pursues (and others as well), such “affirmation” is problematized. The comparative judgments made in the present chapter about Buddhism deal with that line’s representation of it, not the more customary and expected cosmological views, except as noted.

Clooney is the least ready of our specialists to make general representations of Hinduism. Although he cites core pan-Hindu texts such as the Vedas, Upaniṣads, and the Bhagavad Gītā, he does so rather strictly from
Wildman) offer an interpretation of the divergence of the two forms of Second Temple Judaism, Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, that is not found in chapters 5 or 6.

Haq’s approach is not as historical as some of the others but is the most explicitly comparative of all; moreover, it is the most explicitly cosmological in the sense that it focuses on the human condition as created by Allah and as the context in which human beings relate to God.

The result of this diversity and selectivity of approaches is that the scope of the comparative hypotheses summarized in the present chapter is not as broad as might be expected, and this in several ways. First, there are no simple comparisons of some traditions—of Hinduism and Judaism, for instance. Second, sometimes comparisons made here are grounded in chapters 2–7 on only one side, as when 8.3.6 vaguely sketches comparisons between Islam and Christianity in the role of the Word in the relation between God and the world, building on claims about Islam made by Haq that do not have parallels with anything in the Fredriksen chapter, and the references to the common philosophic traditions of Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism are supplied by us (Neville and Wildman). Third, in order to rearticulate the separate points in chapters 2–7 so that they can be brought into comparison, we (Neville and Wildman) sometimes have had to adjust their presentations to make them more vague or specific, or to supplement them with material not found in the previous chapters. In general, we have brought the diverse traditions’ points together to compare them at a slightly more vague level than presented in chapters 2–7, and then moved down to their specifics in order to distinguish them.

Vagueness and specificity are relative notions. The comparisons are always more than a mere lineup of specifications: they involve saying how the specifications are similar and different. But then each specification we articulate is itself vague and might be specified further. Our judgment is always vulnerable to the criticism that it deals with matters only at a vague level and that more precise judgment would require finer discrimination. Our specialist chapters differ among themselves with regard to the level of specificity, with Clooney attempting to say little about Hinduism or Advaita Vedānta in general and to speak only of the very specific Vivekācūdāmaṇi, whereas Kohn and Haq operate with vaguer and more sweeping characterizations of their traditions, only illustrated by specific texts.

Of course, any comparative judgment is vulnerable to the criticism that it does not take into account this or that aberration from the identified specification—for instance a Chinese thinker who believes the universe is too chaotic (hun-tun) to be One, or a Buddhist who believes in a substantial self. For all of our efforts to say only what we mean and write in a posture defensive against objections, we hope these hypotheses about comparative judgments will be construed with sympathetic imagination, filling in with confirming detail as well as questioning the limits of the judgment with disconfirming detail.

In sum, this chapter makes comparative judgments arising in four ways: (1) a repetition of points made in chapters 2–7 or the seminar discussion pretty much in their own words; (2) a restatement of one or several sides in the comparison so as to express the points as specifications of a vaguer comparative category; (3) the translation of one or several sides in the comparison into a vaguer or more specific level so as to make comparison possible; and (4) the development of comparative judgments previously not discussed on the basis of what seems wanted by the cumulative array of judgments here.

8.1.4 The Structure of Chapters 8 and 9

The hypotheses in this chapter and the next will take the form of reviewing what has been learned about specifying the categories concerning the human condition listed in the introduction. Furthermore, our findings will be presented so far as possible and relevant in terms made vulnerable to correction according to four of the five sites of phenomenological analysis laid out in detail in Ultimate Realities, chapter 8. These are: (1) the intrinsically, or the ideas expressed and analyzed in their own terms; (2) the perspectival, or the ways the ideas determine a larger perspective on life, in relevant religious respects; (3) the theoretical, or the ways in which the ideas lead to larger theoretical considerations; and (4) the practical, or the implications of the ideas for practice. The singularity of the ideas, the special qualities that resist analysis of any sort by definition have no comparative capabilities and will not be discussed. Ideas in their singularity are grasped through becoming competent in their use and made accessible by metaphor, indirection, and naming (for those who know the names). Were we assured of infinite reader patience, however, we could talk about the singular and incomparable elements of the religious ideas, just to indicate what cannot be brought under more encompassing categories of comparison. We do not mean to say that everything in a religion’s ideas can be expressed adequately in comparative hypotheses.

Reviewing the ideas from all the sites of phenomenological analysis tests our judgments by exposing them to at least four different angles of representation and understanding. Whereas the review through the four sites sometimes seems mechanical, it is a discipline that enhances vulner-
ability. It is also the discipline that most often has caused us to develop
comparative judgments that had not occurred to us in the seminar or in
the writing of chapters 2–7. Often in this chapter we abbreviate dis-
susions of phenomenological sites where they are repetitive, obvious, or un-
interesting, and the discussions in chapter 9 will abbreviate the rehearsal
of the sites even more.

The structure of this summary of comparative hypotheses is to dis-
cuss each of four main cosmological categories. Under each category,
first Chinese religion will be discussed, beginning with its intrinsic repre-
sentations, then perspectival ideas, then theoretical implications, and fi-
nally practical implications. Next Buddhism will be discussed according
to each site of phenomenological analysis, compared in each case with
Chinese Buddhism. Next Hinduism in its Advaita Vedānta form will be
discussed in like fashion, with comparisons to Chinese religion and Bud-
dhism. And so on for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam with the multiplicity
of comparisons getting more complex as the discussion proceeds. Not
every religion compares with every other in all respects, but we aim to ar-
ticulate the important and interesting comparisons insofar as we have
noticed them. In the long run, the vague cosmological categories get speci-
fied in different comparable ways by most of the traditions in most
respects.

Our comparative method calls for moving beyond the various specific-
cations of a vague category to the rearticulation of the category as con-
cretely filled in. That would require a kind of comprehensive summary of
how the various specifications add up. So, it would be convenient to have
in each of the following discussions a seventh section summing up unity,
onology, value, and causation respectively. But our comparisons are too
fragmentary and selective to add up to fulsome characterizations of those
categories. Therefore, we are left with the comparisons that are made in
the discussions of each tradition.

The cosmological categories found to be most relevant for understand-
ing the religious dimensions of the human condition are those articulat-
ing the unity, ontological status, and value of the cosmos, and causation,
that is, how things of religious import work in the cosmos. All of these in-
volve conceptions of the cosmos as expressed in important symbols in the
traditions and our concern here is with how these cosmological concep-
tions bear upon the human condition. For reasons of ease of exposition,
given the interconnectedness of the ideas, the discussions of the first sev-
eral categories are longer than the others and anticipate many points that
could have been made later. For this reason, too, chapter 9 will be briefer
than 8.

8.2 Unity

Unity is an extremely vague notion, parsed in many different ways within
each religious tradition studied here as well as in different characteristic
ways among the traditions. Relative to the human condition, at the vague
level unity means whatever coherence there is for the inclusive encom-
passing context or environment for human life. The religions differ quite
significantly regarding what is to be included within that encompassing
environment as well as regarding the kinds of coherence the elements
might have. Stated in this vague way prior to specification, unity might
seem to be merely cosmological and not interestingly religious. The speci-
fications will help elucidate the religious aspects of unity, so that at the
end the vague category made specific in these several ways will be much
more informative.

8.2.1 Chinese Ideas of Unity

Kohn (2.2) is extraordinarily clear that Chinese religion is firmly and usu-
ally explicitly based on the conception that the cosmos is one and unified.
Miller, in commentary on an early draft of the present chapter, observes
that the Chinese focus on unity developed in response to issues of diver-
sity, and that it is “more accurate to speak of a syncretic drive towards
achieving unity that eventually resulted in an elite unified cosmology that
was capable of holding together Daoist, Confucian, and Buddha ideas
in a pan-Chinese worldview. This worldview is essentially Daoist, in that
it is built up in commentaries on the Daode jing and the Zhuangzi, but in
that process, Daoism is transformed, Confucianism becomes metaphys-
cal, and Buddhism is sufﬁned.” We (Neville and Wildman) agree with this
account of the evolution on Chinese notions of unity, but agree also with
Kohn’s claim to their centrality from the earliest times. Kohn cites
Colavito’s metaphorical distinction between religions of the One and those
of the Zero. Chinese religions are based on the mythic suppositions of the
One, an aboriginal mass of Qi that achieves differentiation in movements
of yin and yang like vibratory patterns that remain functional processes
and harmonies within the unity of the gigantic jelly bean of cosmic real-
ity. This is a core conceptual motif that underlies all historical develop-
ments of Chinese religion, variously punctuated by the interactions of
Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.

The human sphere within the cosmos can be delimited by processes of
human scale, but these processes are continuous with those of other scales,
and there is nothing in the human condition that is not a condensation or
to a series of high-powered metaphysical questions. Buddhists do, of course, have assumptions about the cosmos, assumptions diversely characteristic of their times and cultures. But these cosmological assumptions are not uniformly important for the religious dimension of the human condition. Eckel and Thatamanil in commentary on an early draft of the present chapter write:

We feel that the "most important" thing Buddhists say about the human condition is that humans suffer and seek to bring suffering to an end. This does not mean that Buddhists have no developed views of the cosmos, either in the moral sense (in the six realms of rebirth) or in the physical sense (as a configuration of continents around a central mountain or whatever). And it does not mean that these views of the cosmos are lacking in "religious" significance, as in the concern to move on to a better rebirth or in Tantric meditation about seeking the still point of the mandala.

Nevertheless, the Madhyamaka line lets the cosmic conceptions of unity be a function of the individual's interest in release from suffering, rather than interpreting the individual's interest as arising from some kind of primordial cosmic unity. Or to put the point more finely in comparison with Chinese religion, whereas Chinese religion emphasizes the objective character of the cosmos and the religious importance of conforming to or harmonizing with that, the Buddhists in the Madhyamaka Mahāyāna line explored in chapter 3, take the religious import of the cosmos to be strictly dependent on the religious needs of individuals, as expressed, say, in the Four Noble Truths. Not that Buddhists need to deny objectivity to the cosmos when properly described—the no-self doctrine discussed in chapter 3 is affirmed as describing the way things are—but that the cosmos is not important for religious purposes except insofar as it is a function of those purposes.

So, for instance, regarding the unity of the cosmos, Buddhism in the Madhyamaka line analyzed by Eckel and Thatamanil is indifferent to questions such as totality and integration that exercise the Chinese, except perhaps to apply a negative dialectic if those questions seem to be given too substantialist a reference; other forms of Buddhism take the opposite rhetorical tack, as shown, for instance, in Garma C. C. Chang's The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hwa Yen Buddhism. Buddhism in the line we have analyzed rather transforms the question of unity into what is relevant to the human condition as described in the Four Noble Truths. Universal statements are allowed, such as that everything is constantly changing, nothing has a self-nature, all experience is suffering, and so forth. Yet these are not so much objective

8.2.2 Buddhist Ideas of Unity

The situation is quite different for Buddhism, especially Indian Buddhism of the sorts analyzed by Eckel. With regard not only to unity but to all the other cosmological categories, the Buddhists might first tell the story (see 3.1) of the Buddha's question about the poisoned arrow asked in response

rarefaction of processes otherwise making up the cosmic whole. The religious aspect of the unified cosmos is that people are in essential continuity with everything else, and hence never seriously alienated. The emphasis on cosmic unity is an intrinsic representation of the cosmos for Chinese religions.

The perspectival understanding deriving from the Chinese conception of unity intrinsically grasped is that the various features of the world are processes expressing and seeking harmony. The human condition thus is to be understood as resting in the harmonies of physical, biological, social, and personal process. And where the human condition has a predicament, it is that something has gotten out of harmony and needs to be reharmonized. Resolution of the predicament is the restoration of harmony and return of human life to full participation in the unity of the cosmos, the one. This reharmonization so as to return to unity has different specifications in Daoism, Confucianism, and Chinese Buddhism (2.1, 2.3.2).

The theoretical understanding of cosmic unity in Chinese religions is the conception of things in the world as falling into harmonically interlocked classes, or sets of balanced changes. For instance, consider the classifications of things according to movements of yin and yang, the four seasons, the five elements and directions, and so forth. Human troubles, accordingly, are understood as things being out of balance, with the Qi moving too fast or slow, the diet being too hot or wet, projects undertaken in the wrong season, and so forth (2.2).

The practical understanding for Chinese religions follows from its conception of life as a project of harmonization so as to maintain continuity with the oneness of the cosmos. As Chinese medicine seeks to restore lost balance, and military strategy seeks to do things in the right season and know when to stop, so Chinese religion employs ritual to bring discords into harmony and advocates practices aimed at bringing people into harmony with heaven and earth, the society, the family, and details of personal life, for instance, as expressed in The Venerable Lord's Wondrous Scripture of Exterior Daily Practice (chapter 2.3.1). The interior life—see the Scripture of Interior Daily Practice (2.3.1)—is likewise to be managed so as to transform the person into a being with perfect union with the One.
descriptions asserted of reality as ways recommended for regarding reality in order for the poisoned arrow to be removed swiftly.

Thatamainil, commenting on an early draft of the present chapter, points out the some qualifications that need to be made comparing Madhyamaka and Yogācāra Buddhism:

While it may be true that Yogācāra Buddhists may deny the objectivity of the world (in the sense of extra-mental reality), for Madhyamikas the problem is substantiality or reification. In other words, while it is possible to read Yogācāra as a kind of “subjective idealism” or at least “idealism,” it would not be possible to read Madhyamaka so. Though it is true to say that the imposition of intrinsic nature (svabhāva) is an activity of mental construction, this does not mean that Madhyamaka philosophers deny extra-mental phenomena. In this respect, Yogacara is both too reificatory in postulating the reality of mind-only (samaropa) and too negative (apatvada) in denying the conventional reality of phenomena.

Regarding unity, it may be that the Madhyamaka emphasis on pratātya-samutpāda has implications for “unity.” To deny that the world is composed of entities with intrinsic nature or own-being is to allow for an experience of the world that is far more unified and characterized by non-duality than to imagine a universe of self-subsistent entities. However, to speak of the universe or reality as unified in such a way that the whole is reified makes language regarding unity problematic.

