

**Text Van der Leeuw Lecture**  
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**What is Religion?**

For the first time in history, an increasingly large number of men and women in the Western world have lost all interest in religion. Some, indeed, have become positively hostile to faith. In the past, people made a great effort to live in some kind of relationship with the sacred. They built massive temples and cathedrals, participated in time-consuming and demanding rituals, embarked on daunting meditations that required a major and initially painful change of consciousness, and were prepared to transform their moral and social lives. The first artistic documents of our species that have survived ~ the magnificent cave paintings in southern France and northern Spain at Lascaux, Altamira and Les Trois Frères ~ clearly had some kind of cultic function. Indeed, there is a strong case for arguing that the experience of and the desire to live in a transcendent dimension is *the* distinguishing mark of Homo Sapiens, who could also be termed Homo Religiosus. Yet now, in some quarters, religion is regarded as retrograde and even reprehensible. This is especially the case in Western Europe. It is less true in the United States, which remains a strongly religious country. But even there, such militant atheists as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens command a large and growing readership. In other parts of the world, however, ~ in Asia, Africa and Latin America ~ there has been a religious revival. How can we account for this Western dissatisfaction with all things religious?

There are obvious reasons for this falling away. Religion has recently been implicated in some of the worst atrocities of our time. The strident voices of the

extremists have persuaded those who were already alienated from traditional faith that religion is inherently violent, intolerant and incompatible with the modern world. The militant religiosity, often called “fundamentalism”, which erupted in every major religious tradition during the twentieth century in rebellion against secular modernity, has given the impression that religion is incompatible with progress, democracy, and has been rendered null and void by scientific discoveries that have made the old beliefs untenable. I myself once shared this view. After an unfortunate experience as a young nun, I abandoned convent life, left the Catholic Church and for some fifteen years thought that I had finished with God, a concept that I had come to find frankly incredible. But after a series of career disasters, I found myself ~ somewhat to my astonishment ~ writing books and making television programmes about the history of religion, which at first were extremely sceptical and hostile. But I was forced to change my mind.

After some twenty years studying not only the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam but also such eastern traditions as Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism and Buddhism, it is now clear to me that, partly as a result of the rational bias of our modernity, we Westerners have developed a rather distorted view of religion, one that differs in several crucial respects from pre-modern faith. So today I would like to look at some of these modern Western misconceptions, and begin by ascertaining what religion is *not*.

Perhaps the most common assumption is that religion consists above all in orthodox doctrine. So much is this the case that in the English speaking world, people of faith are often called “believers”, as though accepting a set of opinions about the divine was their chief activity. But when we look back to the great luminaries of the past, such as the Buddha, Confucius or Jesus, we find that not only did they show

very little interest in metaphysics and theology but that some even thought that they could be positively harmful. This was not because they had no interest in the sacred but because they knew that the ultimate reality was ineffable and indescribable. The first poem of the *Dao De Jing* begins: “The dao that can be named is not the eternal Dao.” Confucius preferred never to speak of Heaven, the High God of China, and advocated instead an attitude of reverent silence before the numinous.<sup>1</sup> For the same reason, the Buddha always refused to define Nirvana, because, he explained, we had no words or concepts for this inner realm of sacred peace: Nirvana transcended unenlightened, mundane experience and human discourse could only distort it by cutting it down to size.<sup>2</sup> One of his monks, a philosopher manqué, continually pestered the Buddha about such matters as the creation of the world and the existence of God ~ to the detriment of his yoga and ethical practice. The Buddha told him that he was like a man who had been shot with a poisoned arrow but who refused to have any medical treatment until he had found out the name of his assailant and what village he came from. He would die before he got this perfectly pointless information. We could while away many happy hours discussing these fascinating topics, the Buddha concluded, but they will not help us; even if we could discover once and for all who made the world and how he did it, grief, sorrow and pain would still exist.<sup>3</sup>

Religion was not about thinking things. All religious teaching was or should be action-oriented. A myth or doctrine is essentially a programme for action; it will make no sense until it is put into practice ritually, ethically or contemplatively. In the same way, the instructions for a board game seem utterly remote, abstract and incomprehensibly complex ~ until one starts to play, when everything falls into place.

