

The
Contemporary
Theism
Handbook

(Second Edition)

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The Contemporary Theism Handbook presents a new faith, a religion for the future. The book provides answers to two vital questions: What is the nature of the world? How should I live my life? Unlike the current religions, Contemporary Theism (CT) is not based on certainty, but rather accepts limits. Contemporary Theists value the discoveries of science, while practicing the spiritual disciplines of worship, social action, prayer and small group participation.

The Contemporary Theism Handbook

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The Contemporary Theism Handbook

SECOND EDITION

John Gruneich

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Second Edition

3. GOD

Contemporary Theism affirms the unconventional idea of a limited God. The limited God of CT has come to its current form through a process of reflection and debate occurring over many years. While the conventional 'perfect' God of the major world religions needs no improvement, hopefully as you read, you will want to enhance the CT idea of a limited God. For CT, any idea of God deserves skepticism and can be improved.

The limited God of CT offers space between the various affirmations of God on the one hand and the various denials of God on the other hand. CT criticizes the ways traditional religion asserts the certainty of God's existence. At the same time, CT criticizes the ways atheism is certain of God's non-existence. CT could be considered a halfway house for those who feel that the battle between warring certainties is becoming ever more tiresome.

The general attitude regarding God is one of mystery. Mystery combines respect with curiosity. Beyond this general attitude, CT adopts the ontological principle. According to this principle, to be is to be limited. Existence means limitation. If something is unlimited, it defies the ontological principle and is not considered real. Thus, an unlimited God cannot be fully real. Flowing from the ontological principle is the ordering principle of CT: the 'better' is better than the 'perfect.'

In framing a limited God, CT makes extensive use of what it considers to be the best available idea of God consistent with the ontological principle. That best available God is the general and specific creative advance that has always characterized the cosmos and life. For CT, God is that power, force or tendency of reality to manifest creativity, novelty and playfulness.

The specific issues of death and heaven, eternal reward or punishment, tragedy, the personality and consciousness of God, and humans as God's co-creators are all taken up in this chapter. There is a price that must be paid to become a Contemporary Theist. That price is the abandonment of certainty.

A. The Argument for a Limited God

1. The Meaning of the Term: Contemporary Theism

The subject of this book is the religion called Contemporary Theism. An essential tenant of Contemporary Theism (CT) is a limited God. Before the arguments that support this limited God are presented, it is important to look at the name Contemporary Theism and to show some of the meanings that are suggested by this choice of a name. The word 'contemporary' refers to current time, or events happening together at the same time. Another meaning of contemporary is modern or up-to-date. The obvious meaning of theism is God. Paring contemporaneity and God in the name given to this religion means that ideas of God have to change and be updated. This simple statement implies the controversial assessment that all the previous ideas of God that profess timeless truths are rejected. A correlative idea of this religion is that God is subject to time. This leads to the idea that the God of a billion years ago is very different than the God of today, and today's God will change as we move into the future. For CT, God changes with time and is therefore inaccurately described by the language of unchanging infinity: the supreme, the unlimited, the absolute, the permanent, or the timeless. Since the idea of God, in both eastern and western religious traditions, has always been associated with this unlimited and timeless realm, both will find the limited God of CT superficial or irrational or both. All these long standing religious systems of 'supreme' understanding, along with their secular soul mates, ignore the basic ontological truth that human understanding is limited, and even more radically, that the nature of reality as a whole is limited. The use of the term Contemporary Theism reminds us that when it comes to the cosmos and God, we are always dealing with partial truths and limited and changing realities, never with the timeless, the infinite, the singularity, the supreme or the unlimited.

2. The Quest for Infinity

Infinity, despite its awesomeness, is slippery. It is also ubiquitous in current human imagination. We have philosophical infinity, mathematical infinity, religious infinity, and economic infinity, among others. We all talk about infinity, but what is it, really? CT supposes that infinity got its start in life when humans started generalizing from spatial and temporal realities that were at hand. Take space. Our ancient ancestors had actual knowledge of a few score or maybe, at most, a few hundred miles. With the advance of civilization and the rise of science, that distance increased significantly. We discovered that we actually lived on a very large globe 8,000 miles in diameter. In the early part of the twentieth century, it appeared that the universe might be our galaxy only. While huge, the 120,000 light years across our galaxy pales in comparison to the 90 billion light year diameter of

God

the currently known universe. If one looks at the history of time, a similar enlargement process to that of spatial enlargement occurred in human thought. We started with a 7 day old universe, but now we now know that the universe is 13.7 billion years old.

Since the more we learned about reality, the larger reality became, and since the more we learned about reality, the more ancient it became, it seemed more or less natural to suppose that if we knew the full story of space and the full story of time, that the future would inexorably lead to the infinite. This is exactly the habit of thought that CT wants to break.

On an initial reading, the idea of infinity seems to make sense. It's really not a huge emotional jump from the inconceivably large size and unbelievably advanced age of the cosmos to the idea that the cosmos is infinite in size and age. But the inference from the former to the latter does not hold. There is an infinite gap between unbelievably large and infinite. In fact, there is an infinite distance between one infinity and another. You can divide infinity up onto an infinite number of parts, and each of those parts will itself be infinite. Such considerations soon show the irrationality of the concept. Infinity is not a quantity, because infinity is not measurable. At most, infinity is a limit concept, or a boundary concept, not a property of reality that is measurable.

If the cosmos is infinite in either duration or extension, then it is not measurable. How, then, would we know about such infinity? We wouldn't. Infinity, whether scientific, philosophical or mathematical, is, in principle, beyond human measurement and also human understanding. And yet those who assert infinity believe that infinity is an accurate way to describe aspects of the cosmos, or even the cosmos in its entirety.

Religion also asserts infinity, but applies the idea not to the cosmos but to God. God is infinite in being, power or knowledge. The religious development of an infinite God preceded and then paralleled the philosophical, scientific and mathematical development of infinity. Early Gods were tribal and local. God got bigger and better with the monotheistic religions. Religion ignored the precept that when applied to God, superlatives become diminutives. Rejecting that wise counsel, ultimate knowledge (omniscience) was attributed to God, ultimate power (omnipotence) was applied to God, and ultimate presence (omnipresence) was applied to God.

Leaving aside the irrationality and the contradictions involved when applying such unlimited concepts to a limited world, what could have been

the motivation for the almost universal embrace that the human mind gave to infinity and the unlimited? To answer that question requires the same kind of analysis that one needs to apply to this question: Why do many Americans tediously assert that the U.S. is the 'greatest' nation on earth? What is so attractive about notions of 'greatest,' 'infinite,' 'unlimited' and their cognates? CT suggests it is not the power of a rationally-convincing argument that secures infinity's place in modern ideas, but rather a displacement from the emotional realm.

The most shocking emotional realization that every human being undergoes is the slowly-dawning realization of personal death. Starting at a very early age, and progressing in urgency and force, it slowly dawns on the honest person that "I will die, all that I love will die, and there is nothing I can do about it." This realization is so shocking that every dimension of human nature is enlisted in the attempt to deny, mitigate, avoid or transcend that primal reality. There arises early and often the idea that simple death can't be the last word about reality. Perpetual perishing cannot be accepted at face value. There has to be more. There has to be a power, a reality, a being, a God to whom I relate, an entity that is not subject to the death which rules my life.

Thus, the ascendance of the idea of infinity has religious roots that go back to the dawn of the human species. The hope that there was some reality impervious to death, one to whom I could relate, became legitimized by religion. Religion offered a faith object that met the emotional need. That object is God in all His/Her/Its multifarious forms. We faked ourselves out. We talked so often and so urgently about the various infinite Gods that we thought we were talking about something real, when in reality we were talking about a projected image that assuaged our fear of death. Instead of making our own limited life the focus of effort and worth, we made a projected entity the depository of worth and value.

This religious project was carried over into science and actually became science's animating spirit. Modern science lies in direct emotional continuity with the religious quest when it seeks certainty and some object external to human life that is impervious to death, a reality that is stable amidst all phenomenal change. Such an object came to be understood as natural law—the unchanging foundation for all the changes of nature.

The option to prefer a limited cosmos to an infinite cosmos is always available. The option to accept death and radical limitation rather than denying both is always available. The option to prefer honesty to grandiose self-deception is always available. We live in a vast but limited cosmos. We

have vast but limited opportunities for living a good life. We can focus on what we know to be real, or we can continue to pursue infinity.

3. Humans and the Cosmos

In order to frame an idea of God, CT starts with a rational examination of human beings and the world in which they live. This is not the starting point for most religions. For the religions, the starting point for God is not reason but revelation. Revelation is understood to be a special communication from God to human beings which conveys nothing less than the key to human salvation. Revelation also claims to provide authoritative information about human nature, the cosmos, and God. CT rejects that starting point because revelation claims primacy over reason. CT is also skeptical of the various historical revelations to the extent that they claim certainty. A fuller treatment of revelation is given in Chapter Ten.

So let's return to the CT starting point in its search for God: human beings. What can human beings know? They can know a great deal; indeed, the knowledge humans possess individually and collectively is vast. This knowledge is important and shapes not only our quality of life, but also through our technology, human knowledge affects virtually all other species on earth. As important as it is to know about this vast knowledge, it is most important, religiously speaking, to know even that vast knowledge is limited. Humans face limits to knowing. The most important limitation is death. Upon my death, my personal knowledge ends, and my ability to know ends. Death is not just an individual reality. Death is global. Humanity as a whole faces death, either sooner, if some of the doomsday scenarios of the 21st century come true, or much later, when the sun will engulf the earth. While death is universal, every person must adopt their own unique response to it.

So let's grant, for the sake of argument, that human knowledge is limited, both individually and collectively. What about the universe? Is the universe limited? Let's look at the universe as a whole, the entire cosmos. Is it limited? How can we find out? Well, we could look at the various religions or the mythologies, or we could look at science for the answer. Let's look at science for now, knowing that religion will return later.

