I. Point of Departure

Although the individuals that I name are now only memories for me, I begin this second edition of this book with the four paragraphs that launched its first edition.

I write these opening lines on a day widely celebrated throughout Christendom as World-Wide Communion Sunday. The sermon in the service I attended this morning dwelt on Christianity as a world phenomenon. From mud huts in Africa to the Canadian tundra, Christians are kneeling today to receive the elements of the Holy Eucharist. It is an impressive picture.

Still, as I listened with half my mind, the other half wandered to the wider company of God-seekers. I thought of the Yemenite Jews I watched six months ago in their synagogue in Jerusalem: dark-skinned men sitting shoeless and cross-legged on the floor, wrapped in the prayer shawls their ancestors wore in the desert. They are there today, at least a quorum of ten, morning and evening, swaying backwards and forwards like camel riders as they recite their Torah, following a form they inherit unconsciously from the centuries when their fathers were forbidden to ride the desert horse and developed this pretense in compensation. Yalcin, the Muslim architect who guided me through the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, has completed his month's Ramadan fast, which was beginning while we were together; but he too is praying today, five times as he prostrates himself toward Mecca. Swami Ramakrishna, in his tiny house by the Ganges at the foot of the Himalayas, will not speak today. He will continue the devotional silence that, with the exception of three days each year, he has kept for five years. By this hour U Nu is probably facing the delegations, crises, and
cabinet meetings that are the lot of a prime minister, but from four to six this morning, before the world broke over him, he too was alone with the eternal in the privacy of the Buddhist shrine that adjoins his home in Rangoon. Dai Jo and Lai San, Zen monks in Kyoto, were ahead of him by an hour. They have been up since three this morning, and until eleven tonight will spend most of the day sitting immovable in the lotus position as they seek with intense absorption to plumb the Buddha-nature that lies at the center of their being.

What a strange fellowship this is, the God-seekers in every land, lifting their voices in the most disparate ways imaginable to the God of all life. How does it sound from above? Like bedlam, or do the strains blend in strange, ethereal harmony? Does one faith carry the lead, or do the parts share in counterpoint and antiphony where not in full-throated chorus?

We cannot know. All we can do is try to listen carefully and with full attention to each voice in turn as it addresses the divine.

Such listening defines the purpose of this book. It may be wondered if the purpose is not too broad. The religions we propose to consider belt the world. Their histories stretch back thousands of years, and they are motivating more people today than ever before. Is it possible to listen seriously to them within the compass of a single book?

The answer is that it is, because we shall be listening for well-defined themes. These must be listed at the outset or the pictures that emerge from these pages will be distorted.

1. This is not a textbook in the history of religions. This explains the scarcity of names, dates, and social influences in what follows. There are useful books that focus on such material. This one too could have been swollen with their facts and figures, but it is not its intent to do their job in addition to its own. Historical facts are limited here to the minimum that is needed to locate in space and time the ideas the book focuses on. Every attempt has been made to keep scholarship out of sight—in foundations that must be sturdy, but not as scaffolding that would obscure the structures being examined.

2. Even in the realm of meanings the book does not attempt to give a rounded view of the religions considered, for each hosts differences that are too numerous to be delineated in a single chapter. One need only think of Christendom. Eastern Orthodox Christians worship in ornate cathedrals, while Quakers consider even steeple desecrations. There are Christian mystics and Christians who reject mysticism. There are Christian Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Unitarians. How is it possible to say in a manageable chapter what Christianity means to all Christians?

The answer, of course, is that it is not possible—selection is unavoidable. The question facing an author is not whether to select among points of view; the questions are how many to present, and which ones. In this book the first question is answered economically; I try to do reasonable justice to several perspectives instead of attempting to catalogue them all. In the case of Islam, this has meant ignoring Sunni/Shi'a and traditional/modernist divisions, while noting different attitudes toward Sufism. In Buddhism I distinguish its Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions, but the major schools within Mahayana are bypassed. The subdivisions never exceed three lest trees obscure the woods. Put the matter this way: If you were trying to describe Christianity to an intelligent and interested but busy Thaiander, how many denominations would you include? It would be difficult to ignore the differences between Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant, but you would probably not get into what separates Baptists from Presbyterians.