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<sup>1</sup> Confucius, *Analects* 17:19

<sup>2</sup> *Anguttara Nikaya* 10:95

<sup>3</sup> *Majjhima Nikkaya* 63

Today, however, many feel that unless they can satisfy themselves about the existence of God, they cannot live an authentic religious life. This is sound scientific thinking, which insists that you must first establish a principle before you apply it. But for the Buddha or Confucius, that was the wrong way round. First you must change your behaviour in a way that will effect an interior transformation: then you will know that Nirvana and the Dao exist; they will become vibrant realities in your life, even though you can never hope to define them. Orthodoxy could even be harmful. The Buddha sternly instructed his disciples never to take anything on faith or at second-hand; they must always test his every single one of his teachings against their own experience and, if it did not help them, they should feel free lay it to one side.

The same is true of the three monotheisms. The Prophets of Israel rarely discussed the nature of God; they were more like political commentators, seeing a sacred meaning in the current events of their time and urging their contemporaries to amend their lives. Later the Rabbis of the Talmudic Age insisted that no exegesis was complete until it had been translated into a practical piece of legislation that would answer the immediate needs of the community. Like the Buddha, they had little time for orthodoxy. There is a famous story of Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, one of the greatest of the early sages, who was one day engaged in an intractable argument with his colleagues about a point of Jewish law. He could not convince them to accept his point of view, so he asked God to back him up by performing some spectacular miracles. A carob tree moved four hundred cubits of its own accord, the water in a nearby canal started to flow uphill, and the walls of the house of studies shook so violently that the building seemed about to collapse. But the other rabbis were unimpressed; indeed, R. Joshua seemed to disapprove of these divine pyrotechnics; it was not suitable, he said, for the house of studies to shake while the sages were

discussing serious matters. In desperation, R. Eliezer asked for a *bat qol*, a voice from heaven, to adjudicate, and a celestial voice obligingly boomed: “What is your quarrel with Rabbi Eliezer? The *halakah* (“legal decision”) is always according to his view.” But R. Joshua would have none of this, and cited the book of Deuteronomy to support his refusal, quoting God’s own Torah back to Him: “It is not in heaven.” The teaching of God was no longer confined to the celestial sphere. It had come down to earth on Mount Sinai and was now the inalienable possession of every single Israelite; nobody could tell another Jew what to think. “So we pay no attention to a divine voice,” R. Joshua concluded. It was said that afterwards, God smiled and said: “My children have defeated me.” They had grown up; instead of accepting everything verbatim, like infants, they were thinking things out for themselves and making their own decisions.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is presented in the New Testament as a religious rebel, who was constantly questioning established custom and belief. He spent very little time, as far as we know, discoursing on the Trinity, Incarnation, Original Sin or Transubstantiation, issues which have exercised so many generations of Christians. When he exhorted his followers to have “faith”, he did not mean that they had to accept the correct theological interpretation of his divine nature. The Greek *pistis* means “to trust; to have commitment; to be loyal” to the divine imperative; the Latin *credo* derives from the words *cor dare*: “to give one’s heart.” And the English word “believe” originally meant to “love, to prize, to hold dear.” When St Anselm of Canterbury prayed: *credo ut intelligam*, usually translated: “I believe in order that I may understand,” he did not mean that first he had to force his mind to accept the articles of faith and that as a reward for this intellectual submission, these otherwise incomprehensible doctrines would become intelligible. The phrase should be

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<sup>4</sup> Baba Metziah 59b; Deuteronomy 30:12.

translated: “I engage myself in order that I understand.”<sup>5</sup> Understanding of the transcendent came only as a result of a lifelong dedication and commitment.

Similarly the Qur’an has very little time for theological speculation, which it calls *zannah*, self-indulgent guess-work about matters that nobody can be sure of one way or the other, but which makes people quarrelsome and stupidly sectarian.<sup>6</sup> Every single verse of the Qur’an is called an *ayah*, a “sign”; doctrines like the Creation, the Last Judgment and Paradise are all *ayat*, “parables,” because we can only talk about the divine in terms of signs and symbols. All these doctrines are essentially a summons to action. The people condemned by the Qur’an are called *kafirun*. This should not be translated “unbelievers” or “infidels.” The Arabic *kufr* means “ingratitude.” The Qur’an makes it clear that the theology of the kafirs was perfectly correct; they had all the right beliefs and accepted without question that Allah had created the world, but they were not allowing this conviction to change their lives. Instead of imitating the divine generosity that was evident everywhere in creation, they were hoarding their possessions selfishly and considered themselves the centre of the universe.<sup>7</sup>

