

I. THE ULTIMATE REALITY IN WORLD RELIGIONS

by Ernest Valea, *University of Wales*

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Each world religion acknowledges an Ultimate Reality that is eternal and unchanging. There are three fundamental ways in which it is defined: as a personal being (a personal and loving God), as an impersonal being (as origin and target of all personal beings) or as an eternal truth or principle that governs the universe. If the world religions are only parts of a global and unique spirituality, these three perspectives should be consistent with each other. Could they be mere manifestations of the same Ultimate Reality?

The Ultimate Reality in Hinduism

The Ultimate Reality according to the Upanishads and Vedanta

Already in the Brahmana writings (*Shatapatha Brahmana* 6,1,1) it is stated that the whole universe has its origin in non-existence (*asat*), meaning that existence must be the product of some unmanifested potentialities. This topic is made clear in the Upanishads, which claim that the origin of all existing things is Brahman, the One of the Vedic hymns:

As the spider moves along the thread, as small sparks come forth from the fire, even so from this Self [Brahman] come forth all breaths, all worlds, all divinities, all beings. (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2,1,20)

According to the Upanishads, the Ultimate Reality is Brahman. It (neuter gender) is at the origin of any physical, moral or spiritual activity (see also *Brihadaranyaka Up.* 4, 1-2; *Chandogya Up.* 3,18,1-6; *Taittiriya Up.* 2,6; 3,1). Paradoxically, Brahman has two aspects: immanent, or manifested, and transcendent, or unmanifested. For a better understanding of this concept, we can compare it to the "Big Bang" theory of the origin of the universe. The point of infinite mass out of which all celestial bodies is said to have originated, according to the astronomic theory, has its ideological correspondence with the unmanifested Brahman of Hindu cosmogony. However, in

the manifestation of Brahman, the product is not only matter, but also living beings, gods and humans. The cause of the manifestation process is Brahman's desire to be multiplied: "Let me become many, let me be born" (*Taittiriya Up.* 2,6,1). (However, in a pantheistic context, this is a strange and contradictory idea, because the impersonal being cannot have desires. Probably a more accurate term would have been that of necessity of becoming manifested.) After the manifestation is completed, all its products tend to return to the initial state of unmanifestation, evolving from one level of manifestation to another. Then another manifestation will occur:

As from a blazing fire, sparks of like form issue forth by thousands, even so, O beloved, many kinds of beings issue forth from the immutable and they return thither too. (*Mundaka Up.* 2,1,1)

Similar to the day and night cycle, the transformation of Brahman between the manifested state and the unmanifested one is everlasting (*Kaushitaki Up.* 3,3).

The philosophical system (*darshana*) that follows the pantheistic teachings of the Upanishads is called Vedanta. The most important organizers are Badarayana (4th century AD) and Shankara (9th century AD); the one who conferred to it a pure monistic character as Advaita Vedanta - "the Vedanta of pure monism".

Shankara's vision of the relation of the Absolute with the phenomenal world is reflected in an old Hindu parable, that of the rope mistakenly perceived in the dark as a snake. As the coiled rope in the dark is thought to be a snake, in the same way the empirical world is mistakenly considered to have a distinct existence, independent of the Absolute, through the illusion (*maya*) produced by ignorance (*avidya*). As only the rope exists, not the snake, only Brahman has a real existence (*sat*) and is the true reality. The phenomenal world is real only if perceived as Brahman, as the "reality" of the snake's existence lays in the substratum that produced the confusion, namely the rope. The plurality of the phenomenal world is an illusion (*maya*), a veil that has to be put aside in order to perceive Brahman. The universe is not unreal, but has the same value as the snake in the parable - it produces confusion and causes humans to pursue a wrong spiritual direction. All that goes beyond this vision of the world is illusion, produced by ignorance.

Shankara tried to settle the relation of the Absolute Brahman (Nirguna Brahman - the One without any definable characteristics) with the origin of the world by proclaiming two distinct points of view: the absolute (*paramarthika*) and the relative (*vyavaharika*). In an absolute sense, Brahman is above any duality and external relation; nothing real exists outside him. But from our empirical and relative point of view, Brahman is the cause of the universe we know. In fact there is no real causality; the world is only an illusory sight of Brahman, as with the rope seen as a snake. Brahman's activity in the world and among human beings is nothing but *lila*, divine play. In conclusion, the Vedanta of Shankara is somehow different from Upanishadic philosophy; the universe is only a phenomenal appearance (*vivarta-vada*) of Brahman and not his transformation (*parinama-vada*). From a substantial manifestation, the universe becomes only a dream (or self-forgetting) of Brahman.

The gods of theistic Hinduism

According to the pantheistic view of the Upanishads and Vedanta, the gods are merely inferior manifestations of the supreme impersonal Brahman. However, they continued to play an important role for the average Hindu. The gods that are worshiped today are not the same as in Vedic times. The most important ones became Vishnu and his avatars (especially Rama and Krishna), Shiva and the goddess Kali.

Some pantheist thinkers consider that devotion is nothing but an easier path towards reaching the same impersonal union with the impersonal Ultimate Reality, towards attaining the extinction of personhood, the main source of illusion (maya). Since the adored god is nothing but a form of Brahman, the mystical union with him would be, in this case, nothing more than the same impersonal fusion atman-Brahman. However, the theistic Hindu thinkers strongly disagree with this. They see the personal creator God (Vishnu in Vaishnavism or Shiva in Saivism) as having no preceding origin. Consequently, the One of the *Rig Veda*, Purusha of the *Purushasukta*, and Brahman of the Upanishads are considered nothing but the supreme personal God (Vishnu or Shiva). He is both the creator and the substance of the world (as a result of creating the world out of himself), the One that both creates and disintegrates the world at will, and the target of all religious rituals and devotion.

