

Chapter 1

RELIGION

Religion is at its best when it helps us to ask questions and holds us in a state of wonder—and arguably at its worst when it tries to answer them authoritatively and dogmatically.

—Karen Armstrong¹

The first chapter of this book is on religion, because I think it is here that the major thesis of this book—that all stated truths are at best partial truths and need to be acknowledged as such—is most obvious or should readily be admitted to be so. Yet, in the field of religion, or perhaps even more so here, this thesis is commonly overlooked, impugned, or denied. The focus of all of the major religions of the world is on persons, presences, powers, attunements, or goals deemed to be radically *transcendent*—and thus to lie forever beyond full comprehension, description, depiction, or attainment. Wariness, tentativeness, and humility are the moods that must necessarily accompany an abiding sense of this radical transcendence.

Most important of all in religion is the haunting *wonder* of which religious scholar Karen Armstrong speaks in this chapter's epigraph. The religious sense of inexhaustible wonder, as she rightly points out, means that an attitude of certainty or close-mindedness with regard to fundamental religious claims is “misplaced, and strident dogmatism that dismisses the views of others inappropriate.”² To put her point a different way, it is inevitably the case that all religious claims, no matter how hoary or well-thought-out and defended, are at best partial truths. What is the case in this regard for spokespersons of other religious traditions is also necessarily the case for one's own most cherished religious outlooks, convictions, and commitments—especially

to the extent that one's religious outlook is centered on some sort of radically transcendent religious ultimate.

I shall expand on and defend this idea through the rest of this chapter. I do so by discussing four paradoxes. The first is the paradox of the Dao and other religious ultimates that cannot be spoken. The second is the paradox implicit in faith in a God of all creation and all peoples. The third is a paradox of transcendence that relates to the radically *immanent* religious outlook I personally espouse, namely, Religion of Nature. And the fourth is the paradox lurking within what I call *existential certitude*.

The Dao and Other Religious Ultimates that Cannot Be Spoken

Here is how the *Daodejing*, the famous ancient Daoist text attributed to Laozi, begins:

The way that can be followed
Is not the eternal way;
The name that can be named
Is not the eternal name.
That which is without name is of heaven and
earth the beginning;
That which is nameable is of the ten thousand
things the mother.³

The transcendent, ineffable, unnameable character of the Dao or "Way" in Daoism is clearly stated in this well-known passage. But despite its insistence that the Dao, as the ultimate focus of Daoist religion, cannot be characterized or named, texts such as the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and others talk of the Dao at great length. What this initially puzzling phenomenon amounts to, in my judgment, and the way in which the paradox can be interpreted, is to understand that the Dao or Way that shines through and is made manifest in all things (e.g., the "ten thousand things" in the passage quoted) is not exhaustively or adequately made known in any or all of those things. To speak of the Dao exhibited in them is therefore to speak a partial truth. Similarly, to point to the unnamed and unnameable Dao is also

to speak of a partial truth because the Dao is both concealed and revealed, hidden and manifested in the things of the palpable world of day-to-day experience.

The unnameable that is the source and sustainer of all things—the radically and inexhaustibly mysterious Way—is also nameable and knowable in the things that arise from it and are granted their being by it. Hence, one can write books about the nameable Dao, as Laozi, Zhuangzi, and others do, even while constantly reminding the readers of those books that its nameability is only a partial truth, just as its total concealment must also be seen as a partial truth. Thus, each of these two partial truths contains important, never to be neglected information. Neither is to be overlooked or ignored. Neither should be rejected in favor of the other. The tension between them comes closer to being the adequate truth of the matter than either is by itself. But a tension or paradox is not a consistent statement of truth. It points beyond itself to a kind of truth for which no final, adequate, complete, or consistent statement is possible. It can be felt, sensed, intuited, or experienced, but it cannot be clearly spoken or rendered into completely intelligible language.

Later Islam developed two tendencies of thought when contemplating the names or attributes of Allah provided in the Qur'an and elsewhere in Islamic lore. These tendencies turned on the ideas of "difference" (*mukhalafala*) and "removing" (*tanzih*). Allah is radically different from anything in this world, so faithful Muslims should recognize and continually stress this difference. They can do so by removing from Allah's true nature any confusion with the natures of his creatures. The first tendency insists that names and phrases associated with Allah can still convey something of what Allah is like, and thus, when carefully qualified, can be usefully employed to bring to the mind of faithful Muslims important aspects of Allah's character and relations to his world. The second tendency is to advocate a kind of *via negativa* and to assert that what the names or traits associated with Allah in the Qur'an and tradition actually mean we cannot know and should not be so presumptuous as to inquire. How, then, should Muslims think and live? A common answer to this question is that Muslims should simply accept and affirm the teachings of the Qur'an and other traditional authorities as the basis of faith and not try to understand them more fully. They should place no trust in their intellects with respect to such matters.