This brings us to one of the central insights of all the great traditions. The Qur’an berates the *kafirun* for their arrogance. They are conceited and supercilious; they imagine that they are superior to the humbler people of Mecca, and strut around haughtily, addressing others in an offensive, braying manner and flying into a violent rage if they think their honour impugned; they sneer at Allah’s revelation, perversely distorting the sense of the Qur’an simply to display their cleverness.<sup>8</sup> All the world religions insist that what holds us back from the divine is egotism. When we

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<sup>5</sup> Anselm, Proslogion I.

<sup>6</sup> Qur’an 3:58~62; 2:129~32

<sup>7</sup> Qur’an 29:61~63; 2:289: 27;14

<sup>8</sup> Qur’an 7:75~76; 39:59; 31:17~18; 23:45~47; 38:71~75; 15:94-96: 2136

transcend the grasping, frightened ego, that constantly needs to denigrate others in order to enhance a false sense of self, we transcend ourselves and experience an *ekstasis*, a “stepping outside” of the prism of selfishness. One of the first things Muhammad asked his followers to do was to prostrate themselves in prayer. This was hard for the Arabs, who did not believe in kingship and found it degrading to grovel on the ground like a slave, but the posture of their bodies taught them, at a level deeper than the rational, to get beyond the preening, posturing ego that constantly seeks to draw attention to itself. This was what the act of *islam*, an existential “surrender” of selfishness, was all about.

In the same spirit, the Buddha formulated a doctrine that he called *anatta*, “no self.” Even though it had philosophical implications, this was essentially a programme of action rather than a metaphysical truth: a Buddhist must live *as though* the self did not exist. Self preoccupation was the chief cause of our suffering, and we could get beyond the type of selfishness that fosters greed, hatred and envy we would achieve an *ekstasis* that would introduce us to the transcendence of Nirvana. One of the main tools for the achievement of this *ekstasis* was yoga. The classical yoga that brought the Buddha to enlightenment was not an aerobic exercise; nor was it designed to make the yogin feel content and relaxed. It was a systematic extirpation of egotism from the conscious and unconscious levels of the mind and heart. It was designed specifically to take the “I” out of our thinking. As they progressed, yogins found that the sense of “I” and “mine” completely disappeared. When they contemplated the most mundane object, they saw it quite differently. Even a simple jar had a wholly unexpected beauty, because they were no longer subjectivizing or privatizing it. Instead of viewing it through the distorted lens of their own needs and desires, they could see it as it really was. When they meditated on the ideas of their particular school, they

experienced them so vividly that a rationalistic formulation of these truths paled in comparison. Their knowledge was no longer merely notional; the texts say that they experienced these truths “directly”, because they had become part of their inner world.

The first Christians quickly realized that Jesus’ entire life had been an act of *kenosis*, of self-emptying. Writing to his converts in Philippi in Macedonia, St. Paul quoted an early Christian hymn that pointed out that Jesus did not cling to the high status of being in the image of God but “emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave...and was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.” Because of this humiliating descent, God had raised him to an exceptionally high level and bestowed on him the title of *kyrios*, “Lord.”<sup>9</sup> This passage is often quoted as a proof text for Christian belief in the incarnation. But Paul was not preaching a doctrine but advocating a practice. He introduced the hymn with this instruction to the Christians of Philippi: “In your minds, *you* must be the same as Christ Jesus.”

There must be no competition among you, no conceit; but every body is to be self-effacing. Always consider the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first, but everybody thinks of other people’s interests instead.<sup>10</sup>

Nobody would be able to understand the doctrine of the Lord Jesus, unless they achieved a similar *kenosis* in the smallest details of their daily lives.

