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GROUP A.

**Are There Values
Common to All Religions**

THE GREAT WORLD RELIGIONS: A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THEIR SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

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1. The Spiritual World

Aziz Nasafi, a Persian mystic of the thirteenth century, said that 'the spiritual world is one single spirit who stands like a light behind the bodily world and who, when any single creature comes into being, shines through it as through a window.' Commenting on this passage Erwin Schrödinger remarked that such an idea seems fantastic and unpalatable to much Western thought, 'but I do believe that this is precisely the point where our present way of thinking does need to be amended, perhaps by a bit of blood-transfusion from Eastern thought.'¹

In seeking for harmony among the sciences it may seem strange to look at religions, which until recently were often regarded as divisive or irrelevant, or both. Yet religions have inspired many cultures and they are closer in contact today than ever before. The similarities and differences of religions are many, and selection of some elements as central may appear arbitrary, but it is made to provide a basis for discussion.

'The spiritual world' seems to be a general religious concept, but with many different interpretations. Nasafi, as one might expect from a Sufi, suggests a pantheistic or monistic view of reality, the unity or even identity of beings, human and divine. This is what appealed to Schrödinger when, having considered that the elementary particles of matter had lost their identity, he went on to discuss whether the presumed individual separateness of minds was equally illusory, and concluded that 'there is obviously only one alternative, namely the unification of minds or consciousness. Their multiplicity is only apparent, in truth there is only one mind. This is the doctrine of the Upanishads.'

The attraction of the monistic teachings of some of the Upanishads is

evident in western importations from India today, and it may be that there is something of a religious revival or a broadening of intellectual horizons. But there are many different strands in Eastern and even in Indian thought, and such different doctrines elsewhere that they demand attention. It has been said that there are two major streams of religious development in the world, two chosen peoples not one, the Semitic and the Indian. This is a broad simplification, notably omitting the Chinese stream, but it is a useful differentiation while it conceals complexities and contradictions. Semitic religion which has shaped Western thought, in Jews, Christians and Muslims, has proclaimed the creation of the world by a transcendent God, different from his creatures even though he seeks to have a personal relation with them. On the other hand many Indian thinkers suggest that personality is illusory, and the goal of life is to be absorbed into the Absolute or to realize that one is the Absolute.

Henotheistic and pantheistic statements appear fitfully in the Vedic hymns, but the Upanishads are the classical source for monism or non-dualism, with nine examples in the Chandogya Upanishad, each culminating in the dogmatic assertion: 'that is reality, that is the Soul (self), you are That.' Other Upanishadic verses declare that 'this self is Brahman' (the Absolute), and 'I am Brahman.' So the human soul (self, *atman*) was identified with the universal Atman, which in turn was Brahman.

Over a thousand years later the Vedanta system of Śankara propounded a complete non-dualism, in which Braham is undifferentiated and Atman is the same as Brahman. 'The existence of Brahman is known on the ground of its being the Self of every one.' Through ignorance the individual self imagines its separation, but by knowledge it can arrive at a realization of its nature as the true self. 'Thus the difference between the individual self and the highest Lord is owing to wrong knowledge.'²

Critics of non-dualist statements like 'you are That' might say that they are tautological or meaningless. Do they amount to more than saying that whatever is, is? Whether Brahman, or Atman, is spirit, being, nature, or matter does not seem to matter. If Atman is Braham can anything be said about either? Or does not description require difference? To say, with Schrödinger, that 'multiplicity is only apparent, in truth there is only one mind,' may seem not only to go against the facts of experience, but to arrive at vague abstraction.

For religion, these objections may be vital, if pure non-dualism excludes the possibility of religious relationship. It is important to note that

there were opposing schools to non-dualism, in the 'modified non-dualism' of Ramanuja and the dualism of Madhva, and even Śankara himself made concessions to popular religious needs. Ramanuja held that the world and selves are real but depend upon Brahman, whose body they are. They are nothing apart from Brahman but they are distinguishable from him, for 'the Supreme Spirit must be understood to be in a different category from all souls, whether bound or liberated.' Man needs God but is also needed by him, for love is the expression of the communion of divine and human, and 'just as my devotee who approaches me as his ultimate goal cannot maintain himself in existence without me, so I too cannot maintain myself without him.'³

In practiced religion 'the spiritual world' does not usually find expression in ideas of 'one mind,' but it is understood in terms of divine-human relations. This appears in India, alongside non-dualist philosophies and popular polytheism, in various forms of monotheism. These developed from ancient times and have both parallels with Semitic monotheism and characteristic divergences. In the Bhagavad Gita the divine Lord teaches his disciple and requires the Yoga of loving devotion, a discipline of action without seeking rewards, in concentration upon the Saviour God. A transcendental monotheism is also found in the widespread worship of Śiva, the kindly and terrifying deity, and in other religious devotions.