When we turn to which views to present, the guideline has been relevance to the interests of the intended reader. Three considerations have figured in determining this relevance. First, there is the simple matter of numbers. There are some faiths that every citizen should be acquainted with, simply because hundreds of millions of people live by them. The second consideration has been relevance to the modern mind. Because the ultimate benefit that may accrue from a book such as this is help in the ordering of the reader's own life, I have given priority to what (with caution yet a certain confidence) we may regard as these religions' contemporary expressions. The third consideration is universality. Every religion mixes universal principles with local peculiarities. The former, when lifted out and made clear, speak to what is generically human in us all. The latter, rich compounds of rites and legends, are not easy for outsiders to comprehend. It is one of the illusions of rationalism that the universal principles of religion are more important than the rites and rituals that feed them; to make that claim is like contending that the branches and leaves of a tree are more important than the roots from which they grow. But for this book, principles are more important
than contexts, if for no other reason than that they are what the author has spent his years working with.

I have read books that have brought contexts themselves to life: Heather Wood’s *Third Class Ticket* for India, Lin Yu-tang’s *My Country and My People* for China, and Shalom Rabinowitz’s *The Old Country* for Eastern European Jews. Perhaps someday someone will write a book about the great religions that roots them to their social settings. This, though, is a book I shall read, not write. I know my limitations and attend to areas from which ideas can be extracted.

3. This book is not a balanced account of its subject. The warning is important. I wince to think of the shock if the reader were to close the chapter on Hinduism and step directly into the Hinduism described by Nehru as “a religion that enslaves you”: its Kali Temple in Calcutta, the curse of her caste system, her two million cows revered to the point of nuisance, her fakirs offering their bodies as sacrifice to bedbugs. Or what if the reader were transported to Bali, with its theaters named the Vishnu-Hollywood and its bookstores that do brisk business in *Klasik Comics*, in which Hindu gods and goddesses mow down hosts of unsightly demons with cosmic ray guns? I know the contrast. I sense it sharply between what I have written of Taoism and the Taoism that surrounded me as a boy in China: its almost complete submergence in augury, necromancy, and superstition. It is like the contrast between the Silent Christ and the Grand Inquisitor, or between the stillness of Bethlehem and department stores blaring “Silent Night” to promote Christmas shopping. The full story of religion is not rose-colored; often it is crude. Wisdom and charity are intermittent, and the net result is profoundly ambiguous. A balanced view of religion would include human sacrifice and scapegoating, fanaticism and persecution, the Christian Crusades and the holy wars of Islam. It would include witch hunts in Massachusetts, monkey trials in Tennessee, and snake worship in the Ozarks. The list would have no end.

Why then are these things not included in the pages that follow? My answer is so simple that it may sound ingenuous. This is a book about values. Probably as much bad music as good has been composed in the course of human history, but we do not expect courses in music appreciation to give it equal attention. Time being at a premium, we assume that they will attend to the best. I have adopted a similar strategy with respect to religion. A recent book on legal science carries the author’s confession that he has written lovingly of the law.

something as impersonal as the law can enamor one author, it should come as no surprise that religion—again at its best—has enamored another. Others will be interested in trying to determine if religion in its entirety has been a blessing or a curse. That has not been my concern.

Having said what my concern is—the world’s religions at their best—let me say what I take that best to be, beginning with what it is not. Lincoln Steffens has a fable of a man who climbed to the top of a mountain and, standing on tiptoe, seized hold of the Truth. Satan, suspecting mischief from this upstart, had directed one of his underlings to tail him; but when the demon reported with alarm the man’s success—that he had seized hold of the Truth—Satan was unperturbed. “Don’t worry,” he yawned. “I’ll tempt him to institutionalize it.”

