

The Ecumenical Route

Christian Godin

All the runners in the stadium race toward the same arbiter, but they are not all running the same race; the starting point is different for each one, and the loser is not entirely deprived of honor. The path that leads to God is not unique, but all these paths converge however toward this unique end.

Themistios¹

Father of All! In ev'ry Age
In ev'ry Clime ador'd
By Saint, by savage and by Sage,
Jehovah, Jove or Lord!

Alexander Pope²

Yes, your religions are born of these passages
Of winds and fogs in the minds of your wise men;
Yes, these rendings of the sacred cloud,
These monstrous fragments of the great All ignored
Which err in the dusk, and become deformed,
Sinister, on the foreheads of men who fall asleep,
Infinity's rags, seen by pale mortals,
Are dreams in your nights and gods on your altars.

Victor Hugo³

Ecumenicism is a synthesis of syncretism and universalism. It combines, in fact, the religious totalization of syncretism with the human totalization of universalism, using syncretism to correct what might be unilateral in the universal religion, and using universalism to complete what might be particularistic in syncretism.

Οἰκουμένη – from the verb meaning to inhabit – signifies the inhabited earth, the world in which men have built their houses, as opposed to the desert where the Devil and God argue over who retires there, and as opposed to the forest which is the realm of beasts. Ecumenism implies the idea of a *single* and solitary earth, and the inhabitant, that of a single and solitary humanity. We know the extent to which this obvious idea had trouble coming forth and surviving. No society, however, no matter how geo-

graphically isolated, has remained closed in on itself to the point of not developing a certain image of the world and its entirety.

In spite of the independence and the politico-religious singularity that make up the very law of their existence, the Greek city-states, to take this characteristic example, were not closed spaces cut off from the universe by their walls. The religion of Zeus Polieus contains an element of universalism, and certain city-states, such as Athens, came out of a synoecism. Pan-hellenic reunions took place on the occasion of the great games – called panegyrics. But it is with the conquest of Alexander, and the huge cultural intermixture that followed in its wake, that ecumenicism took on its first historic form. In each country he subjugated, the Macedonian conqueror rendered homage to the gods as if he saw the various forms of a single and universal divinity in them. In the Hellenistic epoch – in which the syncretic cults multiplied – it was common belief that the gods of foreign peoples were not foreign gods, but the same gods as the indigenous gods with different names. People therefore built temples not to one single god, but to *all* the gods: the pantheons; certain gods, known in fact as *pantheos*, embodied in themselves the theoretical totality of the other gods, and became in turn veritable pantheons. Herodotus already designates the Egyptian gods by Greek names,⁴ but this was an isolated case at the time. Plutarch – whose thought was influenced by Pythagorism and Platonism – is, on the other hand, entirely representative of Hellenistic times from the ecumenical point of view: “We do not believe that the gods of different nations are different, that there are barbarian gods and Greek gods, gods of the south and gods of the north. No! Just as the sun and the moon, the sky, the earth, the ocean are common to all, although they are known by different names by different peoples, so, by the sole reason that commands the universe, the sole providence that governs it, for the subaltern powers that deal with all things, there are honors and different names among the different peoples, in conformity with their respective customs.”⁵

Another reference comes from Mani, who was no doubt the first founder of a religion to see himself as the conciliator and reconciliator of all religions, the ultimate bearer of a universal message perfecting that of his predecessors.

Let us cite the case, both extreme and exemplary, of the philosopher Proclus who was himself initiated into all the pagan mysteries and himself celebrated all the holidays and religious acts of the most diverse nations. "It is not befitting of a philosopher," he wrote, "to be the minister of the cults of a single town or the particular cult of the few, but to be universally the hierophant of the whole world."⁶ It's a fine idea, and could apply to all devotees of ecumenicism.

India, the land of syncretism, also knew ecumenical tendencies. From the *Rig Veda*, which contains hymns to "all the gods," to Mahatma Gandhi, who saw in Rama (God) another name for Jehovah, God or Allah, ecumenical tendencies and currents never failed to hold the opposite tendencies and currents of fundamentalism in check.