The best known piece of literature representative of Hindu theism is the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the worshiped god is Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu. In the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna is granted a fundamental theological importance. He claims to be eternal (4,6), "the supreme Lord of all planets and demigods" (5,29) and the source of existence: "I am the source of all spiritual and material worlds. Everything emanates from me" (10,8). He is not only the creator but also the substance of the universe (9,16-19; 8,4; 10,20-42). The cycle of permanent transformation between the manifested state and the unmanifested one is characteristic for Krishna too, as it was with Brahman:

At the end of an era (kalpa) all creatures disintegrate into my nature and at the beginning of another era I manifest them again. Such it is my nature (prakriti) to follow again and again the pattern of the Infinite manifestations and disintegrations. (Bhagavad Gita 9,7-8)

The excess of Krishna's superlatives and his identification with the whole of existence grants him a personal portrait that is difficult to grasp. A better Hindu theism will be founded later in time by the great theistic Hindu thinkers Ramanuja (1017 - 1137 AD) and Madhva (1238 - 1317 AD). They rejected the idea that the Ultimate Reality is the impersonal Brahman, who has no attributes, no initiative and no influence on man. As it is impossible to take Brahman as an object of worship, both thinkers accepted the god Vishnu as Ultimate Reality. He is not limited by karma, time, space or any other factor, and has an infinite number of attributes (unlike Nirguna Brahman), the most important being love, absolute knowledge, and compassion. According to Madhva, Vishnu is far from being the impersonal substance of the world. He is a personal god who periodically creates the world out of a primordial substance (prakriti) and dissolves it at the end of a cosmic cycle. Regarding souls, their

creation is periodic and dependent on the karma they acquired in previous existences. However, this means that the act of creation is not totally independent, as an act of God's sovereign will. Vishnu is not free to create the world at will, but has to do it according to the karma that the souls have accumulated in previous ages, in order that they might work it out and finally attain liberation.

The Ultimate Reality in Buddhism

The founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama - the Buddha, lived in the sixth century BC. Two main forms of Buddhism are known today: the conservative branch, represented by the Theravada school, spread mainly in Sri Lanka and southeast Asia, and the liberal branch - Mahayana, spread mainly in China, Tibet, Korea and Japan.

The Theravada school, which claims to have guarded the unaltered message of its founder, teaches that there is neither a personal god, nor a spiritual or material substance that exists by itself as Ultimate Reality. The world as we know it does not have its origin in a primordial being such as Brahman. What we see is only a product of transitory factors of existence, which depend functionally upon each other. The Buddha said:

The world exists because of causal actions, all things are produced by causal actions and all beings are governed and bound by causal actions. They are fixed like the rolling wheel of a cart, fixed by the pin of its axle shaft. (Sutta-Nipata 654)

That gods exist is not rejected, but they are only temporary beings that attained heaven using the same virtues as any human disciple. Gods are not worshiped, do not represent the basis for morality, and are not the givers of happiness. The Ultimate Reality is nothing but a transcendent truth, which governs the universe and human life:

There is grief but none suffering,

There is no doer though there is action.

There is quietude but none tranquil.

There is the path but none walks upon the path. (Buddhaghosa; Visuddhi Magga 16)

Mahayana Buddhism emerged later, between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD, and was organized by Nagarjuna in the 2nd century AD. Although the texts of Mahayana Buddhism claim to be a recollection of early speeches of the Buddha, they contradict some conservative doctrines of the Theravada school. It is said that the Mahayana sutras were revealed many years after the master's death, because at that time the world was not yet able to understand them. According to their teaching, Ultimate Reality is also an ultimate truth, called the truth of emptiness. Emptiness is a quality attached to any physical, mental or doctrinal concept. It is the basis of our world, not as a substance, but as a truth. The doctrine of emptiness denies any kind of substantial ultimate reality and affirms that the world is to be seen as a web of interdependent and baseless phenomena.

The presence of many Buddhas in Mahayana Buddhism inaugurated a strong devotional trend that had to be reconciled with this doctrine of emptiness. The result was the doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha (*Trikaya*), developed by the Yogachara school in the fifth century AD. It says that Ultimate Reality, called Buddhahood, is expressed at three levels of understanding. The first is *Dharmakaya*, the essential body of the Buddha, representing emptiness itself. It is the ultimate truth that governs the world. The other two bodies are the embodiment of compassion for beings ensnared by illusion. It is only because ignorance blinds conditioned beings, that the Dharmakaya is manifested as the other two, so that the conditioned beings can grow in wisdom and eventually attain enlightenment.

The second body is the *Samboghakaya*, the body of enjoyment. It is the body of the Buddhas in their Pure Lands, where they preach the Mahayana doctrine to those reborn here. The Buddhas in this form are the objects of Mahayana devotion, the source of grace for the devotees of popular Buddhism.

What was known as the physical body of Siddhartha Gautama is the third body of the Buddha, the *Nirmanakaya*. It is a mere image manifested in our world for the benefit of the lowliest of beings, the most ignorant and weak, unable to attain a Pure Land.

Mahayana takes a different stand on the person of Siddhartha Gautama. According to the traditional view he was a physical being, the founder of the four noble truths and the first human that reached nirvana. In Mahayana Buddhism he is considered to be only one of many Buddhas, the compassionate beings that help other humans to find liberation.

