

Religions in Transition: An Attempt at a Synthesis¹

Any serious discussion about what religion is would probably be endless. Nowadays there is fairly general consensus that, certainly in the case of religion, it is methodologically incorrect to insist that for any x , one should be able to state what feature (or set of features) the x should possess by virtue of which one is entitled to call it x . Consequently, rather than begin an inquiry into what religion is by defining the phenomenon, it seems better to start in some less formal way. I will begin by conjecturing what an extra-terrestrial visitor to our planet might include in a report to his home base about the earthly phenomena that English-speaking human beings usually call ‘religion’.

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¹ This article is being published in memory of Rev. Prof. Peter Serracino Inglott (1936-2012). A good proportion of the material originated as a first chapter of an intended publication, at undergraduate level, on the subject of the philosophy of religion, which was to have been co-authored by Rev. Prof. Peter Serracino Inglott, who had lectured for many years on the subject, and by Rev. Mark Sultana who, since, has taken up a post in philosophical theology. The publication was sadly never completed. The chapter was subsequently developed into a paper by Rev. Mark Sultana. This paper, which is now being published, was delivered at a conference on the philosophy of religion, attended by a select working group, and held at *All Hallows' College*, Dublin between the 16th and the 18th May 2012.

Your Excellencies,

Several and very splendid are the buildings and spaces on earth that are dedicated to this *X*, whom many call *God*. They range from a huge domed structure called Saint Peter's in Rome where sober yet ecstatic liturgies are held ... to a magnificent complex in Mecca called the Al-Masjid al-Harām or the Grand Mosque where we are used to seeing millions of pilgrims gathering for the Eid al-Fitr ... to the Ryongi temple in Kyoto where a stone rectangle evokes the idea of infinite nothingness; within its enclosure one is immersed in the petrified silence of a primitive sea. The contrasts between these buildings is immense: in the Ryongi temple, it is next to impossible not to allow dreaminess to take over one's mind: the heart of the monastery is an imperturbable lake reflecting a nonchalant sky. What a contrast to the multitudes milling about in Saint Peter's, or Mecca, or even in Jerusalem. The contrast spills over into beliefs, liturgies and ascetical practices. Indeed, there are sometimes bitter and even bloody conflicts about the ways of conceiving, let alone dealing with, *X* ...

... Despite the vehemence with which human beings differ among themselves as to God's favourite way of communicating with them, belief that in one way or another he does so is very widespread. Actually there are only 12% of humankind – although this amounts to some 900 million – who declare that they are atheists. There are more – about 20% of humankind, which comes up to some 1,200 million – who profess that they believe in some *X* that might be called 'God' but who claim that they are not 'religious'. Being 'religious' is taken to imply, in addition to believing that God exists, also claiming to be in communication with him and with others who similarly communicate with him. Despite the apparently countless varieties of religion, if one were to carry out a complete survey of the manifestations of religion on earth, it is safe to speculate that it would result that there are just *two* main types. The first type developed in three main phases, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and holds that God communicates with human beings primarily through language. The second type, which developed through two main phases, Hinduism and Buddhism, holds that contact between the divinity and the human, or the eternal and the temporal, occurs primordially in silence. They have been described in terms of transcendence and interiority; reference can also be made to the contrast between the 'theistic' and the 'mystical'² types of religion.

² I am using this term in a generic manner as Ninian Smart often used it (see, for instance,

... A much-controverted phenomenon called 'secularisation' has undoubtedly been taking place, at least in the European world. Even here, perhaps one should rather speak of the unchurched of Europe, and of religious individualization, than of secularisation. For it seems that, in so-called secular societies, people have developed a private religion not abandoned religion altogether. Religion has become invisible rather than non-existent. The emphasis has been switched to individualization of belief; the compilation of personal creeds that give meaning to one's unique existence, according to one's experiences, interests and aspirations. Hence, in contemporary Europe, religious identity is increasingly a matter of personal choice. Almost concurrently, however, in the nineteen eighties, in Iran, an Islamic revolution, spiritually guided by the Ayatollah Khomeini, replaced the Shah; in Poland, the Solidarity Movement led by Lech Wałęsa – wearing a huge badge of the Virgin of Częstochowa on his lapel – began the process of toppling the Communist regimes that ruled over Eastern Europe; in the USA, Protestant evangelism, preached by televangelists remained a significant electoral force; in Latin America, Catholicism preached a liberation theology that inspired millions; in Burma and elsewhere Buddhism remained enormously influential on the social and cultural levels; the relationship between India and Pakistan is largely coloured by that between Hinduism and Islam. It is understandably exceedingly difficult to formulate a criterion in terms of which it would be possible to decide indubitably who should be counted as a religious person and who not. That, of course, has not prevented a fairly large group of philosophers, in the wake of psychologists, sociologists and other self-styled human scientists, from writing interminable series

