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Complementary Shards

In this discussion of what should be seen as an appropriate Christian approach to other religions, my plan is to adopt a rather different strategy, either from patterns that used to prevail in the more distant past or from what tends to be most common today. I shall begin by identifying three features of the contemporary situation which have motivated me in this direction. Thereafter, the resultant strategy will be sketched in a way which makes plain why the following chapters take the structure that they do. Although I make generous use of modern studies in comparative religion and Christian theology, where I differ from most practitioners of the former is by insisting on going beyond objectivity into sympathetic identification with the religion concerned; from the latter, I go beyond generalities into recognition of specific areas where I believe God may have spoken through that religion. Accordingly, in each case one or more topic of this kind is identified, though without any suggestion that this is all that might be discovered. The second half of this chapter will address my chosen image of complementary shards to define the relationship but first we need to note some reasons for a change of approach.

Reasons for a Change in Approach

Below I briefly discuss three of the reasons which have led me to rethink how one might best interpret the extraordinary variety of perspectives in the world's major faiths.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009367677.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

From Distant to Near Neighbour

The first, and perhaps most obvious reason, is the way in which the other has ceased to be remote from ourselves in some distant land but, quite frequently, is our own near neighbour. Post–war immigration resulted in significant religious minorities in most European nations, while Australia and the United States have opened up their borders as never before.[1] In France there are large numbers of Muslims whose roots lie in the country's former colonies in North Africa. In Germany a labour shortage after the Second World War resulted in the large-scale immigration of *Gastarbeiter* (foreign or migrant workers) from Turkey and more recently the admission in a single year of over a million refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis.[2] Meanwhile in Britain, the country's close relationship with its former imperial territories in the Indian subcontinent resulted in a situation in which, to evoke a familiar contrast, there are now more practising Muslims in the United Kingdom than there are Methodists.[3] While in respect of such movements Islam is generally the most numerous, figures for other religions are by no means insignificant. In the United States, for

[1] Australia's white-only immigration policy was gradually dismantled between 1949 and 1973.

[2] In 2015. *Gastarbeiter* or 'guest workers' was a term and policy adopted between 1955 and 1973. Since then some have returned home but most became either permanent residents or citizens.

[3] According to the 2011 census there were 2.8 million Muslims living in Britain, with roughly one and a half million adherents of Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism. In the 2021 census the number of Muslims had increased to 3.9 million (6.5 per cent of the population). The number of Muslims living in the European Union (according to 2007 figures) was 16 million.

instance, Buddhism and Hinduism can each claim about a million adherents, with Islam currently at 3.45 million. Architecturally significant places of worship have been slower to appear but there are now prominent buildings in quite a number of European and American cities.[4]

Such immigration is of course by no means entirely new. One need only recall Christendom's long shameful relationship with Jews living in its midst.[5] There has also been a long history of sporadic attempts at interfaith dialogue,[6] sometimes complemented even today at the practical level in the use of each other's shrines.[7] However, two features in the modern world are different.

[4] Two prominent examples in London are the Central London Mosque on the edge of Regent's Park and the Hindu temple, Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, in Neasden. For a rather unusual example, note the creation of a Kagyu monastery of Tibetan Buddhism on Holy Isle in the Firth of Clyde, gifted by a devout Catholic, Kay Morris. She was responding to a vison of the Virgin Mary instructing her to do so.

[5] Dislike of difference was intensified by the effect of usury laws which allowed Jews to lend but not Christians. There were also various legends of the Jewish ritual murder of Christian children, the most famous being William of Norwich in 1144. All Jews were expelled from England in 1290 and not readmitted until under Cromwell in 1655. England was not alone in this. In Germany the People's Crusade of 1096 resulted in the mass murder of Jews in Mainz, Speyer and Worms, a pattern that was to repeat itself over subsequent centuries.

[6] On Islam, see David Thomas, *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* (Leiden: Brill, 5 vols., 2009–13), and his selected extracts, David Thomas ed., *The Bloomsbury Reader in Christian-Muslim Relations, 600–1500* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022). For a book that concentrates mainly on modern developments, T. A. Howard, *The Faith of Others: A History of Interreligious Dialogue* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

[7] Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu & Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Angie Heo, *The Political Lives of Saints: Christian-Muslim Mediation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

The first is that, while some minority ghettoes still exist, on the whole there is much more integration. Schools are mixed and some attempt is made to provide understanding of the faiths which others practise. So the issue is more 'alive' than it would have been in the past where various forms of separate development were practised.[8] Although a movement like Black Lives Matter indicates that integration still has a long way to go, it is nevertheless the case that those of other faiths have now become prominent in public life and other major positions of influence, as with Rishi Sunak, Chancellor of the Exchequer from 2020 and then Prime Minster from 2022 (a practising Hindu), or Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London since 2016 (a Muslim).[9] Secondly, it is a world in which 'Christian' countries are no longer self-evidently culturally and economically superior. Oil has helped to advance various Arab nations, while China and Japan have already overtaken Britain in wealth, with India projected to do likewise in due course.[10] So even at the pragmatic level there is good

[8] Although the Ottoman Empire was considerably more tolerant of Jews than Christian Europe, even major centres of population had little interaction. Prior to the First World War, Baghdad had 80,000 Jews out of a total population of 200,000. Salonika was even a predominantly Jewish city.

