KAREN ARMSTRONG

IN 1981, KAREN ARMSTRONG published *Through the Narrow Gate,* a controversial account of her experience as a Sister of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, a Roman Catholic order. Armstrong left the convent and the Church in 1972, "wearied by religion" and "worn out by years of struggle," and then spent the intervening years pursuing a doctorate in literature and teaching at an English girls' school. Although her first book was a milestone, Armstrong has described her life's real turning point as a series of trips she made to Jerusalem beginning in 1982. Shocked by Israel's invasion of Lebanon and also by the Palestinians' intifada, Armstrong found herself questioning just how accurately most Westerners—herself included—understood the lives and beliefs of Muslims in the Middle East.

Convinced that the West was "posing as a tolerant and compassionate society and yet passing judgments from a position of extreme ignorance and irrationality," Armstrong set out to help rectify cross-cultural misperceptions and religious misunderstandings. She has written a number of books that explore relations among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, including *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World* (1991); *Mohammed: A Biography of the Prophet* (1992); and *Islam: A Short History* (2000). She has also written a biography, *Buddha* (2001), and *The Battle for God* (2000), an account of the rise of fundamentalism in modern societies.

The selection that follows comes from *The Case for God* (2009), in which Armstrong, a self-described "freelance monotheist," responds to the writings of New Atheists Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Sam Harris, Victor J. Stenger, and Christopher Hitchens. Armstrong makes the case that their view of religion has been shaped by the very fundamentalism they reject. Dawkins, for example, assumes that religion rests on faith in "a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it." Today this view of God is accepted by hundreds of millions of believers, yet Armstrong argues that in earlier times, religion was understood quite differently—as *mythos,* a

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symbolic language meant to transform our consciousness and our ways of being. As she told an interviewer in 2008, she sees religion as "poetry":

> Now a poet spends a great deal of time listening to his unconscious, and slowly calling up a poem word by word, phrase by phrase, until something beautiful is brought forth, we hope, into the world that changes people's perceptions. And we respond to a poem emotionally. And I think we should take as great a care when we write our theology as we would if we were writing such a poem ... because I do see religion as a kind of art form.

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Homo religiosus

When the guide switches off his flashlight in the underground caverns of Lascaux in the Dordogne, the effect is overwhelming. "The senses suddenly are wiped out," one visitor recalled, "the millennia drop away ... You were never in darker darkness in your life. It was—I don't know, just a complete knockout. You don't know whether you are looking north, south, east, or west. All orientation is gone, and you are in a darkness that never saw the sun." Normal daylight consciousness extinguished, you feel a "timeless dissociation from every concern and requirement of the upper world that you have left behind."[1] Before reaching the first of the caves decorated by our Palaeolithic ancestors in the Stone Age, seventeen thousand years ago, visitors have to stumble for some eighty feet down a sloping tunnel, sixty-five feet below ground level, penetrating ever more deeply into the bowels of the earth. Then the guide suddenly turns the beam of his flashlight onto the ceiling, and the painted animals seem to emerge from the depths of the rock. A strange beast with gravid belly and long pointed horns walks behind a line of wild cattle, horses, deer, and bulls that seem simultaneously in motion and at rest.

In all there are about six hundred frescoes and fifteen hundred engravings in the Lascaux labyrinth. There is a powerful bellowing black stag, a leaping cow, and a procession of horses moving in the opposite direction. At the entrance to another long passage known as the Nave, a frieze of elegant deer has been painted above a rocky ledge so that they appear to be swimming. We see these images far more clearly than the Palaeolithic artists did, since they had to work by the light of small flickering lamps, perched precariously on scaffolding that has left holes in the surface of the wall. They often painted new pictures over old images, even though there was ample space nearby. It seems that location was crucial and that, for reasons we cannot fathom, some places were deemed more suitable than others. The subject matter was also governed by rules that we can never hope to understand. The artists selected only a few of the species known to them, and there are no pictures of the reindeer on which they relied for food.[2] Animals are consistently paired—oxen and bison with horses, bison with mammoths—in combinations that would not occur in real life.[3] Lascaux is not unique. There are about three hundred decorated caves in this region of southern France and northern Spain. In some the artwork is more elementary, but in all these caverns the imagery and layout are basically the same. The earliest site, at Grotte Chauvet, dates from about 30,000 BCE, a time when *Homo sapiens* seems to have undergone an abrupt evolutionary change in this locality. There was a dramatic rise in population, which may have resulted in social tension. Some historians believe that the cave art records a "corpus of socially constructed rituals ... for conflict control ... pictorially encoded for storage and transmission through generations."[4] But the paintings also express an intensely aesthetic appreciation of the natural world. Here we have the earliest known evidence of an ideological system, which remained in place for some twenty thousand years, after which the caves fell into disuse in about 9000 BCE.[5]

It is now generally agreed that these labyrinths were sacred places for the performance of some kind of ritual. Some historians have argued that their purpose was purely pragmatic, but their upkeep alone would have required an immense amount of unproductive labor. Some of these sites were so deep that it took hours to reach their innermost core. Visiting the caves was dangerous, exhausting, uneconomical, and time-consuming. The general consensus is that the caves were sanctuaries and that, as in any temple, their iconography reflected a vision that was radically different from that of the outside world.[6] We do not build temples like this in the modern West. Our worldview is predominantly rational, and we think more easily in concepts than images. We find it hard enough to decode the symbolism of a medieval cathedral such as the one in Chartres, so these Palaeolithic shrines offer an almost insurmountable challenge.

But there are a few clues to aid our understanding. A remarkable picture, dated to about 12,000 BCE, in a cave at Lascaux known as the Crypt because it is even deeper than the other caverns, depicts a large bison that has been eviscerated by a spear thrust through its hindquarters. Lying in front of the wounded beast is a man, drawn in a far more rudimentary style than the animals, with arms outstretched, phallus erect, and wearing what seems to be a bird mask; his staff, which lies on the ground nearby, is also topped by a bird's head. This seems to be an illustration of a well-known legend and could have been the founding myth of the sanctuary. The same scene appears on an engraved reindeer horn at nearby Villars and on a sculpted block in a cliff shelter at Roc de Sers near Limoges, which is five thousand years older than the Lascaux painting.[7] Fifty-five similar images in the other caves and three more Palaeolithic rock drawings in Africa have been found, all showing men confronting animals in a state of trance with upraised arms.[8] They are probably shamans.

We know that shamanism developed in Africa and Europe during the Palaeolithic period and that it spread to Siberia and thence to America and Australia, where the shaman is still the chief religious practitioner among the

indigenous hunting peoples. Even though they have inevitably been influenced by neighboring civilizations, many of the original structures of these societies, which were arrested at a stage similar to that of the Palaeolithic, remained intact until the late nineteenth century.[9] Today there is a remarkable continuity in the descriptions of the shaman's ecstatic flight all the way from Siberia, through the Americas to Tierra del Fuego:[10] he swoons during a public stance and believes that he flies through the air to consult the gods about the location of game. In these traditional societies, hunters do not feel that the species are distinct or permanent categories: men can become animals and animals human. Shamans have bird and animal guardians and can converse with the beasts that are revered as messengers of higher powers.[11] The shaman's vision gives meaning to the hunting and killing of animals on which these societies depend.