In these two tendencies in Islam we can see the conflict between what is sayable and is thus thinkable about Allah and what, in the very nature of the case, can never be adequately understood. There is truth in both tendencies, we can assume, but neither can count as the whole truth. These two are partial truths; each must be held in tension with the other. Islamic faith, like the faith systems of all the major religions, must have conceivable, assertible content to be believed in and lived by. Without such content, there would be no religious path to set out upon or followed. But such faith must also constantly guard against taking this content too literally and thus foolishly regarding Qur'anic and other traditional language concerning Allah too anthropomorphically. To do so would mean thinking that the yawning gulf of difference between Allah and his creation can somehow be adequately bridged with puny human language or with conceptualizations derived from the world of Allah's creation.⁴ It would mean commission of the grave sin of idolatry (*shirk*), that is, associating Allah with alleged other gods or things of the finite world.

The essence of idolatry or sacrilege in any high religion is to confuse the infinite *reach and reference* of powerful religious expressions with an alleged complete human apprehension and rendering of their infinite *meaning*. To do so is to mistake partial truths for whole truths, distorting and misconceiving the partial truths in the process. Such a mistake is akin to the error of a child who, fascinated by a shimmering soap bubble floating in the air, tries eagerly to capture and contain it, only to destroy it.

The radical transcendence attributed to the Dao and Allah is echoed in other religious traditions. It is seen in the stupendous revelation of Vishnu's awesome, inconceivable majesty, might, and glory in the *Bhagavad Gita*, as disclosed by the avatar Krishna to Arjuna. It is made clear in the distinction between the Brahman with qualities (*Saguna Brahman*) and the Brahman without qualities (*Nirguna Brahman*) in Advaita Vedanta Hinduism. It is forcefully disclosed to Job in the biblical Book of Job when Yahweh challenges him, a mere man, to even begin to comprehend the ways of the majestic, mysterious, all-encompassing creator and sustainer who has laid the foundations of the earth, brought forth its myriad creatures, and stretched out the heavens above them.

At the same time, there is the avatar Krishna and his revelation of the mind-boggling reality of Vishnu. There is the Saguna realm

of *maya* that manifests the presence of Brahman in all things. And there is Yahweh's gracious disclosure of himself to Job, in response to Job's plea for vindication of Yahweh's reality, justice, and sovereign reign over the earth and its creatures. In all three of these cases there is both hiddenness and revealedness. To opt for either to the exclusion of the other is to confuse, on the one hand, a partial truth with a whole truth and, on the other, to reject a partial truth on the ground that it is only partial. To go either way is to be guilty of a grave distortion and dangerous error—or so I shall continue to argue in this book.

The mistake is a distortion of truth because it fails to allow a partial truth to be accompanied by another partial truth that rightly calls it into question and saves it from being confused with a larger, more adequate truth. As I indicated above, the larger truth lies in the tension between the two partial truths, not in a choice between them. To neglect the partial truth of the radical transcendence of the ultimates in all the major religious traditions, including the ultimate of one's own faith, is to be tempted to make an absolute truth out of a partial one. If my religion is absolutely rather than partially true, it follows that other religions—to the extent that they disagree with it—must be absolutely false.

To ignore or deny the transcendence of a religious ultimate and the final inadequacy of all claims regarding it is to veer toward unquestioning authoritarianism, blind credulity, and haughty intolerance of religious traditions other than one's own. Human history is drenched with bloody gore flowing from this kind of one-sided, dogmatic, and potentially hateful religious perspective. To assume such a view is also to insulate oneself against what can be learned from other religious perspectives or other outlooks on the world and to deprive oneself or one's religious tradition of the kind of ongoing growth, adjustment, refreshment, and renewal needed in a rapidly changing and globally interacting world.

To reject the partial knowability and assertibility of a particular religious ultimate, on the other hand, and to insist without qualification on its complete transcendence and consequent unknowability is to deprive one's religious tradition and one's own religious outlook of meaningful conceptual content. It is to deny to the intellect any significant role in one's faith and to reduce faith itself to an unquestioning, uninquiring, uninformed sheer act of the will. It is to leave

one defenseless in the face of conceptual challenge or criticism and incapable of dialogue with other points of view.

