

CHAPTER 3

II

Contextualising the category formation

RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Prajan Kumar

In the present paper, I shall try to contextualise the process of category formation in the History of Religions. I shall do so in terms of my own area of specialisation, namely, Indian Studies. First of all, I shall outline the intellectual context of the West during the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Secondly, I shall outline the contemporary Religious Studies discourse on categories used in the field. Thirdly, I shall try to put the category formation in light of Hindu cosmopolitanism. **A.** I shall try to provide a cross-cultural evaluation of the category formation in Religious Studies discourse.

In pursuing the above scheme, I shall first myself to specific categories 'Traditional' and 'Modern'. The categories were not only western creations but also the products of the West, but also that, in the process of their formation, they were also the products of the West, as a result, these categories became associated with the consciousness of ordinary people's India and became filled to denote specific meanings. However, many contemporary scholars in the West are beginning to re-examine the methodologies involved in using these categories in the context of Hindu Traditions. This raises the problem of historical consciousness, in that the categories adopted by Hindu have become part of their worldview, attempting to remove them from their consciousness would be an aesthetic repression.

CHAPTER 3

Contextualising the category formation in Religious Studies

Pratap Kumar

In the present paper, I shall try to contextualise the process of category formation in the History of Religions. I shall do so in terms of my own area of specialisation; namely, Indian Studies. First of all, I shall outline the intellectual context of the West during the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Secondly, I shall outline the contemporary Religious Studies discourse on categories used in the field. Thirdly, I shall try to see the category formation in light of Hindu conceptualisations. Finally, I shall try to provide a cross-cultural exploration of the categories in Religious Studies discourse.

In pursuing the above scheme, I shall limit myself to specific categories: 'Hinduism', 'religion', and 'God'. I shall argue that these categories were not only western constructions to understand the 'Hindu' traditions in India, but also that, in the course of time, the nineteenth and twentieth century Hindu elite consciously used the same categories, in their quest to spread Hindu ideals and worldviews in the West, as alternate models of conceptualising reality. As a result, those categories became assimilated into the consciousness of ordinary people in India and became reified to connote specific meanings. However, many contemporary scholars in the West are beginning to realise the inadequacies involved in using those categories in the context of Hindu traditions. This raises the problem of historical consciousness, in that the categories acquired by Hindus have become part of their worldview; attempting to remove them from their consciousness involves an inevitable regression.

Therefore, I argue that, on the one hand, the meanings of those categories in the case of India must be renegotiated, *inter alia*, among at least three interacting worldviews; namely, the Hindu, the Muslim, and the Western. And, on the other hand, any examination of the existing categories, or exploration of new categories, has to be pursued within the present historical consciousness of the people involved.

EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

In our attempt to understand the categories in Religious Studies discourse, we need to understand the general intellectual climate that informed the meanings of those categories as they emerged. A number of scholars have noted the rise of the science of religion, the History of Religions, and comparative religions alongside the European trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as its consequent alliance with mercantilism. The idea that religion and economics - and consequently politics - are interconnected is a very old phenomenon, not requiring a detailed account to establish its point. One has only to gloss over the missionary activities of early Buddhism, medieval Hinduism, the Christianity of Constantine's time, and, more recently, Islam to see the interconnectedness of religion and politics.

Instead of trying to state the obvious, I shall outline some of the intellectual tendencies in Europe that influenced the choice of categories and their meanings in History of Religions discourse. I shall call these 'tendencies' because, while not major movements, they were quite pervasive in the European mind during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and, later on, nineteenth centuries. The first one is the humanistic tendency, which began during the sixteenth century with the Renaissance and culminated in the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The second is the universalistic tendency, which can be traced back to Voltaire's philosophical critique of Christianity. The third is the Deistic tendency; the fourth, the Naturalistic, or scientific; and the fifth includes occultism, theosophism, and neo-Gnosticism.

The Renaissance gave impetus to humanistic tendencies which persisted through the Enlightenment period of the eighteenth century. What is significant in these humanistic tendencies is the gradual separation of theology and philosophy. While Renaissance humanism tended to accommodate theology, eighteenth century humanism, especially in the hands of people like Voltaire, distanced itself totally from Christian theological influences. Thus, the philosophical discourse of the eighteenth century became more independent of theology (Bullock 1985:16, 51f).

A natural outcome of this was Voltaire's universal approach to religion. His notion of God went beyond traditional Christianity. Commenting on Voltaire's restlessness with the Church and its theology, Allan Bullock (1985:57) says:

Voltaire's *Zadig* (in the philosophical tale of that name) ended the theological disputes of the Egyptian, the Hindu, the Confucian, the Aristotelian Greek and the druidical Celt by convincing them that their particular observances were all related to a common divine creator.

Both the deistic and naturalistic (scientific) tendencies have indirectly contributed to this universalistic outlook. It is also noteworthy that the eighteenth century gave rise to a distinction between 'natural' and 'revealed' (or true) religion. Natural religion initially meant deism, but later it included Confucianism and Taoism. Revealed religion meant Christianity. The naturalistic (scientific) tendency contributed mainly to the evolutionary approach to religion, very much in line with Darwin's theory of the origin of species. It also tended to hierarchise the world's religions. Peter Harrison (1992:553) suggests that the early modern construction of 'religion' emerged out of religious controversy, and eventually 'the establishment of a new science of religion in which the various "religions" were studied and impartially compared'.

It must be admitted that discussions of 'religion' in the early modern period were largely determined by the knowledge of the world at that time. It is interesting to note that one of the earliest writers who supported herself by writing books on world religions was Hanna Adams, a woman writer. Thomas A Tweed points out that, despite the fact that she was perhaps the first one who consciously chose to write on world religions without any 'partiality', she was hardly mentioned in any of the major surveys of the History of Religions discourse. Hanna Adams initially published her *Dictionary of all religions* in 1784 under a different title. Tweed suggests that her work provided a model for Vincent L Milner's *Religious denominations of the world* (1872). He (1992:438), however, points out that:

... the majority of late nineteenth century American interpreters of religion overlooked or undervalued her contributions. In one sense, this is not surprising. Her sources quickly became outdated because of the proliferation of new translations and authoritative accounts during the nineteenth century. It also makes sense that the conservative Protestant authors of the many compendia that appeared in the century ignored her work: they did not share her commitment to impartiality.

Despite the fact that Hanna Adams attempted to write on world religions 'impartially', her work also suffered from the same hierarchy that the intellectuals of the eighteenth century provided. As Tweed (1992:447) points out:

... until approximately the second quarter of the nineteenth century the religious world still was populated by Christians, Jews, Muslims and 'Pagans' or 'Heathens'. Christians, as those following the revealed religion, stood in the highest position. Jews were second best. Muslims, because they shared a monotheistic faith and some common heritage stood next in the hierarchy. For Adams and most of her contemporaries, the final category 'Heathens' or 'Pagans', included an extremely wide range of groups and peoples. In the entry under 'Pagans' in her Dictionary, for instance, Adams listed four subgroups of those who stand outside the traditions of the monotheistic West. The first two included the religions of various ancient people (Greeks, and Romans as well as 'Chaldeans, Phenicians, and Sabians, etc ...'). Next came major Asians religions ('the Chinese, Hindoos, Japanese, etc'). Finally Adams listed the religions of the non-literate peoples (the 'barbarians' of Americas, the South Seas and Africa).

CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS STUDIES DISCOURSE

If this was the case in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one wonders if today things have changed in any significant way, especially in South Africa. One could take a look at the existing Religious Studies departments in our country. With the exception of one or two traditions which are taught by specialists, the rest are taught by generalists - as though the so-called 'world religions' didn't matter very much.

Without attending to these issues, which still need to be addressed, I shall move on to point out that, elsewhere in the world, Religious Studies courses have generally kept pace with changing political and economic factors. The emerging Religious Studies faculties in the USA is a case in point. A quick example would be the rise of world religions programs during the seventies, and their gradual separation from Divinity schools.

Even though Joseph Kitagawa and his predecessor and teacher Joachim Wach taught within the Divinity school atmosphere, they systematically separated History of Religions from theological studies and even from philosophy of

religion. They saw History of Religions as reflecting two interrelated types of studies: historical and systematic. Joachim Wach (1988:xix) defines these two types of studies in the following way: historical, 'which studies the growth and development of the concrete religions' (descriptive); and systematic, which deals with 'the structure of religious phenomena'. Wach further points out that the 'historical study of religion cannot proceed from philosophy of religion, which is concerned with "essential nature" (wessen)'. He (1988:xix) describes the systematic type as 'phenomenological, sociological and comparative studies of religions and religious phenomena'. In this sense, the older theological and philosophical models have been gradually replaced by phenomenological and historical methods within the History of Religions discipline.

In the USA, the new programs of Religious Studies teach world religions, from the Christianity of the West to the Shintuism of the East, using the same methodological tools. This changing situation has contributed to a new exploration of category formation in Religious Studies, or more particularly, in History of Religions. We are now beginning to take into account the inadequacies of the older categories, beginning to either redefine the older ones or radically question some of their use in light of the new materials that have become available to scholars during the last hundred and fifty years.

In light of the eighteenth and nineteenth century intellectual context, at least the main categories in Religious Studies discourse became fully established. Among them, the key ones are 'religion', 'God', and the generic names of various religious traditions (such as 'Hinduism', 'Christianity', and 'Buddhism').

In recent scholarly writings, W C Smith (1978) and many of his followers have radically questioned the use of the word 'religion' within the scholarly discourse on religions. In fact, in 1962, Smith boldly proclaimed, in his book *The meaning and end of religion*.

I am bold enough to speculate whether these terms [such as 'religion'] will not in fact have disappeared from serious writing and careful speech within twenty-five years (Smith 1978:195).

Nevertheless, the context in which Smith radically questions the use of the word 'religion' is very Christian and theistic - as he himself admits towards the end of the book (1978:201). And it is very clear from his title that he mainly had in mind the so called 'Great Religious Traditions', as opposed to the so called 'little traditions'. To this day, neither in scholarly discourse nor in popular usage, the term 'religion' as an organising category has not disappeared - even more than thirty years since he (Smith) made his proclamation.

While the use of the word 'religion' continued within scholarly discourse, as well as in popular conversation, its definition became crucial in light of the abundance of new material which has become available on world religions. Therefore, I am not rushing to suggest that we should abandon it. But what I am more interested in is to see if we can redefine the term more inclusively, rather than exclusively.

Behind scholarly efforts to define religion is the major concern for category formation. Every time a foreign concept is translated into English, we are faced with the problem of adequately communicating the conceptual depth that exists in that language. This is the more basic problem that lies behind the problem of defining 'religion'. In this regard, I am in full agreement with Herbrechtsheimer's (1993:1) argument:

The definition of Religion continues to be a matter of dispute among scholars, and I suspect that disagreements about the topic will persist so long as religion is studied in academic circles. This is as it should be. No area of academic specialization should allow its self-definition ever to be a settled thing. Still, certain aspects of this discussion can be laid aside from time to time as our understanding of religious phenomena becomes more sophisticated.