The hunters feel profoundly uneasy about slaughtering the beasts, who are their friends and patrons, and to assuage this anxiety, they surround the hunt with taboos and prohibitions. They say that long ago the animals made a covenant with humankind and now a god known as the Animal Master regularly sends flocks from the lower world to be killed on the hunting plains, because the hunters promised to perform the rites that will give them posthumous life. Hunters often abstain from sex before an expedition, hunt in a state of ritual purity, and feel a deep empathy with their prey. In the Kalahari Desert, where wood is scarce, the Bushmen have to rely on light weapons that can only graze the skin, so they anoint their arrows with a lethal poison that kills the animal very slowly. A tribesman has to remain with his victim, crying when it cries and participating symbolically in its death throes. Other tribes identify with their prey by donning animal costumes. After stripping the meat from the bones, some reconstruct their kill by laying out its skeleton and pelt; others bury these inedible remains, symbolically restoring the beast to the netherworld from which it came.[12]

The hunters of the Palaeolithic age may have had a similar worldview. Some of the myths and rites they devised appear to have survived in the traditions of later, literate cultures. Animal sacrifice, for example, the central rite of nearly every religious system in antiquity, preserved prehistoric hunting ceremonies and continued to honor a beast that gave its life for the sake of humankind.[13] One of the functions of ritual is to evoke an anxiety in such a way that the community is forced to confront and control it. From the very beginning, it seems, religious life was rooted in acknowledgment of the tragic fact that life depends upon the destruction of other creatures.

The Palaeolithic caves may have been the scene of similar rites. Some of the paintings include dancing men dressed as animals. The Bushmen say that their own rock paintings depict "the world behind this one that we see with our eyes," which the shamans visit during their mystical flights.[14] They smear the walls of the caves with the blood, excrement, and fat of their kill in order to restore it, symbolically, to the earth; animal blood and fat were ingredients of the Palaeolithic paints, and the act of painting itself could have been a ritual of restoration.[15] The images may depict the eternal, archetypal animals that take temporary physical form in the upper world.[16] All ancient religion was based on what has been called the perennial philosophy, because it was present in some form in

so many premodern cultures. It sees every single person, object, or experience as a replica of a reality in a sacred world that is more effective and enduring than our own.[17] When an Australian Aborigine hunts his prey, he feels wholly at one with First Hunter, caught up in a richer and more potent reality that makes him feel fully alive and complete.[18] Maybe the hunters of Lascaux re-enacted the archetypal hunt in the caves amid these paintings of the eternal hunting ground before they left their tribe to embark on the perilous quest for food.[19]

We can, of course, only speculate. Some scholars believe that these caverns were likely to have been used for the initiation ceremonies that marked the adolescent boy's rite of passage from childhood to maturity. This type of initiation was crucial in ancient religion and is still practiced in traditional societies today.[20] When they reach puberty, boys are taken from their mothers and put through frightening ordeals that transform them into men. The tribe cannot afford the luxury of allowing an adolescent to "find himself" Western-style; he has to relinquish the dependency of infancy and assume the burdens of adulthood overnight. To this end, boys are incarcerated in tombs, buried in the earth, informed that they are about to be eaten by a monster, flogged, circumcised, and tattooed. If the initiation is properly conducted, a youth will be forced to reach for inner resources that he did not know he possessed. Psychologists tell us that the terror of such an experience causes a regressive disorganization of the personality that, if skillfully handled, can lead to a constructive reorganization of the young man's powers. He has faced death, come out the other side, and is now psychologically prepared to risk his life for his people.

But the purpose of the ritual is not simply to turn him into an efficient killing machine; rather, it is to train him to kill in the sacred manner. A boy is usually introduced to the more esoteric mythology of his tribe during his initiation. He first hears about the Animal Master, the covenant, the magnanimity of the beasts, and the rituals that will restore his life while he is undergoing these traumatic rites. In these extraordinary circumstances, separated from everything familiar, he is pushed into a new state of consciousness that enables him to appreciate the profound bond that links hunter and prey in their common struggle for survival. This is not the kind of knowledge we acquire by purely logical deliberations, but is akin to the understanding derived from art. A poem, a play, or, indeed, a great painting has the power to change our perception in ways that we may not be able to explain logically but that seem incontestably true. We find that things that appear distinct to the rational eye are in some way profoundly connected or that a perfectly commonplace object—a chair, a sunflower, or a pair of boots—has numinous significance. Art involves our emotions, but if it is to be more than a superficial epiphany, this new insight must go deeper than feelings that are, by their very nature, ephemeral.

If the historians are right about the function of the Lascaux caves, religion and art were inseparable from the very beginning. Like art, religion is an attempt to construct meaning in the face of the relentless pain and injustice of life. As meaning-seeking creatures, men and women fall very easily into despair. They have created religions and works of art to help them find value in their lives, despite all the dispiriting evidence to the contrary. The initiation experience

also shows that a myth, like that of the Animal Master, derives much of its meaning from the ritualized context in which it is imparted.[21] It may not be empirically true, it may defy the laws of logic, but a good myth will tell us something valuable about the human predicament. Like any work of art, a myth will make no sense unless we open ourselves to it wholeheartedly and allow it to change us. If we hold ourselves aloof, it will remain opaque, incomprehensible, and even ridiculous.

Religion is hard work. Its insights are not self-evident and have to be cultivated in the same way as an appreciation of art, music, or poetry must be developed. The intense effort required is especially evident in the underground labyrinth of Trois Frères at Ariège in the Pyrenees. Doctor Herbert Kuhn, who visited the site in 1926, twelve years after its discovery, described the frightening experience of crawling through the tunnel—scarcely a foot high in some places—that leads to the heart of this magnificent Palaeolithic sanctuary. "I felt as though I were creeping through a coffin," he recalled. "My heart is pounding and it is difficult to breathe. It is terrible to have the roof so close to one's head." He could hear the other members of his party groaning as they struggled through the darkness, and when they finally arrived in the vast underground hall, it felt "like a redemption."[22] They found themselves gazing at a wall covered in spectacular engravings: mammoths, bison, wild horses, wolverines, and musk oxen; darts flying everywhere; blood spurting from the mouths of the bears; and a human figure clad in animal skin playing a flute. Dominating the scene was a large painted figure, half man, half beast, who fixed his huge, penetrating eyes on the visitors. Was this the Animal Master? Or did this hybrid creature symbolize the underlying unity of animal and human, natural and divine?

A boy would not be expected to "believe" in the Animal Master before he entered the caves. But at the culmination of his ordeal, this image would have made a powerful impression; for hours he had, perhaps, fought his way through nearly a mile of convoluted passages to the accompaniment of "songs, cries, noises or mysterious objects thrown from no one knows where," special effects that would have been "easy to arrange in such a place."[23] In archaic thinking, there is no concept of the supernatural, no huge gulf separating human and divine. If a priest donned the sacred regalia of an animal pelt to impersonate the Animal Master, he became a temporary manifestation of that divine power.[24] These rituals were not the expression of a "belief" that had to be accepted in blind faith. As the German scholar Walter Burkert explains, it is pointless to look for an idea or doctrine *behind* a rite. In the premodern world, ritual was not the product of religious ideas; on the contrary, these ideas were the product of ritual.[25] *Homo religiosus* is pragmatic in this sense only; if a ritual no longer evokes a profound conviction of life's ultimate value, he simply abandons it. But for twenty thousand years, the hunters of the region continued to thread their way through the dangerous pathways of Trois Frères in order to bring their mythology—whatever it was—to life. They must have found the effort worthwhile or they would, without a backward glance, have given it up.