his *Worldviews: Cross-cultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 2nd ed., Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1995) although I am here applying it, even if somewhat controversially, to indicate one of two types of religion. While in theistic or prophetic religions, God is personal, creator and sovereign over the universe, communicates with humans and is personally concerned with the right ordering of creation and with the formation of 'righteous' relationships between Godself and humans and between humans themselves, the divinity of 'Eastern' religions is more of a principle than a person: it is the principle of stillness that is the source of all activity, the One from which all multiplicity proceeds. The latter is what is meant here by 'mystical'. Here, "it is not that ['Eastern'] asceticisms are, as is claimed, ignorant of divine transcendency and of the divine personality; they consider, nevertheless, that the latter is a 'non-supreme' aspect of the former, an aspect destined, in the last resort, to annul itself as such, when knowledge will rise to the non-duality of the Principle," Jacques-Albert Cuttat, "The Religious Encounter of East and West," *Thought*, 33 (1958): 485-514, as quoted in Julius Evola, "On the Problem of the Meeting of Religions East and West," *East and West* 10 (1959): 270.

of books, with each giving a different answer to the question. I have so far allowed myself to simply follow my hunches. I must admit that I did not find it easy even relying on intuition – rather than the principles of scientific investigation – to form a clear idea as to what is religious. For instance, many of the participants in the religious rituals of Japan appear outside it to live animated by hedonist ambitions and the rush to get rich quickly. In a Japanese newspaper there appeared a picture entitled: *A Buddhist Requiem for Broken Telephones at the Zojo-ji Temple in Tokyo*. It showed three Buddhist monks, attired with the proper sacred vestments and implements, celebrating a ritual upon a pile of broken telephones, in front of a large seated audience of men in Western dress who would fit in well in the boardrooms of corporate Japan.³

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Let us now suppose that the text reproduced above has somehow fallen into your hands and you are asked by a Very Important Person on earth to give your opinion of it. The following might well be the result.

An assumption that cannot be made is that an E.T.'s perspective on the religions of the world should be taken as a necessarily perfect one, or as one incapable of being improved upon. The E.T. may well be able to enter successively and successfully into the very differently sized and cobbled shoes of the almost infinitely various believers, but this guarantees no exception to the rule that genuinely objective vision is unattainable for humans. So let us examine the question as to the best way of portraying religion. For, there is hardly any need to stress that the relation between the adherents of different religions are more affected by the images which each group has of the other than by the precise content of the beliefs held by the spiritual leaders of each religious group. It is, however, perhaps worth stressing that it is becoming increasingly impossible in the age of electronic communication for any authority to control the images of any religious group which anyone with the means of diffusing them chooses to broadcast or stream. Given these two conditions, it becomes obviously important for all of us human beings but especially for those of us who are adherents of one or other of the five main world religions to be concerned about the ways in which religion is portrayed. Also, given the often muddled ways of portrayal, the immense plurality of world religions, and the tense relationships sometimes characterising their encounters, we need to urgently propose anew such questions as: how is a real encounter possible given this diversity? What kind of unity can there be? On what basis could we even begin to search for such unity?

³ See Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 465.

In exploring different pictures or portrayals of religion, it is possible to distinguish three main styles – if one wants to parody slightly the historians of art – corresponding perhaps to the three main phases of development of philosophical attitudes – in the portrayal of religions. The suggestion will be that there is something to learn from each of them for the purpose of hopefully constructing a fourth approach.