Herbrechtsheimer rightly argues that specific ethnic concepts from one culture do not always fit other cultures. With this in mind, Herbrechtsheimer (1993:2) sets out to 'make a case against exclusivist definitions that find the chief distinguishing marks of religious phenomena in the reverence of superhuman beings'. Thus, he shifts the search for a definition of religion from human verses superhuman to theistic verses non-theistic notions of religion. By concentrating on the Buddhist case, he demonstrates well how the old definitions, centred around a human-superhuman polarity, cannot be of much help in understanding many religious traditions.

While I do not disagree with him in so far as he rightly rejects a definition based on a polarity between human and superhuman, I wish to point out, however, that Herbrechtsheimer unwittingly creates another dichotomy between theistic and non-theistic and seeks to define religion in that context. One problem that we face in operating with a polarity such as theistic verses non-theistic is to figure out which religion to include where. Surely Herbrechtsheimer thinks that Buddhism is a non-theistic religion. While this is true from the standpoint of 'theistic' religions, such a negative way of stating Buddhism is to narrow down the scope of definition to a theistic verses non-theistic framework.

In the first place, even to conceive of 'superhuman being/s' in Buddhism (if one sees some Buddhas as such) from a theistic perspective results in a distortion of the notions associated with Buddha, whether in the case of Mahāyāna or Theravāda. Using a theistic versus non-theistic framework does not work, not only for Buddhism, but for many other religions. The notion of 'theos' or 'God' is a uniquely Hellenistic one, which only much later became part even of the Christian tradition. Nevertheless, one might see that notion, in some ways (I think rather uncomfortably), fitting the Christian case. But even if we admit it for the Christian case, scholars are beginning to wonder its usefulness to religions beyond the Christian world. In his recent work on Sikhism, McLeod (1989:49) recognises this when he says:

We have all heard reasons why the word 'God' is inappropriate as a translation when we move beyond the Christian tradition and some readers will find those reasons very cogent indeed.

When we recognise that the 'theos' culture is very different from the culture of saṃsāra, (which defines reality in a cyclical mode), the category 'theos' becomes problematic - both in the Buddhist and the Hindu case - in conceptualising reality. While I support the argument of Herbrechtsheimer that in the Buddhist case the definition of religion cannot be sought within the framework of human versus superhuman, I wish to avoid falling into the other polarity between theistic and non-theistic religions. In other words, such polarised ways of defining religion lead to exclusivist definitions, and what we need is an inclusive definition which provides scope for reflection on various world religions.

CONCEPTUALISING THE HINDU WORLDVIEW

In the following, I shall try to show why not only a human versus superhuman framework, but also the theistic versus non-theistic framework does not help in the case of the Hindu worldview. Conceptualising reality through theistic categories is problematic in the Hindu case in view of the differentiated ways in which the Hindu notions of reality are understood. In undertaking to clarify this, I shall, like Herbrechtsheimer, also fall back on the 'elite' conceptions of Hinduism - not that the popular ones are to be ignored, but to recognise the fact that intellectuals provide coherence to the conceptions of common people. In that sense, I agree with the general argument of Herbrechtsheimer (1993:9) that:

Any adequate definition of religion must not only allow for the most common aspects of religious tradition to be included within its scope, but it must also provide a conceptuality that

will allow us to appreciate the intellectual subtlety of the greatest religious thinkers.

Redefining the notions of the divine in the Hindu worldview, especially in contemporary Religious Studies discourse, is replete with serious problems. This is partly due to the fact that many Hindu elite thinkers themselves have, during the last hundred years or so, appropriated the word 'God' as equivalent to what is found in the Hindu worldview. This is evident from a recent Hindu thinker's comment while discussing the concept of God in the Hindu context:

All religion is stupendous symbolism, externalizing the Self as a Holy Other, to emphasize its utter purity and universality. All religions speak of God, each in its own way. Each must be transcendent ultimately; because taken literally each is a particular version of expression (in Sontag and Bryant 1982:39).

Such naive equations of concepts; namely, 'Self', in the Hindu case, and 'Holy Other' and 'God', in the Christian theological sense, lead to an uncritical appropriation of categories loaded, not only with cultural particularities, but also with a specific 'theological' agenda. Furthermore, such an uncritical appropriation of categories across the board creates problems in the interpretation and understanding of various religious traditions. Such an attempt loses sight of important cultural meanings given to the concepts within a particular tradition.

Within the Hindu worldview, there are at least three possible ways in which reality is affirmed: Reality as *Brahman*; Reality as *Isvara*, and Reality as *Isvari* or *Devi*. The first notion is a gender neutral category which attempts to provide an abstract idea of Reality (the word in Sanskrit is *sat*). In its literal sense, the word 'Brahman' means 'the Great', and, since it is a neuter category, one can only conceptualise it as the 'Great It', if you wish. The latter two notions are, in a sense, anthropomorphic; but such anthropomorphism is not to be equated with, for instance, the Christian notion of God.

Whereas the notion of God in other religions, such as Christianity and Islam, is predominantly drawn from a male-dominant ideology, the Hindu conception of *Isvara* (Lord) is only partially male. For, both in the Vaishnava case as well as in the Saiva case, the Lord - which is the approximate translation of the word *Isvara* - is never understood apart from his divine consort. While there is some ambiguity in the Vaishnava case as to whether or not the Lord and his divine consort are of equal status (there was a lengthy debate on this issue within the Srivaishnava tradition of South India during the thirteenth century, see Kumar

1990), in the case of Saiva tradition, the most dominant conception of reality is androgynous (*arthanārisvara* 'the Lord as half woman').

The third notion, namely Isvari or Devi, is fully female in its conception; the Devi dominates her male counterparts. It is perhaps difficult to turn the English word 'Lord' into a female one without having to use another word, such as 'Lady'. But, in the case of the Sanskrit word, one simply can turn the last vowel 'a' in Isvara into a long 'ā' and make it Isvari, and it becomes the feminine 'Lady'. Brahmā, Vishnu and Īva are seen as her various functions, namely creation, sustenance and dissolution.

The three modes of conception of reality are, however, not unrelated. They are intrinsic to each other. The Hindu conception of reality is not a polarised one, in terms of world and God, but a unified and inclusive one. All three concepts try to see the physical world, humans, and the divine as a whole. So whether one conceives reality as Brahman, or Isvara, or Isvari (Devi), each one of them is seen as including the whole reality within itself. Therefore, translating them or equating them with the western notion of God (which is predominantly Hellenistic in meaning) is problematic.

For the same reason, categories such as 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' are problematic because they are specific to a western cultural ethos and not to the cultures of Asia (or even Africa). Interpreting the multiplicity of deities in the Vedas and in the later mythological texts as 'polytheist', while categories such as Brahman and Isvara are interpreted as 'monotheist', is to miss the particular ways in which those concepts must be seen in the Hindu culture.

In their enthusiasm to introduce western education and Christianity into India, the western missionary movements created the impression that monotheism is the highest form of religion. The early Orientalists also tended to follow suit, without evaluating seriously the data coming from the East. Nineteenth century Hindu reformers became influenced by such ideological domination and began to reinterpret the Vedas and the Upanishads in light of the western notion of monotheism.

Such uncritical assimilation of western categories by the Hindu reformers and scholars alike created an intellectual gap in understanding Hinduism. Thus the term 'God' became almost analogous to the category 'Brahman' in the popular language of many Hindu reformers; and even to this day, an ordinary Hindu would use the word 'God' without regard to the distinctive Christian connotations that it has.

Ironically, much of the resistance to a critical re-examination of these categories comes not so much from western scholars, but from ordinary Hindu and neo-Hindu groups. Influenced by the so-called 'higher status' of the notions of 'God' and 'monotheism', they wish to see their own traditions being interpreted in terms of those categories. The western ideological domination that came with the mercantile domination beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made the colonised groups feel so inferior that, today, reinterpreting their traditions in the light of the western notions is seen as the most 'developed' way of thinking. This is a serious problem scholars have to face as they begin to re-examine the viability of many existing categories in understanding Asian and African cultures.

A CROSSCULTURAL EXPLORATION OF CATEGORY FORMATION

Whether the term 'religion' is defined in terms of 'human verses superhuman', or in terms of 'theistic vs non-theistic', or simply in its original sense of 'ritual', such a definition is still caught in a polarity. The definitions that allow a polarity are useful only in cases where a relationship between the divine and the human is posited. But there are traditions which do not lend themselves to such polarities. In other words, there is nothing 'out there' with whom, or with which, some relationship is posited. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism are clearly cases in point. This is not to suggest that there are no divinities in these traditions. Surely there are deities worshipped in each case. But the matter is far more complex than the presence of deities. In each of these, the intellectual traditions tend to move away from the worship of deities. So a definition should take both the popular and the intellectual traditions into consideration.

Since the word 'religion' is not an easy one to define inclusively, perhaps we need to give more attention to the category suggested by Ninian Smart; namely, 'worldview'. This is far more inclusive, and one that radically humanises the discipline we call Religious Studies.

The category 'worldview' presupposes human involvement in constructing the religious world, rather than placing emphasis on transempirical categories such as God - the study of whom is certainly not within the scope of humanities and social sciences. In other words, any definition of our field must be based on empirically available data. Most certainly, in the Hindu case the category 'worldview' is more relevant than the word 'religion'.

While I am not suggesting that 'worldview' is the best category, it is certainly better than 'religion'. By the same token, I am not, as Smith did some thirty

years ago, hastily expecting everyone to give up using the term 'religion'. But I am certainly asking the scholarly community to reflect on whether or not we can possibly include every tradition in the world in defining 'religion'. If, however, an organising category cannot be defined in its broadest possible sense to include a whole variety of traditions, then we must rethink its possible relevance.

As far as the generic terms are concerned, these categories must be re-negotiated between scholars and the people who are part of the respective traditions. For instance, in the case of Hinduism, we know that the category was introduced by the western scholarly discourse. Without going into detail, I shall, however, point out that the term today has become inevitable. The significance of the term became especially evident during the Nationalist movement in India when the identities of various groups in India had to be distinguished. Thus, it was more clearly in the context of Hindu-Muslim relations that the term took its defining features. Thus the word 'Hindu' was used to distinguish between various religious communities (such as Sikhs, Buddhists, Muslims, Parsees, and Christians).

Therefore, a new search for a category, in place of, 'Hindu' needs to be negotiated within the contemporary historical consciousness of people, not only in India but also outside it. In this process, one thing that must be kept in mind is the highly differentiated nature of what we usually call 'Hinduism'. Since there is no single category reflecting that variegatedness within the Hindu tradition, it would be ill-advised to replace it with any other word, such as 'Sanātana Dharma' (Eternal Dharma), which can only reflect a part of the Brāhmānical tradition. To be fair, the term Hinduism has not caused as many difficulties as categories such as 'religion' and 'God' did in understanding 'non-Christian' worldviews. Therefore, while I do not suggest we impose terms such as 'religion' and 'God' on every religious tradition in the world, it is important to recognise the usefulness of the word 'Hindu' - without making it a reified category.