[9] There are also some examples in continental Europe, among them Ahmed Aboutaleb, who became Mayor of Rotterdam in 2009, Cem Özdemir, a prominent member of the Green Party in Germany and now Minister of Food and Agriculture, and Rachida Dati, who served as the French Justice Minister from 2007 to 2009. In Ireland, the Hindu Leo Varadkar was Taoiseach (Prime Minister) from 2017–20, while in the Netherlands Kauthar Bouchallikht was the first Dutch MP to wear a hijab. In 2021, in the United States House of Representatives there were three Muslims, two Hindus and one Buddhist, all Democrats.

[10] Current estimates suggest that China will have become the world's most powerful economy by 2028.

reason for advocating a deeper understanding of the alternative cultures with which Christians must now engage.

Even where separation through distance continues, a different pattern now exists from what once did in the past. Tourism ensures that, even if there is no immediate interaction with other faiths in one's home environment, these are to be seen in organised visits, for example, to prominent mosques or temples in other lands. It is also the case that the literature of some of these nations has become part of a general cosmopolitan culture. This is especially true of writers from the Indian subcontinent and from the island of Japan.[11] Contemporary popular and classical music exhibits a similar range of influences. As examples of the former, think of Leonard Cohen's debt to Buddhism, George Harrison to Hinduism or Cat Stevens to Islam,[12] or again in classical music the fundamental change of view found in the later John Taverner's approach to, and use of, other religions.[13]

Accordingly, just like the mixed character of modern communities, so a shrinking world also argues for greater respect between the religions and a more sustained attempt to understand each other. Such greater awareness

[11] Among contemporary Japanese writers, apart from Kazuo Ishiguro, who became a British citizen as a child and who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017, one might mention novelists I happen to have read in translation in recent years: Takashi Hiraide, Toshikazu Kawaguchi, Yasunari Kawabata, Hiromi Kawakami, Haruki Murakami, Sayaka Murata, Yōko Ogawa and Yōko Tawada.

[12] George Harrison practised Hinduism from 1966 until his death in 2001; in 1977 Cat Stevens converted to Islam, thereafter, giving up his singing career; Leonard Cohen lived in a Zen monastery for five years from 1996.

[13] See further my comments in D. Brown and G. Hopps, *The Extravagance of Music* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 114–16.

has also brought another consequence more directly relevant to this project: the need for greater humility in approaching what others believe. Most readers will have had encounters in which the religious perceptions of someone of another faith proved no less profound than what was available from within their own faith, or something illuminated which had only been dimly grasped in their own religious practice.

Changing Perceptions of the Origins of the Major Faiths

A second reason for a different approach is change in the understanding of how the major faiths evolved. Historically, each of them had to various degrees settled into acceptance of a rather simplistic view of their own origins. The divine was understood to have addressed lead figures in an uncomplicated way which allowed revelation to be seen as a straightforward gift from heaven that, once delivered, remained easy in appropriation and unchanging in meaning. Modern academic research has decisively undermined any such story. Whatever specific religion one considers, there is a complicated story of development that needs to be told. Think, for instance, of the battles in the early Christian centuries over alternative accounts of Christ's significance, or of Muslim debates in their early centuries about how one Qur'anic text might supersede another or the oral tradition of hadith be used to qualify possible applications.[14] Any notion of

[14] For further discussion of the principle of *naskh* or abrogation in the Qur'an and the clarification of *isnad* or chain of transmission in the oral tradition, see my *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change*

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009367677.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

immediate and uncontextualised exchange between God and humanity has gone. In its place has come the necessity for acknowledging that all 'knowledge' of the divine is heavily shaped by the particular settings in which it is received or advanced.

This is an important change because it radically undermines the once common practice of offering the best interpretation of one's own revelatory texts and practice and the worst for those of other faiths. All now prove to be a mixture, sometimes with the human contribution seen to be most evident in one's own religion. By contrast, elements in another religion are sometimes better able to be interpreted positively, precisely through now being able to be set within their proper context. For example, although attempts are still made to defend the *herem* or 'sacred ban' which involved the extermination of other peoples within Israelite territory or the blood-curdling sentiments with which Psalm 137 concludes, the most obvious explanation almost certainly lies in the resentments of a defeated people and a consequent lust for revenge.[15] As such, while the texts might still be used to reflect on how such sentiments can be overcome, it needs to be declared quite unequivocally that their expression has nothing to do with what God desired to communicate and everything to do with human limitations. Markedly different is what has now become possible in interpretating charges of idolatry against Hindu worship. Not only does such an objection ignore

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 155–67. There is also a brief discussion in Chapter 7 of this work.