Ultimate Reality in Taoism and Confucianism

Taoism states an impersonal Ultimate Reality that is both the creator principle and the eternal truth of universe. It is the Tao, the immutable and unchanging principle that is the basis of multiplicity and the impulse that generates all forms of life. The founder of Taoism, Lao Tse (6th century BC), stated in his important writing, *Tao-te Ching*:

There was something undifferentiated and yet complete,
Which existed before heaven and earth.
Soundless and formless, it depends on nothing and does not change.
It operates everywhere and is free from danger.
It may be considered the mother of the universe.
I do not know its name; I call it Tao. (Tao-te Ching 25)

In the same way as the Hindu Brahman or Buddhist *Dharmakaya*, Tao is the source in which all the manifestations of the world originate and return:

All the flourishing things
Will return to their source.
This return is peaceful;

It is the flow of nature,
An eternal decay and renewal. (Tao-te Ching 16)

Tao holds two complementary and opposite modalities that are present in creation: Yin and Yang (Yin - the female principle of darkness, potentiality, regression; and Yang - the male principle of light, activity and progress). Their dynamic and the proportions in which they become mixed at a certain moment determine all aspects of nature or living beings: from day and night, life and death, to personal feelings and dispositions. Any personal form of existence, gods and humans alike, receive their wisdom from Tao, being merely temporary forms of its manifestation:

[Tao] is its own source, its own root. Before heaven and earth existed it was there, firm from ancient times. It gave spirituality to the spirits and gods; it gave birth to heaven and to earth. (Chuang Tzu 6)

The existence of Taoist divinities is the result of an attempt to combine devotion to the ancient Chinese gods with classic Taoism, as a way of making it more acceptable to lay people. Deities like the Jade Emperor (*Yu-huang*) and The First Principal (*Yuan-shis Tien-Tsun*) are considered in some traditions to be gods, while other deities like the three Pure Ones (*San-ch'ing*) are more like Buddhist bodhisattvas, acting as manifestations of Lao Tse.

Another important Chinese religion is Confucianism. Rather than a religion, Confucius (6th century BC) founded an ethical system in order to harmonize social relations in the Chinese state. For this reason it is hard to say that Confucianism, at least in its original form, is a true religion. Although Confucius respected the religious traditions of his time, he gave them a mere ethical interpretation. The supreme principle in the universe according to him is the moral law, a universal principle, omnipresent, hidden and eternal:

There is no place in the highest heavens above or in the deepest waters below where the moral law is not to be found. (Doctrine of the Mean 12)

Following the moral principles means to conform oneself to the will of heaven, but more metaphysical speculations about heaven and afterlife are useless (*Analects* 7,20).

Ultimate Reality according to the three monotheistic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam

Judaism, the earliest monotheistic religion, is about the personal God who revealed himself through the story of the Jewish people. We find it in the scriptures called the Torah by the Jews and the Old Testament by the Christians.

In the very beginning of the Old Testament, God is presented creating the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) and does not manifest it out of his own substance as Brahman, or out of a preexistent matter as Indra does. This "nothing" has no

ontological statute, it is not a primordial substance, because prior to creation nothing existed except God. The Psalms state:

In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end. (Psalm 102,25-27)

The creation presented in the book of Genesis is an act intended and completed by the creator, not out of necessity, but out of love. The beginning or cause of the world is not an impersonal necessity or a blind manifestation of an undetermined nature, but the product of the free choice of a personal God. Being consequent to the idea of the fundamental unity of the world in Brahman, pantheism has to consider the physical world and humans as manifestations of Brahman, manifestations of the same primordial essence to which they are destined to return. For this reason, it can be said that the impersonal Absolute is incomplete without his "creation", i.e., without the manifestation of his potentiality. The manifestation of Brahman is a necessity derived from its very nature. In pantheism creation is always a transformation (or manifestation) of a primordial impersonal unity. It is not a replacement of "nothingness" with "something", but a transformation of the ultimate reality from one ontological condition into another. What once existed in unity becomes multiplicity and manifestation. Therefore the nature of ultimate reality and that of creation prove to be quite different in the monotheist perspective.

The personal and triune God of Christianity

According to Christianity, God reveals himself to be personal and triune. He exists as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, without beginning and without having his origin in a primordial impersonal essence.

There are some important points to make clear about the origin and meaning of the term "person" (Latin *persona*, Greek *prosopon*). Initially used in the Greek ancient theater for the actors' mask, the term designated in Hellenistic philosophy "the masked face of the impersonal being". The term used for the impersonal essence of reality was *ousia*, and its determined, singular forms were called *hypostases*. If Christian theology had been only a form of Hellenistic philosophy, it should have said that the *hypostases* - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - are mere functional aspects of the divine nature *ousia*. The novelty brought by Christian theology is the fact that each person of the Holy Trinity has the fullness of divine nature, and the ontological character of the Ultimate Reality is defined by the reality and relation that exists between the three *hypostases*. A major contribution in defining this aspect was made by the Cappadocian fathers of the Church (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus).

Therefore the Holy Trinity should be understood neither as a sum of three Gods (tritheism), nor as a mono-personal God that assumes successively three distinct forms (the modalistic heresy). God's being does not exist outside the three persons, but only as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and they are the only way for God's existence.

So there cannot exist an Ultimate Reality "beyond" or "above" the Holy Trinity, as in pantheism (Brahman as the ultimate nature of the gods). Therefore none of the three hypostases, Father, Son or Holy Spirit, can be considered a kind of Hindu Ishvara, a first manifestation of the impersonal Brahman. Christian theology overthrew the values of Hellenistic metaphysics in order to adapt its terms to the newly revealed reality. In defining divinity, the accent must be transferred from an impersonal Ultimate Reality to the personal character of the Holy Trinity and the relation between the three hypostases. Here is the origin of the term "divine person" (from the Latin *persona*), and (derived from it) the term "human person".

The triune God exists by himself. In his revelation to Moses, he called himself "I am who I am" (Exodus 3,14). This means that he is self-sufficient, that he does not depend on any exterior element. His existence is expressed through love, omnipotence and omniscience, among which there is perfect unity and harmony. None is manifesting itself by infringing on the other because the Holy Trinity is perfect in love, will and deed. Associated with these characteristics are justice and immutability. God's immutability is not a reminder of Brahman Nirguna's immobility, but an absolute stability in truth and goodness. Likewise, when the Apostle John proclaims that "God is love" (1 John 4,8) this should not be interpreted as an expression of the impersonal primordial energy, but as form of expressing the supreme unity of the tri-personal communion. It doesn't just mean that God has love, as a quality, but that he is love, which is the way of being in the Trinity, each person existing not for himself, but for the others, in a perfect communion of love.

