Who or What is God?

If you ask the educated man or woman in the street, or in a church, what they mean by 'God', they will probably say something like this: God is the infinite personal Being who has created the universe, whom religious people worship and to whom they pray, and who has the power, when He (or She) so decides, to intervene in human affairs in response to our prayerful requests. And so in church we pray for world peace, for the victims of flood, earthquake, famine, war and other disasters, that the rulers of the nations may have wisdom and, in a Church of England service, for the health and well being of the Queen and the royal family; and we pray privately for ourselves and our own family and friends, especially those in any special need or danger. Thus God is seen as an active all-powerful force who is motivated by a limitless love, tempered by justice, and who has knowledge and wisdom infinitely surpassing our own. When our prayers are not answered, this is because God always knows better than we do, and indeed knows infallibly, what is the best thing to do or refrain from doing.

I think this is a fair depiction of the concept of God that operates today in western society, and has operated for many centuries. It applies to Jews and Muslims as well as to Christians, and it applies to atheists as much as to theists. This is the 'God' whom people wholeheartedly or tentatively believe in, and equally whom people wholeheartedly or tentatively believe not to exist, and whom Nietzsche declared to be dead.

This concept of God can be described as anthropomorphic. That is to say, God is a being like ourselves in the fundamental respect that we are both – God and ourselves - persons. But whereas we are finite, created, dependent persons, God is an infinite, eternal, uncreated and omnipotent Person. Some theologians, uncomfortable with such an explicitly anthropomorphic characterization, say that God is not *a* person, but rather is personal. But this is a distinction without a difference. We cannot conceive of a personal being who is not a person. And we know what a person is only because we are ourselves persons. God, then, is like us – or rather we are like God – in this very basic respect.

I am not going to bring in here the doctrine of the Trinity, which distinguishes Christianity theologically from Judaism and Islam, because I don't think that it makes any practical difference within Christian worship. Trinitarian language is of course firmly embedded in our liturgies; but is not prayer itself in practice invariably addressed to God our heavenly Father? We add "through" or "in the name of" our lord Jesus Christ – except of course in the prayer which he himself taught, the Lord's Prayer, in which we address God directly. But adding "we ask this in the name of" does not alter the fact that we are consciously addressing the heavenly Father. So I am leaving aside for now the trinitarian complication.

The central aspect of this prevailing concept of God, on which I want to focus, is divine activity in the course of nature and of human life. God can and does perform miracles, in the sense of making things happen which would not otherwise have happened, and preventing things from happening which otherwise would have happened. These interventions are either manifest or – much more often – discernable only to the eyes of faith. But it is believed that God does sometimes intervene in answer to prayer. The Bible, and church history, and contemporary religious discourse are full of accounts of such occasions. And prayers of intercession in church and in private devotion presuppose that God at least sometimes operates on earth in these ways. Otherwise, what is the point of those prayers? And how often have we heard in the media someone telling of their miraculous escape when, for example, they survived unhurt in a car crash in which the two others were killed, or even more dramatically how a soldier in war was saved by wearing a medallion which stopped the bullet that would have killed him, or how when a family were at their wits end in some terrible dilemma something unexpectedly happened to save the situation? Or there was recently the American who on winning $5 million in the US lottery said, 'I just praised God and Jesus'. Of course most of those who speak like this today, in our pervasively secular age, are not using the word "miracle" in a religious sense but merely as an expression of wonder and relief. Likewise "Thank God for that" is usually no more than an expression of heartfelt relief. But seriously devout believers who give God thanks for a lucky escape, or for recovery from a serious illness, or for the resolution of some problem, do often believe that they have experienced a

divine intervention on their behalf, a miracle which confirms and strengthens their faith and evokes gratitude to God.