For some kinds of Buddhism such as Huayan the conception of the world’s unity is regarded so much as a function of the religious imagination that many Buddha-worlds can be imagined, alternative realities each whole in itself, or perhaps nested so that an entire Buddha-world is contained in a piece of dust under a bed in another Buddha-world. Whereas the Chinese can imagine heavens and hells as various parts of the One world, particularly located relative to the Middle Kingdom, because there is only one world into which they all must fit, Buddhists, even Chinese Buddhists, can imagine alternative realities whose truth lies in their liberating function for the imagination rather than a plain assertion of correspondence to some part of reality. In answer to the question, how is the cosmos unified, Madhyamaka and many other Buddhists would answer something like this: the world’s unity lies in being susceptible to the ideas of unity with which it is grasped for soteriological purposes, and the susceptibility is not to be tested except through the success or failure of the project of religious liberation. Whereas the Madhyamaka schools tend to emphasize the non-objective character of imagination, the Yogācāra schools tend to emphasize the positive qualities of the imagined worlds.
Indian Madhyamaka Buddhism, minimizing religiously important conceptions of objective cosmic unity—in Nāgārjuna’s case refuting them—does not take up a perspective on life based on cosmic unity. Rather, what unity there is to the cosmos is what results from the subjective perspective of the individual. This is not to say that the cosmos objectively is not unified, if that can be known; the objective cosmos per se is not religiously interesting.

By contrast with the Chinese objective classification of things so as to express the harmonious unity of the cosmos, Indian Buddhists such as Bhāvaviveka make few objective claims that are not undone by the negative dialectic discussed in 3.3. As a result, Buddhism, far more than ancient Chinese religion and indeed most other religions committed to a structured view of the religious importance of how the world is unified, tolerates many variant cosmologies. Buddhism has far greater tolerance for the cosmology of modern science, for instance, than those traditional religions committed to a specific view of the world’s structure, precisely because Buddhism finds little of religious importance in such objective views, save when they are asserted as too objective.

The practical consequence of Mahāyāna Buddhism’s non-commitment to an objective view of the world’s unity is nicely expressed in the doctrine of two truths discussed in 3.1 and in Bhāvaviveka’s discussion of vision (3.3; see also 3.4 on negation in comparative categories). Conventional truth expresses whatever unity and structure are taken to be objective in the world. This includes such things as laws of karmic accountability, the sense that nothing hangs together in times of social confusion, and it might even include the worldview of modern science. The ultimate truth is that these conventional truths are not really objective, but merely pragmatically feasible (or unfeasible) ways of projecting organizing ideas onto reality. And the doctrine of the two truths is that the conventional truths are as true in their way as the ultimate truth, and that one has to live in that conventional world of saṃsāra. Even one’s religious life has to be lived in that world. A Madhyamaka adept realizes that the conventional world is the only home one has: nirvana is saṃsāra; a Pure Land adept takes another view.

8.2.3 Hindu Ideas of Unity

The question of cosmic unity in Hinduism is framed differently from that in either Chinese religion or Buddhism. The Hindu question concerns the unity of the personal self with the underlying divine self or Brahma, and the question of a multiplicity to be unified is either that of the falsely assumed distinction between the personal self and the divine, or that of the
world's diversity construed as māyā (4.2.1). But as Clooney stresses in 4.6, a statement like that must be construed as extremely vague, with the understanding that the way it is specified by a text such as the Vivekacāṇḍāmaṇi in the Advaita Vedānta tradition is quite different from ways it is specified in other schools or in the Bhagavad Gītā or even in other Advaita texts, for instance, those of Śaṅkara. The exposition of the Vivekacāṇḍāmaṇi in chapter 4 makes explicit reference to the Atharva Veda and the Taittirīya and Chāndogya Upaniṣads, which are core texts for much of the Hindu tradition, and to ancient motifs such as the three gunas, tamas, rajas, and sattva; those core texts and motifs are developed very differently by other branches of the Hindu tradition. The comparative generalizations made here need to be understood in nuanced ways according to their reference to the vague core texts and motifs or to the specifications in the Vivekacāṇḍāmaṇi (4.6).

The unity of the personal self with Brahman is specified by the Vivekacāṇḍāmaṇi through a series of arguments showing that what might be construed as a separate personal self is not the real self. Thus, the eating body, the vital self, the mind, the intellect and bliss-enjoying self are not the true self, and the true self that is left is no other than Brahman (4.3). This is affirmed positively in accord with Advaita’s non-mythic and rationally accessible specification of the classic tat tvam asi (4.4); any sense of distinction or separation of something real from Brahman is wrong. Hence the emphasis on negation in the doctrine: non-duality.

In contrast to the intrinsic notion of unity in Chinese religion, according to which human beings are proper parts organically related to the rest and internally resonant with cosmic oneness in its aboriginal incipient origins, the Advaita notion negates any possible diversity within Brahman or between Brahman and the personal self. In contrast to the Buddhist conception of unity as a function of the experiencing subject, the Advaita conception takes the ontological reality of Brahman as the only reality in the experiencing subject, a reality that can be discriminated only when the experiencing mechanisms of the personal self are transcended by discernment and transformation. Whereas the Buddhist approach studied here brackets questions of objective cosmic or ontological unity in order to focus on the experiencing subject, the Advaita approach teaches means to bracket all the elements in the experiencing self that are functions of change, māyā, in order to focus on the exclusive cosmic or ontological unity, Brahman. (It should be noted that the Advaita Vivekacāṇḍāmaṇi, ninth century, is later than the work of the sixth-century Buddhist Bhāvaviveka and the other writers on whom Eckel bases his argument; the Advaita position here arises in the context of responding to Buddhism.)
The conception of self-Brahman unity in Advaita Vedānta casts the diversity of things in the world in the perspective of being māyā (4.2.1–2). Māyā is problematic because non-discriminating people can be fooled by it. But the successful realization of the Advaita Vedānta path can lead to proper discrimination, or rather consists in the successive achievements of capacities properly to discriminate, so that one is not fooled (4.4). The world is viewed from the Advaita’s theory of unity, not as a field of processes in potential harmony or disharmony, as in the Chinese case, but as a field of potential illusions that would have the effect of reinforcing the false sense that things other than Brahman have reality.

The Vivekacūḍāmani’s Advaita Vedānta conception of the spread of the world as māyā does not entail the belief that it lacks structure or that one cannot relate pragmatically to human needs. Indeed, the laws of karma govern samsāra in the ancient imagination, and the laws of science can be accepted in the modern. The irreality of māyā consists in its appearance as duality whereas the real truth of things is their non-duality (4.2.2). Whereas in Chinese religion the field of harmonious processes is a matter of opportunities for religiously important action, the field of māyā has only preliminary religious bearing in Advaita, though in important ways: scriptures, teachers’ meditation, and the entire religious quest coming to the knowledge of non-duality are part of māyā, as Thatamanil points out in seminar commentary. Māyā is not unreal in the sense that the son of a barren woman is unreal, to use Thatamanil’s citation, and therefore we (Neville and Wildman) call it irreal. In contrast to the Buddhists whose world is unified according to the experience of persons, the advocates of Advaita take the real unity, that is, non-duality, of the world to be the truth behind any discriminations that themselves are dualistic māyā.

The practical consequence of the Advaita Vedānta view of self-Brahman unity might seem paradoxical. For, although the truth is the non-duality of self and Brahman, most people actually live in māyā without realizing it. So the practical point is to transform the self through the processes described, say, in the Vivekacūḍāmani to have the powers of discrimination (4.4). This is a matter of serious work, involving study and the rigorous life of discipleship, and in the tradition of the Vivekacūḍāmani the project is limited to smart, interested, male Brahmins who have the texts and a teacher at hand. In this regard Advaita is far closer to the Chinese project of maintaining and repairing one’s harmonious relations than it is to the Buddhist change of attitude or realization of the Middle Path. On the one hand it is an illusion to believe that there is a religious problem in the human condition (4.1), but it takes a lot of work, a lifetime (or many lifetimes) project, to dispel that illusion. One of the most important points Clooney makes is the distinction
between the abstract truth of non-duality and its concrete realization in experience (4.6).

Although there are many qualifications to the comparative generalizations among Hinduism, Chinese religion, and Buddhism, as expressed in the seminar commentaries of Eckel, Thatamanil, and Miller on early drafts of this chapter, they show that on balance the center of gravity is with the comparative hypotheses we have presented.

8.2.4 Jewish Ideas of Unity

In contrast to Chinese religion, Buddhism, and Hinduism, the three monotheistic religions of West Asia agree vaguely in asserting a dualism between God and the world, however variously they specify that dualism internally and in comparison with one another. Saldarini (5.1.1) makes for Judaism a claim that applies to Christianity and Islam as well: "Human life and the human condition in all its complexity may be defined as life under, and in relation to, and responsive to God or as a deviation from that divinely ordered relationship." Dualistic as this vague claim might be, the three West Asian religions envision a totality inclusive of God and the world, with an asymmetrical relation between them.

Staying for a moment with the vague claim that God creates the world, the character of unity in that God-world totality varies most according to the sense in which human responsibility for being responsive to God or deviant is interpreted. Although East Asian and South Asian religions recognize disharmony and ignorance as existentially crucial religious problems, they downplay the ontological significance of that, and human responsibility for it, compared with the West Asian religions. That they downplay it does not mean they reject it. As Thatamanil points out in commentary, "The question of the locus of ignorance, a question that post-Śaṅkara Advaitins worry about constantly, is baldly ontological. Is Brahman the locus of ignorance or is it the individual soul? If the individual soul is itself the product of ignorance how can it also be the locus of ignorance?" In the West, the emphasis on morality and conformity to the divine will has been coupled with a problematic of human freedom such that it is inevitable that the question will be asked whether people can be in ontological opposition to God. That is, does the God-world dualistic totality tolerate a serious rupture in the totality? The three traditions share some core texts, for instance, the creation and fall stories in Genesis. How they differently develop those texts is interesting indeed.

Judaism affirms that God is the just and provident creator of the cosmos (5.1.2). Although there have been mystical movements within Judaism for which it might be inappropriate to use personalistic imagery for
God, the main part of the tradition has treated God as personal and intentional, so that it is always appropriate to ask why God does or allows things that are evil or seem to be so. With the exception of a few thinkers such as Richard Rubenstein (5.4.1) who believe that the horrendousness of evil in the world, especially in the Nazi holocaust, requires rejection of the existence of God altogether, Jewish thinkers from Ben Sira to Eli Wiesel (in a problematized way) affirm that God exercises just and provident control over the whole cosmos (5.1.2). The world as a whole is in God’s hand. And therefore evil constitutes a problem for human understanding, as it would not be were God’s justice and provident control to be partial. The cosmos is unified through being created and providentially ruled by one God. The unity of the whole is thus the dualism of a just, provident, personal creator and the creation that includes free and sometimes evil persons as well as much suffering.

From the perspective of Judaism’s dualistic unity of just, provident, creator God and world, the human condition is the field in which one lives before God affirming and worshipping the divine person. Saldañini traces some extraordinary developments of this core motif that was interpreted principally in terms of how Israel, not the whole human race, relates to God. In Ben Sira’s thinking this field is generally a well-managed order within which the Torah (5.2.2) provides the means by which the people of Israel rightly live before God and by which God generally keeps order. The stability of the Jewish state in Ben Sira’s time included the flourishing cult of temple sacrifices and the leisure to practice pieties, which became a threefold interpretation of the way to God for Jews in the field of human endeavor. Even after the destruction of the Second Temple, rabbis remained concerned to interpret human events in terms of how they relate to the temple sacrifice. But slowly the study of Torah assumed preeminence as the key to what is important in life. The Torah is the revelation of the just and provident creator; life’s crucial points are not focal points for harmony, as in Chinese religion, or for liberation from craving as in Buddhism, or for discerning illusions as in Advaita, but rather are focal points for obedience and thanksgiving as defined by Torah.

The theoretical ideas of how to live before God in the dualistic unity of Judaism are bound up with the problematic of the freedom to live obediently or disobediently before God. If God is the just and provident creator, then is God responsible for creating the evil tendencies in human life? If so, as Judaism has generally affirmed, how then are individuals or the collective responsible for their good and evil deeds, as Judaism has also generally affirmed? Saldañini point out that the questions of the goodness and unity of God as providential creator versus the capacity of human
being to rebel against divine order are rarely neatly reconciled. They might be downplayed in Ben Sira, or inverted in post-holocaust writers to ask God how He could allow evil (5.2.2.1). But they usually cannot be answered by giving up on either side.

Except in certain mystical strains, Judaism is frankly dualistic in practice both abstractly and concretely. Abstractly, God is just but creates a world in which there is sometimes evil, and both sides have their integrity (5.3.3.2). Concretely, God relates to this duality by practicing both justice and mercy: with either one of those alone, the person of God could not relate to the world created. From the human side, people are enjoined to relate to God by repentance, acknowledging their own responsibility, and by thankful obedience to Torah that includes both acknowledgment of God’s justice and mercy and resolution to follow Torah more closely (5.3.4).

Judaism’s dualistic unity makes for quite different comparisons with Chinese religion, Buddhism, and Advaita Vedānta. On the side of its claim for God’s practice of justice and mercy toward the world, there is very little analogue in those three religions, none of which has such strong images of personal intention in a God. The motif of a creator God is strong in many forms of Hinduism, even if quickly transcended in Advaita; but even in theistic Hindu piety such as expressed in the Bhagavad Gītā or in Śaivism, there is not a degree of emphasis on the unity of the person of God to occasion the reconciliation of justice and mercy to be such agony as in Judaism.

8.2.5 Christian Ideas of Unity

Christianity, of course, arises from most of the same core texts and motifs as Judaism, beginning self-consciously as a movement within the people of Israel, one of many movements in Second Temple Judaism. But it differed very sharply from the other developments of Judaism at the time and since over the issue of Jesus as the Messiah, a point assumed in Fredriksen’s chapter and given more direct analysis here.

This difference is clearly reflected in the Christian conception of the unity of the God-world totality. Jesus was taken by his disciples to be extraordinarily connected to God, and yet as depicted in the New Testament gospels he died young, with disappointing students, a fickle following, caught up in the political turmoil of Jerusalem and Rome that had little to do with his business, and was crucified in humiliation: according to such historical measures, Jesus was a failure. Moreover, although the disciples experienced Jesus as raised from the dead, he did not return to ordinary life like Lazarus and thus perhaps to raise an army to defeat
Rome and restore Zion: on the contrary he left the historical world to ascend to heaven. With Jesus ascended, according to Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit is promised to come as advocate and guide for the people, but not to bring them historical victory. Rather, as argued in the “Farewell Discourses” in the Gospel of John, the function of the Holy Spirit is to comfort and shape their fragmentary and often persecuted lives and to bring them at last to God. So in stark contrast to most other forms of Judaism, which envision a Messiah who will bring peace and righteousness to Earth, restoring Israel for a long time, Christianity from its core New Testament texts onward views life as always finite and filled with frustration and suffering. Religious fulfillment is in relating to God within this life, and perhaps over or after this life, so as to take satisfaction in God’s own glory, not history’s.