The sculpted grottoes of Ellora (India) are Brahmanic, Buddhist and Jain – but one cannot speak of ecumenicism since the three religions succeeded each other in these places and did not coexist there. On the other hand, in a little sanctuary in the neighboring grotto of Aurangabad a statue of Ganesh is placed next to a statue of Buddha and a statue of Tirtankhara (a Jain saint). Certain sects of Hindu inspiration still accept the Christian cross and the Islamic crescent alongside the Shivaist trident today. On the island of Sri Lanka,⁷ there is a footprint at the top of the Adam mountain: both Christians and Muslims see it as Adam's footprint, made when he stopped to rest there, after being chased from nearby Paradise; the Hindus worship it as Vishnu's (or Shiva's) footprint, while the Buddhists venerate it as Buddha's footprint. This allows them all to have the same site of pilgrimage. One finds oneself dreaming of a Jerusalem based on the same model.

We must mention the syncretism of the emperor Akbar. He named his prime minister and historiographer Abdul Fadi⁸ religious head of the new society, the *Din-i Ilâhî*. The following is a prayer addressed to God, composed by Abul Fadi, one of the most beautiful ever written: "You are without equal. In the mosque, it is to You whom the crowd murmurs its prayers. In the Christian church, it is in Your honor that the bells are rung. One day I visit the church, the next day the mosque, but from temple to temple I seek only You. Heresy, orthodoxy, empty words for the truly faithful, words which find no access to the true Sanctuary. I leave

heresy to the heretic, religion to the orthodox, and, like a perfume maker, my soul gathers the scent of each rose.”⁹ The reunions organized by the emperor Akbar in Fatehpur Sikri prefigure the great modern ecumenical council.

The difficulty in tracing a rigorous line of demarcation between syncretism – because it aims at ecumenicism – and ecumenicism – because it includes syncretism at least in theory if not in practice – is nowhere more evident than in the religion of the Mongol empire. The ecumenicism of this empire did not at first derive from any actual tolerance on its part, but from its anthropology and its religious ideology. This unitarian ideology is expressed by the conception of the unity of man on an anthropological plane and attaches everything on earth to the great sky-god Tengri on a religious plane. If everything flows from the One, each cult can in fact manifest Tengri according to different modalities. “Monotheism is perceived as a variant of the cult of Tengri, Manichean dualism as an insistent belief in the struggle between good and evil spirits (a familiar theme in shamanism); as for the Buddhist divinities and the genies of Taoism, nothing prevented their worship alongside the secondary divinities and the local spirits who shared popular devotion.”¹⁰ All the divinities of all the monotheist, dualist or polytheist religions were called *Tengri* in Mongolian. The empire that preceded that of the Mongols in Central Asia, the Uigurs empire, already cultivated a syncretism that would pave the way for Mongol ecumenicism: we still have a manuscript from this period (eighth and ninth centuries) which begins by evoking Indra, Brahma and Buddha, then continues with a hymn to “Father Mani-Buddha” who is associated with Friend Yisu, Jesus.¹¹

People say that Genghis Khan had Islam explained to him and that he approved of the principles and practices, except for the pilgrimage to Mecca: what is the good of a pilgrimage to one spot since the whole world is the house of God (whether he is called Tengri or Allah)? The successor of Genghis Khan, Mongka, his grandson, organized in his court, in 1254, three centuries before Akbar, a multi-denominational gathering in which Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims, and Christians of various sects took part. Guillaume de Rubrouck – sent by the king of France, Louis IX, the future Saint Louis – was present, and left us an account of his expe-

rience. He tells us that on the occasion of an important feast the great khan first had his cup blessed by the Nestorian priests, then by the Muslim clergy, and lastly by the Buddhist and Taoist monks. Rubrouck also relates this sentence of Mongka: "Just as God has given man many fingers, he has given him many paths."¹²

During this time, in Europe, Raymond Lull dreamed of hearing praises to the Virgin Mary sung in Arabic and in Latin on both sides of the Mediterranean, and of unifying the world under the banner and the cross. To carry out this project, he wanted to write the absolute book; this became the *Ars magna*, an abstruse work inspired by combinative logic.

In the *Liber de Santo Spiritu*, a Latin Christian, a Greek Christian, and a Muslim act out the dispute over the Procession of the Holy Ghost within the Trinity.¹³ The *Liber de quinque sapientibus*, on the same subject, includes discussions by a Latin Christian, a Greek, a Nestorian, a Jacobite and a Muslim. In the *Liber acquisitione Terrae Sanctae*, as in the *Liber de fine*, there is a synthesis of philosophical and theological principles, used by Christian missionaries who accomplished their task of evangelization among Muslims, Jews, Greeks, Nestorians, Jacobites and "Tartars."¹⁴ In *The Book of the Gentile and Three Sages*, Raymond Lull imagines a "gentile" (a pagan) enlightened by the successive teachings of a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim and ends up with a fine profession of ecumenical faith: "Since we have but one god, one creator and one lord, we have but one faith, one law, one community and one way to love God and to honor him;"¹⁵ "we shall talk this way until we have, all three of us, one faith and one law."¹⁶ One must remember that at the same time St. Thomas Aquinas was writing his *Summa contra gentiles*, the Inquisition was beginning its terrible work and the king of France, who was later to be named a saint even because of his anti-Judaism, died on a crusade in Muslim lands.