No doubt monotheism is seen even more clearly in Jewish, Christian and Islamic religions, and theologians speak of God as 'the Wholly Other,' and of the 'great gulf' between God and man, though neither of these phrases occurs in the Bible or the Qur'an. These religions teach the transcendence of God as 'high and lifted up,' but they also speak of him as dwelling 'with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit' and being 'nearer to man than his jugular vein.' Islam may be the most transcendentalist of these three religions, and yet its mystics have often come the closest to Hindu pantheism. Abu Yazid said, 'I looked into myself, and lo, I was He,' and Hallaj was crucified for declaring 'I am the Real.' It seemed that if 'there is no god but God,' no reality but he, then he was all and in himself bridged the supposed gulf between God and man.

A further element in religion is the personalization of the object of devotion. Orthodox teachers, in the three Semitic religions, might affirm the unity and transcendence of the deity in a manner that was virtually deistic, with a lofty but almost indifferent creator. And mystics might speak of the single reality, or the deification of human nature. But devotion sought personal relationship. Devotion to Christ arose among Christian Jews, of which the Gospels and Epistles are sufficient evidence. In the ensuing

Christological controversies it was Athanasius 'against the world' who realized that if Christ is not divine it is blasphemy to worship him, but if he is not worshipped then distinctive Christian devotion perishes.

Modern interpreters of Islam tend to speak of Muhammad as a mere man, but devotion has always considered him as sinless and the mediator between God and man. The second clause of the testimony of faith affirms that 'Muhammad is the Apostle of God,' and this is understood in terms of his uniqueness and finality. In prayers this is seen even more clearly. 'No one,' says Constance Padwick, 'can estimate the power of Islam as a religion who does not take into account the love at the heart of it for this figure' (Muhammad).⁴

The divine-human mediatorial figure, whether Krishna, Christ or Muhammad (and I am not equating them but suggesting some similarity of function), serves to humanize the Absolute or transcendent Deity, and to assure believers that there may be personal relations with the divine, a possible unity but not an identity in religious understanding. There are similarities between religions here, and if they do not fit into a monistic picture of the spiritual world then it must be recognized that religions give a different viewpoint. They believe in 'one mind' in the sense of one supreme Creator or Lord, but they are often pluralistic in speaking of the relationship of many minds to the one deity.

Some, however, may wish to interpret these differing doctrines of religion and philosophy as expressions of different levels of understanding. Writing of the religion of the Nuer in Africa, Evans-Pritchard suggested that 'a theistic religion need not be either monotheistic or polytheistic. It may be both. It is a question of the level, or situation, of thought rather than of exclusive types of thought. . . . These conceptions of spiritual activity are not incompatible. They are rather different ways of thinking of the numinous at different levels of experience.'⁵ Perhaps Śankara would have agreed with that, since he is said to have composed hymns to Krishna, but a Christian who taught it might be accused of the heresy of Modalism, teaching a succession of operations in the Godhead.

Finally, in this section, some consideration should be given to Buddhist and Far Eastern religions, which may appear to be quite different from both Semitic and Indian faiths and perhaps not religions at all. Melford Spiro remarks that he went to Burma challenged by the 'stunning problem' of a religion which apparently constituted a profound exception to most generalizations about religion and society, and so offered a great opportunity for research into the meaning of religion. Theravada Buddhism seemed to be

atheistic, whereas other religions had supernatural saviours; Theravada seemed to reject belief in the soul, taught that all life was suffering, and salvation came through renunciation not only of the world but of friends and one's very self. Other religions found happiness in this world, even if beyond it as well, believed in an immortal soul and taught social values. Arriving in Burma, however, Spiro found that some of the sources of his information were unreliable. Some of the doctrines mentioned were not normative, or if they were they tended to be rejected or ignored by the faithful. In this Buddhists were like members of other faiths for not all Christians and Jews, for example, follow all the normative doctrines of their religions. Spiro concluded that 'Buddhists differ very little from people in general,' and their beliefs on human nature and the supernatural compare well with those of other religions. There is a spiritual world, transcendent and immanent, and revealed in the Dhamma. The Buddha was not a mere man but far above the gods, and as 'teacher of gods and men' he is comparable to superhuman figures of other religions. In Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are even more exalted.⁶