It is this serious and literal use of the idea of divine intervention that concerns us here. The problem that it raises has led many to atheism. If, for example, in the car crash case, God intervened to save only one of the people in the car, who then gave God thanks for a miraculous delivery, this implies not only that God decided to save *that* person, but equally that God decided *not* to save the other two. It presupposes that it is, so to speak, okay from God's point of view to intervene whenever God so chooses, and this inevitably poses the question why God intervenes so seldom, leaving unprotected the great majority of innocent victims of natural disasters and of human cruelty and neglect? Some years ago the atheist philosopher Anthony Flew wrote, 'Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no sign of concern.' ("Theology and Falsification", reprinted in John Hick, ed., *The Existence of God*, p. 227). And given the biblical and traditional assumption that God does intervene miraculously whenever God so decides, one can understand why this belief has led Flew and many others to atheism. It is this implied picture of God as arbitrary, protecting some but not others, and thus as deliberately leaving so many in pain, hardship, misery and peril, that is so repugnant to so many people. If there is such a Being, why regard Him (or Her) as good and as worthy of worship, except by the chosen few who benefit from the special divine interventions?

The problem arises from the belief that it is, as I put it, okay from God's point of view to intervene on earth whenever God chooses. Suppose, however, that, regardless of whether or not it is within God's power to intervene, it is for some good reason *not* okay from the divine point of view to do so. Suppose this would be counter-productive from the point of view of a creative purpose which requires both human freedom (which is directly or indirectly the source of much the greater part of human suffering) and also elements of contingency and unpredictability in the evolution of the universe. The kind of theodicy sketched in this brief formula has been developed in a number of works, including my own *Evil and the God of Love* (2nd ed., 1977). This does not require the idea of special divine interventions in the form of open or covert miracles. However, as we shall see presently, whilst I think this is a viable position I now want to suggest going a good deal further.

For a non-intervening anthropomorphic God, who does not act within human history and human life, who does not cause things to happen which would not otherwise have happened and does not prevent things from happening which would otherwise have happened, seems religiously unsatisfying to many practicing Christians, a kind of deism which is little better than atheism.

So we have a dilemma. Can we find any way through it or beyond it? At this point I want to suggest enlarging our field of vision – or if we have emerged from the BC (Before Computers) age, extending our data base - by taking account of the other world religions as well as our own. After all, the large majority of religious people in the world are not Christians, and yet their religions involve forms of life and thought that claim to lead to a transforming relationship, of limitless value, with an eternal reality that both transcends, and in the case of the eastern traditions is also immanent within, us. But Buddhism and Taoism and Confucianism and some strands of Hinduism do not see that eternal reality as an infinite Person. Suppose then, as an experiment, we now use the word 'God' as our western term for the ultimate reality which some do and others do not believe to be an infinite person. We then broaden the question, Who or what is God? by not confining it at the outset to a particular concept of the religious ultimate. When we do this some prefer not to use the term 'God', finding it almost impossible to detach it in most peoples' minds from the notion of an infinite divine person and use instead such terms as Ultimate Reality, or the Ultimate, or the Real. But let us for our present purpose stick with the familiar term 'God', reminding ourselves however from time to time that we are not now using it in a sense restricted to what are called the western monotheisms – although in fact they all originated in the Middle East.

Where do we now go from there? I suggest that at this point it will be helpful to take account of an enormously important distinction drawn by some of the great Christian mystics, as well

as by mystics of the other major traditions. Although the writer who has been given the derogatory sounding name of Pseudo-Dionysius is largely unknown outside the history of Christian mysticism, he has in fact probably been the most influential single individual in that history. He wrote in the name of Dionysius, the disciple of St Paul (Acts 17: 34), thus assuming a near apostolic authority, and he was a major theological influence throughout the thousand years prior to the Reformation. Thomas Aquinas, for example, quotes him as an authority some 1700 times. He is generally believed today to have been a Syrian monk writing around the year 500, and whether he would have exerted the same immense influence if this had been known before Erasmus and others became suspicious of his identity is one of history's fascinating unanswered questions. But he did exert this immense influence, and in my opinion it was a very creative influence. For it reinforced the existing emphasis on the ultimate ineffability of God. I am not fond of the word 'ineffable' and prefer 'transcategorial', meaning beyond the range of our human systems of concepts or mental categories. Theologians have nearly always taken the ultimate divine ineffability or transcategoriality for granted, though usually without taking its implications to their logical conclusion. Augustine, for example, about a century before Pseudo-Dionysius, said that 'God transcends even the mind' (*On True Religion*, 36: 67), but did not develop this further. But Dionysius – or Denys, to give him a more user-friendly name – makes the divine ineffability central and begins at least to struggle with its implications. In his central work, *The Mystical Theology*, he says in every way he can think of that God is utterly and totally transcategorial. God is 'indescribable', 'beyond all being and knowledge'. God, the ultimate One, is 'not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. . . It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding . . It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding . . It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness . . It is not sonship or fatherhood . . There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it . . It is beyond assertion and denial'.