The God of the Bible admits no deeper Ultimate Reality beyond himself. He is not an Ishvara manifested out of Brahman (or a Deus manifested out of Deitas, according to Eckhart), a god that comes and goes, located far beyond the impersonal absolute. The triune God of Christianity does not admit the existence of a "deeper reality" in which he originated, because he says:

I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God (Isaiah 44,6).

He cannot be equated with any god of the Hindu pantheon. They are only aspects of an impersonal Absolute, manifestations that will finally be absorbed by it. The triune God of Christianity is different from Krishna, who periodically manifests and annihilates the universe (*Bhagavad Gita* 9,7-9). According to Christianity, God does not create the same world many times, but just once, and then not out of any necessity that surpasses him. Neither can he be equated with the "Hindu trinity" Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Shiva (the destroyer). The three Hindu gods are reminiscences of the old Vedic polytheism, from where they have been later assimilated as primary products of Brahman's manifestations. As a consequence, it is absurd to define a superior and esoteric way (*apara-vidya*), that aims at the impersonal Absolute, and an inferior exoteric way (*para-vidya*) for those who are so limited that they are satisfied with a personal manifestation of the absolute. Christianity cannot be assimilated as a form of bhakti-yoga, a way accessible for the inferior and weak people to attain the impersonal Ultimate Reality of the world.

God and creation in Islam

The other great monotheistic religion of the world, Islam, was founded by the prophet Muhammad at the beginning of the sixth century AD. The god of Islam, Allah, is presented in the Quran as an eternal being, transcendent and almighty. In the 112th Surah it is stated:

Say, He is God, the One!
God, the eternally Besought of all!
He neither begets nor was begotten.
And there is none comparable unto Him.

Allah seems to have the same attributes as God the Father of the Old Testament, since the influence of the Old Testament on the Quran is more than probable. For more information on this topic one can follow these links:

The Triune God of Christianity is considered to be a heresy, both in Judaism and Islam, a threat to monotheism. Therefore, Allah cannot be the same as God the Father of the Christian Trinity, since Allah says that belief in the Trinity is one of the worst possible heresies and sins:

Surely, unbelievers are those who said, "Allah is the third of the three [in a Trinity]". But there is no god but One God. And if they cease not from what they say, verily, a painful torment will befall the unbelievers among them (Quran 5,73).

Conclusion

The world's religions hold very different views on Ultimate Reality. More than merely different, they are irreconcilable one with another. Indeed, the impersonal Brahman of the Upanishads, who balances between his manifested state and unmanifestation, or the lack of any transcendental being, as stated by Theravada Buddhism, are positions that cannot be reconciled with the personal God of the monotheistic religions. On the other hand, even the three great monotheistic religions of the world state irreconcilable positions concerning the nature of the personal God. He must be either tri-personal (the triune God of Christianity), or mono-personal (as in Judaism and Islam).

II. THE HUMAN CONDITION IN WORLD RELIGIONS

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1. The human condition in Hinduism
2. The human condition in Buddhism
3. The human condition in Confucianism and Taoism
4. The human condition in the monotheistic religions

Introduction

Humans have always been attracted by life's mystery: its origin, meaning, and finality. The author of *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* asks: "Whence are we born? Whereby do we live, and whither do we go?" (1,1). Consequently, not only Hinduism, but all religions need to give an answer to the fundamental questions concerning creation, life, and death.

What is the human being? According to pantheist religions, a small part of the Ultimate Reality locked up by the illusion of physical experience. According to Theravada Buddhism, nothing but an illusion, a temporary combination of five aggregates, none of which is ultimately real. Dualistic religions, like Gnosticism and Manicheism, state that humans are spiritual beings originated in another world, a kind of angels fallen into a miserable bodily condition. According to monotheistic religions, the human being is a person created in the image and likeness of God.

What is humanity's present condition? Have we fallen from the created status as a result of sin, defined as a moral barrier against our creator? Or are we rather a product of the periodical manifestation of the Ultimate Reality, and thus ignoring our true spiritual nature? Do we have a soul that predated our birth or not? Is our personal character illusory, or do we keep it for a further existence? Is our destiny limited to this present existence, or do we inherit an eternal one, and if eternal, is it personal or impersonal, conformed with the character of the creator or absorbed into the impersonal nature out of which all things emanated? These are some of the aspects that define the human condition in the world's religions. Closely related to how human nature is defined are the values we pursue in life and the kind of relationship we have with our neighbors.

In the previous article, we have seen that the world religions do not agree on what they hold as Ultimate Reality. Could it then still be possible that humans share the same condition? Following the pattern used in the previous article, we will analyze the way human nature is defined in relationship to Ultimate Reality, its origin and present condition. Beginning with Hinduism, we will continue with the other Eastern religions and finish with the perspective of monotheistic religions.

The human condition in Hinduism

The unity atman-Brahman in the Upanishads and Vedanta

The Upanishads state that the world finds its ultimate unity in Brahman, the impersonal matrix equivalent to the One of the *Rig Veda* (10,129). In their search for a fundamental entity of human nature, something that should be the unifying principle of all psycho-mental faculties, but above their temporal fluctuations, the Hindu rishis defined the concept of *atman*. In the *Chandogya Upanishad* (5,1,1) it is stated that breath (*prana*) is the "oldest and the best" principle that assures the functioning of all other psycho-mental capacities (sight, speech, hearing, thought). That is why from the notion of breath (Sanskrit "an" = "breathing") derived the notion *atman* (reflexive pronoun), which came to designate the self, man's spiritual being. Therefore *atman* is not the seat of personhood, or man's soul, as it is sometimes mistakenly translated, but a spiritual entity distinct from personhood and from the physical body.

Unlike all other manifestations of Brahman, *atman* is of the same ontological quality with Brahman; it does not fluctuate, it is expressionless, irreducible, eternal and pure:

The self is not this, not this. He is incomprehensible for he is never comprehended. He is indestructible for he cannot be destroyed. He is unattached for he does not attach himself. He is unfettered, he does not suffer, he is not injured (*Brihadaranyaka Up.* 4,2,4).