- i. To begin with, before the Cartesian Age, the predominant attitude seems to have been for the adherents of each religion to hold that the truest portrait not only of their own but also of the religions of the others could only be given from the standpoint of their own. Thus, in the Middle Ages, Christianity and Islam would appear, in the eyes of a Jew, as misapprehensions of the Torah; Judaism, in the eyes of a Christian, would appear to be an anachronism and Islam a heresy; both Judaism and Christianity, in the eyes of a Moslem, seemed to be polluted versions of the divine revelation restored to its pristine purity in Islam. The relationship between religions is here seen in terms of proclamation, missionary activity and conversion.
However, reflection on the concept of truth has led later – especially contemporary – philosophers to a, perhaps, unexpectedly general agreement that it – truth – only arises in a dialogic context. Hence, although there may be some point in certain contexts to the mere portrayal of other religions from the point of view of one's own, it is not an exercise conducive to the dialogue in the context of which truth shines out. That was not, of course, the reason for the change of fashion in the style of portraiture of religions which took place with the waning of the Middle Ages.
- ii. The second phase in the history of the portraiture of religions – which is here being outlined in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek way – began, at least in the West, with the Cartesian Age. The attitude then spread that the best account – or the most accurate portrait – of a religion would be that given by a liberal-rationalistic standpoint. This view went swimmingly with the post-Cartesian view prevalent throughout the course of modern philosophy that the only sure starting point of knowledge was self-knowledge on rational grounds. Scholarship here was based on a standpoint supposedly above and beyond the religious phenomenon. The dream was to evaluate the various religions using the neutrality of enlightened reason. This led to a transition in interest from philosophical theology to the philosophy of religion. The aim was to seek to separate the rational core of religion – now understood mainly in terms of some kind of deism and of morality – from the emotional and superfluous husk – which had to do with liturgies and rituals, revelation and providence, prayer and worship. This kind of portrait, of course, severely

delimited the phenomenon of religion. Again, however, such truncation was not the primary reason for the shift in the kind of portrait of religion which took place towards the middle of the nineteenth century.

- iii. The second view began to lose its popularity with the beginning of the contemporary view. Then the 'masters of suspicion' – as Paul Ricoeur famously called Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – convinced many, in the West at least, that there is much which is irrational in our beliefs and actions and that others might be able to understand our deep convictions better than ourselves. In congruence with this view of the self, many philosophers of religion came to think that truer accounts of religion could be given by non-adherents, whose penetrating minds had acquired the various new analytic skills that allowed them to pierce beneath the surface consciousness of the mass of religious believers.

One suspects that there is hardly anyone today who subscribes to any of the theories of the 'masters of suspicion' *in toto*. On the other hand, it is difficult not to agree that adopting a hint or two from them can improve the quality of our exercise of the craft of the portrayal of religions, as it has improved that of all art criticism when practised judiciously. If we stuck to just the portraits of a religion given by its own adherents or if we accepted such portraits at face value, the result would be just as vast an impoverishment and distortion of our knowledge as if we only allowed autobiographies to be written and did not countenance any other sort of biographical work. In addition, it is nowadays largely agreed that there is no neutral rational standpoint.

However, the belief that the self, at least as conceived after Descartes, does not exist at all also gained sway. This belief, together with the renunciation of meta-narratives, the embracing of perspectivism, and the portrayed weakness of reason, is often taken to be, if not the corollary of totally consistent atheism, the seedbed for at least a vague form of agnosticism. Perhaps the best description of this state is the expression, coined by the British sociologist Grace Davie: *believing without belonging*.⁴ This means that an increasing gap has grown between religious believing and belonging: while people are apparently increasingly concerned to nurture the spiritual dimension of life, and find answers to questions of meaning in life, they progressively seem to see organised religion in the form of the institutional church as being irrelevant to those issues. But this should not blind us to the fact that we are in a new age of religious searching. It is a time of belief for many, a

⁴ See Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), passim.

time of unbelief for some and a time of novel ontic commitments, albeit not religious ones and perhaps including play, mystery, and even horror, for others.⁵ While morality may seem to be a mere matter of creative freedom and it may be hard to see it should be grounded in something higher – such as divine transcendence – religious answers to the question of life's meaning are still available, and, in a number of significant occasions in the person's life, such answers are *desirable*.⁶ Perhaps one should speak of a decline, not of religious aspiration and its urgency, but rather of the very possibility of unchallengeable beliefs.⁷ Despite the loss implicit in such a decline, one must also say that postmodernism has clearly contributed a lot to the development of skill in constructive and multi-dimensional portraiture.