The generally-accepted scientific theory of the universe is the big bang. Big bang cosmology gives us new information about both the age and the size of the universe that we did not have in previous centuries. The big bang shows us a universe that is 13.7 billion years old. In human terms, this is unimaginably ancient. The current universe is not only very old but is also very large. The universe, according to current cosmology, is some 90 billion light years in diameter. In human terms, this is unimaginably vast. And yet

despite its huge size and advanced age, the universe is limited in both size and age. This current scientific view is not unchallenged. For many, the universe is not limited but rather infinite, in both time and space; one currently influential idea is that we live not in one universe but rather a multiverse. Many others hold views that suggest the cosmos is in a steady state as it is now, and so it has always been; this is a view affirmed weekly by all those who intone the Protestant hymn 'Old Hundredth':

As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,
World without end, amen, amen.

Such views influence millions and receive more detailed discussion in the sections of the book that deal with the various religions.

Returning to scientific cosmology, it appears that we face limits--human limits and cosmic limits. There seems to be no way of avoiding the realization that essential limitation is characteristic of everything that science has discovered about *Homo sapiens* so far and everything science has discovered about the universe so far.

Of course, some humans (that is, those humans who have been honest) have known this truth for millennia. They did not need the mind-expanding perspectives of modern scientific cosmology to show them the pervasive reality of limitation. Those honest humans, however, have always been in the minority. The default position for human understanding, both now and in the past, has denied limitation. We eagerly embrace any option that avoids the admission of limitation.

4. The Ontological Principle

Let's accept for the moment that essential limitation is intrinsic to both human nature and the cosmos. Let's further accept the idea that human nature and the cosmos are inclusive of all that we can know, or all that we can experience. If both these ideas are accurate, then the following ontological principle holds: To be real is to be limited. This ontological principle (OP) is the central philosophical perspective of Contemporary Theism.

One implication of the OP is that if God is to operate in human life or the cosmos, God's actions must be limited. God's 'actions' must be limited because both human beings and the cosmos are limited. Perhaps a simplistic analogy will help convey this point. Let's say Thor is the world's expert in bicycle construction and usage. Thor knows all there is to know about bike mechanics and operation. Thor wants to help a child learn to ride

God

a bike. Thor can't use all his knowledge with that child. Thor has to limit the use of his knowledge in order to teach the child to ride a bike according to the physical and biological limits the child has. We are in an analogous situation with God, wherein we are the child learning to ride a bike and God is Thor. By analogy, God can't use all (or even most) of God's knowledge with us.

The analogy breaks down when it implies that God has unused powers or imposes limits on the use of the greater power God has. How would we know about those unused powers? We wouldn't. We can only know about the power that God uses with us or with the universe. Thus, unused powers or potential actions are not real in the same sense as humans are real or the cosmos is real. Such unused powers belong to the realm of the potential, the Platonic realm of the ideal, or the Whiteheadian realm of the eternal objects⁹.

The ontological principle sets parameters for any idea of God. It provides grounds for criticizing most traditional ideas of God. At the same time, it allows or provides room for the CT idea of a limited God. God is limited to aspects of the universe or to certain tendencies that have real efficacy in the universe. What might such aspects or tendencies be? They are creativity, novelty and playfulness. The God of CT is the principle, the force, or the reality of creativity, novelty and playfulness.

5. God as Creativity

God is the universal force, tendency, power, or reality of creativity, novelty and playfulness. Creativity can be seen in both large and small scale phenomena. Creativity characterizes the cosmos. Creativity also characterizes human beings, which is why CT calls them Co-Creators. To establish the reality of the CT God requires the establishment or at least the plausibility of the idea that the cosmos is creative. Is creativity or novelty characteristic of the universe? It certainly seems so. If we look at the evolution of the cosmos, it appears to be creative in the sense that new or novel events, entities and processes regularly appear. The very earliest universe was an almost perfectly uniform energy plasma so hot that no stable atoms could even form. From that state we have arrived, 13.7 billion years later, at the cooled-down state of the universe that has differentiated into galaxies, stars, and the planets; on at least one of those planets, we see the amazing complexity of life. There seems to be a pattern or

⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 43 ff.

movement from the simple to the complex, from the undifferentiated to the differentiated, and from the less to the more creative. In fact, if one looks at this cosmic evolutionary history from a broad perspective, one of its most indubitable features is its novelty and creativity. It is the force or tendency that drives this novelty and creativity that CT understands as God.

As universal and as powerful as creativity is, it is always limited. There are lengthy stretches of time and huge areas of space where creativity is minimal. At the same time, it is unlikely that there is any time or place where creativity was totally absent. The reality of creativity or the reality of God is the reason for the belief that in spite of limits, more will be discovered. We will learn more about ourselves, and we will learn more about the universe. This implies that the future is, in some very important sense, open. We don't know the extent of its openness. There appear to be times when there is more openness and times where openness is limited, for both human beings and for the universe.

God is the lure to become more, to increase in being. God is the lure or urge to learn more about the universe and ourselves. Because of God's creativity, we can grow and mature in being and understanding. This openness is one of the most important reasons to be hopeful. In Whiteheadian terms, Creativity points to the process of greater diversity leading to contrast, rather than diversity leading to conflict. Such Creativity seems to operate on all scales of the universe. Creativity points to what is new. Creativity is a differentiated harmony.

If one rejects this CT way of understanding God as creative force, then one has to provide another source or cause for novel things to spring forth from past events. If one rejects God's creativity, one has to explain why there are new things in the world, or why unique events take place, or why evolution to more complex forms is even possible. Can the habitual processes of the past produce anything new? They can if they are seen to combine their own individuality with the creative influence mediated by God. This CT view is thoroughly evolutionary. Everything has a past and can only be understood in terms of its past. That is the genius of the simple but profound idea of evolution—everything is connected, and current states cannot be understood except with reference to prior states. But past states always include God's creativity acting in those past states.

There is minimal room in the current scientific understanding of evolution to posit any nonmaterial causative factor(s). There is no room for what CT calls the spiritual dimension. This 'physical only' interpretation of evolution is only partially accurate. We need a broader way to look at the

God

problem. Since evolution is creative (new structures, new species, new thoughts), how does a materialistic-only view of evolution account for the appearance of what is new and the creative? It must say that the new is exhaustively explained by what came before. Is that true to our experience? We experience the new as not totally derivative of the past. The beauty of this particular sunset is not totally derivative from my experience of previous sunsets. The genius of this or that scientific breakthrough is not totally derivative from past breakthroughs. We may be mistaken, but something seems to be missing from a 'physical only' understanding of evolution. What is missing is a nonmaterial ingredient in evolution, understood by CT to be God. This God is the force or tendency for the cosmos to be creative. If that kind of God is allowed, then again, we have a whole new set of options for understanding and action. The entirety of this book argues that the 'only material' interpretation is not exhaustive of the evolutionary process, much less the royal road to full understanding of reality as such.

In anticipation of the arguments in Chapter Five, causality operates in the various dimensions of human nature. The physical is one of those dimensions, but to restrict causality to the physical makes the patent powers of the emotional, familial, cultural and spiritual dimensions of human nature inexplicable.

For CT, God is the primary source of novelty to the actual occasions of experience. While God is omni-creative in this sense, it must also be seen that God works with the particular actual occasions that are existent. There are limits to God's creativity based on the nature of actual entities as creatures. God cannot make an ape into an Einstein. God works with what is actual in any moment of reality. Thus, what is actual limits God, and this state of affairs is the reason CT proposes a limited God. On the other hand, by acting creatively to every actuality, over time, God has shaped the current cosmos and all the amazing events and creatures that populate that cosmos. God continually lures that cosmos into greater complex harmony. The creativity on God's part is unsurpassed by any other force or any other creature, but it does remain limited by the nature of the individuals (the various quarks, molecules, animals, people, stars, galaxies) with which God must work.

Another aspect of the limited God of CT is that the cosmos and God co-evolve. Each changes in relation to the changes of the other. Each is subject to time and evolves in time. There is no timeless place or space where God exists independently of the universe or independently of time. Or to repeat again, God is understood to be limited.

The great texts of creation from the book of Genesis provide an artistic and spiritual way of expressing the creativity of God. The deeper spiritual meaning of these texts is lost if they are understood to be literally true descriptions of physical reality. In the current religions, acceptance of these literal details is made a test for one's 'faithfulness.' It would be hard to overestimate the harm done to the followers of the western monotheisms by such ideas in how they stunt individuals' spiritual maturity and maturation. The deeper meaning of these texts is also lost when they are interpreted as proof of the existence of an unlimited God who creates by fiat.

6. God and the World: Four Views

To clarify the limited God of CT, it is helpful to compare it to other views. This section provides four figures to visualize the ideas discussed. The figures will help some people conceptualize the rational argument, but there is a danger. A figure or a diagram can be a helpful simplification, yet it is also a distortion of the full argument. If the figure could convey the argument, this section would be nothing but charts, diagrams and pictures. Such visualizations have intrinsic limitations, but they also provide a channel of understanding that is different than the rational argument, and for some, images can be more illuminating than the rational arguments alone.

The topic here is restricted to one aspect of religion and can be framed in a simple question: How are God and the World related? The answers to this question as given by Western Monotheism, Atheism, Hinduism and Contemporary Theism are summarized below. The purpose of this section is clarify the differences in these four views. There are two areas of differences, and both are important. The first area concerns the different ideas about how God and the world relate (the content of the doctrines). This doctrinal content is easy to summarize and appears in the figures. The second area of difference is more subtle. This second area of difference concerns how certain these religions are in holding their particular beliefs. It seems clear that Western Monotheism, Atheism and Hinduism hold their doctrinal beliefs with certainty. In contrast CT is not certain of its doctrinal truth, even going so far as to say its basic beliefs will likely have to change and must be reformable. The first area of difference is the focus of this section. The second area, the area of certainty, will appear later in this chapter.

As you ponder these views, CT again encourages you to claim your power to choose what you will believe. You really do have a choice about embracing the option that makes the most sense to you. You really do have the freedom to change your mind as you move through life.

Western Monotheism

The western monotheisms discussed here are Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For convenience, I label them the three monotheisms, or 3M for short, and use that 3M abbreviation throughout the book. While they have significant differences from each other in their history and current practice, and while they are often at war with each other, the 3M all posit one God. This one God relates to the world in ways that are very similar in all three religions.