Given his condition as a product of Brahman's manifestation, a human being's purpose in life is to join the returning process of all manifestations to the initial state of non-manifestation. This is possible only through dissociating the self (*atman*) from the corporeal and psycho-mental experience, and realizing the identity between his self and Brahman. However, there is an important aspect to emphasize here: Man's return to Brahman is a concept that could raise confusion. In fact, Brahman is already present in humanity, both at a transcendent and an immanent level, that is, both as the absolute *atman* and the relative (gross) manifestations (body and psycho-mental faculties). Discerning between the two conditions is possible by gaining a deep mystical knowledge of *atman*: "The self is to be meditated upon for in it all these become one. This self is the foot-trace of all this, for by it one knows all this, just as one can find again by footprints (what was lost)" (*Brihadaranyaka Up.* 1,4,7). "Meditating on the self" means getting the knowledge of his essential identity with Brahman, and this knowledge is equivalent with attaining effectively the *atman*-Brahman identity, as the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* states:

This is the great unborn self who is undecaying, undying, immortal, fearless, Brahman. Verily, Brahman is fearless. He who knows this becomes the fearless Brahman (4,4,25).

However, there exists the obstacle of illusion (*maya*) against getting this intuitive knowledge. *Maya* deceives humans about the true nature of existence, channeling ones wishes toward the phenomenal world that is ever changing. At the same time, *maya* strengthens the confusion of *atman* with the psycho-mental activity and the physical body. As a result of illusion, humans grant true spiritual value to what is unstable and changing instead of knowing their eternal immutable self. This

ignorance (*avidya*) is the cause of *atman*'s captivity in the world of material experience:

Just as those who do not know the field walk again and again over the hidden treasure of gold and do not find it, even so all creatures here go day after day into the Brahma-world and yet do not find it, for they are carried away by untruth (Chandogya Up. 8,3,2).

As a result of ignorance, a process develops in the spiritual world similar to the law of action and reaction that works in the physical world. This is karma, the law of action and retribution according to one's deeds. Its origin is found in the exegesis of the benefits of sacrifice. It was thought that the same way sacrifices bring good results to the one who performs them, all his other acts also need a reward. This mechanism prevents humans from entering the celestial world after death or limits their stay there, forcing them to come back in this life and reap the fruits of their deeds. As a result of karma, any action has an effect on its performer. The practical way one reaps the fruits of his or her deeds is reincarnation (*samsara*). It teaches that we live further lives as humans or, according to how badly we acted and how gross our ignorance was in detaching from the material world, as animals or plants.

The first clear mention of *samsara* is in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (3,2,13), where it is mentioned that "one becomes good by good action, bad by bad action". It is also stated that the reincarnation cycle is started by desire: "As is man's desire so is his will; as is his will, so is the deed he does, whatever he does, that he attains" (4,4,5). The "desire" is that of experiencing the physical world, and consequently illusion, and "that he attains" is the fruit reaped in a further life, as a result of karma's retribution. Karma is the direct link between desire and reincarnation, which builds an inter-conditioning mechanism between the previous, the present and the next lives. As a result of karma's retribution, any thought, word or deed of this life will find its reward in the next life, at the same level. In the *Katha Upanishad* (2,2,7) it is stated: "Some souls enter into a womb for embodiment; others enter stationary objects according to their deeds and according to their thoughts."

An important aspect to emphasize here is the fact that reincarnation should not be understood only as solution for punishing bad deeds. Reincarnation functions independently of how good or bad actions are. It follows only the necessity imposed by karma, an impersonal and amoral law. Between *atman* and moral values there is no possible connection: "He (*atman*) does not become greater by good works nor smaller by evil works. (. . .) What he has done or what he has not done does not burn him" (*Brihadaranyaka Up.* 4,4,22). Good deeds only provide a short reward in heaven, but then the soul has to return to earth and continue its struggle. In the *Mundaka Upanishad* (1,2,10) it is stated:

These deluded men, regarding sacrifices and works of merits as most important, do not know any other good. Having enjoyed in the high place of heaven won by good deeds, they enter again this world or a still lower one.

The Upanishads mark a transition from the point where the human condition is determined by divine personal agents (the Vedic gods), to the situation of being totally controlled by the impersonal law of karma. As anticipated, from the polytheistic perspective of the Vedas, of a universe governed by a sovereign god (Varuna)

through a law that was subordinated to him (*rita*), we arrived at the pantheistic view of the Upanishads, where the impersonal law of karma is ruling the world. In this situation humans are alone facing their destiny, having the duty to escape by their own efforts from the vicious cycle *avidya-karma-samsara*, an objective that will be foundational to most Hindu religious systems.

The human condition in Buddhism

Following the ascetic tradition of his time, the Buddha described the human condition in very harsh terms:

Behold this painted body, a body full of wounds, put together, diseased, and full of many thoughts in which there is neither permanence nor stability. This body is worn out, a nest of diseases and very frail. This heap of corruption breaks in pieces, life indeed ends in death. What delight is there for him who sees these white bones like gourds cast away in the autumn? Of the bones a citadel is made, plastered over with flesh and blood, and in it dwell old age and death, pride and deceit. (Dhammapada 147-150)

The all-pervading reality of suffering as motivation for seeking liberation is not a new element in Hindu spirituality. The Upanishads have already exploited this topic. But the Buddha went further than the ideologies of his time, excluding from his metaphysics even the fundamental concepts of Upanishadic philosophy: *atman* and Brahman. He denied there is a self as an unchanging entity that would define our nature, that would reincarnate and eventually attain liberation. This is called the no-self (*anatta*) doctrine. What we call a "person" is in fact the product of five factors that depend upon each other and are themselves in a constant process of becoming. These five factors, called aggregates (*skandha*), are the following:

1. The body, also called the material form (*rupa*);
2. Feeling (*vedana*), the sensations that arise from the body's sense organs.
3. Cognition (*sanna*), the process of classifying and labeling sensory and mental objects, which enables us to recognize them.
4. Mental constructions (*sankhara*), the states which initiate action and give shape to our character (most characteristic being the will).
5. Consciousness (*vijnana*), the sense of awareness of a sensory or mental object, the aggregate that generates the illusion of a self.