At this point, it seems that there are three ways forward for an encounter between religions: the tendency to simply give up the endless dispute about truth and recognize that what is at the core of religion is orthopraxy delineated in the service one ought to give to peace, justice and the stewardship of creation; the tendency of theistic religions to dissolve and annihilate themselves in pursuing a 'mystical' path; or the tendency of 'mystical' traditions to trace forth their relationships with theistic religions.

Perhaps it is the first and the second routes which are the more beguiling.

We can start by granting some attention to the first alternative: the 'pragmatic' route. The call is for religions to give up all disputes about truth and aim together for the betterment of humanity in whatever the situation could demand of them. There is much which is laudable here: questions of peace, justice and the respect towards creation are of great importance. Undoubtedly religions have much to contribute towards such vitally important aims. Here there have been noteworthy attempts to strive towards world peace in a context of interreligious ethical understanding and cooperation like the 'Global Ethic Project' and the 'Parliament of the World Religions.' However, one must also say that religions cannot be reduced to morality or to political purposes. Religions are constituted by more than moral injunctions; they have to do with beliefs, emotions, revelations, rituals, practices, prayers and offerings. Indeed, it would be simplistic to expect *a priori* religiously-neutral solutions to situations of lack of peace and justice. The personal formation and transformation associated with religions is a vital and ever-new aspect making hope possible – there are no procedural shortcuts to peace, social justice or the respect for the integrity of creation.

⁵ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007), 374-376.

⁶ See *ibid.*, 591-592.

⁷ See *ibid.*, 530.

Then, what about the ‘mystical’ model? At a time when we are very doubtful whether we can know the transcendent at all and we are very uneasy about claims of intolerance when any truth-claims regarding the transcendent are made, it appears that the future should belong to ‘mystical’ religions. Here, no claims are made about the divine; there is no emphasis on the institutional or sacral features of religion, and all conflict with scientific reason is excluded. Religion is to be found entirely in the realm of ‘mystical’ experience; hence, it is tolerant and allows the human person an unfettering of her finitude. Here, one certainly finds an excellence: we are united in our inward search in that, leaving our very ‘I’ behind, we come into contact with the ineffable and are transformed and dissolved in such a way that we engage with and view the world serenely, and without attachments. There is much which is great here: this is the greatness of the ‘mystical’ religions. There is certainly also much that is common here; and much that could serve to deepen the theistic religions. Indeed, theistic religions have always had a strong apophatic dimension.⁸

At this point, reference could be made to the remarkable book by Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*, in which a heavenly council of religions is summoned by the *Logos* to serve peace. In this meeting, in which seventeen representatives from various religions and nations are summoned, the *Logos*, referring to the teachings of wisdom, says “You will not find another faith, but rather one and the same single religion presupposed everywhere ... As infinite [God] is neither three, nor one, nor anything that can be stated. The names which are attributed to God are taken from creatures, since He Himself is ineffable in Himself and is above all that can be named or stated.”⁹

However, while ‘mystical’ and theistic religions may have much in common – indeed, more than one could think – one must also take note of irreducible elements in theism: the cosmos seen as *created*; history as pregnant with God’s presence and providence; the believer as related to God; worship of God as transformation of the believer in such a way that she is given back to herself in mission. However important the apophatic element may be, it does not exhaust the theistic religious experience. In addition, a complete apophaticism would mean that there could never be any community of thought and will; there could never be a point, beyond our individual selves, to our thinking and acting. The religious search would become a matter of individual therapy where one does not – and indeed *cannot* – reach out towards states of affairs outside oneself or towards others.

⁸ See the formulation of the Fourth Lateran Council in DS 806: “between Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying an even great dissimilitude”.

⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*, IV and VII, translated by William F. Wertz, accessed 29 October 2012, http://www.schillerinstitute.org/transl/cusa_p_of_f.html.

Now, the point of the regrettably clumsy and cursory remarks of potted history uttered earlier was to lead up to a serious and sincere plea for a fourth kind of approach to the portrayal of religions.

For instance, it is natural that a first look at the great, living world religions yields the impression that there is a big divide between the theistic or prophetic, and the 'mystical' religions, but it may well turn out that a second look will reveal that it is quite logical to consider the 'mystical' as being a tendential emphasis upon one side or dimension of theistic religion – its 'experiential' aspect – or even a hyperbolization of this aspect.