There can also be great danger to oneself and to others in unqualified insistence on the radical transcendence of the religious ultimate of one's own tradition, making matters of religious faith immune to questioning or critical reflection. Constructive, sane, engaged, compassionate religion requires continuing critical thought and open-minded interaction with those of different religious persuasions. Insisting on the absolute transcendence of one's own religious ultimate makes such interaction impossible. Absence of effective communication among people of different faiths can lead—and often has led in human history, as I noted above—to alienation, hostility, and violence. This point holds as much for interactions *within* historical religious traditions and institutions as it does for interactions of proponents of different religions with one another. Transcendence and knowability are not opposites. Neither are openness and conviction. These are two sides of the same coin of relevant, meaningful, and humane religious faith. Each side is an important partial truth.

A God of All Creation and of All Peoples

If one's religious faith centers—as does the faith of Jews, Christians, and Muslims—on a single God of all creation and of all peoples through the whole history of humankind, then the following questions present themselves. What can be believed concerning the outlooks of peoples who existed before these three religions arose? What can be believed regarding major religious traditions that differ today from these three monotheistic religions? And what can be believed, given that there are these three distinctive monotheistic traditions, each of which conceives of God and of God's putative revelations in significantly different ways? The universality of God seems to contradict the diverse cultures and traditions that do not focus on such a God or that do not focus on the same conceptions of such a God. Why would a supposedly universal God not ensure that all peoples of all times and all nations would conceive of him in the same or at least closely similar manner?

One way in which Jews, Christians, and Muslims have responded to this seeming conundrum is to argue that God has made Godself

known in manifold compelling ways throughout history but that many peoples have rejected God and God's perspicuous natural and supernatural revelations of Godself. These peoples do not acknowledge and respond to God's claim on them, it is argued, because of their prideful close-mindedness and sin. Monotheists who make this accusation take for granted that their conception of God is the right one and the only right one. In other words, they assume without question that their conception of God is absolutely true and that all differing religious outlooks are, by this unquestioned standard, absolutely false. Defenders of the absolutely true view of God have the obligation to spread their view throughout the earth in the hope of saving the apostate others from sinful ignorance and perfidious pride.

A way to deal with the conundrum of differing ideas about God and his revelations in the three Abrahamic traditions is to argue that one's own monotheistic outlook and tradition is the culmination, fulfillment, and completion of the other ones. Thus, Christians have typically claimed that their religion is the culmination of Judaism, and Muslims have claimed that theirs is the completion of a history of divine revelation that incorporates and builds on but also goes beyond the revelations of Allah made known in Judaism and Christianity. In this way, or so it is believed, the finally true supplants the relatively true, and the possessors of final truth have the right and obligation to guide or even to rule over the proponents of mere relative truth. They also have the right, or so it can be believed, to persecute those who differ from them and reject the finality of their religious claims.

Thus, Jonah of the Hebrew Bible was sent by Yahweh to preach to the pagan peoples of Nineveh; Christians felt called to throw out the lifeline of Christianity and so-called Christian civilization in the Middle East, Asia, and other parts of the world; and Muslims set out on their path of righteous conquests both to the East and to the West of Arabia. In some cases, those judged to be unrepentant heretics or pagans were subjected to ostracism, fire, or sword in the name of the one true God. This practice was justified on the ground that it effectively warned others against pernicious beliefs and practices that threatened the integrity of divine revelation and the hope of their own salvation.

The same sort of reasoning can be applied to those who adhere to non-Abrahamic forms of religious faith. They may have ideas and insights pointing toward the true God in various ways, but they lack

the benefit of a final revelation of God's awesome majesty and saving power. Judaism, Christianity, or Islam can claim to offer this final revelation in their own respective ways, a revelation that for each of them has been made known progressively throughout human history.

At the other extreme from the two absolutist or exclusivist approaches I have so far sketched in this section is radical relativism, that is, the notion that there is no way to adjudicate among different religious outlooks because none of them admits of any kind of convincing rational criticism or defense. In other words, or so it is held, religious beliefs are at bottom and by nature nonrational and purely emotional, conventional, or arbitrary in character. This statement can then be said to encompass all sorts of belief in a so-called universal God as well as the absence of such beliefs. Hence, there is no conundrum, just the pure, unresolvable fact of differing religious outlooks—monotheistic or otherwise—pitted against one another.

This is a third way in which the puzzle of universal monotheism and diverse forms of religion may be said to be resolved, namely, by simply dissolving the notion of any conundrum altogether. Religions differ from one another, including different forms of monotheistic faith, because matters of religious faith and conviction have, in the final analysis, little to do with rationality or rational criticism or defense. They are outcomes of acculturation or emotional predilection with little or no basis in critical thought, and with no need for grounding in such thought. Religious faith is reduced, in this view, to unquestioning obedience to external authority—the authority of one's own tradition, texts, teachers, tribe, and upbringing. The close resemblance of this idea to insistence on the intellectually impenetrable transcendence of a person's or tradition's religious ultimate can be clearly seen.