Figure One: Western Monotheism

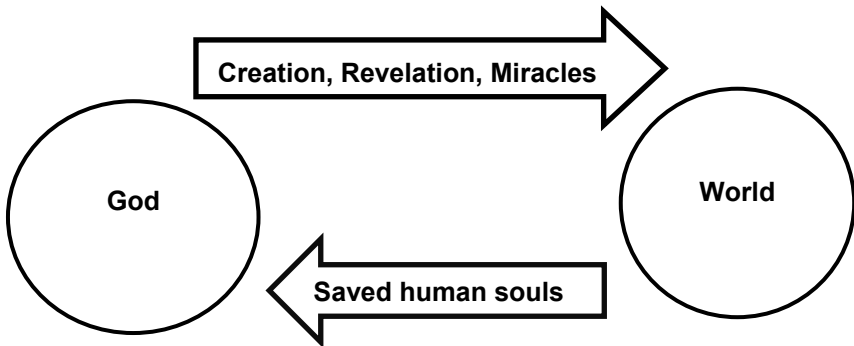


Figure One shows that for the 3M, the world and God are separate things. God is a being separate from the world or from reality as we know it. The classic idea here is that there was a time when God existed all by Him/Her/Itself. The name for this state is ‘aseity.’ God needed nothing but Him/Her/Itself in order to exist. That state had some characteristics. It was timeless or eternal. Time didn’t apply to God. God was ‘before’ the world, and God will be ‘after’ the world. In addition to being eternal, God is omnipotent, able to do anything. God’s power is unlimited. God could have created any one of an infinite number of universes. God could have created any number of different types of universes. God is also omniscient. God knows everything—everything that is actual and everything that is potential. In this pristine state of eternity, omnipotence and omniscience, God decided to create. What God created was the world, the cosmos, or all of reality as we know it.

Why did God decide to create this world? Different theories have been put forward. One is that God got bored living alone. Another is that God’s nature is love, and God needed something besides Him/Her/Itself to love. Another is that God’s motivation will always remain a mystery. Regardless of what God’s motives may have been, out of nothing God brought forth the

current world. Thus, the central tenet of classical 3M doctrine is that there is one world and it is created by one God. God is one thing and the world is a different separate thing.

While different things, God and the world do relate to each other. As indicated by the top arrow of Figure One, the main channel of relationship is God's creation of the world. God also relates to the world via revelation and miracles. In its turn, the world doesn't relate to God in any sort of reciprocal fashion. According to 3M doctrine, the world has nothing to give to God. There is one exception. The world does give back to God, or God receives back to Him/Her/Itself the souls of believers when they die, leaving their bodies behind.

Atheism

Atheism eliminates God and says that the only reality is the world itself. Atheism has always been the preferred option of a tiny minority of human beings. It is important today because many of the leaders of science and culture are atheistic. It is listed here because of its heuristic value in elucidating possible options for ways to understand how the world and God might be related to each other. For Atheists, there is no relationship because there is no God for the world to relate to. Atheism is addressed in more detail later in this chapter.

Figure Two: Atheism



Hinduism

Hinduism is an ancient and great world religion with approximately 800 million adherents. It is the foundation for Indian civilization historically and exerts immense influence on the subcontinent today. As with the 3M, Figure Three is an over-simplified summary, but it does convey some basic Hindu perspectives. In Hinduism, ultimate reality is conceived to be the realm of Brahman, the source of all existence. Brahman is ONE. Brahman is

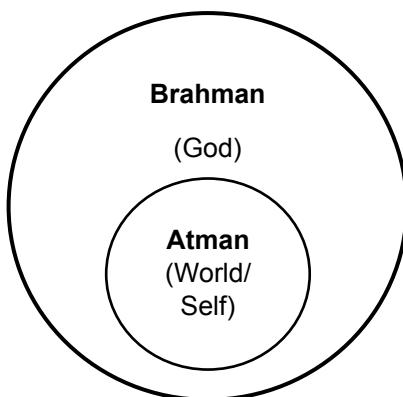
God

manifested in Atman, or 'self,' or all the forms of worldly phenomenal appearance. The apparent difference between Atman (self/world) and Brahman is an illusion. The particularity of Atman is finally enclosed and dissolved in the mystery of Brahman.

In Figure Three, this relationship is symbolized as Brahm encompassing Atman. Brahman is the final reality, hence its association here with the idea of God.

Atman is associated with the world, a lesser reality dependent upon Brahman for its relative reality. Salvation for Hinduism is the meditative realization of the unity of Brahman/ Atman and the illusion of creaturely (worldly) existence. The final truth of Hinduism is the unitary reality of the ONE, beyond particularity and transcending all rational thought.

Figure Three: Hinduism



Contemporary Theism

Contemporary Theism is depicted in Figure Four. Each circle symbolizes all that exists at any moment of time. Within each circle, we have both the World and God, with a two-way arrow connecting them. The two-way arrow shows that the world and God are not the same thing. The two are separate but at the same time also in a relationship to one another. This figure symbolizes the idea that God and the world together comprise one universe. God (creativity) is part of the one world. In the figure, we have a second similar world connected by an arrow of time. This symbolization points to an essential difference between the CT and the other three views.

There is no CT God without time, just as there is no CT world without time. There is no timeless world, nor is there a realm that is separated from or independent of the reality of time. All the other three views can be understood to be timeless. All the other views assert that their version of ultimate reality is true now, was true in the past, and will be true in any possible future. Hinduism and elements of modern science go so far as to say that time is an illusion. All three understand themselves to embody timeless truths. In contrast, CT offers no timeless truths. All 'truth' for CT is subject to change, whether sooner or later.

Figure Four: Contemporary Theism

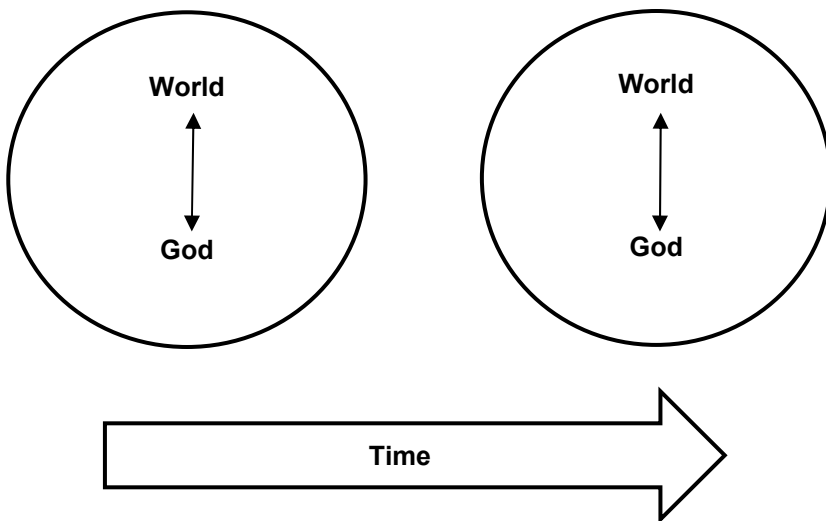


Figure Four is one way to depict the idea that we can only understand one state of God and the world if we understand earlier states of God and the world. Thus, the arrow of time connecting the two circles symbolizes this evolutionary perspective. This arrow of time is not reversible. Thus, time extends indefinitely into the past and indefinitely into the future. An important corollary of this CT view is that both the deep past and the deep future are both unknown and unknowable. This limitation is unique among the four views presented. The other three views pretend to offer complete understanding of reality as a whole—at all times and in all places. In contrast, Figure Four does not pretend to represent an exhaustive picture of reality as a whole. The hubristic claims of completeness in the various guises of the 3M, Atheism and Hinduism are explicitly rejected.

Another way to compare the four views is to note that the first three can be said to be structural; they focus on what the structure or composition of God and the world are. The view of CT, in contrast, is historical. What is most important to know about both God and the cosmos is not their structure but rather their history. In this view, history gives rise to structure, not the reverse.

B. Religion and the Certain Reality of God

There are irreconcilable differences that characterize Atheism, the 3M and Hinduism. Despite these differences, these and all the other religions and atheisms are united in one affirmation: each is 'certain' of its truths. The apologetic task of CT is to provide reasons for dissolving the certainties of both the traditional religions as well as the certainties of the various atheisms. If CT wants to make disciples of religious people as well as atheists (which it does), it will have to provide reasons to those people for rejecting their respective certainties. The rejection of certainty has some parallels for both groups of potential disciples but requires different emphases. Let us start with the certainties that lie at the heart of a number of current religious beliefs and teachings, which will be followed by a consideration of atheistic certainty.

What can we be certain of? This is a very important question because traditionally, almost every kind of philosophy or worldview assumes that what is certain is more important than what is uncertain. It is commonly-held that any concept of God must be certain, because God is the most important general truth, and general truths must be as certain as possible. What is certain is taken to be higher in meaning or value than what is uncertain. CT reverses this equation. Let's take the example of a human life. What is certain about that life? The old saying is generally true: the only certainties in life are death and taxes. Both death and taxes are certain according to the proverb. But is that certainty the most important thing to know about life, or is that the aspect of life we should most value? Is the certainty about my death the most important thing about my life? Not for CT. The most important thing about my human life is not the certainty of my death; rather, the most important thing about my human life is how I live that life. The effect of this meditation on certainty should make the limited God of CT more plausible and more attractive, and it should raise doubts about the quest for and veneration of 'certainty.' The limited God of CT enriches the uncertain life that each of us must live rather than offering 'certain' truth that putatively transcends life.

Certainty moves us away from the acceptance of limits. Since certainty is impossible for CT, as a religion it embraces limits—both human and cosmic—as well as a limited God. Almost all the followers of the current 3M religions as well as other religions will find the CT idea of a limited God strange and uncomfortable, if not heretical. Some will grant that human beings are limited and the cosmos is limited, but what about God? Is God limited? How can we find out if? If we follow the same pattern we used with human reality and cosmic reality, we would look at what is there. For example, we look at samples of human history or human nature and come to the conclusion that humanity both individually and collectively is limited. In the case of the universe, we look at parts or epochs of the universe and come to the conclusion that it, too, is limited. For God to be without limits as the religions assert, there must be some reality other than human nature, or there must exist some place beyond the cosmos in which God operates, since both humans and the universe are limited. What realm might that be? According to common religious ideas, it is the realm of the Eternal, the One, or Unity.