In traditional China there were countless deities in Taoist and Buddhist pantheons, and while these may have largely disappeared today it is hard to deny the divine person and function of Chairman Mao, the 'never-setting red sun,' to whom devotees ascribe eternal life. The Little Red Book is far more than a manual of economic theory; it is endowed with magical qualities and Red Guards sleep with it under their pillows, as Chinese believers laid their heads on the classics of Taoism.

Much more might be said on this theme, with illustrations that could range from the apotheosis of Stalin to that of Ron Lafayette Hubbard of the Scientologists. But in summary it can be affirmed that the major religions, at least, believe in a superhuman spirit, a conscious intelligence, that created and sustains the world but is transcendent to it, and who is revealed through mediatorial figures.

2. Individual and Society

That religion is a product of society has long been a popular theory. Even critics of religion such as Hume and Spencer, Montesquieu and Condorcet, admitted that religion had at least been helpful as an expression of society and in giving support to its leaders. But Durkheim made it into a powerful theory. For him religion was not an illusion or a mistake, but an objective phenomenon derived from society and expressed by it. The object

of this religion was not imaginary, for it was the worship of society itself, which had absolute power and provoked feelings of reverence.

To prove his theory Durkheim chose what was then regarded as the simplest and earliest form of religion, that of the Australian aboriginals. He thought that their totemism disguised and symbolized society and revealed its origins. By inference, all other religions followed this pattern. Durkheim never went to Australia and he formed one of that great band of theorists about religion who did not see the people about whom they wrote with authority, and often practiced no religion themselves. Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl, Tylor and Frazer, and many others were armchair theorists who depended on the reports of assorted travellers. Even stronger terms could be used about Freud whose Oedipus theory of the origins of religion had no basis in either history or anthropology.

To call religion a mere function of society is to mistake its very nature. Religion is thought and felt by individuals, since society has no mind of its own. Religion is a phenomenon of individual psychology and is subjective, though it appears in objective form as transmitted from one generation to another and expressed through the cultures of particular societies. But primarily religion is individual experience, and to the believer it is the result not of human action but of superhuman revelation. 'All religions are religions of revelation,' remarks Evans-Pritchard.⁷

'Belief, ritual, and spiritual experience: these are the corner-stones of religion, and the greatest of them is the last,' writes an anthropologist. But he bewails the fact that most anthropologists, dismayed by easy theories of religious origins held by their predecessors, studiously avoid paying attention to spirituality. They have amassed a wealth of information about beliefs and rituals, but related them only to the social framework. From inside a religion, however, spiritual experience is supreme. Every encounter with the divine is unique, and it can only be grasped by personal and direct experience.⁸

From a believer's point of view, much of what is written about a religion by supposedly scientific observers seems quite irrelevant. It is as if a visitor from Mars entered a church on a Sunday morning and observed people standing and sitting, opening mouths and closing eyes, processing and paying. He might put forward a theory of social cohesion or suggest that this was the operation of a middle class club (if he was a middle class Martian). But to the believer it would be completely different and outward movements could only indicate partially, if at all, his communion with God.

Those of us who study other religions are uneasily aware how limited our understanding may be, since even between churches in the same religion there is room for much misunderstanding. But at least a believer may feel a kinship with other believers, of whatever faith. 'The non-believer seeks for some theory—biological, psychological, or sociological—which will explain the [religious] illusion; the believer seeks rather to understand the manner in which a people conceives of a reality and their relations to it.'⁹

The individual, personal and spiritual part of religion is primary and dominant in all faiths. To the outsider Christianity may appear as a series of organizations with differing doctrines and rituals, but to the devout Christian his religion is mystical in the sense of inward communion. Indian religions have been weaker on the organizational side, though there are many groups, 'sects' or 'churches,' which express communal beliefs. But the primary search of both philosophers and emotional adepts has been the experience, of identity with the Absolute or loving devotion to the Avatar. Even Buddhism seeks reality or Nirvana, not only in solitary (Pratyeka) Buddhas 'like lonely rhinoceroses,' but in individual devotions in the daily Threefold Refuge and visits to pagodas.