All too often, religion is used to prop up the ego and to enhance a sense of identity. This is one of the flaws of fundamentalism, which in every case is rooted in a profound fear of annihilation. Every single fundamentalist movement that I have studied in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is convinced that modern, secular or liberal

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<sup>9</sup> Philippians 2:6~11

<sup>10</sup> Philippians 2:2~4



society wants to wipe them out. When people feel that their backs are to the wall in this way, they can lash out violently. That is why the emphasis on doctrine and theological belief is, in Buddhist terms, “unskillful”. The early Daoists understood that strong opinions can be spiritually dangerous, because we identify too strongly with them and become mired within ourselves. Our ideas of God can become idolatrous, because they can only be human and limited. God can become a mere projection of ourselves, writ large, with likes and dislikes similar to our own. The Crusaders went into battle with the cry “God wills it!” when they slaughtered Muslims and Jews; they were projecting their own fears and loathing onto a deity that they had created in their own image and likeness, giving their prejudice a seal of sacred approval. Terrorists today fall into the same trap.

But in its attempt to transcend egotism, religion can easily become unskillful. A great deal of my convent training was designed to undermine our sense of self-worth. We were constantly berated in public for the smallest fault, were perpetually on our knees confessing our inadequacies and kissing floors and feet. All this was a complete waste of time, because we became so obsessed with our own performance that we were incarcerated in the ego we were trying to transcend. The great sages would have had no time for such nonsense. They all understood that the safest way to divest ourselves of egotism was the constant cultivation of compassion. In compassion, we learn to *feel with* the other, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there. Consequently at the heart of every single one of the major faiths, we find the ideal of compassion. It is the litmus test of true spirituality. I can have faith that moves mountains, said Paul, but without charity, which requires the constant transcendence of self-important self-preoccupation, it is worth nothing.

Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; love is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people's sins but delights in truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, it is compassion that brings us the enlightenment of Nirvana, aligns us with the Dao or, as monotheists+ would say, brings us into the presence of the ineffably transcendent God.

The dynamic of compassion is classically expressed in the Golden Rule, which as far as we know was formulated by Confucius, some five centuries before Christ. He was one of the first people to make it crystal clear that religion was inseparable from altruism. His path had no abstruse doctrines or complex liturgical formulae; everything always came back to the importance of treating others with absolute and sacred respect. What was the single thread that ran through all his doctrines? Which of his teachings could his disciples put into practice all day and every day? "Perhaps the saying about *shu* ('likening to the self')," Confucius replied. "Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you."<sup>12</sup> The Golden Rule demands that, all day and every day, we look into our own hearts; discover what it is that gives us pain; and then refuse under any circumstances to inflict that pain on anybody else; it requires that we no longer put ourselves into a special and separate category but constantly relate our own experience to that of others. For Confucius, compassion had the transcendent value that he called *ren*; it was indefinable, because only a person who practiced it perfectly could have any conception of it. It resembled what Socrates and Plato would later call "the Good." Walking the path of *ren* was itself a transcendent

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<sup>11</sup> I Corinthians 13:4~8

<sup>12</sup> Confucius, *Analects* 15:23

experience Yan Hui, Confucius' favourite and most mystical disciple, expressed this beautifully, when he said of *ren* "with a deep sigh":

The more I strain my gaze towards it the higher it soars. The deeper I bore down into it, the harder it becomes. I see it in front, but suddenly it is behind. Step by step, the Master skilfully lures one on. He has broadened me with culture and restrained me with ritual. Even if I wanted to stop, I could not. Just when I feel that I have exhausted every resource, something seems to rise up, standing over me sharp and clear. Yet though I long to pursue it, I can find no way of getting to it at all.<sup>13</sup>

*Ren* was itself the transcendence you sought. Living a compassionate, empathic life took you beyond yourself and introduced you to another sacred dimension. The constant discipline of kenotic ritual with *ren* gave Yan Hui intimations of a sacred reality that was both immanent and transcendent, looming up from within yet also a companionable presence, "standing over me sharp and clear."

This was also the ethos of Rabbinic Judaism. For Rabbi Hillel, the older contemporary of Jesus, the Golden Rule was the essence of Jewish teaching. In a famous Talmudic story, it was said that one day a pagan approached Hillel and promised to convert to Judaism if the rabbi could teach him the entire Torah while he stood on one leg. Hillel replied: "What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah and the remainder is but commentary. Go learn it."<sup>14</sup> It is an extraordinary statement. Hillel did not mention any of the doctrines that seem essential to Judaism: belief in the One God, the Creation of the world, the Exodus, Sinai, and the Promised Land. The emphasis was wholly on compassion. The

