

# A HEART OF WISDOM

Religion and  
Human Wholeness



MAURICE FRIEDMAN



*A Heart of Wisdom*

*SUNY Series in  
Religious Studies*

Harold Coward, Editor

*A Heart of Wisdom*

*Religion and Human Wholeness*

Maurice Friedman

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So teach us to number our days  
That we may get a heart of wisdom.  
Psalm 90

Le coeur a ses raisons  
Que le raison ne connait pas.  
Pascals, *Pensées*

*No Break*

Rabbi Mendel saw to it that his hasidim wore  
nothing around the neck while praying, for, he  
said, there must be no break between the heart  
and the brain.

Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*



To the memory of my friend

Ben Weininger, M.D.

Who possessed a heart of wisdom  
which he shared unstintingly  
with countless others



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## PREFACE

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Thirty-five years ago when I was working on my first book, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, Martin Buber helped me in my task by pointing out that writing is like musical composition: one has to know what goes in each segment. Today, when I am working on my twentieth book, I have rediscovered the truth of Buber's statement in a new and surprising manner.

In 1972 E. P. Dutton published my book *Touchstones of Reality: Existential Trust and the Community of Peace*. Ten years later Anima Publications published *The Human Way: A Dialogical Approach to Religion and Human Experience*, which I regarded as a sequel to *Touchstones of Reality*. In the course of discussions about a new edition of *Touchstones of Reality* and a paperback edition of *The Human Way*, I made a surprising discovery. I found I had a perspective as to what belonged where that I had not had even five years before. Looking at the two books together, I realized that even a radical revision of each would not suffice. Rather I had to take from both books (plus one chapter on "Literature and Religion" from my 1974 book *The Hidden Human Image*) what belonged to my reflections on religion and human wholeness.

As a result, *A Heart of Wisdom* now brings together more of my thought on religion and the religions than any of my earlier books and does so in a new Gestalt that I had not previously glimpsed. As such, I believe it will have a value to the reader considerably surpassing *The Human Way*, which Professor Harry Buck, director of Anima Publications, has graciously allowed to go out of print in order that I might be free to pursue the new vision that has opened up to me.

I wish to acknowledge the more than generous help of my colleague Professor Marcia Hermansen of the Department of Religious Studies of San Diego State University who has helped me leaven this book with a proper representation from Islam, which supplements my

own witness to Sufi mysticism in chapter 2—"My Dialogue with the Religions."

Chapter 4 on "Jesus: Image of the Human or Image of God" is not a scholarly account of the Christian viewpoint but is instead the fruit of my own dialogue with the Gospels and with Christianity and Christians. I do not deal with that part of the Gospel record which is the foundation for the Christian experience of Jesus, namely, his resurrection and continued presence through the Holy Spirit. That makes it more of a Jewish than a Christian touchstone of reality, although one that is more open to the meeting with Jesus than that of many other Jewish writers.

Maurice Friedman  
Solana Beach, California  
April 1991

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*PART ONE*

A Way That One Walks



# 1

## *Religion and the Religions*

You could not in your going find the ends of the soul, though  
you travelled the whole way: so deep is its Logos.

**Heraclitus of Ephesus**

What is man that Thou art mindful of him?  
And the son of man that Thou dost care for him?

**Psalm 8**

My great teacher, Joachim Wach, defined religion as a total response of the total being to what is experienced as ultimate reality. "Total response" because in religion, as distinct from scientific inquiry and aesthetic emotion, the whole being is responding and the whole being is involved in the response. Religion as we know it has always expressed itself in doctrinal forms as myth, creed, theology, metaphysics. It has expressed itself in practical forms as rituals, masses, and prayer—communal and individual. It has expressed itself in social forms as brotherhoods, churches, and sects. It is impossible, indeed, to understand any religion except in terms of these three expressions and their interrelations.

But for all that, one cannot reduce religion merely to these expressions and interrelations, for their matrix is the religious reality that is expressed, and what is expressed is not in itself directly expressible. One of the great errors in the approach of many people to religion is to see it as a form of philosophy or metaphysics which is going to prove that God exists or describe his nature and attributes.

This is to reduce God to an object, a part of the universe, to make him subservient to our logic, and in any case has to do with the detached observer rather than the involvement of one's total being. Religion is a way that one walks. Religion is a commitment. Religion is one's basic response *whether* or not one calls oneself religious and *whether* or not one affirms the existence of God. Some of our "labyrinthine ways," whether we are fleeing "the Hound of Heaven" or not, are so far underground that we ourselves are not aware of them when we come up again.

Religion for me, accordingly, is neither an objective philosophy nor a subjective experience. It is a lived reality that is ontologically prior to its expression in creed, ritual, and group. At the same time, it is inseparable from these expressions and cannot be distilled out and objectified. The *religious* at this deepest level might be described as a basic *attitude* or relationship arising in the encounter with the whole reality directly given to one in one's existence. The task of philosophy of religion for me is a conceptual clarification and a metaphorical pointing to the religious reality that is known in the between. This clarification and pointing must take place *without* abstracting from that meeting detached statements about the nature and attributes of God and without doing injustice to the typical and the unique apprehended in the phenomenological study of the history of religions.

In entering into dialogue with the religions, therefore, we are not looking for *the* truth, either in the sense of a Platonic truth—a metaphysical absolute—or in the sense of one religion being true and the rest false, or in the sense of a "perennial philosophy" in which we can say what is the "essence" of all religions and what is only the "accidental," cultural expression. Insofar as we can enter into dialogue with it, each religion will say something to us of its uniqueness and will say something to us about our life—our life as human beings but also as the particular persons that we are. We cannot *become* Mohammed or Lao-tzu or the Buddha or Jesus, but we can meet them and know them in that meeting. We cannot be an ancient Greek, but we can respond with "pity and terror" to the downfall of Oedipus or feel in the depths of our own lives Socrates' drinking the cup of hemlock.

What is common to all great religions is that each in its own way sees the human person as a problem to his or herself. Why is the person a problem to herself? Because of the given of human existence. The awareness of self, of the passage of time, of change, in oneself, others, and the world, of the fact that one is mortal and will die, of the fact that one moves inexorably and irreversibly from youth to age, of possibility and the need for choice, of freedom and the checks on freedom by the limitation of our inner resources and the constraint of