A fourth and in my judgment more promising way of dealing with the issue of how monotheistic faith can be reconciled with the fact of diverse religions in the world is to acknowledge a partial truth in historical and cultural relativism but to see it as nonetheless consistent with a type of monotheistic faith. It can be argued by monotheists that God is the God of all peoples, cultures, and times, but that God has allowed each of them to develop concepts of Godself as religious ultimate in a wide variety of ways that accord with the distinctiveness of their historically enshrined cultural beliefs and practices. It can be further argued that each of these ways, including different versions of monotheism itself, contains important truths to be pondered and lived by, but that all its statements of truth are partial. None can begin

to exhaust the majesty and mystery of God or sound the depths of other, non-theistic types of religious ultimate such as Dao, Nirguna Brahman, or the Buddha Nature to which they can only feebly point. For monotheists, belief in God is the best approximation to religious truth, but they can also acknowledge that their claims about the nature of God are in the final analysis only approximations.

It does not follow from this fourth approach that all religious traditions, points of view, and claims are *equally* adequate and true. Nor must the claims of each and every one of them be deemed to be nonrational, arbitrary, and closed to inquiry. It does follow that each of them can and should be kept open to the possibility of containing partial truths and of acknowledging, each in its own manner, the presence of a graceful and compassionate God or some other sort of all-encompassing sacred power or saving goal present or available in the world. Staunch monotheists are allowed and even, I would say, *required* to have this fourth kind of outlook, one that can be viewed as consistent with faith in a magnificent God of all places and times.⁵

The theistic Sufi philosopher of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Mu'id ad-Din Ibn al-Arabi, issues a warning to this effect when he entreats,

Do not attach yourself to any particular creed so exclusively that you disbelieve all the rest; otherwise you will lose much good, nay, you will fail to recognize the real truth of the matter. God, the omnipresent and omnipotent, is not limited by any one creed, for he says, "Wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allah."⁶

Everyone praises what he believes; his god is his own creature, and in praising him he praises himself. Consequently, he blames the beliefs of others, which he would not do if he were just, but his dislike is based on ignorance.⁷

Each culturally and personally varying religious outlook, whether theistic or not, can with this attitude learn much and come to appreciate much from the others.

However, proponents of each religious perspective can also be appropriately and compassionately critical of some views of the others. I do not want to leave the impression that anything goes, that

whatever others may hold to be religiously true is immune to critical reflection and articulation. We should not overlook the fact that the notion of partial truth implies that each partially true statement must also be partially false. The degree of truth and falsity in any given statement can vary—and sometimes widely—from statement to statement. A partial truth is not the same thing as a half-truth because there can be important degrees of truth on either side of the halfway mark. There is often no way of knowing what this degree is without careful consideration and examination—a care that may in many cases need to be patient and prolonged, continuously striving to become more knowledgeable and well informed about religious views different from one's own.

The scriptures of a religious tradition both arise out of tradition and are interpreted by emerging traditions. These in turn reflect the spiritual experiences and insights of great religious teachers and exemplars of the religious life. Special religious symbols come over time to mark these emerging religious traditions. Distinctive doctrines interpret the meanings of traditions, scriptures, and symbols. New symbolic expressions can be inspired, in turn, by these three. But none of them is able to give finally adequate expression to the religious ultimate itself, whatever that might be. To think otherwise is to be guilty of hubris, idolatry, or profanation of the sacred. All them are mere pointers to the religious ultimate in all of its majesty, mystery, and ineffability, and are not to be confused with it. A sufficiently high, exalted, awesome, and overpowering vision of the religious ultimate is or should always be a constant safeguard against the temptation to attribute non-partial or absolute truth to any and all texts, statements, analyses, or expressions of the nature of the ultimate and its relations to the world.

Transcendence and Immanence in Religion of Nature

The Religion of Nature I have elaborated and defended in a number of previous books is avowedly non-theistic. It has no conception of the supernatural, of God, or of anything outside of or beyond nature. For it, all that exists is natural. The natural constitutes the whole of reality.⁸ In view of the fact that I take this position, it might be asked how I can support the idea that there is anything like a para-

dox of transcendence and immanence within the wholly naturalistic and seemingly wholly immanent religious outlook I support and propound. But I do support this idea and do so emphatically. Let me now try to show why.