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 9:10

<sup>14</sup> B. Shabbat 31a

Rabbis followed Hillel, insisting that the Golden Rule was the essence of Torah. Any interpretation of scripture that spread hatred or contempt was illegitimate; a mean-spirited exegesis that poured scorn on others and sought to discredit them must be avoided.<sup>15</sup>

Every major tradition has developed its own version of the Golden Rule. But they all take one step further, insisting that it is not sufficient to confine your benevolence to your own group. You must have what the Chinese sage Mozi (c.480~390) called *jian ai*, “concern for everybody.” Love of your own family, your nation, and your chosen group of congenial companions could simply be group egotism. Mozi was at living at a time when the Chinese had embarked on a terrible period of violence that would result in horrific casualties; the only way to stop the Chinese exterminating one another, he believed, was to apply the Golden Rule universally. At about the same time in India, the Buddha taught his disciples a meditation that he called “the Immeasurables.” At each stage of his yogic journey into the depths of his mind, he deliberately evoked the emotion of love ~ “that huge, expansive and immeasurable feeling that knows no hatred” ~ and directed it systematically to the four corners of the world, not omitting a single plant, insect, animal, friend or foe from this radius of sympathy. The object of this exercise was to attain an attitude of total equanimity, which was extremely difficult, because our ego constantly looks to see how other things and people might benefit, flatter us or advance our interests. The Immeasurables were designed to pull down the barricades that we almost unconsciously erect between ourselves and others in order to protect

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<sup>15</sup> B. Sanhedrin 99b

the fragile ego. As the mind broke free of its ordinary self-oriented constriction, it felt “expansive, without limits, enhanced, without hatred or petty malevolence.”<sup>16</sup>

It was in this spirit that Jesus told his followers to love their enemies, selflessly offering their benevolence where there was no hope of any return. The word “love” here did not mean tender affection; in Jewish law, “love” was a legal term meant being helpful, loyal and giving practical support to our allies, neighbours and even the stranger.<sup>17</sup> It is not an impractical ideal but one that is well within the grasp of any committed person, but which requires constant *kenosis*: “For if you love those who love you, how can you claim any credit? Even the tax-collectors and the pagans do as much do they not?”<sup>18</sup> The gospels presented Jesus acting on this instruction to an exceptional degree, forgiving his executioners, turning the other cheek, and showing concern to everybody around him while he suffered until the very end.

Compassion is not a popular virtue. Religious and secular people alike often prefer to be right rather than compassionate, but that of course is pure egotism. Centuries of institutional, political and intellectual development have tended to obscure the importance of compassion in religion. That is why I am working to create, launch and propagate a Charter of Compassion that will be crafted by the general public online and by a panel of religious leaders from the three Abrahamic faiths who have such problems with each other right now. It will be signed, we hope, by a thousand religious leaders from all the major religions. And of course, the Charter will also suggest practical ways of making people aware of the spirit of the Golden Rule, which lies at the heart of all our great traditions.

Compassion is no longer just an edifying option. It is now essential to our survival. We are living in a world that is dangerously polarized; religion has often

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<sup>16</sup> *Anguttara Nikaya* 8.7.3.

<sup>17</sup> Leviticus 19:34

<sup>18</sup> Matthew 5:43~48

been used ~ or, rather, abused ~ in order to fuel the hatred that threatens the future of the human race. In a militantly secular world, where faith comes frequently under attack, the faithful can become defensive. All too often, the religion that dominates public discourse seems merely to express an institutional egotism: *my faith is better than yours!* But as the Daoists noted, once people interject themselves into their beliefs, they lose the plot and become quarrelsome, officious or even unkind. In seeking transcendence, it is better to focus on what we are transcending *from* ~ our egotism, greed, hatred, and destructive fear. The Daoists realised that if people concentrated on what they hoped to transcend *to*, seeking to define it and pin it down dogmatically, they could develop an inquisitorial stridency that was “unskilful.” But in the spirit of the Golden Rule: if our beliefs ~ secular or religious ~ make people belligerent, intolerant and unkind about other people’s faith, they are not skilful; if, however, their convictions ~ religious or secular ~ impel them to act compassionately and honour the stranger, then they are good, helpful and sound.

