

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE THAT CROSSES RELIGIOUS DIVISIONS

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Introduction

'In *Hinduism*, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism ... we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity', wrote William James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,¹ which was first published in 1902.

Many of the pioneers of the search for interfaith fellowship worked with this assumption that there is a similar underlying experience of the Divine at the heart of every religion. They hoped that members of different religions could go beyond the particular rituals and doctrines which divided them and find a unity in the Spirit. This presupposition is sometimes known as the *philosophia perennis*, which Aldous Huxley defined as 'The metaphysic that recognises a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds: the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being – the thing is immemorial and universal.'²

This was the approach of many leading members of the World Congress of Faiths and, as I suggested in my history of the WCF, this mystical approach is still, I think, a distinctive emphasis that the WCF can bring to interfaith work.³ Francis Younghusband, who founded the Congress, was inspired by a universal mystical experience outside the city of Lhasa.⁴ He also spoke of other occasions when with a people of a variety of faiths he had sensed an underlying unity at the heart of the religious paths. In a talk broadcast in 1936, he said, 'Fifty years ago in Manchuria I commenced a series of journeys which led me from one extremity of the Chinese Empire to the other and took me eleven times across the entire breadth of the Himalayas from the plains of India to the plains of Turkestan and the highlands of Tibet and back. During these explorations ... I have come into the most intimate contact with adherents of all the great religions, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Confucians. I have been dependent upon them for my life. ... I have been in deep converse with them on their religions, I have been invited to attend their religious ceremonies – even in the Cathedral at Lhasa. I have also been invited to speak at their religious meetings. And from all this close intercourse with men of different faiths I have derived intense enjoyment. It has forced me down to the essentials of my own Christianity and made me see there a beauty I had not till then known. It also forced me to see a beauty in the depths of theirs. The beauty of holiness I have learned to recognise wherever found.'

Such an approach has been expressed in WCF's support for 'All Faith services' or interfaith worship. As Bishop Appleton said at one such service, 'We stand in worship before the mystery of the final reality to whom or to which we give differing names, so great and deep and eternal that we can never fully understand or grasp the mystery of His Being'.⁵

I am aware that my interfaith work has been shaped by this sense of an underlying unity of spiritual experience. It also colours my approach to my Christian faith. In my recent *Explorer's Guide to Christianity*, I took the experience of encounter with God in Christ as the starting point.⁶ To my way of thinking, doctrine, creeds, rituals, even the scriptures point beyond themselves to the personal meeting with or experience of God in Jesus Christ, which is beautifully articulated in the words of the Prayer of Humble Access, 'that we may evermore dwell in Him and He in us'.

Such an approach has come under question from Christian theologians because it obscures the uniqueness of Christianity, and from students of the religions of the world because it is said to gloss over the profound differences between these religions. This approach has also been criticised by some students of mystical experience, especially by those who hold to a 'constructivist' approach and who claim that all experiences are in significant ways formed, shaped, mediated and constructed by the terms, categories, beliefs and linguistic backgrounds which the subject brings to them.⁷

I do not here have the space to try to grapple with the many complex issues involved in discussions about the nature of mystical experience. In this paper I want to recollect some of my experiences of 'A presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts'.⁸ I would regard them as 'mystical', but the definition of what constitutes a mystical experience is so debated that my experiences would not fit everyone's definition. Some of the experiences I shall describe were in the context of sharing in prayer and worship with people of other faiths. This has led me to ask whether a Christian can have a 'Hindu religious experience' or has he or she merely had a 'Christian religious experience' but in a Hindu setting. Or is the religious adjective irrelevant when applied to a religious experience?

Guests at the Worship of Other Faiths

A conversation at an interfaith gathering in South India prompted my reflection on this question. It is becoming common at interfaith conferences to begin the day by inviting people of all faiths to attend prayers or meditation led by a member of one particular faith. At a conference in South India, the morning devotions consisted of *bhajans* or songs addressed to the Hindu *avatars* (manifestations of Vishnu) Ram and Krishna. I noticed that several Roman Catholic priests joined happily in the singing. Afterwards I asked them about this and they said, we just alter Ram or Krishna to Jesus. They were in fact engaging in devotion to their Lord and Saviour. Did this imply that the One Divine Being is encountered equally in Jesus, Ram or Krishna? This is what many modern Hindus would claim, although this is a view rejected by a considerable number of Christians. Alternatively, were the Catholic priests worshipping Jesus and so in fact remaining in their own tradition and only apparently but not really opening themselves to the Hindu object of worship?

Increasingly, people of one faith may attend the worship of another faith. This may be as a matter of courtesy or as an observer. It is a good way of learning about another religion. Is it also an occasion for prayer or worship or meditation? If it is, is the guest using this as an opportunity for his or her usual devotional practices or is it in some way a different devotional experience? The question of what unites worshippers, even of the same denomination, is complex and people attend worship for a variety of reasons, such as loyalty to a group. Even so, encounter with the Transcendent is at the centre of the life of each faith community and at the heart of the spiritual life of the devotee? Can guests of one faith make their own the experience of the Transcendent enshrined in the worship of another religious tradition or are they always an on-looker? David Brown, a former Bishop of Guildford, who

had made a deep study of Islam once wrote, 'My distance from Islam came home to me in a sad but profound way one evening in Khartoum, when I went to the home of a Muslim religious leader. There were some thirty men sitting at ease in his courtyard, and for an hour or more we enjoyed a good and open discussion about religious matters. Then the time came for the night prayer and they formed ranks to say it together. I asked if I might stand with them but the Sheikh told me I could not do so, since I did not have the right "intention". I had to remain standing at the edge of the courtyard. Even though I have walked on the approaches of Islam for over thirty years, I can only speak of it as a stranger.'⁹ Worship in Islam is a communal activity and the host community did not regard David Brown as a member.