This last statement, that that to which the term 'God' refers is beyond assertion *and* denial is crucial. For Denys is not simply doing negative theology, saying that God does not have this or that attribute but, much more radically, that our entire range of attribute-concepts do not apply to God at all, either positively or negatively. To apply them to God in God's ultimacy is, in modern philosophical terms, a category mistake. To say, for example, that molecules are not stupid, although true, is misleading because it assumes that molecules are the sort of thing of which it makes sense to say that they are either stupid or not stupid. And to say that God is not 'one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness', although true would likewise, by itself, be deeply misleading because it assumes that God is the kind of reality to which such qualities could be rightly or wrongly attributed. We have to take on board the much more radical concept of a reality which is what it is, but whose nature lies beyond the scope of our conceptual and linguistic systems. When we speak about such a reality we are not, then, speaking about it as it is in itself, totally beyond the range of our comprehension, but about its impact upon us, the difference that it makes within the realm of human experience, to which our concepts and hence our languages do apply.

It is worth stressing that the divine ineffability does not entail that the ultimate reality, which we are calling God, is an empty blank, but rather that God's inner nature is beyond the range of our human conceptual resources. This is also, incidentally, what Mahayana Buddhism intends when it speaks of the Ultimate Reality as *Sunyatta*, Emptiness: it is empty of everything that the human mind inevitably projects in its acts of cognition. Going back to Denys, although he himself does not make this further qualification, modern philosophical discussions of ineffability have introduced a distinction between on the one hand what we can call substantial attributes, meaning attributes which tell us something positive about the divine nature, and on the other hand purely formal, linguistically generated attributes, which do not tell us anything about the divine nature. Thus that God is ineffable formally entails that God has the attribute of ineffability. And even to refer to God at all entails that God has the attribute of being able to be referred to. But such purely formal attributes give rise only to trivial truths, trivial in the sense that they make no difference and do not in any way contradict or undermine the divine ineffability.

But given divine ineffability, problems immediately arise for Christian theology. Denys was, we presume, a devout worshipping Christian monk. And as well as teaching the total divine transcategoriality, he also took for granted the main body of Christian doctrine. Although

Denys takes surprisingly little interest in the traditional dogmas, he does nevertheless take it for granted that God is a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that the Second Person became incarnate as Jesus Christ. But how can one both hold that God is totally ineffable and also profess to know all these substantial truths about God? God cannot both have no humanly knowable attributes and also have such humanly knowable attributes as being a Trinity, etc. On the face of it this is a sheer contradiction. And Denys saw this quite clearly. He asks, in his book on *The Divine Name*s, 'How then can we speak of the divine names [i.e. attributes]? How can we do this if the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and knowledge, if it abides beyond the reach of mind and of being, if it encompasses and circumscribes, embraces and anticipates all things while itself eluding their grasp and escaping from any perception, imagination, opinion, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding?' (593A-B).

And he makes at least a beginning in answering this question. He has said that God is self-revealed in the scriptures. But then he goes on to say that the scriptural language about God is metaphorical. He does not use the modern term 'metaphor' but a later Denys, Denys Turner of Cambridge, points out very clearly that when Dionysius speaks of symbols he means what today we call metaphors (*The Darkness of God,* p. 35). Denys - the early medieval one - says that 'the Word of God makes use of poetic imagery' (*The Celestial Hierarchy*, 137A-B), and he speaks of 'what scripture has revealed to us in symbolic and uplifting fashion' (121A), and of how the divine Light makes truth known to us 'by way of representative symbols' (121B). Further, he says that the function of the scriptural symbols and poetry is practical, to draw us forward on our pilgrim's progress: 'By itself [the ineffable One] generously reveals a firm, transcendent beam, granting enlightenments proportionate to each being, and thereby draws sacred minds upward to its permitted contemplation, to participation and to the state of becoming like it' (*The Divine Names,* 588C-D). Again, God 'uses scriptural passages in an uplifting fashion as a way . . . to uplift our mind in a manner suitable to our nature' (*The Celestial Hierarchy,* 137B). When I translate this into my own terms I hear Denys saying that in the scriptures we speak about God in true myths, that is to say, descriptions which are not literally true but which nevertheless have the effect of evoking in us an appropriate dispositional response to the ultimate subject-matter of the myths. He does not however go beyond the scriptural ascriptions to apply the same principle to Christian doctrines. If he had he would have been in tune with the teaching of the Buddha, a thousand years earlier, that the function of religious doctrines is to help us onward at particular stages of our spiritual journey and that when they have served their purpose they are to be left behind.