That story helps to separate the best from the ambiguous in religion. The empowering theological and metaphysical truths of the world’s religions are, this book is prepared to argue, inspired. Institutions—religious institutions emphatically included—are another story. Constituted as they are of people with their inbuilt frailties, institutions are built of vices as well as virtues. When the vices—in-group versus out-group loyalties, for example—get compounded by numbers, the results can be horrifying to the point of suggesting (as some wag has) that the biggest mistake religion ever made was to get mixed up with people. Actually, this is not true, however, for to hold aloof from people would have resulted in leaving no mark on history. Given the choice—to remain aloof as disembodied insights or to establish traction in history by institutionalizing those insights—religion chose the wiser course.

This book honors that choice without following its story—I have already said that it is not a book about religious history. It adopts what in ways is the easier course of skimming off the cream of that history: the truths that religious institutions preserve, and which in turn empower those institutions. When religions are sifted for those truths, a different, cleaner side appears. They become the world’s wisdom traditions. (“Where is the knowledge that is lost in information? Where is the wisdom that is lost in knowledge?”—T. S. Eliot.) They begin to look like data banks that house the winnowed wisdom of the human race. As this book concentrates on those wisdom deposits, it could have been titled alternatively “The World’s Great Wisdom Traditions.”

4. Finally, this is not a book on comparative religions in the sense of seeking to compare their worth. Comparisons always tend to be
odious, those among religions the most odious of all. So there is no assumption here that one religion is, or for that matter is not, superior to others. "There is no one alive today," Arnold Toynbee observed, "who knows enough to say with confidence whether one religion has been greater than all others." I have tried to let the best in each faith shine through by presenting it in the way I have found its most impressive adherents envisioning it. Readers may press on with comparisons if they wish to do so.

In saying what this book is not, I have already started to say what it is, but let me be explicit.

1. It is a book that seeks to embrace the world. In one sense, of course, that wish must fail. Even when stretched to the maximum, a single pair of arms falls short, and feet must be planted somewhere. To begin with the obvious, the book is written in English, which to some extent anchors it from the start. Next come cross-references, introduced to ease entry onto foreign turf. There are proverbs from China, tales from India, paradoxes from Japan, but most of the illustrations are Western: a line from Shakespeare, a verse from the Bible, a suggestion from psychoanalysis—Eliot and Toynbee have already been quoted. Beyond idiom, however, the book is incorrigibly Western in being targeted for the contemporary Western mind. That being the author's mind, he had no choice in the matter; but it must be accepted with the recognition that the book would have been different had it been written by a Zen Buddhist, a Muslim Sufi, or a Polish Jew.

This book, then, has a home—a home whose doors swing freely in and out, a base from which to journey forth and return, only to hit the road again in study and imaginings when not in actual travel. If it is possible to be homesick for the world, even places one has never been and suspects one will never go, this book is born of such homesickness.

We live in a fantastic century. I brush aside the incredible discoveries of science, and the razor’s edge between doom and fulfillment onto which they have pushed us, to speak of the new situation among peoples. Lands across the planet have become our neighbors, China across the street, the Middle East at our back door. Young people with backpacks are everywhere, and those who remain at home are treated to an endless parade of books, documentaries, and visitors from abroad. We hear that East and West are meeting, but it is an understatement. They are being flung at one another, hurled with the force of atoms, the speed of jets, the restlessness of minds impatient to learn the ways of others. When historians look back on our century, they may remember it most, not for space travel or the release of nuclear energy, but as the time when the peoples of the world first came to take one another seriously.

The change that this new situation requires of us all—we who have been suddenly catapulted from town and country onto a world stage—is staggering. Twenty-five hundred years ago it took an exceptional man like Diogenes to exclaim, "I am not an Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the world." Today we must all be struggling to make those words our own. We have come to the point in history when anyone who is only Japanese or American, only Oriental or Occidental, is only half human. The other half that beats with the pulse of all humanity has yet to be born.