Religion was not something tacked on to the human condition, an optional extra imposed on people by unscrupulous priests. The desire to cultivate a sense

of the transcendent may be *the* defining human characteristic. In about 9000 BCE, when human beings developed agriculture and were no longer dependent on animal meat, the old hunting rites lost some of their appeal and people ceased to visit the caves. But they did not discard religion altogether. Instead they developed a new set of myths and rituals based on the fecundity of the soil that filled the men and women of the Neolithic age with religious awe.[26] Tilling the fields became a ritual that replaced the hunt, and the nurturing Earth took the place of the Animal Master. Before the modern period, most men and women were naturally inclined to religion and they were prepared to work at it. Today many of us are no longer willing to make this effort, so the old myths seem arbitrary, remote, and incredible.

Like art, the truths of religion require the disciplined cultivation of a different mode of consciousness. The cave experience always began with the disorientation of utter darkness, which annihilated normal habits of mind. Human beings are so constituted that periodically they seek out *ekstasis*, a "stepping outside" the norm. Today people who no longer find it in a religious setting resort to other outlets: music, dance, art, sex, drugs, or sport. We make a point of seeking out these experiences that touch us deeply within and lift us momentarily beyond ourselves. At such times, we feel that we inhabit our humanity more fully than usual and experience an enhancement of being.

Lascaux may seem impossibly distant from modern religious practice, but we cannot understand either the nature of the religious quest or our current religious predicament unless we appreciate the spirituality that emerged quite early in the history of *Homo religiosus* and continued to animate the major confessional traditions until the early modern period, when an entirely different kind of religiosity emerged in the West during the seventeenth century. To do that we must examine a number of core principles that will be of fundamental importance to our story.

The first concerns the nature of the ultimate reality—later called God, Nirvana, Brahman, or Dao. In a rocky overhang at Laussel, near Lascaux, there is a small stone relief that is seventeen thousand years old and was created at about the same time as the earliest of the nearby cave paintings. It depicts a woman holding a curved bison's horn above her head so that it immediately suggests the rising, crescent moon; her right hand lies on her pregnancy. By this time, people had begun to observe the phases of the moon for practical purposes, but their religion had little or nothing to do with this protoscientific observation of the physical cosmos.[27] Instead, material reality was symbolic of an unseen dimension of existence. The little Venus of Laussel already suggests an association between the moon, the female cycle, and human reproduction. In many parts of the world, the moon was linked symbolically with a number of apparently unrelated phenomena: women, water, vegetation, serpents, and fertility. What they all have in common is the regenerative power of life that is continually able to renew itself. Everything could so easily lapse into nothingness, yet each year after the death of winter, trees sprout new leaves, the moon wanes but always waxes brilliantly once more, and the serpent, a universal symbol of initiation, sloughs off its old withered skin and comes forth gleaming and fresh.[28] The female also manifested this inexhaustible power. Ancient hunters revered a

goddess known as the Great Mother. In large stone reliefs at Çatalhüyük in Turkey, she is shown giving birth, flanked by boars' skulls and bulls' horns—relics of a successful hunt. While hunters and animals died in the grim struggle for survival, the female was endlessly productive of new life.[29]

Perhaps these ancient societies were trying to express their sense of what the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1899–1976) called "Being," a fundamental energy that supports and animates everything that exists. Being is transcendent. You could not see, touch, or hear it but could only watch it at work in the people, objects, and natural forces around you. From the documents of later Neolithic and pastoral societies, we know that Being rather than *a* being was revered as the ultimate sacred power. It was impossible to define or describe because Being is all-encompassing and our minds are only equipped to deal with particular beings, which can merely participate in it in a restricted manner. But certain objects became eloquent symbols of the power of Being, which sustained and shone through them with particular clarity. A stone or a rock (frequent symbols of the sacred) expressed the stability and durability of Being; the moon, its power of endless renewal; the sky, its towering transcendence, ubiquity, and universality.[30] None of these symbols was worshipped for and in itself. People did not bow down and worship a rock *tout court;* the rock was simply a focus that directed their attention to the mysterious essence of life. Being bound all things together; humans, animals, plants, insects, stars, and birds all shared the divine life that sustained the entire cosmos. We know, for example, that the ancient Aryan tribes, who had lived on the Caucasian steppes since about 4500 BCE, revered an invisible, impersonal force within themselves and all other natural phenomena. Everything was a manifestation of this all-pervading "Spirit" (Sanskrit: *manya*).[31]

There was, therefore, no belief in a single supreme being in the ancient world. Any such creature could only be *a* being—bigger and better than anything else, perhaps, but still a finite, incomplete reality. People felt it natural to imagine a race of spiritual beings of a higher nature than themselves that they called "gods." There were, after all, many unseen forces at work in the world—wind, heat, emotion, and air—that were often identified with the various deities. The Aryan god Agni, for example, *was* the fire that had transformed human life, and as a personalized god symbolized the deep affinity people felt with these sacred forces. The Aryans called their gods "the shining ones" *(devas)* because Spirit shone through them more brightly than through mortal creatures, but these gods had no control over the world: they were not omniscient and were obliged, like everything else, to submit to the transcendent order that kept everything in existence, set the stars on their courses, made the seasons follow each other, and compelled the seas to remain within bounds.[32]

By the tenth century BCE, when some of the Aryans had settled in the Indian subcontinent, they gave a new name to the ultimate reality. Brahman was the unseen principle that enabled all things to grow and flourish. It was a power that was higher, deeper, and more fundamental than the gods. Because it transcended the limitations of personality, it would be entirely inappropriate to pray to Brahman or expect it to answer your prayers. Brahman was the sacred energy that held all the disparate elements of the world together and prevented it

from falling apart. Brahman had an infinitely greater degree of reality than mortal creatures, whose lives were limited by ignorance, sickness, pain, and death.[33] You could never define Brahman because language refers only to individual beings and Brahman was "the All"; it was everything that existed, as well as the inner meaning of all existence.

Even though human beings could not think about the Brahman, they had intimations of it in the hymns of the Rig Veda, the most important of the Aryan scriptures. Unlike the hunters of Lascaux, the Aryans do not seem to have thought readily in images. One of their chief symbols of the divine was sound, whose power and intangible quality seemed a particularly apt embodiment of the all-pervasive Brahman. When the priest chanted the Vedic hymns, the music filled the air and entered the consciousness of the congregation so that they felt surrounded by and infused with divinity. These hymns, revealed to ancient "seers" *(rishis)*, did not speak of doctrines that the faithful were obliged to believe, but referred to the old myths in an allusive, riddling fashion because the truth they were trying to convey could not be contained in a neatly logical presentation. Their beauty shocked the audience into a state of awe, wonder, fear, and delight. They had to puzzle out the underlying significance of these paradoxical poems that yoked together apparently unrelated things, just as the hidden Brahman pulled the disparate elements of the universe into a coherent whole.[34]

During the tenth century, the Brahmin priests developed the Brahmodya competition, which would become a model of authentic religious discourse.[35] The contestants began by going on a retreat in the forest, where they performed spiritual exercises, such as fasting and breath control, that concentrated their minds and induced a different type of consciousness. Then the contest could begin. Its goal was to find a verbal formula to define the Brahman, in the process pushing language as far as it could go, until it finally broke down and people became vividly aware of the ineffable, the other. The challenger asked an enigmatic question, and his opponent had to reply in a way that was apt but equally inscrutable. The winner was the contestant who reduced his opponents to silence—and in that moment of silence, when language revealed its inadequacy, the Brahman was present; it became manifest only in the stunning realization of the impotence of speech.