This heap of aggregates generates the illusion of personal existence, the false notions of person (*puggala*), vital principle (*jiva*) and self (*atman*). Therefore, the human being is a cluster of ever changing physical and mental processes, a mere heap of the five aggregates, which has no underlying self. All five of them are subject to becoming, as they depend one upon the other as in a castle of domino tiles, and therefore are marked by suffering. Therefore we do not merely suffer in life, but life itself is suffering.

The rejection of a self has most of all a practical significance. All discussions and philosophical debates on the existence and definition of *atman* have as the only result persistence in suffering, and are hindrances in attaining liberation. The Buddha

argued that the answers we would like to know about the character of the universe, the existence of a soul or a transcendent Ultimate Reality, start debates that lead us astray from our real problem, which is escaping from suffering (*Majjhima Nikaya* sutra 63). He discouraged speculative thinking on these issues in order to concentrate all efforts in reaching *nirvana*, a state where they all lose importance, not because the answers are found, but because in *nirvana* there is no one left to get them.

Some immediate problems raised against Buddhism came from the way it described human nature as having no abiding principle or self. If there is no self, who is actually suffering the pain of which the Buddha was speaking so much? Who is liberated? If there is no self, what is reincarnated from one existence to another? The Buddha answered that only karma is passing from one life to another, using the illustration of the light of a candle, which is derived from other candle without having a substance of its own. In the same manner, there is rebirth without the transfer of a self from one body to another. The only link from one life to the next one has a causal nature.

The human condition in Confucianism and Taoism

Confucius did not establish a new religion or a new philosophical system. All his efforts were channeled into finding an ethical system that could improve the Chinese society of his time (6th century BC). His main concern was social life and the principles that should govern it for the welfare of society, family, and personal life. Although Confucius respected the existent Chinese religious traditions, he gave them a mere ethical interpretation.

Human perfection, according to him, cannot be attained by religious rituals or meditations, but only by proper education and by respecting moral values. Therefore, religious traditions have value only as means of moral living. The most important ethical principles emphasized by Confucius were reciprocity (*shu*) ("what you do not want others do to you, don't do to them"), doing good for the benefit of others (*jen*) and loving and respecting ones own parents.

Following the moral principles means implicitly to conform oneself to the will of Heaven, but metaphysical speculations on life after death are futile (*Analects* 7,20). The same is true with regard to worshipping gods or spirits. Confucius denied their importance saying: "If you cannot serve people, how could you serve the spirits?" (*Analects* 11,11). In conclusion, early Confucianism had no religious beliefs; it pursued only the perfection of human character by fulfilling one's social and familial duties, according to what is true and morally right.

Unlike Confucianism, which focuses on human moral duties, Taoism states that humans have to align their life to the pulse of nature. All instincts, feelings and imagination have to be allowed to manifest freely, imitating nature. The Confucianist morality is criticized because it is considered to be an illusory and dangerous way of departing from the essence of Tao:

When the Tao is forgotten
Duty and justice appear;
Then knowledge and wisdom are born
Along with hypocrisy.

When harmonious relationships dissolve
Then respect and devotion arise;
When a nation falls to chaos
Then loyalty and patriotism are born. [...]

If we could abolish duty and justice
Then harmonious relationships would form; (Tao-te Ching 18-19)

Human nature is a reflection of the universe. It is a small universe permeated by the Tao, with which it has to be in resonance (*gan ying*). Like the universe itself, humans have an ascending life and a descending one, which ends in death. The ascending life is the intrauterine one, which leads one to birth, the climax of his or her existence. For this reason it is said in the *Tao-te Ching* that the one "who is filled with harmony is like a newborn" (55). Physical life, unlike the intrauterine one, is chaotic because humans do not know how to keep up their vital force. They die as a result of this ignorance, before yin and yang can naturally separate and their being return into the Tao. Progression and regression are constant developments in the universe and also in the human body. Because of their ignorance, humans cannot understand this dynamic and subscribe to it. The natural result is reincarnation, repeating physical existence until liberation is attained. However, reincarnation is a topic developed only later in Taoism, probably two centuries after Lao Tse.

The human condition in the monotheistic religions

The creation of humanity in Judaism and Christianity

According to the Bible, God creates the universe out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) and not out of his own substance (*ex Deo*). This "nothing" has no ontological statute, it is not a primordial substance, because prior to creation, nothing existed except God. Creation *ex nihilo* is not an artifice of Judeo-Christian philosophy, but the only possibility compatible with the existence of a personal God as Ultimate Reality. The creation of humans follows the act of creating the physical universe, as is mentioned in the Genesis account:

The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (Genesis 2,7).

There is no ontological continuity between the nature of God and that of humans, as between Brahman and *atman*, but a fundamental difference that excludes any pantheistic resemblance. Unlike the physical world, the human being has a physical dimension (the body) and a spiritual one (the soul). Both are created by God at the same time, so the human being is not a pre-existent celestial soul fallen into a material body.

Image and likeness. Personhood in Christianity vs. Eastern religions

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (Genesis 1,26-27).

The fact that humans were created in the image (*eikon*) and likeness (*omoiosis*) of God does not imply that God has a physical nature, but suggests that humans received by creation a way of existing resembling that of the persons (*hypostases*) of the Holy Trinity. According to the Church fathers of the first centuries, the "image" conferred to the human being represents the personal character of God, as an ontological fact of creation. Since God exists only as person, human nature too, exists only as person. Humanity is defined primarily by the ability to have communion with the creator and other people and only secondarily by self-consciousness, ability to think, feel and will. As the *hypostases* of the Holy Trinity are defined only in relationship with each other, in the same way the human *hypostasis* is defined only in relationship with God and other humans. This relationship is a reciprocal fellowship, accomplished by a personal unfolding of each toward the other.

