

CURRENTS OF ENCOUNTER

*Studies on the Contact between Christianity and
Other Religions, Beliefs, and Cultures*

VOLUME 4

CURRENTS OF ENCOUNTER

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On Sharing Religious Experience

Possibilities of Interfaith Mutuality

edited by

Jerald D. Gort, Hendrik M. Vroom
Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels

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Contents

Foreword

vii

Part I *Can Religious Experiences Be Shared?*

- 1 Can Religious Experience Be Shared? Introduction to the Theme 'Sharing Religious Experience' HENDRIK M. VROOM 3
- 2 Hermeneutics of Religious Experience GERHARD OBERHAMMER 13
- 3 Transcendence and Wholeness WILLEM DUPRÉ 25
- 4 Meaning, Power, and the Sharing of Religious Experience: An Anthropology of Religion Point of View ANDRÉ DROOGERS 45
- 5 Can Believers Share the Qur'an and the Bible as Word of God? WILFRED CANTWELL SMITH 55
- 6 Can Faith in the 'Inspiration' of Holy Scripture Be Shared REIN FERNHOUT 64
- 7 Religious Experience: Autonomy and Mutuality LAMIN SANNEH 76
- 8 Liberative Ecumenism: Gateway to the Sharing of Religious Experience Today JERALD D. GORT 88
- 9 The Incomparability of God as Biblical Experience of Faith WALTER STROLZ 106
- 10 From Sharing to Encounter HASAN ASKARI 116

Part II *Case Studies of Intra- and Interreligious Sharing*

- 11 What it is like to be a Banzie: On sharing the experience of an Equatorial Microcosm JAMES W. FERNANDEZ 125

12	Sharing Religious Experience in Hindu-Christian Encounter MICHAEL von BRÜCK	136
13	Revelation and Experience in the Theosophic Tradition R. KRANENBORG	151
14	Religious Experience and Social Change: The Case of the Bangalore Madhvas CORSTIAAN J. G. van der BURG	163
15	Father Hugo Makibi Enomiya-Lassalle and Zen TILMANN VETTER	178
16	Transmitting the Buddhist View of Experience HAN F. de WIT	189
17	Can Śūnyatā Be Shared? Religious Experience in Dialogue H. WALDENFELS	203
18	Sharing in Japan's <i>New New Religions</i> JACQUES KAMSTRA	215
19	The Experience of the Prophet Mohammed ANTON WESSELS	228
20	Sharing Religious Experience as a Problem in Early Islamic Mysticism HANS DAIBER	245
21	The Prayers for Peace at Assisi, October 27, 1986: What was Shared? ARNULF CAMPS	255

Part III *Common Themes and Problems*

22	Sharing Religious Experience: Recapitulation, Comments, and Questions HENDRIK M. VROOM	269
	Index of Names and Authors	285
	General Index of Subjects	291
	List of Contributors	305

Sharing Religious Experience in Hindu–Christian Encounter

Michael von Brück

Experience is participation in an event and as such is culturally conditioned. In the process of maturing everybody encounters his/her tradition, shaping and changing it in the process. The process of adapting to other traditions forms part of the cultural development of every culture. Assimilation, contrast, drawing borders, or synthesis are different types of development within this process. Different fields of identity should be distinguished in this process, and these are significant for the question of sharing in the respective identity of any 'other' person, be it social, emotional, or personal identity. This article analyzes different areas of identity and sharing in Hindu–Christian encounter and on the theoretical basis of such types concludes that there are singular cases of sharing in the emotional, personal, and even the social identity of an other person. This is not, however, tantamount to a *communicatio in sacris* between Hindus and Christians due to the persisting differences in social identity between the two groups. This circumstance can change, however, particularly in social action groups who share a common task, albeit on the basis of different religious backgrounds, thereby creating a common social and emotional identity as a basis for genuine religious sharing.

It is quite likely that in every paper at this conference the question of the definition and meaning of the term 'religious experience' will be raised. That is the reason that I shall indicate in the first section of this article the sense in which the term religious experience will be used. Second, I will identify certain areas of religious experience in Hinduism. The third section deals with the problem of sharing religious experiences within Hindu–Christian encounter. Observations and clarifications in this field may eventually contribute to the general question raised at this symposium.

1 Religious Experience

Experience is participation in an event and as such is not necessarily accompanied by conscious observation. Hence, observation and experience are to be distinguished. This distinction prompts us to ask how we can determine what a religious event capable of producing religious experience actually is. There is obviously no universally acknowledged scheme of

classification which could indicate the significance of all phenomena studied under the term 'religion.' It is obviously "not something one can see" (Smart, 3). Rather, one can take note only of its manifestations or interpretations. Geographical, historical, sociological, and linguistic systems provide different sets of parameters which enable us to observe certain selected phenomena. The very complex and ever changing situations of encounter and participation, however, cannot be adequately understood within such parameters. This raises a basic epistemological problem not limited to phenomena which are termed religious.

What we call religion is dependent on our cultural conditioning. As is well known, the term 'religion' is itself not a universal one. What the Hindu tradition calls *dharma* is by no means identical with the object of study called religion in the Latin epistemological tradition. Comparing these structures of language and systems of thought enables us to discern the limitations of any system of thought. In addition, we can become aware of the assumptions on which any possible structuring system depends, even though these do not form part of the system itself. Any system is thus an open one. Such openness is precisely what we could call the methodological point of intersection in comparative religious studies. The consequence is that religious —and for that matter any linguistic or cultural— encounter is always creating both new religious forms as well as new structures of religious meaning and interpretation. There is no way to write a 'history of religious experience,' as Ninian Smart attempts (Smart, Preface), but only a history of its ever changing interpretations. There can never be a hermeneutic framework providing us with unequivocal data that we can share in a hermeneutic community of scholars or of religious practitioners; what does exist, however, is the hermeneutical process that moulds and changes that which is shared as well as those who are sharing it in the very process. In fact those who share and what is shared are inseparable.

We could perhaps make the following distinction:

1) Encounter *with* a religious event within a rather stable framework of tradition, such as when a Hindu or Christian is confronted by his/her own tradition. The language, symbols, and non-verbal and verbal forms of interaction are pre-shaped by the community in which this encounter takes place. In early childhood religious or national stereotypes already provide a frame of reference which exists prior to the formation of any concepts as well as prior to any experiences of our own that might alter such stereotypes. The possibility that an individual find order in a complex world seems predicated on the presence of such an ordering structure (Adler). In other words, preconceptions and predispositions as well as prejudices are basic and inescapable epistemological factors which need to be further studied by social psychology. (Tajfel)

Still, any confrontation with a religious event is itself a religious event which not only accrues to the tradition, but which, in some sense and to some degree, changes the very framework of perceiving a tradition. Since there is no tradition outside the event(s) of participating in this tradition, the tradition itself will be altered by the event of participating in it. The degree of alteration is dependent on various circumstances that account for relative differences in a tradition's stability, and in rethinking, reforming, revolutionizing, etc., the tradition.

2) Encounter *between* religious events from different sets of meaning (expressed in different languages, cultural patterns, hermeneutical approaches to meaning, etc.), for instance, encounter between Christian and Hindu individuals or groups. It is obvious that this is a secondary event of participation, since such an event creates an experience that is unprecedented in any of the traditions concerned considered alone. Such encounter thus creates a new experience influenced by far more complex symbols, religious content, and structures of meaning.

The difficulty which is thus introduced is that the religious subject forms part of a network of cultural relations which is not shared universally, as Geertz and others have shown. Interreligious encounter also establishes a different basis for the structures of experience. It alters such pre-established notions as the person, group, individual time, social time, etc.

Since the formation of group mentality and stereotypes ('we' as opposed to 'they') occurs in early childhood at the age of six or seven, religious experience and social identity form a close-knit unity. Taking a discovery by social psychology into consideration makes the situation even more complex. Humans tend to perceive their own group in a differentiated way, whereas strangers are perceived as 'they' and tend not to be perceived as individuals with their individual experiences (Tajfel, 175ff.). Prejudices can be intensified by actual encounter, since perceptions might seem to accord with preconceived ideas, and this in turn influences the experience of sharing the religion of a different social group.

The question of this symposium is whether such encounter, participation, and experience belong to the second type of encounter, or, put differently, whether sharing the religious experience of other groups is possible. The simple answer is that such sharing has always been going on where different cultures have met and have translated one set of meanings into an other language, etc. The history of humankind, as far as we know, is largely an interplay between what we have just termed the first and second levels of encounter and human experience. An inevitable conflict between the two, however, ensues due to the problems posed by *identity*. The question today seems rather to be whether we can become somewhat more conscious of what actually happens during such

encounter. Can we outline such factors as the anthropological, psychological, epistemological, and hermeneutical implications of encounter in a way that would diminish the potential for conflict to a minimum and would optimally increase the potential for creative new religious configurations, mutual enrichment, and intensification of purpose and meaning?

Present day experimental studies (Bochner, 5-44) teach that there are at least four different patterns for types of behaviour in a cross-cultural situation, changing one's own cultural/religious identity built by social conditioning: assimilation, contrast, drawing borders, and synthesis. Not all the factors are adequately understood, nor the complex configurations that determine which type of behaviour ensues. The observations I shall present in § 2 and 3 are, consequently, not yet sufficiently comprehensive to construct a theoretical framework.

A 'religious group' is here called a religious group because a group of people feel they are a religious group. I would like to suggest characterizing religious experience as participation in any event in which a wholeness is realized that gives identity and orientation in the search for meaning by an individual and/or a group. Since the whole integrates all aspects of individual, social, and transcendental relations, it is always beyond any actual empirical realization inasmuch as it encompasses all *possibilities* and not just actualities. Since all the possibilities are not known, however, religious experience is not closed, limited, or fixed. According to our definition, the experience of wholeness is participation in wholeness. If this participation is intensified and leads to a transformation of one's identity such that one's individual identity becomes at least partially identical with the identity of the whole, then we can speak of *mystical experience*: It is the experience of unification based on unifying awareness. (von Brück 1987a, 251ff.)