[15] Deut. 20. 16–20, Ps. 137. 8–9. Both texts probably originate from the period after the collapse of the southern kingdom of Judah.

the various ways in which the imagery seeks to point beyond itself, it also needs to be conceded that there is no less danger of idolatry within Judaism and Christianity. Thus, on the former point so many images are provided and with such variety that it is impossible to absolutise any single one. Again, on the other side 'respect' for the biblical word can all too easily collapse into a veneration that prevents the text from escaping such limited perspectives.[16] In short, it is necessary to see both divine and human at work not only in one's own faith but also more widely. Such changes in understanding bring with them two important consequences

First, it means that all claims to religious truth need to be properly set in context. In other words, such comparisons need to always be adjusted to take account of relationships with the wider cultural context. While major differences may still remain, even against such deeper settings, this is not always so. Sometimes as a consequence of such contextual analysis greater harmony between apparently competing revelations may well be the result. In an earlier book I took advantage of this possibility to suggest that the varying treatments of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in the three Western monotheisms are not in fact as opposed as initially might appear (Islam even focuses on a different son, Ishmael).[17] This is because their surface differences reflect different embedded traditions which nonetheless can each be seen to move

[16] The question of images is discussed further in Chapter 3 on Hinduism.
[17] Strictly speaking, the Qur'an does not name the boy, but subsequent tradition moved overwhelmingly in favour of Ishmael as ancestor of the Arabs.

eventually towards the same basic principle: that the most profound form of sacrifice is self-sacrifice.[18] That is where the implication of the story is finally taken to point in all three cases, even if in its earliest written form in Genesis 22 the dilemma had been made to centre round the father rather than the son. Islam's focus primarily on the elder son is matched by later Judaism's re-orientation towards an older Isaac,[19] while Christians of the patristic world saw in the victim a 'type' or anticipation of Jesus' own sacrifice. Although Hinduism offers no direct parallels, there is a similar emphasis on the value of self-sacrifice.[20]

It might well be possible to extend this kind of conciliatory move more widely, even in the case of what seem apparently intractable divergences. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the Hindu assumption that an impersonal Braham is ultimate and Islam's strong stress on Allah as a single person certainly sound sharply divergent. But, as we shall see later, by reflecting on internal discussion and practice within the three faiths some limited degree of reconciliation could become possible. Even so, such partial conciliation hardly amounts to exactly the same affirmation. Likewise, at first sight the Hindu doctrine of avatars might be thought to offer some appropriate parallels to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation.[21]

[18] Discussed at length in my *Tradition and Imagination*, 237–60.

[19] In one text (Genesis Rabbah) it is even inferred from the timing of Sarah's death that Isaac was in fact 37 years old at the time of the incident.

[20] As in the various stories associated with Prajapati's creation of the world: Rig Veda 10.21 & 10.90.

[21] Krishna, for instance, is reputed to have been the eighth avatar or 'incarnation' of the god Vishnu. The two major differences from the Christian doctrine are the lack of historical foundation (though this

But, while accommodation might appear possible for Hinduism as it has in its treatment of Buddhism,[22] Christianity presents two seemingly insuperable obstacles: its strong stress on both historicity and uniqueness. No doubt there are comparable sticking points across the various religions. As I shall explain in the second part of this chapter, I do not think that in such circumstances reduction to the lowest common denominator is the right answer. Instead, adherents of the different faiths (including Christians) should remain committed to their own perspective but at the same time more open than they were in the past to the possibility of learning how revelation may have operated elsewhere.

Secondly, although from a purely human perspective such an analysis could (as in the Isaac example) be wholly positive in offering additional possibilities for reconciliation, it actually adds to the difficulties of making coherent sense of the workings of the divine. Of course, at one level we may speak of divine respect for the human condition. God does not wish to overthrow the ordinary processes of human cognition. Instead, individuals are allowed to discover divine reality at their own pace and that of their culture rather than according to any absolute standard. Yet, although such a way of proceeding may be taken to demonstrate deep respect for the integrity of human beings as they are, such a proposed perspective would still raise some difficult questions. Not least is the issue of what advantage there might be in allowing such

would be challenged by many Hindus) and the insistence that none of the god's powers remained in abeyance.

[22] Buddha is treated as yet another avatar of Vishnu.

apparently diverse conclusions to have been reached. Might the easiest response to such evidence not be to acknowledge either that no such pattern of communication has ever occurred, or else that the variety has only been overcome to a very small degree, with human and divine still remaining at an enormous distance from one another?[23] No major religion would want to reach that conclusion. So the question is posed in its most acute form: how are we to conceive of God as still active amidst such astonishingly diverse, perceived variety? It is part of the purpose of this book to work towards a partial answer.