The ultimate reality was not a personalized god, therefore, but a transcendent mystery that could never be plumbed. The Chinese called it the Dao, the fundamental "Way" of the cosmos. Because it comprised the whole of reality, the Dao had no qualities, no form; it could be experienced but never seen; it was not a god; it predated heaven and earth and was beyond divinity. You could not say anything about the Dao, because it transcended ordinary categories: it was more ancient than antiquity and yet it was not old; because it went far beyond any form of "existence" known to humans, it was neither being nor nonbeing.[36] It contained all the myriad patterns, forms, and potential that made the world the way it was and guided the endless flux of change and becoming that we see all around us. It existed at a point where all the distinctions that characterize our normal modes of thought became irrelevant.

In the Middle East, the region in which the Western monotheisms would develop, there was a similar notion of the ultimate. In Mesopotamia, the Akkadian

word for "divinity" was *ilam*, a radiant power that transcended any particular deity. The gods were not the source of *ilam* but, like everything else, could only reflect it. The chief characteristic of this "divinity" was *ellu* ("holiness"), a word that had connotations of "brightness," "purity," and "luminosity." The gods were called the "holy ones" because their symbolic stories, effigies, and cults evoked the radiance of *ellu* within their worshippers. The people of Israel called their patronal deity, the "holy one" of Israel, Elohim, a Hebrew variant on *ellu* that summed up everything that the divine could mean for human beings. But holiness was not confined to the gods. Anything that came into contact with divinity could become holy too: a priest, a king, or a temple—even the sacred utensils of the cult. In the Middle East, people would have found it far too constricting to limit *ilam* to a single god; instead, they imagined a Divine Assembly, a council of gods of many different ranks, who worked together to sustain the cosmos and expressed the multifaceted complexity of the sacred.[37]

People felt a yearning for the absolute, intuited its presence all around them, and went to great lengths to cultivate their sense of this transcendence in creative rituals. But they also felt estranged from it. Almost every culture has developed a myth of a lost paradise from which men and women were ejected at the beginning of time. It expressed an inchoate conviction that life was not *meant* to be so fragmented, hard, and full of pain. There *must* have been a time when people had enjoyed a greater share in the fullness of being and had not been subject to sorrow, disease, bereavement, loneliness, old age, and death. This nostalgia informed the cult of "sacred geography," one of the oldest and most universal religious ideas. Certain places that stood out in some way from the norm—like the labyrinthine caverns of the Dordogne—seemed to speak of "something else."[38] The sacred place was one of the earliest and most ubiquitous symbols of the divine. It was a sacred "center" that brought heaven and earth together and where the divine potency seemed particularly effective.

A popular image, found in many cultures, imagined this fructifying, sacred energy welling up like a spring from these focal places and flowing, in four sacred rivers, to the four quarters of the earth. People would settle only in sites where the sacred had once become manifest because they wanted to live as closely as possible to the wellsprings of being and become as whole and complete as they had been before they were ejected from paradise.

This brings us to the second principle of premodern religion. Religious discourse was not intended to be understood literally because it was only possible to speak about a reality that transcended language in symbolic terms. The story of the lost paradise was a myth, not a factual account of a historical event. People were not expected to "believe" it in the abstract; like any *mythos*, it depended upon the rituals associated with the cult of a particular holy place to make what it signified a reality in the lives of participants.

The same applies to the creation myth that was central to ancient religion and has now become controversial in the Western world because the Genesis story seems to clash with modern science. But until the early modern period, nobody read a cosmology as a literal account of the origins of life. In the ancient world, it was inspired by an acute sense of the contingency and frailty of

existence. Why had anything come into being at all, when there could so easily have been nothing? There has never been a simple or even a possible answer to this question, but people continue to ask it, pushing their minds to the limit of what we can know. One of the earliest and most universal of the ancient cosmologies is particularly instructive to us today. It was thought that one of the gods, known as the "High God" or "Sky God" because he dwelt in the farthest reaches of the heavens, had single-handedly created heaven and earth.[39] The Aryans called him Dyaeus Pitr, the Chinese Tian ("Heaven"), the Arabians Allah ("*the* God"), and the Syrians El Elyon ("Most High God"). But the High God proved to be an unviable deity, and his myth was jettisoned.

It suffered from an internal contradiction. How could a mere being—even such a lofty one—be responsible for being itself? As if in response to this objection, people tried to elevate the High God to a special plane. He was considered too exalted for an ordinary cult: no sacrifices were performed in his honor; he had no priests, no temples, and virtually no mythology of his own. People called on him in an emergency, but otherwise he scarcely ever impinged on their daily lives. Reduced to a mere explanation—to what would later be called First Cause or Prime Mover—he became *Deus otiosus*, a "useless" or "superfluous" deity, and gradually faded from the consciousness of his people. In most mythologies, the High God is often depicted as a passive, helpless figure; unable to control events, he retreats to the periphery of the pantheon and finally fades away. Today some of the indigenous peoples—Pygmies, Aboriginal Australians, and Fuegians—also speak of a High God who created heaven and earth, but, they tell anthropologists, he has died or disappeared; he "no longer cares" and "has gone far away from us."[40]

No god can survive unless he or she is actualized by the practical activity of ritual, and people often turn against gods who fail to deliver. The High God is often mythologically deposed, sometimes violently, by a younger generation of more dynamic deities—gods of storm, grain, or war—who symbolized relevant, important realities. In Greek *mythos*, the High God Uranus ("Heaven") was brutally castrated by his son Kronos. Later Kronos himself was overthrown by his own son Zeus, head of the younger gods, who lived more accessibly on Mount Olympus. In our own day, the God of the monotheistic tradition has often degenerated into a High God. The rites and practices that once made him a persuasive symbol of the sacred are no longer effective, and people have stopped participating in them. He has therefore become *otiosus*, an etiolated reality who for all intents and purposes has indeed died or "gone away."

In the ancient world, the High God myth was replaced by more relevant creation stories that were never regarded as factual. As one of the later hymns of the Rig Veda insists, nobody—not even the highest *deva*—could explain how something had issued from nothing.[41] A good creation myth did not describe an event in the distant past but told people something essential about the present. It reminded them that things often had to get worse before they got better, that creativity demanded self-sacrifice and heroic struggle, and that everybody had to work hard to preserve the energies of the cosmos and establish society on a sound foundation. A creation story was primarily therapeutic. People wanted to tap into the massive implosion of energy that had—somehow—brought the world we

know into being, so they would recite a creation myth when they were in need of an infusion of sacred potency: during a political crisis, at a sickbed, or when they were building a new house. The creation myth was often re-enacted during the New Year ceremonies, when the old year was ebbing away. Nobody felt obliged to "believe" in a particular cosmology; indeed, each culture usually had several creation stories, each of which had its own lesson to impart, and people thought nothing of making up a new one if their circumstances changed.