This would imply that we can speak of collective religious experiences when, for instance, a tribe participates collectively in an act of meaning that embraces the whole (such as sacrifice). In contrast, mystical experience is always the experience of an individual who *overcomes* his/her socially conditioned individual identity through an act of participation in ultimate integration. In this respect mystical experiences may be *structurally* very similar across different cultures and different periods, but psychologically the experiences differ inasmuch as they depend on what there is to overcome through such integration, viz., the multiformity of individuals and circumstances as reflected by a tradition.

Participating in another's mystical experience is therefore impossible, just as it is impossible to participate in the experience of someone eating an apple. I may eat the other half of the same apple if given a chance, but my experience will probably be different. In fact, there is no way of

knowing whether I taste the same 'flavour' as someone else or not — it depends on my sensory apparatus and on incidental circumstances. In the case of the apple, however, as well as in the case of religious experiences, one can share one's interpretation or personalization of this experience, expressing joy, discomfort, or whatever. The result of different experiences may be similar among different individuals but the experience is never identical. This holds true for any relatively stable religious identity (though it is also subject to modification in the end) possessed by differing individual subjects.

2 Hindu Religious Experience

I shall now proceed to identify areas or levels of religious experience within Hinduism which constitute events of sharing religious experience within that culture and which might be relevant to Hindu-Christian encounter. Since experience as an act of participation in an event involves the entire life-long process of forming a person's identity, I will outline these areas according to three aspects of identity: *social identity*, *emotional identity*, and *personal identity*. I will advance an argument for adopting this sequence shortly.

The background paper to this conference states that "the essence of religion is the personal faith-experience" (Vroom, 1). This assertion is, however, very much the question. It might be true for highly personalized cultures and religions such as Buddhism and Christianity, but is questionable with regard to tribal religions and many forms of Hinduism. In Advaita Vedānta and other self-conscious *darśanas*, of course, as well as in *bhakti*-movements that occur, for instance, within Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism, a personal experience of a form of consciousness which is pervaded by God-consciousness or which has been totally transformed by the experience of identity with the One occupies a central position. Yet the village religion of tribal and lower caste Hindus as well as many 'higher' forms of Hinduism consist rather more in a collective integration into the harmony of the universe, as expressed in the term *dharma*. This harmony consists in the appropriate interplay of different forces, qualities (*guṇas*), and hierarchical structures on the cosmic, social, and personal levels. What is distinct remains nonetheless distinct, but the equilibrium of all is *dharma*. (Manusmṛti XII, 24-51; I, 102, *et al.*; Mahadevan, 54ff.) It is not so much the individual experience or the experience of the individual as such that counts but rather the collective awareness of being in tune with the specific pattern of cosmic and social events which is experienced by this specific tribe, clan, or village. This is often overlooked when highly individualized specialists with Hindu or Christian backgrounds meet in a neutral location detached from the actual live background to the experi-

ences discussed. Our point of departure must, therefore, be closer to this more basic area of encounter.

1) The cultic community centred around sacrifice (*yajña*) has always been the central religious and social framework for Vedic religion (Ṛgveda I, 164, 35). This group constitutes a more or less coherent basis for a *social identity* that distinguishes those who participate from others who do not. Since performing these rituals means sharing in the cosmic order, such a group is imbued with a cosmic dimension, realizing and enhancing the universal *dharma* throughout the whole of reality, including, of course, the caste-order, which is the very representation of the creational order (Ṛgveda X, 90; Manusmṛti I, 31), and certainly not a mere social contrivance to which religion confers legitimacy. In this context, religious experience is to *live* the *dharma* according to the cosmic order as specified by the Vedas and the *dharmaśāstras*. Sacrifice as participation in the universal act of God's creation most certainly represents a universal symbol. Yet in actual Hindu history, sacrifice always has the specific meaning of fulfilling *this dharma* for *these* people, and this applies equally to other traditions. As a salvific act, it is concrete, mediated by a particular group sharing in a specific tradition. (Chethimattam, 175ff.)

To share this experience would imply sharing their life, becoming a caste-Hindu, offspring of ancestors who have also been participants in the village's community. It is obvious that this is impossible, and that a Christian cannot, by definition, share this aspect or level of religious experience. One could perhaps share in the ritual but once cannot share in the experience which is the social identity of a particular group. For the sojourning Christian who participates in such ritual the experience would be a different one than for the villager. On the other hand, there may well be a longing on the part of Hinduism to communicate by means of the (Christian) Eucharist (Panikkar 1964, 211). But in what sense? In so far as the Eucharist signifies the universal sacrifice that allows human beings to resonate to the cosmotheandric reality (Panikkar), no problem arises. But what if the scope of such sharing also encompasses a different religion with other value systems, social structures, and political ambitions? This is hardly conceivable. Yet the notion of sharing religious experience cannot simply treat the two aspects as separate lest such sharing remain an academic enterprise.

It bears repeating that the level of the sacrificing community is a basic level of religious experience for religion rooted in the Vedas, despite the fact that it was somewhat transformed at a later time. In later times, it is true, it was not *yajña* but *pūjā* that was central. *Pūjā* is much more personalized than *yajña*, in many cases amounting to exclusive meditation, especially in such elements as concentration, invitation of the Godhead, and participation in God which approaches a certain measure of deifica-

tion, all in a community that seeks its identity in this transformative way (Rao, 582ff.; Vandana, 106ff.). Nevertheless, the rhythm of *pūjā*, the festive calendar of processions, pilgrimages, etc., still retain their original function of exemplifying and reenacting the basic *dharma* of a specific community.

2) The ascent of *bhakti*-movements and the personalization of religion, however, represents a counter tendency which displays relativity of the former pattern. The Bhagavadgītā (BG) is a case in point in connection with this transition. The story running through the Gītā — Kṛṣṇa's admonition to Arjuna who refuses to fight— suggests the narrative operates substantially on the level of the *dharma* and *svadharma* ideology which establishes social identity, whereas the teaching of *karma-yoga*, explained in the later chapters as being a complement to the central path of *bhakti*, focuses on an individualized *emotional identity*. All cultic action has both a cosmic as well as an emotional aspect, but the shift from *karman* as cultic act to *karman* as fulfilling one's *svadharma* diminishes the emphasis on the community and increases that placed on the individual. The social identity of the caste-person is no longer merely belonging to a particular caste by birth, but in *bhakti* proper thought and action according to *svadharma* confers perfection (*siddhi*) and oneness with God (BG XVIII, 41-45); the individual is asked here to express his love and oneness with God by dedicating everything to Him. *Emotional identity* is the main focus, summoning the individual's response rather than the tribe's. Various individuals may thus share a common *karma-yoga* and *bhakti* effort. This can give them a certain common social identity, even though their individual experience of *emotional identity* may differ. It is a striking phenomenon that such personalization as we encounter in *bhakti* at the same time produces a shift in emphasis away from the exclusive relation between a single teacher and his student toward a new group which accommodates people with dissimilar social identities. The *bhakti*-movements thus tend to transform secret transmission of religious experience to mutual sharing among groups which had formerly been separated by their cultic and social-religious identity. (Carman, 216ff.)

3) Actual God-realization, direct experience (*anubhāva*), *brahmavidyā* or *jñāna* is the climax of religious experience for many Hindus, not just for those who follow the Vedāntic teachings. This form of contemplation has been compared to a *cosmic sabbath*, which is the crown of creation, something also to be found in biblical tradition, wherein all particular forms of experience and symbols come to abide in the completely unbroken light of a 'beyond.' (Sahi, 615)

On the basis of the concepts of *adhikāra* or *upāya* in Hinduism and Buddhism respectively, different philosophical tenets, concepts of reality, and forms of worship are accepted as preliminary stages which ultimately

reach full maturity in contemplation. A famous passage in the Gītā states: Which particular form such and such a devotee with faith wishes to worship, each to his own faith I confirm (BG VII, 21). This can be interpreted as referring to different images of God as well as to different stages in the personal assimilation of worship. Hinduism has what might be called a pedagogical tolerance. It is accepting with regard to all possible forms of worship, but *ātmanjñāna* or *brahmavidyā* alone represent true sacrifice and the ultimate goal (Chethimattam, 182). *Personal identity* is attained in the actual experience of *mokṣa* or liberation, which is a liberation from ego, including the ego's fabric of consciousness which creates its identity in particular symbols, experiences, and interpretations, and such liberation could be termed *transpersonal realization*. The relationship between the personal and the transpersonal will not be elaborated in this context. (von Brück 1987a, 287ff.)

It is clear that aspects of social and emotional identity at this level play a much less important role, and this is the reason that the mystics from all religions can more easily share and understand each other than can religious people who have not attained this level of experience. This is not, however, tantamount to claiming that all mystical experiences are the same. It has been convincingly demonstrated that there is no way of knowing and comparing experiences apart from their respective interpretations (Katz 1978). Yet —and this point must not be ignored— mystics are aware of the permanent need to move beyond concepts and interpretations, including, of course, their own. This fosters an openness and readiness that is more accepting and receptive to sharing religious experience with others. At the same time, however, this is also the reason that mystics often encounter difficulties in explaining themselves to people from their own religious group who are not mystics. The boundaries in this case run not so much between different religions as between various types of religious people such as mystics and non-mystics across religious lines.

3 Sharing Religious Experience in Hindu—Christian Encounter

The above analysis holds a number of consequences for the question of sharing religious experience in Hindu—Christian encounter.

1) It has been suggested that sharing religious experience between Hindus and Christians might be most easily accomplished at the level of mystical experience, as historical evidence seems to suggest. Nanak, a mystic, succeeded to some extent in unifying Muslims and Hindus, whereas Akbar, a politician, failed (John, 203ff.). As we can infer from the existence of the different levels of identity outlined above, however, the problem is much more complex.