But those who insist that categories such as 'religion' and 'God' can still be used effectively must, at least, concur with scholars such as Michael LaFargue, who suggests a definition along the lines of differential systems in mathematics.

LaFargue (1992) identifies two contrasting approaches to the study of religion: a quest for religious truth (for example, J Hick, and W C Smith); and an attempt to gain an accurate account of religions of the world (such as anthropological or sociological studies). LaFargue (1992:693) rejects the first approach on the basis of Langdon Gilkey's comment that:

the single essence of religion (which this approach seeks) represents a particular way of being religious. Thus it has to misinterpret every other tradition in order to incorporate them into its own scheme of understanding.

LaFargue (1992:694) also rejects the second approach by pointing out that:

It must confine itself to description, and hence accept at face value the interpretation of any given religion that happens to be most common among the members of that religion. This approach puts one in a position similar to a musical anthropologist who can't tell good! kung music from bad! kung music. Without the addition of a critical element, the descriptive approach also tends to leave us implicitly operating out of a position of skeptical relativism when it comes to the substantive claims of religion.

So following the mathematical model of differential systems, LaFargue (1992:709) suggests that:

the characteristic of a differential system is that its elements are mutually defining. No single elements have their meaning completely in themselves, so that they can serve as self-contained foundation for the meaning of other elements.

He argues that a category, such as 'God', has its value in relation to other key Pauline concepts, such as 'sin', 'faith', and 'salvation by Christ'. Therefore, terms such as 'God' cannot be equated with concepts such as 'Nirvāna', 'Brahman', and 'Isvara'. The basic premise he (1992:710) suggests is 'that the meaning of any given element in a religion needs to be understood by considering its relation to other elements of the same religion'.

This kind of definition takes into account the different meanings that terms such as 'God', 'Nirvāna', 'Tao', and 'Isvara' connote in their respective systems of thought. And these meanings are foundations upon which valid claims are made by the respective adherents of those religions. Thus, one could criticise the claims of those religions from within, and not from without. Criticism across the board cannot be valid in view of the variegatedness of meanings and purposes such have for their respective adherents.

In conclusion, I might stress that religious traditions are highly differentiated, not only when they are compared with other outside traditions, but also from within.

This means that our search for categories in the study of religion must take into account the variegatedness of each religious tradition. And defining religion as variegated systems of thought, or as 'differential systems' (as LaFargue suggests), is more helpful in our search for categories. No single category should claim universality, but rather only find itself useful in a relative sense. In that sense, whether we choose 'worldviews' (as suggested by Smart) or keep the term 'religion' we need to redefine them from time to time to incorporate the new material that keeps coming as we study the various traditions of the world.

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CHAPTER 4

Religion through another set of glasses: The challenge of a different optic¹

Gerhard van den Heever

INTRODUCTION: TAKING POINTS FROM METAPHORS

It is enlightening to observe how scholars in the field of religion, especially in denominational theology, insulate the ideas expressed in the religious texts of their respective traditions from religious phenomena, ideas, and folklore found in 'neighbouring' traditions - other traditions hailing from roughly the same era and 'culture continent'.² The ideological bias with which the uniqueness of religious ideas, motifs, and texts is argued raises a number of questions: How do religious traditions interact? What are the effects of such interactions? Is interaction itself the mode of existence of a religious tradition's *Überhaupt*? However, a more fundamental question is also implied: How do religions work? Or, what is religion?

The answers we give to such questions are of tremendous importance with regard to the way we analyse religious phenomena and engage religious texts. It is in light of them that the boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' are drawn, the contents of inclusivity and exclusivity defined, and the desirability of tolerance, or the obligation to be intolerant, argued.

No answer to the question, 'What is religion?' is innocuous or innocent. Any theory about religion and its workings has, therefore, political relevance. Recently, the truth of this statement became obvious as the Afrikaans Reformed

churches vehemently rejected the Declaration on Religious Rights and Responsibilities (drafted in November 1992 by the South African chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace).³ The negative reaction of these churches to the Draft Declaration showed how religious communities insulate themselves against what is perceived to be a strategy to enforce political change by viewing religion as an a-historical and monolithic entity. In this viewpoint, Truth (that is, *their* understanding of religion) can be strictly distinguished from Untruth (that is, *other* religious traditions or religions). Such interreligious co-operation is said to amount to syncretism (and should therefore be rejected).

And now, by way of this long detour, we come to the metaphor. What religion is understood and defined to be depends on one's vantage point. Our experience of the weather is a case in point. One can look at the formation of clouds from above or from below. From below, one can see the slow build-up of cumulus clouds - as if they have been hung there in display for the day. We speak of an 'overcast day' or a 'sunny day' as if it was meant to be the case that day. We see the almost static display of thunderclouds towering above, suspended motionless in the sky. But the perspective changes when we watch the weather forecast on television. When viewed from many hundreds of kilometres above, satellite pictures will show the movement and flux of the cloud formation, the coming and going of fronts. What appears to be static and frozen in time from below can be seen to be moving and flowing when viewed from another angle. The limitations of human perception create the impression of an unchanging object. But this is an illusion, since we know weather changes constantly. Clouds form and dissipate. What seems fixed is actually an illusion. 'Reality' is what moves and changes.

FROM THE KENOSIS OF BEING TO THE KENOSIS OF RELIGION

The emptiness of Being has some unsettling implications for religion. Whatever should go by the name of 'religion' is itself no fixed, definable object. It is no-thing. If the Being of beings has a text structure (that beings are only what they are within a network of meaning-giving relations - what Heidegger called the 'worlding of world' and *Bewandnisganzheit*), then 'religion' itself exhibits a textual structure.

Religions are not fixed, a-historical entities. Each religion, as an orientation within reality, is inextricably enmeshed in the conditional network of reality.⁴ Religious truth is not only perspectival by nature, but the positions adopted by specific religious traditions are themselves not fixed. Those positions are shifting viewpoints relative to all the other changing and shifting moments in the deve-

loping contexts with which they are interwoven. Religious orientation is conditioned by many factors: physical, psychological, social, economical, and historical. This means that no religious perspective can claim absolute truth.

This has some important implications for the study of religion(s) and religious phenomena. If religion is the search for an orientation in reality, then, given the unstable and empty nature of reality, religion is an unending series of balancing acts, a receptive-creative interaction with reality. To view religion (or a specific religious tradition) as a fixed, monolithic entity is to distort the logic according to which religious orientation works. Conceptual closure in fixed, absolute dogmas and systems is an attempt to escape the dynamics of creative adaptation from moment to moment - which religion is in essence.

Concrete, historical religions are not static, homogeneous entities - they are multiform and ever changing organisms, each taken up in interreligious nodal points of extensive historical dimensions. New religions emerge from their predecessors: come into existence, adapt to changing circumstances, and become extinct. But even their 'extinction' is relative. Older European pagan religions lived on in the popular religion of Christian Europe. The old religions of the Graeco-Roman world exerted an indelible influence on the Christianity of late Antiquity. Zoroastrianism is a good example of this. Rooted in the ancient Indo-European past, it exerted a tremendous influence on emerging Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and even on Mahayana Buddhism. Another good example of this is Manichaeism, a hybrid of apocalyptic Jewish Christianity, Gnosticism, elements of Zoroastrianism, and later also Confucianism and Buddhism. Every religion is taken up in this process of give and take, development and change, adaptation and integration, disintegration and reintegration, demise and rebirth.

Remaining within the meaning of the cloud metaphor, it is clear that the political and ideological use of religion as a *principium* for action (*praxis* derived from *theoria*), as well as viewpoints presupposing a 'God's-eye view' of reality and religion as a fixed point, are built on an illusion. I am advocating, instead, a History of Religions (*Religionsgeschichtliche*) approach to the study of religion. A religio-historical approach (*Religionsgeschichte*) allows one to perceive the mode of existence of religious orientation as a constantly changing dialogue, movement, adaptation, integration, disintegration and reintegration, demise and rebirth; in short, as a constantly evolving creation of an unfixd world. In this sense, a religio-historical approach has an ideological-critical function. In the words of Kurt Rudolph (quoted in Van den Heever 1993b:19 n44):

... 'religion', the religious situations, and the history of religions are connected. If we examine the beginnings of the discipline, we see everywhere that a certain distance from one's own tradition opens one's eyes toward the foreign world; on the other hand, contact with a foreign tradition affects one's own tradition in such a way that very soon reflection begins, reflection which thematizes this contact, often with the result of producing an awareness of self through a new awareness of others. It is well known that as a discipline, the history of religions is a product of European *Geistesgeschichte*. It was and still is accompanied by the midwives who assisted in its birth: tolerance, humanitarianism, and a critical attitude toward tradition. Whenever the history of religions has found itself in the dangerous waters of religions and theology, it has consistently chosen to swim in liberal, anti-orthodox, and 'enlightened' currents. To this extent, it has preserved a religious heritage which theology itself has often lost.

Since religion exists only in its concrete manifestations, the conditional and interactive processes which describe the functioning of religious orientation should also be indicated as concrete, historical processes and events. I have selected two sets of patterns of interaction as examples. The first concerns the birth of the saviour in Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian traditions. The second concerns the motif of the conflagration (the cataclysmic, fiery end of the world) in Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian traditions. In both cases, it can be shown that seminal ideas, which touch on the core of each tradition, are found in more than one tradition and that, within the same culture continent, one can hardly speak of 'uniqueness' with regard to religious traditions.

Of course, one will always be able to point out very numerous differences between, say Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity in the one instance, and between Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity in the other. But a comparison of religious folklore will show that there exists a family resemblance between these traditions which is not simply to be decried as superficial, or even worse, analogous (but essentially unique). Historical study of the dissemination of these ideas indicates that the similarities are not coincidental, but the result of an interaction of traditions.

It is common practice in scholarship to focus almost totally on differences in detail while missing the broader similarity of the pattern. If the pattern is similar, and one can account for the differences, as well as show the historical probability of an interactive relationship between traditions, then one has to assume that the

similarities are the result of religious interaction. When so many similarities are found, it is also impossible to argue for independent archetypal derivation. It has to be religious interaction.

PATTERNS OF INTERACTION: BIRTH NARRATIVES OF THE SAVIOUR IN INDIAN AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS⁵

Although it can be shown that a dynamic interchange among the peoples of the Mediterranean basin, the ancient near east, and the Indian subcontinent existed before the Hellenistic era, the Alexandrian conquests turned this diverse geographical area into a multiform 'culture continent', called 'the Hellenistic world'. This does not imply that the Hellenistic world was a monolithic phenomenon - far from it. Hellenism affected all peoples in this wide area in varying degrees and with different results, heightening interchange between the different parts of this delineated world for the period roughly from the start of the Hellenistic era to well into late Antiquity.

It is within this 'culture continent', and roughly within the time borders implied by the terms 'Hellenistic era' and 'late Antiquity', that we see the rise of five great religious traditions - Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - which have endured to this day. While Zoroastrianism predated the Hellenistic age by half a millennium, it reached its acme, and exerted its influence, exactly in the Hellenistic age and late Antiquity.

A comparative study shows that within this culture continent all religious traditions were taken up in this great movement of interchange. This section shall establish the pattern of interactions noted above by listing parallels. These parallels shall establish the pattern.

In Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as in Christianity, there is a powerful belief that God visits humankind in a human body; both share uncertainty about the finality of their central figures - in Buddhism, we find a belief in Buddha Maitreya who is yet to come, while, in Christianity, there is the belief in the second coming of Christ. Both Buddha and Jesus are believed to have had a pre-existence,⁶ and each is reputed, through genealogies, to be of royal lineage.⁷

One outstanding feature of Buddhism is its concern for the salvation of the entire human race and its missionary zeal in spreading the *dharmā* throughout the whole world - a feature mirrored in Christianity with Jesus' missionary charge to his disciples and the missionary zeal of Christianity itself. The universalist view of Christ's relevance for humankind is in agreement with the

Buddhist view that Buddha became incarnate for the salvation of the entire human race.⁸ Both the Buddha and Jesus are divine children conceived and born without the agency of a male progenitor. They 'descend' directly into the mother's womb. But more than that, the mothers (Maya and Mary) remain virgins in childbirth and after giving birth. Maya dies soon after giving birth to Siddharta, but Mary goes on to become an eternal virgin.⁹ There is a dream vision connected to the births of the Buddha and Christ: in the case of the Buddha his mother sees him entering her womb in the form of a white elephant; in the case of Jesus, his 'father' receives the divine message about his conception in a dream vision.¹⁰ Immediately after the miraculous conception of the Buddha and Christ the news is made known to the husbands. Though in Luke, the annunciation is made to Mary, in Matthew it is made to Joseph - as in the Buddhist tradition, where king Suddhodana is the recipient of the message. In both narratives, the husbands are in turmoil: they receive a heavenly message, and they are asked to accept the new situation of the pregnancy of their wives, which they accept wholeheartedly.¹¹

Another rather picturesque parallel to the Christian infancy narratives concerns the birth of the Indian deity, Krishna. He was born under the reign of the wicked king, Kamsa, who was told that he would meet death by the eighth son of Devaki and Vasudeva. He had six of her sons put to death. Krishna was born in prison, where Kamsa had Devaki and Vasudeva put. In the dead of night, Vasudeva took Krishna out to a pair of cowherds, Nanda and Yasoda, whose daughter was born at the same time. They had actually come to Braj to pay taxes to Kamsa. He exchanged Krishna for Nanda and Yasoda's daughter. When Kamsa heard about the daughter being born to Devaki and Vasudeva, he had the infant hurled against a rock. By a series of miracles, the child Krishna escaped the general massacre of infants ordered by Kamsa. Krishna grew up with his brother Balarama, who was entrusted by Vasudeva to Nanda as a herdsman's son, tending his flocks. Both Krishna and the Christ of John's gospel are portrayed as good shepherds with their religions of love.¹²

At the birth of Buddha, as at the birth of Jesus, the devas, rishis, and angelic beings were present, engulfed in radiant light, announcing joy and peace to the world.¹³ As with the Buddha, all movement in the world of humanity and nature ceases with the birth of Christ.¹⁴ Immediately after his birth, Buddha took seven steps, as Mary did after her birth.¹⁵ A marvellous light shines at Buddha's conception and birth. Luke and the Protoevangelium of James retain the light, but Matthew changes it into a star.¹⁶ Buddha and Buddhist saints are often credited with the miraculous power of taming wild animals, a power also ascribed to the infant Jesus.¹⁷ The young infants Buddha and Christ make a tree bend over miraculously and make water to gush forth.¹⁸ Both the infants make

the idols in the temple fall over (in the case of Jesus, in the Egyptian city of Sotinen).¹⁹ The actual moment of birth is announced by a woman who acted as midwife, functioning in the narrative as female messenger.²⁰ Each is given precious gifts.²¹

At an early age, Buddha and Jesus are presented in the temple by both parents.²² In both traditions, an elderly sage enjoys the privilege of seeing the infant before he dies (Asita/Simeon), alluding to the greatness of the infant and prophesying his own death before the child will have grown up. A further verbal parallel exists in that both traditions refer to the spirit: in the Indian tradition, the sage arrives by air to the scene; in the Biblical tradition, Simeon is brought to the temple by the Spirit (*en to pneumatī*).²³ The motif of old women blessing the infant prodigy is found in the story of Shabari, who is given the chance to see Rama before she goes to heaven, as well as in the story of Anna, who saw the child Jesus. In the Buddhaghosa version of the story, the old women and the saintly hermit, Asita, is connected in the same chapter, prompting a consideration of the possibility that the Mahayana versions of the Life of the Buddha, circulating along the silk route, must have been known to the early Christians.²⁴

The Buddha and Jesus Christ are described as infant prodigies who astound their teachers with a deep knowledge of the mystical meaning of the letters of the alphabet.²⁵ Both prince Siddhartha and Jesus are visited by wise men. In the case of Siddhartha, the visit is by five rishis (wise men), while in the case of the Jesus story, it is by three magi. In both cases, it is wise men who arrive and worship the boy - who is addressed as 'king' and 'god'. Each presents the wise men needing instructions to overcome their difficulty in proceeding further. There are guides who lead the wise men to the children in both instances. The major difference in the stories lies in the fact that Siddhartha is already twelve years old, whereas Jesus is still an infant.²⁶

Both the Buddha and Jesus are said to grow up 'full of wisdom', coinciding with the favour of the divinity.²⁷ Buddha and Jesus are recognised by signs: both traditions concentrate on the infants and their recognisability by the people for whom the signs are intended. The children are found in special circumstances. Buddha bears numerous signs in his body: he is recognised by the thirty-two signs that go with every Bodhisattva. Jesus is recognisable by the manger and his swaddling cloths. One might even draw attention to the Messianic horoscopes at Qumran for a similar phenomenon.²⁸

There are other interesting parallels to the lives of Buddha and Jesus, such as the harrowing of hell which, for Buddha, occurs from his birth while, for Jesus, it is reserved for the end of his earthly life. Another are the healing miracles,

which occur at the moment of the Buddha's birth but, in the case of Jesus, only later in adulthood during his public ministry. The difference is to be explained by the simple fact that, in the Indian tradition, it is the birth of the Saviour that is the real salvific event, whereas it is the death of Jesus in Christianity which is the saving moment. Thus, the Indian Masters perform their miracles from the moment of conception and/or birth.

Thundy goes on to argue that these parallels are no fortuitous convergence of universal folkloric motifs simply because nowhere else do we see such a convergence of literary motifs (1993:127-128). It can be argued that the Indian traditions are closer, and better, parallels to the Christian nativity stories than just the Hebrew scriptures - which means that future studies of the New Testament and other early Christian writings will have to employ Indian sources to elucidate the textual history of the New Testament.

PATTERNS OF INTERACTION: THE CONFLAGRATION IN ZOROASTRIANISM, FORMATIVE JUDAISM, AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Perhaps the most important and longest lasting contribution of Zoroaster to the history of the Iranian and other later religions is his doctrine of the end time (eschatology). World history does continue *ad infinitum* in a cyclical fashion, but is steering towards its end. This same picture of the end is found in most other religious systems originating in Near East.²⁹

For Zoroaster, history endures for a period of twelve millennia, divided up into four periods of three thousand years each.³⁰ In the first, the world is created by Ohrmazd in the *mnîg* (ideal) condition. In this period Ahriman starts his conflict with the good powers. The second period is the result of an agreement between Ohrmazd and Ahriman to fix a period of nine thousand years during which they will mix good and evil. Ohrmazd transforms the world from *mnîg* to *gōtig* (material). The third period starts with Ahriman's attack on the world created by Ohrmazd, with Ohrmazd creating the *fravashi* (spirit) of the prophet (Zoroaster). The revelation of the 'good religion' to the prophet, which starts the fourth period, takes place in the year 9000 of world history and is continued through the advent of three saviours at the end of each millennium. All three are sons of Zoroaster: Ukhshyatereta ('He who lets truth grow'), Ukhshyatnemah ('He who causes awe to grow') and Astvatereta ('He who embodies truth'). The latter is the true saviour, the *Saoshyant*, because it is he who wins the eschatological war against evil and inaugurates the restoration.³¹

The conflict between Ohrmazd and Ahriman reaches a climax in the last millennium, with the cosmic eschatological war between the powers of Ohrmazd and Ahriman, the powers of good and evil. The inauguration of the end is announced by many signs. The natural order is disrupted. Rain becomes unreliable and unpredictable.³² Extreme heat alternates with extreme cold.³³ Plants seemingly flourish but do not bear fruit.³⁴ The world is in the grip of drought.³⁵ There are cosmic disturbances. Sun and moon become dark.³⁶ Stars fall from heaven.³⁷ Mountains and valleys are made level.³⁸ The sea becomes impossibly to navigate.³⁹ Time is disturbed; year, month, and day are shortened.⁴⁰ The signs of the end are accompanied by disturbances in relations between people:⁴¹ in the last days, evil and impiety will proliferate; greed and lust will be found among people. The iniquitous will rob and plunder the righteous, and the godless will live in wealth and luxury. Justice and righteousness will be overturned, and the law destroyed. Everything will be acquired through unashamed violence. Faith, peace, and kindness will be absent. Shame will be non-existent, while truth and security will be wanting. There will be no respite from evil. Respect for age will disappear. Religious duties will be neglected.

Then the Saoshyant will enter, together with his helpers, to make the world frasha (strong/whole). This is called 'the great restoration' (Frashkert). This goes hand in hand with the end-time judgment. The final battle takes place when the righteous are encircled on the mountain by the devil and his troops.⁴² They plea to Ohrmazd, who then sends the Great King as their saviour. Fire is poured out on the earth.⁴³ The fire is an instrument of destruction and judgment, as well as of purification. The world is burnt up by fire, but also purified through a fiery test. The fire is accompanied by spectacular phenomena such as earthquakes, loud hissing noises, and the earth tearing open to reveal the abysmal depths. Rivers of fire (molten metal) flow down from the mountains and burn everything to ashes. Mountains melt like wax (Airyaman, Yazata of friendship and healing, and Atar, fire, will melt all the metal in the mountains and it will flow in a glowing river over the earth). People will flee before the flames. Even the abysmal depths - hell - will be burnt together with the mythological snake.

The dead will be resurrected and given incorruptible bodies. Then the final judgment by the Saoshyant will take place. Everyone will cross the Cinvat bridge. Their good and evil deeds will be balanced in a scale. When the good deeds outweigh the evil deeds, they will be met on the bridge by a beautiful young girl (representing the good conscience). Those whose evil deeds outweigh their good deeds will find that the bridge becomes like a thin razor blade which is difficult to cross. On the bridge, they will be met by an ugly old shrew (representing the bad conscience). They will fall from the bridge into the abysmal depths, which is dark and filled with stench, where they will endure eternal punishment. But,

simultaneously, a universal salvation is taught.⁴⁴ For the righteous, it will be like passing through hot milk. They will not be hurt. For the godless, it will be like passing through molten metal. They will be tortured, suffering excruciating pain, but will eventually also be purified since hell is also consumed by the fire).