Indeed, if the theistic religions are right in holding that language is indeed the medium of communication between God and humankind, then, it is almost inevitable that the nature of the relationships will be three-dimensional. This observation is not at all surprising, since they are characteristic of the linguistic animal as such and there is, on that basis, a close affinity between ethics, politics and religion. Moreover, even a summary genealogical tracing of the development of the characterisation of religion by anthropologists will yield a gradual, progressive emergence of the recognition of just these three dimensions of religion. In this light, it might be said that if the E.T. were to submit a revised or improved version of the report, she would say – rather than that there were two main types of religion – that religion, looked at holistically, had three aspects – corresponding to the three dimensions of language – institutional, referential, and experiential.

- i. Firstly, we have the 'Experimental and Mystical Side': the world of action and suffering, of interiorised, personally appropriated experience and responsibility that serves to integrate the elements of 'thought' and 'fact'. This dimension recognizes that human beings are never totally passive or contemplative. It acknowledges that humans are irreducibly wilful creatures and that this 'active' aspect of their being colours and shapes their contemplative attitude towards reality so that their thoughts are moulded by elements of interiorised and appropriated action.¹⁰ Indeed, long before William James made the claim that the essence of religion was a specific form of experience (that of the twice-born),¹¹ one of the relatively early attempts at finding the essence of religion claimed that there was a specific form of experience, only authentically found in primitive man, and which was the

¹⁰ For a more extensive exposition of these three elements – which were famously discussed by Friedrich von Hügel in the second chapter of his *The Mystical Element of Religion* – see Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 154-162.

¹¹ See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 1902).

source of religion. The anthropologist Levy-Bruhl maintained that although primitive man was potentially capable of logical reasoning, his particular psychological state in the world was rather like that of an infant who lacks the experience which results, above all, in the ability to distinguish one thing from another. Hence, according to Levy-Bruhl, primitive man lived in a state which could be termed 'participation mystique' i.e. a communion between all beings – expressed by the totem – which he feels to be 'divine', but which he lacks the ability to conceptualize and verbalize. Thus, it exists only as an affective state or feeling. Also, because his self-consciousness is not highly individualized, he pictures death, for instance, not as a total destruction, but as a change of place. The foundation or ground of the experience of communion is worshipped as God.¹²

- ii. In addition, since no language can function without its having a system of reference to the world, as Gottlob Frege and Michael Dummett have also most perspicuously shown, then any religion that claims to be rooted in divine-human linguistic transactions must have a thought-content just as any single sentence of any language. This dimension acknowledges the questioning, reasoning, argumentative, abstractive, inquisitive, analytical and dialectical sides of the human mind. It recognizes that there is a nexus between intelligent activity and the intelligibility of the world; that there are minds only because the world is understandable; that the real is somehow rational. Indeed, one of the best-known – and earliest – attempts at finding the essence of religion by studying primitive beliefs was made by Tylor. He held that the essence of religion was Animism, i.e., the belief that there existed a 'soul' as the invisible principle of activity in all things. According to Tylor, the source of this belief was the individual's experience of dreaming. In dreams, the individual experiences a kind of shadowy double of himself coming into being, leading a life of its own, replete with fantastic adventures. Thus, the idea of a 'soul' with its own life independent of the body comes about. This 'soul' is then thought to go living on, even after death and the corruption of the body. If the souls of the dead remain active, then it is only reasonable to entertain a fearful respect of them and to seek to keep them friendly by, for instance offering them gifts. All things are then, by analogical

¹² See Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1910), translated as *How Natives Think* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1926); *La mentalité primitive* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1922), translated as *Primitive Mentality* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1923); *L'âme primitive* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1927), translated as *The "Soul" of the Primitive* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1928); *Le surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1931), translated as *Primitives and the Supernatural* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1935).

