

## CHAPTER 10

# The Divine Nature

The question about what we may call the Ultimate Reality or, in the terminology of Western religions, God, is one of the big questions of human life. How we see this Reality, whether it exists or not, and, if so, what we think God is like, will shape our view of the world and our place in it. It may profoundly influence the kind of people we become. Some have argued that, if there is no God, then "all is permitted". As Dostoyevsky wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "crime must not only be permitted but even recognized as the most inevitable and the most rational outcome for every infidel!" In this view, a godless world is a world without moral judgment. It is a world where the strongest and most selfish rule. On the other hand, if we not only believe in an Ultimate Reality, but see in it the source of all that is good and true, then we may naturally feel that life has purpose and meaning. We have motivation to develop our character and pursue a life of goodness. We believe that in the end virtue will be rewarded.

Since the dawn of time, people have been pursuing this "ultimate question" through religion and philosophy. People have alternately seen God as knowable and mysterious, transcendent and immanent, unchanging and passionate. Some have seen the Ultimate Reality as either a personal or impersonal Being, or as Truth that is neither being nor non-being. People have said that God is One, yet has many manifestations, like different sides to a person's personality. Many religions, though not all, see God as the creator of the universe.

### The question of God's existence

If we look at the course of human history we find that the great majority of people have believed in a Supreme Being of some kind. Virtually every major civilization

throughout history has been based upon some sort of religious belief. If not, then people ended up instituting a kind of pseudo-religion. This phenomenon strongly suggests that human beings have an innate religious sense which throughout all of human history has caused them to seek for God. Where does this sense come from? Some will say that this in itself is evidence that God does



“The highest expression of man’s life—the climax of the evolutionary process and still a biological fact—is his spirit, the inner, questing, desiring, aspiring part of him.... The human spirit is a bridge to the Divine. Man’s spirit, rooted in life, may actually be part of the Universal Spirit, emerging from it and returning to it again.”

— E. W. Sinnott  
20th century American biologist

exist—that in our inner being we are seeking to return to our origins.

Others have argued for God’s existence using a philosophical approach based upon natural law. Through nature we notice that for every observable phenomenon or effect there is a cause. If we see a kettle of water boiling on the stove (our example from Chapter 9), we quickly surmise that the fire beneath the kettle is the cause of this event. We can go further back. What is causing the fire? The answer to that depends on whether you have an electric, gas, oil or wood-burning stove. Now we can consider a more profound question. What is the origin of life? No doubt you have asked yourself this question. Well, we may say that we, or any form of life, came from parents, be they human, animal or plant (the source of the seed). But where did those parents come

from? Of course, from their parents, and we could trace it all the way back to the first life form. But then, where did that come from? Indeed, where did anything come from, in its ultimate sense? Finally, we get to the question of the origin of the universe.

Using this line of reasoning, and that all of this had to have come from somewhere, many people have said that there must exist a First Cause. Some choose to call this First Cause God, while others use the title Allah, the Absolute, and many other names. Determining who or what this First Cause is has been the source of philosophical, religious and personal inquiries and speculation for thousands of years. Using logic, as we have here, people have tried to prove God’s existence through their rational minds. We may observe also that down through history, in many different settings, countless people have claimed to have had personal experiences with God, some receiving revelations, others having feelings of ecstasy from being in what they thought was God’s presence. However, despite all of this seeking, the ultimate reality of God has always seemed to be beyond our limited ability to understand. Finally, we cannot put God into a box or category of human understanding. As God said in response to Moses’ question about his identity: “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). God just is. We humans live in a material world of time and space. Our minds and consciousness are bound by this reality. God, if he exists, inhabits a realm beyond time, space and matter. Because of this, our limited minds may never be able to fully comprehend the Ultimate Reality. We have to be careful not to reject the notion of a God, however, as many have done, simply because we cannot understand it.

Our purpose here is not to “prove” God’s existence or non-existence. Probably this is impossible. But there is a great deal of evidence that points to the probability of the existence of an Ultimate Reality. Assuming that it does exist, let us move on to the question of the nature of this Reality.

### *How can we know what God is like? Clues from nature*

If we think about the nature of cause and effect, we notice that the characteristics of any effect are already contained in the cause. Thus, a seed coming from an apple tree will, without doubt, produce another apple tree. There is no chance that you’ll get an orange, pear, plum or any other kind of tree out of that seed, no matter how many times you try. Similarly, human babies are born from human beings. Not only that, but those babies are likely to look a lot like their parents. If it is true that God is the First Cause of our universe, then we ought to be able to tell something about God’s nature by observing the characteristics of the universe. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote in his letter to the Romans: “For what can be

known about God is plain to (all), because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.” It means that we ought to be able to find evidence of God’s nature by looking at the world around us.