Mystical experiences are shaped by interpretation, i. e., a distinctive religious tradition of language and meaning. Thus, many Christian mystics experience the union with the Divine in a specific way, co-suffering in the wounds and pains of Christ (Katz 1983, 14-16). The distinctive character of the experience cannot be shared by those who do not share the frame of meaning provided by the Christian story of the suffering Christ. Although one can ponder a general abstraction of mystical experience such as 'union with the Divine,' the flavour and emotional texture of such experience remains particular unless the partner in dialogue from a different religion crosses over to the comprehensive framework of meaning presupposed by the other religion. This usually happens only in the course of an extensive and protracted process of syncretism and integration. An example would be the integration of Neo-Platonism into Christianity, which is not just the work of Dionysius the Areopagite, but forms a whole chapter of history.

The mystic, furthermore, is the exception, and in most cases even the mystic belongs to a group that seeks social identity by differentiating itself from other groups. It has, nonetheless, been an undeniable experience in many Hindu-Christian encounters that silence and meditation and/or the contemplative reading of Holy Scriptures from various traditions enhances the *communio* of those assembled (von Brück 1987b). Though the mystical experience as such cannot be shared, those engaged in its interpretation and in expressing its repercussions in their lives and language tend to be tolerant, flexible, and open, realizing from their own experience that words and symbols cannot convey the full meaning of this experience. They are aware of the fact that language here is not descriptive but evocative. Those who see God in everything and are totally immersed in God-consciousness are free to disregard the differentiating symbols which portray a stratified social-religious order. It is far more important to a mystic to lead others to the actual experience than is agreement on interpretation.

That which distinguishes sharing between mystics from that between theologians is their basically different approach to religious epistemology. The mystic flourishes and remains within an experiential attitude. His experience as well as his sharing of that experience is an ongoing, never ending process. Certainty (*certitudo*) is an experiential aspect of the experience itself, and does not stand in need of support from security (*securitas*) which is purportedly founded on formulating conceptual or social limits.

The quest for experience is the common bond that shapes such encounters between mystics from Hindu or Christian or other backgrounds. They understand because they do not speak. They also tend, however, to live by themselves and do not try to form an interreligious

social community based solely on mystical experience. This is the reason that considerations regarding social and emotional identity are less important for this kind of encounter and sharing.

2) It is much more difficult to engage in sharing religious experiences which in some way involve the level of *emotional identity*. There is a difference in attitude between Hindus and Christians in this regard. Hindu society is accustomed to religious pluralism, Hinduism itself being a pluriformity of types of religious and ethical observances, philosophies, symbols, and rituals. As long as no violation of his/her *svadharma* is implied, a Hindu has no difficulty in participating in the religious rites of other communities, at least, not insofar as the four classic forms of religious life according to the *āgamas* are concerned, i. e., recitation of the names of God (*japa*), sacrifice (*yajña* or *homa*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and devotion to God who is worshipped in the form of an icon both at the temple and at home (*arcana*). Matters lie differently with respect to the rites of initiation (*samskāras*), since here a special form or manifestation of the Godhead is celebrated which requires celebrants to respond with specific duties which cannot be shared outside those who are initiated. Such groups are determined by caste and religious denomination (Manu-smṛti II, 62; II, 65-66, *et al.*). Even though an individual has a particular affiliation with Vaiṣṇavism or Śaivism and perhaps with an even more specific *iṣṭadevatā*, for instance, there is general respect for other rituals, images, and forms of devotion that can be easily shared. The rituals and liturgies, with the exception of the initiation rites, are specific but not exclusive. Holy places may be visited by people who have a different religious affiliation, and Hindus are even permitted to visit Muslim and Christian sacred sites for the sake of receiving spiritual blessings. Thus, the tomb of the Šufi saint Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī in Ajmer/Rajasthan is visited by Hindus as well as Muslims. In Southern India Christian festivals such as Good Friday processions, prayer meetings, etc., are visited by Christians as well as Hindus. Depending on the local political and religious atmosphere, such sharing can be rather uninhibited. Thus, it is reported that for lack of a Hindu priest in the village, a Christian priest was asked to celebrate a Hindu *pūjā*. The status of priest as a sacred person may well be more distinctive than the difference in religion (Puthanangady, 71). Hindus frequently request to participate in the Eucharist, and more recently even (Catholic) Christians have argued for admitting Hindus to the Eucharist, provided that they have truly long for it. The ensuing fellowship among participants has already developed into a kind of *communio*. (Puthanangady, 800)

Generally speaking, however, Christians encounter more difficulties in sharing religious experience with Hindus, especially rituals. This is partly due to the exclusivity of the traditional understanding of Christ, the history

of Christianity in India, etc., but there are additional obstacles as well. As a minority, Christians seem in need of justifying their existence and of establishing their identity by preserving and emphasizing a distinctive behaviour in cult as well as in ritual. 'Christian' symbols such as using candles, certain songs, the cross, etc., have often been adopted and absorbed by Hindus. What marks a Christian and establishes his/her identity is no longer simply a matter of one's own symbol but of deliberate non-participation in the world of Hindu symbols and rituals. A positive social identity is created through a negative emotional identity, such as not being a vegetarian or avoiding the vicinity of a temple, etc.

In the Christian Ashram movement, deliberate efforts have been made to integrate Hindu rituals into Christian liturgies. Not just readings from Hindu sacred scriptures, recitation of the names of God (*japa*), mantras for inviting the deity into the *mūrti*, fire symbolism (*ārati*), and observation of Hindu festivals (such as Onam in Kerala, Pongal all over Southern India, etc.), but the whole life style of the Hindu *sannyāsin* has been integrated. Yet this enculturation is not really an exchange of religious experience. Mantras may be used, but rarely will a Christian chant *Om namaḥ Śivāya*, preferring *Jesu namo*, just as a Hindu chants the names of the Hindu gods and not *La ilāha illā' llāh*. Mystics in all religions, though transcending rituals and formalized concepts, nevertheless practise on the basis of the specific symbolism of their own tradition (Katz 1983, pp. 20ff.). Although general Hindu symbols such as *Om* or the *Gāyatrī* are being used by these Christians, the very names of God that give these symbols an emotional flavour and which serve to identify them with a particular history are not shared. It is difficult to predict whether Indian Christians may eventually create a synthesis of Yahweh and Śiva just as Rudra and Śiva were synthesized hundreds of years ago.

Even in contemplative communities (as for instance in Shantivanam Ashram near Tiruchirapalli) Christians remain largely among themselves. Even after decades of indigenous Christian worship no real sharing of ritual between Hindus and Christians has been achieved, due to the enduring difference in social identity between the two groups. Where, on the other hand, such social identities do merge in common action for the improvement of social-economic conditions in India, new social groups emerge who show hardly any desire to share specific religious experiences from their respective backgrounds. For them the *communio* in social action itself is the symbol for the trans-religious dignity of every human being. Further pursuit of this would lead us prematurely to the third aspect.

Before elaborating the third aspect, it seems helpful to generalize the problem of sharing rituals on the basis of a very personal experience. While living in India to study Hinduism I developed a great interest in

participating in Christian liturgies that had become indigenous and had been saturated with traditional Hindu symbolism. This was all very meaningful, and the backdrop of Vedāntic symbols and language had contributed to a deeper Christian understanding of sacrifice in the Eucharist and to a more profound realization of the gradual divinization which takes place in a Christian life. Some Hindu friends, however, remained reluctant to rejoice in such rediscovery of Hindu rituals within a Christian environment precisely because the social identity of such a Christian group remained separate from the Hindu one. Although symbols do refer to a universal reality, they are also a means of identification and as such create group boundaries. Though we ought to distinguish between specific and archetypal symbols, it remains true even of universal symbols that they can create a relatively closed social-religious group within the intersubjective process of symbolization.

Some time later I had the opportunity to share a Zen-Buddhist Vesak ritual at Shasta Abbey in Northern California. Rather to my surprise, I felt uncomfortable when some of the well-known English Christmas carols were sung by the (excellent!) Buddhist choir — the text had been changed. The texts now narrated the story of the Buddha's birth and life. Although I have no major intellectual difficulty relating the Buddha and Buddhist experience to Christ and the Christian experience as being complementary, *emotionally* I felt discomfort precisely because my early childhood religious socialization was connected to those Christmas carols. This was a unique experience, drawing out a social-religious identity which is prior to any conceptualization and possible comparison to other religious experiences. Since cult, liturgies, and the whole ritualistic aspect of religion is normally learnt by the child in a more or less exclusive socialization process which is dependent on a specific family situation, the values thus created obtain a unique importance to each individual. Such values may be so basic that they may present difficulties in translating them into a different social-religious context. This probably constitutes the reason that religious people all over the world are hesitant about effortlessly sharing their rituals and liturgies with outsiders — they represent the very intimate tokens of emotional identity for a specific social context. Unless there is a genuine modification in *social identity*, the sharing of rituals between Hindus and Christians may be unacceptable to major portions of these religious groups.

3) Despite a strong tendency towards separation and antagonism between different religious groups in India, there is also growing communication, due to urbanization, migration, and other economic-political factors. Poverty and social misery provide one of the main sources for social conflicts and communal violence. The question of social identity cannot, therefore, be raised only in the context of the past, i. e., traditional

religious identities such as Hindu or Christian, but ought to be raised in terms of the present and future, i. e., the crisis of India's social reality and the survival of all human beings in the face of economic and environmental crisis as well as the general crisis of values. Motivation for creating an awareness of a new humankind is by all means to be nurtured, and in that context, Hinduism, with its rich cosmic symbolism and its dedication to harmony with mother earth, and the Christian sense for social justice certainly form good candidates for meaningful dialogue.