extension, imagined to have 'souls'; hence, we have, for instance, the souls of the sun, the moon, and the earth and they are held to be responsible for such natural phenomena as rain and fertility. These larger-than-human souls are called 'gods'. Finally, the multiplicity of gods is reduced to unity by the attribution of supremacy to One Supreme God, identified either with the life-principle of the tribe or with some natural entity, such as the Sun, represented by the tribal chief or king. The point which appears to be valuable in Tylor's account is that it stresses what seems to be a universal human aspiration – that is, to be in contact with some larger, fuller, more significant life than the humdrum one of ordinary existence.¹³ This, as Erik Erikson has shown, is the way in which an 'identity' is established, through both receiving (benefits) from, and giving (sacrifice) to, the larger reality. Nevertheless, critics have stressed that, in the first place, no very clear account is given of what is meant by 'spiritual' or 'supernatural' beings (souls or gods); many religions, such as Buddhism, treat 'supernatural powers' as impersonal (equally non-animistic is the 'mana' which Durkheim emphasised as the essence of totemic religions). In the second place, Tylor's account appears to focus too much on the individual and his beliefs and too little on the social reality which comes 'finally' into his picture.

- iii. Indeed, since as Ludwig Wittgenstein has most perspicuously shown, there cannot be a 'private' language; there must be an institutional dimension, rich in conventional elements, such as rituals and governance structures, all subject to historical development and change. This dimension can be described further as the tradition-respecting dimension: realizing that one must build on the lessons of the past, recognizing as authoritative the judgments of the experts, and acknowledging the need for some system of governance for human society to exist. This aspect is well brought out by the attempt made at identifying the essence of religion by the sociologist Emile Durkheim in his famous book *The Elementary Forms of Religion*.¹⁴ Durkheim found it in *totemism* i.e. the cult of an object which represents the embodiment of an impersonal force called 'mana', which is society itself. In Durkheim's view, it is social life which accounts for all that raises the human being above the other animals and, in particular, for rational activity. The role of religion is

¹³ See Ivan Strenski, "The Shock of the 'Savage': Edward Burnett Tylor, Evolution, and Spirits," in *Thinking About Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 91-116.

¹⁴ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religion* (New York: Free Press, 1965). See also Robert N. Bellah, ed., *Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

the strengthening of the social links between humans, since society depends on the obedient fidelity of its members to its unified control structures, and this fidelity is maintained by reference to the sacred (Mircea Eliade tells of a tribe of Australian aborigines, the Achilpa, which lost the cult-object that was their contact with the gods – their response was simply to lie down and die). Durkheim thus stresses the institutional and ritual aspects of religion, its social rather than its ‘belief’ side. He defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things [i.e. things set apart, and contact with which is ordinarily forbidden] ... which unite all those who accept them into one single moral community [or church]”. Critics have pointed out that “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” is a definition which applies to magic just as much as to religion. In any case, Durkheim seems to think that mass ceremonies are what there essentially is to institutional religions. Robertson-Smith, Radcliffe-Brown and Talcott Parsons are among the famous anthropologists and sociologists who, like Durkheim, have emphasised the social dimension of religion above all others.

There have subsequently been various accounts that attempted to unify these three dimensions of religion. Despite the fact that Friedrich von Hügel was self-taught and apt to wander like an unbridled horse across fields that academic specialists would have liked to keep segregated, his is one of the clearest analyses of the phenomenon of religion. He sets out a tripartite schema which is meant to apply, not solely to primitive, but to all kinds of religion. His scheme (set out in his book *The Mystical Element in Religion*¹⁵) clearly distinguishes three elements:

- a. the ‘intellectual’ (or ‘mythical’): dogmas and beliefs, theology and philosophy;
- b. the ‘institutional’ (or ‘social’): specific rituals and organisational structures;
- c. the ‘mystical’ (or ‘vital’): special experiences and ascetical practices.

Indeed, if other attempts at identifying the basic components of religion are studied, it will be found that, while many appear to understate one or another of the elements, they fall readily into von Hügel’s tripartite scheme. For example, the philosopher Henri Bergson distinguished the ‘social’ (closed, static, stabilising) from the ‘mystical’ (open, dynamic, intuitive). The sociologist Roger Bastide

¹⁵ Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element in Religion* (London: Dent, 1923). See also Joseph P. Whelan, *Spirituality of von Hügel* (London: Collins, 1971); Michael de la Bédoyère, *The Life of Baron von Hügel* (London: Dent, 1951); James J. Kelly, *Baron Friedrich von Hügel’s Philosophy of Religion* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1983).

distinguished the 'representational' (the intellectual) from the 'motivational' (the ritual, part of the institutional). The theologian Antonin-Gilbert Sertillanges distinguished the 'dogmatic' from the 'governmental' and the 'sacramental'.