Christianity has had many ways of specifying this view of history and fulfillment. One sort, keeping very close to the Jewish images of God in history, is apocalyptic, envisioning an end of time with a last judgment, or an end of historical time where the forces of evil lose power and a heavenly city comes to Earth, or a millenarian approach that can combine those two apocalyptic images; see Fredriksen’s account in 6.3.3, 6.4.4, 6.5.6, 6.7.5. Another sort, “realized eschatology,” interprets fulfillment as relating to the divine eternity now, not necessarily in an afterlife, supposing that history itself is but a partial dimension of the real reality that includes the possibility of people participating in the divine eternity; see the “Farewell Discourses” mentioned above or Colossians 2:8–3:4.

Christianity also has had many ways of specifying the conception of the creator God. It has always maintained the imagery of the personal God from the Hebrew bible. Yet, influenced more than Judaism by Hellenistic and then by the entire European tradition of speculative and metaphysical philosophy, decisively so in Origen (6.4), Christianity has given many different philosophic interpretations of the basis for that personal or anthropomorphic imagery; Augustine, for instance, said that God creates time, and hence it is not in time except by an action of divine intervention; Neo-Platonic Christianity identifies God with the One that is beyond all determination; Thomas Aquinas said God is a pure Act of To Be (esse), surely not a personal individual in any ordinary sense; Paul Tillich in the twentieth century said God is the Ground of Being, not a being at all.

With regard to the question of unity relative to the human condition in Christianity, therefore, it is important to distinguish the metaphysical from the existential respects in which unity is interpreted. Metaphysically, Christianity has been expressed in dualistic positions akin to Judaism, with integrity to the different realities of both God and world,
and with the equivocations of asymmetrical and symmetrical relations between them (see 8.3.4, 8.4.4, and 8.5.4 on symmetry and asymmetry). But Christianity has also been expressed in such ways that the world is part of the active or creative divine nature, with no integrity of its own apart from God, as in Neo-Platonic theologies; and also in such ways that God has no nature as God apart from the creating of the world, as in some creation ex nihilo theologies. These last two approaches, not much discussed in chapter 6 or the seminar, are closer to monisms than to dualisms and they affirm that the human condition cannot ever be in total separation from God no matter how bad it gets. At its worst, the human condition is bad for these nearly monistic views because human attention is just “turned in the wrong direction,” to use Plato’s, Plotinus’ and Augustine’s metaphor; in this respect, this kind of Christianity is closer to Advaita Vedānta than to dualistic monotheisms in its account of the separation of people from God as resulting from a mistaken perspective or way of looking.

Existentially, Christianity finds unity only within God and in a divine life or heavenly world that transcends history in the ordinary sense. The Christian perspective on history in the ordinary sense is that it is a field of crucifixion; resurrection is transcendence, real full-bodied transcendence (6.1, 6.6) of the ordinary historical plane. Christianity thus involves an existential dualism in which ordinary history is taken to be at odds with the full reality in which human beings are existentially unified with God. That existential dualism is softened where the plane of ordinary history is taken to be a mere misinterpretation of the larger reality, a dream from which people should awaken (as in Jesus’ “wake up” parables in Matthew). But often heaven is interpreted as a different place to which people go later, or the course of history is regarded as subject to ontological, not merely historical, transformation at the Second Coming of Jesus. For Christianity, there is no existential unity within history in the ordinary sense, as there is or ought to be for Judaism in the line traced by Saldarini.

The Christian perspective on the world derivative from its peculiar sense of existential dualism is expressed in its phrase, “in the world but not of it.” Life is to be lived enthusiastically within the world, under the guidance and comfort of the Holy Spirit, encountering obstacles but continually attempting to be just and holy with a whole heart (6.6.2), expecting ultimate defeat and death in the ordinary historical sense. Gnosticism did not sustain itself as a Christian strain because it abandoned the importance of living fully in the world (6.3.1–3). On the other side, Fredriksen (6.4) cites Origen’s attack on the Christian materialists who interpret scriptures “according to the flesh” and expect a material resurrection at
Jerusalem with a bodily God. At the same time, true human identity is a function of existential purified unity with God and is not a matter “of the world.”

Christian experience has much the same practical perspective on the world regarding unity that Judaism does: on the one hand love God, for in that is true human identity, and on the other work to be just and holy, if not through Torah then through something very like that. But Christianity does not expect vindication in the flesh in history, in the restoration of justice and universal piety; it expects rather the transformation of the flesh to be vindicated in unity with God. At least this is the impact of the crucifixion-resurrection motif in most of the Christian tradition. (Contemporary liberation theology sometimes returns to a view of God’s unification of history consonant with Judaism though lacking Wiesel’s tragic disappointment.) The concern with history in the ordinary sense sets both Judaism and Christianity off over against Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta; Judaism insists that God be fulfilled in history, Christianity that history be transformed to be fulfilled in God.

Christians approach the existential dualism of God and history, and the unity of human life in relation to God alone, by means of a theoretical conception of Jesus as the Christ. Jesus was the paradigm of how to live in the world but not be of it. The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) stress his devotion and ministry; John concentrates on how he marks the pathway to God from within this life. Subsequent debates over what it means to be transformed bodily so as to be in union with God, such as those discussed in chapter 6, were fought over the interpretation of such core texts about Jesus. The Trinitarian controversies carried this out to elaborate philosophic detail. In respect of defining the proper course of human life according to the paradigm of a founder, Christianity has much in common with the theory of avatārs in Hinduism and with following the way of the Buddha. But more than those traditions, on balance, Christianity in its anti-docetic modes has stressed the importance of fully investing oneself in the world.

Christians early conceived the practical consequences of existential dualism and the unity of true human identity with God in terms of grace and sin. Grace is the divine action that keeps the existential option of human unity with God open, and sin is the human action and subsequent limiting condition that prevents or inhibits that unity. St. Paul intensified the Jewish notion of evil inclinations to be a depotentiating transformation of human powers so as to make people unable to return to unity with God, a unity he interpreted in terms of the Torah’s covenant (6.2). He interpreted Jesus Christ as the man sent from God, the divine Son, who is the sufficiently powerful means of grace to retransform human
nature. As Fredriksen relates (6.2), according to Paul the first man Adam corrupted human nature and Jesus, the second Adam, restored it. The practice of life “within the world but not of it,” therefore, is the practice of human beings availing themselves of the various means of grace, which for Christians mainly has meant becoming disciples of Jesus in one historically conditioned sense or another. As Fredriksen says, Christianity has provided many ways of conceiving the problem of getting body and soul together to enter into the divine or heavenly life.

8.2.6 Islamic Ideas of Unity

Islam, like the other monotheistic religions, affirms a strong God-world dualism (7.4–7.5). At the same time, far more than Christianity, even more than Judaism, Islam emphasizes the unity or oneness of God the creator. Haq goes so far as to suggest a deep similarity of the Islamic stress on unity with the Chinese “one-centered” religion (7.1).

Three main points specify the Islamic approach to cosmic unity. First, there is the absolute unity of God, witnessed to in the primordial “vision” (7.1) and elaborated especially in opposition to any kind of polytheism and Christian trinitarianism (7.4.2). The Islamic preoccupation with *shirk*, idolatry, is less an attempt to establish a gulf between God and the world than an attempt to deny any multiplicity in deity (7.4.1).

Second, because the absolutely unified God absolutely creates the whole world, the world itself has a high degree of unity. The world’s unity consists in the *amr*, “the divine command which is the fundamental constitutive principle of each created entity, placing it under obligation to take its assigned place in the larger cosmic whole” (7.3.2). It is in respect of each thing having a specific harmonic place within the larger whole that Islam is similar to the Chinese case. Natural things, for Islam, cannot do anything but express their roles as defined by *amr*; but human beings have the freedom to do otherwise, and hence the *amr* for humans is a matter of obligation that might be failed. Precisely because the *amr* of human beings, elaborated in *Shari’a* and proclaimed in *ahkām*, is to live under obligation (of which much more in chapter 9), the world has a unity derivative from the absolute unity of Allah (7.3.1, 7.4, 7.6).

Third, the unity of Allah with the world, encompassing their dualism, is accomplished by the former being the total source of the latter. This will be elaborated further in discussing the cosmological category of ontological status (8.3.6). Here we note the tension Haq describes (7.5) that results in mystical tendencies to lose oneself in God or to find God in oneself, both of which are *shirk* but are almost unavoidable when entering into the Creator-created relation.
Islam stands in steady contrast with Buddhism, at least the Madhyama-kā strain described in chapter 3, with its plainly objective reference to God and the world and their unity. Islam stands with Judaism, Christianity, and Chinese religion over against the māyā theme in Advaita Vedānta in emphasizing the unified real plurality of the natural and social world.

The emphasis on unity in Islam, both divine unity and the unity of the world, gives it the perspective on life of free people in society taking life as a field of obligations. Haq (7.3.2) describes the development of the Islamic notion of law as divine command, articulating the normative elements Allah establishes in nature and society. Moreover, the field of obligations is a unified one.

Judaism and Christianity share the perspective that life is a field of obligations, but specify that somewhat differently. Judaism, at least after Ben Sira (5.2.3), stubbornly acknowledges a kind of recalcitrance of evil, and a problematic tragedy in that field of obligations. The messianic theme in Judaism is that God and good people should be able to triumph in history, and that God is provident for that; nevertheless, the unity of the divine intent across history, the fulfillment of the promises, is not evident. Like Islam, Judaism sees the forces of evil to be part of creation, and thus subserving the divine purpose (7.6). But that purpose seems obscure, or at least not obviously fulfilled in what happens. Islam, by contrast, had its formative period when its political aspirations were on the ascendancy, in contrast to late Second Temple Rabbinic Judaism that was formed when Israel's low status was deteriorating to the complete destruction of temple worship and the abandonment of any pretense of a Jewish puppet state. Islam has a more nearly triumphalist obsession with the divine unity of the field of obligation, to be expressed in political exercise of Islamic praxis (7.6).

The Islamic perspective on the unity of the field of obligations contrasts also with the Christian perspective that the obligations are to be engaged with the expectation that life is filled with crosses. Unity in Christian perspective comes only through people's unifications with God that embrace dis-unified historical life in the transcendence of history. Islam, of course, is filled with visions of Paradise, but not a Paradise in radical discontinuity with historical life; in this respect Islam agrees with the Chinese position that there is only one world even though it contains more than is apparent to ordinary consciousness. Christianity views the kingdom of heaven or life before God as a transformation and transvaluation of ordinary historical existence.

Islam agrees with all the other religions studied that life is a field of responsibility points, specified in Islam as obligations in the sense expressed in Shari‘a (7.3.3). Buddhism specifies the field of responsibility points as
occasions for liberation from ego-induced cravings, and Advaita Vedānta as occasions for learning and practicing discriminations making apparent non-dualism. The personal and social dimensions of this field will be discussed later (9.3.6).

The chief theoretical implication of the Islamic approach to unity, especially the unity of the world, is the conviction that the world is rational and that therefore science is not only possible but a part of fiqh, the process of understanding the divine word (7.3.3). The theoretical emphasis on the divine word, shared with Judaism and Christianity, even though interpreted differently, promotes science and rational inquiry as an important virtue. Thus, whereas Buddhism of the sort studied here and Vedāntic Hinduism are tolerant of science as non-interfering with religion, Islam promotes rational inquiry as a positive pious virtue.4

The practical consequence of the Islamic approach to unity is enthusiasm for the engagement of the life of obligations, with a sense that all is working out God's unified plan. Chinese religion, Judaism, and Christianity are all committed to the goodness of life, but with reservations. The Chinese understand that the search for harmonies might be frustrated because the proximate disharmonious processes participate in vast harmonies beyond our reach. The Jewish sense of suffering and tragedy means enthusiasm is qualified by trips to the Wailing Wall. The Christian sense of the inevitable fragmentariness of life in its human dimensions means that practical commitments to life's responsibilities are always to be accompanied and supplemented by intentional involvement with the transcendent God.

8.3 Ontological Status

The vague category of ontological status relative to the human condition has to do with the contingency of human existence and the interpretation of this with regard to the cosmos as such. Ontological status is related to the unity of the cosmos in many ways, but is not reducible to it. How or why does the world exist (whatever its unity or lack thereof)? What is its power of existence? The traditions specify this in ways that at first look very different but that have more continuity than expected when reflected upon as specifications of the ontological question. “Ontology,” of course is a Western philosophical category, and the “ontological question” is a phrase from Heidegger given theological currency within Christianity by Tillich. We mean ontology in a much vaguer sense than this, of which the Western tradition is only one line of specification, a vague sense having to do with how or why things exist, contingency, power, and the like. The
Chinese case is probably the harshest test as to whether this category picks up on an important respect in which religions interpret the world relative to the human condition.

8.3.1 Chinese Ontological Ideas

The ontological status of the cosmos in Chinese religions, given the mythic pattern of the One, is that the plural world ontologically arises from within, as it were, rather than from some source transcending the aboriginal unity. Kohn (2.2) cites Daode jing 42: “The Dao produces the One; the One produces the two; the two produce the three. . . .” In this case the Dao is the aboriginal or incipient unity and is present in all portions of the plural world as the incipient unifying ground of the existence and connections of manifest diversity. A similar point can be made for later representations in Wangbi or Zhou Dunyi7 of non-being giving rise to being or the Great Ultimate and then to the manifold things: the one unified manifest world of changes does not depend ontologically on another one of any sort, but on a principle of ontological origination within the unity of the one world itself, not one of its parts but a self-starting incipience of its own diversified unity.8 We in this chapter stress the difference of the ontological point from the unity problem more than Kohn does.

The Chinese ontological conception of incipience conduces to a perspective of deep appreciation of spontaneity in things and in human affairs. The Chinese of course also have a deep appreciation for the causal patterns and processes of nature, of which human social and personal life take part. But the relation between the flow of temporal causation and ontological spontaneity in the core motifs of Chinese thought is quite different from what it might be in Enlightenment European thought (2.4.3). In the modern European scientific worldview the processes of nature are often construed as controlled by a mechanistic determinism, relative to which spontaneity would be a breaking of law-governed process, as in Hume’s approach to miracles; or the deterministic process of nature might be construed as compromised by islands of indeterminacy with regard to the future, in relation to which spontaneity is the individual decisions that determine what is otherwise an indeterminate option, as in Whitehead’s process philosophy. The Chinese ontological conception is different: in its perspective, every happening within nature is both continuous with other processes and also ontologically spontaneous, arising from the Dao, the incipient one.9

For Chinese religion the theoretical implication of the ontology of incipient one-worldness is that the human condition is part of the unity of the cosmos in two senses. One sense has to do with harmonizing with the
processes that make up the whole. The other has to do with finding oneself situated in those processes as a spontaneous product and agent of the ontological arising of the world, a depth dimension of human existence. For Chinese religion, spontaneity is not in competition with the ongoing processes of nature. On the contrary, one finds one's spontaneous depths by harmonizing more closely with the pervasive unifying forces of the cosmos. Spontaneity is not willfulness, but a merging of the will with the principles of harmonization ingredient in nature's or society's processes. Or better, spontaneity requires a deconstruction of selfish motives that put one at odds with the harmonies of the One and an opening of the will (to use a Western philosophic term temporarily) so as to be conformed to the principles of harmonization in the cosmos, a message of *The Great Learning* and *The Dri-tryne of the Mean* as much as of the *Daode* *jing* and the *Zhuangzi* (2. 3. 4).