To borrow an image from Nietzsche, we have all been summoned to become Cosmic Dancers who do not rest heavily on a single spot but lightly turn and leap from one position to another. As World Citizen, the Cosmic Dancer will be an authentic child of its parent culture, while closely related to all. The dancer's roots in family and community will be deep, but in those depths they will strike the water table of a common humanity. For is the dancer not also human? If only she might see what has interested others, might it not interest her as well? It is an exciting prospect. The softening of divisions will induce borrowings that sometimes produce hybrids, but for the most part simply enrich species and sustain their vigor.

The motives that impel us toward world understanding are varied. I was once taxied by bomber to an air force base to lecture to officers on other peoples' faiths. Why? Obviously, because those officers might some day have to deal with those peoples as allies or antagonists. This is one reason for coming to know them. It may be a necessary reason, but one hopes that there are others. Even the goal of avoiding military engagement through diplomacy is provisional because instrumental. The final reason for understanding another is intrinsic—to enjoy the wider angle the vision affords.

I am, of course, speaking metaphorically of vision and view, but an analogue from ocular sight fits perfectly. Without two eyes—binocular vision—there is no awareness of space's third dimension. Until sight converges from more than one angle, the world looks as
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flat as a postcard. The rewards of having two eyes are practical; they keep us from bumping into chairs and enable us to judge the speed of approaching cars. But the final reward is the deepened view of the world itself—the panoramas that unroll before us, the vistas that extend from our feet. It is the same with "the eye of the soul," as Plato called it. "What do they know of England, who only England know?"

I have acknowledged that the practical gains that come from being able to look at the world through others' eyes are major. They enable corporations to do business with China, and diplomats to stumble less often. But the greatest gains need no tally. To glimpse what belonging means to the Japanese; to sense with a Burmese grandmother what passes in life and what endures; to understand how Hindus can regard their personalities as masks that overlay the Infinite within; to crack the paradox of a Zen monk who assures you that everything is holy but scrupulously refrains from certain acts—to swing such things into view is to add dimensions to the glance of spirit. It is to have another world to live in. The only thing that is good without qualification is not (as Kant argued) the good will, for a will can mean well in cramped quarters. The only thing that is unqualifiedly good is extended vision, the enlargement of one's understanding of the ultimate nature of things.

These thoughts about world understanding lead directly to the world's religions, the surest way to the heart of a people is through its faith, if that faith has not fossilized. Which distinction—between religion alive and dead—brings us to the second constructive intent of this book.

2. It is a book that takes religion seriously. It is not a tourist guide. There will be no pandering to curiosity seekers, no ruffling through peoples' faiths to light on what has shock value; no ascetics on beds of nails, no crucifixions among Penitentes in Mexico, no Parsi Towers of Silence that expose the dead for vultures' consumption, no erotic sculpture or excursions into Tantric sex. The great religions house such material, but to focus on it is the crudest kind of vulgarization.

There are subtler ways to belittle religion. One of these is to acknowledge its importance, but for other people—people of the past, people of other cultures, people whose ego strength needs bolstering. This, too, will not be our approach. Our parts of speech will be in the third person. We shall be talking about Hindus, Buddhists, Confucianists, Muslims—it will be "they" and "them" all the way. But behind these fronts our deepest concern is for ourselves. The chief reason I find myself returning to the world's great wisdom traditions is for help on issues I have not myself been able to circumvent. Given the essential similarity in human nature—we are all more human than otherwise—I assume that the issues engage the readers of this book as well.

Even the subtlest way to patronize religion will be avoided, the way that honors it not for itself but for its yields—its contributions to art, or to peace of mind, or to group cohesion. This is a book about religion that exists, in William James' contrast, not as a dull habit but as an acute fever. It is about religion alive. And when religion jumps to life it displays a startling quality. It takes over. All else, while not silenced, becomes subdued and thrown into a supporting role.

Religion alive confronts the individual with the most momentous option life can present. It calls the soul to the highest adventure it can undertake, a proposed journey across the jungles, peaks, and deserts of the human spirit. The call is to confront reality, to master the self. Those who dare to hear and follow that secret call soon learn the dangers and difficulties of its lonely journey.

