



## CHAPTER 2

# RELIGION AND THE COSMOS

Religion is man's attempt to get into touch with an absolute spiritual Reality behind the phenomena of the universe, and, having made contact with It, to live in harmony with It.

—ARNOLD J. TOYNBEE<sup>1</sup>

Every religion gives a definition of the cosmos that helps its adherents understand the bigger picture of reality. These definitions are often referred to as worldviews. A worldview is simply how we view this world, this universe, in which we live. Therefore religion is a way of understanding the world. The philosophical systems developed by the Greek thinkers Plato and Aristotle were worldviews. Every mature rational human being has a worldview, whether or not he is fully aware of it. Becoming fully aware of one's worldview is probably the most significant thing a person can do to enhance self-understanding. We each have a deep-seated need to understand reality in a way that is meaningful to us.<sup>2</sup> Every religion attempts to explain one's thirst for the truth, one's need for significance, the problem of pain, the question of evil, and the inevitability of death. Each endeavors to apply the design of the cosmos to our lives individually. Every religious system attempts to give meaning to existence, to explain that there is more to life than meets the eye—that there is a Transcendent Reality. From the very beginning, human beings have understood that there is a mysterious depth to life that extends beyond the five senses. And alongside this recognition of

a Transcendent mysterious reality, there has been the conviction that human beings can contact it and be in relationship with it.

### **Types of Religion**

Today, there are about six billion people living on our planet, and each of us uses our own set of glasses (worldviews) to make sense of the cosmos. No worldview is merely a theoretical philosophy; they are each intensely practical and affect the way people live their lives. The system of beliefs we embrace will include the most basic beliefs about God, the world, humanity, values and truth; and no human being is ever neutral with regard to God.<sup>3</sup> When someone looks at the world of reality from the perspective of a wrong worldview, the world will not make sense. In times of difficulty and uncertainty, a wrong worldview will leave the adherent bewildered and depressed.<sup>4</sup> If we adopt a false worldview, inevitably we will find ourselves going against the grain of the universe, and subsequently experience consequences we will not want to live with. If, however, we order our lives in accord with reality, we will not only find meaning and purpose, but also discover that our lives are healthier and more fulfilled.<sup>5</sup>

All human beings can differentiate between good and evil, right and wrong. Most humans who practice or believe in a religion act out of the primary conviction that the Transcendent Reality demands a certain kind of living from them. They often hope by their actions to achieve blessings in the next life as well as this one; therefore they follow prescribed behaviors in order to acquire these benefits. Humans also believe they have a responsibility for the quality of their lives.<sup>6</sup> Transcendence inspires and persuades people to worship and serve, and service usually has a strong ethical component. It involves showing kindness to others, which in turn brings stability and well-being to our communities.

There are thousands of religions in the world today, yet 94 percent of the world's population admit to being adherents to only seven of them—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Naturalism, and Chinese traditional religion.<sup>7</sup> Though every religion has a very different idea about how God (Ultimate Reality) interacts with the world, all religions can basically be divided up into four groups: Monotheism, Polytheism, Pantheism, and Naturalism. Therefore everyone in the world essentially embraces one of four worldviews. In order to get a good picture of how many people embrace each of these worldviews, the world's population can be divided into seven parts. *Monotheism* accounts for four of those parts, while *Polytheism*, *Pantheism*, and *Naturalism* account for one part each. (See Figure 2).

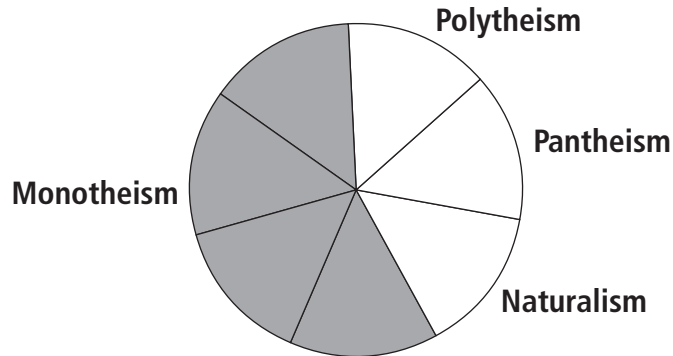


Figure 2. Types of Religion

### **Monotheism**

Monotheism literally means God (*theos*) is one (*mono*). The central tenet of monotheism, as the two words suggest, is that there is only “one God” in the universe. This Ultimate Reality is viewed as the eternal, infinite, personal Creator of the cosmos, who created both the material and the immaterial worlds out of nothing, and created humanity in His own image. Broadly speaking, monotheists believe this omnipotent, omniscient God oversees and intervenes in human events, and as a beneficent and holy being, is the source of all that is good. Thus the universe has a purpose for its existence, it is not just an accident in the cosmos; hence, the universe itself is not eternal or self-sufficient. God also designed and created not only the *physical laws* which run the universe, but the *moral laws* as well; as such, monotheism teaches that we live in a moral universe. Human beings live with the sense that they have significance and value, that life has a purpose, and that morality has meaning. The world’s three monotheistic religions are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The God of monotheism is described as being *transcendent*—that is, He transcends creation, He exists outside of it, He is beyond it; nevertheless, He is actively involved in it. God’s involvement in our world is referred to as the *immanence* of God. Figure 3 shows the relationship between the transcendent God and the cosmos. The cosmos represents everything that exists in this orderly, harmonious, complex, systematic universe, both the material and the immaterial worlds, the seen and the unseen worlds.

As the diagram shows, God transcends the entire created order. As big and impressive as the cosmos is, it is infinitesimally smaller than God; that

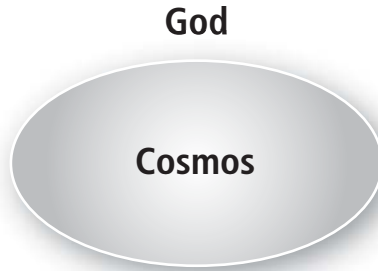


Figure 3. The Concept of Transcendence

is, it is so much smaller, it cannot even be measured. By looking at the circle on this page, it's easy to get the idea that both the cosmos and God are measurable, but that would be a gross misunderstanding. The God of creation, according to monotheism, continues *ad infinitum* (without end). Because God *created* the cosmos, He is neither to be identified as the cosmos, nor is He to be seen as dependent on the cosmos.<sup>8</sup>

When monotheists think of creation, they think of God's creation of the *space-time continuum*; some include *mass* in the equation, but such an addition is somewhat redundant since space and mass are essentially the same thing. The diagram above focuses on the *space* dimension of God's creation, but we also need to focus on the *time* dimension. Because God created time, He transcends time; that is, He is not bound by the constraints or the limits of time. Therefore, God is *eternal*. He cannot be placed within the parameters of the space-time continuum. To do so would humanize God and make Him out to be significantly less than He really is. Every monotheistic religion understands God as that Ultimate Reality which transcends the space-time continuum (the cosmos). Because God is eternal, His attributes are eternal, whereas all of ours are temporal and therefore vastly inferior. The prophet Isaiah puts it this way: "God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and God's ways are not our ways."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, if we try to define God in such a way that we can wrap our minds around Him completely, we reduce God to something far less than He really is. He then becomes the product of our imagination, rather than the Transcendent Creator of the universe. The God of creation is infinitely greater than all creation.

There are differences between the God of the three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. All three religions strongly believe in a transcendent God, but the God of Christianity is more *personal*, more *immanent*, than the God of Judaism and Islam. Because Christianity gives