When viewed synoptically, it is clear that this same view on the fiery end of the world and end-time judgment is presented in the three traditions under consideration. Further, this is not a marginal theme in Zoroastrianism, formative Judaism, and early Christianity, since it is part of a bigger complex which concerns the general expectation of the end of the world, the restoration of all things, the final judgment, coming of the Saviour ('Messiah' in Jewish and Christian circles, *Saoshyant* in Zoroastrian circles), an understanding of history, and ethics. Moreover, it's apocalyptic language gives expresses the 'international' response of all three traditions to Hellenism.

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK AND PROBABILITY

I will not venture into a detailed elucidation of the historical links that bound together the peoples of India, Persia, and the eastern Mediterranean basin into one culture continent. That has been superbly done in the work of Martin Hengel (1974) and the relevant chapters in Thundy (1993:174–267). Elsewhere, I have shown how the process of hellenisation affected and changed all religious traditions in the Hellenistic world, often in very subtle ways (Van den Heever 1993b:86–113). I restrict myself to making a number of remarks about the composite pictures presented above.

The first has to do with the scriptural basis of the religious traditions under consideration. Since the various religions do not coincide with their scriptural canons, getting an impression of the faith of each emerging religion necessitates putting together all the documents used by adherents of that tradition - whether they gained scriptural status or not.

To create a picture of the faith of formative Judaism, then, one has to use not only the Hebrew scriptures, but also the Dead Sea scrolls, the Septuagint (an interpretive translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek), the so-called Old Testament 'Apocrypha', the Pseudepigrapha (the so-called 'intertestamental' Jewish literature, or Jewish writings of the Second Temple period), and the early layers of the rabbinic traditions which later became the Talmud.

In the case of Christianity, one obviously has to utilise the Christian canon, but also the Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha,⁴⁵ the earliest Christian

writings (such as the Apostolic Fathers), the early Church Fathers, and the Coptic Gnostic library of Nag Hammadi (since this collection of Gnostic writings were obviously used, edited, and in some cases composed, by Christians of the great monastic movement in Egypt).

My second remark has to do with the status of the scriptural traditions. In a pre-industrial world, the primary mode of communication was oral. The documents we have cited functioned as manuscripts within this world. I contend that these documents 'floated on a sea of folklore', as it were, and that the pictures described above are actually windows on the religious folklore found in that specific culture continent. Folkloric traditions only exist in variants of the basic motifs or stories; by its very nature, folkloric traditions are composed using established patterns. This fact, namely the way folkloric traditions are composed, appropriated, and retold, accounts for the differences in detail between the various sources. It also accounts for the pattern-like similarities. If these are so numerous, and if, taken together, they create the same overall picture in which the motifs have the same function, then it is surely not entirely unwarranted to accept that, although we have separate traditions, each with its own name, they float on the same sea of religious folklore.

It is within this framework that the comparative work so characteristic of earlier religio-historical studies, especially evident in the work of the so-called *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, can and should be taken up anew in a meaningful way. Although comparative work is sometimes disparagingly referred to as 'the search for parallels', it becomes meaningful today as a way of retrieving religious traditions from their self-imposed ghetto.

It is important to realise that parallels in themselves do not say much unless it be shown that there is some historical plausibility in the thesis that they evidence religious interaction or syncretic relations. I have argued more fully elsewhere about the historical plausibility of syncretic relations (Van den Heever 1993b:86–113). A few remarks on the direct witness for such relations will have to suffice.

With respect to the infancy parallels, it is notable that the earliest clear testimony to the virginity of Buddha's mother comes from a Christian source. In his work *Adversus Jovinianum* (I:42), Jerome argues that the state of virginity is universally esteemed by referring to stories of virgin birth among the pagans. One of his examples is that of Buddha.⁴⁶ In the same work (I:26), he refers to the story of the Bodhisattva's birth from his mother's right side without her right side being injured.

Similarly, the heresiarch Hippolytus, who came to Rome from Alexandria, recognised the indebtedness of the Gnostics to Indian thought. In his *Refutatio omnium haeresium* (I:21), he describes the lifestyle of the Brahmins and, elsewhere, traces the origins of the encratite movement within Christian asceticism to the 'gymnosophists among the Indians' (VIII:13). Likewise, Clement of Alexandria makes the distinctions between the Brahmins and Sramana - common to Buddhist scriptures as *samana-brahmana* - which suggests that Indian sages were still found in the Hellenistic world after the time of Asoka (Thundy 1993:243).⁴⁷ In the light of this and other evidence, it is not unwarranted to accept that there was religious interaction between the Indian and Near Eastern (Christian) world (Thundy 1993:212-267).

There is even more explicit evidence of the appropriation of Zoroastrian end-time lore by early Christian writers. Justin Martyr (second century CE) actually commends making use of Zoroastrian and Jewish apocalyptic traditions: The Sibyll and Hystaspes (that is, the Sibylline Oracles and the now lost Persian Oracle of Hystaspes) claim that this whole system of incorruptibles will be destroyed by fire (I *Apologia* 20:1, also I *Apologia* 44). Clement of Alexandria not only knew about the Indian philosophers, he also knew and commended Zoroastrian eschatology:

... apart from the *Kerygmata Petrou* the apostle Paul will also show with the words: Take up the Greek books, read the Sibyll, how it is shown that God is one, and how the future is explained. And take up Hystaspes, read it and you will find how the Son of God is described more radiantly and clearly ... (*Stromateis* VI:5).

The fullest Christian use of the Zoroastrian Oracle of Hystaspes is made by Lactantius in his voluminous work, *Divinarum institutionum* (VII). Not only does he refer directly to the Oracle of Hystaspes, but also describes the end of the world in terms which echo Zoroastrian texts about the end-time - the Bundahis, the Zand i Wahman Yast, the Denkart and the Jamasp Namag (see further references and discussion in Van den Heever 1993b:55-64).

Christian writers could make use of Jewish and Zoroastrian writers for this simple reason: they were perceived to support the Christian world-view. In fact, I would contend that there was not that much difference between being a Jew, a Christian, or a Zoroastrian Parsee.

In the early third century CE, Bardaisan, the sage of Edessa, said to a disciple:

Have you read the books of the Chaldaeans in which it is described what influence the stars and their constellations exercised on the horoscopes of men, and the books of the Egyptians in which all the different things that may befall people are described? The disciple replied, 'I have read books on the Chaldaean doctrine, but I do not know which are Babylonian and which are Egyptian.' To which Bardaisan replied, 'The doctrine of both countries is the same.'

This dialogue, if ever it took place, was conducted in Syriac, and it is preserved in a text in Syriac. The speakers, who thought of themselves as Christians, are reporting on the diffusion of pagan doctrines. There was a very good reason why they could not tell what was Babylonian from what was Egyptian. The Chaldaean doctrine, which was to prove so influential in the paganism of fourth-century Neoplatonists, was disseminated in Greek (Bowersock, cited in Van den Heever 1993b:106).

AGAIN: WHAT IS RELIGION? OR, A CASE FOR SYNCRETISM AND KENOSIS

It should be clear by now that when we look historically at the way religious traditions are embedded in the history of which they are part, we are confronted with questions of great importance. What is religion? In what sense can we speak of the essence of a specific religion? Where do we draw the boundary lines between religions? Is it still meaningful to speak of 'a religion'?

Religion is a human phenomenon and humans are beings that create worlds (for the following, see Smith 1978). Culture is the symbolic process of world creation. Religion is one mode of world creation. Whoever describes religion is compiling an imperial map of the world, a map on which the boundaries between 'in' and 'out' are clearly drawn, and the relations between inclusivity and exclusivity clearly defined. In this 'cartography', binary oppositions are employed: we/they, East/West, primitive/modern. In this ethnic cartography, the Other is portrayed as static and monolithic. However, myths as narratives, as folklore, do not exist in pure forms. They only exist as they are used, as building blocks used by the religious person in the construction of a religious world, or to find direction in the flow of events and time by means of a metaphoric polar star. Such a map is what we would call 'religion'. The religious world inhabited by the religious person constitutes the landscape.

Our task is to gaze through the map at the landscape. Whoever gazes at the landscape, and sees how religious persons create their worlds with the building blocks at hand, will eventually realise that the term 'unique' has no place in this travelogue. In the same culture continent, within the same time span, people of different groups use similar building blocks in fashioning their world orientations. How else can one explain phenomena like the *interpretatio pythagorica*, the *interpretatio graeca*, the *interpretatio christiana*, the *interpretatio stoica*, and the *interpretatio buddhistica*. In the same geographical context, in the same historical circumstances, and subject to roughly the same cultural influences, people exploit the same thesaurus of stories to create their mythology as world orientation. As Kurt Rudolph (1991:17) says:

For the history of religions, there has never been a 'pure religion'; this would be an ahistorical construct. Indeed, every religion is a syncretistic phenomenon

NOTES

- ¹ This paper is based on material and arguments put forward in my MTh thesis (Van den Heever 1993b).
- ² 'Culture continent' denotes a diffuse geographical area in which, broadly speaking, the same culture, folklore, and religious phenomena are found; a process, I would add, facilitated by interchange of long duration. In this study I accept that the eastern Mediterranean basin, the Near East as well as the Indian subcontinent form such a 'culture continent'.
- ³ Since I belong to an Afrikaans church, I will restrict myself to describing a situation I know about. I do not pretend to have intimate knowledge about the situation in other churches and Christian communities.
- ⁴ For what follows, see Van den Heever 1993b:16-19. I have drawn heavily on Krüger 1990:212-213.
- ⁵ In each instance, I will indicate the Buddhist or Hindu sources first, followed by Christian sources. For the citations from Buddhist and Hindu sources see Thundy 1993:79-127 for the location of the sources in the various translations and editions used.
- ⁶ Mahapadana Suttanta (in the Dighanikaya), the Mahavastu, and the Buddhavamsa; the prologue to John's Gospel.
- ⁷ The respective genealogies of Buddha and Jesus have strong analogies. See the Jatakas, the Chinese version of the Abhinishrkramanasutra, the Dighanikaya I:113; the gospels of Matthew (1:1-16) and Luke (3:23-38).
- ⁸ The Kandahar Edict and the Rock Edict XIII of Asoka, the Vinaya (Sacred Books of the East 13:112), the Suttanipata, the introduction to the Jatakas I:47; Luke 2:14, Matthew 28:19.
- ⁹ Acchariyabhutadammasutta (*Discourse on the wondrous and marvellous events*) III 120-121, Majjhimanikaya, Lalitavistara, Nidanakatha, Buddhacarita; Luke 1:26-38, Matthew 1:22, Protoevangelium of James 14:14-28, Latin infancy gospel 69, Luke 2:1-7, Matthew 1:24-25. Nidanakatha; Matthew 1:18-25.
- ¹⁰ Lalitavistara vi; Matthew 1:18-25.
- ¹¹ Harivamsa, the puranas; Matthew 2:13-16, Protoevangelium of James 12:1-3.
- ¹² Acchariyabhuta-dammasutta 123; Luke 2:8-20.
- ¹³ Lalitavistara vii; Protoevangelium of James 13:1-10, Latin infancy gospel 72.
- ¹⁴ Nidanakatha; Protoevangelium of James 6:1.
- ¹⁵ Lalitavistara vii, Majjhimanikaya; Luke 2:8-10, Protoevangelium of James 14:9-12, Matthew 2:1-5.
- ¹⁶ Cariyapitaka (a selection of the Jatakas); Pseudo-Matthew 16-17.
- ¹⁷