Among the practical consequences of the Chinese ontological idea are the practices for cultivating openness and a feeling for one's grounding in the ontological spontaneity of existence. The Daoists do this with the inner alchemy discussed in 2. 3, the Confucians with their cultivation of the sense of Heaven and its mandâte (and the Neo-Confucians with the cultivation of Principle), and the Chinese Buddhists with their cultivation of a mind empty and open to the spontaneous suchness of things.

### 8.3.2 Buddhist Ontological Ideas

Whereas Buddhism in most of its forms, especially that studied here, does not have a religiously important sense of a unified objective world whose ontological status might be in question, it does have an extraordinarily important sense of the ontological contingency of everything that happens, as 3. 1 points out. This is not contingency in the sense of lack of determination by the past. Nor is it contingency on an external ground as might be the case for some theisms, nor internal ground as might be the case for Chinese religion in the sense mentioned previously. Rather each thing in the world for Buddhism is contingent in the sense of not having its own being, having no "self," as Eckel says in 3. 2. Everything, including persons, are mere congeries of constantly changing elements, only conventionally identified together and named. Given the constant flow of elements, there are no stable things in the world to which words refer; or, to put the matter the other way, the reality of stable things is contingent on the reference of words, not on the nature of the things. Any given "thing" to which a word might refer is reducible to the causal components that are passing one another in the object of reference. So things in the world are ontologically contingent in two senses for Buddhism, especially of the
Madhyamaka sort. On the one hand any given object in our experience is contingent on our conventional reference for its identity over against other things in the flow; on the other hand, any object is contingent in the sense of being wholly reducible to the array of conditioning causes.

With such a different ontology from the Chinese, it is perhaps surprising that Buddhism’s ontological perspective on the world is similar in precisely this point: the radical contingency of things on their conditions and on conventional designation fills the world with openings for freedom. Or, as the point is expressed in 3.2, coming to realization of the non-self-identity of things means that you need not be bound by any of the attachments to false conceptions of self or of other things. From the perspective of Mahāyāna Buddhism’s ontological contingency, life is a field of opportunities for spontaneity. In this regard, Buddhism’s discovery of freedom as spontaneity in the midst of dependent co-origination is remarkably like Chinese religion’s sense of spontaneity in the midst of temporal process.

The Buddhist ontology of radical contingency takes the world into perspective by seeing things in what Eckel characterizes as the Middle Way (3.3). That is, things are recognized or approached with an attitude ready to negate the descriptions with which they are designated or apprehended. The fact that putative reference is to change makes this understandable: to say an object has such and such a character when in fact it is on the way to becoming something else is to be ready always to take back what has been said. But change itself is not the only reason for finding the middle way between negations. The very lack of self-identity in things, and in the knowers referring to them, requires expression through the elliptical forms of assertion and negation.

There are thus two levels of comparative contrast between Chinese religion and Buddhism in their theories of the world extrinsic to their ontologies. Both agree in stressing change and denying anything like an Aristotelian enduring self-identified substance. The Chinese, however, describe things positively precisely as changes, as transformations, as shifting proportions of yin and yang; change, not substantial things, is the object of reference. The Buddhists, by contrast, assume that the objects of reference ought to be static things like words and therefore have to draw back from positive description to the elliptical forms of reference through assertion and negation. Perhaps the Sanskrit origin of Buddhist thinking has deep affinities with the other Indo-European languages that lead many West Asian thinkers to believe in substances-with-properties like subjects-with-predicates. Eckel and Thatamanil, in commenting on an early draft of this chapter, remind us to not make the comparison too strict: “Conventionally Buddhists are perfectly happy to use words. They
criticize their literal significance when words are viewed from the ultimate perspective. Conventionally there is no need to be elliptical. Ultimately there is no need to refer." This qualification, however, makes the point of the comparative contrast with the Chinese happy readiness to refer to concrete things at all levels. This is one level of comparison.

The other level of comparison between Chinese religion and Buddhism is with regard to reference. Being of a piece with the entirety of the harmonious universe for Chinese religion, a person’s referential abilities and the structure of human knowing need to be natural and continuous with the causal processes of what it knows. Knowing, in Chinese religion, is a cultivated way of being in harmony, connected on the one hand with the rest of the cosmos and resonating spontaneously with its depths; knowing is on the one hand practiced and on the other intuitive, in accord with the Chinese conceptions of harmony (2.3.3). By contrast, the Mahāyāna Buddhist notions of reference are problematically related to natural processes. Because things in nature cannot be taken with simple positive form (of change), reference is made a function of the subject’s conventional delimitation of the world on the one hand and of the subject’s being fooled into delusion by taking those conventions to be more than they are on the other. For Buddhism, as explicated in chapter 3, even the conception of “the world” is a result of a special Buddhist reading of reference as much as of a reading of nature. Whereas the Buddhist approach to reference is to refer in such ways as to become free from suffering, the Chinese approach is to refer so as to get it right about nature and thus be able to reconnect harmoniously.

Chinese Buddhism is continuous with Indian Buddhism in the respect just cited, namely, the practical cultivation of the apprehension of the spontaneous suchness of things, their no-selfness or emptiness. The radical ontological contingency featured in Indian Madhyamaka and Yogācāra means that people need to realize the freedom inherent in things in order to free themselves and exercise their freedom. The practices of Buddhist cultivation are aimed at this realization.

There is a striking comparative difference between Chinese and Buddhist religion at the practical level stemming from their ontologies, however. The Chinese practical bent is toward greater connectedness and harmony, both regarding the processes of the world and the return to the One in depth. The Buddhist bent in part is toward disconnection, toward escaping the binding connections resulting from hypostatizing conventional unities and self-identities, so as to be free. In other part, of course, the Buddhist bent is toward connection. As Thatamanil writes in commentary, “The limitless compassion of the bodhisattvas is grounded in the realization of dependent co-origination. To realize emptiness is also
to realize mutual co-dependence. Consequently, there is both a moving away from connections based on reification and a moving toward all creatures and their suffering." The Neo-Confucians were extremely critical of the Buddhist meditative attempt to reach completely empty non-being; from the Neo-Confucian point of view, that would be to fall out of the One into a pure fiction, and would be entirely contrary to the religious intent to maximize harmony. (What would it be like for a Song sage wannabe to team-teach a course on quiet-sitting in the Hanlin Academy with a working bodhisattva?)

8.3.3 Hindu Ontological Ideas

One of Advaita Vedānta’s primary concerns is ontological, namely, to discriminate what is really real in the context where life is tormented with illusions (4.1). Although it has been common in the West to associate Vedānta with the Perennial Philosophy, akin to Neo-Platonism with its levels of reality reaching to higher and higher unity, the point of Advaita is that there simply is not any other reality, lesser or not. True, there are levels of discrimination; but anything dual is māyā. The ontological distinction is between Brahman, full reality, and māyā, which is not reality. Chinese religion, by contrast, does not distinguish significantly between true reality and a vast realm of māyā, though it does acknowledge that people can be fooled by their own selfishness and by being unpracticed in discerning the Dao. Buddhism would seem to share with Advaita Vedānta the view that the realm of samsāra has an illusory, deceptive, and binding character. But what is religiously real for Buddhism is the subjective experiencing non-self and the reality of the rest is a matter of religious indifference, whereas what is real for Advaita is Brahman relative to which the subjective experiencing self is unreal insofar as it takes itself to be different. For the Mādhyamikas, as Eckel points out in commentary, all reality is conventional, “including the subjective experience of Emptiness.” But not all conventional realities are as religiously important as that experience.

That only Brahman is real for Advaita Vedānta means that all appearances to the contrary are māyā. Thus the field of experience from the ontological perspective of Brahman is ready for discrimination (4.3). The unrealized person takes the world into perspective and is fooled into believing that it is real. The realized person simply enjoys the world for what it is, happy as described in the citation of the last two verses of the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi in 4.4.

The theoretical ontological ideas in Advaita Vedānta are those distinguishing māyā from reality, as expressed in 4.2.1. What is religiously
interesting about the world, from this standpoint, are what we might call the puzzle-points, the places where in particular some element of māyā is taken to be real itself and also capable of being unveiled, like apparent snakes shown to be ropes (4.3). Clooney analyzes one such puzzle-point from the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi in his discussion of the five layers of non-self that ordinarily are taken to be the real self (4.3). This differs from the extrinsic ontology of Chinese religions, which identifies action-points as where harmonies can be affected for the better, perhaps with some spontaneous depth. The Advaita theory is similar in many respects to the Buddhist emphasis on learning not to misconstrue experience because of existentially binding ignorance. With much mutual resonance, Buddhism focuses on removing the causes of the binding ignorance, namely cravings that suppose permanence and self-identity, while Advaita focuses on identifying the mistakes and developing the capacity of discernment necessary to distinguish the true Brahman in all things from the false or dual. Thatamani writes in commentary on an early draft here:

After all, both Mādhyamikas and Advaitins focus on removing a habitual cognitive mistake. For the former, that mistake is the imputation of intrinsic existence or own-being on both self and things. For the latter, the mistake is the superimposition (adhyāsa) of the non-self on the Self. These mistakes are the basic cause for the perpetuation of the defilements (klesa) or faults that mark the human predicament. In Madhyamaka, these defilements are raga, dvesa, and moha. This list with variations also occurs in Advaita texts. Both traditions believe that fundamental ignorance is responsible for these problems but disagree on the nature of that ignorance.

The outcome sought by Buddhism is to be free because no longer bound in ignorance. The outcome for Advaita is to be free because identical with Brahman, fully realizing the truth, previous error itself being part of māyā.

A practical consequence of Advaita Vedānta ontology is the path of discipleship that binds a proper male Brahmin to a guru, perhaps in a community of disciples, reading texts and working on the transformations necessary to gain ever better discrimination of the distinctions between māyā and the real. Chapter 4.4 analyzes this as bhavana. Advaita Vedānta practice shares its transformative theme with Chinese religion and Buddhism, though with less of an emphasis on transforming the world than much Chinese religions exhibits and more of a sense of becoming attuned to the true reality than Buddhism, which makes no objective claims about true reality.
8.3.4 *Jewish Ontological Ideas*

The ontological status of the world for Judaism is obviously reflected in its claim that the world is wholly created by God and would not exist without God. This point it shares with Christianity and Islam as well as many forms of Hinduism. Judaism is distinct in its note that there is a special ontological status for the people of Israel, set within the larger ontological status of the created order. Israel is ontologically special because it is defined in relation to Torah, which is God’s revelation and in some forms of Judaism is treated as preexisting the world as the means of the world’s creation (5.1.2). This is an ontological difference for Israel, not just a superiority of civilization as in some Chinese religion, or a readiness of a certain class of people to receive revelation, for instance, smart male interested Brahmins with a teacher and a text at hand.

The perspective on the world from the Jewish ontology of creation and Israel’s special status is that the world is a problem. The problem is that, whereas from the human standpoint we are free and responsible, from the divine standpoint all we are, good and bad, is the gift of God (5.3.3.2). Another way to express this is the following. From the standpoint of the ontology of creation, there is an asymmetrical relation between God and the world such that God is responsible for everything. From the standpoint of the ontological condition of Israel, and even the rest of the nations, there is a symmetrical relation of reciprocity between divine command and human obedience or disobedience, between divine justice and mercy and human repentance and recommitment, and so forth. Because Israel is commanded to be responsible, it treats God symmetrically as an Other to whom it is responsible, and this is problematic because the ontology of creation is asymmetrical. When these different standpoints come into conflict or press questions for interpreting God’s person, generally the asymmetrical relation of creation trumps, but without ever denying the interactive symmetry of command (in Torah) and response (5.3.4.4).

One of Judaism’s theoretical ontological ideas has already been mentioned, namely, the need to understand the world as a field in which to be responsible, including taking responsibility for one’s own faulty actions, at the same time acknowledging that God is sovereign over all. This is focused by construing life through Torah such that occasions for obedience are at once choice-points for responsible freedom and acknowledgment points of God’s creative sovereignty. Judaism thus shares with Chinese religion a proclivity to view the world as punctuated with decision points for the exercise of responsibility. But there is little in Chinese religion corresponding to the Jewish view that our responsibility is judged by a God
construed in highly personalistic ways; even the Daoist gods who measure and reward human action are represented more as bureaucratic functionaries than as the highly individualistic God who has a personal history with Israel. The Jewish emphasis on conforming to Torah, especially loving God with all one’s heart, mind, soul, and strength, for the sake of pleasing God, has little resonance in Buddhism or the Vivekaçūdamāṇi’s Advaita Vedānta that do not give much place for gods whom it is important to please. In some other forms of Hindu religion, there is a kind of reverse emphasis on human beings taking pleasure in God that has its analogue in Jewish scholars taking pleasure in studying God in the Torah.

One practical inference from Judaism’s ontology of creation is a strong focus on the worship of God. That worship reflects the dualism of the ontology. On the one hand is the straightforward address to God in devotion and prayer. On the other hand is the worship that consists in the practice of Torah, and the working through of the problematic parts of life resulting from the symmetrical interactive relation with God, problems concerning who is responsible for the evil in the world, and also for doing good.

8.3.5 Christian Ontological Ideas

Christianity shares Judaism’s ancient motif of creation of the entire world by a monotheistic God. Perhaps more than Judaism it has interpreted this according to a great variety of philosophical constructions, Origen’s being analyzed in 6.4. The creation theme is common in many forms of Hinduism, and the contingency of the apparent world on an originating source has analogues in Chinese religion. The special ontological element in most strains of Christianity has to do with the role of Jesus whom the “Prologue” to the Gospel of John identifies as the incarnation of the Logos by means of which the entire creation takes place. There have, of course, been many specifications of what this might mean, often involving complex doctrines of God as Trinity. The special ontological point, however, is that because the world is constituted by the divine Logos it cannot have a separate existence over and against God, Deist fashion. In fact, the way to a unity between human beings and God is laid through the Logos. In practical terms, following Jesus as the incarnation of the Logos is supposed to lead people into proper harmony with God. This special ontological twist in Christianity surprisingly bears close relation to the Chinese ontological conception of the world arising from its own internal incipient ground; but whereas Chinese religion emphasizes the world with its ground, Christianity emphasizes in reverse God as creator whose creative act the world is, formed by the Logos and guided temporally by the Holy Spirit.
The perspective on the world from most forms of Christian ontology is that everything in the world is potentially interpretable as the Logos or God, and thus as a connecting point in the potential existential unity between God and people, especially insofar as each thing has a way to be pure. Neo-Platonic Christianity provides a specific philosophical theory of how God is to be found in the world. Yet in nearly all strains of Christianity, ancient, medieval, and modern, there is an ontological play on the double meaning of Jesus Christ: on the one hand, the historical Jesus from whom the Christian Church dates its life and, on the other hand, the cosmic Logos or principle Jesus was supposed to incarnate and that subsequently is grasped according to the symbols of Jesus Christ. Put in other symbols, the Christian perspective on the world is that it is the divine plenum, a notion central to the scientific mind of Isaac Newton and, as we have seen in 8.2.6, with the Islamic notion of the rationality of the world.