Perhaps Islam might seem to present the completely social religion, with the 'community' (*umma*) as the recipient of divine revelation. But the Qur'an, as a good religious book, expresses many different attitudes: 'to each community there came a messenger,' but some individuals believed and others did not. Though not a biography, the Qur'an indicates the personal experience of Muhammad: 'he saw him. . . on the high horizon, and then he drew near,' and such experiences were the very origins of Islam.¹⁰ The struggles of the later Sufi mystics expressed the claims of personal experience against the rigid formalism of authority, as in revivalist movements in other religions. Yet not only members of dervish orders, but countless ordinary Muslims pray and praise and seek communion with God, as is testified by many little books of prayer where one may feel 'the pulsing life of religion through a study of devotions actually in use.'¹¹

The priceless value of the individual is one of the central themes of religion, since it offers him salvation and stretches beyond this life into eternity. In such emphasis religious experience is at odds with all forms of dictatorship in which the individual is completely subservient to society and has no meaning apart from it. The significance of the life of the individual is a dangerous question, it may not increase production and it detracts from the prestige of the absolutist state. The most that totalitarians can accept is that

society is eternal, since individuals are disposable in war and peace, and their deaths are made up by births of others. An individual should have no experience which is not for the glory of the state, that is to say the minority which has seized power by violence.

At the end of his profound and expert study of *Buddhism under Mao*, Holmes Welch considers whether it matters if the Chinese government has eliminated Buddhism. Are not most Chinese better off without it? Why should China remain backward and priest-ridden, when religion is dying out all over the world?

He answers that religion is not necessarily a sign of backwardness, and it is not dying out. New forms of religion constantly appear in advanced societies and testify to human need. The Chinese were not priest-ridden by Buddhist monks. If anything, it was the Confucian mandarins who imposed dogmas on the populace and they have been replaced by modern politicians.

Buddhism in China was a popular rather than an established religion, and revivals occur from time to time. Religion has an other-worldly element which seems necessary to human thought, and it usually has teachings about life after death. Further, religious festivals are helpful for a happy life. In olden times work was interrupted by holy days, with poetry and gaiety which made complete changes from daily life. Industrial festivals do not offer such a change, for their goal is to make people work harder, by extra time without pay, and this may reveal a deeply mistaken psychology.

In traditional Buddhism, as in other religions, daily life is holy and Nirvana may already be present. 'What is really at stake is the existence of the individual,' not to be lost in society but only lost to find himself. 'This is something he can only have reached on his own,' for the masses cannot reach Nirvana. They are an abstraction, 'used to depersonalize' the individual. H. Welch concludes that Buddhism may not revive in its traditional form, but elements of its belief and practice will remain, and they will flourish because they are part of something which cannot be eliminated from human life.¹²

Religious experience, right across the spectrum of faiths, seems to challenge the merging of the individual into either the Absolute or society. Religious believers hold that there is a superhuman power that has an authority above all that society can claim, and that power is revealed in the experience of individuals. That the divine being also has a concern for the community, for the individual in society, and for the redemption of society is the third topic that has been chosen for our discussion.

3. Values and Goals

It may be questioned whether the traditional values of beauty, truth and goodness are primary religious concerns, for religions seek, or respond to, the divine being and his word to man. It has been suggested that religious experience is basic, and although morality follows, it is as a result of harmony with the divine will.

The great religious classics portray spiritual powers and qualities. The Greeks regarded Homer as their first theologian, but although he depicted the comic side of the gods he also showed them as very formidable and worshipful. The Mahabharata, of perhaps later date, also emphasizes the activities and powers of the gods rather than their morality. Even the Bhagavad Gita, with its later polish, though it is concerned with 'right' (*dharma*) from its first word, is basically a revelation of God teaching the indestructibility of the soul and loving devotion to the deity. The Bible has as much of the divine power as of morality, and the same might be said of the Qur'an. While the early Buddhist texts repeat that the truth has been made known by the Blessed One, to whom men go for refuge and release from sin.