A little more than a century later, the other great figure of Western ecumenicism was found in Nicolas of Cusa. In his work *De Pace fidei* (1453) (The peace of faith), cardinal Cusa sketches out a speculative Christianity capable of uniting all beliefs and hence ensuring the reconciliation of all peoples. In his eyes, the unity of faith is hidden behind the diversity of rites: this is already, three centuries before the fact, the kernel of the deist theory of

Natural Theology. In cardinal Cusa's view, the absolute power of the papacy was counterbalanced by the *Catholic concordance*, the sovereignty of the body of the Church, the universal council. A faithful and perceptive reader of Raymond Lull, he considered it easy to come to an understanding with Islam, since the vocation of the prophet, he said, had been to simplify Mosaic law and the Gospel in order to make them more accessible to Arabic pastors. Cusa's ecumenicism did not stop at monotheism; in his opinion polytheists, in worshiping their gods, implicitly recognized the same divine, unique and yet threefold principle; for the relationships of unity, equality and interconnection are universal. The *homo maximus* contains, in a state of "envelopment," incompletely "developed" "words," of which the messengers of various religions were "bearers," and through whom, as if by a kind of magnet, our "intellectual nature" is attracted, to the point of the total adhesion symbolized by the hypostatic union. Interpreted in this way, Christianity would be acceptable to all peoples.¹⁷

In a study entitled *Critical Examination of the Koran*, Nicholas of Cusa went so far as to posit the idea that by his preaching Mohammed had initiated great progress among the Arabs and that, in the final analysis, Islam could become a stage toward Christianity. Nicholas of Cusa was not an isolated case in the fifteenth century: artists, other philosophers, and even certain princes shared the cardinal's conviction that behind the variety of signs belonging to the different cultures and religions – the Orphic Hymns of Plato, the Law of Moses and the Scriptures, the Jewish Cabbala and the Christian Neoplatonism of Pseudo-Dionysius – the original unity of the divine was hidden. Characteristic of this frame of mind, images ranging from the triad to the center of the circle of the Three Graces, would all be interpreted as traces bearing witness to the Christian Trinity.¹⁸

Religious universalism preceded ecumenicism. The idea goes back to the Middle Ages and would be defended many times during the Renaissance. In his treatise entitled *De Religione Christiana*, Marsilio Ficino, associating the Stoic idea of humanity with that of a Christ made up of all men, posits his conviction of the possibility of a universal religion in which all men would be unified in a love of God and their brothers.

During the Renaissance, the spirit of Platonism was present whenever the ideal of unity predominated. Guillaume Postel, who knew Greek, Hebrew and Arabic as if they were other mother tongues, dreamt of a religious unity on earth (*De Orbis Terrae Concordia*, 1542); he thought this possible due to the rational nature (in his opinion) of religious truths. Hostile to the Protestants who disrupted Christian unity, and no less to the authoritative Catholicism that established the Council of Trent, he thought that salvation could only be found in a return to the forgotten origin of all the religions, which is reason. In the *Heptaplomeres*,¹⁹ Jean Bodin gathered for discussion in Venice, a city open to the world if there ever was one, seven "scholars," a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Calvinist, a Jew, a Muslim, a believer in Natural Theology and a sceptic. The aim of the conversation (Jean Bodin, we see, takes up the situation already imagined by Raymond Lull and Nicholas of Cusa) is to know which religion is the best. The answer is that there is none and that all are avatars of the same natural religion. A typically humanist profession of faith: there is a natural faith, common to all peoples, which transcends the particular forms to which men remain attached to their misfortune and which constitutes the moral unity of the universe. For, in Bodin's eyes as well as for his contemporary Guillaume Postel, it was a question of leading men to consider themselves brothers in the bosom of a fully ecumenical Church – through the manifest power of reason – and to silence diverging viewpoints under the aegis of a reason identical to the law of Christ. One can, according to Bodin, extract a common content from all religions, which can then become a universal religion, which "is nothing more than the gazing of a pure spirit toward the true God."²⁰ The program of deism is already in place: suppression of dogma, affirmation of the existence of God, practice of moral virtues, first and foremost those of tolerance.