Mere repetition of sacred symbolism is insufficient, however. A cardinal ritual such as pilgrimage forms a fitting example. First, many of the Hindu *yatras* possess cosmic symbolism, culminating in the participation in the divine power at a special place which is consecrated as *axis mundi* during a particular rite. Second, pilgrimages are often non-sectarian in design, including both Śaivaites, Vaiṣṇavas, as well as others (Vaidyanathan, 72). Third, they help in surpassing social boundaries, since caste discriminations are often overcome. A case in point is the famous pilgrimage to Lord Ayyapan at Sabarimala which attracts millions of devotees every year. Even Christians have been known to participate in this pilgrimage, as well as in others. To the extent that such dynamics are at play, pilgrimage serves as an example of a ritual that does not seem bound by religious borderlines. Social limits are eliminated only temporarily, however. It can be shown that pilgrimage depend on a specific static social structure and even serve to stabilize social organization precisely through such merely temporal transgression of the social order (Arockiadoss, 655f.). What is more, such pilgrimages tend to underscore and reinforce existing group identities. Even such examples of ritual remain particular and exclusive. This is not remarkable, since all religious symbols serve to unify and differentiate society at one and the same time, creating social group identities.

Communication in the actual everyday social praxis of various people is required if *communicatio in sacris* is taken seriously. All ways of sharing ritual or of intellectual dialogue are secondary and can do no more than interpret the actual sharing occurring between social-religious groups. Otherwise sharing religious experience remains an isolated matter. On the other hand, it has been correctly observed that there can be no common *social identity* on the part of a cooperating social unity (such as the Indian nation) without sharing each other's sacred traditions lest the *communio* be reduced to mere intellectual communication (Panikkar 1973, pp. 65). Unless the urgent need for human solidarity is truly felt as a common concern, any participation in the other's rituals will not be very meaningful and perhaps even disturbing. A real 'mutation' in human consciousness needs to occur (Panikkar 1988, 230), but such mutations are successful only under circumstances of extreme environmental pressure.

In other words, unless the urgency, danger, and fragility of the human situation is felt by major portions of the various religious groups, any sharing in the well-springs of other religions can take place only among a few selected and mostly intellectual participants engaged in dialogue in artificial situations. Such dialogue is occasioned by countless conferences in India, and it is certainly enriching and perhaps forms a testing ground. Nevertheless, such dialogue does not yet amount to *communicatio in sacris* between Hinduism and Christianity.

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Index of Names and Authors

- Abdel-Kader, Ali Hassan 246-253
 Abe, M. 211
 Abraham 233-235, 239
 Abraham, K. C. 101, 102
 Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq 79
 Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī 240
 Adler, P. S. 137
 Agni 67
 Akon, Okomfo Kodwo 260
 Alcyone 156
 'Alī 79
 Allah 66, 67, 69, 261
 Ananaikyo 222
 Anantha Murthy, U. R. 163
 al-'Arabī, Ibn 82
 Arai, T. 257
 Arberry, A. J. 246, 249, 251
 Ariarajah, W. 257
 Arinze, Cardinal Francis 260
 Arockiadoss, P. 148
 Arrupe, Pedro 179, 180
 Asahi Shimbunsha 221
 al-Ash'arī 77
 Askari, Hasan 242, 274, 275
 Ayoub, M. 228, 241
 Ayyapan 148
 Baal, J. van 49
 Badhwar, Inderjit 89
 Bailey, Alice 151, 157, 158, 161
 Balasuriya, Tissa 90
 Balthasar, H. U. von 111
 Batchelor, John 83
 Baṭṭūṭa, Ibn 80
 Bavinck, H. 233
 Begrich, J. 106
 Bell, R. 236
 Berkouwer, G. C. 243
 Bernstein, Richard J. 46, 47
 Besant, A. 154
 Beyerhaus, P. 256, 261-263
 Bhattacharya, K. 70, 72
 al-Bisṭāmī, Abū Yazīd (Bāyezid) 250
 Blavatsky, Madame H. P. 151-155, 157, 158, 160, 161
 Bloch, L. 114
 Blyth, R. H. 224
 Bochner, S. 139
 Bonino, José Míguez 94
 Bosch, David 101
 Böwering, G. 249
 Bragt, Jan van 186, 187
 Brahmā 21
 Brandson, S. G. F. 91
 Brocke, M. 110
 Brück, Michael von 139, 143, 144, 149, 276, 282, 283
 Buddha 8, 25, 68, 69, 71, 113, 190-192, 201, 218, 220, 222, 224, 225, 257
 Gautama 152
 Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-66
 Burg, Corstiaan J. G. van der 170, 171, 177, 278, 283
 Bürkle, H. 261
 Calvin, John 56

- Camps, Arnulf O. F. M. 256, 257,
 264, 265, 281-283
 Carman, J. B. 142
 Ch'en, K. 218
 Chao-chou 181
 Chethimattam, J. B. 141, 143
 Christ 65, 66, 69, 70, 73, 206,
 207, 209-211, 213
 Maitreya 152, 155-158
 Clement of Alexandria 181
 Cobb, J. B., jr. 210
 Cohen, Anthony P. 47
 Coleridge 134
 Cragg, Kenneth 94, 228, 233
 Crick, Malcom 46
 Cyrus 109
 Daiber, Hans 247, 251, 252,
 254, 281, 283
 Dalai Lama 261
 Dasgupta, S. 71
 David 233
 De Silva, Lily 68
 Deladriere, R. 246
 Denny, M. 233
 Devātideva 71
 Dilthey, Wilhelm 4
 Dionysius the Areopagite 111,
 144
 Djibril 66
 Djunayd 245-253
 Djwal Khul 153, 158
 Dōgen, Zenji 112, 113, 185
 Dörmann, J. 256, 260-262
 Dornberg, Ulrich 95
 Dörrie, H. 250
 Droogers, André 271, 282, 283
 Drummond, Richard H. 90
 Duchrow, Ulrich 89
 Dumont, L. 164-167, 174-176
 Dumoulin, H. 204-206, 211
 Dupré, Willem 270, 271, 282,
 283
 EATWOT 90, 95, 101, 102
 Eckhart, Meister 111, 184, 205
 Etchegaray, Cardinal 255, 258
 Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 46
 Fabella, Virginia 90
 Fahd, Toufic 80
 Falaturi, A. 109
 Falwell, Jerry 61
 Fārābī 252
 Fernandez, James W. 47, 49,
 50, 54, 125, 132, 135, 275, 276,
 282
 Fernando, A. 217
 Fernhout, Rein 54, 70, 135,
 273, 283
 Fischer, A. 66
 Forward, Martin 94
 Francis, St. Francis of Assissi
 255-259
 Freud 80
 Gabriel 66, 67, 229, 232, 237
 Gadamer, H. -G. 4, 5
 Gandhi, Rajiv 81
 Gardet, L. 245
 Gautama 152
 Geertz, C. 138
 Genshun 212
 Gibb, H. A. R. 234, 235
 Giddens, Anthony 47
 Gidado, Malam 77
 Glasenapp, H von 167
 Glemp, Cardinal Joseph 260
 Glüer, W. 260
 Goi Mahikisa 225
 Gonda, J. 67, 70
 Gort, Jerald D. 48, 54, 88, 99,
 105, 273, 274, 282, 283
 Gotama 68
 Gramlich, R. 249
 Harada, Sogaku 180-182,
 Heidegger, Martin 4, 9
 Hikari Kyodan 226
 Hirota, M. 221, 223-226
 Hiskett, Mervyn 76, 77, 79, 80

- Holmström, M. N. 165, , 165,
166, 168, 169, 173-175, , 176
Holy Spirit 65, 103, 255, 264
Houtepen, Anton 94
Hud 233-235, 239
Hui-neng 178, 185, 186
Hunwick, John 79
Ibn Ḥanbal 251
Ibn Sa'd 237
Ignatius 69
Indra 67
'Īsā 70
Isaiah 106, , 106, 107, 109-111
Ismaili 252
Ito, G. 217, 224
Izutsu, Toshihiko 230
James, William 5, 32, 84, 90,
193
Jantzen, Grace 11
Jayatilleke, K. N. 68
Jesus Christ 5-11, 25, 82-85, 89,
90, 92-95, 97, 99-103, 136-138,
140, 141, 143-148, 152-158,
161, 217, 218, 220-222, 224,
225, 228, 229, 233, 235, 236,
238-243, 255-260, 262-264
Jesus 65, 69, 70, 73
Jesus of Nazareth 103
Master 152, 155, 161
Jizo 220
John, St. John 65, 66, 69, 242
John, St. John of the Cross 57,
205
John, T. K. 143
John Paul II 255, 257, 260
John XXIII 255
Jongeneel, J. A. B. 97
Kadushin, M. 11
Kalābādhi 245, 246
Kamei 220, 221
Kamstra, Jacques 216-220, 222,
227, 280
Kannon 223
Kant, Immanuel 10
Kaspers, W. 186
Katz, St. T. 8, 143, 144, 146
Kern, H. 71, 72
Khadija 118
Khaldūn, Ibn 80
Kharrāz 245, 247
Khumayni, Ayatollah 61
King, W. L. 211, 212
Kiryama Seiyu 220
Kitagawa, Joseph 83
Kobo Daishi 220
Kramers, J. H. 234, 235
Kranenborg, R. 162, 277, 283
Krishnamurti 151, 156, 157, 161
Kṛṣṇa 142, 261
Kuitert, H. M. 9
Kümmel, W. G. 65
Küng, Hans 217
Kuthumi 153-158
Lanczkowski, G. 31
Lassalle, H. M. Enomiya-
178-187, 205, 206
Leadbeater, C. W. 151, 154-158,
161
Leertouwer, L. 216
Levinas, Emmanuel 5, 107
Light, Mr. Light 223
Lot 233, 235
Luke 65
Luther, Martin 56
MacDonald, D. B. 245
Mahadevan, T. M. P. 140
Mahfuz, N. 241
Maitreya 152, 155-158, 222
Malcolm X 84-86
Manu 71
Mañjuśrī 204
Massignon, L. 240
Micah 261
Michaud, H. 241
Michel, Th. 260
Miers, H. 157