A sharpened edge of a razor; hard to traverse,
A difficult path is this—the poets declare.²

Science makes major contributions to minor needs, Justice Holmes was fond of saying, adding that religion, however small its successes, is at least at work on the things that matter most. When, then, a lone spirit succeeds in breaking through to major conquests here, it becomes more than a king or queen. It becomes a world redeemer. Its impact stretches for millennia, blessing the tangled course of history for centuries. "Who are . . . the greatest benefactors of the living generation of mankind?" Toynbee asked. "I should say: Confucius and Laotze, the Buddha, the Prophets of Israel and Judah, Zoroaster, Jesus, Mohammed and Socrates."³

His answer should not surprise, for authentic religion is the clearest opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos enter human life. What then can rival its power to inspire life's deepest creative centers? Moving outward from there through myth and rite, it provides the symbols that carry history forward, until at length its power is spent and life awaits a new redemption. This recurrent pattern leads even the impish, like George Bernard
Shaw, to conclude that religion is the only real motive force in the world. (Alfred North Whitehead added science, which raises the number to two.) It is religion as empowering that will be our object in the chapters ahead.

3. Finally, this book makes a real effort to communicate. I think of it as a work of translation, one that tries not only to penetrate the worlds of the Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims, but to throw bridges from those worlds to the reader’s world. The study of religion can be as technical and academic as any, but I have tried not to lose sight of the relevance this material has for the problems that human beings face today. “If you cannot—in the long run—tell everyone what you have been doing,” wrote a great scientist who was also a superb communicator, “your doing has been worthless.”

This interest in communication leads back to the book’s stance toward historical scholarship that was touched on earlier.

As far as I am aware there is nothing in these pages contrary to the facts of historical evidence, but beyond the avoidance of outright inaccuracy, the issue is less simple. I have deleted enormously, simplifying where historical details seemed to be slowing the pace and obscuring the essential. Occasionally, I have supplied corollaries that seemed to be implied, and I have introduced examples that appear to be in keeping with the theme but are not in the texts themselves. These liberties may lead some to feel that the book “sits loose to the facts,” but historical accuracy is not the basic issue. Religion is not primarily a matter of facts; it is a matter of meanings. An analogy from biochemistry is helpful here. “Despite a knowledge of the structure of protein molecules down to the very placement of their atoms in exact three-dimensional space, we do not have the faintest idea of what the rules are for folding them up into their natural form.” The religious analogue to the biochemist’s atoms are the facts that history, sociology, anthropology, and textual studies marshal about religion. These could be as complete as the biochemists’ knowledge of the atomic structure of protein molecules; by themselves they are as lifeless. Implicitly, not explicitly, I have tried in these chapters to apply the “rules” that “fold” religious facts “into their natural form.” I have tried to make them live religiously.

We are about to begin a voyage in space and time and eternity. The places will often be distant, the times remote, the themes beyond space and time altogether. We shall have to use words that are foreign—Sanskrit, Chinese, and Arabic. We shall try to describe states of consciousness that words can only hint at. We shall use logic to try to corner insights that laugh at our attempt. And ultimately, we shall fail; being ourselves of a different cast of mind, we shall never quite understand the religions that are not our own. But if we take those religions seriously, we need not fail miserably. And to take them seriously we need do only two things. First, we need to see their adherents as men and women who faced problems much like our own. And second, we must rid our minds of all preconceptions that could dull our sensitivity or alertness to fresh insights. If we lay aside our preconceptions about these religions, seeing each as forged by people who were struggling to see something that would give help and meaning to their lives; and if we then try without prejudice to see ourselves what they saw—if we do these things, the veil that separates us from them can turn to gauze.

A great anatomist used to close his opening lecture to beginning medical students with words that apply equally to our own undertaking. “In this course,” he would say, “we shall be dealing with flesh and bones and cells and sinews, and there are going to be times when it’s all going to seem terribly cold-blooded. But never forget. It’s alive!”

**Notes**