- 18 Abhinishkramanasutra; Pseudo-Matthew 20.
 19 Lalitavistara viii; Pseudo-Matthew 22-24.
 20 Abhinishkramanasutra; Protoevangelium of James 14:13-16.
 21 Abhinishkramanasutra; Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11, Protoevangelium of James 21:3.
 22 Abhinishkramanasutra, Lalitavistara viii; Luke 2:22-24.
 23 Introduction to the Jatakas; Luke 2:25-35.
 24 Ramayana of Valmiki III canto 74, Buddhaghosa's Life of Buddha in the Chinese version of Fo-sho-hing-Tsan-King I.39-70; Luke 2:36-38.
 25 Abhinishkramanasutra, Lalitavistara x; Infancy gospel of Thomas 20:1-15.
 26 Lalitavistara xi; Matthew 2:1-12.
 27 Abhinishkramanasutra; Luke 2:39-52.
 28 Lalitavistara vii; Luke 2:11-12.
 29 This end time picture can also be found in Islam, in Indian (Hindu and Buddhist) folklore, and in various Gnostic traditions, such as Manichaeism, as well as in philosophical schools, such as Stoicism.
 30 This periodisation of world history is also found in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic.
 31 One is immediately reminded of the tradition, reflected in the Christian gospels, of the Messiah and his two predecessors Elijah and John.
 32 Zand i Wahman Yast 2:41; Lactantius: Divinarum Institutionum 7:16 - an allusion to the Persian pre-Christian Oracle of Hystaspes.
 33 Bahman Yast 2:41; Lactantius *ibid*.
 34 Bahman Yast 2:31; Lactantius *ibid*.
 35 Bahman Yast 2:41; Lactantius *ibid*.
 36 Bahman Yast 2:31, 3:4; Testament of Levi 4:1, Sibylline Oracles 8:190ff, 342ff; Apocalypse of Peter 5; On the Origin of the World 125:10-11; also Mark 13:24 (with parallels) and Revelation of John 6:12ff.
 37 Bahman Yast 3:15; Sibylline Oracles 2:196ff, 3:84ff, 8:190ff, 342ff; 2 Peter 3:10, Apocalypse of Peter 5; On the Origin of the World 126:12; also Mark 13:15par, Revelation of John 6:12ff.
 38 Bundahis 30:33; Isaiah 40:4, 1 Enoch 1:6ff.
 39 Zand i, Wahman Yast (Iranian recension) 4:46; Sibylline Oracles 8:236.
 40 Bahman Yast 2:31; Sibylline Oracles 2:196ff, 3:51ff; also Mark 13:20par.
 41 Almost all the texts cited occur in contexts which contain Lasterkataloge (lists of iniquities). They do not only refer to the occurrence of impiety, but also to theft, robbery, murder, wars, tyranny, strife and discord within families - Micah 1:3ff, Isaiah 66:15ff, Malachi 4:1, Testament of Levi 4:1, Sibylline Oracles 2:196ff, 283ff, 4:171ff; 2 Peter 3 (context), Didache 16. See also Bahman Yast 2, Jamasp Namag and Denkart Book 8:8.

- 42 A picture also occurring in the Qumran War Scroll.
- 43 For this picture of the outpouring of the fire, how it burns the whole world as well as heaven, and how even the mountains melt in its heat, see Bundahis 33:17-34, Denkart Book 9:35:11; Micah 1:3ff, Zephaniah 1:18, 3:8, Joel 2:3, Psalm 97:3ff, Isaiah 66:15ff, Malachi 4:1, 1QH 3:29ff, Testament of Levi 4:1, 1 Enoch 1:6ff, 52:6ff, Sibylline Oracles 2:196ff, 3:51ff, 4:130ff, 5:211ff, 8:225ff, Testament of Isaac 5:21, Vita Adae et Evae 49:3, Pseudo-Sophocles, Josephus *Antiquities* I.2.70, Philo De Vita Mosis II.263; 2 Peter 3:10, Apocalypse of Peter 5, Didache 16:5, 2 Clement 16:3; *On the Origin of the World* 125:33ff, *The concept of our Great Power* 46.22ff, and the Gnostic Valentinus.
- 44 For fire as an instrument of judgment, but especially of purification, in that all people must pass through the fire and molten metal, see Bundahis 33:17-34, Denkart Book 9:32.25, 9:35.11, Dadistan-i, Dinik 32:12ff; (the cited texts from the Hebrew scriptures are all oracles of judgment); Sibylline Oracles 2:252ff, Testament of Isaac 5:21-25, Vita Adae et Evae 49:3; 1 Corinthians 3:12ff, Apocalypse of Peter 5, 2 Clement 16:3, *The Concept of our Great Power* 46:22ff.
- 45 Almost the whole corpus of Pseudepigrapha was only preserved in Christian circles. For various reasons, they were used by Christians for their own faith.
- 46 *Apud gymnosophistas Indiae, quasi per manus huius opinionis auctoritas traditur, quod Buddam principem dogmatis eorum e latere suo virgo generarit.*
- 47 Asoka was the mid-third century BCE Mauryan king who, after converting to Buddhism, sent missionaries to spread the Buddhist *dharmā*. Some of his inscriptions show that he dispatched envoys to the Greek kings of Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, and Cyrene. These inscriptions also give evidence of 'hundreds' and 'thousands' of 'Yojanas' (Ionians, or Greeks) who were won over to the *dharmā*.

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CHAPTER 5

Spiritual experience in three contemporaries, Dom Henri le Saux, Vandana Mataji RSCJ and Fr D S Amalorpavadass, and its significance for inter-religious dialogue and social responsibility¹

Felicity Edwards

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF CONTEMPLATION AND PRAXIS

The academic study of religion, as pursued in the newly-inaugurated South African Academy of Religion, may be seen to have ramifications spreading widely beyond the classically 'academic'. Aspects of such study can offer insight within, for instance, the current socio-political situation of rapid transition, reconstruction, and development. One particularly important, and as yet unresolved, question of our time concerns 'the relation between contemplation, theology and praxis' (cf Grant 1991, title page). In what follows, my main preoccupation is with the relation between contemplation and spiritual experience generally, on the one hand, and praxis on the other. Theology features as the theology of this relationship.

It is frequently assumed that there is a dichotomy, or discontinuity, between 'inner' spiritual and 'outer' social transformation. This paper proposes, inter alia, and with supporting evidence, that the experience of such a dichotomy is more

the product of western conceptuality and conditioning than a feature of reality; that 'inner' and 'outer' are integrally inter-related; and that, moreover, if there is appropriate awareness of the process of connectedness between inner and outer, between 'spiritual' and 'social', this awareness itself contributes to social change.

This paper takes spirituality to include, particularly, what is recognised in the Christian tradition as contemplative prayer, with the appropriate psycho-spiritual discipline accompanying that, but also the spiritual experiences and psycho-physical disciplines, prayer, meditation, and so on, of other religious traditions. 'Social transformation', an almost jargon term these days, is taken to refer to positive change in social existence, including societal structures and socio-political experience. In our context, social transformation would include the emerging intentions and praxis of the *Reconstruction and Development Programme*, as well as, of necessity, the diminution and cessation of socio-political hostilities and violence. Positively, it would be in the direction of love, compassion, and freedom, and of the socio-political conditions necessary for the authentic democratisation of society and the building up of the structures and consciousness of the new nation in justice and peace.

There are two extreme positions, on the one hand the privatisation of religion with concomitant pietistic, escapist spiritualities, and, on the other, self-interested partisan socio-political activism, both of which discount the question of the relationship under investigation. Both drive a wedge between spirituality and social existence such that the one is perceived to have no bearing on the other. Both have resulted, partially at least, from the prevalence of a western scientific mindset dominated still by a now-outdated worldview, as will be outlined in the second section of this paper. Between these extremes there is increasing evidence of already-existent interconnectedness. The liberation movements have particularly developed social analysis as revealing underlying exploitative patterns in oppressive situations, and the process of conscientisation further spreads, deepens and hones awareness. Compassion as an authentic 'experiencing with' the other develops, and, concomitantly, life-styles can voluntarily change towards greater simplicity, becoming non-acquisitive, non-exploitative and non-oppressive.

Given that this is already starting to happen, the question is raised as to whether the process cannot be (a) engaged in more consciously and deliberately, and (b) accelerated. This question is addressed as the argument of the paper unfolds. If it is the case that 'inner' and 'outer' are integrally interrelated and if it is the case that awareness of the relationship is contributory to the effecting of 'outer' change, then it would be important to find a kind of language in terms of which to speak of this. Within contemporary writing in physics I have found the work

of the quantum physicist, David Bohm, to be particularly illuminating in suggesting a much more comprehensive worldview and in being attentive to the precise point at which transformation is possible. But also illuminating is the language used by contemporary Christian contemplatives whose literal 'profession' presupposes engagement in transformation.

The three people of the title, Dom Henri le Saux, Vandana Mataji and Fr D S Amalorpavidass, are the subjects of a research project in hand, and the resulting material well exemplifies the issues addressed in this paper. The research material includes investigation of the spiritual experiences of the three subjects, within two religious traditions, Christian and Hindu. It explores the meaning of this for inter-religious dialogue, particularly because it is largely in the context of inter-religious dialogue that the experience developed as it did. It also includes an approach to social action from within the milieu of Indian Christian spirituality. The paper first very briefly outlines some of the relevant material, and then goes on, in the latter part, to discuss what may be seen as the deep structure of the relationship between so-called 'inner' spiritual experience and so-called 'outer' social transformation.

SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL ACTION: LE SAUX, MATAJI, AND AMALORPAVIDASS

Le Saux (1910-1973) was the pioneer of the group, a French Benedictine monk who had entered a monastery at the age of nineteen, at least partly in the hope, as he puts it, 'of finding there the presence of God more immediately than anywhere else' (Letter 4.12.1928; Stuart 1989:3). He developed a strong interest in eastern spirituality and in 1948 went to India, initially to establish a Benedictine presence there. In India he felt increasingly the impetus to enter, as thoroughly as possible, into the spirituality of the Hindu tradition as he was encountering it. Apart from any other considerations, it was vital to him in attempting to build a bridge between Hinduism and Christianity to be deeply immersed in both. But also, and even more importantly, le Saux was by disposition not so much a theoretician or theologian as an *anubavi*, as it is called in Sanskrit, a person of experience; and in the Hindu context he was supremely a *jnani*, one seeking God through the path of knowledge and intuitive wisdom.