But if God operates in the unlimited realm of Eternity, or Unity, or The ONE, there is no way we can know about the activity of that God. It is, in principle, beyond human knowledge or understanding. It is similar to the question of what came before the big bang. We can entertain hypotheses verbally or cognitively, but there is no way we can be certain. It is similar to the question, “What I can know about my own death?” There is no way I can know my own death. The phrase CT uses to describe this state of affairs with regard to one’s own personal fate, the reality of the universe, and the idea of an unlimited God is this: Invincible Ignorance. Another phrase CT uses for this state of affairs is to describe it as Our Ontological Plight. Our plight is that an essential or intrinsic limitation characterizes our world. Modern worship can only legitimately begin with the recognition of that limitation.

Current religion will admit neither ‘invincible ignorance’ nor ‘our ontological plight’ when it comes to God. Most often this denial comes by asserting that God transcends the limited universe. The apparent limitations of the universe cannot be applied to God. A partial list of the ways the various religions deny limits would include the idea that God is the ‘Ground of Being,’ the idea that God is ‘Being Itself,’ the meditative certainty that God is ‘One’ transcending all appearance; the conviction that God’s unlimited nature is revealed in the sacred scriptures or traditions of Judaism, Christianity or Islam; and the feeling that God’s unlimited love is present in one’s personal relationship with God. All these religious ideas or beliefs are

validated via revelation. When it comes to divine revelation, greater honesty is needed.

1. The Principle of Honesty

The principle of honesty, like the principle of thanksgiving, is more of an attitude than an analytical method. To be honest about religion, it helps to have a general overview of how religion has actually functioned in history. That requires a digression into anthropology. There is debate within the anthropological community about when modern humans appeared. Dates as divergent as 500,000 years ago to 50,000 years ago have been proposed. In addition to the debate on dates, there is the debate about the required abilities a hominid would need to have to be considered a modern human. Those abilities could be one or some combination of the following: technological (control of fire), cognitive (language acquisition), social (pair bonding within a local tribe), physiological (brain size), or some other observable or measurable factor. While there is no consensus on when an animal becomes a human, there does seem to be agreement that becoming human was a process extending over time. Like the process of a zygote becoming a baby, there is no specific time when that happens, even though it happens in a limited amount of time (an observation that inexorably leads to the annulment of the doctrine of ensoulment).

What CT adds to this discussion is a speculative demarcation criterion. Hominids became human when they could begin to ask and begin to answer the dual questions: the question of cosmology (what is the nature of the world?) and the question of purpose (how can I, and should I live my life?). If this kind of demarcation is accepted, then the human odyssey begins with spiritual and religious questions. Taken to its logical conclusion, humanity will end when that dual problem no longer arouses human interest. Since that is unlikely in any foreseeable human future, religion will not disappear from human civilization since, by definition, CT understands religion to be the answer one gives to that dual question. If that is true, then finding a better religion should be more important than the sometimes understandable crusade to abolish religion. This demarcation point between animal and human life due to the spiritual dimension of human nature has many ramifications, some of which are explored in this book.

Let us suppose, for the sake of discussion, that once these hominids became human, they made progress in answering the dual question. They developed and slowly discarded nature worship, ancestor worship, demons, goblins, witches, necromancers, mediums, soothsayers, fertility rituals, magic, spirit possession, astrology, totemism, mythology, human sacrifice, and tribal gods. As religion evolved, it slowly recognized the crudities of

previous religion. Humans slowly came to understand that religion must worship something more inclusive than various natural phenomena or tribal personages. Religion began seeing itself as the search for a higher reality, another dimension, a greater understanding, or a timeless truth. Religious aspiration sought an unlimited God as the source and foundation for the limited particularities of nature. It sought a source and a foundation. It wanted a God that gave birth to nature but also transcended nature.

At the same time that religion was pursuing more transcendental meanings to human life and the cosmos, the religions conducted a more thorough inventory of what existence was actually like. Human existence is actually nasty, brutish and short. The unspoken reason for the arguments of transcendence was that since this world is a sinkhole of suffering and death, it can't be the last word on human destiny, either individually or collectively. What is of most value (human life) must not end. What is of most value (human life) must be certain. The most comforting certainty became the certainty of an unlimited God, and an individual's continuing life with God after death. Since this human life and this human world obviously does end and is not certain, human life and human world have to be illusions. There has to be something more. Thus, religion moved attention away from this world to the next world, or to another realm. Religion preferred an imaginary world over the real world in which human beings actually live. As Jesus said:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not consume.

The path that almost all forms of religion chose lead away from earthly life. Perhaps the most important exception was the religion of the early Hebrews. Early Israel put less emphasis upon individual blessedness after death; rather, they emphasized building and sustaining the community of shalom here on earth. Within this early Hebrew religion, it was especially the prophetic strand that inveighed against the idea that it was possible to achieve some kind of individual salvation that was independent of or outside of an earthly communal well-being. God wanted economic justice for all in this world. Hence arose the prophetic emphasis upon helping the least powerful or important members of society: the poor, the stranger, and the widow. Early Hebrew religion however, is the exception. Spiritual realms separate from and superior to the earthly realm were consistently held out to be the goal or ideal of religious faith.

There was another path that could have been taken which is still a viable option for religious pilgrims today. Instead of brutal honesty about the

human condition leading to a rejection of the world, brutal honesty about the human condition could have lead back into the world, to renewed engagement with the world. Why not accept the world as it is, on its own limited terms? Well, no, that would be too painful, too honest, and too limiting. It would also require great courage. It would require the courage of Socrates as he fearlessly drank the hemlock. The average religious person cannot be expected to be that courageous. To say this in another way, religion preferred to treat human beings as little children who must be sheltered from harsh reality. The best possible shelter from every human heartache, every human fear, and every human loss is a divine realm not dependent on the realm in which we actually live—one that is immune to heartache, fear and loss.

The various religions then took their own particular form of this divine realm and held that belief to be normative. Many religious leaders went further and sought to impose their belief in that realm on others. If you do not affirm the reality of this religious realm, it was asserted, you have no grounds for hope. You have no solution to man's existential predicament. In one of religion's favorite putdowns for honest ideas it doesn't like, you become 'nihilistic,' one who rejects all moral and religious principles.

The charge of nihilism that might be leveled against CT may be accurate in the short run. There should be no illusion that greater honesty of the kind that CT advocates might be a quick fix for our modern spiritual problems. There is no such quick fix. Greater honesty would destroy many current forms of faith. Honesty may increase pain, it may hinder hope, and it may not even work very well for most people at this particular time in human history. And yet honesty—that is, the desire to see things more as they are, rather than seeing them as we wish they were—is on the side of fostering long-term spiritual maturity, both for individuals and for humanity as a whole.

Both initially and fundamentally, CT urges the curious to value honesty about our existential condition more than the allure of putative certainty regarding our 'final' condition. Such honesty is difficult, yet if we can be more honest in our religion, we will set the tone for being more honest about ourselves as we live our lives, more honest about our families, more honest about our politics, and more truthful about our economy. Such honesty is the guiding attitude of disciples as they pursue the spiritual disciplines of CT.

2. Unburdenment

The current religions have taken on a huge burden. It is a huge burden to seek perfection. It is a huge burden to try to explain everything. That burden can be felt ethically (having a rule for every moral dilemma) as well

as philosophically (offering timeless truths). If your religious ideal is a perfect God, then you are allergic to even small flaws. Every crack in the dike of certainty must be plugged. You don't have the luxury of letting things go; you have to address any challenge to your belief in the perfect God, or any small area of imperfection that could destroy the whole limitless edifice of faith. Doubt and questioning become your mortal enemies. To accept an unlimited God you have to be willing to accept a huge burden.

The onerous nature of this burden cries out for relief: "I can't carry this load by myself. What can I do? I can ask for help. There is somebody who knows more than I know. There is somebody who has experienced more than I have experienced." Thus, I turn towards religious authority. And religious authority is steeped in tradition. This is the main emotional reason why authority and tradition play such huge roles in the religions. I may not know all the 'certain' reasons for God, but somebody in my religion does. I know that I haven't talked to God, or Moses, or Jesus, or Muhammad or Buddha, but somebody in my religious tradition did, so I can consult that tradition. I realize that I can't carry the huge burden of certainty myself. I don't have to! I can offload that task to some authoritative scripture or some authoritative person.

But again speaking honestly, you can't do that offload with integrity. You have to give your own account of your faith; you can't responsibly hand over that burden to your religious leader or your religious authority; you can't find it in the authoritative scripture. Thus, your non-transferable burden as a human being is not just accounting for the preponderance of the evidence, nor is it even belief beyond a reasonable doubt. If you follow an unlimited God, you are engaged in the grandiose and smothering project of certainty. Why take on such an impossible task? Why not relax a little bit? Why not leave certainty to the realm of mythology, fairy tales and geometric 'proofs'? Why not become more honest and accept limitation, in thought, in life, and in faith? Take time to enjoy the limited life you actually have rather than pursuing the unlimited perfections that are not real. Unburden yourself!

In this connection, CT has a decisive advantage over almost all of its religious and secular rivals. The burden of proof is much lower for CT. It only has to show that there are limits to understanding both God and the world. It freely admits that all its own ideas are limited and need improvement. The other religions and some parts of modern science, on the other hand, have to show certainty or decisive proof of the validity of their statements. Point out a flaw in CT, and it will amend that flaw. Point out a flaw in the religions or the natural law interpretation of science, and that flaw will be defended as if one's very life depended on it. And if (God forbid) there is reason to

believe a flaw might actually be there, then the 'true believer' knows that the whole edifice of thought or belief could totally collapse. This fear of potential collapse is one reason why religious devotees are so often defensive and argumentative, and why they dismiss other views reflexively. The whole spirit of CT is a contrast to reflexive rejection of new ideas. CT welcomes crazy, new and creative thinking because it knows that all thinking is limited. CT welcomes new ideas because its formulations can always be improved.