Once people had abandoned the myth of the High God, there was no concept of creation "out of nothing" (*ex nihilo*) in the ancient world. A god could only assist a creative process that was already well under way. In the tenth century, another Indian *rishi* suggested that the world had been set in motion by a primordial sacrifice—something that made sense in India, where new vegetation was often seen to sprout from a rotting tree so that it was not unnatural to think of death resulting in new life. The *rishi* imagined the Purusha ("Person"), the first, archetypal human being, striding of his own free will to the place of sacrifice and allowing the gods to put him to death; thence everything—animals, horses, cattle, heaven, earth, sun, moon, and even some of the gods—emerged from his corpse.[42] This *mythos* encapsulated an important truth: we are at our most creative when we do not cling to our selfhood but are prepared to give ourselves away.

The cosmology was not influenced by current scientific speculation because it was exploring the interior rather than the external world. The priests of Mesopotamia undertook the first successful astronomical observations, noting that the seven celestial bodies they sighted—later known as Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—moved in an apparently circular path through the constellations. But the chief inspiration behind their creation myth was their pioneering town planning.[43] The first cities had been established in Sumer in the Fertile Crescent in about 3500 BCE; it was an enterprise that required enormous courage and perseverance, as time and time again, the mud-brick buildings were swept away by the flooding of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Constantly it seemed that the Sumerians' fragile urban civilization would sink back into the old rural barbarism, so the city needed a regular infusion of sacred energy. And yet it seemed such an extraordinary achievement that the city was extolled as a holy place. Babylon was the "Gate of the gods" (*Babi-lani*), where heaven and earth could meet; it re-created the lost paradise, and the ziggurat, or temple tower, of Esagila replicated the cosmic mountain or the sacred tree, which the first men and women had climbed to meet their gods.[44]

It is difficult to understand the creation story in Genesis without reference to the Mesopotamian creation hymn known from its opening words as the *Enuma Elish*. This poem begins by describing the evolution of the gods from primordial sacred matter and their subsequent creation of heaven and earth, but it is also a meditation on contemporary Mesopotamia. The raw material of the universe, from which the gods emerge, is a sloppy, undefined substance—very like the silty soil of the region. The first gods—Tiamat, the primal Ocean; Apsu, the "Abyss"; and Mummu, "Womb" of chaos—were inseparable from the elements and shared the inertia of aboriginal barbarism and the formlessness of chaos: "When sweet and bitter mingled together, no reed was plaited, no rushes

muddied the water, the gods were nameless, natureless, futureless."[45] But new gods emerged, each pair more distinct than the last, culminating in the splendid Marduk, the Sun God and the most developed specimen of the divine species. But Marduk could not establish the cosmos until he had overcome the sluggish torpor of Tiamat in a tremendous battle. Finally he stood astride Tiamat's massive carcass, split her in two to make heaven and earth, and created the first man by mixing the blood of one of the defeated gods with a handful of dust. After this triumph, the gods could build the city of Babylon and establish the ritual "from which the universe receives its structure, the hidden world is made plain, and the gods assigned their places."[46]

There was no ontological gulf separating these gods from the rest of the cosmos; everything had emerged from the same sacred stuff. All beings shared the same predicament and had to participate in a ceaseless battle against the destructive lethargy of chaos. There were similar tales in neighboring Syria, where Baal, god of storm and life-giving rain, had to fight the sea dragon Lotan, symbol of chaos, Yam, the primal sea, and Mot, god of sterility, in order to establish civilized life.[47] The Israelites also told stories of their god Yahweh slaying sea monsters to order the cosmos.[48] In Babylon, the *Enuma Elish* was chanted on the fourth day of the New Year festival in Esagila, a re-enactment that symbolically continued the process Marduk had begun and that activated this sacred energy. There was a ritualized mock battle and a saturnalia that re-created the lawlessness of chaos. In archaic spirituality, a symbolic return to the formless "nothingness" of the beginning was indispensable to any new creation.[49] It was possible to move forward only if you had the courage to let go of the present, unsatisfactory state of affairs, sink back into the potent confusion of the beginning, and begin again.

As life became more settled, people had the leisure to develop a more interior spirituality. The Indian Aryans, always in the vanguard of religious change, pioneered this trend, achieving the groundbreaking discovery that the Brahman, being itself, was also the ground of the human psyche. The transcendent was neither external nor alien to humanity, but the two were inextricably connected. This insight would become central to the religious quest in all the major traditions. In the early Upanishads, composed in the seventh century BCE, the search for this sacred Self (*atman*) became central to Vedic spirituality. The Upanishadic sages did not ask their disciples to "believe" this but put them through an initiation whereby they discovered it for themselves in a series of spiritual exercises that made them look at the world differently. This practically acquired knowledge brought with it a joyous liberation from fear and anxiety.

We have a precious glimpse of the way this initiation was carried out in the Chandogya Upanishad. Here the great sage Uddalaka Aruni slowly and patiently brings this saving insight to birth within his son Shvetaketu and has him perform a series of tasks. In the most famous of these experiments, Shvetaketu had to leave a lump of salt in a beaker of water overnight and found, of course, that even though the salt had dissolved, the water still tasted salty. "You, of course, did not see it there, son," Uddalaka pointed out, "yet it was always right there." So too was the invisible Brahman, essence and inner self of the entire world. "And you are *that*, Shvetaketu."[50] Like the salt, the Brahman

could not be seen but was manifest in every single living thing. It was the subtle essence in the tiny banyan seed, from which a giant tree would grow, yet when Shvetaketu dissected the seed, he could not see anything at all. The Brahman was also the sap in every part of the tree that gave it life, and yet it could never be pinned down or analyzed.[51] All things shared the same essence, but most people did not realize this. They imagined they were unique and special and clung to these particularities—often with extreme anxiety and expenditure of effort. But in reality these qualities were no more durable than rivers that flowed into the same sea. Once they had merged, they became "just the ocean," and no longer asserted their individuality by insisting "I am that river," "I am this river." "In exactly the same way, son," Uddalaka persisted, "when all these creatures reach the Existent, they are not aware that: 'We are reaching the Existent.'" Whether they were tigers, wolves, or gnats, they all merged into Brahman. To hold on to the mundane self, therefore, was a delusion that led inescapably to pain, frustration, and confusion, which one could escape only by acquiring the deep, liberating knowledge that the Brahman was their atman, the truest thing about them.[52]

The Upanishadic sages were among the first to articulate another of the universal principles of religion—one that had already been touched upon in the Purusha myth. The truths of religion are accessible only when you are prepared to get rid of the selfishness, greed, and self-preoccupation that, perhaps inevitably, are ingrained in our thoughts and behavior but are also the source of so much of our pain. The Greeks would call this process *kenosis,* "emptying." Once you gave up the nervous craving to promote yourself, denigrate others, draw attention to your unique and special qualities, and ensure that you were first in the pecking order, you experienced an immense peace. The first Upanishads were written at a time when the Aryan communities were in the early stages of urbanization; *logos* had enabled them to master their environment. But the sages reminded them that there were some things—old age, sickness, and death—that they could not control; things—such as their essential self—that lay beyond their intellectual grasp. When, as a result of carefully crafted spiritual exercises, people learned not only to accept but to embrace this unknowing, they found that they experienced a sense of release.