In Chapters 4 and 5 we discussed some basic features that we find throughout nature and the universe. We noted that every being possesses both an inner nature and an outer form. Every being also has a positive and negative aspect that is expressed in the living world as masculinity and femininity. Hence, we can assume that the Ultimate Reality also contains these same features. In other words, God has an inner nature of personality or character, and an outer form of energy and matter. We may also say that God, as a living entity, is a harmonized being of masculinity and femininity. When we look at the religions of the world, we find that each of them emphasizes some of these characteristics while de-emphasizing others. This is because we are like those blind men we talked about in the last chapter who feel only part of the elephant—in this case, the elephant being God.

Thus, while the religions of the Western world (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) speak about a personal God, those of the East see God more impersonally, as the source of all energy or as a principle (such as the Tao). Having a personality, the Western God is more active and initiating while the God of Eastern culture tends to be more passive and contemplative. Christianity, Judaism and Islam see God primarily as a masculine being while the Shinto religion of Japan and some Hindu traditions speak of God as a female deity. Some emphasize God’s masculine characteristics such as disciplining, guiding and fearlessness and others speak of the more feminine characteristics of comforting, nurturing and compassion. Rather than considering them to be in contradiction, we can think that the various religions of the world simply are relating to different aspects of the same one God. Actually, most religions believe that there is but one true God, by whatever name we want to call him, her or it. (You will notice that, in this chapter, for convenience sake, we are usually referring to God’s masculine aspect).

### *God’s inner nature*

How can we know God’s inner nature that, as we understand from Chapter 4, describes the essence of any being? What is the essence or core of God’s being? Of course, as we have said, God, being an invisible, transcendent reality beyond time and space, can never be fully knowable by we finite human beings. However, if we take the previous argument one step further, surely we can discover something more about God’s nature.

Genesis 1:27 tells us that “God created man in his own image...” Human beings, as the most developed of all living creatures, according to this passage resemble God’s very own nature. Although by studying an image we should not expect to gain complete knowledge about its source, a deep understanding of our own human nature should reveal something about God’s nature. In Chapter 6 we explored various aspects of human nature, the primary of these being intellect, emotion and will. If human beings have intellect, emotion and will, then God also must have intellect, emotion and will. It means that God thinks, feels and has desires to do things, to accomplish something. In other words God is a living being with a personality with whom we can have a relationship.

Do you remember what we said was the deepest part of our nature, that which harmonizes and combines our intellect, emotion and will? It is our desire to give and receive love, which springs from the deep recesses of our heart. Our intellect, emotion and will are all meant to be used to express love. For God, it would be the same. God is a being of heart and love who, like man, seeks to experience joy through giving



and receiving love. In fact, as creator, God is the origin of all true love.

Although religions see God in many different ways, they all testify to the fundamental goodness of the deity (see the passages at the end of this chapter). It is a goodness arising out of God's desire to love and be loved.

If this is so, then we can realize that God himself has a need to be in relationship with others in order to experience love. Perhaps the common image of God as an old man sitting high on some remote throne is far off the mark. Rather it may be that God is, and always has been, intimately involved with the world. God, as a being of heart and love, is deeply affected by everything that goes on in the world. Thus, God may be closer than we think, closely watching and participating in world events—and in each person's—your—life.

### *God as creator*

Seeing God as the First Cause of the universe also implies God's creatorship. Indeed, most religions of the world consider that somehow, in some way, God created the universe. Science has discredited literal interpretations of the creation accounts

given in various scriptures, such as the passages in the Bible and Koran saying that God created the world in six days. Nevertheless, if these accounts are read more symbolically, understanding that they were not written by persons with scientific knowledge, they can be seen as containing some fundamental understanding concerning the cause of our existence.

Some accounts liken God's act of creating to that of a mother giving birth to a child. If so, we can consider the creation of the universe as a labor of love in which God invested his whole heart and being. It suggests an intimate relationship between God and the creation. We may think that every aspect of this creation is infused with God's energy, from the smallest subatomic particles to the vast galaxies. More internally, it is also infused with God's love, which answers the question 'why did God create?' We have already spoken of God's need to be in relationship in order to be able to experience love. If this is true, the fundamental purpose of the creation may be to manifest love in order to produce joy.

The image of God as a mother giving birth also implies that the activity of creation is ongoing. The mother's investment does not end with the birth but, in a sense, is only just beginning. She must nurture, guide and shape her child to become all that it can be. So too, God has been guiding us, involving himself in our lives in many imperceptible ways. In this sense the act of creation is a continuing process. Our own creativity, on a completely different plane from the rest of creation, is another expression of our likeness to God's nature. When we use our creativity to demonstrate our love for God and our fellow human beings, we are coming to resemble God's divine nature.