3. Perennial Solvent

Religion in its various forms is in constant danger of taking its formulations of God to be certain and therefore final. Such finality would be perhaps tolerable if it remained in the realm of ideas. But finality of idea leads to extremes of behavior. Finality of idea leads to culturally-intolerant political power. In the political relations between peoples and nations, finalities often require war with other finalities. For most of traditional religion, since there can only be one 'final' truth, those who know that truth have an obligation to force that saving truth upon all 'unbelievers.' This outlook only leads to human separation and is the rationale for persecution and pogroms, anathemas and violent jihad, always justified by the 'false' and 'heretical' certainty of your opponent.

Thus, the current forms of religion need a perennial solvent for their 'certain' beliefs and 'final' doctrines. That is, religion, if it is to adapt or accommodate to new life, must find a way to dissolve its certainties. The CT idea of a limited God is such a perennial solvent. It provides reasons for admitting new ideas and for leaving behind old ideas. As this solvent acts, it reduces the differences between the religions. The more they assert that they have certainty or the one path towards the truth, the more powerful the solvent of CT becomes. CT has the uncanny ability to constantly lure human beings back to a global truth: despite our religions, we are all in the same existential predicament. No religion or worldview has the one certain answer for everyone. Just this one idea from CT makes it invaluable to the modern global quest for maturation.

Religion is not the only form of certainty that needs a perennial solvent. There are various cultural, economic and political certainties active today which also need dissolution. Some of those areas are addressed in this book.

C. Atheism and the Certain Unreality of God

1. Appreciation

The first thing CT must say about atheism is a word of appreciation. That appreciation is not in the form of any endorsements of the rational or metaphysical positions of various atheists. Rather, it is recognition of the courage and honesty with which atheists attempt to approach existence. Atheists are a minority in all societies. Most modern humans feel uneasy about atheists or even seek to persecute them for their beliefs. It is common knowledge that even in the United States, which some consider to be a progressive nation, no avowed atheist could seriously hope to run for President, much less be elected. Atheists can provide lessons to us in two ways: honesty and courage. Atheists want to look at what is, instead of what they hope might be, and that takes honesty. Atheists are willing to self-identify as members of a questionable minority, and that takes courage. Despite the honesty and courage with which many atheists hold their positions, they are criticized by CT to the extent they propound certainty.

2. The Spiritual Dimension

The multi-dimensional view of human nature is presented in Chapter Five, but the spiritual dimension of human nature discussed in more detail in that chapter is relevant here in this discussion of atheism. According to CT, we became human when we could ask the dual question of meaning and purpose. This question moves us into the spiritual dimension. If the dual question is ruled meaningless or impossible to answer, then we have a radical form of atheism. In this radical form, no general ideas about purpose and meaning are legitimate. In the more moderate form of atheism, the dual question can be asked, but it is assumed beforehand that 'God' can never be the right answer. Thus, the mild form of atheism admits the spiritual dimension or recognizes the spiritual dimension as an essential dimension of human nature; it just rejects the most common theistic answers. In criticizing atheism, it is important to know which form of atheism one is dealing with.

3. Holism

To provide a useful global spirituality requires a sense of the whole. CT rejects the absolutistic way that the religions pursue this need for holism. CT suggests that a limited God provides a view of the whole that is limited, but is still comprehensive enough to provide the needed holistic views. The attack of atheism on the certainty of God is misplaced when applied to the limited God of CT. To the extent that atheism undermines holism, it needs to be criticized.

From the point of view of CT, atheism can make a good case in questioning the various religious certainties of God. But the certainty of 'no God' is analogous to the religious views it seeks to destroy. Certainty, no matter if used to assert God's necessary existence or God's necessary non-existence, is suspect. Both alike partake of the same mindset and violate the ontological principle. Certainty is a chimera, presented to thought as a temptation. Certainty leads to fundamentalism, and there are atheistic fundamentalists just as there are theistic fundamentalists. Again, the message to atheists from CT is calming: You can't have and don't need certainty to attack the certainties of religion. You don't need certainty to attack the evils of religion. The best tool is rigorous honesty applied consistently.

With regard to the substantive arguments of atheist teachings, this book in its entirety is the response. To the extent that atheists are certain that no God exists, to that same degree they violate the idea of mystery and refuse to accept limits. Certainty about the unreality of God is just as misguided as certainty about the reality of God. From the point of view of CT, atheists need to accept a basic truth that is also directed at any affirmative faith; there is no final ground for either faith or skepticism since both presume to form a definitive interpretation of the whole of existence based on a limited human point of view. Atheists are urged to ponder CT's idea that a limited idea of God might be better than no God. In any case, no atheist or believer can assume a God-like perspective from outside the cosmos, nor from there can they observe all of reality as it is. This limitation, which applies with equal force to the non-believer, the skeptic and the atheist, is an example of our ontological plight.

D. Four Guiding Ideas

1. Mystery/ Certainty

The idea of mystery for CT is more of an attitude than it is a rational criterion for truth or a principle to be applied. Mystery combines respect with curiosity. Mystery allows space for questions and enjoys playing with new ideas. It is hard to understand the meaning of mystery taken by itself. It is more helpful to think of mystery in conjunction with its contrast: certainty. Likewise, limits, or the limited, are best understood in contrast with 'unlimited.' Mystery has a kind of numinous quality. It is the intuition that what is mysterious or unknown now might become better understood later. The proper attitude to accompany mystery is a combination of thanksgiving and research. The mysterious invites exploration.

Certainty, on the other hand, discourages exploration. Why explore when you are certain of what's there? Thus, the idea of mystery functions in CT as a sort of guiding attitude or aspiration. The most constructive approach to ideas about God or the fundamental nature of the universe is an attitude of mystery—not certainty. If this is true, then one can tell a great deal about any given religion or any religious leader by observing how they deal with mystery and certainty. Be wary of those religions and leaders who are certain about God or the universe. Be especially wary if they are certain about what is right for you. Welcome those religions and leaders who respect mystery. They will seek to guide you through the mysteries of thought and life, knowing that certainty is a distraction. If a religion or a leader cannot admit ignorance in some of life's most important problems, you are dealing with a fearful charlatan. The wisest and most accurate statement about some of life's most important questions is often, unfortunately, "I don't know."

2. Limits and the Unlimited

Human beings are limited. We are limited in the time that we have to live, in the ability we have to explain nature, in our plans to make the world better, in our enactments of love, and in the legacy we will leave behind. And these individual limits are not canceled by considering the human race as a whole, or the advance of civilization in its historic sweep, or in the idea that humans will evolve into a super species, or the idea that we will colonize the galaxy, or that we shall give birth to a non-biological super intelligence. The idea of the limit is essential for any honest religion.

Unanswerable Questions

To illustrate the idea of limits, consider the query: Are there unanswerable questions about important aspects of reality? Or, to put this in another way, are there important areas of life that will remain unknowable? There are such questions—important questions—to which any thinking human being would like to know the answer. The following important questions all have the same answer: We don't know now, and we can never know.

- Why is there something rather than nothing?
- Where did the universe come from?
- Where did God come from?
- What's the ultimate fate of the universe?
- What will happen after I die?
- What's the complete structure of matter?

God

- Why does evolution happen?
- What is the full extent of time?

The limit idea is regularly degraded, resisted, and scorned by the majority of human beings and human religions. For example, the western monotheisms comfort their faithful with variations on the certainty of eternal life with God after death; and the Eastern religions comfort their followers with variations on the escape from Maya and Samsara, and the merger with Brahman- Atman, the Unlimited One that encompasses all reality. The idea of the limit is also regularly degraded and resisted by most secular ideologies. For consumerism, there are, in principle, no limits to buying and accumulating ever larger collections of enchanted stuff. For capitalism, there is no limit in principle to growth, progress, financial innovation, and wealth accumulation. For technophiles, there is no limit to the creativity and potential of electronic gadgets and computer intelligence. For science, there is no limit, in principle, to our ability to understand the origin of life, extending even to explaining human consciousness. Even further, science seems able to press on to the full cosmological understanding of both the origins and final destiny of the universe.

From the point of view of CT, however, the refusal of modernity, in most of its religious as well as secular forms, to accept the profound implications of radical limitation is at the root of the spiritual crisis we now face. We see signs of that crisis in personal meaning, in social policy, in philosophical understanding, in scientific pursuits, and in the construction of a globally-sustainable and just civilization. In contrast to the apotheosis of such unlimited vistas, CT suggests that it is more hopeful as well as more useful in the long run to accept limits. Since the denial of limitation, in thought, in aspiration, and in achievement has been the hallmark of the rise of civilization, any significant modification of that (civilization-making) limitless pursuit will be difficult, slow, and could end in failure. CT honestly accepts this possible failure. The project of making a limited, more realistic and more honest religion may be not only quixotic but impossible.

A Historical Moment

On the other hand, the project of CT may be more realizable now than at any time in the past. Today's pilgrim has many tools that have only recently become available to the human imagination. Science, for example (one of the sources of CT), is historically recent. The discovery of a 13.7 billion year old universe vastly explodes the most common current understanding of the cosmos as a three-story world of heaven, earth and hell. Pre-scientific forms of religion should be everywhere retreating. Beyond science proper, only until relatively recent times has there been the leisure

time available to the common person to undertake the study and reflection needed to practice a religion like CT. For the vast majority of human existence, humans could neither read nor write, basic skills necessary to fully practice any of the higher world religions of the last 2500 years, much less the complex nuances of CT. Only when the historical conditions are ripe for a certain type of conceptualization and ritualistic practice would CT even be possible. The early twenty-first century may present such historical conditions.

3. Better is better than Perfect

At the same time that the ideas of mystery, honesty, and limits are marinating in one's thoughts, we return to this idea: better is better than perfect. In other words, since we cannot be perfect, we should aspire instead to be better. This means that even though we can't know with certainty the true nature of God nor the meaning of our own life and death, we can at least come up with some ideas that are better than others ideas to address those concerns. In this way, a God understood with an element of mystery is better than a God understood as some kind of known commodity or patent reality. Admitting that there are limits to human understanding of God is a better idea than exempting God from any limitation. The limiting idea is a better idea because it is a more honest and accurate idea. Honesty about God and our own death is better than myths about God and our own death.