The sages began to explore the complexities of the human psyche with remarkable sophistication; they had discovered the unconscious long before Freud. But the atman, the deepest core of their personality, eluded them. Precisely *because* it was identical with the Brahman, it was indefinable. The atman had nothing to do with our normal psycho-mental states and bore no resemblance to anything in our ordinary experience, so you could speak of it only in negative terms. As the seventh-century sage Yajnavalkya explained: "About this Self [atman] one can only say 'not … not' [neti … neti]."[53]

> You can't see the Seer who does the seeing. You can't hear the Hearer who does the hearing; you can't think with the Thinker who does the thinking; and you can't perceive the Perceiver who does the perceiving. This Self within the All [Brahman] is this *atman* of yours.[54]

Like the Brahmodya, any discussion of the atman in the Upanishads always ended in silence, the numinous acknowledgment that the ultimate reality was beyond the competence of language.

Authentic religious discourse could not lead to clear, distinct, and empirically verified truth. Like the Brahman, the atman was "ungraspable." You could define something only when you saw it as separate from yourself. But "when the Whole [Brahman] has become a person's very self, then who is there for him to see and by what means? Who is there for me to think of and by what means?"[55] But if you learned to "realize" the truth that your most authentic "Self was identical with Brahman, you understood that it too was "beyond hunger and thirst, sorrow and delusion, old age and death."[56] You could not achieve this insight by rational logic. You had to acquire the knack of thinking outside the ordinary "lowercase" self, and like any craft or skill, this required long, hard, dedicated practice.

One of the principal technologies that enabled people to achieve this self-forgetfulness was yoga.[57] Unlike the yoga practiced in Western gyms today, it was not an aerobic exercise but a systematic breakdown of instinctive behavior and normal thought patterns. It was mentally demanding and, initially, physically painful. The yogin had to do the opposite of what came naturally. He sat so still that he seemed more like a plant or a statue than a human being; he controlled his respiration, one of the most automatic and essential of our physical functions, until he acquired the ability to exist for long periods without breathing at all. He learned to silence the thoughts that coursed through his mind and concentrate "on one point" for hours at a time. If he persevered, he found that he achieved a dissolution of ordinary consciousness that extracted the "I" from his thinking.

To this day, yogins find that these disciplines, which have measurable physical and neurological effects, evoke a sense of calm, harmony, and equanimity that is comparable to the effect of music. There is a feeling of expansiveness and bliss, which yogins regard as entirely natural, possible for anybody who has the talent and application. As the "I" disappears, the most humdrum objects reveal wholly unexpected qualities since they are no longer viewed through the distorting filter of one's own egotistic needs and desires. When she meditated on the teachings of her guru, a yogin did not simply accept them notionally but experienced them so vividly that her knowledge was, as the texts say, "direct"; bypassing the logical processes like any practically acquired skill, it had become part of her inner world.[58]

But yoga also had an ethical dimension. A beginner was not allowed to perform a single yogic exercise until he had completed an intensive moral program. Top of the list of its requirements was *ahimsa,* "nonviolence." A yogin must not swat a mosquito, make an irritable gesture, or speak unkindly to others but should maintain constant affability to all, even the most annoying monk in the community. Until his guru was satisfied that this had become second nature, a yogin could not even sit in the yogic position. A great deal of the aggression, frustration, hostility, and rage that mars our peace of mind is the result of thwarted egotism, but when the aspiring yogin became proficient in this selfless equanimity, the texts tell us that he would experience "indescribable joy."[59] Their experience of yoga led the sages to devise a new creation myth. In the

beginning, there was only a single Person, who looked around him and discovered that he was alone. In this way, he became aware of himself and cried: "Here I am!" Thus the "I," the ego principle, was born. Immediately the Person became afraid, because we instinctively feel that we must protect the fragile ego from anything that threatens it, but when the Person remembered that because he was alone, there was no such threat, his fear left him. But he was lonely, so he split his body in two to create a man and a woman, who together gave birth to every single being in the cosmos "down to the very ants." And the Person realized that even though he was no longer alone, there was still nothing to fear. Was he not identical with Brahman, the All? He was one with all the things that he had made; indeed, he was himself his own creation.[60] He had even created the gods, who were essentially a part of himself.[61]

Even now, if a man knows "I am *brahman*" in this way, he becomes this whole world. Not even the gods are able to prevent it, for he becomes their very self [atman]. So when a man venerates another deity, thinking, "He is one, and I am another," he does not understand.[62] This insight, Yajnavalkya explained, brought with it a joy comparable to that of sexual intercourse, when one loses all sense of duality and is "oblivious to everything within or without."[63] But you would not have this experience unless you had performed the yogic exercises. Other traditions would also find that these fundamental principles were indispensable: Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, and Daoism, as well as the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each had its own unique genius and distinctive vision, each its peculiar flaws. But on these central principles they would all agree. Religion was not a notional matter. The Buddha, for example, had little time for theological speculation. One of his monks was a philosopher manqué and, instead of getting on with his yoga, constantly pestered the Buddha about metaphysical questions: Was there a god? Had the world been created in time or had it always existed? The Buddha told him that he was like a man who had been shot with a poisoned arrow and refused medical treatment until he had discovered the name of his assailant and what village he came from. He would die before he got this perfectly useless information. What difference would it make to discover that a god had created the world? Pain, hatred, grief, and sorrow would still exist. These issues were fascinating, but the Buddha refused to discuss them because they were irrelevant: "My disciples, they will not help you, they are not useful in the quest for holiness; they do not lead to peace and to the direct knowledge of Nirvana."[64]

The Buddha always refused to define Nirvana, because it could not be understood notionally and would be inexplicable to anybody who did not undertake his practical regimen of meditation and compassion. But anybody who did commit him- or herself to the Buddhist way of life could attain Nirvana, which was an entirely natural state.[65] Sometimes, however, Buddhists would speak of Nirvana using the same kind of imagery as monotheists use for God: it was the "Truth," the "Other Shore," "Peace," the "Everlasting," and "the Beyond." Nirvana was a still center that gave meaning to life, an oasis of calm, and a source of strength that you discovered in the depths of your own being. In purely mundane terms, it was "nothing," because it corresponded to no reality that we could recognize in our

ego-dominated existence. But those who had managed to find this sacred peace discovered that they lived an immeasurably richer life.[66] There was no question of "believing" in the existence of Nirvana or taking it "on faith." The Buddha had no time for abstract doctrinal formulations divorced from action. Indeed, to accept a dogma on somebody else's authority was what he called "unskillful" or "unhelpful" (*akusala*). It could not lead to enlightenment because it amounted to an abdication of personal responsibility. Faith meant trust that Nirvana existed and a determination to realize it by every practical means in one's power.