A double ambiguity, however – already present in Raymond Lull – will not fail to encumber this ecumenical ideal philosophically: is the universal religion, intended to unite all men, a new religion, a religion of the future that would synthesize the different real tendencies of positive religions, or is it in fact, in its laws, Christianity, and more specifically Catholicism? Here we see a possible rupture between two types of ecumenicism – that of

Catholic universalism and that, shall we say, of religious universalism. While the latter exists as an ascertainable fact, the former has never been more than a project. Still more important and more serious, from the point of view of a philosophy of totality, is the rupture between an irrational ecumenicism – an occult ecumenicism based on sentiment, which implies tolerance in actual fact – and a rational ecumenicism, which implies legal tolerance. A parenthetical remark on this subject is in order here. Could it not be that the profound ethical ambivalence concerning the value of tolerance – so prized in our day that it seems to be one of our rare absolutes – be understood through an inability to imagine a universalism that would not be exclusive but rather ecumenical? The fact that tolerance was – and still is today – challenged by the obtuse defenders of dogma and ritual – who choose to see it only as indifference and skepticism in matters of religion and morality – is not enough to confer an ethical purity on it – for in fact, tolerance as a value and an ideal is also born of the renunciation of ecumenical unity. It is easy to cover a scandalous renunciation of the universal human with a veil of tolerance: today this is called the right to differ. We believe that this ambivalence is a corollary to the rupture, noted above, between the two types of ecumenicism. The phenomenon is interesting in as much as it reveals, within a concrete debate of civilization, the profound ambivalence of the notion of Totality, seen now as a night that creates black cows, now as a light that illuminates something, now as a triumph of unreason, drunkenness and confused knowledge, now as a victory of reason and knowledge.

Let us begin with the night. A few glimmers of light still penetrate it, however. Ecumenicism was an esoteric theme, and not just a rational declaration of peace and unity. O. V. de Lubicz Milosz, in his masterwork *Les Arcanes*, writes (verse 5): “I prostrate [myself] before you, my son Hiram, king of the unified world, architect of the true Catholic church of tomorrow, that universal regent of faith, science and art.” A few centuries earlier, Pico della Mirandola – he has been associated with Christian Cabbalism – was so persuaded that the Christian doctrine could be found in the Jewish Cabbala that he thought that the Jews could easily be refuted with their own books. From the time of the Renaissance, the Jewish Cabbala

so influenced a sector of Christianity that a new Cabbala was formed – the Christian Cabbala – one of whose principal goals was to give unity to all religions. One will not be surprised, two centuries later, that the Romantics, smitten with occultism, had made the fundamental unity of all religions their theme. For Gérard de Nerval, whose fascination for esoterism is well known, the infant Horus suckled by the divine mother was already Jesus. This obsession with unity responded to a profound desire to reconcile everything, and, in what amounts to the same thing, to let nothing from the past slip away. In Germany, when the dream of the Ur – the primordial – became confused with the Sym – the communion – the idea of an underlying unity of all religions returned as a leit-motif. But the very nature of a dream is to include a plurality of meanings and interpretations – and the dream of origins is no exception. According to the angle adopted, one would denounce ambiguity – or rejoice in the unity of plenty. For if the essence of the religious is in one of origins – which *imply* the Totality, as in a reliquary – then the religious sentiment is no more than a nostalgia (since the origin is necessarily lost), and the “true” religion, the “authentic” religion, is the religion closest to the original one (found by some in Greece, by others in the Catholic Middle Ages, by still others in India). But then the absolute, ideal community is also lost – and this is why art offers so many sonorous or poetic images of it. But if, on the other hand, the totality is no longer in its mythic place of origin, but rather in the real world that displays it, then the search for a universal essence of religion goes hand in hand with the essence of an existing, concrete community – which is the essence of men today. In short, the One/All cannot be dreamed in the past, or found in the present; it can only be hoped for in the future – not that these three ways of conceiving of it are necessarily incompatible. Hence the nostalgia of the unity of origins leads into a hope for a unity to come. This is why a Herder, a Creuzer, or a Görres seek the fusion of mythologies – Greek and Indian. This is why A. Kuhn and F. Max Müller, fascinated by F. Bopp’s discovery of a “comparative grammar” that was thought to be that of an Indo-European people before they dispersed, form, along the same lines, the project of a “comparative mythology” – to which, later, the works by G. Dumézil would give some consis-