If this principle (better is better than perfect) is accepted, then a whole new world of useful ideas and options for self, others, world and God will appear. Since the idea of perfection is a unitary idea, it tends to move away from plurality and seeks simplicity. Better, on the other hand, is a comparative idea (better this than that) and values plurality and complexity. Most of us, most of the time, are much closer neighbors to better than we are to perfect. Better is, therefore, a more utilitarian and evocative idea than is the idea of the perfect. Most of CT operates in the world of better, and not in the world of perfect. If you want perfection in understanding, in faith, in action, in love, in aspiration, or in God, CT is not for you. An easy way to reject CT is to say: It is a religion of only a middling (only better not best) understanding of God, and middling (better not best) plans for human improvement which rejects the truth of infinity, the message of eternity, as well as the certainty of my holy crusade.

In light of this discussion, CT simply says that a limited religion is better than no religion, and at the same time, CT is better than the 'unlimited' religions now available. This argument rests on conditional and not 'final' types of arguments. In the traditional catalogue of proofs for God's

existence, it is assumed by all parties that 'proof' in the sense of certainty is what the argument is all about. CT rejects this conception of 'proof.' Since both proofs of God as well as dis-proofs are impossible, why not move on? This moving on will focus on a limited task of answering this question: What is useful to say and believe about God? Since the burden of proof for CT has now become not 'ultimate' but 'better,' the whole discussion changes.

There is a civilization-changing difference between two Gods: One unlimited, and the other 'best available.' The spiritual odyssey of our species has slowly elevated ideas about an unlimited 'God' along with pursuit of 'final truth,' such that they have become the highest in meaning and value for billions of people. CT suggests that this elevation has taken us as far as it can, and alternatives must be considered. It seems that our civilization has to reorient itself to meet the challenges of the future. Part of that reorientation might be the demotion of an unlimited God and final truth combined with an elevation of and passion for the pursuit of a 'best available' God and a 'best available' truth.

That 'best available' God is another way to describe the CT God. Thus, in the world of better not perfect, the questions become what concept of God and what spiritual practices are most helpful to people who want to be honest? As a reminder, those who want to be painfully honest are a minority, perhaps a tiny minority, of people today. But let's start by building a community of these honest people, a topic described in Chapter Eleven.

4. The Principle of Thanksgiving

The principle of thanksgiving, like the principle of honesty, is more of an attitude than an analytical method. Every human being has the obligation to give thanks for life. Each of us should be thankful for the amazing panoply of life that surrounds us, without which our own existence would be impossible. You also have the obligation to give thanks for your unique personal life. There is no one like you in the history of the cosmos. When you are gone, it will not be possible to replace you. Such a special being, made possible only by a unique concatenation of circumstances, calls for gratitude, awe, and thanksgiving on the part of that being. These musings seem to lead one to, if not require, an attitude of thanksgiving.

Of course, many people are not thankful, nor do they have an attitude of thanksgiving. They have other basic attitudes, one of the most common of which is entitlement: "I earn what I get. I deserve my blessings. I don't owe anyone." Another common attitude is victimhood: "It's not my fault. I was treated unfairly. I don't deserve this." These and many other negative attitudes violate the principle of thanksgiving. CT recognizes the negativities

of life, but when these negativities are elevated above the principle of thanksgiving, we diminish our life now as well as the possibility of embracing a better future.

The principle of thanksgiving recognizes life as a gift that we did not earn. It is, in fact, the greatest gift. For human beings, there is no gift greater. If that is true, then the proper attitude for that gift is to give thanks. But for CT, such necessary thanks have to be directed somewhere. We are not just thankful in a general or abstract way. We have an obligation to give thanks to God who has provided the creative impulse for life, both our life and the countless lives that have gone before ours. If this is true, then we have a technical obligation to worship God. In this view, if you don't offer worship, you are ungrateful, self-centered, and therefore stunted as a human being. Without worship, you also maintain an inaccurate assessment about the amazing fact that you are you.

This obligation to worship does not mean that every Friday you must face Mecca and prostrate yourself in prayer. It does not mean that every Sunday you partake of the communion of the body and blood of Christ. It does not mean that every Saturday you listen for God's word in the Torah. It does not mean that you daily practice the meditation of unitary consciousness. It does not mean that you sing and shout once a week about the power of the Lord. It does mean that you have the obligation to regularly join with others in giving thanks for the gift of life. That is why CT disciples meet weekly for communal worship, and especially thanksgiving. A version of the traditional folk song says it well:

My life goes on in heartfelt song
Above earth's lamentations,
I hear the real, though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.

Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear its music ringing,
It sounds an echo in my life
How can I keep from singing?

If you can't or don't offer thanksgiving, you diminish yourself. You move toward becoming something no one should respect or be patient with: an ungrateful person.

E. Particular Problems and Issues

This section deals with six particular issues or problems in no particular order. There are important theological topics not addressed in this chapter nor in this book that must be developed more fully as CT evolves. Two of those areas are free will and eschatology.

1. Death/ Heaven

There is the reality of death, and there is also the way that individual human beings deal with that reality. Thus, while death itself is a constant, the way that humans choose to deal with that reality is variable. Along that variable continuum, we see meek resignation on one end and heroic resistance and denial on the other. CT accepts death in the sense of accepting that which cannot be changed. In this sense, CT resembles an important strand of Islamic teaching which encourages submission.

Of the two basic questions with which religion must deal—what is the nature of the world and how do I live my life—death provides the boundary for the latter. When I am dead I have no part of life. This realization is unimaginable and shocking. One can, with difficulty, imagine what life was like before birth, but it is impossible to know what life will be like after death. Because of this existential shock, there is overwhelming emotional pressure for humans to deny death. Any attitude except submission will be attractive. Thus, the promise of life after death, in some form, is a facet of almost every religion in almost every time. This denial of death is not part of the teaching of CT; however, it is excluded because the denial of death is dishonest. To express the denial in another way, the denier says, “I refuse to accept what is the case; instead I prefer to accept what I want the case to be.” Such a choice is dishonest and false.

Thus, in dealing with death, the first step is acceptance. The second step is to live life to the fullest while alive. It is not easy to accept death. We grasp any alternative to acceptance. It can be helpful in this process of acceptance to honestly look at the alternatives to acceptance. It may help to show some of the shortcomings of the various ways humans have tried to deny death. The most common is the idea of life after death, commonly understood to be heaven or the state of immortality. For Whitehead, the doctrine of life after death is called “subjective immortality” defined as the subjective stream of conscious experience that somehow continues after physical death¹⁰. Subjective immortality (heaven or eternal life) is the

¹⁰ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978), p. 29.

continuation, after my death, of the same stream of conscious awareness that characterized my life before death. Thus, I will retain my memories from my pre-death life, only now I will receive some kind of spiritual body and will go to live with God in some kind of a spiritual heaven. This new body and this new heaven are radically different from my former biological body and my former material earthly home; and yet it is assumed that the first leads to the second. The material body leads to a spiritual body. Again, the philosophical name for this understanding of salvation in heaven after death is subjective immortality. My body will decay, but my subjective experience will continue (become immortal) in a new kind of body.

A noteworthy example of this type of belief comes from an interview with Pastor Rick Warren:

People ask me, what is the purpose of life? And I respond: In a nutshell, life is preparation for eternity. We were made to last forever, and God wants us to be with Him in heaven. One day my heart is going to stop, and that will be the end of my body, but not the end of me. I may live 60 or 100 years on earth, but I am going to spend trillions of years in eternity. This is a warm-up act, the dress rehearsal. God wants us to practice on earth what we will do forever in eternity. We were made by God and for God, and until you figure that out, life isn't going to make sense¹¹.

Warren's statement is useful for discussion because it is both clearly stated and likely also representative of many Christians' belief. However, a veritable panoply of problems accompanies this understanding of heaven. Let us begin with the rational problems. Any rational (as opposed to emotional) view of life will amply demonstrate that, far from being eternal, all life is transitory. Change, evolution, and variability seem to be essential descriptors of life, at least any form of life that humans are currently aware of. To apply the category of 'eternal' to life is a plain rational contradiction. Even life in its entirety is not eternal. Science provides evidence to suppose that life had a beginning on earth (or was transported to earth) and that physical changes in the sun will eventually make life as we know it impossible on earth. The hope that someday humans will colonize the galaxy is unconvincing and, even if it were possible, would only postpone

¹¹ Rick Warren, interview conducted by Paul Bradshaw, 31 October 2007, http://www.billygraham.org/DMag_article.asp?ArticleID=492.

the eventual demise of life in a galaxy that itself is not everlasting. Rationally considered, life is not and (if CT is right) cannot be considered eternal.

Another rational problem with the traditional idea of heaven is creativity. What creative projects will those saved, eternally-existent humans occupy themselves with? With eternity at their disposal, it would seem all possible projects could be pursued to completion. Then what? Reflections of this type soon reveal the absurd implications of the attempt to apply unlimited metaphysical categories (eternality, everlastingness, changelessness) to limited human beings. Thus, the attempt to apply the aspect of permanence to any life form (humans included) violates the basic CT idea of limits. Life is change, and sometimes progress, over time. Without such change and possible progress, there is no meaningful understanding of life. Endless duration is not living.

Another major problem with the traditional teaching on eternal life in heaven is that it is supported by linear thinking and conceived to be dichotomous in nature. You are either saved or not. If heaven or hell is our final personal destiny as human beings, then humanity can be viewed as divided into two basic groups. The battle then becomes: who is assigned to each group, and who does the assignment? Such dichotomous thinking is directly parallel to the neural processing of the brain structures in the limbic system (especially the amygdala), which is the province of the emotional response to threat. If there is a threat (in this case, my demise), then only two options are possible. For the actual biological animal, it is either fight or flight. For the spiritually-dichotomous human person, it is either heaven or hell. The parallels in response are clear and disturbing. It is even possible that this dichotomy supports or even *anchors* many other unhelpful dichotomies of modernity, such as substance/process; successful/unsuccessful; rich/poor; beautiful/ugly; material/spiritual; faithful/infidel; and/or saved/damned. It is hard to deny that this dichotomous type of thinking has too often supported war, persecution, racism, and ethnic cleansing. The traditional view of heaven relies upon linear and zero-sum thinking. The alternative to dichotomous thinking, as CT has been suggesting, gives attention to the gradation of value, and comes from a multidimensional view of life.