Nirvana was the natural result of a life lived according to the Buddha's doctrine *of anatta* ("no self"), which was not simply a metaphysical principle but, like all his teachings, a program of action. *Anatta* required Buddhists to *behave* day by day, hour by hour, as though the self did not exist. Thoughts of "self" not only led to "unhelpful" (*akusala*) preoccupation with "me" and "mine," but also to envy, hatred of rivals, conceit, pride, cruelty, and—when the self felt under threat—violence. As a monk became expert in cultivating this dispassion, he no longer interjected his ego into passing mental states but learned to regard his fears and desires as transient and remote phenomena. He was then ripe for enlightenment: "His greed fades away, and once his cravings disappear, he experiences the release of the mind."[67] The texts indicate that when the Buddha's first disciples heard about *anatta,* their hearts were filled with joy and they immediately experienced Nirvana. To live beyond the reach of hatred, greed, and anxieties about our status proved to be a profound relief.

By far the best way of achieving *anatta* was compassion, the ability to *feel with* the other, which required that one dethrone the self from the center of one's world and put another there. Compassion would become the central practice of the religious quest. One of the first people to make it crystal clear that holiness was inseparable from altruism was the Chinese sage Confucius (551–479 BCE). He preferred not to speak about the divine because it lay beyond the competence of language, and theological chatter was a distraction from the real business of religion.[68] He used to say: "My Way has one thread that runs right through it." There were no abstruse metaphysics; everything always came back to the importance of treating others with absolute respect.[69] It was epitomized in the Golden Rule, which, he said, his disciples should practice "all day and every day":[70] "Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you."[71] They should look into their own hearts, discover what gave them pain, and then refuse under any circumstance whatsoever to inflict that pain on anybody else.

Religion was a matter of doing rather than thinking. The traditional rituals of China enabled an individual to burnish and refine his humanity so that he became a *junzi,* a "mature person." A *junzi* was not born but crafted; he had to work on himself as a sculptor shaped a rough stone and made it a thing of beauty. "How can I achieve this?" asked Yan Hui, Confucius's most talented disciple. It was simple, Confucius replied: "Curb your ego and surrender to ritual (*li*)."[72] *A junzi* must submit every detail of his life to the ancient rites of consideration and respect for others. This was the answer to China's political problems: "If a ruler could curb his ego and submit to *li* for a single day, everyone under Heaven would respond to his goodness."[73]

The practice of the Golden Rule "all day and every day" would bring human beings into the state that Confucius called *ren,* a word that would later be described as "benevolence" but that Confucius himself refused to define because it could be understood only by somebody who had acquired it. He preferred to remain silent about what lay at the end of the religious journey. The practice of *ren* was an end in itself; it was itself the transcendence you sought. Yan Hui expressed this beautifully when he spoke of the endless struggle to achieve *ren* "with a deep sigh."

> The more I strain my gaze towards it, the higher it soars. The deeper I bore down into it, the harder it becomes. I see it in front, but suddenly it is behind. Step by step, the Master skil[l]fully lures one on. He has broadened me with culture, restrained me with ritual. Even if I wanted to stop, I could not. Just when I feel that I have exhausted every resource, something seems to rise up, standing over me sharp and clear. Yet though I long to pursue it, I can find no way of getting to it at all.[74]

Living a compassionate, empathetic life took Yan Hui beyond himself, giving him momentary glimpses of a sacred reality that was not unlike the "God" worshipped by monotheists. It was both immanent and transcendent: it welled up from within but was also experienced as an external presence "standing over me sharp and clear."

Religion as defined by the great sages of India, China, and the Middle East was not a notional activity but a practical one; it did not require belief in a set of doctrines but rather hard, disciplined work, without which any religious teaching remained opaque and incredible. The ultimate reality was not a Supreme Being—an idea that was quite alien to the religious sensibility of antiquity; it was an all-encompassing, wholly transcendent reality that lay beyond neat doctrinal formulations. So religious discourse should not attempt to impart clear information about the divine but should lead to an appreciation of the limits of language and understanding. The ultimate was not alien to human beings but inseparable from our humanity. It could not be accessed by rational, discursive thought but required a carefully cultivated state of mind and the abnegation of selfishness.

NOTES

1. Joseph Campbell, *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of God,* rev. ed. (New York, 1988), p. 305; Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York, 1988), p. 79.
2. André Leroi-Gourhan, *Treasures of Prehistoric Art* (New York, n.d.), p. 112. This rules out the suggestion that the paintings were simply a form of hunting magic.
3. Ibid., p. 118.
4. John E. Pfeiffer, *The Creative Explosion* (New York, 1982), p. viii.
5. André Leroi-Gourhan, *Les religions préhistorique: Paléolithique* (Paris, 1964), pp. 83–84; Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas,* 3 vols., trans. Willard R. Trask (Chicago and London, 1978, 1982, 1985), 1:16.

6. Joseph Campbell, *Historical Atlas of World Mythologies,* 2 vols. (New York, 1988), 1,1:58.
7. Ibid., 1,1:65.
8. Leo Frobenius, *Kulturgeschichte Africas* (Zurich, 1933), pp. 131–32; Campbell, *Primitive Mythology,* p. 300.
9. Mircea Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas,* 1:24.
10. Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *Power of Myth,* pp. 85–87.
11. Ibid., pp. 72–79; *Historical Atlas,* 1,1:48–49; Mircea Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas,* 1:7–8.
12. Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth,* trans. Peter Bing (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1983), pp. 16–22.
13. Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1980), pp. 54–56; Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans,* pp. 42–45.
14. Joseph Campbell, *Historical Atlas,* 1, 2:xiii.
15. Ibid., 1,1:93.
16. Joseph Campbell, *Primitive Mythology,* p. 66.
17. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History,* trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J., 1954), pp. 1–34.
18. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions,* rev. ed. (New York, 1991), p. 367.
19. Mircea Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas,* 1:17.
20. Mircea Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth: The Religious Meanings of Initiation in Human Cultures* (New York, 1958); Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities,* trans. Philip Mairet (London, 1960), pp. 194–226; Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *Power of Myth,* pp. 81–85.
21. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams,* p. 225.
22. Herbert Kuhn, *Auf den Spuren des Eiszeitmenscken* (Wiesbaden, 1953), pp. 88–89; Joseph Campbell, *Primitive Mythology,* pp. 307–8.
23. Abbé Henri Breuil, *Four Hundred Centuries of Cave Art* (Montignac, France, 1952), pp. 170–71.
24. Joseph Campbell, *Primitive Mythology,* p. 311.
25. Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans,* pp. 27–34.
26. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion,* trans. Rosemary Sheed (London, 1958), pp. 331–43.
27. Alexander Marshack, "Lunar Notations on Upper Palaeolithic Remains," *Scientia* 146 (1964).
28. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion,* pp. 146–85.
29. Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans,* pp. 78–82.
30. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion,* pp. 1–124, 216–39.
31. Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices,* 2nd ed. (London and New York, 2001), p. 2; Peter Clark, *Zoroastrians: An Introduction to an Ancient Faith* (Brighton and Portland, Ore., 1998), p. 18.
32. Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians,* pp. 9–11.
33. Jan Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion* (The Hague, 1965), p. 200; Louis Renou, "Sur la notion de *brahman,*" *Journal Asiatique* 237 (1949).