tency. Schlegel, arguing that Idealism grew out of the void, placed all his faith in a new mythology.²¹ Like Schlegel, Schelling would believe this new mythology to be capable of inspiring a new art. At the same time, Schleiermacher would write: "It is only in the totality of all forms thus conceived as possible that a total religion can truly be created."²² In his voluminous treatise entitled *De la religion considérée dans sa source, ses formes et son développement* (Religion considered in its source, forms and development), Benjamin Constant again takes up the idea that religions all derive from a universal religious sentiment. The universal would therefore not be the exclusive domain of reason. Totality can be sought and found in the emotional and even the impulsive. From the Romantics at the beginning to the Symbolists at the end, the whole century is crossed with a strange ecumenicism that owes nothing to the deism of reason, quite the contrary. Troubling themes would appear – the Celts and the Nordic gods took on frightening guises and boded ill.

In 1848 the artist P. Chenavard was given the task of decorating the Pantheon.²³ The project, palingenetic and encyclopedic, was to represent the social, philosophical and religious history of the human spirit in all its guises. With the intention of indicating that all the religions were but various forms of the same idea, Chenavard decided to represent all the symbols of all faiths merged in the unity of the Word: the religious *one*, Pan whom humanity adores in all his pseudonyms. Is not pantheism the religion which, in excluding no religion, assimilated them all?

At the end of the eighteenth century, Fabre d'Olivet spoke of a universal rite in its most concrete peculiarities – the form of the altar or the prostration. At the end of the following century, Edward Schuré (in his work *Les grands initiés* [The Great Initiates]) would make the doctrine of the ancient Mysteries the origin of all great religions, and therefore of all civilizations. This passionate extoller of Wagnerian drama, and hence of uni-totality, saw in Jesus the synthesis of all the preceding initiations, and in each of his principles the representation of a great religion. He was convinced of the kinship between Krishna and Christ, Abraham and Brahma, inherent in the etymology itself!

Parallel to this irrational – even irrationalist – ecumenicism, an ecumenicism of reason, perhaps born with Leibniz, would tri-

umph in the eighteenth century and merge, at the end of the nineteenth century, into the ecumenical movement – or what is called the ecumenical movement in the strictest sense of the term.

Leibniz's interest in Chinese religion, the intelligence he demonstrated in resolving the problem of the apparently extreme foreignness of this religion, and the few texts he wrote on these issues,²⁴ were enough to make the philosopher of the *Monadology* the irrefutable father of rational modern ecumenicism. Leibniz immediately points to the heart of the matter: the translation of Chinese terms into European languages. The aporia, thought Leibniz, came from trying to establish a system of lexical equivalences from one language to the other. If one considers not the elements of the system (the Chinese language), but the relationships it contains within itself, and one compares this network of relationships to that which one can extract from a study of the Christian religion, the difficulties begin to disappear. Leibniz's genius was to have sought meaning not in the elementary unities of language, but in the network of relations they form amongst themselves. In this way a system of correspondences can be established between the Chinese and Christian religions. It amounted, in short, to having already the idea of what would in our day be called functionalism and structuralism. But the *correspondences* between the two systems do not imply either their analogy nor a fortiori their identity. Leibniz was not saying that the Chinese think and believe the same things as Christians, he was content to ascertain that the two systems are *not incompatible*. Compatibility, which says less than analogy but more than non-contradiction, is a logical value; it establishes tolerance, a moral value.²⁵ This does not mean that analogies are totally lacking: "The Chinese," writes Leibniz, "also call their *Li* Globe or Round. I think that this tallies with our ways of speaking when we say that God is a sphere or a circle whose center is everything and whose circumference is nowhere."²⁶ And when Leibniz analyzes the expression *all is one, one is all*, in relation to the attributes of *Li*,²⁷ one finds oneself on familiar ground; and even if he seems not to know Damascius, he appeals to Plato and Spinoza and shows that a European philosopher is not incapable of understanding Chinese thought:

The saying that *all is one*, must be reciprocal to the other saying that *one is all*, which we discussed above, in recounting the attributes of *Li*. It means

that God exists eminently, just as the perfections of results are found in their cause, and not formally, as if they were made up of them, or as if this *great one* was their material, but through emanation, since they are the immediate results, in that he assists them intimately everywhere, and expresses himself in the perfections he communicates to them as much as their receptivity permits ...²⁸

A recurring theme is found penned by Leibniz in the magnificent *Letter to M. de Réymond*: the Jesuit fathers, trying to understand the Chinese religion in depth, became lost in the *details*. They forgot the whole. The essential is neither in *the word* or in *the gesture*, as in *this word*, or *that word*: "The ancient Chinese sages, in considering that the Spirit that governs the Sky, as the true God, and in taking him for the *Li* itself, meaning for the Rule, or for the sovereign Reason, had more reasons to do this than they were aware of."²⁹ The only ecumenicism is that of reason.