But whilst Denys makes a good start – indeed in the context of his time he was an extremely bold and original thinker, - there is another aspect of the religious life which his writings do not cover, namely religious experience. I do not mean at this point the ultimate ineffable unity with the divine of which he does speaks, but more ordinary religious experience – the worshipper's occasional sense of God's presence, or sense of being in God's presence, the occasional vivid I-Thou experience in prayer, the sense of divine presence through the liturgy or in some moments of daily life, the transformed consciousness sometimes found through meditation or, moving up a notch, the mystical visions and auditions reported in all ages. But without moving up that notch, religious experience, particularly the sense of being in God's presence, and the transformed consciousness reached in meditation, is central to the religious life. Without it, religion would consist simply in human, all-too-human institutions. Within these institutions there has usually also been space for the inner reality of religious experience and its transforming influence in human life. But if there were only the institutions, devoid of the experiential aspect of the religious life, the religions would be simply cultural frameworks and exercises of social control which have done at least as much harm as good in the course of human history.

So given the centrality of religious experience, who or what is it that is being experienced? If it is the experience of the loving presence of the heavenly Father of Jesus' teaching, this is clearly not the ineffable Ultimate Reality of which Denys has been speaking. What, then, is the relation between that ultimate reality and the available God of the Bible and of Christian worship? This is the question which Pseudo-Dionysius does not tackle.

Nor do subsequent medieval theologians. Aquinas, for example, declares that 'by its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches' (*S..c.G.* 1:14,3), and that 'The first cause surpasses human understanding and speech' (*De Causis*, 6). He tries to bridge the gap between God's ineffability and our doctrines about God with his use of analogy. But this does not really help. For although we know, according to Aquinas, that God possesses the divine analogues of human goodness, wisdom, etc, we do not have the faintest idea what these divine analogues are. Although we know what it is for a human to be good and wise, we have no conception of what it is for God to be analogically good or analogically wise. Indeed, according to Aquinas, the divine nature is absolutely simple, not made up of a number of distinct attributes (*S.T.*, I/I, Q. 3, art 7). So such attributes as goodness, wisdom, and love are constructs which arise at the human level as a result of the divine impact upon us, but are not reflections on the human scale of the same attributes in God. Because of the ultimate divine simplicity, which is only divided up into distinct attributes in the human mind, these so-called divine attributes refer to the impact of God's presence on us, expressed in our human categories of thought.

Now let us come down through the centuries from Pseudo-Dionysius to another original genius, the 13th and 14th century mystic Meister Eckhart. Eckhart was profoundly influenced by Denys, whom he quotes as speaking of 'the unknown God above all gods' (Sermon 39), echoed in Paul Tillich's 'the God above the god of theism'. Eckhart himself distinguishes between the utterly transcategorial Godhead (*Gottheit, deitas*) and the worshipped God (*Gott, deus*). 'God and the Godhead', he says, 'are as different from each other as heaven and earth' (Sermon 27). It is clear that by God, in distinction from the Godhead, he means the God of the Bible and of Christian devotion. He says, 'God acts. The Godhead does not' (Sermon 27). Further, he sees very clearly the implication that the known and describable God of Christian experience and worship exists only in relation to the experiencing and worshipping community. 'For before there were creatures,' he says, 'God was not god, but, rather, he was what he was. When creatures came to be . ., then God was no longer God as he is in himself, but god as he is with creatures' (Sermon 28), so that 'before there were creatures God was not "God"' (Sermon 52) , i.e. not the humanly known God. Eckhart does not of course mean that with the creation of humanity the Godhead ceased to exist, but that there then also came to be the humanly experienced God of Christian worship.