Without gradations of value, the traditional teaching on eternal life exhibits other problems. Since there is always a range of human behavior and human belief, what is the dividing line between acceptable and unacceptable belief or behavior? If one thinks in dichotomous terms, then one is forced to argue that only tiny differences in belief or behavior would result in vast differences in destiny—indeed, the difference between eternal

paradise and eternal damnation. But our destiny is not dichotomous in this sense, but rather proportional. God saves from our life what is of value for future life. There is no magic threshold of belief or practice that earns one their ticket to paradise.

The traditional view of heaven actually discourages the mature acceptance of personal limits. One of the hallmarks of childhood (for example the behavior of a toddler) is to reject limits of any kind. I want it! With maturation, the toddler learns that 'having it all' is an immature and largely dysfunctional quest. This insight (which can be learned from an observation of human child development) does not seem to enter into the thinking of those who assert the traditional view of salvation as endless life in heaven. When it comes to duration, so the traditional religious view teaches, having it all is not only not immature, but is the essence of spiritual hope and profundity. Religion can and must do better.

Contemporary Theism provides a view of personal destiny which is much more resonant with our deeper rational understandings of the cosmos. Humans and all other creatures are not subjectively immortal. Our stream-of-consciousness comes to an end—when we sleep, when we are unconscious, and finally at death. There is no doubt that acceptance of death in this sense is never easy, never consistent, and amounts to a spiritual challenge as long as life exists. To convey the intuition that informs this kind of acceptance, perhaps a parable will help.

Parable of the Zoo

Once there was a large, attractive and well-maintained zoo. The zoo housed a huge variety of plants and animals. The requirements for food, water and shelter were provided in ecologically-appropriate ways. The care given to the zoo residents was world class. The zoo maximized the various environments for the plants and animals. In the daily life of the zoo, there were a number of deaths every day. When that happened, the dead were mourned, then life went on.

One day some new animals appeared in the zoo. These animals were a new species of advanced hominid. The zoo took care of these new arrivals. One day one of the hominids said, "We should be treated differently than all the other plants and animals. We should live forever and not die." The zoo looked carefully at the hominids and recognized the differences between the hominids and the other plants and animals. The zoo knew that the hominids were special in some ways. The zoo also knew that every creature in the zoo must die.

God

When the hominids realized they, too, must die, they rose up, destroyed the plants, and killed the other animals. "We have escaped the zoo they said. We are free. We deserve to live forever. We do not need the zoo. We are not like the other animals."

In reflecting on the parable, you are invited to speculate about the zoo and its creatures. What about these hominids? Are they a just a figment of the imagination? Can we see ourselves as but another advanced species of hominid, with no more rights to endless life than any other hominid, or indeed any other resident of the zoo? With regard to the parable, could the hominids embrace the zoo and learn from the other residents and from one another what it means to make the zoo a home? Can they find a reason to fully invest in the zoo? Can they see that the zoo is their one and only home? Am I one with the zoo? Will I do all in my power to protect it and cherish it? Or will I follow those who try to escape the zoo?

2. Divine Rewards and Punishments

It is in the context of our most profound reflections on the nature of reality and God that the idea of divine rewards and punishments should be addressed. Probably one of the most controversial aspects of this chapter will be the proposal that in CT there are no rewards for believing in God just as there are no punishments for not believing in God. This idea is so out of step with religion in almost all its forms that it will be emotionally rejected. The careful elaboration of this idea will go a long way to differentiate the God of CT from many other conceptions of God.

As creative force, God is always maximizing the creative options that are mediated to every actual entity as it evolves. This creative aspect of God is continuous and ever-faithful. This activity is also understood to be independent of any response on the part of the creatures. I may welcome God's creativity or reject it, or I may simply be oblivious to that activity, neither of which will affect God's creative action. God provides new creative possibilities to all, even in the most forlorn or obscure realms of the cosmos or to the most evil human beings. This view suggests a kind of nurturing patience on the part of God that is rarely recognized as important for God. It suggests an image of God working in vast scales of time and space as well in the instants of personal illumination. It also shows that there is nothing the creature can do to either earn greater creative input or to earn more attention from God.

Unlike what the official 'highest authorities' of most of the world's religions say, God is supremely un-anxious about how you regard Him/Her/It. From the point of view of God's creative nature, you could say

that God doesn't care what you think about Him/Her/It. God will provide you with a constant stream of creative possibilities for your life, regardless of whether you are a devout believer or a hardened atheist. In other words, unlike many traditional understandings of God, for CT God is not a jealous God. What or who could possibly make God jealous? Jealousy is a reactive human emotion that actually says more about what God is not. The general problem of God's consciousness is addressed below.

It is also important to see that God acts to enrich the entire cosmos and not just human beings or human awareness, or even that one tragically lost and innocent child. If rewards and punishments for human beings alone are the central salvific truths of religion, then that teaching is simply much too narrow from a cosmic perspective. In a deep sense, it is not just human life but all life is the focus of God's actions. Most broadly of all, all other sentient beings both on earth and on (possibly) other planets, are at least as central to God's purposes as human reward or punishment. To believe that rewards or punishments for humans are the central salvific truths is to argue that human worth exceeds the worth of any other being or any other entities of the universe. Such a view makes God the servant of human ego and ignores the grandeur not only of the amazing diversity of life on earth, but also the grandeur of cosmic vastness.

The appeal to rewards and punishments also promotes human rational and spiritual immaturity. The highest ethical imperatives are more related to what I should do, regardless of my reward or punishment. Certainly, on the emotional level, I will respond to rewards for doing some things, and I will also try to avoid other things if I am punished. Rewards and punishments operate mainly on the emotional dimension of human nature. But operating on the emotional dimension is in tension with the goal of CT, which is to promote spiritual maturity through the maturation of life in the rational and spiritual dimensions (Chapter Five).

The belief in rewards and punishments, especially the idea of eternal rewards and punishments, simply rejects the needed recognition of human limits. Human beings are limited creatures. If we are limited creatures, then the notion of either an eternal (unlimited) reward or punishment ignores the basic reality of human nature— namely, that we are limited beings that do not justify, nor can we merit, any type of 'eternal' treatment.

Another problem with the religious idea of rewards and punishments is what it does to human community. If I believe that God's main job is to dole out the proper rewards to the deserving and the proper punishments to the erring, then I will be that much more likely to think I can help God along in

God

this important work. This means that if God is mainly in the rewards-and-punishment business, then God's limited human followers should also be in that same business. To the extent, however, that one is focused on either rewarding or punishing others, to that same extent, one is not focused on one's own spiritual maturation. For CT, the first obligation for those who seek spiritual maturity is their own improvement.

It would be hard to imagine a greater change in daily religious practice than the recognition that God plays no favorites. If religion could move even slightly toward the idea that God is not swayed by religion nor by what any human says they believe about God, we would make a giant step towards global maturation.

Similarly, if just a smidgen of this CT view of rewards and punishments could become more widely effective, the religious motivation to judge, condemn, and persecute others based on religious criteria would lose much of its force. It is one of the ugly ironies of religion that the portions of religion that call for benevolence and forgiveness should be habitually overpowered by the portions of religion that promote dehumanization, excommunication, torture and death. Such religious corruption is responsible for the death of hundreds of millions of human beings over the ages. One major factor in that corruption is the effort to make specific religious teachings final and certain. The tragic history of millions of religiously-motivated murders demands that the followers of the current religions be more self-critical of their past. Or, that history could be another reason to embrace a new form of religion entirely.

Today we do not have to believe in a tribal God who rewards His/Her/Its favorites and punishes His/Her/Its enemies for what they say about God's royal highness. Rather, we can conceive of a God who is not primarily the grantor of rewards and punishments; rather, we can conceive of a God who is concerned with promoting richness of experience, harmony in contrast, or even human spiritual maturation. Unlike the tribal God who plays favorites with us depending on how we regard that God, we need a God who is just—one who provides creative alternatives to all people (indeed, all of creation) in their myriad aspects. Such a God is worthy of worship (Chapter Eleven).

3. Tragedy

Religion must address the reality of human tragedy. CT begins with a frank admission of the tragedy of lost human potential. Probably the worst and most disheartening example is a healthy young child who dies, whether from a rare disease or (perhaps the even worse case) at the hands of a murderer or terrorist. How can such a death be anything but tragic? How

can such a death be accepted? How can a family member or anyone who loved that child live with hope and optimism again? How can a person affirm any kind of God in the face of such a personal loss? And, even more painfully compounding the tragedy, what can be said when it is not just an individual, but a tribe, race, or a people that is needlessly persecuted, tortured or murdered?

When faced with such a loss, there are certainly no easy answers for the afflicted, and CT admits that there may not be any satisfying answers. One whole class of answers is rejected—namely that class of answers that denies the final reality of that child's death and says that a blessed realm, or another time, or another life is possible for that child. That kind hope is forever beyond the embrace of CT. The CT hope, or the answer to the omnipresence of human tragedy, is limited, just like human life and human understanding is limited.

First of all, a tragedy such as a tragic death should prompt us to do what we can to avoid future similar tragedies. All of us, in some way, could have done more to prevent this tragedy. We also can believe that whatever was good in this child's life will live on in some way for some time in this world. Our memories of that child are limited but still very important; in fact, the memories are precious. We can offer to be with or walk with those who have experienced loss, suffering, death and tragedy. Human sympathy provides a limited but essential antidote to tragedy.

Art can be a major resource in dealing with tragedy. We can open ourselves to the healing power of art in all its various forms. The healing power of art is an irreplaceable support when we come face to face with tragedy.

Further, we know that by faith what was creative in this tragic life will be remembered by God and used by God in the future. A small but significant comfort is the realization that all suffering ends.

The reality of tragedy should prompt us to construct more just and peaceful societies and social institutions. Much of the worse suffering of humankind is related to the social arrangements humans have constructed and maintained. We can reduce tragedy by helping to form more just and fair institutions and laws.