While God's image is imprinted on humans and remains in them as their personal character, the "likeness" is defined as a way of being. It corresponds to a free will relationship of obedience to the creator. While the image is an ontological fact of human nature, the *likeness* is an attribute that has to be built up through exercising the relationship with God. This position is held by most Church fathers of the first centuries, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus of Lyon, the Cappadocians, etc.

Man does not have the nature of God, but only qualities resembling his. Therefore, "the breath of life" (*Genesis* 2,7), which God has transmitted to humans, is not a small part of God's essence (a kind of *atman*), but the act of life giving, which marked the beginning of experiencing self-consciousness. According to Christianity, human personhood has real and unique value. It does not succumb to the Eastern doctrine of illusion (*maya*). Both body and soul define human personhood and neither of them is intrinsically bad or illusory. The command says: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (*Luke* 10,27). Nor do the elements of psycho-mental life have anything bad in themselves, reason for which Christianity demands the renewal of mind (*Romans* 12,2), discernment between good and bad feelings (*Galatians* 5,16-23) and using the will for good purposes (*Titus* 3,8). Nowhere in the Holy Scripture is it taught that they should be annihilated in order to grasp a higher impersonal Ultimate Reality.

In Hinduism, the principle of individuation (*ahamkara*, the sense of the "I", of duality and separatedness from others) is considered to be one of the most important causes of illusion and suffering in the world, as well as *abhinivesha* - the will to live. Unfortunately, a clear difference is not stated between personhood and egoism, both terms being translated as *ahamkara*. In Christianity, on the other hand, the sense of the "I" itself is not the cause of problems (as it belongs to our created status), but its wrong usage, which generates bad products, such as egoism. Without personhood and self-consciousness, in other words without the quality that makes one person

different from another, the idea of personal communion with God, the very reason humans were created, is absurd.

In the pantheistic religions, as a result of affirming an impersonal Ultimate Reality, all that belongs to personhood has no ultimate meaning and therefore personal communion with God cannot be the purpose of man's existence. Except the impersonal self (*atman* or *purusha*), any other element that may define human existence is a source of karma and by consequence has to be annihilated. In Buddhism there is a similar situation. Personhood is the result of the coming together of the five *skandhas*. In order to destroy any element that may lead to attachments, Buddhism rejects even the notion of *atman* in defining human nature.

Another consequence of having a personal status according to the Christian worldview is the fact that desire does not have an evil nature in itself, as does the Hindu *trishna* (the desire to experience existence). Desire belongs to human nature, with the role of being used in order to attain likeness with God. Personal desires have to be channeled to function in obedience to God, not to be annihilated.

In conclusion, Christianity brings a major novelty in defining human nature. Humans are created as personal beings by a personal God, but without having the same essence with him. Personhood holds nothing wrong in itself, but is the premise for grounding a personal relationship with the creator.

The nature of sin

God's command to Adam was:

You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2,16-17).

Here must be emphasized the following important aspect: The knowledge (*gnosis*) of good and evil does not mean gaining some new information. It is neither a kind of a science (*episteme*), nor abstract information. It is not a matter of conceptual elaboration, a science of good and evil that would explain rationally two opposite concepts without judging them morally. In this Biblical text, knowledge (*gnosis*) means experiencing and getting mixed with another reality. It is an ontological process rather than an epistemological one. Rather than to know (as we understand it), *gnosis* means to be in communion with something and live according to it. The same way as knowing God is not just a mental operation, but a participation and subscribing to his will, the knowledge of good and evil is an existential experience, an accommodation to a state that is not indifferent to human nature. In this context, God's command is not a hindering from getting necessary knowledge or an artificial limitation of man's freedom, but a warning concerning the possibility of getting involved with the nature of evil, of participating in another reality than that intended by God. This other reality was the world of Satan and the fallen angels.

Since this is the context of creation in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the meaning of human existence cannot be found in oneself, but only in one's creator. Humans are

not meant to find an inner "true spiritual nature" or a "higher self" inside (a kind of atman), but to adjust to the character of God. Therefore the human status in the spiritual world can be better likened to a river bed than to a spring. In other words, the human being can be better defined as a river bed that chooses what spring will flow through it rather than a spring that doesn't depend upon external circumstances. This is the ultimate ability one has in attaining "a higher spirituality". As a river bed is clean or dirty according to the water that flows through it, human identity (and obviously one's morality) is fashioned by the spiritual source one chooses to obey -
God or Satan.

The story in Genesis reveals that Satan's temptation cast doubt on the justice of God's demands, suggesting that God's command was not just and that rebellion against him would bring total freedom:

"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman.

"For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3,1-5)

The temptation can be summed up as "to be like God", that is, to find all resources in oneself and follow the same path of rebellion Satan had followed, in order to find self-determination. The Genesis story says that Adam and Eve sinned against God and that the first thing they came to know was not that they had become like God, but that they were separated from God and also from the perfect environment where they lived (Genesis 3,24). The biblical meaning of sin does not correspond to some pantheist interpretations, which consider it to be the loss of a pantheist view of reality ("the perception of the One") and the subsequent appearance of duality and illusion. The human fall is a consequence of man's wrong decision toward independence from God; it is an act of perverting the relationship established by God in his creation.

In order to define sin, one of the most frequently used terms in the New Testament is the Greek word *hamartia*, literally translated "to miss the mark". It suggests that humans have missed the mark that God has intended for them. Calling us sinners, God blames us for what we know is wrong but still do, not for unknown mistakes done against some unknown laws of God (see *Romans* 2,1-15). According to God's justice, the consequence of this situation would have been that God should respect humans' desire to live a separate existence from him (as a fulfillment of their free will), and to abandon them in a world where he withdraws his presence and intervention, where separation from him and any good thing he created is eternal. This world is called hell. It is often asked: How can a loving God condemn humans to such a horrifying punishment? But instead of seeing hell as a punishment, it can rather be taken as a real chance of existence offered to those who reject his presence. God would be unjust if he forced humans to live in his presence against their will.