34. Louis Renou, *Religions of Ancient India* (London, 1953), pp. 10, 16–18; Michael Witzel, "Vedas and Upanishads" in Gavin Flood, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 70–71.
35. J. C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society* (Chicago and London, 1985), pp. 70–72, 126.
36. Zhuangzi, *The Book of Zhuangzi*, 6:29–31.
37. Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York and London, 2001), pp. 41–79.
38. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 367–88; Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1959), pp. 50–54, 64; Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Princeton, N.J., 1991), pp. 37–56.
39. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 38–63; Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams*, pp. 172–78; Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin of the Idea of God* (New York, 1912), passim.
40. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 120–25.
41. Rig Veda 10.129.
42. Rig Veda 10.90.
43. Gwendolyn Leick, *Mesopotamia: The Invention of the City* (London, 2001), p. 268.
44. Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Cosmos as State," In H. and H. A. Frankfort, eds., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on the Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago, 1946), pp. 186–97.
45. "The Babylonian Creation" 1.1 in N. K. Sanders, trans. and ed., *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia* (London, 1971).
46. *Enuma Elish* 6.19, In Sanders, *Poems of Heaven and Hell.*
47. E. O. James, *The Ancient Gods* (London, 1960), pp. 87–90.
48. Psalms 89:10–13; 93:1–4; Isaiah 27:1; Job 7:12; 9:8; 26:12; 38:7.
49. Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams*, pp. 80–81.
50. Chandogya Upanishad (CU) 6.13; my italics. All quotations from the Upanishads are from Patrick Olivelle, trans. and ed., *Upanisads* (Oxford and New York, 1996).
51. CU 6.11–12.
52. CU 6.10.
53. Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (BU) 4.5.15.
54. BU 3.4.
55. BU 4.5.13–15.
56. BU 3.5.1.
57. Mircea Eliade, *Yoga, Immortality and Freedom*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York, 1958).
58. Women participated in Upanishadic spirituality and, later, in Buddhist practice.
59. Patanjali, Yoga Sutra 2.42, in Eliade, *Yoga*, p. 52.
60. BU 1.4.1–5.
61. BU 1.4.6.
62. BU 1.4.10.
63. BU 4.3.21.

64. Samyutta Nikaya 53:31. The quotations from the Pali Canon of Buddhist scriptures are my own version of the texts cited.
65. Sutta-Nipata 43:1–44.
66. Majjima Nikaya 29.
67. *Vinaya:* Mahavagga 1.6.
68. Confucius, Analects 17.19. Unless otherwise stated, quotations from the Analects are taken from Arthur Waley, trans. and ed., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York, 1992).
69. Analects 4.15.
70. Analects 15.23.
71. Ibid.
72. Analects 12.1. Translation suggested by Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1985), p. 77.
73. Ibid.
74. Analects 9.10.

QUESTIONS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS WITHIN THE READING

1. In "Homo religiosus," Armstrong takes us back to the roots of religion in the Paleolithic era. The portrait she paints might surprise many readers. "In archaic thinking," she argues, "there [was] no concept of the supernatural, no huge gulf separating human and divine." There was "no belief in a single supreme being," and indeed belief itself was beside the point because religion was openly understood as a myth, not a literal truth. Reread the chapter and carefully note the many differences between religion then and religion now. Next, go back and look for the continuities. In spite of the differences, would you say that much of the Paleolithic legacy survives to this day? Can we conclude that religion has become more mature and sophisticated, or is it possible that we have lost touch with what religion actually represents? Where does Armstrong herself seem to stand on this final question?
2. Whether we are looking at the Middle East, ancient China, or the culture of Aryan peoples who came off the steppes and settled in India, Armstrong insists that religion was "a matter of doing rather than thinking." But what exactly does she mean by "doing"? What kinds of activities might religion have entailed in ancient times? Start with the ancient shamans whose activities are hinted at by the frescoes at Chauvet, and then follow the historical thread until you reach Heidegger. Clearly, religious activities are meant to enhance ordinary life, but at the same time they appear to involve forms of behavior that are quite distinct from everyday existence. How do the mundane and the sacred interact in the history of religious "doing"?

3. One central concern of "Homo religiosus" is the self in its connections to the universe as a whole. Even though religion in our time is quite commonly understood in terms of a personal relationship with God, Armstrong emphasizes the importance of what the ancient Greeks called *ekstasis,* a "stepping outside the norm," and *kenosis,* the "emptying" of the self. In what way does self-emptying connect the individual with the "sacred energy" of the universe? How might the experience of "nothingness" make people more alive and creative? What gets lost, in Armstrong's view, when we imagine the "ultimate reality" as a "Supreme Being"?

QUESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. According to Armstrong, "All ancient religion was based on what has been called the perennial philosophy, because it was present in some form in so many premodern cultures." To support this claim she looks at religion among such disparate groups as the Australian Aborigines, the ancient Aryans and Chinese, the peoples of the Middle East, and the ancient Greeks. While their belief systems can appear quite dissimilar today, Armstrong points to underlying commonalities. For example, just as the Aryans thought of their gods as *devas* or shining ones, so the forerunners of the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—used the world *ilam,* meaning "radiant power," to describe their own deities. What are the implications of these parallels? Have we put so great an emphasis on the differences that we have lost touch with the greater unity? What factors might explain the emphasis on such differences?
2. One theme of Armstrong's recent work has been the distinction between two forms of knowing that she calls *logos* and *mythos. Logos* describes a kind of truth that strives for objectivity through the use of critical reason, while *mythos* describes a truth whose purpose is to overcome our subjective sense of separateness from the world and other living beings. Though past societies understood the distinction between the two, Armstrong contends that in our time both skeptics and religious people treat *mythos* as a set of objective claims. After reading "Homo religiosus," would you say that *mythos* should have a place in our lives today? Is it really possible for us to keep *mythos* separate from *logos?* How might the two become confused, and what dangers might arise from confusing them?

QUESTIONS FOR MAKING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN READINGS

1. What might Armstrong have to say about our relationship with technology as it is described by Sherry Turkle in Selections from *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other?* One place to start in developing your response might be this passage from "Homo religiosus":

> Human beings are so constituted that periodically they seek out *ekstasis,* a "stepping outside" the norm. Today people who no longer find [*ekstasis*] in a religious setting resort to other outlets: music, dance, art, sex, drugs, or sport. We make a point of seeking out these experiences that touch us deeply within and lift us momentarily beyond ourselves. At such times, we feel that we inhabit our humanity more fully than usual and experience an enhancement of being.

Can our attitude toward technology be defined as *religious* in Armstrong's sense of the word? Think about the popular notion of the *singularity*—does that qualify as religious? Does our current technology "lift us ... beyond ourselves" and allow us to "inhabit our humanity more fully"? Or, by contrast, does our reliance on technology amount to an inversion of *ekstasis,* a contraction rather than an opening? Have machines taken the place of the animals that once figured in our rituals and mysteries? If we are no longer connecting to nature, what are we connecting to?

2. Armstrong sees religion as "matter of doing" rather than a matter of allegiance to unchanging beliefs. Reread her chapter and carefully note the many different forms of "doing" she explores, from ritual sacrifice to yoga. In what sense might we understand premodern religion as a form of psychotherapy of the kind practiced today by Martha Stout, author of "When I Woke Up Tuesday Morning, It Was Friday"? Were religious practices possibly designed to overcome dissociated states and the pathologies that they cause? Or does religion actually encourage dissociation? If the answer to this last question is yes, what might be the purpose of turning away from the here and now, at least temporarily?