Le Saux's deep immersion in *advaita*, non-duality, along with his life-long faithfulness to Christianity and commitment to Christ, gave rise to a major inner struggle and to anguish that persisted nearly to the end of his life. It seemed to him that he was committed to two mutually contradictory doctrinal frameworks (as indeed Hinduism and Christianity are at the level of doctrine). He struggled

to lay hold of, and to articulate consciously, his own self-identity within that cross-cultural set of parameters. This has been discussed in detail in a previous paper (Edwards 1994, forthcoming).

Le Saux's inner struggle, with its accompanying series of cumulative break-throughs, resulted in a profound transformation of consciousness, and a radical shift in his overall sense of self-identity. In the course of this he had gone through a number of exacting but fruitful learning situations. There was the Christian ashram he founded at Thannirpalli in South India, along with an extremely dedicated French priest, Jules Monchanin. He saw the setting up of the ashram as part of his calling to establish a Benedictine presence within the Indian church, particularly because he felt that Hindus would be much more likely to take Christianity seriously when they saw it practised in the context of monastic spirituality and life-style, and the ashram was intended as a place of prayer for both Hindus and Christians seeking a deeper experience of God.

While le Saux and Monchanin were establishing the ashram, they visited together the ashram of the great modern Hindu sage, Sri Ramana Maharshi, at Tiruvannamalai and it was here that le Saux began to be deeply involved in advaita vedanta. This led to his taking as his own Hindu guru the teacher, Swami Gnanananda of Tapovanam, Tirukoiyalur, who was a disciple of Ramana Maharshi. Later le Saux made his base at Utterkashi in the Himalayas where he lived as a total renunciate, a hermit in the life-style of the Indian spiritual tradition.

Through these and other stages in his spiritual development le Saux realised that to 'find God' one has to 'go beyond' the external or surface realities of phenomenal existence, to penetrate towards 'the cave of the heart' or return to the source, which is that ultimate reality and/or ultimate consciousness from which everything comes. His understanding was that all created reality is continually coming forth from its source, and the seeker has to penetrate to that very point where all of reality, including oneself, is coming into being. This point is the interface between non-manifest and manifest, which, in the Christian tradition, is also the point of the existential gap between Creator and creature. In the Hindu tradition, this point is that fullness from whose fullness all fullness proceeds (*purnam purnam udacyate*). That point in the human person le Saux referred to in both Hindu terms, using the metaphor of 'the cave of the heart' (*guha*), while in Christian terms he verbalised it as 'the bosom of the Father where the Word is born and comes to be from all eternity' (Letter 19.12.1956; cf Stuart 1989:111). The cave is also 'the deepest centre of your heart and the deepest centre of the Father's heart' (Letter 10.2.1965; cf Stuart 1989:189). Within each person, the divine mystery is always 'already there in the cave in the

depth of the heart' (Stuart 1989:122). Le Saux later come to understand the discovery of this 'inner world beyond all sound and form, all word and thought' in terms of the resurrection of Christ and also in terms of the attaining of oneself in one's 'supreme and definitive essence' (cf le Saux 1974a, 60). So the depth, or peak, of the contemplative experience was, for le Saux, this penetration into what he regarded as the source from which all reality springs up, as well as being the point of the indwelling of the resurrected Christ and the centre of one's own true identity.

Conscious movement into this level of awareness is now recognised cross-culturally as accessing the transpersonal level of consciousness. Experience there does not belong to the individual person; it is transpersonal and, more deeply, transcultural. There is a whole branch of psychology dealing with this, transpersonal psychology, which, along with transpersonal theology, I suggest is going to be of seminal value in assisting and facilitating the personal and socio-cultural processes which are indispensable to socio-political stability.

Le Saux was much involved in practical dialogue between Christians and Hindus. But, most significantly, his interior life was a heuristic inner dialogue between, as it were, his Christian self, finding himself in Christ, and his advaitic 'self', finding himself not other than Christ. Le Saux wrote a great deal about the process of transformation and his theology of it, but his experience was always far ahead of what he wrote and his last writings only suggest the profundity of his experience when he indicates transcendence of both duality and non-duality in the depth of his awareness. That consciousness is what is designated now as transpersonal and transcultural, and it corresponds, it has been suggested, to an ontologically prior level of reality, that is to say, that which always already is.

The more deeply le Saux accessed this transpersonal quality of awareness the more clearly he came to realise that, at the level of doctrines, of theology, there could be no reconciling of differences between religions, for instance, between Christianity and Hinduism. Rather, the foundation of dialogue is this deeply experienced existential penetration into 'the cave of the heart', that is to say, identification beyond the namarupa, beyond the specific names and forms, or characteristics, by which each religion identifies itself. Inter-religious dialogue is authentic when it takes place between those who have penetrated deeply into their own tradition, where there will be a resonance between the participants as each is present to the dialogue within the background of their own experiential spiritual tradition. Verbal expression will not then be simply the comparing and contrasting of doctrines which, to an extent, are dead anyway, but rather, the meaning conveyed will have a background in mutually-shared transpersonal reality. This is true meeting 'in the cave of the heart' (cf le Saux 1976).

Le Saux's work in India was initially in a pre-conciliar context, which makes his pioneering efforts all the more remarkable. At the same time, while he was intensely aware of social oppression and the enormous depths of poverty and desperation it brought, and while he personally did whatever he could to assist those whose suffering he compassionately shared, he was not himself directly or consciously active in any movement for social change in India, such as is taking place at the moment, for instance, with the relatively recent dalit movement.

The other two subjects of the research project, both Indians, are in the same developing tradition of Indian Christian spirituality as le Saux, and they are, in a sense, successors of his pioneering explorations. Vandana Mataji is a religious of the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and is founder of an ashram in the Himalayas, which she runs with an English psychologist, Ishipriya Mataji. Like le Saux, Vandana Mataji had a Hindu guru, in this case Swami Chidananda of the Sivananda Ashram in Rishikesh. Also like le Saux, she is very much an *anubhav*, one who experiences, and whose focus is on the experience of God in all things. So contemplative prayer is the focal point of her life and she interprets such prayer as being radically transformative. With regard to its social effects, an important part of the process, in her view, is dis-identification from self (with a small s), overcoming one's personal predilections and tragedies, such that one is moving towards identifying with Self (with a capital S), and so accessing a reality much larger than one's limited personal being.

Vandana Mataji's approach is well exemplified in the week-long Easter retreat she gave in 1991, in a Jesuit Seminary outside Calcutta. There each day, through spiritual practice, conceptual and psycho-physical teaching and personal direction, she related together the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ and the fundamentals of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. This was in no way either a juxtaposition or syncretism at the level of conceptuality, but rather what she was doing was facilitating movement by the participants beyond concepts and theories, to the transconceptual, transpersonal, and transcultural reality.

Vandana Mataji, as a contemporary, involved, Indian Christian, is acutely aware of social issues and takes part, actively and sensitively, in whatever she can do to bring about change. Examples range from, for instance, her timely handling of a local water crisis, to her involvement in fasting and prayer for peace between Hindus and Muslims on the controversial site of the Ayodhya mosque. In each case, her action arises with the level of prayer that is continually present within her.

The third subject of the research project, Fr D S Amalorpavadass, died in May, 1990 in a car crash on the road between Mysore and Bangalore. He has been a

major influence in the development of Indian Christian spirituality and in the liberation struggle in India, particularly through the intensive training he gave to priests and religious in the formation of 'base community'-style grass roots groups, committed to the struggle for equality, justice, peace and economic viability, grounded in authentic indigenous spirituality as interpreted within a Christian frame of reference.

Following Vatican II, the work of Amalorpaviadass was focussed largely on the implementing in India of the vision of the Council. He was founder of the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC), first Professor of Christianity in the new Department of Christianity at the state University of Mysore, and founder and guru of Angali Ashram. The ashram was set up as complementary to his academic work at the university, where what he was teaching academically could be lived in practice, in community. The major trends in his work were, in his own words, 'first a commitment to social justice and struggle for liberation in view of creating a new society, free, just ..., and participatory. Secondly, inter-religious dialogue and co-operation: thirdly, inculturation, and fourthly, an authentic Christian spirituality to be developed, lived and promoted as the source and climax of the other three concerns' (Amalorpavidass 1982:6). He wrote extensively on all these issues, and edited, for instance, *The Indian church in the struggle for a new society* (1981) and *Indian Christian spirituality* (1982), which are the documentation of conferences he organised on these subjects at the NBCLC. His approach was holistic, energetic and very Indian. He perceived life (his own, and that of the whole) in terms of 'a relentless quest for the absolute, ultimate and supreme reality' through interiority, awareness, God-experience (anubhava, brahmavidya, atmanubhava and ishwaranubhava; Amalorpavidass 1991, 246), leading to integration. Nothing is lost. That which is broken and fragmented is to be integrated in a new personal and social coherence, integration, and wholeness.

For Amalorpavidass, the interpenetration of self and cosmos is to be seen in terms of the human person as panchakoshas (Amalorpavidass 1991:251), the five bodies, or better, the five progressively deeper levels of the person in the Upanishadic tradition (cf Grant 1991:32). By this he was emphasising the interpenetration of Spirit and material creation. Integration involves interiority leading to penetration to the core of one's being, resulting in turn in the release and flow of inner energy (antarshakti) through the whole person and into society and the world at large, this energy welling up from the source and over-flowing to others (Amalorpavidass 1991:247, 255, 256). His spirituality involved a contemplative penetration into the depth of reality, into matter in what he refers to as its vibratory form or 'electromagnetic field of interior interaction' (Amalorpavidass 1991:247). Thus the quest for God and the search for social

justice emerge integrally 'as a single concern in the same movement' (Amalorpavidass 1991:259).

All three subjects of the research use western Christian conceptuality to speak of contemplation as a profound mystical experience characterised as loving union with God, in and through Christ. They use aspects of Hindu conceptuality also, particularly, for instance as mentioned above, the metaphor of the cave of the heart (*guha*), in whose silence and darkness (as of the womb) is the source and origin of all things. In both Hindu and Christian frames of reference, they recognise spiritual experience as radically transformative with respect to self-identity, this inner transformation being evidenced at the same time as a new efficaciousness in the world. The subjects came to recognise the significance of that precise point, not often taken into consideration, where phenomenal reality is coming into existence, moment by moment. What needs to be asked, in the present context, is how can this be spoken of in appropriate contemporary terms? How does contemplative 'closeness to God' effect social transformation, which implies the affecting of matter as its material base?

THE DEEP STRUCTURE: DAVID BOHM

I suggest that contemporary science can be helpful in providing a way of understanding and speaking of this connection between inner and outer, and that, particularly through the new model in scientific explanation presented by quantum physicist David Bohm, it is possible to be much clearer about it.

David Bohm was Professor of Theoretical Physics at Birkbeck College, University of London, latterly Professor Emeritus, until his sudden death in 1992. He had at one time worked with Einstein on the interpretation and ontological significance of quantum theory, and his main life-work has been in quantum physics. He is becoming known now for his new interpretation of quantum physics, through which he is also contributing a radically new, deeper, and immensely enlarged understanding of the nature of physical reality. It is this very recent work of Bohm's that correlates so positively with the experience of the research subjects. Significantly, he also sets out his new interpretation of reality as pointing the way forward out of the self-destructive state the world is in at the moment.