## The problem of evil

When we examine our own nature in the attempt to know God, immediately we are confronted with the problem of evil. We know that we have evil, selfish tendencies that thwart the good that we would do. If we had only this as a guide, then we would have to conclude that God, too, must be self-contradictory and self-destructive. The reality of evil in the world has been one of the strongest arguments against the existence of God. The French author Dominique Morin writes:

...If God really existed and was good and all-powerful, as believers affirm, he could not have allowed evil and suffering. Here lies the root of many people's atheism. If God exists, why does he allow this curse?...The problem seems insoluble. As the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur asks in his book on evil, 'How can one affirm together, without contradiction, the following three propositions: God is all-powerful; God is absolutely good; yet evil exists...when only two of these propositions are compatible, never all three?'

Since we cannot deny the existence of evil, we must assume then that either God is not all-powerful or that he is not absolutely good. Although in moments of despair and hopelessness some have accused God of causing evil, and thus of being evil himself, most believers cannot imagine such a God. Certainly this kind of God is not worth honoring or worshipping. Such a conception goes against the views of God by all the world's religions which unanimously see God as a being of total goodness. The reality of evil is explained by these religions as originating through a countervailing force, often called the devil or Satan. The origin of this force or being has been debated, but it should be clear that such a force could not have existed from the very origin of the universe, otherwise the universe itself would contain an intractable contradiction heading towards self-destruction. Instead we find a universe of order and harmony, without such tendencies. The existence of evil is confined to the earth plane and specifically to the human race. It is human beings that commit evil, not God.

Thus, we must draw the conclusion that God is not all-powerful, at least in the sense that he does not control all human activity. He does not force human beings to be good. Rather, perhaps it is the case that God voluntarily has limited his power in order to respect our free will. We have mentioned that to be created "in his own image" means to resemble God also in the aspect of creativity. It may be that to allow us to inherit his creativity, God chose not to control human beings like robots, but to be free to make choices (subject to God's guidance) and create. In allowing us freedom, we can understand that he was taking the risk that human beings might misuse that freedom and bring evil into the world.

Yet there may be an even more profound aspect to this, which is that God was willing to assume such a risk not only to preserve creativity but primarily for the sake of love. God's deepest desire, as a being of heart, is to experience joy through love. But in order to experience love in his relationship with human beings, as those most closely resembling him, he had to allow us the freedom to choose to love him. Can you be forced to love someone? Have you ever been successful in forcing someone to love you? It doesn't work, does it? Neither can God force us to love him. By loving us unconditionally, his hope and expectation was that we would love him in return unconditionally. If we realize this, then how painful it must be for God when we fail to return that love and instead engage in evil selfish acts. The Bible and other scripture are full of references to God's grief and suffering over man's betrayal of his love:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.

— Genesis 6:5,6

## Relating with God

If we are to find God for ourselves, we must understand the reality of God's situation. To have a close relationship with anyone, you must be able to understand and relate to that person's heart. Isn't that true in your closest friendships? The more you understand each other's hearts, the closer you can be, the more you can trust, and the more you can share with each other. It is the same in a relationship with God. First we must understand God's situation. If we have the wrong idea about God, we can never develop a true relationship with him.

We see from the foregoing discussion that we are separated from God because of the evil and selfishness within us. We have all experienced moments when we were hurt or betrayed by a friend, or, if we are honest, when we hurt someone else, due to our selfish behavior. We suddenly feel very distant from that person. It can happen even if the action was not intended to hurt. It doesn't matter. Selfish actions cause pain in the hearts of those who care for us. We must understand God's situation in this way.

If we look at human history we find that those who had deep experiences with God were those who made sincere effort to overcome their selfish tendencies, who tried to close the distance between themselves and God by first recognizing characteristics within themselves that would be difficult for God to love and then trying to change themselves. Generally speaking, if we want to "meet God", we have to be honest with ourselves. We have to overcome the urge to excuse our selfishness. Just because "everybody does it" doesn't make it right and certainly doesn't help us come closer to God.

God has an absolute standard that he wants us to meet. Of course, God loves us unconditionally, but if we want to *experience* that love, we have to train ourselves not to give in to our selfish desires. God's heart is drawn to those who practice a life of self-denial and living for the sake of others.

Think of it in this way: What if you were going to meet the president of your country, or perhaps your favorite musician, someone you would give your "right arm" to see? How much would you prepare beforehand to meet that person? Probably you would pay special attention to your appearance, your clothes, your hairstyle. And you would probably spend hours rehearsing what you would say and how you would say it when the great moment came. Then, how much more should you prepare yourself to meet God? Of course, in meeting God, your internal preparation of heart and mind is much more important than your external appearance and behavior. God sees into your heart and wants to relate to you on that level. What is important to God is the purity and sincerity of your heart.