The Christian ontological perspective on the world as the divine plenum or as shaped by divinity creating has remarkable parallels in some forms of Hinduism, for instance in the Bhagavad Gītā, chapters 8–10. This point is not weakened by the fact that Christianity recognizes only one incarnation whereas Hinduism recognizes many. There is also some parallel with the Chinese perspective on the world as a field of harmony-points at which spontaneous freedom might be exercised; the parallel is that the spontaneous freedom arises from the incipient ground just as the Christian believes that a responsible action is expressive of the divinity within. Whereas Christianity's ontology often leads it to equate acts of human freedom with divine action (modern process theology is a counterexample), and hence the pursuit of responsibility is a way of intensifying the unity with God, Christianity does share with Buddhism the point that the free exercise of responsibility is the goal of practice.

Christianity shares with Judaism the conception of the world as a field of responsibility both for loving God and pursuing justice. More than Judaism, however, it sees the occasions for responsibility in that field as connecting points with God, shaped by the Logos in their very structure and capable of bearing responsibility in a Christ-like manner. Hence the Christian understanding of the prevalence of grace: though it is human responsibility, it is God acting in the responsible person (6.5.3). Hence also the extreme form of sin, according to Christianity in contrast to Judaism: to turn from God, as Augustine put it, whose Logos shapes the very being of people is serious indeed, an ontological denial more serious and debilitating than a mere acceding to evil inclinations.

Though sharing with Chinese religion the sense that the world is a field for responsible action, Christianity stresses the possibility of alienation
from the world and its ground far more than is common in Chinese religion. Metaphors of destructive, even self-destructive, disharmony describe evil in the Chinese context; Christian metaphors have to do with ontological contradiction of self and of the unity between self and God.

The practical consequence of the Christian ontology is the pursuit of holiness by means of availing oneself of divine grace in the world. For the most part, this means life within the Church that presents grace in the form of symbolic encounters with Jesus, the saints, holy times and places, sacraments, and so forth. But it also means finding grace, and responding so as to become more holy, in nature and also events of social life. This is remarkably similar to the Neo-Confucian project of becoming a sage by availing oneself of Principle, which can be found in all things. The actual practices of holiness in Christianity might have many similarities with those in Buddhism, including meditation, monastic life, even asceticism; some Buddhist sects urge celibacy like the Christian sects discussed in 6.6.2. The Christian ontological emphasis on God graciously present in the world, helping human beings, is different from the non-ontological but pious Buddhist emphasis on the grace of the Lord Buddha in that the latter is usually represented as merely an expedient means of thinking.

8.3.6 Islamic Ontological Ideas

The principal Islamic ontological idea, in fact what might be regarded as the principal idea in all of Islam—so important is the ontological question—is that the entire world is wholly dependent on God its creator. The internal dialectic of Islam involves defining the boundaries of the world by test cases of idolatry, *shirk*. The dispute between the Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites recounted in 7.4.2.1–2 concerning whether the Qu'ran is created or an eternal part of God is perhaps the central test case. A fundamental underlying intent is to deny multiplicity within God, and that means denying parts of God that are determinate so as to be different from one another. Hence, even the Ash'arites affirmed that the Qu'ranic Word expressed in spoken and written words is contingent and created whereas the eternal Word in Allah is a disposition that is not internally manifold (7.4.2.2).

Islam and Judaism vaguely agree that the entire world is contingent upon God as creator, and share core texts to that effect. But because of its fierce insistence on the unity of Allah, Islam specifies that the Creator be non-manifold or simple, at least so far as that can be conceived (7.4). Judaism, by contrast, construes the Creator very much in personal terms with purposes and regrets, and especially a tension between justice and mercy; for Jews to say that the Lord is One is to affirm integrity
and organization to the divine Person, not to claim internal non-manifoldness. Judaism has been less influenced than either Islam or Christianity by the Hellenistic philosophic tradition that offers abstract conceptual options for interpreting the nature of the creator and the creator-creature relation.

Islam and Christianity share profound commitments to the ontological claim that the world is created by God, and also are jointly shaped by the dual streams of Semitic thought in the Hebrew Bible and by Hellenistic and late antique Greek philosophy. Unlike Islam's very great rhetorical stress on divine unity, Christianity's rhetoric has been Trinitarian, affirming a manifold of divine Persons within the Godhead. Indeed, within one line of Christian thought that emphasizes the "immanent Trinity," the three Persons are taken to be internal to God eternally and apart from the world and God's creative activity; this line dominated the great Christian councils of the fourth century and appeared as the orthodox Christian position to the early Islamic thinkers. Another line of Trinitarian thinking, however, called "economic Trinitarianism," ascribes the three-Person distinction to the relation between the Creator and the created world; Catherine Mowry LaCugna has recently argued that this was the better position all through the Patristic period.

The range of philosophical conceptions articulating economic Trinitarianism overlaps in many interesting ways with the range of Islamic conceptions for the Creator-creature relation, with disputes about the status of the Word as Second Person of the Trinity mapping the Mu'tazilite-Ash'arite debate. Aristotle's insistence on self-sufficient simplicity, Neo-Platonism's metaphors of creation as overflowing plenitude, and *creatio ex nihilo* models of creation competed in both Islam and Christianity to afford adequate conceptualities for affirming the complete contingency of the whole world on the Creator-God while maintaining also that God is genuinely revealed in a divine Word expressed in the world. Islam, of course, never identified that Word in the world with a person in whom its worldly expression is incarnate, as Christianity affirmed about Jesus. But concerning the Creator-world relation, the perhaps surprising parallels between the Islamic and Christian dialectic are exhibited in the theology of Thomas Aquinas. Influenced by direct interaction with the Islamic philosophers as well as by the Neo-Platonic and Aristotelian elements of his Christian tradition, Thomas began his *Summa* with a discussion of the existence and simple unity of God, subordinating the Trinitarian distinctions to second place, and making them philosophical negligible. Thomas conceived God's dispositions to be non-manifold within the divine simplicity, manifold only as expressed in creation; God can know separate creatures by knowing their simple origin.
within the creative disposition, not by distinguishing them in separate acts of knowledge. Thus in many respects Thomas' position has more in common with the Ash'arite Islam than with the immanent Trinitarianism of the fourth-century Christian councils. Although our seminar discussion did not explore the philosophical aspects of the Creator-world relation in any detail for either Islam or Christianity, it did indicate that this is a fruitful avenue for comparative research.

Islam shares with Advaita Vedānta the ontological idea that the manifold world is totally contingent on God as Creator. It would be another interesting research project to explore the uses in Advaita Vedānta of conceptions of Śiva as creator and of the distinction between Sagūpta Brahman (with qualities) and Nirgūpta Brahman (without qualities), as Hindu attempts to affirm the total dependence of the world while at the same time affirming that the Creator can be known somehow in the world, a project like Islam's. The sharp difference between Islam and Advaita Vedānta concerning the relation between the Creator and the world has to do with the world. Islam affirms a strongly realistic and objective view of the world of nature and society, with little patience for construals of the world of ordinary experience as māyā. Advaita Vedānta's central claim about the importance of discriminating non-dual Brahman within the field of māyā puts the central religious focus on precisely that point where Islam has difficulty keeping the human from sliding into God or humans claiming divine presence, both forms of shirk; see 7.5 on the Sufi mystics. That is, the common vague Creator-world affirmation is specified dualistically in Islam and monistically (or non-dualistically) in Advaita Vedānta.

The ontology of Chinese religion is epistemologically realistic, like Islam's, but not concerned to define a transcendence for the creative ground by a sharp distinction whose boundaries are marked by potential shirk. On the contrary, Chinese religion internalizes the ground to the Oneness of the cosmos by making it a deeper level of incipient determinate multiplicity. In fact, in certain core Chinese expressions there is not a single distinction between ground and manifold world but a series of nested incipient orders; Zhou Dunyi thus wrote of non-being (wujì), being (taijì), yang, yin, elements, and the ten thousand things, each item generating its successor, and only the last being the multiple organic world of processes.14

Because the strain of Madhyamaka Buddhism we studied ascribes ontological matters to subjective functions of human experience, it does not provide interesting comparisons with Islam at the ontological level, save in that very point: realistic ontology is not ultimately important for this Buddhist approach to the human condition.
The perspective on life deriving from the Islamic ontology of the total dependency of the world on Allah as Creator has what might be called three dimensions. First and most obvious is the complete and total submission of each person, and of social groupings such as family and state, to Allah, acknowledging and witnessing to, seeing, the dependence (7.1). The second dimension is the commitment to follow Sharia in all one’s ways, personally and politically; as Haq puts it (7.3), to be human is to live under obligation and therefore take life to be a field of obligations. This dimension is part of the means to submission to Allah in the first dimension. The third is associated with Sufism and is the finding and worshipping of Allah in the world, with all the risks of shirk this entails (7.5–6).

All of the religions we studied take up a perspective on life as a field of occasions of responsibility, and this vague perspectival agreement derives from their ideas of unity, value, and causation as much as from their ontological ideas. Different aspects of the diverse specifications of responsibility are discussed in this chapter at appropriate points. The point to emphasize here, concerning the perspective coming from Islam’s ontological ideas, is that the ground and goal of responsibility is the ontological relation between human beings (and the world more generally) and Allah the Creator. This consideration is not of much importance in Chinese religion and Buddhism, at least of the sort we studied. Various forms of Hinduism, including Advaita Vedanta, acknowledge that the ground of obligation and the contingent content of each person’s obligations come from the contingency of human life generally on Isvara as Creator; there is a religious element in the obrigatoriness of one’s obligation, as Arjuna discovered in the Bhagavad Gita. But the pursuit of obligation is not the heart and soul of religiosity derivative from the human ontological status, as it is in Islam.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share certain themes derivative from the shared conception of God and the created world. They agree that one should love the Creator with heart, mind, soul, and strength, including submission to the divine will, the first dimension. They agree that social life should be structured by the Word of God, variously specifying that Word as Torah, Christ-the-Logos, and the Qur’an-Sharia, the second dimension. And they agree in their mystical strains that God is to be found in the world and human soul, variously specified, the third dimension. But Islam more than the others stresses that the emphasis on obligation is definitive of the ontological status of human beings (7.3). The others would not deny the point, but they would soften its force. Judaism softens the point by attributing to God some of the responsibility for evil, whereas Islam tends to put a positive spin on evil as serving God’s purpose, part
of the maturation process for human beings (7.6). Christianity softens the point by saying that even faithful fulfillment of obligations may be fragmented and frustrated, and should be understood in terms of the supplementary relation to God, whereas Islam has no doubt that God's purposes are being served in history. Historical moral life in the Jewish perspective is puzzling, in the Christian perspective unrewarded, but in the Islamic perspective triumphant.

The theoretical implication of the Islamic ontology regarding the human condition is that it ought to be possible rationally (through fiqh) to conform to a consistent divine plan (7.3.3). Without dismissing the ambiguities involved in casuistry, and the fallible nature of specific juridical judgments, Islam attempts to conceive the world as a consistent expression of a moral Will. As noted before, this is a strong motive for scientific inquiry. Judaism shares Islam's faith that God is provident, but wrestles with the fact that apparent counterinstances to a fundamental moral ontological structure are so strong, according its interpretation, that it is hard simply to explain them as hidden purposes: human freedom is an ontological stumbling block to an ontologically moral and divinely ruled universe. Christianity says that the ordinary historical plane of the cosmos is not moral, however obliged people are to try to make it so, and that the providence of God involves transcendence of that historical plane.

The practical implications of Islam's ontology, of course, are an intense practice of worship—prayer five times a day for everybody, not just monks and nuns—and moral conformation of life to the law. Parallels to this exist in Judaism and Christianity, but often with the recognition that such intensity is a matter more for heroes than for everyone.

8.4 Value

The category of the value of the cosmos, and of human beings as part of the cosmos, is specified by different approaches to value in the religious traditions. But for the human condition, the vague meaning of value is how and whether human life is good, given the value constitution of the cosmos.

8.4.1 Chinese Ideas of Value

The Chinese conception of value at the cosmological level is expressed in the metaphors of harmony and unity (2.1). A thing is good by virtue of what it harmonizes and how it harmonizes with the whole. Things are better the more they are in harmony with the cosmic processes articulating
the one (2.2). Miller, in commentary on an early draft of this chapter, puts the point with a stress on nature:

The most important thing to say, I think, is that because the constitution of all human processes is the same as everything else in nature, there is not a great distinction between humanity and nature. Consequently the highest aesthetic value is placed on things that reflect most closely natural patterns, and promote the harmony of man and beast. As a consequence of this life of all sorts is intrinsically valuable and good, because it is natural. Nature is not amoral, wild, dangerous and beautiful, but exquisite when fully harmonized with human beings.

The perspective on the human condition of the Chinese conception of cosmic value as harmony is that life is basically good because it cannot help but be an element in the larger harmony. Even when things go wrong and people suffer, that suffering is possible only because of cosmic processes that tolerate it, processes that might be local setbacks in harmony, or because human consciousness allows for local obstructions of the otherwise good movements of nature and society (2.3.3).

The theoretical consequence for the human condition of the Chinese ideas of value as harmony is the articulation of a practical worldview highlighting occasions for harmony and disharmony as of prime pragmatic significance (2.3.2). Enjoyable things are enjoyed because they create, exercise, or celebrate human connectedness, harmony, and inner balance, particularly reflecting patterns of nature in human life; for instance, music and ritual, art and poetry, family life and cuisine are articulated as expressions of harmony. Contrarily, the pains of life are articulated in the Chinese worldview as elements of disharmony, disconnection, and inner imbalance. Given the Chinese ontological idea of internal incipient oneness, harmony is interpreted both horizontally, as it were, wherein one thing harmonizes with the processes connecting it across the cosmos, and vertically wherein the harmony enjoyed includes an openness and spontaneous sincerity regarding ontological roots (2.3.3).