Bohm's basic premise is that wholeness is primary over separation and fragmentation. Relativity theory and quantum theory have in common, as an incontrovertible given, the premise of the unbroken wholeness of the universe (Bohm 1985:8). This new view cuts right behind, and obviates, both dualism and also

importantly, substantialism, the two characteristics of typically Western thinking which, for instance, John Cobb identifies as 'two illusions with which Christianity is burdened and from which it needs to be liberated' (cf Cobb 1982). In Bohm's view, the world, in all its aspects considered together, is in fact one seamless whole. Instead of being 'mechanical' and consisting, as does a machine, of separate parts only externally related to one another, Bohm's assertion is that a more appropriate image is that of a web of interconnected, dynamic relationships in which every part is internally related to every other part. This next section is an explanation of the significance of Bohm's position as being a more scientifically correct, penetrating, and generally coherent worldview in terms of which to perceive and relate to reality.

Bohm is radically critical of the currently prevailing model or paradigm according to which the world is interpreted, and in terms of which humans relate to the world and to one another. He holds that it is flawed, confused, reductionistic, and dangerous. The present worldview, as he points out, is committed to the mechanistic model of reality, which stemmed from the stunningly successful science of Newton et al and developed into the physics which explained the structure of the atom. According to this Newtonian model, the world is perceived on the analogy of a great machine where each part is not only external to every other part, but each part is explainable in isolation from the whole. This model, or worldview, predominates in contemporary science, society, and religion. Bohm points out that normal perception is largely conditioned by worldview. Conditioning literally changes one's nervous system so that unless one deliberately makes room for change, in the way discussed below, one goes on perpetuating the same patterns. It is precisely our conditioning in terms of the mechanistic worldview which is leading continually to increasing fragmentation both in the experience of individual personal reality, and in society and the world as a whole.

It is true that in the Newtonian worldview there is a kind of 'interconnectedness': the parts of a machine are certainly connected. But in his explanation of the new understanding of wholeness, Bohm speaks of an entirely new understanding of interconnectedness. To do this, he introduces the notion of two orders of reality, the explicate order and the implicate order. The explicate order is the phenomenal world, the ordinary explicit or manifest objects and events of sense experience. But how does the explicate order come to be? The explicate order, says Bohm, is unfolding dynamically, moment by moment, from what he is calling the implicate order. In one of its aspects the implicate order is simply the dimension of quantum reality, where physicists are dealing with that which is 'smaller' than the atom, or better, that which is ontologically prior to the atom. At this level, there is implicitly present every possibility of every event and entity that can possibly come to be; this is the field of quantum potential. In quantum

physics it is understood that the implicit quantum potential unfolds out of the universal, implicit, unbroken field of all possibilities, to give the explicate order which is the atoms, molecules and structures of our phenomenal world, which we tend to perceive as consisting of discrete and separate entities and events. But because in the wholeness of the implicate order there is total interconnectedness and simultaneity, it is the case that, rather than separateness, it is the interconnectedness of all entities and events which is the more fundamental. It needs to be stressed that the evidence for the existence of the implicate order comes from quantum physics, and, according to Bohm, is in fact necessitated by the data of quantum physical research methodology, instrumentation, and data collection.

As Bohm explains it, the movement of enfolding and unfolding from the implicate order to the explicate is the primary reality. One of his conclusions from his own research is that 'the mathematical laws of the quantum theory applying to all matter, can be seen to describe just such a movement in which there is continual enfolding of the whole into each region and unfolding of each region into the whole again' (Bohm 1985:12). Bohm terms this movement of unfolding and enfolding the 'holomovement' or 'holoflux'. While the holomovement is the basic reality, the objects and entities coming into existence from it as the phenomenal world are relatively stable features, but are neither permanent or unchangeable. So this means that one can look at the universe and at all that happens, in society and in ourselves, in terms of this invisible but in fact more real order, the implicate or enfolded order, where everything is enfolded into each part such that 'the activity fundamental to what each part is, is based on its enfolding in all the rest, including the whole universe Each part is in a fundamental sense internally related ... to the whole and to all the other parts' (Bohm 1985:12-13). And, since the explicate order is unfolding moment by moment from the implicate order, any part of it can come into being differently, that is to say, transformed (cf Bohm 1985:104-141). So this dynamic view of Bohm's offers a way of speaking about transformation which is simply not possible in the Newtonian, mechanistic worldview.

For Bohm, it is indispensable to be able to speak of consciousness and matter within one coherent framework. Consciousness is both implicate and explicate. Consciousness includes thought, feeling, desire, will, impulse to act, and so on; and, of course, awareness. Language, feelings, and thoughts are all mutually enfolded, and, most importantly, both mind and matter unfold together from the greater common ground of the implicate order. Because consciousness and matter 'have the implicate order in common, it is possible to have a rationally comprehensible relationship between them'. So, with this new worldview, the differences between the mental and material aspects can be acknowledged

'without falling into dualism'. And 'we can relate mind and matter consistently, without reductionism' (Bohm 1985:19), since 'the mental and the material are two sides of one reality' (Bohm 1985:20).

When mind and matter, observer and observed, are seen as separate, as in the Newtonian or mechanistic worldview, there is an insoluble problem as to how to relate them. 'Even if thinking of wholeness in attempting to see the world as a whole, there is the observer who is looking at this wholeness.' There is duality, division, and if there are many observers there is more division (cf Bohm 1985:20). This is a convincing argument for investigating thoroughly the nature of both dual and non-dual experience.

It is important to recognise that concepts and knowledge can never capture the whole of existence. Rather (1) 'we understand the totality as an unbroken and seamless whole, the holomovement, in which relatively autonomous objects and forms emerge'. And (2) 'insofar as wholeness is comprehended with the aid of the implicate order, the relationship between the various parts or sub-wholes are ultimately internal' (Bohm 1985:21). Outer and inner are related internally. This means practically that although we cannot directly articulate in concepts the relationship between the parts and the whole, between 'inner' and 'outer', we can work with it.

Bohm emphasises that it is in consciousness that this internal relationship is most directly experienced, for literally the whole of reality, physical and mental, internal and external, is enfolded in the consciousness of each human being (cf Bohm 1985:21). According to the content of his consciousness a person acts, whether rightly or wrongly. 'Each human being is therefore related to the totality, including nature and the whole of the humankind. He is also therefore related internally to other human beings Quantum theory implies that ultimately the relationship of parts and whole - of matter in general - is understood in a similar way' (Bohm 1985:22). So what is primary is the wholeness. 'The parts are secondary in the sense that what they are and what they can do can be understood only in the light of the whole' (Bohm 1985:22). The emphasis is therefore on 'the wholeness of the whole and its parts'. This is the central and key point of Bohm's position.

Bohm suggests that this completely new approach to wholeness can 'help to end the far-reaching and pervasive fragmentation that arises out of the mechanistic world-view' (cf Bohm 1985:23) within which people see and experience themselves as consisting of separately and independently existing components. Perceiving only fragments instead of the underlying wholeness, actions are conformed to this way of thinking, and by this sequence of perceptions, actions,

and further perceptions, apparent proof is obtained of this fragmentary and alienating view of self and world. But in fact, Bohm asserts, the primary truth about the world is not its fragmentation but its wholeness; and it is oneself who has brought about the fragmentation which now seems to have an autonomous existence. This whole pattern has to be changed, and, Bohm suggests, can be changed.

Following from the basic premise that wholeness is primary over fragmentation, the correlative principle is that it is fragmentation that gives rise to self-centredness, alienation, and conflict, whereas by contrast, wholeness makes for justice, peace, and harmony. Construing oneself in a fragmentary way, as self in contrast to 'the other', it is inevitable that one will put oneself first - one's own person, one's own group. This is precisely not conducive to overall health and sanity, 'health' and 'sanity' being terms cognate with the term 'wholeness' (cf Bohm 1985:24). Fragmentary thinking is constantly giving rise to 'a reality that is consistently breaking up into disorderly, disharmonious and destructive partial activities'. It therefore is not only reasonable but crucial, in the present time of deconstruction and reconstruction, 'to explore the mode of thinking and being that starts from the most encompassing possible whole and goes down to the parts and subwholes in a way appropriate to the actual nature of things. This would bring about a different reality, one that is more harmonious and orderly and creative' (Bohm 1985:25).

In Bohm's view, the issue of meaning is decisively important. He brings together the meaning of meaning and the quantum interpretation of reality, as he explores how meaning arises along with matter and energy, 'as three aspects of one flow' (Bohm 1985:105). Since 'only meaning can arouse energy' (Bohm 1985:97), for his new worldview to make any difference to how reality comes into being, we will have to comprehend more clearly the nature of reality and 'we will actually have to mean what we are saying' (Bohm 1985:25). Meaning, he is emphasising, is not simply linguistic; it arises with our very being and must penetrate it.

One important consequence following from this is that it is not possible simply to make a specific plan to change society and expect that the plan will work. A plan for change will not in itself change society because society is the result of what it (society) means to us, and the plan itself will not change what it means. There is a lot of quite irresponsible 'new age'-type talk these days about creating our own reality. Bohm's position is clear that 'we cannot produce the change that is needed to change the future of (hu)mankind'. But we can have what he calls 'this passionate intensity to look at it (reality), to explore it, to find out where it isn't making sense, and why. Then it will change creatively' (Bohm 1985:107). Behind this is his insight that, as consciousness is investigated with awareness,

deeply concealed patterns of thoughts are discovered which are operating as 'programmes'. When these programmatic thoughts are seen, by that very awareness they are defused or disempowered, and reality comes into being differently. And when one person changes in this way, because of the inner connectedness in the implicate order, whatever takes place in that one person affects the whole (cf Bohm 1985:141). This would mean that if one person can become aware of his or her compartmentalising, divisive conditioning and, by becoming aware, disempower it, this is not only a change in that one person but also a contribution to the transformation of the whole. Because of that one person's change, the whole will come into being differently. This process is practical, healing, and transformative.

CONCLUSIONS

Thinking together the experience of the three subjects with Bohm's interpretation of reality, the connections may be summarised as follows:

- (1) What all three subjects experience is that the essence of their contemplative prayer is a 'going beyond' personal consciousness to access levels of awareness which in current terminology are designated transpersonal.
- (2) These levels are described as being successively closer to the source of the person's reality, and to the source of all reality - closer to that point from which the manifest world comes, moment by moment.
- (3) This is what Bohm designates as 'the implicate order', out of which matter and energy, consciousness and meaning, continuously arise.
- (4) Bohm affirms that increasing awareness is the appropriate strategy for personal and social transformation. There are particular, clearly-defined ways of bringing about greater awareness.
- (5) The principle that whatever takes place in one person changes the whole is precisely the experience of the contemplative, in whom 'self' and 'other' are experienced as arising together out of a deeper ground common to both. Conversely, what takes place in the whole affects each part, each person. This is the basis of compassion. If Bohm is correct, as I suggest, then awareness of this inner connection between 'inner' and 'outer' would itself be the bringing about of more conscious, deliberate and accelerated outer change (cf Walsh 1984:3).

NOTES

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