In keeping with my contention that all truths are at best partial truths, I argue in this section that the immanence of nature, conceived as the focus of religious faith, is an extremely important but also a partial truth. It is made partial or paradoxical by important respects in which nature is also metaphysically and religiously transcendent. This is so without anything being conceived to lie beyond or outside of nature itself. The respects of transcendence I have in mind are three in number. Nature transcends itself over endless time; it exhibits ongoing active novelty as well as continuity; and it is shrouded in mystery and transcends complete human understanding.

1. Nature Transcends Itself Over Endless Time

As I view it, there are two fundamental aspects of nature: nature as it exists at any given time and nature as it continues to change over endless time. The terms *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* were used in the Middle Ages to indicate these two aspects. The first, “nature natures,” refers to the present state of nature, nature as it exists here and now. The second, “nature naturing,” refers to the dynamic, unceasing, transformative impulses or powers within nature that show it not to be something static and unchanging but to be continually undergoing change. Over eons of time these changes can radically transform the character of nature that existed in earlier periods—an idea that is brought vividly to mind by current scientific theories concerning the evolution of the present cosmos, the evolution of the solar system, the evolution of the planet earth, and the evolution of the earth’s diverse forms of life. These evolutionary processes not only bring new things into being. They also leave older things behind. Creation and destruction are linked necessarily together.

The volatile interactions of creation and destruction have not only continued throughout the history of the present cosmos. We can surmise that they must also have been involved in the origin of this cosmos from earlier ones, and they will be involved in a destruction of the present cosmos that will give rise to subsequent ones. All change is therefore transformation of something already existing into some-

thing new. There is no *ex nihilo* or *de novo* origination of anything. Whatever *is*, including this present cosmos, comes from something that *was*. Out of sheer nothing, nothing can come (*ex nihilo, nihil fit*). One reason for this being the case, in my view, is that sheer nothingness is unintelligible. There is thus no absolute beginning of nature in any of its forms and no conceivable absolute ending of nature. Nature is everlasting, stretching from an everlasting past, through the present temporary state or face of nature, into an everlasting future.⁹

One way of stating these ideas is that *nature transcends or surpasses itself*. It does not stand still but exhibits endless processes of change. The *immanence* of nature consists in the fact that all of its everlasting transformations are natural. There is nothing supernatural or trans-natural about any of them, including the rise of a new cosmos out of the remnants of an older one or the coming into being of a future world from the collapse of a present one. All changes, whether minor or massive, are natural. They have no origin and need no explanation beyond nature. But the fact that these changes can, over large stretches of time, be radically transformative means that nature is continually *transcending* itself. Each and every “nature nated” is subject to a relentless, ever-surging and transforming “nature nating.”

The immanent and the transcendent are thus locked together. Either by itself is a partial truth. The ongoing tension between them constitutes a more adequate truth. The extent of this tension varies widely over the whole span of primordial, everlasting time. Being is both created and transformed by becoming, but at different rates and over different expanses of time.

2. *Nature Exhibits Continuity As Well As Novelty*

Our day-to-day experience of the passage of time shows that the past is transcended by the present, and the present is transcended by the future. This transcendence is only partial, not complete because something of the past continues on into the present, and something of the present continues on into the future. The respective degrees of continuity and novelty can vary greatly in particular cases, but there is never a total absence of the one in relation to the other. The necessary element of transcendence in the very notion of time as an immanent trait of nature can be a source of deep-lying responsibility

and sustaining hope. It is also a warning of the transitoriness of things and of the urgency of present opportunity, obligation, and right action.

The reality of novelty means that the future is not closed but open and therefore that the present course of one's thinking, feeling, and acting—and the course of human history itself—is not inevitable or fixed. There is no place for anything like causal determinism, inexorable fate, or wholesale predestination in Religion of Nature. Real novelty in the universe makes way for real freedom in human actions and events and thus for the hope of real changes that can be brought about in oneself and in the world by human freedom. The effectiveness of this freedom, however, is also dependent on an appropriate sense of the transitoriness of time and the need for appropriate actions when the time is most suitable for such actions.