The Chinese practical consequences for the human condition of the idea of value as harmony have to do with the religious practices of attaining or restoring both external and internal harmony, as discussed in 2.3. The practical intent is to make possible enjoyable harmony both with the rest of the cosmos and also with the spontaneous grounds of one’s being.

8.4.2 Buddhist Ideas of Value

The Buddhist approach to value is somewhat different from the Chinese. Rather than treating it as a characteristic of things in the world, or the
world as a whole that the Chinese perceive as pervasively good, Buddhists of nearly all sorts focus on the subjective mechanisms of valuing. The first approach to value in the Buddhist analysis examines the values imposed by our attachments and cravings. Mainly these are things falsely believed to be valuable but in fact are disvalues, negative and harmful valuations. There are at least three kinds of attachment-driven values/disvalues, corresponding to the three levels of suffering analyzed in 3.2. These include the plain pleasures and pains that please or hurt, the values and disvalues shaped by the fact of impermanence, and those arising from the deep illusion of self-identity.

A second approach to value in our Buddhist analysis is to revalue things instrumentally as means or blocks to liberation. What might be good for the liberation of some people might be harmful to others: the value of a thing is instrumental and contextual. This instrumental approach explains some of the more striking valuations associated with Buddhism, for instance, the ego-breaking menial and boring work in Chan monasteries, or the “excesses” of sexual tantrism.

A third approach to value in Buddhism is to say that, after all the above subjective analyses and practices are acknowledged, there still are more or less objective goods and evils in the world and these should be attended to in devising a life. For instance, the Eightfold Noble Path stresses the importance of a moral life and clean living as a condition for more intense spiritual development. In evaluating social conditions, justice is better than injustice, personal freedom than political imprisonment, health than illness. Buddhists should be committed to values such as these even though they know that, in the path toward true liberation, oppression, imprisonment, and sickness can be just as salutary instrumentally (as in the second approach to value) as their opposites. A truly liberated person, for Buddhism, will be more discerning about what is publicly and objectively valuable than one confused by binding cravings; but Buddhism, unlike Chinese thought, does not focus on an analysis of what makes such values objective as having any religious relevance; a Buddhist might engage in metaethics, but not as a religious consideration.

Things come into the Buddhist perspective on value according to the unliberated structures of their attachments. Buddhists on the path see things as having instrumental value or disvalue for their liberation and for that of other sentient beings. Buddhists freed enough to recognize the importance of responsibility in public life look to the real values of things in an objective sense, even if those values play no special role in spiritual bondage or liberation.

The fact that the first two approaches take value to be a matter of human projection or instrumentality already expresses a theoretical vision
of how the world takes on value because of human subjectivity. This is a way of saying that for Buddhism, in contrast to most of the other religions, the intrinsic character of value relative to religion is a function of subjectivity, not of some objective character.

The very heart of the Buddhist approaches to value appears in the phenomenological vantage point emphasizing practice. Buddhist practice, as enjoined in the Four Noble Truths, especially the Fourth, aims to deconstruct the values that are functions of attachments. It does so by pursuing or avoiding things whose instrumental value for liberation is positive or negative respectively. And it concludes with a commonsense or public appreciation of things as good or bad for life when life is approached from an enlightened perspective. Whereas the Chinese practices are aimed to change one’s actual connections with the rest of the world and its underlying oneness, the Buddhist practices are aimed to change one’s attitude or relation to the world, after which things will fall into place (3.3).

8.4.3 Hindu Ideas of Value

Advaita Vedānta in the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, like Buddhism, and unlike Chinese religion, does not thematize objective inquiry into why things are valuable or disvaluable in the ways they are. It recognizes the various affective elements in experience, of course, and relates these to the religious problem and its solution. Chapter 4.1 quotes the disciple’s apprehension of the tormenting fire of samsāra, and longing for the nectar-like speech of the guru. But all of these values are functions of māyā, of dualisms set at odds with the Advaitic truth. This is not to say that within māyā there are no serious value distinctions. It is only to say that when properly discriminated as Brahman, those valuable things are no longer dualistically set apart from the disvaluable ones. The adept is at peace with Brahman as such, regardless of its manifestations in māyā (4.6). Brahman is not value-neutral or empty, however. It is bliss, as well as being and consciousness (satcitananda). Whereas a person’s bliss-experiencing self is not the true self because of its transience (4.3), the true self, Brahman, is pure bliss, which many forms of Christian and Sufi mysticism, for instance, would identify in their different specific ways with the fullness of goodness in God.

Ordinary people, according to Advaita Vedānta (4.2.1), live within the value-discriminating world of māyā, pursuing good projects perhaps but even at their best fundamentally unhappy because alienated from their true self. For the prepared male brahmin, the project of realizing the true self of Brahman results from the perspective in which the illusoriness of
the world is sensed, at least in its pain and alienation, and the promise of a greater reality, visible in the guru, has come into view. This perspective on the world, viewing ordinary valuations as problematic functions of ignorance, is similar to Buddhism's first approach to value in noting pleasure and pain. But whereas Buddhism accounts for the error as mistaking impermanence and the empty no-selfness of things, Advaita Vedânta accounts for the error as not discriminating the non-dual reality from the apparent dualisms in mâyâ. The world for Advaita Vedânta invites the project of getting it right; for Buddhism, the world invites the project of stopping the desire to get it in its own being. As mentioned earlier, Advaita Vedânta looks upon the value structure of the world of mâyâ as an indication of opportunities for improved discrimination, but not as chances to harmonize things better rather than worse, the Chinese case.

Advaita Vedânta would say that value has no intrinsic character save for the bliss of Brahman, if that counts. Rather, the values of things in the world are functions of dualistic mis-discriminations that constitute the world of mâyâ. For those who have not realized the non-dual character of reality, those values are apparently real and guide such things as householding and even the taking up of the religious life. But if one is an adept with a "theory of life" based on the truth, there is no religiously interesting theory of why things have different worths and why that is important. Rather, the adept lives discriminatingly, "hearing, knowing, doing, but not speculating" (4.6).

The practical consequence of the Advaita Vedânta approach to value is to direct an appropriate person (a smart, interested male brahmin with texts and a guru at hand) to give up the major pragmatic considerations of life, determined as they are by mâyâ, and attend to Vedântic study. The course is to transform one's self so as not to be hurt, or helped, by the values of mâyâ but to see through them to Brahman. Then one can live within what others see as mâyâ without being fooled.

8.4.4 Jewish Ideas of Value

Judaism agrees with Chinese religion in taking the world and its contents to be good. This is so because it is the product of a good Creator (5.1.2). The value of the world is resident in the world, not merely imputed to it because God creates it. As Genesis 1 says, God looks at the things created and sees that they are good. The world's goodness reflects its Creator's goodness. So the world can be read as an expression of divine goodness, beauty, and glory. Judaism is not particularly associated with a philosophic theory of the nature of goodness, for instance, value as harmony, as in the Chinese case. In most instances, the goodness of the world is
measured by its appropriateness and support for human life. But the world’s goodness is not limited to the domesticated realm of human habitation. The heavens themselves declare the glory of God. Judaism values things in the world in real and objective ways, not especially concerned about either projections or illusions.

The Jewish approach to the world’s value provides a powerful perspective on the world that, on the one hand, should be enjoyed as God’s handiwork and gift for human life and, on the other, should be dealt with according to the strictures of Torah. Life lived by Jews in accordance with Torah is itself a praise of God for the world’s goodness. At the same time, the rabbinic focus on the study of Torah recognizes how complex the values of the world are and how complex people’s responses need to be. Chapter 5 traces the increasing complexity perceived by the tradition. So, whereas Judaism shares the general appreciation of the world expressed in Chinese religion, it adds the revelatory dimension of Torah as a guide to navigating through the world. The rabbinic tradition of detailed analysis of experienced values and permissible responses is somewhat like Buddhists’ detailed analyses of experience to identify egoistic projections and Advaitins’ detailed discriminations of illusions. The Jewish problematic is not a matter of fundamental ignorance, however, not ego-based projections or illusions, but rather is a concern about selfishness, aggressiveness, partiality, and lack of wisdom, as well as for misreadings of the revelation.

The theoretical consequence of the Jewish idea of value, namely, that the world is good, is that life should be approached with the expectation of satisfaction and happiness. This means that life should be embraced vigorously and with enthusiasm, and also with hard work to make good things happen. There is no tentativeness in Judaism about life being illusory or objectively value-neutral, with only experiential projections making it seem valuable. On the contrary, life is to be invested with all one’s energies. And when life holds more troubles or suffering than usual, then questions should be raised as to what is going wrong, questions that might examine conscience or conduct, or even that put God’s intent on trial (5.3.3.2).

The practical consequence of the Jewish approach to value, of course, is for the Jew to embrace life through faithful obedience to the Torah. The prescriptions for this life include not only positive ways of appreciating the good things of life, of working to deliver and secure them and to use them for praising the Creator, but also remedies for restoring the moral covenant and ritual purity when they are spoiled. Although all the religious traditions have careful prescriptions for practice that come from their approach to the world’s values, Judaism perhaps more than the
others save Islam makes this the prime form for its general religious practices as such. For Judaism, because the world including ourselves (even with some evil inclinations) is good, and because that goodness displays the goodness of God, we should live in the covenant defined by Torah to enjoy, praise, and fulfill our roles. Chinese religion stresses more the importance of the human contribution to creating that value, not merely playing covenantal roles but playing constituting roles. Far more than either Buddhism or Advaita Vedānta, Jewish thinkers stress the religious importance of enjoying, fostering, repairing, and securing the good things in life, objectively or realistically construed, and hedging against the evil (5.3.3.1). Although Jewish thinkers point out many conditions when things are wrongly valued, and bear the internal debate about just how good the world is, as discussed in chapter 5, they would think that distrust of all experiential valuing as ego-driven projection or serious illusion are attitudes of impiety. Undue suspicion of the world’s felt goods denies the goodness of the Creator manifest in them, and the goodness of the Creator’s intent for human life.

8.4.5 Christian Ideas of Value

Christianity for the most part agrees with Chinese religion and Judaism about the goodness of the world (6.1), and its history has been powerfully shaped by the Platonic theme that to be at all is to be good. Its special stress is on the point that the goodness of the world is not merely a reflection of the Creator’s character, a main point in Judaism, but is the real presence of the Creator; this “incarnational” theme was sounded early, in the Gospel of John, and gradually became a pervasive Christian motif.

The world from the perspective of the Christian idea of value is of course not only the manifestation but the living presence of God, the Spirit of God resident in nature, society, and persons. For this reason, the early modern scientific project of treating the world as value-free had a devastating effect on Christian sensibilities. Deism was a first step of retreat, abandoning the principle that the Logos is resident in the world as its shaping creator. Beyond that, value was seen as merely aesthetic and non-cognitive, hence subjective, or constituted by the human moral will (Kant); at all events non-revelatory. Much of modern Christianity has flourished either in forms that emphasize its moral dimension, perhaps coupled with aesthetic mysticism, or in forms that stress the Christological and Pneumatological symbolism of liturgies and other practices that do not treat the cognitive dimensions of science as religiously interesting.
The Christian theoretical interpretation of value agrees with the Jewish regarding the importance of life as a field of occasions for investing oneself wholeheartedly, with the added stress that this is one important way to participate in God's presence.

The practical consequences of the Christian idea of value include those mentioned for Judaism, with the contrasts to the other religions. The Christian contrast with Judaism in the practical sphere is that it does not suppose that the values of the world can be embraced with full satisfaction or that the human project will be properly rewarded in history. Rather, the value of things in the world is both simply what they are worth and also the fact that these valuable things are connecting paths to the true human fulfillment in unity with God.

8.4.6 Islamic Ideas of Value

Islam agrees vaguely with Chinese religion, Judaism, and Christianity that the cosmos is fundamentally good and that human life is good, though of course each religion specifies that differently. Islam agrees with Chinese religion in a point stressed far less by the others that there is a unity to the good of the cosmos, that human beings participate in a singular cosmic good, mirroring the whole somewhat in their own lives. Chinese religion provides a naturalistic account of this cosmic goodness whereas Islam attributes both the goodness and unity of the world to its Creator.

Islam, Judaism, and Christianity agree in specifically attributing the goodness of the world to its Creator. As already noted, Islam has far more confidence than Judaism that the world's apparent evil and suffering are integrated into a larger divine goodness in the world. Judaism in the forms studied here, save a few thinkers in the twentieth century, continues to affirm faith in God despite the incomprehensibility of evil, including in that faith a confidence that God will somehow keep the divine promises. Islam is less ready to admit the incomprehensibility of evil and suffering, in light of God's thorough presence throughout creation. For Islam, everything in creation, even the devil, participates in God (7.6).

Islam shares with Christianity not only the belief that the world is good because God creates it but also much of the European philosophic tradition deriving from Plato that to be is to be good. In the Neo-Platonic scheme, even though the material elements of the world are far down the scale of existence from the One and Soul, they still are overflowings of goodness: evil has no positive reality. Christianity in most of its philosophic dispositions insists that the natural goodness of the world, its beauty and nobility, is finite and fragmented, and that human life on that plane alone has no guarantee of fulfillment, however beautiful, gracious,
and satisfying its parts might be; but taken in proper transcendent relation to the Creator’s loveliness, human life participates in a divine glory that perfects historical life. Islam stresses more the goodness of the world on its own account because of the presence of God in it. Islam and Christianity share a range of mystical interpretations of God in the world and the world in God like that recounted in 7.5, with Christianity being less uneasy about idolatry. For at least some forms of Christianity, especially the Orthodox and Roman Catholic forms, the world can be conceived as a sacrament of God without idolatry (a point with which the Reformed Protestant Christian tradition is in some tension).

The Islamic idea of value shapes the world in perspective much the way the topic is approached in Judaism; that is, the world is to be savored for its beauty and the presence of God, and people should work to the utmost to follow Shari'\textregistered a and fulfill their part in the plan. More aesthetic than early Christian asceticism or Calvinism, more rigorous and action-oriented than many forms of Roman Catholicism, Islam combines gracious thanksgiving and delight in its perspective on the world with an extremely rigorous view that people are defined by their obligations.

The theoretical implications of this include an emphasis on the world to be known as beautiful and expressive of divinity, though not in idolatrous forms. Thus like Christianity, Islam emphasizes science but is uneasy with the modern Western conception of science as value-free.

The practical implications have already been mentioned and compared with others, namely, an aesthetic approach to life coupled with moral rigorism.