And, finally, we know that tragedy provides us with a stark choice. We can be destroyed by such events, refuse to live again, devote our lives to revenge, give up on hope, become evil ourselves, or end our own lives. Or

we can choose to value the life that we have left, and even learn to give thanks for the life we have left. It may even be possible to occasionally give thanks for all of life, and even to appreciate the tragic reality of death itself. We may even hope to advance to the stage where we are indifferent to death, as the Apostle Paul claimed, or that we have transcended the illusion of the body's painful existence as some eastern mystic might claim. Such a stance of indifference or claimed transcendence is almost always faked; in any case, this perspective is extremely rare and of little use to the vast majority of humans, no matter what their faith is named. Even so, thankfulness combined with total honesty about life should be one of the spiritual goals of CT, even though it is often a very challenging goal for humans to reach, indeed.

4. Personality and God

Any modern idea of God or conception of God must come to terms with the poignant and touching hope that the universe is, despite all appearances to the contrary, a benevolent place. A personal God expresses the hope that ultimate reality, whatever that may be, desires to enter into a loving personal relationship with me, as an individual. Visions of this personal God express the at once childlike and stupendous good news that God is my friend. To say that God is my friend is to argue that aspects of human personality like anger, joy, disappointment, jealousy, and hope are appropriate categories for understanding God. In the Western monotheisms, personality is a central interpretive paradigm that is applied to God. God is like a very powerful human, only more human than any other. By analogy, God's power has been compared to ideas of kingdom, royalty and empire. The powers and prerogatives of a human king are projected into the divine realm. Similarly, God has also often been considered merciful. That mercy has been expressed by analogy to human mercy, especially the mercy seen in the self-sacrificial actions of a loving mother.

While recognizing the immediate appeal of such analogies, the revolutionary impact of CT will be best served if personality is denied to God in any correlative human sense. Unlike the dogma of Christian orthodoxy, God is not now, nor has God ever been a person, much less a unity of three Trinitarian persons. CT makes a number of points to support the elimination of projecting human personality traits on the conception of God. The first is one of spiritual practicality and honesty. Practically and honestly speaking, the desire to bring God down to the human level is, in a way, understandable. God is a very difficult concept, and the more one thinks about God, the more complex and difficult the subject can become. It is natural that the founders (and especially the subsequent interpreters) of religion would want to provide tools for the average believer to relate to God.

But was it anything more than pure opportunism for Jews to contend that God wanted a special personal relationship with only their particular tribe? Was it anything more than opportunism for Christians to assert that the infinite God was just Jesus talking to his friends? Was it anything more than opportunism for Muslims to proclaim that Muhammad heard God's voice and then recited those very words?

A personal God has immediate emotional appeal. We know that the people we actually encounter in life—our parents, our siblings, our lovers, our friends, our co-workers—are all flawed and limited beings who disappoint us sooner or later. But a personal God would be like all these flawed humans, except without the flaws. If God is like my friends (except that God is perfect), then I have a very powerful way to affirm God's reality. I can relate to God without having to think beyond personality. I can relate to God without having to move beyond my emotions. To become a disciple does not require that I revise any of my categories of thought. I can be friends with God in the same way that I can go with my friends to see a movie. In other words, I can embrace the religion of comfort and reject the religion of challenge (Chapter Ten).

Contemporary Theism chooses a different way. Instead of bringing God down to the level of personality, it attempts to elevate humans to a higher form of life and a more rigorous form of thought. Of course, this CT program will be a tough sell. We are so inured to thinking of God as personal, whether or not we are some form of theist that the absurdity of the idea refuses to bother us. As a very basic illustration, take the universally-recognized proposition that God is the Creator. What did God create? Well, everything. God created the earth, the heavens and all that is therein. As persons, we know we did not create this cosmos. There is no conceivable kind of 'person' who could create the universe. Every person is a creature, and a creature who is part of the universe cannot account for the existence of the entire universe. Thus, it is fundamentally absurd to apply the ideas that connote personality to God.

Further, if God is a person, then we then have full permission to treat God like our pal. We are invited to regress in our spiritual maturity to the level of small children. We can pray to our buddy 'God' for a better job, a better bottom line, a victory in the game, or just that a better parking spot will open up. The practical impact of the idea of God as a person is the trivialization of the search for God. Every Christian worship service is rife with trivial references to our pal 'God' and superficial petitions for God's help. Even the habitual greeting between Muslims, 'Inshallah' (by God's will), has the effect of focusing the believer's attention on the small and daily

God

trivialities of life. For humans to mature spiritually, attention must be paid to a higher and larger vision of life, even becoming aware the possible purpose of our existence in the cosmos. Such a search is only retarded when the primary image of God we entertain is 'my personal friend.'

This does not deny what CT has affirmed repeatedly: that God is active in the world and does provide creative alternatives to all the creatures in every moment of existence. But that understanding of God is not anchored in metaphors of personality, which draw upon the emotional dimension. The God of CT must be interpreted by using the dimensions of culture and rationality as well. Honestly and realistically, we are not God's personal friends, as the human term is commonly used.

If God is a person, the problem of evil or theodicy will remain inexplicable. If God is a person, then we as other persons can judge God on the basis of ordinary human emotions. If I am fair, then God should be more fair. If I am forgiving, then God should be more forgiving. If I abhor the death of innocents, then God should be even more appalled by such deaths. Thus, in applying the category of personality to God, we make the problem of evil or theodicy impossible to resolve. With almost no exception, even the most hardened or jaded criminal will show some shadow of remorse at the senseless murder of an innocent child. And yet God, under the category of friend and guided by the flawed understanding of God having a human personality, allows such murders. Such a personal God is worse than a criminal. Such absurdity is the natural conclusion of the line of thought that begins by ascribing personality to God. God is not a person. God does not judge the way a human person would judge. God transcends personality, just as God transcends all human categories.

5. Consciousness and God

The problems of a personal God, or with applying categories of personality to God, are similar to the problems encountered when considering the consciousness of God. When we consider consciousness, we can only think in terms of our own consciousness. The experience of our consciousness, while persistent and sometimes overpowering, is limited. We are conscious of only a limited range of phenomena. Thus, there is almost nothing to be gained by ascribing consciousness to God. We can't take the route of using that which we are personally acquainted with and extrapolating that knowledge to God. The best current answer to the question of the nature of God's conscious experience is: "I don't know."

6. God's Co-Creators

As we move through life, we usually recognize that our views and opinions change as we interact with other humans and our environment. In CT, this process of change in humans can even be understood to apply to some aspects of God. God actually changes Him/Her/Itself during the process of relating to the cosmos and to human beings. There is a two-way influence between God and the creatures. In a small but significant way, what we do changes God. In almost all the other forms of religion, this is not true. Most religions would say that God affects us, but we don't affect God. For God to be changed means that, in some sense, the idea of evolution applies even to God—even more radically expressed, God, like all evolutionary phenomena, has a history. This complex of evolutionary ideas has implications for scientific self-understanding (Chapter Four).

If what we do as human beings has a very small but significant impact upon the reality of God, that idea will lead to many important ramifications. The first is that creativity is not just a divine prerogative. The creatures are also creative, and none more so than human beings. Of all the living species that we know, humans are by far the most powerfully creative. The artifacts of human ingenuity cover the earth, and, in fact, are impacting the planet on a historically-unique scale. The only other change in global ecology caused by a life form that may be comparable to what humans are now affecting was the transformation of the atmosphere of the earth due to the respiration of aerobic organisms starting about two billion years ago. It is possible that the modern artifacts of human action may modify the physical environment of the planet on a scale comparable to the 'oxygen revolution' caused by those early organisms. If so, humans themselves might change the earth in such a way that would make ongoing human life untenable. The two most likely scenarios are a nuclear disaster or the ongoing ecological crisis. These human scenarios may turn out to be as epochal as the earlier aerobic transformation itself.

If humans do change God, then we have reason to call human beings Co-Creators. CT suggests a novel view of the way creatures impact God. In the majority of religious conceptions, a human person does not and cannot have any impact on God's 'being.' In contrast, CT suggests that all of creation (humans included) does, indeed, produce value that essentially affects God's being or reality. This is the main reason why the term Co-Creator is appropriate for human beings, and why Co-Creator Communities are proposed as the name for CT communities. To believe that what I do can have even a tiny impact on the reality or being of God is both novel and empowering. If I believe that I impact God, I can never submit to complete

belittlement of myself. My life is never completely without hope (Chapter Six).

F. The Cost of Becoming a Contemporary Theist

The personally and globally transformative spiritual life offered by CT comes at a price. That price is the abandonment of certainty. It is a price that is likely too steep for many traditional religions and many current religious leaders, not to mention the followers or adherents. As a test, you might take the unanswerable questions discussed earlier and pose them to your current spiritual advisor, or if you don't have a personal spiritual advisor, pose those questions yourself about your current religion or worldview. The cost of becoming a Contemporary Theist is significant, and becoming a disciple is challenging. Further aspects of this challenge are discussed in Chapter Ten.

This chapter has described in some detail what is lost as well as what might be gained when certainty about God is no longer the obvious point of religious life. CT abandons certainty and puts in its place the acceptance of limits. The abandonment of certainty and the acceptance of limits in regard to our understanding of God, or our apprehension of God, or the practice of the presence of God, seems to be essential for the next steps in human spiritual evolution. It is the hope and the conviction of CT that in the long run, the price it asks its disciples to pay is not only justifiable, but may even be the portal towards a greater liberation of human potential.

Questions

1. Can one be hopeful about life without the certainty of God's existence?
2. When you explain the way the world is, are you being totally honest with what you know to be true?
3. Do you want everyone to adopt your religion or worldview, and if so why?
4. Should an atheist be electable to the highest national office?
5. What are the reasons to support or oppose the limited God of CT?
6. Which traditional arguments for the existence of God are most and least convincing?
7. How do you come to terms with your own death?

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8. How do you come to terms with suffering and tragedy?
9. How does the creative God of CT square with your current understanding of God?
10. Which current religion (or no religion) does the most to promote human maturity?
11. What is the reward your religion offers to you?
12. Is the 'better' better than the perfect?
13. Is it time to give up on a personal God?
14. Is the ontological principle itself 'certain'?

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