During the time Leibniz was interested in China, in England John Toland was condemned for having published *Christianity not Mysterious*, subtitled "Treatise showing that there is nothing in the gospel contrary to reason, nor above it, and that no Christian doctrine can properly be called a mystery." This crime is called *deism*. The word dates from the seventeenth century, the doctrine triumphed in the eighteenth. It had to do with a religious philosophy, not a philosophical religion.³⁰ It is characterized by a belief in a God, creator or organizer of the cosmos, to the exception of any other belief (a deist is not reputed to believe in the immortality of the soul, even though, historically, almost all of those who professed themselves deists or were attached to this philosophy also believed in the immortality of the soul). The deist performs the most radical *epochè* on religion, and keeps only the pith. With the idea of "natural religion," as opposed to "revealed religion," the idea of religion itself disappeared. Victor Hugo entitled a group of poems: *Religions et religion*. In so doing he shared the point of view of Shaftesbury, Voltaire and Rousseau: behind the *existing* religions – historical, restricted, fanatical, contingent – there exists an *essential* religion – eternal, whole, universal, divine, generous, fair, necessary. The only problem – but in the eighteenth century this could not be spoken out loud – was that this religion is no longer a religion. We know what would come from Robespierre's synthesis of the cult of the Supreme Being. For the incorruptible also

dreamed of a universal religion that would fuse all the "sects." The idea of natural religion is analogous to that of democracy as Rousseau analyzed it: just as general interest is the ensemble of common segments obtained once abstraction is made of its peculiarities, so natural religion is the religion common to all peoples – the only universal religion, consequently, that appeared once people abstracted absurd beliefs and dead rituals. Just as a chemist rids a mineral of its impurities to see it in its natural purity, the philosopher sets himself up as the one who, through his critique, rids religion of its historical impurities to cause it to be reborn in its purity. From here identity was formed, not the nocturnal identity of the esoterisms – that link everything to everything else, and, like magicians, seem wonderstruck to find what they have put in their hats – but the conscious, rational identity that is the product of a rationalism concerned with the universal.

One of the masters of this ecumenicism of reason was Lessing. In his play *Nathan the Wise*, one of the most beautiful in the world's repertory, he inserted the parable of the three rings recounted by Boccaccio in his *Decameron*.³¹ The sultan Saladin, with his eye on the money of the Jew, Melchisedech, tries to lead him into a trap by asking him which of the three religions, the Christian, the Jewish or the Sarracen, he considered the true religion. Melchisedech steers clear by telling the parable of the rich man who, among all the jewels of his treasures, gave his heir a precious ring – this jewel was the sign of the respect everyone owed to the new head of the family. The son would give the ring and the custom to his heir, as had already been the case for several generations. The ring had come into the hands of a man who had three equally virtuous sons. Not wishing to favor only one of them, he secretly had two more rings made, identical in every way to the first one. As he was dying, and likewise in secret, he gave a ring to each of his three sons. After he died, each son claimed to be the true heir – and as proof he presented the ring. They were examined, but since they were identical no one could really say who was the true heir. So it is for the three religions as well: each claims to be in possession of the true law and the true commandments; as for the question of knowing which one indeed has them, this is still debated to this day.

The ecumenicism of reason we have mentioned, is not a mask behind which a pseudo-universalism is hidden, nor a haze of syncretism. It is neither the triumph of the strongest, nor the association of cripples, but the religious expression of the universal human that can only be searched and found in reason. "Taking in a general manner," wrote Kant, "this statutory faith (which in any case is limited to a people and could never comprehend the universal religion of the world) as an essential ingredient in the cult of God, and making it the supreme condition whereby man fulfills divine satisfaction, is the *illusion of religion*."³² Kant, we see, calls "illusion of religion" not the illusory character of the object of the religion (this would be the direction of the later critique from Feuerbach to Freud, via Marx and Nietzsche), but the false representation that religion makes of itself – in the most concrete terms, the pretension (for with Kant, all illusion comes from pretension) of the Christian religion (Catholicism in particular) of establishing a universal religion.