### 8.5 Causation

The category of causation is difficult to state vaguely except in Aristotle’s way of saying that a cause is something that answers to the question “Why?” The supposition is that “Why?” is asked about changes, about the occurrence of one pattern rather than another, about composition, about existential placement, about purpose, about value, about existence, indeed, about anything that can be conceived to be other than it is. Even in this vague statement it is necessary to recall that the “thing” to be explained is itself problematic, as the Buddhist emphasis on the nothingness of things asserts. There are wide differences among the ways the religious traditions conceive causation in relation to the human condition. Causation, as answer to the question Why? includes correlative causation when that is taken to be explanatory, as well as linear or ontological causation.
8.5.1 Chinese Ideas of Causation

The Chinese conception of causation is extremely important for its understanding of the human condition because the human sphere needs to be harmonized causally with the rest of the cosmos, and with its spontaneous ground. There are two lines of metaphors for causation as reflected in Chinese religion. One is the account of temporal change in which processes come together and diverge in a multitude of ways, not so much in linear fashion but in synchronic balances (2.2). This account analyzes causation as a function of the interchanges of elementary yin and yang movements, organized as the five elements, which in turn combine and recombine to form the ten thousand things. The wave-like shape of yang extension and yin return allow variations of amplitude and frequency, thus giving rise to different, changing, and interacting vibratory patterns (2.2). Some of these temporal changes are regular, even cyclical, such as the movement of the stars and the rotation of the seasons, and the Chinese carry this forward in the sequence with which the elements can transform into one another. Correlative causation, as analyzed by Graham and Hall and Ames, is of this temporal sort, with the temporality being patterns of simultaneous processes. Others of the temporal changes are irregular and accidental such as unexpected earthquakes or the sudden appearance of the barbarians over the hill. Of special importance for the religious dimension of the human condition are the irregularities that result from human selfishness and disharmony. Miller, in a paper presented to the seminar, wrote:

It was the cosmologists of... the Han who first succeeded in regularizing the patterns of correspondence between heaven, earth and humanity in terms of the five phases, an eternal hierarchical cycle of arising and decaying. What made this possible was the compilation of histories (the greatest literary and intellectual figure of the Han, Sima Qian, was a historian) from the analysis of which patterns of interaction between heaven, earth and humanity could be deduced. ... More interesting to the Han cosmologists than the observation of causality between two temporally successive events in one particular situation, was the observation of correspondence between two different situations that are temporally simultaneous.

Correspondence rather than causation is the underlying principle of investigation, and a continuous intra-related universe rather than a temporal contiguity of discrete objects its metaphysical presupposition.

(Miller uses “causation” in a narrower sense than Why? in order to contrast it with correspondence.)

The other line of causation in Chinese religion is the ontological one according to which the whole temporal flow as just analyzed itself results
from being or Taiji, which in turns results from non-being. Put the other way, the aboriginal unity of nothingness gives rise to the undifferentiated unified plenitude of being that then has articulation in the differentiations of yin and yang. This “line” of causation is usually expressed sequentially, but real temporal sequences does not occur except as the transformations of yin and yang and what they comprise. So this second line of causation is expressed as spontaneity that can be appreciated anywhere along the temporal line of causation (2,3.3). It is thematized in the various uses of the term sheng, meaning “giving rise or birth to.”

The temporal and spontaneous lines of causation are both crucial to the conception of the human condition in Chinese religions. The first articulates the breakdown of harmony with other things in the cosmos as well as providing the causal mechanisms to repair that, as in the Exterior Daily Practice (2,3.3). The second articulates the relation of human beings to the unity of the cosmos, indeed the aboriginal unity upon which the dance of movements depends as spontaneously produced; Daoist alchemy, certain projects of Confucian sagehood, and certain Buddhist meditations aim to reconnect the individual with the One, as in the Interior Daily Practice (2,3.1, 2,3.4). The temporal and spontaneous lines of causation cannot really be separated because any thing or movement is to be grasped as involved in both at once. This unity of the two lines of causation is itself a vague idea, because the different Chinese schools specify it differently.

From the perspective of the Chinese conceptions of causation as temporal and spontaneous, the human condition is to be viewed primarily as a project. The project is to stay in harmony along both causal lines and, if that harmony is broken, to repair it. That human life is a project does not necessarily mean a creative or aggressive project, although some elements of Chinese religion take that position. Confucians (2,3.2), for instance, believe that human beings need to create a civilization based on conventions that define family life, political responsibility, friendship and the like, and that complete or bring to fruition the excellent potentials supplied by heaven and earth; similarly, individuals need to be deliberate and aggressive in creating their own character. Others, however, emphasize the negative elements in the human project, the elimination of selfish preoccupations and attachments, for instance, that inhibit both harmonizing with the other ten thousand things and returning to the unifying Dao in all. The point of calling life a project is that, if everything is constantly changing, one must engage in constant rebalancing even to stay steady. This is one of the crucial points at which the spontaneous line of causation coincides with the temporal: to be human requires a constant activity of maintaining poise among the changes of the cosmos.
The implications of the Chinese conception of temporal and spontaneous causation for the theoretical conception of the human condition have to do with viewing life under the aspect of identifying changes, both regular and irregular. As Kohn points out (in the Japanese case, 2.4.2), the dates of seasonal transformation are more important than actual temperature for determining when to turn on the furnace. In deciding what to do, the location of things in ongoing identifiable processes is of paramount importance. Perhaps more than any metaphysical dispute about the priority of process over substance in the Aristotelian sense, the Chinese view of life as having to deal with things that are implicated harmoniously or disharmoniously in processes expresses its basic sense of causation.

The practical consequences of the Chinese ideas of causation have to do with practices that sustain or deepen one’s harmony with nature and society, and the original one, or that repair disharmony in those respects. Music, dance, and ritual are exercises in harmonization, in bringing concordance and mutual resonance. Gymnastic, diet, and Chinese medical arts are ways of restoring balance. The Confucian and Daoist techniques mentioned earlier are based on effecting changes understood according to the Chinese conceptions of causation, including correlative causation. Miller writes, in commentary, that “what is religiously interesting in China is the relationship between earthquakes, revolutions, plagues of beetles, and an itchy scalp.”

8.5.2 Buddhist Ideas of Causation

The focus on causation is central to Buddhism in ways quite different from its role in Chinese religion. Elaborated in the earliest Buddhist schools to articulate the impermanence of things, it was given detailed metaphysical expression in the Madhyamaka of Nāgārjuna as the doctrine of pratityasamutpāda or dependent coorigination and developed even further in the Yogācāra schools to express the constant change and instability of even ideas in the mind. Some of the early schools allowed for continuity amidst change, and even for the self-identical reality of some of the dharmic elements. But gradually, by the time of the Buddhist flowering in the early centuries of the common era analyzed by Eckel in chapter 3, the doctrine of causation amounted to something like this. On the one hand, everything is changing and any identity is impermanent. On the other hand, change itself is literally inconceivable if things are conceived to have any self-identity or own-being whatsoever: this was one of the main points of Nāgārjuna’s metaphysics. Therefore, change has to be conceived in such a way that everything that can be the object of
inquiry, or referred to in words, can itself be reduced to the multitude of causes on which it depends; and each of the causes can in turn be so decomposed, *ad infinitum*. Thus everything including the whole is empty of self-identity. The Yogācārins abandoned even the apparently objective reference to changing things in Madhyamaka (Nāgārjuna's argument was not really committed to objective reference, except hypothetically: if you believe that substantial things change, think again) and asserted the doctrine of dependent coorigination for even mental experience that alone is accessible for analysis. As noted in chapter 3 and above here, the Buddhist notion of causation is central to its fundamental interpretation of the Four Noble Truths.

The first and most obvious comparative point to make about the Buddhist doctrine of causation is that, despite its centrality and thorough development, it was never transformed into an ontological metaphor. The theistic religions use causal metaphors to say that God creates the world; Hinduism in one form or another says much the same, allowing for interesting variants such as that the world is the body or dance of the deity or Brahma; even Chinese religion says that the temporal passage of causation analyzable as *yin* and *yang* movements is itself "mothered" by a deeper *Dao* or aboriginal One. Not only does the Buddhist approach to causation not extend in that metaphorical direction, it asserts what is in many respects the very opposite: *pratātyaṃsatpāda* is such that there is no real ontological creation or dependence. Causation for Madhyamaka Buddhists is appealed to not to explain why things are as they are, not as a principle of sufficient reason, but to deconstruct the solidity of apparently stable and self-identical realities.

A second point of comparison with Chinese religion is that Buddhist thinkers frame their causal interpretations so as to loosen up the connections between things and create a space for freedom, as mentioned above. The Chinese look to causation in order to identify ways of enhancing harmonious connections. Whereas both Chinese religion and Buddhism affirm thoroughgoing interconnectedness, the former takes this observation as part of an apprehension of an organic wholeness to reality and the latter resolutely fail to make that inference. Even for Huayan Buddhism, according to which the Jewel Net of Indra contains gems in its knots each of which reflects every other gem with infinite symmetrical mutual mirroring, there is no sense in which one gem is in palpable touch with the rest: between the gems is empty space and cords of karma. For most forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, though not Theravada, and in contrast to many non-Advaita forms of Hinduism, karma too is empty.

Human life from the perspective of Buddhist dependent coorigination is exactly the opposite of the Chinese: not a project. To believe in the
continuous self-identity of a person required to organize life as a project is precisely the problem for Buddhism, and embodies all the errors involved in the attachments that lead to suffering. Rather, for Buddhism one should learn to abandon taking life into the perspective of one or a number of human projects and attain to the objectivity of seeing life as it is—a vast swarm of changes determined by dependent coorigination. To be sure, Buddhists should pursue good goals, such as getting an education, building a house, or becoming a better Buddhist. Indeed, the entire symbol system of the bodhisattva, the person who takes the vow to become a Buddha but to postpone the fulfillment of that until all sentient beings are helped to enlightenment, is powerfully goal-oriented. Despite the vow, however, the bodhisattva's path cannot be followed many steps before it is required to abandon any sense in which one's self is committed to the vow; rather, one forgets self and transforms the vow to the great compassion for others. As Sung-bae Park argued, the key to the bodhisattva's vow is the "patriarchal faith" that one is a Buddha already, and therefore fully (or emptily) self-less.  

The Buddhist theoretical implications of causation similarly construe happenings in the world as intricately related in causal conditions. The force of the Buddhist observation of this is not to call for greater harmony but to back up and look at the attitudes of people toward the changing things. More to the point, the Buddhist emphasis is on the affirmation-negation approach, the middle way, to describe and assess the causal connections. From a religious standpoint, the Buddhist concern is not to make or break causal connections but to see them as empty, and therefore as providing openings for spiritual freedom.

The practical consequences of the Buddhist ideas of causation have to do with practices that break the attachments to self-identity's projects and that cultivate an attitude of enlightened freedom that can take things to be such as they are, and respond then appropriately. Unlike the consequences the Chinese draw from their conception of causation, which are to do something, Buddhist consequences have to do with taking up a new relationship to the causal process, including that within oneself, so as to be free.

8.5.3 Hindu Ideas of Causation

Causation in Advaita Vedānta has nothing like the religious centrality that the topic has for Chinese religion and Buddhism because it is put down to māyā's dualism. Within māyā, of course, it recognizes causation of many sorts. Advaita Vedānta (4.2.1) accepts the three gunas theory of natural change and causation, an ancient motif given clear expression in
sāṃkhya; this is specifically different from but generally parallel to the Chinese conception of change and causation in nature as the dance of yin and yang vibratory patterns in the Qi. Like in Buddhism, thinkers in Advaita Vedānta believe in the causal powers of karma, and articulate religious success as liberation from those powers, though in a different sense of liberation from the Buddhist. Like in Chinese religion, thinkers in Advaita Vedānta entertain the problematic of the ontological creation of the world and consider what Brahman must be as Isvara to create a material world. Unlike both Chinese religion and Buddhism, which take causal change to be pervasive and stable identities to be only temporary or conventional projections, the assumption in Advaita Vedānta is that causal change is a mask for ultimately stable unity and substantiality.

The driving force of Advaita, perhaps in distinction from Visisṭādvaitya Vedānta, however, is to learn to discriminate the true non-dual reality of Brahman in all the dualities of causation—natural, karmic, and ontological. Even the pedagogical causation involved in the project of transformation (bhavana) is preliminary to the discrimination of the non-dual truth that is accomplished by the transformation (4.4). None of this is to say that Advaita fails to be effective in causal ways: it is a school for personal realization. But its interpretation of that causation rejects the duality in what causation seems to be: it is in reality only Brahman, one and unchanging.

Advaita Vedānta agrees with Chinese religion over against most Buddhism (bearing in mind the ambiguity of the bodhisattva’s project) that personal life is a serious project, at least for ready male brahmins. The project is that of realizing one’s true identity with Brahman, and there are social and personal as well as intellectual elements to the project. The project of realization of true identity results from the perspective on life created by the Advaita Vedānta approach to causation. But of course the successful prosecution of that project eliminates the dualism even in “perspective.” Like the patriarchal faith of the bodhisattva that he is already Buddha, the Advaitin conviction is that one is always and already only Brahman and therefore the externality or dualism in having a “project” is something that will be understood differently, as non-dual, in the end.

Within the realm of māyā, Advaita Vedānta accepts causal accounts of nature and society appropriate for understanding natural change and for maintaining the social institutions supportive of households in the life of the castes. Moreover it attends to a careful institutionalized pedagogy for those included in the Advaita Vedānta path. The Vivekacudāmaṇi is a wonderful pedagogic instrument, as described in chapter 4. The causal elements of personal transformation so as to make possible the realization of identity with Brahman are special to the Advaita
Vedānta path. But they remain characteristic of the duality of māyā. Brahman as the one reality is not transformed.

The practice of Advaita Vedāntins is as engaged as the Daoists’ attempt to reach personal unity with the Dao or the Confucians’ project of becoming a sage. It is less like the Buddhist view of enlightenment as changing one’s attitude toward things so as not to be bound or hurt by them, or the middle way’s combination of affirmation and negation; for Advaita Vedānta there is a clear, convincing, and univocal truth and, though it cannot be said except in dualistic self-betraying terms, there is a way to it. Even though Advaita lacks the impulse in Chinese religion to change the world to make it more harmonious, it shares with Chinese religion and Buddhism a sense that a fully realized adept is at home in the world and fully free.

8.5.4 Jewish Ideas of Causation

Judaism has not been wedded to any religiously important philosophical account of natural causation, such as the yin-yang theory of the Chinese or dependent coorigination in Mahāyāna Buddhism. So it has been free to think in terms of causation in Hellenistic philosophy, the alchemical theories of medieval Europe, and the categories of modern science.