In history, people's experiences with God have taken many different forms. The Old Testament recounts Moses dramatic encounter with God at the burning bush (Exodus 3). Later we read of the prophet Elijah's hearing God's "still, small voice" (I Kings 19:12). Jesus, of course, had a special intimate relationship with God. For



him, God was “Abba” (Papa). Muhammad received the words of God through the angel Gabriel in the depths of a cave. Eastern religions do not speak of encounters with a personal God, but do tell of spiritual awakenings, as with the Buddha’s experience of enlightenment under the Bo Tree. Many different forms—some would say there are many different paths to God—but in nearly every case the experience was preceded by a period of purification, sometimes through suffering, in which the person would have to overcome selfish temptation and choose a path of self-denial.

For some, their meeting with God was not only a revelation, but also a calling—a life-changing experience from which they would never turn back. The experience was a challenge to take up a mission, as with Abraham who left his family and traveled to a strange land to begin a new life. For them and others, the encounter with God developed into a living relationship in which one could variously experience God’s grace and forgiveness, a sense of being healed and liberated, a feeling of peace and enlightenment. For them, God was as real as one’s own parents or closest friend. Read the words of David in Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me besides quiet waters,  
he restores my soul.  
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

By studying the lives of the saints and great holy men of history, we learn that their relationship with God developed on the basis of a deep longing within their souls for communion with the source of their being. Such people felt a dissatisfaction with life as it was. They sensed profoundly that something very fundamental was lacking. Their feeling was that their physical lives were as a vast desert in which they suffered from a tremendous spiritual thirst. Such was their desperation to find the

One who could relieve their great thirst and hunger. Their yearning for God was overwhelming, so occupying their minds that they could think of nothing else until it was satisfied. It was in this kind of state that God would come to them.

We may never become like these saints, but we can still have our own close encounters with the living God. It depends upon the intensity of our desire. Experiences with God come in many different forms and occur in many different kinds of circumstances. God may come to us in our moments of deepest despair, or in times of great ecstasy. God may come as we struggle to get at the root of some problem that is afflicting us. Or we may experience God’s presence when we forget ourselves for a moment and see the pain and suffering in the eyes of another perfect stranger and we suddenly feel that this person

Have you not heard His silent steps?  
He comes, comes, ever comes.  
Every moment and every age, every  
day and every night  
He comes, comes, ever comes...  
In sorrow after sorrow, it is His steps  
That press upon my heart  
And it is the golden touch of His feet  
That makes my joy to shine.

— Rabindranath Tagore  
Indian poet

is really our brother. God can come to us at any unexpected moment if we have a deep desire for such an experience.

In the end the quest for God, to understand his nature, is not an intellectual or academic one, but a quest of the heart. It is a quest to know from where we came—and why. Thus, we can say it is really a quest to find our Parent—the One who gave us life.

## Something to think about



- Some people have said that it takes greater faith not to believe in God than to believe in God. What do you think of this statement?
- What manifestations of God can you find as you look at the world around you?
  - In nature...
  - In human society...
- Do you agree with the following passage? "God himself has a need to be in relationship with others in order to experience love. Perhaps the common image of God as an old man sitting high on some remote throne is far off the mark. Rather it may be that God is, and always has been, intimately involved with the world. God, as a being of heart and love, is deeply affected by everything that goes on in the world."
- How would you resolve these incompatible propositions: God is all-powerful, God is absolutely good, yet evil exists?
- If God did not create evil, then from where did evil come? What makes human beings commit evil acts?

## For Your Journal



Who is God to you? Does he or she exist or not? Give reasons for your answer. What experiences have you had that confirm for you that God does or does not exist?

## The Love and Goodness of God

The Lord is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
The Lord is good to all,  
and his compassion is over all that he has made.

*Judaism & Christianity. Psalm 145:8-9*

It is He who sends down to you out of heaven water of which you may drink, and by which (grow) trees, for you to pasture your herds, and thereby He brings forth for you crops, and olives, and palms, and vines, and all manner of fruit. Surely in that is a sign for people who reflect...

If you count God's blessing, you can never number it; surely God is All-forgiving, All-compassionate.

*Islam. Koran 16.10,18*

"I am the Tathagata,  
The Most Honored among men;  
I appear in the world  
Like unto this great cloud  
To pour enrichment on all  
Parched living beings,  
To free them from their misery  
To attain the joy of peace,  
Joy of the present world,  
And joy of Nirvana..."

*Buddhism. Lotus Sutra 5: Parable of the Rain Cloud*

To love is to know Me,  
My innermost nature,  
the truth that I am.

*Hinduism. Bhagavad Gita 18.55*

It is the Way of Heaven to show no favoritism.  
It is for ever on the side of the good man.

*Taoism. Tao Te Ching 79*

The Master said, "Is Goodness indeed so far away? If we really want Goodness, we should find that it was at our very side."

*Confucianism. Analects 7.29*