In modern times, these two ecumenicisms continued to lead their lives, parallel at times, intersecting at others. They could also merge – for on which side would one place the Religion of Humanity which Auguste Comte saw as the religion of modern times? It is difficult to sort out syncretism, universalism and ecumenicism in these utopias in which reason merges into its opposite, but it is undeniable that it is a dream of totality – the common denominator of these modalities – that animated the school of Saint-Simon when it taught that after and beyond the nature religions (paganism) and after and beyond the religion of the Spirit (Christianity), there was room to take a further step and to create a new project, and, in its new dogma, to merge matter and spirit into a single and same substance.

Outside of Europe, the variety of ecumenicism was no less great. Originally from the Punjab, land of millennial mixings, Muza Ghulam Ahmad,³³ who gave his name to a new sect, Ahmadism, declared himself the universal messenger of the end of time, claiming to be the messiah of the Jews, the reincarnation of Jesus, the Mahdi of the Muslims and, for good measure, the latest avatar of Krishna. All syncretisms, however, do not lead to ecumenicism – the Latin American, African or Oceanic syncretisms are in fact

religious peculiarities, often closed to the outside world, which is perceived as threatening and dangerous. But a universal theme alone is not enough to found ecumenicism: the spheric "Lamp" that shines in the Caodaist temples in Vietnam can well represent the universal Monad, but it shines for the Caodaists alone.

The greatest thinkers of modern India are all ecumenists: Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Gandhi. For all of them, Krishna and Jesus, Rama and Allah are one and the same person, one and the same absolute. But the most typical of the ecumenicisms of sentiment was the religion founded in Persia in the last century by Bahauallah – called Bahaism.³⁴ This religion is exemplary in that it proclaims conjointly the unity of God, that of religions and that of humanity. Monotheist, Bahaism worships Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed for the same reason and considers that all these messengers adapted their words to the times in which they lived³⁵ – hence the different circumstantialities that should not make one forget the fundamental unity of the religion. This ecumenicism is joined by a passionate cosmopolitanism: "The earth is but a single country and men are its citizens." The universalism of Bahaism does not end at the temple doors.

In the *Kitab-i-Agdas*, as well as in numerous other writings, Bahauallah, the founder of Bahaism, invites the chiefs of state to come to an agreement on the use of a language and a universal writing.³⁶ Monism and universalism are symbolically inscribed in the architecture of its temples: the dome recalls Islam, religion's original land; the nine sides, of equal length, each have a door symbolizing humanity's great religions; the faithful entering through these doors converge upon a sole center, the symbolical route humanity takes toward a single god.

During this time in Europe an analogous movement, in terms of its founding principles, was being prepared, which would give a historical direction to ecumenicism. It was the Protestants, who worked the hardest toward ecumenicism, since they were the most affected by religious dispersal. In rational ecumenicism Leibniz was, as we have seen, the first and one of the greatest representatives. The philosopher of the *Monadology* wrote a universal prayer – which Catholics could recite just as well as Protestants. Later, in the last lessons he gave, Schelling³⁷ called for a *panchristianity* that

would gather all Christians together. In the middle of the century the idea of a communal religion of future humanity was acquired, which was to be born around the base of *immanentism*. The idea was retained, without the immanentism. The most important date of the ecumenical movement was 1893. On the occasion of the Chicago exposition, delegates from the five continents met in a Parliament of Religions. Vivekananda gave a conference there. On this occasion people were searching for a *non-denominational church*, open to all denominations. Protestantism had become scattered into a multitude of churches, and even chapels, that needed to be regrouped. The focus went beyond Protestant unity to Christian unity, beyond Christian unity to that of all religions, hence of all men of the whole earth. The endeavor took place on two fronts: institutional and intellectual. In the intellectual field, Germany before World War I saw the creation of a School of the History of Religions; the theologians who worked there believed in the unity of all religions and thought that Christianity and "paganism" had more points in common than differences. Later, Hans Küng, in his project of planetary ethics, worked in favor of world peace through peace among the religions. This gave proof of a great deal of optimism and a great deal of idealism. This said, on the institutional level the ecumenical movement grew further, and in 1945 the Ecumenical Council of Churches represented two hundred and fifty-two churches from eighty-three different countries. Today it includes more than four hundred churches (Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox). Otherwise the philosophy of the movement is modest – since it is less a matter of unifying than of manifesting a communion within which the churches, while recognizing their differences, bring together what they already have in common in their faith, their predictions and their sacraments. A distinction is established between the divisions passed down from the History, and judged surmountable because contingent, and those which correspond to the cultural differences thought to be legitimate. On the Catholic side, the movement was slower – but in 1964, the proclamation of the conciliary decree *Unitatis redintegratio* marked the official entrance of the Roman Catholic church into ecumenicism.