The existence and power of God is paralleled by the weakness and sin of man. Religions take evil seriously, in individuals and societies. Sin is an offence against God and man, and in theistic religions men pray for forgiveness. The Bhagavad Gita is remarkable not only in condemning the rich fool and evildoer, but also for affirming that wicked men are constantly held in demonic births and never attain to God.¹³

All religions have rituals of purification, in which individuals and communities seek deliverance from sin and reconciliation with the divine. The Day of Atonement has resemblances to Lent and Good Friday. In Islam the supreme hours of the annual ritual of pilgrimage are those spent in the Valley of 'Arafat, where individuals in a vast community pray for 'salvation from sin' and 'the joy of meeting with God.' Devout Hindus probably spend more time than most other religious people in purificatory rites and festivals, while in Buddhism the weekly Uposatha days are occasions for confessing breaches of disciplinary rules, and laymen and women also seek purification by temple attendance and reverence to images.

With their long history, and profound understanding of human weakness, religions in different ways recognize the evil in man and provide means for purification and salvation. The systems of moral behaviour which also are taught, express the ideals but admit the failures of men and women. If religions propound a divine law, an eternal *dharma*, it is because anything

less appears to be tainted with weakness and transience. Individuals and society, commoners and kings, cannot be the source of ultimate truth or goodness, which are above and beyond them all.

Therefore religions hold out goals for man and society. Imperfections and evils are to be overcome by divine power, and man's persistent dreams of a perfect world are to be translated into reality by supernatural power. Eschatology is a common feature of religions. The Jewish faith in a coming Messiah is continued in Christianity, where the Messiah has come but there is to be a Second Advent or perfect Kingdom of God. In Islam, although the Qur'an does not mention the Mahdi, since Allah himself guides everyone in the world, yet before long faith in the coming Mahdi, the 'Guided One,' became popular. In days of darkness and uncertainty belief in a future deliverer and restorer flourished, and for Shi'a Islam the Mahdi is both the expected and the hidden guide. Belief in this Mahdi also prepared the ground for the modern religion of the Baha'is. Islam, of course, also had a traditional eschatology of belief in a Last Day, Judgement, Heaven and Hell, as had Judaism and Christianity.

No doubt it is the Semitic background of Marxism that made it propound its own version of eschatology. The Little Red Book declares that 'the socialist system will eventually replace the capitalist system: this is an objective law independent of man's will.' And again, 'the world is progressing, the future is bright, and no one can change this general trend of history.'¹⁴ These are articles of faith, perhaps influenced by Darwinian evolutionism and nineteenth century optimism, but also inspired by Semitic eschatology. The difference between religious and Marxist teachings is that religions rely on a power and conscious deity greater than man to bring in the Kingdom of God, whereas Marxism trusts in a 'trend of history' and an assumed 'law.' At the end of the twentieth century, which began with bright hopes of the abolition of wars and all evil, and which has seen some of the most devastating wars, persecutions and tortures in history, one may well question optimistic hopes for the triumph of a natural eschatology.

The religions of farther Asia also have important eschatologies. The Avatars of Vishnu, partly mythical and animal in the past, and partly human and heroic in history, have appeared in successive ages. The present age, of course, is the worst, with declining religion and mounting disaster. But the cycle will turn and Vishnu is to appear as Kalki, the hero mounted on a white horse and wielding a flaming sword to destroy the wicked and usher in the age of gold. Buddhist ideas may have contributed to this picture since hopes of a Buddha-to-be, Maitreya, appeared long before Vishnuite notions of Kalki. There may also have been some influence from the eschatology of Zoroastrianism, which looked for the coming of the Saoshyans or Saviour,

the last posthumous son of Zoroaster, to raise the dead and renew all existence.

Religions, therefore, provide ideals for mankind in deliverance from evil and establishment of justice and peace. There are many other elements of religious life and teaching, too numerous to mention, but perhaps the three elements which have been singled out here may provide scope for further discussion on the contribution of religion to the understanding of life and the welfare of mankind.

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