This distinction between the ultimate divine reality and its humanly thinkable and experienceable form (or forms) is also found within each of the other great traditions. To refer to these very briefly, Advaitic Hinduism distinguishes between *nirguna* Brahman, which is the totally 'formless' or transcategorical Ultimate Reality, and *saguna* Brahman, which is that same reality as manifested within human experience as the realm of worshipped gods and goddesses. The *trikaya* doctrine of Mayahana Buddhism distinguishes between the utterly transcategorial *dharmakaya* and its manifestation in the realm of the heavenly Buddhas (the *nirmanakaya)*, one or other of whom becomes incarnate on earth from time to time. The Jewish mystics of the Zoharic and Lurianic Kabbala distinguished between *Eyn Sof*, the Infinite, and the God of the scriptures. The Sufi mystics of Islam distinguished between the ineffable ultimate reality, *Al-Haqq*, usually translated as the Real, and the revealed God of the Qur'an. Thus al-Arabi says, 'God is absolute or restricted as He pleases; and the God of religious beliefs is subject to limitations, for He is the God contained in the heart of His servants. But the absolute God is not contained in anything . . . Thus, He is not known [as Allah] until we are known' (*The Bezels of Wisdom*, 92).

Now I want to suggest that this generic distinction within the mystical strand of religion worldwide between, on the one hand, the transcategorial – or if you prefer the older term, the ineffable – Godhead or the Real and, on the other hand, the form or forms in which that ultimate reality is manifested within our human conceptual frameworks and modes of experience, makes possible a religious interpretation of the data of the history of religions.

Suppose that, as is in fact the case, I participate in some small degree in the very wide and varied realm of religious experience. And suppose that, as is again the case, I hold the basic religious faith that this is not purely imaginative projection, but that whilst clearly employing my own conceptual and imaginative resources, it is at the same time also a response to the presence to me of a transcendent reality. I then notice that others within the same, in my case, Christian tradition also report moments of religious experience, though often taking

different forms. And I then notice that people within the other religious traditions likewise report a yet wider range of such experiences. Applying a kind of philosophical Golden Rule, it would be unreasonable not to grant to religious experience within other traditions what I affirm of it within my own tradition. And so I have to take account of the worldwide varieties of religious experience. I now have the two-level picture of the ultimate ineffable Real, or the Godhead, being responded to in this range of different forms of religious experience, the differences between them arising from our different culturally formed conceptual systems and imaginative repertoires, and – very importantly – our different kinds of spiritual practice.

The basic principle that we are aware of anything, not as it is in itself unobserved, but always and necessarily as it appears to beings with our particular cognitive equipment, was brilliantly stated by Aquinas when he said that 'Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower' (*S.T.*, II/II, Q. 1, art. 2). And in the case of religious awareness, the mode of the knower differs significantly from religion to religion. And so my hypothesis is that the ultimate reality of which the religions speak, and which we refer to as God, is being differently conceived, and therefore differently experienced, and therefore differently responded to in historical forms of life within the different religious traditions.

What does this mean for the different, and often conflicting, belief-systems of the religions? It means that they are descriptions of *different* manifestations of the Ultimate; and as such they do not conflict with one another. They each arise from some immensely powerful moment or period of religious experience, notably the Buddha's experience of enlightenment under the Bo tree at Bodh Gaya, Jesus' sense of the presence of the heavenly Father, Muhammad's experience of hearing the words that became the Qur'an, and also the experiences of Vedic sages, of Hebrew prophets, of Taoist sages. But these experiences are always formed in the terms available to that individual or community at that time and are then further elaborated within the resulting new religious movements. This process of elaboration is one of philosophical or theological construction. Christian experience of the presence of God, for example, at least in the early days and again since the 13th-14th century rediscovery of the centrality of the divine love, is the sense of a greater, much more momentously important, much more profoundly loving, personal presence than that of one's fellow humans. But that this higher presence is eternal, is omnipotent, is omniscient, is the creator of the universe, is infinite in goodness and love is not, because it cannot be, given in the experience itself. In sense perception we can see as far as our horizon but cannot see how much further the world stretches beyond it, and so likewise we can experience a high degree of goodness or of love but cannot experience that it reaches beyond this to infinity. That God has these infinite qualities, and likewise that God is a divine Trinity, can only be an inference, or a theory, or a supposedly revealed truth, but not an experienced fact. And so Jesus himself will have understood the experienced loving and demanding presence to be the God of his Jewish tradition, and specifically of that aspect of the tradition that emphasized the divine goodness and love, as well as justice and power. But as his teaching about the heavenly Father was further elaborated, and indeed transformed, within the expanding gentile church, it grew into the philosophical conception of God as an infinite co-equal trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so what we inherit today is a complex totality in which religious experience and philosophical speculation embodied in theological doctrine have interacted over the centuries and have to a certain degree fused. In the other great traditions the same process has taken place, in each case taking its own distinctive forms. For religious experience always has to take some specific form, and the forms developed within a given tradition 'work', so to speak, for people within that tradition but not, in many cases, for people formed by a different tradition.