Can one go so far as to say that for twenty centuries many paths have been taken toward religious unification? Humanity and the

earth are becoming unified progressively – but it is not religion that is the driving force of the movement, on the contrary. Furthermore the work of historians and anthropologists tends rather, during the last few years, to focus on the irreducible visions societies share amongst themselves. This means that between two religious groups there is no bi-univocal correspondence possible – no more, for example, than between the works of two artists – as close as their themes and inspirations may be. The fact that there are universal structures of human thought and existence does not mean that there is a single religion, which would be the theme on the basis of which each culture has strummed out its own variation.

Notes

1. *Discours*, V, 67 B ff.
2. *The Universal Prayer*
3. *Dieu – Ascension dans les ténèbres – Les Voix*, ninth fragment.
4. Herodotus identifies Osiris with Dionysius and Isis with Demeter.
5. Plutarch, *Isis*, quoted in: L. Gernet and A. Boulanger, *Le Génie grec dans la religion*, Paris, 1970, p. 386.
6. Quoted in: G.F.W. Hegel, *Leçons sur l'histoire de la philosophie*, Paris, 1975, Vol. IV, p. 912.
7. An independent nation today, Sri Lanka's history is nevertheless pervaded by the influence of Indian culture. See the article by A. Abeydeera in: *Diogenes*, No. 159 (1992).
8. Or: Abu'l Fazl.
9. Quoted in: R. Grousset, *Figures de proue*, Paris, 1949, p. 320.
10. L. Bazin, "L'unité de l'homme dans la pensée turco-mongole," in: *Diogène*, No. 140 (1987), p. 33.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Furthermore, this kind of dialogue, imagined or real, between scholars of divergent faiths is a topic quite common to the Middle Ages. Thus Reuchlin in his *De Verbo Mirifico* set up a dialogue between a pagan philosopher, a Jew and a Christian.
14. R. Lulle, *Le Livre du gentil et des trois sages* (ed. by D. de Courcelles), Paris, 1992, pp. 18f.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
17. M. de Gandillac, *La Philosophie de la 'Renaissance'. Histoire de la philosophie*, Paris, 1973, Vol. II, p. 32.
18. See E. Wind, *Mystères païens de la Renaissance* (transl. by P.-E. Dauzat), Paris, 1992.
19. The full title is: *Colloquium Heptaplomeres de rerum sublimium arcanis abditis* (Colloquium among Seven Sages on the Hidden Secrets of Sublime Matters).

20. Quoted in: E. Bréhier, *Histoire de la philosophie*, Vol. I: *Antiquité et Moyen Age*, new ed., Paris, 1985, p. 690.
21. F. Schlegel, *Entretien sur la poésie* (transl. by L. Larbathe and J.-L. Nancy), in: *L'Absolu littéraire*, Paris, 1978, p. 312.
22. F.E.D. Schleiermacher, *Discours sur la religion* (transl. by I.J. Rouge), Paris, 1944, p. 289.
23. We should remind ourselves of the word's etymology: all the gods.
24. G.W. Leibniz, *Discours sur la théologie naturelle des Chinois* (transl. by C. Frémont), Paris, 1987.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
26. Leibniz, *Lettre à M. Rémond*, p. 84.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
30. In fact, by definition a religion cannot be philosophical.
31. Première journée, Troisième nouvelle, Paris, 1973.
32. "La religion dans les limites de la raison," in: *Oeuvres philosophiques* (transl. by A. Philonenko), Paris, 1986, Vol. III, p. 201.
33. He died in 1908.
34. Bahaism originated in Babism which in its turn split off from Shi'ism. It should be noted that the syncretism of the Din-i-Ilahi is also of Shi'ite origin.
35. Bahaullah is the messenger of our time.
36. H. Dreyfus, *Essai sur le baha'isme*, Paris, 1962, p. 58.
37. Included in his posthumous work *Philosophie de la Révélation*.