The Eastern concept of hell is different from the Christian one. In Hinduism,

Buddhism and Jainism hell is analogous to the Catholic concept of Purgatory. It is not an eternal damnation, but only a place to expiate bad karma in order that the purified soul can continue its advance toward liberation (see *Markandeya Purana* 13-15, *Sutta Nipata* 672-76, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*). The punishments one has to bear in hell are according to his or her karma, and Yama, the lord of hell, acts in accordance to the demands of karma.

According to Christianity, sin has thoroughly affected human nature, conferring a hereditary perverted status. This is called "the sinful nature" or "original sin" (see *Romans* 7-8), which we all inherit. It represents a natural tendency toward evil and manifests itself through the conscious sins we commit with our thought, speech and deeds. It is important to notice here that we inherit neither the particular sins of our ancestors, nor sins we have done in alleged previous lives, but the sinful nature of mankind. In other words, what we inherit is not karma. Humans do not "pay" for sins committed out of ignorance in previous lives, but for individual and conscious sins committed here and now.

The notion of sin, as stated in Christianity, has no correspondent in the Eastern religions. Although there are some Hindu terms translated as "sin" (*papa* - any form of wrongdoing; *adharma* - acting against one's own dharma; *aparadha* - mistake), they do not represent a crime against God, but an act against *dharma* (the moral order) and against one's own self (leading to accumulation of karma). The origin of "sinful" conduct is spiritual ignorance (*avidya*). Therefore, a "sinner" needs only instruction and not condemnation. He needs help to reason the right way and realize that he is responsible for his actions, for which he must pay the consequences in *samsara*. Being a manifestation of the Absolute, humans have in themselves the divine nature (*atman*, *purusha*) and all resources to overtake the state of ignorance. But Jesus stated:

For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.' (Mark 7,21-23)

According to the Judaic understanding of humanity, which was the context of Jesus' saying, the "heart" is the core of man's being, the headquarters of mental, emotional and volitional life. Consequently, in the New Testament, the heart is depicted as something that can think and understand (*Matthew* 9,4; 13,15), be troubled (*John* 14,1; *Romans* 9,2), rejoice (*Ephesians* 5,19), make decisions (*2 Corinthians* 9,7) and also participate in salvation by expressing faith (*Romans* 10,9-10). There is no deeper level of man's nature that could hide a superior spiritual self. According to Christianity, the attitude of relying on inner resources in order to find an alleged "true inner nature" is a result of spiritual pride, the very cause of the fall. The Bible teaches that humans do not possess an intrinsic divine nature, and thus are incapable of saving themselves from sin. The only "true inner nature" humans possess is a sinful nature.

The human condition in Islam

The Quran presents the creation and fall in a way similar to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Humans and angels were created to worship Allah (Quran 51,56). However, there is a major difference from the biblical account. Allah created Adam and commanded that he be worshiped by all angels. Satan (Iblis) opposed this command and only then was he banished from heaven:

And surely, We created you (your father Adam) and then gave you shape (the noble shape of a human being), then We told the angels, "Prostrate to Adam"; and they prostrated, except Iblis (Satan), he refused to be of those who prostrate. Allah said: "What prevented you Iblis, that you did not prostrate, when I commanded you?" Iblis said: "I am better than him (Adam), You created me from fire, and him You created from clay. Allah said: "O, Iblis, get down from this (Paradise), it is not for you to be arrogant here. Get out, for you are of those humiliated and disgraced." (Quran 7,11-13)

After this episode Iblis planned to deceive humans and make them disobedient to God, which he accomplished in a similar way to the biblical account (see Quran 7,20-21). However, in Islam there is no such thing as original sin. Although Adam and Eve sinned, they repented and were forgiven, so that their sin had no repercussions for the rest of the human race. In their present condition, humans are exhorted not to repeat the mistake of Adam, and also warned that the devil attempts to cheat them by all means (Quran 7,27). However, all people sin because of the passion to which they are subjected by Satan and because they are careless about the demands of the Quran. For each individual are appointed two angels who record all sins and good deeds that are performed during his or her life, and these records will be revealed at the final judgment.

Behold, two guardian angels appointed to learn [man's doings] learn and note them, one sitting on the right and one on the left. Not a word does he utter but there is a sentinel by him, ready to note it. (Quran 50,17-19)

Conclusion

Ultimate Reality and human nature are in a cause and effect relationship. An impersonal Ultimate Reality determines that the essence of the human being, or its innermost nature, is also impersonal. This is the case in the pantheistic religions. The core of human nature is the impersonal self (*atman*), of the same essence with Ultimate Reality (Brahman in Vedanta, or Shiva in Tantrism). Humanity's present condition is governed by karma, an impersonal law started by spiritual ignorance that forces the self to reincarnate until true knowledge is attained.

Buddhism rejects both personal gods and Brahman as Ultimate Reality. As a result it denies the reality of any permanent self residing in humans and defines human nature as a mere process of becoming in which are involved five aggregates of an impermanent nature. The only reality of human existence is that of suffering. Although reincarnation is fully accepted, it deals only with the passing of karma from one life to another, without any permanent self being involved.

The monotheistic religions state humanity's personal created status as a fundamental element of their theology. Personhood has nothing bad or illusory in itself, since it is the major condition for having personal communion with God. Karma and reincarnation are excluded. They have no room in Judaism, Christianity or Islam, because the role of supreme judge belongs only to God. The major flaw that defines human existence is sin, understood not as ignorance for one's "true inner nature", but as an offence against the creator. The barrier between humans and God has a moral nature, not an epistemological one, as in the Eastern religions. The result of sin is hell, a state of definitive separation from God, according to man's decision during this single earthly life.