The interesting question about causation for Judaism is how God interacts with the human sphere. We have already traced some of the questions concerning God’s role in creating the conditions of suffering and the evil inclinations within human beings. There is also the issue of miracles, interventions by God to change what would have happened otherwise. Even modern Jewish thinkers, however, who believe in the determinism or quasi-determinism of modern science still ask how God could allow something as terrible as the Holocaust. How could God allow a world in which the deterministic laws of blood and psyche could produce the Nazis? How could God allow a world in which the people of Israel are targeted for genocide? Whereas secular thinkers, or thinkers from at least the non-monotheistic religions, could respond to those questions by saying that the Holocaust was a tragic accident, a disastrous chance encounter of various social and psychological forms of causation, Jewish thinkers are haunted by the idea that either God is involved or there is no God (5.4.1). God’s involvement is to be understood according to both the asymmetrical creation relation and the symmetrical covenant relation discussed above under ontology.

Life for Judaism surely is a project of living in accordance with Torah to praise God and enjoy creation. The causal perspective for Judaism, assuming some sense of natural causation and how to get things done,
has two dimensions. One is to live life before God in a fitting way. Salda- 
nini describes the evolution of this way from the three joined points of 
temple sacrifice, study of Torah, and pious works, to the more exclusive 
focus on study of the Torah. The shape of this behavioral causation is to 
live according to law. The other dimension, cutting through the first but 
not limited to it, is the more direct encounter with God in which things 
that happen in the world are taken to be divine acts with intent and sig-
ificance to which human beings respond. The shape of this second 
dimension of causation is like that of personal interactions. In respect of 
the first dimension, Judaism is similar to many religions that stress life 
lived according to law or dharma. But in respect of the second dimension, 
Judaism differs from the non-monotheistic traditions, and agrees with 
the other monotheistic ones, that a crucial part of piety is a personal 
relationship with God. There are, of course, many ways of specifying "per-
sonal relationship with God," and perhaps Judaism rarely approaches 
the anthropomorphic extremes of some kinds of Protestant Christianity. 
Nevertheless, the persistence within Judaism of the Why question ad-
dressed to divine intent marks the importance for Jewish piety of per-
sonal relationships between God and the people.

The theoretical idea of causation in Judaism, of religious significance, 
is the conception of human life as an engagement with God. This involves 
both the covenant role-playing of life according to Torah, in which God 
is engaged in praise, obedience, and repentance, and also the more direct 
saga of the people's and individuals' interpretation of life's meaning and 
the significance of its projects and frustrations in terms of their interac-
tion with God. In respect of the former, the rabbinic tradition has 
stressed the conception of life as a plan of conformity to Torah, or in-
quiry into how to conform in problematic situations. In respect of the lat-
ter, far more than the non-monotheistic religions Judaism requires narra-
tive to make sense of life: the relationship with God is a matter of story. 
 Especially in the modern period, whether Israel or an individual lives 
rightly according to Torah is a point of interest within the larger story, 
not the other way around in which the stories would be instances of obe-
dience or disobedience to Torah.

Whereas freedom is an important value in Judaism, both in political 
and in personal senses, it is not as important as competence and faithfulness 
at the pious life of Torah. Like Chinese religion, Buddhism, and Advaita Hinduism, Judaism employs ritual, prayer, and shared community 
practices to cultivate and reinforce competence and faithfulness. Judaism 
shares with Advaita Vedânta a dimension far less stressed in Chinese reli-
gion and Buddhism, namely the spiritual importance of the study of the 
sacred texts. Chapter 5 traces the development of this stress.
8.5.5 **Christian Ideas of Causation**

Like Judaism, and unlike Chinese religion and Buddhism, Christianity and Islam do not have any special theory of natural causation. The theories espoused by Christian and Islamic thinkers have been functions of the philosophic and naturalistic, if not scientific, theories of their various contexts. Like Judaism, both Christianity and Islam take special religious interest in how God interacts with the world and with human beings; that is the first sense of causation that bears especially upon the human condition.

The Christian vague affirmation that God relates to the world as its creator has been specified in a wide range of ways. From earliest times to the present day the biblical metaphors of God as a personal individual with whom people interact have been powerful in Christian thinking. To the extent this is so, Christianity has shared with Judaism the perplexing conundrum of both asymmetrical (God creates the totally contingent world) and symmetrical (God and people interact) causal relations. But as Fredriksen points out, from the earliest times Christianity has also incorporated the Hellenistic conviction that the High God, as they put it, is eternal and beyond change; moreover, if individuation comes from being bodied in some sense, however spiritual (Origen), the High God is not an individual (a point made in other ways by Christians as distant as Aquinas and Tillich). This Hellenistic conception makes for a very strong stress on causal asymmetry between God and the world. God’s eternal reality has to be something like a singular act that together creates the world, fills it with grace, responds to the Fall, and elects the to-be-saved (some or all of humanity). Chapter 6 traces variations on what this act has to do in the thought of Paul, Origen, and Augustine.

Because of the Christian diminution of the symmetrical interactive causal relations between God and the world, it was pushed to treat biblical stories of patriarchs and others wrestling with God in metaphorical, even allegorical ways. Christianity then stressed a different collection of metaphors for the human (and world’s) causal relation to God, namely, those of the human ascent to God and of human turning to God. In these metaphors the change is on the human side, and God acts only in the singular multiplex creative act, subsequently drawing people and the world to union or enjoyment or cognizance of the divine by non-active attractiveness, the beatific vision. Chapter 6 traces several ways of specifying this point. Insofar as Christian spiritual life requires an interactive tussle, it relates to Jesus as the interactive partner.

Obviously there is a second sense of causation that is religiously important for Christianity, and that is the matter of human freedom. Most
of the issues concerning freedom will be discussed in detail in chapter 9. The following can be said here where the focus is on the cosmological aspects of the human condition. In vague agreement with all the other religions, each specifying the point in its own way, Christianity acknowledges that life is a field for responsible behavior in which people ought to do the better, can and sometimes do the worse, and in which the bounds of freedom are variable conditions (not being in jail, having the relevant knowledge, training, etc.).

In vague agreement with Buddhism and Advaita Vedânta, but not with Chinese religion, Judaism, or Islam, Christianity holds that in ordinary life there is a special religious inhibition to freedom, a special bondage to sin and to the "powers" of the world (6.2). The ordinary state is thus a "fall" from what ought to be the normal conditions of finite freedom, and in the fallen state people are powerless to deal with that special inhibition of freedom, however skillful they might be at exercising responsibility in a more general sense; chapter 6 traces several ways of specifying the conception of the fall. Restoration of the full sense of religious freedom then requires a gracious transformation in which people are turned back to God or brought to God in some kind of union; and because the matter is one of freedom of knowledge, will and action, the "whole person," body and soul, needs restoration; Fredriksen explores pivotal conceptions concerning "bodily resurrection."

The perspective on life coming from the Christian ideas about causation in divine action and human freedom is thus less of an interactive model between God and human beings, as in Judaism in the texts and motifs we studied, than a model with a two-way orientation: human transcending of the ordinary world through turning toward or union with God in some sense, and human commitment to exercise freedom responsibly in the world without guarantee of worldly success. Even where asceticism and sexual abstinence are intended to model transcendence in immanent worldly life, the distinction is maintained between transcendent transformation of the human, body and soul, and historical practice. Sometimes, as in Origen (6.4), the transcendent transformation is not of the fleshly body but of the eternal spiritual body defined by intellection.

Christianity shares with Chinese religion, especially medieval Daoism, its emphasis on bodily transformation. But whereas Chinese religion supposes a unified cosmos within which the transformation of the Daoist adept is continuous with the processes of the universe, the Christian conception of transformation is transcendent as well as immanent. For Christianity, only because one can turn (or return) toward God and thus not be in bondage to the powers of the world and its fragmentary, frustrating character, is it possible to turn back to the world with loving
commitment and proper spiritual, holy, freedom. Further study of the Chinese and Christian conceptions of transformation is very important. Just as Fredriksen says (6.6) that despite all the diversity, even contradictions, within Catholicism, and among Catholicism and gnostic and do- cetic brands of Christianity, their practices regarding bodily discipline were remarkably similar, so the differences between Chinese and Chris- tian transformations might not be so great in practice as in theory.

The theoretical and practical implications of the Christian ideas of causation have already been spelled out.

8.5.6 Islamic Ideas of Causation

As noted several times, Islam shares with Judaism and Christianity the vague conception that God creates the world and the world is wholly de- pendent on God, an asymmetrical causal relation. Islam would regard a strong symmetrical interactive relation between Allah and people as shirk and, like Christianity, give metaphorical interpretations to popular expressions of divine-human interaction. With Christianity, Islam affirms that Allah as High God is beyond change on account of unity.

Like Christianity, Islamic thinkers believe that if one properly turns to- ward God in submission, one is free to act in the world in accord with Shari‘a, properly playing out one’s destiny in the divine Word (7.3.3). But most Islamic thinkers do not agree with Christianity’s extreme interpreta- tion of the fall (6.1; 7.7), and therefore do not suppose that a special reli- gious bondage needs to be removed before proper human freedom is pos- sible. Rather, for Islam the fall is a good part of creation: “The human exit from the Garden, then, was an ontological phenomenon, akin to nat- ural birth. . . . Indeed, like nature, Adam had to evolve, morally, spiritually, intellectually—just as baby grows into adulthood, and a seed grows into a lofty tree” (7.6). More of this in chapter 9.

Although vaguely agreeing with the other monotheistic religions that the causal patterns of the world are the result of the divine creative will, Islam stresses the triumph of the divine will in worldly affairs, especially history. Because of this, religious life is required to be political (7.6). Jewish thought, by contrast, after Ben Sira acknowledges the power of evil and suffering to thwart at least temporarily the divine intent for just re- wards; Christian thought, by contrast, sees history as not the full expres- sion of divine goodness, which also requires human transcendence into unity with God. Far more than the other monotheistic religions, Islam stresses the creation as a unified totality expressing the goodness of Allah, a totality within which natural and historical causal processes play rel- giously significant roles.
The perspectival and theoretical consequence of this Islamic stress on the unified totality of the world with its causal processes is that all dimensions of life are seen as religious, as avenues for playing out one's submission to Allah and following of Shari'a. In a variety of senses, all of the religions we studied claim that everything in the human condition has a religious dimension. But none other has maintained as consistently as Islam that everything in life, down to manicures and politics, is governed by religious obligation (7.3.3). This is because of the stress on unity in its conception of cosmological causation. Recent scholars have criticized the Western notion of religion as parochial, reflecting a European privatization of religion and division of life into related but distinguishable and partly separable dimensions; such a conception of religion cannot treat Islam fairly, it is argued, because Islam involves no distinction of religious from secular life. But this is not entirely a matter of biased Western epistemology; it is also a function of the different ways thinkers in religious traditions conceive the causal connectedness of the world. Religion might still be one dimension of life among many but relates to those others in different ways for each tradition according to the conception of causation in that tradition. For Islam but not most other religious traditions, the causal totality of the world as God's expression is such that there is no obligation that is not religious. More on obligation in chapter 9.

The practical implications of the Islamic approach to causality have already been noted, namely, the imperatives to witness to and worship Allah (7.1) and to live life as the opportunity to follow the demands of Shari'a. The singularity of the Islamic conception of causation is its extraordinary unity, not only the coherence of the world and its history but the coherence of that with God's creative action. Indeed, most of what is to be said about Islam's specifications of the cosmological categories for the human condition derives from its specification of the first, unity. Because of this, the important comparisons we made with other religions have already been expressed.

Many fascinating comparative projects yet remain regarding causation in the human condition. For instance, in respect of the totalizing presence of the Creator in the world, according to Islam, it would be interesting to relate this to the model of the world as God's body, say as expressed in Râmânuja's non-advaita Vedânta, an equally totalizing conception. Whereas Islam strongly emphasizes human freedom of choice, thus accentuating obligation to divine will, the God's body model emphasizes the presence of God in individuals enabling blissful knowledge and holy action, dancing God's dance. What difference does that make? That question is beyond the scope of this study. Our comparative work continues in the next chapter in which the personal and social categories
of the human condition are given vague and specific elaborations. Many of those topics, especially concerning freedom and obligation, already have been broached.

Notes


8. See also Zhuxi’s “Treatise on Jen” in Chan, ibid., 593–596.

9. The line of interpretation of Chinese cosmology taken by Kohn in this book, and followed in most respects by Neville and Wildman, stands in at least rhetorical contrast to that initiated by A. C. Graham (e.g., *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Arguments in Ancient China* [LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989]); and developed in beautiful detail by Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall in *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); idem., *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); and idem., *Thinking from the Han* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). According to Hall and Ames, notions such as transcendence, linear causation, being, and truth have only a western provenance and do not apply except mischievously to Chinese culture. One of their most mature and carefully argued defenses of this is in chapter 9 of *Thinking from the Han*. The rhetorical contrast between the two lines of interpretation is more apparent than real, we (Neville and Wildman) believe. Our own comparative
project does indeed employ comparative categories whose origins lay outside the Chinese tradition, and comparativists ask questions of texts and traditions that might not arise natively. Thus we need to be especially careful not to import foreign elements falsely into intrinsic representations of the Chinese cases; ironically, within our project we (Neville especially) are accused of forcing a Chinese, mainly Confucian, frame on the approach to comparison. On their side, Hall and Ames are vigorously committed to a polemic against such notions as transcendence, linear causation, being, and truth, which leads them to bias their representation of the Chinese case with what Whitehead would call “negative prehensions” and to represent Western conceptions in ways far too narrow for identification with much of the outgrowth of that tradition in the present situation (i.e., Neville and Wildman’s own various views). There are perhaps two matters of substantive disagreement. One is our belief that Hall and Ames emphasize correlative causation in Chinese thought to the exclusion of the linear causal theme of roots and branches, the ethical concern to locate false starts and broken connections in development, the fairly constant desire to be centered because from that flows beneficial consequences for affairs. Hall and Ames recognize the many Chinese references to these phenomena, but do not accord them the dignity of a style of causation different from the correlative and more like that developed in Western thought (though not according to patterns of law, admittedly). The other substantive disagreement concerns their nominalism, their assertion that only particulars exist in particular connections, with a consequent denial that something else lies behind or within the particulars at hand. Against this we would argue that for the ancient Chinese the particulars of a given situation exhibit underlying patterns such as those described in the Yi Jing or the interactions of yin and yang; later thinkers such as Wangbi and Zhou Dunyi developed hierarchies (or “lowerarchies”) of underlying presupposed levels of reality articulating the paths of incipience, e.g., from the ten thousand things to the five elements to yin/yang to the Great Ultimate to Nonbeing (wuji). If one is to raise the question of nominalism versus realism, or particulars-only, in the Chinese case, a very western kind of question, then we think the Chinese are realists of some sorts. See Ames and Hall, op. cit., esp. chapter 9.


11. Haq, op. cit.


13. Ibid., chap. 5.


15. See Graham, op. cit.; and Hall and Ames, op. cit.