There also emerges here an answer to the question, Why should we think that there is an ultimate transcendent reality, the Real or the Godhead, in distinction from the experienced personal Gods and impersonal Absolutes of the different traditions? For surely if it is the case that not only our own Christian experience, but also the different forms of experience within the other great religious traditions, are indeed responsive and not purely projective, it is not surprising that within human awareness many different God-figures have formed. Phenomenologically - that is, as describable, - the Holy Trinity is different from the Allah of Islam, which is different from the Adonai, the Lord, of rabbinic Judaism, which is different again from the Vishnu and the Shiva of theistic Hinduism, and even more different from the non-personal Tao, or Dharma, or Brahman. All these are, in Kantian language, divine

phenenoma in distinction from the divine noumenon of which they are its appearances to humanity. Thus we need – I am suggesting - a two level model, with the experienced realities in relation to which the religious life is lived as manifestations of an ultimate reality beyond them.

Let me offer a couple of analogies to illustrate this. The sun's light is refracted by the earth's atmosphere into the spectrum of the different colours of the rainbow. Perhaps the ultimate light of the universal divine presence is refracted by our different human religious cultures into the spectrum of the different world faiths. Or, in the words of the medieval Sufi thinker, Jalaluldin Rumi, 'The lamps are different but the Light is the same: it comes from Beyond'.

And concerning the different, and indeed often conflicting, belief systems of the religions: our earth is a three-dimensional globe. But when you map it on a two dimensional surface, such as a piece of paper, you have to distort it. You cannot get three dimensions into two without distortion. And there are a variety of projections used by cartographers which are different systematic ways of distorting the earth's curvature to represent it on a flat surface. But if a map made in one projection is correct it does not follow that maps made in other projections are incorrect. If they are properly made they are all correct, and yet they all distort. Perhaps our different theologies, both within the same religion and between different religions, are human maps of the infinite divine reality made in different projections, i.e. different conceptual systems. These all necessarily distort, since that infinite reality as it is in itself cannot be represented in our finite human terms. But perhaps all are equally useful in enabling us make our journey through life.

But finally, let us return to the point at which we started, namely prayer, particularly petitionary prayer, prayer for other people. In my opinion it is an observable fact that such prayer does sometimes 'work'. I do not however see this as a matter of our asking an omnipotent God to intervene miraculously on earth and of his then acting accordingly. I see it rather as depending upon a mental field or network, below the level of normal consciousness, within which we are all connected and through which our thoughts, and even more our emotions, are all the time affecting one another. These influences are usually largely filtered out by the mechanism that preserves our individual autonomy. But when in 'prayer', or what Buddhists call loving-kindness meditation, we concentrate upon some particular individual who is in a distressed state of anxiety, fear, anger, dispair, etc., concretely visualizing a better possibility for them, this can have a positive effect. Even in the case of bodily distress our thought may affect the patient's mind and sometimes through this his or her bodily state. And I would suggest – outrageously, from the point of view of the contemporary secular mindset – that quite possibly the thou of whom we are sometimes aware in prayer is a reality, but is what the eastern religions call a *deva*, a god in distinction from God, or in western terms an angel.

So here is a large-scale hypothesis which constitutes a religious, as distinguished from a naturalistic, interpretation of religion. And like all such hypotheses, it presents itself for consideration and invites others who find it inadequate to offer a better hypothesis.