"There is no time like the present" is an appropriate aphorism for many of these free decisions and acts, while "haste is waste" may be more appropriate for some others. In either case, the opportunity and responsibility of striving to make a difference for the betterment of oneself, one's community or nation, and one's world beckon. And development of a keen sense of what is most timely and opportune is critical. Novelty transcends continuity, and this kind of transcendence, ever-operative within nature, has momentous religious significance. It is the sign not only of moral but also of profound religious responsibility and hope. The fact of such ongoing transcendence in nature is implicit in and figures prominently in the demand, assurance, and empowerment aspects of Religion of Nature.¹⁰

3. *Nature Is Shrouded In Mystery and Transcends Human Understanding*

Nature is in principle completely and finally knowable—a view sometimes assumed or proclaimed by natural scientists¹¹—or nature is utterly strange and inscrutable—a view propounded by the character Antoine Roquentin in Jean Paul Sartre's existentialist novel *Nausea*¹²—neither of these claims states a whole truth. The terms *finally*, *completely*, and *utterly* need to be expunged from both. With this change, both are partial but deeply significant truths that need to be held together. They are such for Religion of Nature. Nature is partly knowable, but its intelligibility is also suspended over depths of impenetrable mystery.

Science and other modes of inquiry such as philosophy and religion may help to make numerous aspects of nature more intelligible, but all such inquiries are limited in their reach and comprehension. It is important to strive for knowledge and understanding as best as we can. But at the same time, there are dimensions and levels of intractable mystery that preclude complete knowledge of nature and its ways. This sense of impenetrable mystery in nature, even if regarded only as a partial truth, is an important ingredient in Religion of Nature. The bar to complete knowledge it insists upon is part of its recognition of the daunting massiveness, intricacy, changeability, and sublimity of nature stretching through endless time and of consequent limitations on what we finite, fallible creatures of nature are capable of rendering into clear and adequate statements concerning it.

For example, if novelty is real and operative throughout nature, as I claimed earlier, then the farther into its limitless future our projections and predictions extend, the less confidently determinable and knowable they become. When teaching philosophy to students in a university, I would sometimes ask them, “Do you think that there are any absolute truths?” After they had finished giving answers to this question, many of them quite confident and positive, I would cite some of the unquestioned “truths” of people in the past, putative truths such as the idea that there are four physical elements; that there are indivisible atoms; that all things come in binary oppositions such as male and female, hot and cold, dry and wet; that the earth is the center of the solar system and the solar system is identical with the universe as a whole; that Euclidian geometry is the only geometry; that Newtonian physics is the finally comprehensive and adequate physics; and so on.

We may smile condescendingly at such beliefs today. But who among us can be certain about what the future may bring in the way of presently cherished assumptions and unquestioned beliefs? Who can anticipate today the work of a Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, Darwin, Maxwell, Planck, or Einstein of tomorrow—work that may well produce radical new and different modes of thought about nature and its creatures? The further into the future we try to peer, the more murky the horizon and uncertain our vision becomes. Some if not many of our unquestioned “truths” of today may turn out to be just as quaint or even laughable at some time in the future as are many of those of the remote or even more recent past. So even if there were absolute

truths, we would have no way of being completely confident of them or of asserting them without a smidgen of hesitation and doubt.

For Religion of Nature, the mysteries of nature and their transcendence of what is known or can be known about it is a necessary part of nature's religious ultimacy. It is task enough to try to understand the present cosmos. Who can rightly claim to understand all past or future ones? Who can claim to know what the world is like from the perspectives of nonhuman forms of life? Who can argue to have exhaustive or completely reliable knowledge of the memories, outlooks, experiences, and potentialities of any human creature, including one's own self? And yet, all of these perspectives are aspects of nature. There is no God's-eye view of them for any of us that can reduce them to a single, all-knowing, all-inclusive perspective. The different perspectives I have mentioned are in their very nature at least partly incommensurable.

Humble acknowledgment and appreciation of the pervasive mysteries of nature is an essential feature of the religious outlook of proponents of Religion of Nature. When we are properly attuned to them, the mysteries of nature can become almost overwhelming and overpowering. It is fitting that they be so if we want even to begin to comprehend the depths of nature and our place as humans within it. We may yearn to know and take delight in knowing, and it is natural for us to do so. But we should also delight in the fact that nature is wondrous enough, awesome enough, and elusive enough to evoke unceasing reverent meditation on its incomparable majesty and glory.

Any adequate response to nature, in my judgment as advocate for Religion of Nature, must begin with wonder, be suffused with wonder, and end with wonder. There are abundant miracles in nature, astounding miracles of everyday life and of the whole span of nature's history and histories before which we can only respond with wonder and awe when our sensibility and receptiveness to them are rightly awakened and cultivated.¹³ And there is the wondrous mystery of the encompassing nature itself beyond and within us as creatures of nature that inspires and enables our fervent searches for truth. Nature's radical transcendence of our ability fully to comprehend it is only to be expected if all that nature is, has been, and will yet become is to be the focus of religious life and commitment.

Nondiscursive symbols of many different types are required for us even to begin to plumb or be properly attuned to nature's depths.