Escaping Over-Simple Explanations

In a book such as this, one can scarcely avoid mention of the modern rise of fundamentalism in all the world's major faiths. How modern, indeed recent such dogmatism is, it is salutary to recall.[24] Not implausibly, much can be viewed from the outside as a rather cowardly retreat in response to the challenges presented by questions of the compatibility of scripture with science and historical research. But it can also be seen in part as a response to the levelling of all religions by secularist assumptions. An equal right to be heard can so easily turn into an

[23] The latter is in effect the solution offered by John Hick in *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Macmillan, 1973) and subsequent publications.

[24] Although the movement was growing throughout the later nineteenth century, within Christianity it particularly associated with the Princeton theologian Charles Hodge and the five Princeton 'fundamentals' of 1910.

equally curt dismissal.[25] Yet the best way to deal with the secular challenge is surely not to run before it but rather to face squarely the objections. Of course, in order to achieve some degree of plausibility a more complex story of the development of the world's religions will need to be told but there is surely no harm in that. On the contrary, it may be countered that it is often the secularist as much as the fundamentalist who is plagued by the search for over-simple explanations. To see how applicable such an observation is, just consider for a moment some of the accounts of the origin of religion which have been offered.

As each new discipline in the social sciences has emerged, they have produced advocates for the view that their own discipline would now provide a full 'explanation' of religious belief. This is well illustrated by successive attempts in sociology, psychology and anthropology. Yet it is not difficult to detect in the process how particular elements of truth were implausibly universalised. For example, while it is indubitably true that there is a strong social component to religion, the famous reduction proposed by the sociologist Ēmile Durkheim (1858–1917) ignored the fact that this is by no means all that religion amounts to. Nor is it even always the major component in any religious belief system.[26] Indeed, there is no

[25] A good example of this is attitudes towards religious education in schools, where a demand that all religions be represented equally is often quickly turned into the rejection of their presence altogether.

[26] In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; original French edition, 1912) Durkheim argued that the role of religion was to form a social undergirding to communal life.

consistency regarding the period during which a strongly socially structured pattern to belief is likely to emerge. Whereas with Christianity this was a prominent feature in the middle ages which has subsequently declined, some other religions have moved in the opposite direction. Even some major religions like Hinduism or Shintoism have only become consciously self-reflecting as a social phenomenon in modern times.[27] In other words, there is considerable complexity which is being ignored.

Much the same criticism can be applied to the more recent phenomenon of the 'cognitive science of religion'. The term was first coined by J. L. Barrett in 2000 and since that time its literature has become extensive, not least through its International Association (founded in 2006). Barrett argues that human beings are hardwired to believe in the supernatural because of the evolutionary advantage postulating agency gives human beings even when no such agent is present (for example, in response to a sound precisely because of the warning thereby normally given of potential predators).[28] While Barrett's advocacy of the explanation is quite moderate, other researchers who have adopted the same sort of approach have shown much less caution. Even if contributing an

[27] Shintoism only really became self-consciously a distinct religion as a result of imperial policy in nineteenth-century Japan. Even Hinduism only gradually differentiated itself from others in reaction to the religion of successive invaders of the Indian subcontinent, notably Muslim and Christian.

[28] In *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2004) Barrett gives a formal name to the process: HADD or 'Hyperactive Agency Detection Device'. That is, the action of an agent tends to be presupposed even where a natural explanation is readily available, such as the rustle of the wind.

element of truth, a partial cause can scarcely be used to account for numerous other aspects of religion with which it bears little or no relation.[29]

No doubt belief in the supernatural among 'primitive' peoples was in part motivated by aetiology or a search for causal explanation. While the origin of the world is an obvious case in point, it is not hard to identify similar reflections at work with respect to specific emotions, such as powerful sexual passion which can sometimes feel like an invasion from outside the person.[30] But again to concede that much is scarcely to suggest that universalising the explanation carries with it any inherent plausibility. Not all religious belief appears motivated by such a search for explanation. Even where it was at the start, it by no means follows that this will account for its continuation. Consider the earliest known religious practice, which was in all likelihood veneration for the dead.[31] To suggest as an explanation purely apotropaic purposes (to ward off possible harm through damage to present projects) would be to make our ancestors' behaviour less subtly complex than our own. While no doubt a factor, it is surely dangerous to discount love and respect for the dead, and so a desire that they share positively in the next generation's projects. Similarly, sacrifice (another early practice) was sometimes certainly motivated by the desire to prevent a capricious deity from doing harm to one's crops. But,

[29] For some more criticisms of this position, see my comments in D. Brown and G Hopps, *The Extravagance of Music*, 42–3.

[30] A likely origin for deities such as Aphrodite and Venus.