- Minoo 221
 Mitra 67
 Morgan, R. 31
 Master Morya 152-155, 158, 161
 Moses 9, 230, 233, 235, 238, 239, 242
 Mu'in al-Dīn Chishtī 145
 Mudaliar, A. Shanmugha 70, 71
 Muhammad 8, 9, 25, 66, 67, 69, 70, 77, 78, 80, 117, 228-239, 241, 242, 243
 Munson, T. 29, 39
 Nāgārjuna 209
 Nagel, Thomas. 127-129, 131
 Nakano Katsutate 222
 Nanjio, B. 71, 72
 Nichiren 220
 Nicholson, R. A. 247
 Niffarī 249
 Nishitani, Keiji 112, 206
 Noah 233-235, 238, 239
 Nuwayhi, Muḥammad al- 239
 O'Brien, Donal Cruise 78
 Oberhammer, Gerhard 8, 13-15, 17, 19, 20, 24, 113, 115, 208, 214, 269, 270, 272, 282
 Odin, St. 207
 Ohikarisama 223
 Okada Kotama 223
 Okada Mokichi 223, 225, 226
 Olcott, H. S. 153, 154
 Onisaburgo Deguchi 222
 Origen 72
 Panduranga 170
 Panikkar, R. 141, 148
 Pao Liang 217
 Paret, R. 231, 234, 235
 Parmenides 111
 Paul, Pope Paul VI 256
 Paul, St. Paul 58, 65, 85
 Damascus 92
 Saul 92
 Peniel 92
 Pharaoh 109
 Pieris, Aloysius 101
 Plato 111
 Ploeg, J. P. M. van der. 261, 262
 Polman, A. D. R. 233
 Prabhushankara, S. 173
 Puthanangady, P. 145
 Pye, M. 31
 al-Qādir, Shaikh 'Abd 77-79
 Qushayri, ar-Risāla 249
 Raalte, J. van 88-90, 101
 Raguin, Yves 92
 Rahman, Fazlur 231-233
 Rahner, Karl 7, 8, 11, 211
 Räsänen, H. 241
 Rao, C. R. 170
 Rao, S. N. 142
 Renou, L. 68, 70, 71
 Ricoeur, Paul 4
 Ries, J. 256
 Rilke, R. M. 19
 Rissho Koeikai 219
 Rūmī 82
 Rushdie, Salman 80, 81, 237
 Ruth 94
 Sadāśiva 70
 Sahi, J. 142
 Salih 233-235, 239
 Ṣāliḥ, Subḥi al- 66, 69
 Sāmarrā'ī, Qāsim 247
 Samartha, Stanley J. 90, 100, 102, 103
 Sanneh, Lamin 100, 273, 283
 Santa Ana, J. de 90
 Satan 95, 237
 Saul 92
 Schimmel, A. 245-247, 250, 251
 Schmidt, W. H. 114
 Schuré, E. 157
 Seckler, M. 256
 Sezgin, F. 246
 Shakyamuni 113
 Sharma, B. N. K. 167, 169

- Shaykh 'Uthmān b. Fūdī 76-81
 Shehu Usuman dan Fodio
 Shaykh 'Uthman b. Fudi 76-81
 Sinnett, A. P. 154
 Śiva 21, 70, 71, 146
 Smart, N. 137
 Smith, B. 220
 Smith, Wilfred Cantwell 3, 12,
 38, 44, 90, 271, 272, 281
 Soka Gakkai 218-220
 Soma 67
 Soothill, W. E. 224
 Spae, Joseph J. 96
 Speyer, H. 249
 Spindler, Marc 97
 Stachel, Günter 179, 184
 Steere, Douglas V. 179, 180
 Steiner, Rudolf 151, 156, 157,
 161
 Sting 96
 Streng, F. J. 209
 Strolz, Walter 109, 113, 115,
 214, 274, 282
 Šu'ayb 233, 235
 Suzuki Shosan 211, 212
 Svami V. 164, 165, 167-169,
 171-176
 Tabari, At-. 237
 Tajfel, H. 137, 138
 Takpo Tashi Namgyal 198
 Taniguchi 222
 Tendzin, Ösel 197
 Teresa, St. Teresa of Avila 205
 Thoma, C. 108
 Thomsen, H. 222, 223, 226
 Tillich, Paul 5, 90
 Torres, Sergio 90
 Trimmingham, J. Spencer 80
 Trungpa, Chögyam 191
 Tsultrim Gyamtso Rimpoche 200
 Ueda, S. 112
 Ulin, Robert C. 46
 Vaidya, P. L. 71, 72
 Vaidyanathan, K. R. 148
 Van Elderen, Marlin 98
 Vandana, Mataji 142
 Varuṇa 67
 Vasubandhu 192
 Veer, Peter van der 164, 170,
 173, 174
 Vergote, A. 5, 6
 Vetter, Tilmann 8, 68, 278, 279,
 283
 Vimalakīrti 203-205
 Viṣṇu 21, 70, 261
 Vitthala of Pandharpur 169, 170
 Voetius, Gijbertus 97
 Vroom, Hendrik M. 6, 12, 31,
 38, 44, 49, 54, 59, 105, 140,
 150, 209, 214
 Waldenfels, H. 13, 24, 185-188,
 205, 206, 208, 211, 214, 257,
 258, 266, 279, 283
 Walker, S. 192
 Watt, W. M. 66, 229, 230
 Webb, J. 161
 Weisacker, Carl Friedrich von
 257
 Wensinck, A. J. 66, 230
 Wessels, Anton 54, 59, 280-282
 Wilson, Bryan R. 46
 Wit, Han F. de 10, 12, 201, 202,
 278, 279, 283
 Wittgenstein, Ludwig 4, 83
 Wyschogrod, M. 108, 109
 Yahweh 106-109, 146
 Yajima, T. 220
 Yāśka 67
 Yūsūf 79
 Yuvaka 168
 Zaehner, R. C. 242
 Zago, Marcello 263
 Zeid, Hamzah 98
 Zwingli 56

General Index of Subjects

- abhidharma* 193
abhisamaya 185
abnegation
 self-abnegation 82, 83
absurdity 33, 42
activity 29, 42
Acts
 book of 65, 69, 239
adhaesio intellect 91
adhikāra 142
Advaita Vedānta 7, 140
Africa 100, 257, 258
āgamas 70, 71, 145
Ainu 83
Ajita Āgama 70
allegorical interpretation 72
allusion 245, 246
Amaterasu 220, 221, 224
Amerinds 57
amorphous feelings 96
analogy 65-68, 73, 128, 129,
 131, 133
anima naturaliter christiana 217
annihilation 245, 249, 250, 252
anthropologist 45-48, 51
anthropology 45, 46, 49, 271,
 276, 283
anubhāva 142
Apauruṣeya 68
apocalyptic 65
apostle 78, 79
 Apostolic Fathers 69
apperception 31
appropriation/subject/annexati
 68-73
Arab 229, 233, 235, 238, 239,
 241
arahat 68
arcana 145
Aristotle
 Aristotelian science 82
Ashram 146
Asia 100, 255, 257, 263, 264
Asian theology 255, 263, 264
Assisi 255-263, 281
āthār/fī'l 250
atheism 261
ātman 196
attribution/extension/ascription
 64, 66, 67, 69-73
authenticity 92, 95, 101
 religious faith 95
authority 252
 absolute 64-66, 68, 72, 73
Avalokiteśvara 223
Avatamsaka 218
'awāmm 248
awareness 28, 29, 32
 discriminating 189, 199
 self-awareness 28, 29, 32
Babylon 106, 107, 109
Bangalore 163, 164, 167, 168,
 171, 172
Banzie 129, 131-134
bāṭin 247, 248
bayān 250
beyond-being 13, 15-17, 113

- encounter with 16, 17
 openness 17
 openness of 15, 16
 Bhagavad Gītā 62, 142, 143
bhakti 4, 140, 142, 163, 164,
 167, 170, 175, 176
bhāvanā 185
 Bible 55-62, 64, 80, 81, 85,
 106-114, 228, 229, 234
 bibliocentrism 58, 61
 Black Muslims 84
 Black Untouchables 95
 bodhisattva 155, 158, 220
 Jizo 220
 Brahman 7
 Brahmanism 64, 169, 170
 Brahmans 163, 165, 167,
 169-171, 173-175
brahmavidyā 142, 143
 brokenness 99, 100
Buddhavacana 68
 Buddhism 6, 8, 9, 11, 64, 68,
 71, 73, 106, 111-114, 116-118,
 140, 142, 147, 189-201, 257,
 258, 260, 261
 Buddhahood 112, 113
 Buddhahood of nature 112,
 113
 Hīnayāna 190
 Mahāyāna 71, 190, 195, 200,
 261
 meditation 191, 199, 201
 Samurai-Zen 211
 Shentong school 200
 Sōtō 211
 Tendai 218
 Theravāda 64, 68, 190
 three *yana* 190
 Tipiṭaka 64, 68, 71
 Vajrayāna 190
 Zen 4, 8, 92, 106, 111-114,
 147, 178-187, 204, 211, 212,
 274, 278, 279
 Buddhist path 191, 192, 200
*Bulletin Secretariatus pro Non
 Christianis* 257-260, 263
 Bwiti 125, 129-134, 275, 276
 Canadian Indians 57
 canon 64-73, 78
 case method 130
 caste 140-142, 145, 148, 276,
 278
 Catholic 258-263
 charismatic 78
 leadership 78
 charlatanry 78
 child 41
 Christian 55-62, 136-138, 140,
 141, 143-148, 228, 229, 233,
 236, 238, 240, 242, 243,
 255-260, 262-264
 church 95
 mission 97
 Christianity 6, 8, 11, 83, 85, 92,
 93, 99, 103, 106, 108, 109, 111,
 117, 140, 144, 146, 217, 218,
 220, 222, 224, 263, 264
 Christians 93, 97, 99, 100, 103
 Christocentrism 58
 church
 early church 69
 clarity 250
 Cloud of Unknowing 181, 182
 coherence 94
 Colombo 99
 Commission *Justitia et Pax* 256
 common ground 258, 261
communicatio in sacris 136, 148
 communication 26-30, 37
communio 14, 17, 18, 21-23,
 144-146, 148
 human *communio* 22
 communism 261
 community 5, 25, 26, 30, 38-40,
 119, 120, 137, 141, 142, 145,
 146, 258, 263, 264