What can this tell us about the relationship between religions in transition. What kind of meeting-point could be found? And what could Christianity's position be in the dialogue between religions?

One great contribution of Christianity is certainly the question of truth: a most fecund meeting-point of faith and reason. Christianity holds that God is truth and is the source of whatever truth is present in reality, and makes possible whatever truth is present in our utterances. This assertion often appears alarming in that it seems necessarily intolerant. The contemporary person will probably opine that beneath varying forms all religions are in essence the same: each person has his beliefs which will simply lead him to the unknowable God. The proposition that God is truth is also a statement that appears to emphasise the immense gulf present between Christianity and the 'mystical' types of religion. Although God is ultimately ineffable, allowing oneself to be addressed and called forth by the Triune God is significantly different from letting oneself sink and disappear into the silent depths of Being. Even so, both in the case of human persons and, particularly, in the case of God, we know far more about what 'person' is not than what the word means positively – this is an observation which brings to mind again the remarkable words by Nicholas of Cusa.

Here, in conclusion, two interrelated points could be made which touch both the quest for a possible meeting-point between religions and the question of the role of the Christian believer in the dialogue between religions.

First of all, the mystical and apophatic dimension of the different religions should be ever-present. Here it is interesting that Socrates, in the *Apology* and in the *Crito* pointed to the connection between truth and poverty: "I believe I can produce a satisfactory witness for the truth of what I say, namely my poverty".¹⁶ Commitment to 'God' brings Socrates neither prestige nor possessions but rather poverty and ridicule. Poverty is the truly divine manifestation of a pilgrimage for truth. Here, it would be important to note that even dogmas in Christianity – like Trinitarian Theology and Christology – are an invitation to an infinite journey towards God who is always infinitely greater. They are 'speech', but they simultaneously serve to preserve the ever-greater pregnant mystery and infinity who is God.

Secondly, perhaps the goal of a *synthesis* of religions is a misplaced one and not even a desirable one. Perhaps, rather than trying to bring all religions together, one

¹⁶ *Crito* 48c-d.

should pray ardently for the unification of humankind in the love for the same God.¹⁷ This is not a renunciation of truth nor is it mere pragmatism. It is not a dispensation from the need to search for truth nor is it an assertion denying that truth could be articulated at all. It is rather an attitude of respect and a humility that seeks to appreciate that which is deeper purifying truth even in that which is strange and foreign. It has to do with allowing one's narrow understanding of truth to be loosened to allow oneself to be on a pilgrimage towards God who is ever-greater. It also has to do with allowing one's religion to be purified by the truth that shows itself in religions and reveals itself in dialogue – dialogue, after all, aims at truth, where we are companions in this vital search. Here, one stands to learn much even from the detractors of religion like the masters of suspicion. Much of what they say is not too dissimilar to the criticism of the sickness in religion expressed by Old Testament prophets. Finally, it has to do with the profound recognition that, in the world of religions, we are always encountering persons who are somehow in search for the hidden depth who is God. No one is saying anything which is utterly unknown to others; no one is saying anything which is utterly grasped by oneself. We do proclaim yes – otherwise we would be trivialising our very search and conviction – but we proclaim in dialogue where the one who proclaims is also a receiver. We are, after all, all *pilgrims* (who follow a personal religious journey) and *converts* (who responsibly take decisions regarding the religion which we profess).¹⁸

Perhaps the heavenly vision which Nicholas of Cusa describes and hopes for could become real in a process where “the dialogue of religions become[s] more and more a listening of the *Logos*, who is pointing out to us, in the midst of our separation and our contradictory affirmations, the unity we already share”.¹⁹

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¹⁷ See Jacques A. Cottat, *Begegnung der Religion* (Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag, 1956), 84, as quoted in Joseph Ratzinger, “The Dialogue of the Religions,” in *Many Religions – One Covenant* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1998), 102.

¹⁸ See Danièle Hervieu-Léger, “The Role of Religion in Establishing Social Cohesion,” in *Conditions of European Solidarity*, ed. Krzysztof Michalski (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006), 2: 45-63, *passim*.

¹⁹ Ratzinger, “Dialogue of the Religions,” 113.