[31] Even Neanderthals seem to have shown respect for their dead, while many ancient civilisations buried their dead beneath their houses: see *Extravagance*, 44–5.

equally, could not the motive also have been at other times simply to express gratitude for the flourishing of those same crops? Sacrifice would then be less about appeasement and more about maintaining a proper balance between our world and that of the gods. The offering during a Roman or Greek meal of part of the animal to be eaten and of some accompanying wine poured out as a libation surely suggests not just caution (the gods as a rule did not even get the best bits!).[32] Rather, it conceded their role in making such feasting possible, and so gratitude to them for allowing human beings to share in it.

In other words, what I am protesting against are somewhat naïve, unduly simple explanations. This observation holds equally to how the life of the gods was first envisaged. It is all too easy to contrast a religion like Christianity and an allegedly naïve anthropomorphism with which religion may have begun. While a spatial location in the heavens and features of character that resemble those of human beings appear dominant in earlier times, there are plenty of indications that these assumptions were not taken entirely literally. The way in which Egyptian gods were all given animal features at one time or another surely suggests rejection of any straightforward understanding of them as merely larger versions of ourselves. Indeed, what may well be the earliest representation of a god so far found nicely illustrates this point:

[32] Similarly, at Jewish as well as much pagan sacrifice, while the blood of the sacrificial animal was poured over the altar, only the inedible parts were burnt as an offering to the gods. The edible parts were consumed by the celebrants.

the so-called Lion Man of Ulm, believed to have been carved from mammoth ivory over 40,000 years ago.[33] Recent research indicates that the place where the object was discovered functioned as a kind of ritual sanctuary. This would be compatible with thinking of the Lion Man as used in worship to indicate an imaginative leap to another world, where there was to be found something much greater than the two already impressive creatures used in the carving (mammoth and lion).[34] So even at the distant birth of religion there was a subtlety that many a modern scholar lacks.

Not that such lack of refinement is always present. A recent encouraging example of willingness from an evolutionary scientist to acknowledge greater complexity in the origins and development of religion comes from Robin Dunbar in his recently published book, *How Religion Evolved*.[35] Although without religious belief himself, he acknowledges that at its heart even primitive religion sought subtle kinds of connection with an alternative world.[36] Their evolutionary importance lay in the way in which such moves secured the stability of society, though not always in the same way.[37]

[33] See further the discussion in Neil MacGregor, *Living with the Gods* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 1–13, esp. 6 (illustration) and 12–13.

[34] The original is in Museum Ulm in Germany. It was called the Lion Man because the figure was given human legs with which to stand upright.

[35] Robin Dunbar, *How Religion Evolved and Why It Endures* (London: Pelican, 2022). He is Professor of Evolutionary Psychology at Oxford.

[36] Ibid., 149–75. [37] Ibid., 177–212, esp. 194–8.

A Distinctive Approach: Complementary Shards

Having thus outlined these three considerations for adopting a different approach, let me turn now to first outlining my own proposed alternative model and then explaining why what follows seeks to go well beyond either of the two most common conventional understandings of the relation between the religions (inclusivism and pluralism).

An Alternative Model

For most of its past, Christianity has been quite dismissive of other religions. The 'compliment' was usually returned but Christianity had the advantage, at least until modern times, of being part of the ideology of the dominant, colonial powers and so looked more 'progressive'. Apart from one major exception,[38] more recently within Christian theology a respectful attitude has prevailed for the most part, with some version or other of inclusivism becoming the norm: the view that other religions may be seen as at most partial and imperfect anticipations of Christianity. Such attitudes are increasingly common, even among more conservative groups such as Pentecostalism. One of its major theologians has used features such as the witness of pagans in scripture and potential parallels in other religions to their own

[38] Karl Barth insisted that other religions were constituted by a human search for God rather than any reaching out of God towards them. His position was given classical expression by the Dutch theologian, Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (New York: Harper, 1938).

charismatic experience to argue for the activity of the Holy Spirit in all religions.[39] Characteristically, such inclusivism has taken one of two main forms. Either the focus has been at a high level of generality in which case gradations of truth (in favour of Christianity) have been postulated,[40] or else a very specific type of practical ecumenism is recommended, with joint ventures in acting or listening but with no expectation of real change on either side.[41] Both approaches are to my mind quite defective. What they ignore is the complexity I have briefly indicated above: complexity both in how the divine might be seen to communicate in general with humanity and complexity with regard to the story of that development within any particular religious tradition.

That is to say, what is ignored is the way in which conditioning by cultural context might allow different insights to reach prominence at different times within the perspective of the various faith communities. So there is no reason in principle why Christianity might not be more profound than, say Hinduism or Islam, in one area, but yet further behind in another. Indeed, that is precisely what I shall suggest in the examples chosen for

[39] Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), esp. 75–6, 113–14.

[40] The views of Karl Rahner are usually quoted in this context, in particular his notion of 'anonymous Christians'. Adherents of other faiths are seen as on the way towards more explicitly Christian perceptions: *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1960), 6.390–8.