- with others 22
- Comparative Religion 137
- complementary 142, 147
- concrete universality 42
- concreteness
 - repeatable 21
- confession 91, 93, 96, 97
 - of faith 77
- confusion 189-196, 198, 200, 201
- conscience 26, 41
- consciousness 26, 41, 193, 197
- Constitution of the Church of South India 97
- contemplation 142-144, 146, 189-193, 195, 198-201
 - path 189, 192
 - psychology 190, 193
- contingency 28
- conversion 48, 72, 73, 88, 92-94, 102
 - horizontal 88, 94, 96
 - mutuality 102
- convert 41
- cosmotheandric 141
- covenant 249, 250
- creation 106-114
 - creatio continua* 114
 - creatio ex nihilo* 106, 114
 - integrity of 98
 - respect for 98
- Creator 76, 82, 86, 107, 109-112
- crucifixion 236, 238-243
- cultic
 - word 67
- culture 27, 30, 32, 33, 35-38, 46-50
 - cultural specificity 93
- Dalit
 - Dalit Voice* 95
- Dalits 95
- Damascus 92
- Damietta 256
- darśanas* 140
- Dasakuta 167, 169, 175
- Dasas 167, 169, 170, 175
- Day of Prayer in Assisi 255, 259, 260
- death 108, 112, 113, 134
- deficiency 33
- delirium 78
- deluding Scriptures 71
- dependency 89, 90
- detachment 36, 112
- determinants 96
 - particularizing 96
- dhamma* 68
- dharma* 67, 68, 71, 137, 140-142, 145, 168, 170-172
- Dharmaparyāyas* 71
- dhyāna* 145
- diakonia* 101
- dialectic 178, 186, 187
- dialogue 3, 5-7, 25, 27, 46, 48, 50, 51, 53, 99-103, 106, 107, 111, 113, 120, 144, 148, 175, 178, 185-187, 189, 190, 192, 201, 203, 207, 210, 211, 213, 217, 218, 222, 228, 240, 242, 245, 252, 255, 256, 259, 260, 262-264, 274, 277, 279-282
 - interreligious 189, 190, 201
- difference 30, 39
- discriminating awareness 189, 199
- distinctiveness 94, 96
- distinctives 94, 97, 103
- disunity 90
- diversity 26, 27, 29, 30, 36, 91, 94, 98
- dividedness 98-100
- divine 8, 32-35, 37-40, 42, 43, 55, 58, 60-62, 67, 68, 73, 83, 90-93, 97, 103, 117, 144, 147, 148, 151, 169, 206, 221, 223-225, 228, 229, 232, 233,

- 238, 242, 245, 246, 249, 250,
 252, 259, 270, 271, 281
 divine character of reality 39
 experience of 90, 97
 grace of 35
 idea of 33
 moments of 32, 33, 42
 Other 91, 99
 presence of 37
 recognition of 34
 revelation 91, 92
 Will 90, 91
 docetic 93
 double loyalty 264
 dream 76, 78-81
 dualistic 106, 109, 112
 Dvaita 167, 169
 East-West 107, 108, 110-112,
 114
 eboga 130
 ecstasy 250, 252
 ecstatic drunkenness 250
 ecumenism 88, 102
 egalitarianism 163-165, 169-172,
 174-77
 ego 189, 192, 196-201
 ātman 196
 egolessness 199
 elliptical 82, 84
 emancipation 16, 20
 emptiness 189, 195, 200, 205,
 206, 208, 210-212
 śūnyatā 200, 203-213
 encounter 3-5, 7, 13-19, 23, 25,
 41, 46-49, 51, 83, 86, 89, 90,
 91, 95, 99, 112, 113, 117, 118,
 120, 127, 136, 137, 138-145,
 151, 153-157, 160, 161, 178,
 184, 205, 208, 215, 216, 243,
 255, 259, 269, 270, 273, 275,
 276, 278, 279, 283
 enculturation 180
 enlightenment 8, 67, 68, 71, 91,
 92, 111, 113, 154, 180, 181,
 183-185, 190-193, 196, 200,
 201, 204, 209, 274, 278, 279
 epistemology 101
 religious 137, 139, 144
 equality 163, 165, 169, 170, 175,
 176
 esoteric 151-161, 247
 Essenes 155
 ethical
 transformation 85
 Eucharist 56, 141, 145, 147
 evanescence 249
 evangelism 99, 102
 Commision on World Mission
 and Evangelism 102
 media evangelists 83
 mission 91, 96, 97, 99-102
 exclusive
 exclusivity 19
 validity 18
 exclusivity 30, 39, 43
 exclusivist 84, 85
 exclusivist position 93
exaninitio 217
 existentials 49
 Exodus 57
 experience 25-33, 36-43, 47,
 189-201
 articulated 88, 95-97, 102
 experience of experiences
 28-32
 human interior 90, 91
 mystic 139, 143-146
 of non-being and death 95
 of the Divine 90, 97
 of Transcendence 13-15,
 17-19, 21, 22
 outward articulation 91, 96,
 97
 salvific 96
 sharing 14

- exploitation 89, 98, 99
 extrapolation 64, 65, 72, 73
 faith 3, 4, 11, 38, 42, 43,
 106-112, 114
 faith and order 91
 false gods 261
fanā' 249, 250
 Federation of Asian Bishop's
 Conferences (FABC) 263
fidelitas Dei 91
fides
 depositum fidei 91
 qua 91, 97, 103
 quae 91, 97, 103
fiducia cordis 91
 figure of identity 83, 84
 finitude 90, 95, 96, 98, 100
 finitum non capax infiniti 98
finitum non capax infiniti 98
 frame of reference 29, 137
 framework 137-139, 141, 144
 freedom 30, 35, 36
 freedom of religious movement
 94
 fundamentalism 264
Gāyatrī 146
ghalaba 250, 251
ghayb 245
 ghetto 263
 glossolalia 81
gnosis 181
 God 7, 140-146
 God's 245-253
 nearness to 252
 unicity 245
 unification with 245, 246, 249,
 250, 252
 unity 245, 248, 249, 252
 Golgotha 261
 gospel
 Gospel of John 65, 66, 69
 gospel for the poor 99
 grace 32, 35, 245, 251-253
 event 16
 grass roots 53
 group
 projection 83
 guilt 82, 84, 85, 95, 240, 241
gunas 140
ḥadīth 230, 251
halachah 11
 Harijans 163-165, 168-176
 Harvard University 55, 57
 Hebrews
 epistle to the Hebrews 69
Heil 13-18, 21-23, 269, 274
 actualization of 15, 22
 heretical tendencies 179
 hermeneutic 4, 5, 13-21, 23, 31,
 47, 72, 99, 101, 102, 120, 125,
 137-139, 168, 208, 270, 271,
 273, 276, 282.
 circle 125
 community 137
 comparative 31
 epistemology 101
 faulty 99
 new common 101
 of religious experience 13
 process 137
 Hiei, Mt. Hiei (Kyoto) 260
hijrah 79
hikari 223, 224
ḥikma 247
 Hinayāna 190
 Hindu 64, 68, 73, 89, 95, 100,
 118, 136-138, 140-148, 257,
 258, 260
 caste system 100
 Hindu-Christian 136, 140,
 143, 144
 revivalism 89
 history 106-114
 holism 264
 holy 33, 37, 38, 42, 43, 90, 91,
 96, 103, 109

- Holy Scriptures 64, 72, 73
 Holy Spirit 65, 103, 255, 264
 holy war 261
homa 145
 human 107-109, 112-114
 being human 26, 27, 29-37, 42
 completion 29, 32, 33, 37-39
 human division 89
 human nature 197
 nature 28, 30-32, 37, 42
 person 30, 37
 situation 31, 33, 36, 39, 42
 humanity 26, 33, 35, 41, 42,
 255, 260, 264
 function fellow-humanity 17
 Hymn of Wisdom 67
 idea 25-33, 35-37, 39, 40, 43
 ideal type 26, 39
 identity 117, 136, 138-148
 emotional 136, 140, 142, 143,
 145-147
 ideology 53
 ignorance 189, 192-194, 200
 images 7, 48, 132, 134, 142,
 143, 145, 148
 temple 20
 imitation 250
 immanence 29, 43
 immediacy 117, 118
 incarnation 21, 111
 inclusivity 39, 43
 inclusivist view 93
 normative inclusiveness 84
 incomparable
 Yahweh 108-112, 114
 India 4, 5, 89, 95, 97, 145-148,
 163-168, 170, 173, 257, 258,
 263
 Indians 57
 indication 245-247, 252
 individuality 250, 252
 Indochina 263
 inhumanity 33
 injustice 90, 98, 99
 inspiration 64-73, 232, 233, 237
 integrality 37
 integrity 37
 inter-canonical application 65,
 69
 internodal analogies 129
 interreligious
 dialogue 189, 190, 201
 discussion concerning inter-
 religious character of Assisi
 260
 division 89
 overlap 94
 phenomenon 65
 intoxication 245, 250, 252
 intuitive thrust of the heart 96
iqīdā' 250
ishāra 245-248
 Islam 4, 8, 56, 60, 61, 76, 77,
 79-81, 83-86, 106, 111, 117,
 118, 261
 Black Muslims 76, 77, 79-81,
 83-86
 Isma'īlī 247
 Israel 106-111, 114
istadevatā 145
 Īśvara Samhitā 70
 Itto-en 224
 Jains 257, 258, 261
 Japan 215-217, 219-223, 225,
 226, 257, 260, 263
 Jeddah 85
 Jerusalem 106, 261
 Jesuit order 179
 Jew 69, 70, 257, 258, 260, 261
 Jewish 8, 11, 60, 62
 Jews 106, 109, 110, 112
jīvanmuktīh 16
jñāna 142, 143
 John
 gospel 242
 Jordan 264