Literal assertions and theories, no matter what degrees of truth they may contain, cannot accomplish alone the task of access into or attunement with the wonders of nature. In fact, they frequently open up and make us aware of new dimensions of wonder and mystery hitherto unsuspected. The truths of propositions and the truths of evocative symbols are partial at best, each needing to be complemented by the other.¹⁴ With nature as with the Dao, there is inevitably much that cannot sufficiently or finally be spoken, exhibited, or expressed.

The Paradox of Existential Certitude

What is existential truth? It is different from a truth of statements. It is the felt and experienced authenticity or certainty of a person's commitment to a religious ultimate. It is the sense of confident, sustaining, guiding rightness in that commitment. It is the truth of wholehearted engagement with that ultimate as the supreme source of meaning and value in the world and in one's life. It is a much more mysterious and deeply indwelling kind of truth than alleged truths of intellectual assent or assertion, although avowed beliefs are part of it. Here is the biblical Job's confession of existential truth in the midst of his grievous and inexplicable suffering:

[A]s for me, I know that my Redeemer liveth,
 And that He will witness at last upon the dust;
 And when after my skin this is destroyed,
 Then without my flesh shall I see God;
 Whom I, even I, shall see for myself,
 And my eyes shall behold, and not another's.¹⁵

"Here I stand; I can do no other" was Martin Luther's expression of existential truth when he stood alone and in great personal danger before the Diet of Worms in the sixteenth century. His existential truth gave him courage and strength in the face of perilous opposition from the papacy and the Catholic Church of his day.

One part of the paradox implicit in existential truth is that it provides a sense of unshakable certainty and confidence that mere statements about it invariably fail to capture. One is existentially certain while at the same time being unable adequately to articulate

and defend this certainty. Words are halting and failing in its presence. Existential truth defines who and what persons are in all of their aspects: dispositions, emotions, preferences, choices, actions, as well as intellectual beliefs. It is more like unshakable trust than mere intellectual affirmation. In fact, existential truth or certitude is another term for *faith*, whether that faith be religious or secular, when the nature of faith is properly understood and not assumed to be identical with mere belief. One can thus be certain about the meaning of life without being able fully to explain or prove it. This kind of truth transcends and is in tension with conceptual or propositional truth.

But of course one's existential truth at one time could turn out later to be perceived as false or misplaced. It is fallible, although in the spirit of passionate commitment it may not appear to be so. The sense of confidence, integrity, and integration it imparts to one's life at one time may no longer be operative or effective at a later time. So we can speak in this manner of existential truth as a kind of partial truth, as a precarious mixture of conviction and openness. This is another indication of the paradox of existential truth. Such truth is accompanied by a sense of vulnerability arising from having continually to confront the challenges and perplexities of life in the world, from ongoing self-searching and self-criticism, and from encounters with different kinds of existential truth operative in other human lives. One is sure and unsure at the same time.

There is a close connection between existential truth and what theologian Paul Tillich calls "the courage to be." This courage is made possible, he argues, because of the experienced power of "being-itself." The power of being-itself is what gives one the courage, in his view, to confront and effectively resist powers of negation such as fate and death, moral misjudgment and failure, and aimlessness and meaninglessness that threaten one's self-affirmation. How are we to understand the idea of being-itself? Tillich contends that we should see it as the manifestation of God in human life. But his conception of God is not that of a personal being. It is the sense of what gives support to all of life and all of the myriad beings and their intricate relationships that constitute the world. God is not a being but the ground of the existence and persistence in being of all things, as well as of their coming into and passing out of being.¹⁶

Tillich's thought is deeply influenced by that of the philosopher Martin Heidegger. The latter makes a fundamental distinction in his

book *Being and Time* between *being* and *beings*, and constantly warns against the fatal mistake of confusing them with one another.¹⁷ Rather than thinking of being-itself as some kind of abstract universal or arcane philosophical conception, we should regard it, Tillich insists, as the experience of undaunting persistence and courage in the living of our lives in the face of all of the threats, uncertainties, and tragedies of life. This experience is, for the most part, simply given to us. We do not create it, although we can work to strengthen our awareness of it and our ability to draw on its resources.

One exceptionally telling way in which Tillich helps to understand the idea of being-itself is his pronouncement in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology* that “God does not exist. He is being-itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore to argue that God exists is to deny him.”¹⁸

In other words, God for Tillich does not exist in the manner of all of the sorts of entity that can rightly be said to exist. To attribute to him existence of this sort is in fact to deny his reality. God or being-itself is what grounds and accounts for the existence of all things and, in the case of humans, for their courage to persist in being in the face of the negative potentialities and hazardous conditions of life that threaten their continuance in existence and confidence in existing. To assert that God exists in the manner of distinct, finite kinds of being is for Tillich a kind of atheism because it denies God’s true character as the nonpersonal, nonparticular ground of all existing things. Human personality rests upon such a God, but God is not a personal being.