[41] The best-known contemporary approach of this kind is probably the practice known as Scriptural Reasoning, initiated by the Jewish scholar, Peter Ochs in 1995. It involves different faiths observing how others study their own sacred texts. Rose Castle in Cumbria is currently the headquarters of the movement in England.

subsequent chapters. An analogy might help at this point. The most complete divine disclosure possible would be rather like a beautiful inlaid pattern on a collection of ancient vases, alluring and fascinating in detail yet currently only detectable in part on a number of shards or broken parts. Sometimes aspects of the pattern are replicated on more than one shard. Sometimes the pattern is only discoverable by fitting together different pieces from different broken aspects. And sometimes (and more difficult to resolve) the same corresponding piece seems quite different, almost suggesting no recognizable common identity.[42] In other words, each and every religion falls short of the ideal or totality. They are more like these shards or broken potsherds, full of promise yet incomplete in themselves. The fullest pattern is only recoverable by noting complementary elements, different bits of the jigsaw, as it were: fuzzy parallels that need to be worked at, in order to provide a more complete picture of the whole.

Perhaps some will take offense at the analogy and suggest that it offers too low a view of revelation, but, as even as orthodox a theologian as St John Henry Newman concludes, 'no revelation can be complete and systematic, from the weakness of the human intellect . . . A Revelation is religious doctrine viewed on its illuminated side; a mystery is the selfsame doctrine viewed on the side unilluminated. Thus, religious truth is neither light nor darkness, but both together; it is like the dim view of a country seen in the twilight, which forms half extricated from the

[42] How that particularly challenging issue might be best resolved is pursued in most detail in Chapter 8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009367677.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

darkness, with broken lines and isolated masses. Revelation, in this way of considering, is not a revealed system, but consists of a number of detached and incomplete truths, belonging to a vast system unrevealed'.[43] So, elsewhere even of the Trinity Newman observes: 'Break a ray of light into its constituent colours; each is beautiful, each may be enjoyed; attempt to unite them, and perhaps you produce only a dirty white. The pure and indivisible Light is seen only by the blessed inhabitants of heaven; here we have but faint reflections of it as its diffraction supplies ... Attempt to combine them into one, and you gain nothing but a mystery which you can describe as a notion, but cannot depict as an imagination'.[44] In other words, however strong an image we are able to form of the individual members of the Trinity, it will defy our powers of imagination to make complete sense of the notion.

Beyond Inclusivism and Pluralism to Contextualism and Discovery

A quite different sort of objection will come from those who argue for a pluralist approach, with all religions seen as equally distant from ultimate Reality. Sometimes this operates as a maximising strategy, but usually at a price as critics often claim that in the process real differences are insufficiently acknowledged. It is an objection that has been raised, for instance, against Keith Ward's claim that

[43] J. H. Newman, *Essays Critical and Historical* (London: Longmans, 1887), vol. I, 41–2 (Essay 2.4).

[44] J. H. Newman, *Grammar of Assent* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), ch.5, sec. 2, 116–17.

the philosophical conception of God in the Western monotheisms exhibits 'strong similarities with Vedanta' and even with the 'atheistic religion of Buddhism',[45] in 'a picture of the religious life as one which turns from the concern of the world to find eternal bliss in a source beyond the finite and temporal, which yet manifests in personal form, possessing supreme bliss and knowledge'.[46] More typical is a thoroughly minimalist strategy. For example, John Hick reduced much of Christian orthodoxy to myth,[47] and in this he has been followed by the most recent significant utilisation of such an approach in Perry Schmidt-Leukel's impressive 2015 Gifford Lectures.[48] In effect both offer a reconstruction of the Christian religion rather than any essential continuity. This was recognised by Hick himself, when towards the end of his life he abandoned the confessional church he had espoused for most of his life (Presbyterianism) for the

[45] Keith Ward, *Images of Eternity* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1987), 181.

[46] Ibid., 29. The differences between the two contrasting Hindu approaches of Shankara and Ramanuja are, it is alleged, minimized. Again, on Buddhism it is suggested that the doctrine of no-self could be 'taken as teaching that beyond the relatively illusory self, there is an underlying Mind ... with which one can be united' (73), certainly a controversial, if not necessarily false, claim.

[47] Notoriously in the book which he edited, entitled *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

[48] *Religious Pluralism & Interreligious Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017). Although fully comprehensive in its range of reference, the book strikes me as too concerned to achieve a common mind without regard to how beliefs have functioned in the history of the traditions concerned. So, for example, the author thinks it enough to note that Jesus never claimed to be God, whereas the gospels (and John in particular) are already shaping Christianity in this direction. For the method in action applied to relations with Islam, see 146–63, esp. 151–54.

non-dogmatic Society of Friends. Alan Rice, the person who invented the commonly used categories of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism, was himself a postgraduate research student of Hick's. Judging by his latest book,[49] he would probably regard my own proposals as merely yet another version of inclusivism, and of course in one important sense he is exactly right. I do think it important that in religious practice preferential judgements are made. An open agenda actually avoids any real commitment. Yet there is another sense in which what I am offering in this chapter and those that follow is something fundamentally different. There is, I would contend, a willingness to acknowledge a much more complex reality in which one's own religion does not always 'win'. In short, pluralism is emphatically not the only option in expressing openness to others.