- jorei* 223
 Judaism 8, 106, 109, 111, 117
 justice 89, 90, 98-103, 270, 273
 Ka'ba 8, 86
kāhin 66
 karma 142, 172
kensho 92
Khalwah 80
khāṣṣ 248
 kill 233, 234, 238-241, 243
 kingdom 264
 knowledge 245, 247, 248, 250, 251
 kōan 181, 204, 211-213
 Kūrma Purāṇa 71
kyohan 217, 218, 220
 language 27, 137, 138, 144, 147
 religious language 82-84
 leadership 252
 levels 138, 140-143, 145
 liberation 9, 16, 20, 68, 88, 99, 101-103, 107, 109, 112, 143, 146, 166, 170, 173, 180, 201, 209, 210, 212, 263, 274
 liberative 88, 99, 101-103
 ecumenism 88, 102
 elements 102
 movement of innovation 102, 103
 life and work 91, 98
 liminal 134
 liturgy 145-147
 Lord of Creation 77
 Lotus of the True Law 71, 73
 Lotus sūtra 71, 73, 218
 Luke
 gospel 242
 Madagascan Confession of Faith 97
 Madhvas 163-176
madi 168, 172
 Madras 70
 magic 52
Mahāprajñāpāramitā 218
 mahikari 221-226
 mahikari no waza 223, 225, 226
 Sukyo Mahikari 224
 Mahāyāna 71, 190, 195, 200, 261
makoto 224, 225
 mantra 146
mantra 67
maṣlahah 82
 Masters 151-158, 160, 161
 meaning
 total 39, 43
 universe of 25, 31
 meaning-making 45, 49
 Mecca 85, 86, 234, 235, 241
 Medāthiti 71
 media evangelists 83
 mediation 19, 29, 30, 34, 36, 38, 40, 109, 111, 113
 speaking 17
 meditation 48, 141, 144, 145, 191, 192, 198, 199, 201
 metaphor 7, 47, 50, 53
 metaphysics 108, 112
 method 65
 mind
 nature of 189
 mission 91, 96, 97, 99-102, 256, 261, 262, 264
 Commision on World Mission and Evangelism 102
 evangelism 99, 102
 missiology 88, 97, 100, 101, 274
 World Missionary Conference 101
 misunderstanding 47
mitama 223
mūthāq 249, 250
modell Assisi 1986 260
mokṣa 143, 166

- monotheism 106, 107, 109-111
 Mourides 77, 78
mu 181, 182, 212
muktiḥ 16
 Multi-Lateral Dialogue 99
munen muso 181
murīdūn 250-252
mūrṭiḥ 20
 music 30
 Muslim 4, 8, 11, 55-62, 110, 117, 118, 120, 143, 145, 228, 229, 232-234, 236-238, 240-242, 256-258, 260, 261
 Black Muslims 84
 Muslim-Christian 228, 242
 mutual
 accountability 88, 94
 conversional mutuality 102
 critical witness 94
 leavening 94
 mutual responsibility 101
 participation 88, 93-96
 seasoning 94
 sharing of guilt 95
muwahhidūn 247
 mystery 106, 109, 111-113
 mystical 6-8, 11, 111
 mysticism 245-247, 249-252
 mythical 13, 16-23
 mediation 19
 mythically present 17
 pattern 18
 presence 20
 presence of transcendence 22, 23
 mythologization of Transcendence 18, 20, 21
 narrative 125, 132-134
 nature
 nature of things 28
an-nawāfil 251
 necessity 27-29
 negative 205
 philosophy 205
 theology 7, 106, 111
 Negro 86
 Neo-Platonism 144, 249, 250
 Nigeria 76
 Nippon Kannon Kyodan 223
nirukta 67
nirvāṇa 16, 21, 196, 198-201, 217, 218
 non-dual 112
 nothingness 205, 206, 212
 absolute 112, 114
 before God 249
 novices 245, 250, 251
nyorai-in 224, 225
okiyome 221
 omniscience 68
 one specimen-centered method 65
 openness 14-17, 22, 205, 208
 order 136, 137, 139, 141, 144, 148
 orthodoxy 163, 165, 167, 169, 170, 229, 232
 otherness 39, 40
 God's 245
 overlap
 areas of 88, 89, 94, 102, 103
 initial 96
 interreligious 94
 of meaning 94
 overwhelming 245, 250-252
Paccekabuddha 68
 Paix aux Hommes de Bonne Volonté 255, 258
 paleo-anthropologist 128
 paleo-anthropologists 134
 paleolithic 126
 Palestine 57
 Pāṇcaratra 70, 72
 paradigm 25
paramārtha-satya 195
paramasamhitā 18, 20

- participation 136-141, 145-148
 participant observation 46
 passivity 29, 42
 path
 Buddhist 191, 192, 200
 contemplative 189, 192
 peace 89, 98, 100, 103
 Pen of Power 76
 perception
 of religious phenomena 32
 perspective 10, 43
 Peter, St. Peter
 epistle 69
 phantom 249, 250
 phenomenology 48, 127-129
 phenomenon
 tradition 13-18, 20, 22
 philosophy 26, 38, 40, 41, 142, 145
 of religion 6, 8, 9
 piacular intention 83
 pilgrimage 85, 86, 142, 145, 148
 planetary life 89
 pluralization 88-90, 94, 98
 pollution 50
 polytheism 237, 241, 242
 Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue 256, 259, 260, 262, 263
 poor 5, 11, 50, 88-90, 99-103, 273, 274, 282
 religiosity of 100, 101
 Pope 255-257, 260
Populorum Progressio 256
 possibility
 recovery of 40
 possibility of becoming 36
 power 45, 46, 51-53
 powerless 89, 100
 pragmatism 98
praxis 91, 101-103, 113
 caritatis 91
 common 103
 cultus 91
 interreligious 102, 103
 meditationis 91
 pietatis 91
 pray together 255-262
 prejudice 137, 138
 presence 34, 35, 37, 42
 projection
 group 83
 prophet 69, 70, 73, 77, 78, 80, 245, 250-252
 prophetic 106-111, 114, 117, 118, 228-239, 241-243
 proximity 249
 Psalms 69
 psychology 189, 190, 192-194, 196-199
 contemplative 190, 193
 ego 196
pūjā 141, 142, 145
Purāṇas 71
 purity 168, 172, 173, 176
Pūrvamīmāṃsā 68, 71
Qādirīyya 77
Qaṣīda al-sudāniyya 77
qawl 251
 Qur'ān 55-60, 62, 64, 66, 69, 70, 73, 79, 80, 83, 110, 111, 117, 228, 229, 230-243, 245, 250-252
 Qurayshites 237
 Rajasthan 145
 rationalism 98
 rationality debate 46
 reaching-out 14, 15, 17, 21
 trancendental 21
 reality
 absolute 189, 195, 196, 199-201
 cosmotheandric 141
 crisis of social reality 148
 personal 193
 Reality beyond 259-261

- relative 189, 194-196, 200, 201
- realization
 - God-realization 142
 - transpersonal 143
- reasoning 65, 70, 73
- recognition 34, 41
- reconciliation 82, 98
- reflection 119
 - contemplative 92
 - missiological 101
 - reflective distinctions 28
- reincarnation 155, 157, 223
- reinterpretation 270, 271, 273, 279, 283
- relations
 - interpersonal 33, 38, 39
 - self-relations 35
- relative
 - reality 189, 194-196, 200, 201
 - relativism 264
 - truth 194
- religion 13, 15-19, 23, 30-38, 43, 90, 137, 138, 140-147
 - Comparative 137
 - one 31
 - plurality of 257, 263
 - popular 52
 - theology of 53
 - tribal 140
- religious
 - beliefs 38
 - language 82-84
 - religious belief 103
 - religiously other 90
 - tradition 13, 14, 16, 18, 25-27, 30-32, 36-43
- religious experience 3-7, 9, 11, 12, 13-18, 20-23, 25, 26, 31, 38, 40, 43, 45, 46, 48-53, 56, 58, 76-86, 88-97, 102, 103, 106, 107, 110, 112-114, 116-119, 125, 129, 130, 133, 136-143, 145-148, 151-153, 156, 158, 160, 163, 164, 166, 178, 189, 192, 200, 208, 209, 229, 245-247, 250, 252, 253, 269, 270, 272, 273, 276, 277, 279, 282, 283
- religious specialists 51, 52
- repentance 95
- representation 35, 42, 43
- revelation 8, 9, 17, 19, 65-68, 70, 81, 91-93, 95, 108-112, 118, 130, 131, 133, 151-153, 157-160, 186, 217, 223, 225, 228-232, 242, 246, 250, 261, 277
 - bipolar 92
 - divine 91, 92
 - docetic 93
 - essence 92
 - final aim and purpose of 95
 - particularity 93
 - revelatory incident 130, 131, 133
 - revelatory event 92
 - self-revelation 68
 - supernatural disclosure 91
- Rgveda 67, 68, 70, 141
- rite 10, 11, 72, 145, 148, 172, 276, 282, 283
- rites
 - initiation 145
 - Vesak ritual 147
- ritual 3, 129, 132-134, 141, 145-148, 167, 168, 172, 180, 219, 272, 276, 277
- Rōankyō* 211
- Rome 255, 257, 262
- root
 - root of the universe 70
 - root of the Veda-tree 70
- ṛsi* 67, 68
- ṛta* 67, 68
- ru'yā al-ṣāliḥah* 79
- ruler-philosopher 252