Today we all ~ religious or secular ~ have a task: to build a global community, where peoples can live together in harmony and respect. Any ideology ~ religious or secular ~ that breeds hatred or contempt for any group or nation whatsoever is failing the test of our time. If our religious traditions cannot contribute to this project, they too will fail the test of the twenty-first century. Long ago, Mozi pointed out that a deliberate and impartial “concern for everybody” was in our best interests. We now know this to be the case. What happens in Afghanistan or Iraq today is likely to have repercussions tomorrow in London or Washington. Our challenge is to find a way to interpret the Golden Rule globally. We have to realize that other nations have aspirations that must be taken as seriously as our own and refuse to treat other groups or nations in a way that we would not wish to be treated ourselves. This will

ultimately be of more benefit to everybody than self-interested, chauvinist or short-sighted policies. We are now living in a world in which small groups will increasingly have powers of destruction that were hitherto the preserve of the nation state. If we do not change our behaviour and implement the ethos of the Golden Rule, we are unlikely to have a viable world to hand on to the next generation.

The pursuit of the Golden Rule need not be a grim duty. We can and should make it a spiritual process that will lead us to enlightenment. I would like to end with two stories, which express the spirituality of *jian ai*. First is the story of Abraham, sitting outside his tent at Mamre and seeing three strangers on the horizon.<sup>19</sup> In the ancient Near East, strangers were dangerous because they were not bound by the rules of the local vendetta, and indeed very few of us would bring three total strangers off the street into our own home. But Abraham ran out to greet the three foreigners, bowed before them as if they were gods or kings, brought them into his camp, and provided them with a lavish meal. And in the course of the ensuing conversation, it transpired quite naturally, without any great fanfare, that one of these unknown visitors was Abraham's God. The act of practical compassion had led to a divine encounter. And it is of great importance that the recipients of Abraham's kindness were strangers. In Hebrew the word for the holy is *qaddosh*; its literal meaning is "separate, other." Sometimes the very "otherness" of the stranger ~ our initial sense of fear, panic or even revulsion ~ can give us intimations of that holiness that we call God and that goes beyond anything we can conceive.

The second story comes from Homer's *Iliad*, which, as you know, tells the story of one small incident in the ten year war between the Greeks and the Trojans. Achilles, the leading Greek warrior, had quarrelled with King Agamemnon. In pique

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<sup>19</sup> Genesis 18

and egotism, he withdrew his troops from the army, to the great detriment of the Greek cause. As a result of Achilles' egotistic and irresponsible tantrum, his beloved friend Patroclus was killed by Hector, one of the Trojan princes. Maddened by grief and rage, Achilles seemed to lose his very humanity. He challenged Hector to a duel, slew him, mutilated the body in front of the Trojan royal family, and refused to return the body to the family for burial. This meant that Hector's soul would never have rest. But one evening, Hector's old father, King Priam of Troy came into the Greek camp incognito, and to the amazement of everybody, he entered Achilles' tent. The old man fell to the ground and embraced Achilles' knees, kissing, Homer tells us, "the hands that were dangerous and man-slaughtering and had killed so many of his sons." His grief and utter self-abasement stirred up within Achilles a passion of grief for his own father. He took Priam's hand, and sitting side by side the two men wept together for their dead. In his sympathy and compassion for the father of the man who had slain his best friend, Achilles recovered his humanity. He gently laid Hector's corpse in Priam's arms and the two men contemplated each other in a moment of wonder and silent awe. The experience of self-emptying empathy had enabled them to see the divine and godlike in the other.<sup>20</sup> This is the spirituality that we need in our time.

Finally I would like to conclude with a very early Buddhist prayer, an accompaniment to the meditation of the Immeasurables, which reaches out to the end of the earth. It can be said by anybody, whatever his or her beliefs ~ or lack of them. If we could allow this prayer to become a part of our deepest selves, we would begin to understand the meaning of religion.

Let all beings be happy! Weak or strong, of high, middle or low estate,  
Small or great, visible or invisible, near or far away,

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<sup>20</sup> Iliad 24:479~81



Alive or still to be born ~ may they all be perfectly happy!

Let nobody lie to anybody or despise any single being anywhere.

May nobody wish harm to any single creature, out of anger or hatred!

Let us cherish all creatures, as a mother her only child!

May our loving thoughts fill the whole world, above, below, across, ~

Without limit; a boundless goodwill toward the whole world,

Unrestricted, free of hatred and enmity!<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Sutta Nipata* 118