Similar endorsements of pluralism are also occasionally to be found in those of other faiths. Perhaps no one has done more to popularise mindfulness in the West than the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022). But it is arguable that in his desire to draw parallels between Christianity and Buddhism he actually substantially rewrote the basic contents of each.[50] A hint in that direction is suggested by the way in which the

[49] Alan Race, *My Journey as a Religious Pluralist: A Christian Theology of Religion Reclaimed* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021).

[50] Controversially, he argued for an alternative translation for the short Zen treatise, The Heart Sutra. Instead, of emptiness being seen as the ultimate aim, it becomes compassion, with inter-dependence now seen as its fundamental assertion. The result is that '"emptiness" is an expression we could say is equivalent to "God"': *The Other Shore* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2017), 58.

patristics scholar Elaine Pagels in her introduction to his *Living Buddha, Living Christ* opts for ancient Christian Gnosticism as the nearest analogue to what he wants to say.[51] Yet, even if at times he does take implausible shortcuts,[52] Nhat Hanh's reflections may be seen as those of a deeply holy man, seeking somewhat too enthusiastically to mediate the ideas of the east where he originated and the Christian West where he eventually settled.[53] A more accurate eastern estimate of the difference might, therefore, be the work of another holy Buddhist monk, the current fourteenth Dalai Lama (b. 1935) who exhibits much more caution in drawing parallels.[54]

Apart from the question of whether sufficient identity is maintained and thus the engagement of existing adherents, two further fundamental challenges need to be set against pluralist approaches. First, there is the problem of why unqualified equality should be deemed of such supreme worth; secondly, why everything is analysed from a human perspective and never from the divine. Presumably, lurking in the background of the former is an assumption that any other attitude would denigrate the faith of others. But surely this would only be so if a

[51] Thich Nhat Hanhn, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (New York: Rider, 1996), xix-xxvii.

[52] Ibid. 'Jesus pointed to the same reality of no-birth, no-death. He called it the Kingdom of God'. (143).

[53] Plum Village monastery was founded in the Dordogne in 1982. There are three daughter monasteries in the United States, as well as others elsewhere in the world.

[54] See further his book *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teaching of Jesus* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1996). For example, he observes that 'the conception of God and creation are a point of departure between Buddhists and Christians' (55).

position of arrogant exclusivism were adopted and not what is being advocated here: a willingness to listen and learn that will sometimes at least result in recognition of better insight on the part of one's interlocutors than within one's own community. Another element in play, though, may be the thought that, since we are dealing with a purely human search, none can be placed more highly than any other. But why accept such reductionism? The failure of simple models for proposing a divine initiative in revelation need not entail that no more satisfactory, complex account can be given. Chapter 8 will in fact offer some more formal proposals precisely along these lines. In the meantime, as our discussion proceeds, some hints will emerge, not least because it is that very complexity which earlier chapters will be seeking to address. Chapter 9 will then return to this issue of pluralism versus inclusivism by examining more closely some major figures in that dialogue but this time with our project largely behind us.

In an ideal world, no matter what the topic, a full dialogue between different perspectives would involve alternating contributions with each interlocutor doing as much listening as talking. But for such interaction to flourish it is necessary that some common presuppositions and values are shared. Otherwise, frequent misunderstanding will be the result. Unfortunately, the various world religions are not yet at such a point. At most, what we can hope for is a sympathetic exploration of other religions that endeavours to take with maximum seriousness those alternative presuppositions. This is what I shall seek to do, as I attempt in what follows two main aims: both to set the religions concerned in their various

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009367677.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

appropriate cultural contexts and to identify some prominent features from which I believe Christianity could learn. So each chapter begins by setting the origins and present practice of the religions concerned in their specific contexts before going on to identify some contribution which might be appropriated. Contextualisation is usually assumed to be reductionist, with belief and practice in effect equated with cultural constraints. But because different contexts generate different forms of limitation, another way of viewing the situation is as potentially liberating; enabling the possibility of seeing issues from some new perspective.