- samsāra* 16, 196-201
samskāras 145, 163
sacrifice 139, 141, 143, 145, 147
 yajña 141, 145
saga 234
śahw 250
Śaivism 70, 140, 145, 148
sakra 250
śalāt al-istikhārah 80
salvation 7, 13, 48, 92, 93, 95,
 96, 103, 106-110, 113, 114, 141,
 187, 209, 210, 217, 225, 235,
 262-264, 269, 274, 281
 salvific experience 96
 salvific help 96
 self-redemption 262
 soteriologies 263, 264
 ways of salvation 262
samhitās 70, 71
Sammāsambuddha 68
sampradayas 167
saṃvṛti-satya 194
Saṃyutta Nikāya 68
Samyaksambodhi 71
San Antonio 101
sane 250
sangha 165, 168-170, 172-176,
 210
sannyasin 166, 174, 176
Śāriputra 203, 204
satori 92, 178, 181, 183, 184
science 26
scripture 64, 65, 69-71, 73, 144,
 146, 204, 211, 228, 229, 232,
 240
 deluding scriptures 71
 seal of the prophets 70
Secretariate for non-Christians
 262
sect 49, 52
secularism 50, 98, 261
 state 176
Sekai Kyuseikyo 222, 223, 226
sekai mahikari unmei kyokai 221
self 25-32, 34-37, 39, 41-43,
 107-109, 112, 113
 self-control 250
 self-image 198
 self-mediating 15, 16
 openness 15
Senegal 77
senses 125-131, 134
 auditory 127-131
 gustator 129, 130
 olfactory 126, 130
 sense apparatus 126-128
 sense world 127
 sensorium 125, 127-130, 134
 six sense faculties 193, 195
 visual 128, 129
Seoul 257
shabāh/shabḥ 248-250
shahādah 77
Shaker 79
shape 247-249, 252
sharing 45-50, 52, 53, 90, 99,
 101, 103, 203, 207, 208, 210,
 212, 213
 authentic 92, 95, 101
 communicate 116
 communication 26-30, 37
 complementary apprehensions
 of Truth 98
 essential conditions 93
 granting a share 18
 heart to heart 97
 limits to 94
 mind to mind 97
 mutual participat 88, 93-96
 mutuality 225
 of guilt 95
 possibility of 50, 51
 religious experience 14, 22,
 23
 soul to soul 95
 spirit to spirit 97

- Shentong school 200
shin shin-shukyo 215, 219-221, 223, 224, 226
shinkoshukyo 219, 222-224, 226
 Shinto 217, 218, 220-222, 224, 257, 258, 260
shukyo 215, 219-224, 226
şifât 250
 signification 46, 48, 51-53
 signs 28, 35
 Sikh 257, 258
skandha 197
 sobriety 245, 250, 252
 social 3, 4, 11
 social bifurcation 89
 social change 163
 soteriological
 auto- 91, 92
 deo- 91
 soul 29, 116
 spirit 65, 66, 69, 70, 73
 Holy Spirit 65, 103, 255, 264
 spirituality 264
 Şri Kapaleeswarar Temple 70
subhaniyya 117
 subject 13-16, 21, 22, 90, 92
 specific receptive capacities 92
 subjectivity 90
 suchness 200
 suffering 191, 193, 196, 197
 sarīsāra 196-201
 şufî 8, 145, 245-247
sukyo 221, 224
śūnyatā 6, 8, 195, 203-213, 217
 Sura 7:172/171 249, 250
 surrender
 to transcendence 22
 sūtra 62, 203, 217, 218
 Sword of Truth 79
 symbol 9, 11, 35, 38, 39, 41, 43, 45-52, 55, 56, 82-84, 113, 137, 138, 141-148, 172, 176, 205, 208, 222, 225, 247, 257, 270-272, 274, 282, 283
 symbolical 83, 84
 Vedāntic 147
 syncretism 45, 48, 52, 99, 215, 216, 218, 262, 263
 synesthetic 128, 131
 synthesis 32, 33, 36-38, 42
 tactics 71
Tahrîf 70
ṭarîqah 79
 task
 religious 25, 26, 34-39, 41-43
tathatā 195, 200
tawfiq 251
tawhîd 245, 247-249
 teacher 245, 250, 252
tekazashi 225, 226
 Testament 64, 65, 69, 70, 72, 73, 108, 109, 206, 230, 233, 242, 243, 261, 272
 testimony 13, 17, 18, 22, 88
 fellow-human 17
Theologisches 260, 261
theologoumena 94
 theology
 negative 106, 111
 of religion 93, 255, 256, 262, 263
 theonomous
 character of reality 96
 theosophic 84, 151, 153, 155-158, 161
 Theravāda 64, 68, 190
 things as they are 189, 195, 200
 Tipiṭaka 64, 68, 71
 tradition 66, 67
 communio 14, 17, 18, 21-23
 cumulative 151, 153, 155-159
 phenomenon of 13-18, 20, 22
 principle of 18
 religious 13, 14, 16, 18, 25-27, 30-32, 36-43

- trance 151-154, 156-161
 transcendence 3, 6-8, 11, 13-23, 25, 37-39, 43, 109, 116, 117, 118-120, 245
 mythologization of 18, 20, 21
 surrender to 16, 18, 22, 23
 the Transcendent 67, 73
 transcendental principle 39
 transcendental Wherefore 17
 transcendent 90, 91
 transformation 90, 95
 ethical 85
 transition 34, 35
 transitoriness 107-109, 112
 translation 27, 32
 transmission 189-192, 199, 201
 transmit 96
 tribalized deity 93
 trinity 111
 tropes 131
 trust
 confident trust 18
 truth 25-28, 33, 36-38, 40-43, 191
 monopoly of 84
 relative 194
 truth-claims 97
 TV evangelism 61
‘ulamā 78
 ultimate concern 5
 unbelief 238
 understanding 35
 abstract 43
 unification with God 245, 246, 249, 250, 252
 unique 107-109, 111, 112, 114
 uniqueness 94
 United Nations 256
 unity 25-27, 29-31, 36-40, 42, 43
 universality 28, 31, 37, 39, 41-43, 120
 universalized idol 93
upāya 142, 217
 Vāc 67, 68
 Vaiṣṇavism 70, 140, 145, 148, 167, 169, 174
 Varsavia, Poland 260
 Vāsudeva 70
 Vatican II 179, 255, 256, 259, 262, 263
 Commission Justitia et Pax 256
 Council for Interreligious Dialogue 256, 259, 260, 262, 263
 Paix aux Hommes de Bonne Volonté 255, 258
 Vedāntic 140, 142, 147
 Vedic religion 64, 67, 68, 70-72, 141
 Victorines 181
vijñāna 193
 vision 76-81, 86
 Vyasakuta 167, 172
waḥdāniyya 248, 249
waḥy 66, 67, 69
waqfa 249
wāridāt 76
 WCC 5, 100-102, 257
 Commission on World Mission and Evangelism 102
 Sub-Unit on Dialogue 100, 102
 World Conference on Religion and Peace 256, 259
 wholeness 37, 42, 43, 269-271, 276, 283
 witness 65, 66, 69, 73, 88, 91, 93, 94, 100-102
 word 27, 28, 38
 word of God 229, 230, 232, 242, 264
 world
 world disorder 89
 world problems 53
 world structure of apartheid 89

- World Conference on Religion
and Peace 256, 259
- World Missionary Conference
101
- World Year for Peace 256
- yajña* 141, 145
- yatra* 148
- yearn 98
for transcendence 96
- yin/yang 264
- zāhir* 247, 248, 252
- Zen 4, 8, 92, 106, 111-114, 147,
178-187, 204, 211, 212, 274,
278, 279
- Bompu 182
- Daijō 182
- Gedō 182
- kensho* 92
- Saijōjō 182
- satori* 92
- Shōjō 182
- Zoroastrian 258

Contributors

- HASAN ASKARI, Islamic Thought, Ilkley, West Yorkshire.
- MICHAEL von BRÜCK, Comparative Religion, University of Regensburg.
- CORSTIAAN J. G. van der BURG, Indology and Comparative Religion, Faculty of Theology, Free University: Amsterdam.
- ARNULF CAMPS, O.F.M., Missiology, Faculty of Theology, University of Nijmegen. Wijchen.
- HANS DAIBER, Arabic Studies, Faculty of Semitic Languages, Free University: Amsterdam.
- ANDRÉ DROOGERS, Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Social-Cultural Studies, Free University: Amsterdam.
- WILLEM DUPRÉ, Philosophy of Religion, Faculty of Theology, University of Nijmegen: Nijmegen.
- JAMES W. FERNANDEZ, Cultural Anthropology, Princeton University: Princeton.
- REIN FERNHOUT, Comparative Religion, Faculty of Theology, Free University: Amsterdam.
- JERALD D. GORT, Missiology and Evangelism, Faculty of Theology, Free University: Amsterdam.
- JACQUES KAMSTRA, Comparative Religion and the History and Phenomenology of non-Christian Religions, Faculty of Theology, University of Amsterdam.
- R. KRANENBORG, New Religious Movements, Faculty of Theology, Free University: Amsterdam.
- GERHARD OBERHAMMER, Indology, Institute for Indology, University of Vienna.
- LAMIN SANNEH, Missiology, Yale Divinity School: New Haven, Connecticut.

WILFRED CANTWELL SMITH, Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University. Toronto.

WALTER STROLZ, Philosophy of Religion, Former Moderator of the Publications Program on Interreligious Encounter for the Herder Verlag: Innsbruck.

TILMANN VETTER, Buddhist Studies and Indology, Faculty of Letters, Rijksuniversiteit of Leiden.

HENDRIK M. VROOM, Philosophy of Religion, Faculty of Theology, Free University: Amsterdam.

H. WALDENFELS, Philosophy of Religion, Faculty of Theology, University of Bonn: Bonn.

ANTON WESSELS, History of Religions and Missiology, Faculty of Theology, Free University: Amsterdam.

HAN F. de WIT, Theoretical Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Free University: Amsterdam.