What does of this talk of being-itself have to do with the paradox of existential truth? The paradox of claiming that affirmation of the traditional God of personalistic *theism* is a type of *atheism* is similar in a way to the paradox of existential truth that cannot be denied and yet is capable of caving in to various kinds of adversity. It is so because there can be a kind of compelling existential truth in faith in God as a *symbolic* truth consisting in the unquestionable fact that many people are nurtured and sustained by what this symbolic truth can be taken to symbolize. It is true in this sense, but it is not a literal truth. It is in one way true and in another false.

The symbolism of God is true for Tillich to the extent that it points beyond itself to the power of being-itself or to the mysterious, suffusive courage to be of daily human life. But what gives inner

strength to live and to affirm oneself as a living being, however it may be symbolized, can also be threatened by the trying struggles and haunting dangers of finite human existence. It is therefore at one and the same time certain but uncertain, confident but uneasy, a stubborn truth of life that is nevertheless always liable to becoming false and unreliable. Either side of the paradox can come to the fore in varying degrees at various times in a person's life.

For me, Tillich's power of being-itself is none other than the energizing and supporting power of *nature*, the mysterious natural forces, impulses, drives, and motivations of every living being to continue in its existence and to do so despite all obstacles, hazards, and uncertainties. This is nature, partially secreted in hidden depths, and yet also partially made known by the multiple beings and types of beings exemplifying and confirming nature's creative and sustaining powers. We fallible, finite human beings are upheld and sustained by nature in myriad ways—most of them usually taken for granted—from the steady beatings of our hearts and regular expansions and contractions of our lungs to our most cherished projects, plans, and relationships. The incalculable marvel is that we are generally able and willing confidently to persevere in the courses of our lives despite being continually aware of—and at times being brought squarely up against—obstacles, perils, and tragedies that threaten our lives from every side.

Not to be able or any longer willing to bear up under such threats or experiences is commonly mourned as a deficiency or sickness, not as the emblem of a normal human life. It is just this normality that is most striking and miraculous, and that is brought vividly to mind in the concept of existential truth. While the experience of existential truth indwells most people at most times, existential truth can also falter, decline, or collapse into despair. Self-affirmation can degenerate into self-abnegation or even self-destruction, and it is never entirely immune to this possibility. Finite existence, while grounded in the sustaining, enlivening, emboldening powers of nature, can never be entirely safe or secure. It walks a tightrope, as Tillich observes, between the power of being and the menace of non-being, between confident assurance and unnerving anxiety. The former is existential truth, and the latter is by the same token existential falsity. Neither by itself is the final word for all peoples or all times. The unending tension between them comes closer to being the full truth of the matter for finite beings such as ourselves.

Religion as I view it involves at its heart the sense of an inexhaustible mystery, depth, and power by which we are sustained, challenged, perplexed, enlivened, and given a strange inner peace, joy, and hope. It is the sense of being at home and of being where we belong—an appropriate part of an immense, all-encompassing whole—and of yearning to become ever more fully responsive to the astounding fact that this is so. This sense lies far beyond complete or final description, analysis, or examination, but it includes everything that is or can be designated and understood.

For a religious naturalist like me, as I indicated earlier in this chapter, the appropriate name for the focus of this religious sense is *nature*, which I view in the two-sided character of *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*—the side of all that presently is, on the one hand, and the side of all that lies in the past and is yet to come, on the other. Nature as thus perceived is over endless time dynamic and ever-changing, a restless process of creations and destructions—even though its present face or character is relatively stable and enduring. Concerning nature in all its guises and manifestations, only partial truths are possible, although some truths are less partial than others.

The enthralling sense of the inviolable and daunting ultimacy of nature, like the sense of what is differently named and understood as ultimate in other religious perspectives, invites and demands serious, open-hearted cultivation and expansion throughout one's life. I am constantly and necessarily assisted in the course of my own religious thought and practice by countless other past and present interpreters of this deep-lying religious sense, including those of quite different religious persuasions than my own. What I am struggling to allude to and haltingly describe here can be simply but profoundly called *a sense and taste for the holy*, a holiness that for me resides entirely and sufficiently in nature itself. As awesomely and overwhelmingly holy, nature is nameable and unnameable, conceivable and inconceivable, describable and indescribable. Consequently, all claims to truth about it are partial at best.