Although I write as a believing Christian, this is not the place to say something about what Christianity might itself be able to contribute. This is not because I suppose my own religion to have less to offer but precisely because there is a need to reverse the traditional Christian evangelistic approach which has supposed that the benefits would run exclusively in one direction, from itself to others. In other words, there is now a real need for much greater humility, a willingness to pursue the learning process in reverse. Accordingly, what follows is not treated as simply an intellectual exercise. There is also a deliberate focus on actual practice in the religions concerned. By deliberate intent the discipline of religious studies usually focuses upon an 'objective' presentation, viewing any particular religion from the outside, as it were. It is also a policy pursued by most biblical scholars who see their task as an historical one, essentially no different from that of any other historian investigating secular history. While there is undoubtedly a place for such objectivity, it does come in both cases at a

considerable price: putting it somewhat crudely, the failure to take into account what makes a particular religion 'tick', what might enable a sympathetic observer to enter into its spirit. So, for example, while Christianity is at root an historical faith, this by no means entails that its only interest is in the historical value of its texts. Rather, of far greater importance is the potential meaning which they might convey, in engaging a new perspective and affective commitment.[55] Equally, such 'objectivity' can lead to the treatment of Buddhism as more philosophy than religion.[56] While such an analysis might better capture aspects of its general perspective, it also undoubtedly side-lines much of what actually goes on in the practice of its various forms. Cultic behaviour at Buddhist shrines suggests a very different account.[57] That is why, in order to avoid such potential misunderstandings, in preparing to write this book I deliberately sought out encounters with believers in the world's other major religions, especially in countries where that particular religion constitutes the majority faith and so would prove especially easy to observe in practice. As well as focused visits to China, India and Japan, I took the opportunity to visit a number of Muslim countries, as well as some other Buddhist

[55] I have sought to argue for this sort of approach in *Gospel as Work of Art: Imaginative Truth and Open Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2024).

[56] No one could deny a strong philosophical element in Buddhism but treating it exclusively in this way is probably primarily motivated by the current widespread negative cultural response to 'religion'.

[57] I recall a memorable afternoon in Yangon (the principal city of Myanmar) observing a range of practices from individual adults adding gold leaf to statues to a group of young children singing chants. Clearly evident was the joy and devotion on the faces of most of them.

nations.[58] That practical dimension has meant that, although more conceptual issues eventually take centre stage, I have not infrequently initiated discussion with a focus on devotional issues.[59] Perhaps in terms of an appropriate precedent one might mention the current creation of the House of One in Berlin.[60] With a church, mosque and synagogue sharing the same building, it is hoped that frequency of encounter at a practical level may well induce some more tolerant and sympathetic attitudes.

So my hope is that this book demonstrates greater humility than Christian theologians have commonly shown in the past. A sympathetic reading demands that one see the divine at work elsewhere as well as in one's own religion, and this I have sought to do. One way of helping towards such a perception is to take careful note of the kind of interactions between religions which have already occurred in some cases, as for instance, between Hinduism and the various other religions practised on the Indian subcontinent, or between Buddhism and Shintoism in Japan. That is one reason why three of the chapters address religion in specific nations (India, China and Japan) precisely because, even if seldom fully admitted, there has been a long history of such interaction.[61] However, I shall begin in Chapter 2 with something that

[58] Muslim countries included Albania, Iran, Kosovo, Morocco, Turkey and Uzbekistan; Buddhist countries included Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam.

[59] As in Chapter 3 on Hinduism.

[60] The foundation stone was laid on 14 April 2020 in Fischerinsel, where apparently Berlin's first church once stood.

[61] As we shall see, China will prove the most complicated to analyse with Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism all having major impacts on the other two.

is even less widely recognised. Indeed, it is only becoming fully apparent in the light of more recent historical research, and that is the extent to which both Judaism and Christianity were indebted to pagan religion. Judaism and Christianity were also constrained by specific contexts.

Chapters 3 and 7, devoted exclusively to Hinduism and Islam, respectively, frame the central chapters on religions in the three nations (China, India and Japan) and may initially seem exceptions to that pattern. Yet even here a more complicated dynamic needs to be admitted. Hinduism only came to see itself as a single entity in modern times. It was thus interaction between originally semi-independent strands which produced its present greater internal coherence. Equally, it cannot be denied that there were some changes in overall emphasis in response to the challenges set by the dominant religions of the colonial powers.[62] Again, with respect to Islam, as will be noted in due course, the Qur'an cannot be properly or fully understood without additional awareness of some of the major narratives of Judaism and Christianity.[63] Finally, towards the book's end I return to the question of how revelation may be understood across the religions and in particular how the most intractable differences might be, if not resolved, at least ameliorated

[62] It is not implausible to claim that it was competing pressure from Christianity and Islam which led to a much stronger emphasis in more recent times on a central place for monotheism.

[63] Muhammad alludes to the stories in a way that presupposes knowledge of relevant details in the other two religions.

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Perhaps in a relatively short book I have tried to achieve too much. As it is, there are some obvious omissions. Not all religions are included. Modern Judaism in particular receives no mention. However, of all contemporary faiths, this is the one with which modern Christian theology has most often sought to engage, so readers may confidently be left to the many reflections on the matter in other writers. We begin, though, with Judaism in its most ancient form. Here, the natural superiority it once assumed along with Christianity in supposing a self-contained development needs to be challenged, and the great debt both religions owe to surrounding pagan culture duly acknowledged. It is to such questions that we now turn.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009367677.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press