An individual may, however, feel free to explore another path. Fr Pierre F. De Bethune, a Benedictine monk who is the Secretary General of Dialogue Interreligieux Monastique has written, 'Personally I have been practising zen meditation every day for twenty-five years. This practice which was a casual discovery has gradually become important in my monastic life. It is an experience of radical silence at the heart of an existence in which the Word of God is paramount. I think I can say that this type of meditation practised as a Christian, but in explicit communion with Buddhists, has rejuvenated my religious practice by challenging it to be utterly simple and open'.¹⁰ What does it mean for a Catholic monk to practise Zen Buddhism? Are they different religious experiences or has he gone beyond labels?

Is there a common core of religious experience? Do all religious paths lead to the same goal? Or is each religion distinct and discrete. Some years ago, through the World Congress of Faiths, I helped to arrange a series of weekends of meditation at the Ammerdown Retreat Centre. Mostly they were led by Bishop George Appleton, a former Chair of WCF who was also deeply involved in the work of the Religious Experience Research Unit in its early days, and Swami Bhavyananda, Head of the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society in Britain. Each led meditations according to his own tradition, with no deliberate attempt to mix the traditions. Yet, I think most of those present felt they were doing the same thing whether the meditation was led by the Bishop or whether it was led by the Swami. I believe there is an affinity between the spiritual experience enshrined in the different traditions of faith, but there is a distinctiveness which is also significant. This points to the wider question of whether or not there are varieties of religious experience.

If the form of the devotion is a quiet meditation, perhaps a Buddhist or Quaker silence, the question may not arise. Equally, people of many backgrounds have found the Brahma Kumaris' meditation helpful. The Raja Yoga, which is taught, does not involve any mantras, special postures or breathing techniques nor does it involve attention to a guru. The Brahma Kumaris' World Spiritual University says it is non-political, non-religious and non-sectarian, so anyone can take part in the meditation. Even so, the Brahma Kumaris' movement has certain philosophical or metaphysical presuppositions about the nature of the soul and about the Divine reality, although those who benefit from the meditations may not share these beliefs.¹¹

There is also a difference between Buddhist and Christian silence. Christians may happily sit with Buddhists in silent meditation and there are parallels to the breathing techniques in Christian contemplation. Yet whereas for many Buddhists the intention is to empty themselves, for Christians it is a preparation for the presence of the Lord. As one Buddhist is said to have pointed out to a Christian bishop 'I am no one praying to no body for nothing'.

In a recent article, Sodô Yasunaga, Chief Priest of the Shôunji-Temple at Osaka, compares the experiences of light of Paul and Hakuin. Paul sees his experience as an encounter with

the Risen Christ, but Hakuin describes the light in terms that are completely impersonal. Sodô Yasunaga goes on to ask, 'If a Christian practices Zazen and has some kind of religious experience, should this be called a Zen experience or a God experience? If a Christian practitioner of Zazen experiences the "Great death", does that person's rebirth to a new life involve becoming conformed to Christ or to the original Buddha?'¹²

Can we jump over the metaphysical or philosophical differences and say it is just a matter of language or culture? It perhaps becomes more difficult when the form of worship involves much language and ritual. Can we substitute one name of God for another? Can the 'pure experience' be disentangled from the complex living tradition which makes up any religious path?

Is all mystical experience the same?

The claim that the spiritual experience to which different religious paths point is the same was made by the remarkable 19th century Hindu, Sri Ramakrishna (1836-86). He was born in a Bengal village and at the age of 19 he became the priest of Kali at Dakshineswar, near Calcutta. After some time of intense devotion, he realised the presence of Kali, the Divine Mother. He then focused his attention on Rama. He put himself in the place of Hanuman, a devotee of Rama and began to imitate his actions, 'living on nuts and fruits and climbing trees and jumping from branch to branch'¹³. Eventually he had a vision of Sita, Rama's consort and of the child Rama. Following other spiritual disciplines (*sadhana*), he had visions of Krishna as a friend and then identified himself in an ecstasy of passionate love with Krishna, the eternal Lover. Later in life, he was instructed in Advaita Vedanta and we are told that on the very first day he attained *nirvikalpasamadhi* (undifferentiated concentration) to the astonishment of his teacher, who exclaimed, 'Is it really true? Is it possible that this man has attained in the course of a single day that which it took me forty years of strenuous practice to achieve? Great God, it is nothing short of a miracle'¹⁴

After a time, Ramakrishna followed the devotional path of a Sufi and said that after three days he had had a vision of the Prophet Muhammad. He also had some acquaintance with Christianity and the Bible and saw a vision of Jesus – dressed as a European – whom he recognised as an incarnation of God. Ramakrishna insisted that it was the One Divine Reality whom he experienced in his various visions.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote a poem in tribute to Sri Ramakrishna.

To the Paramhansa
Ramakrishna Deva
Diverse courses of worship
from varied springs of fulfilment
have mingled in your meditation.
The manifold revelation of joy of The Infinite
has given form to a shrine of unity
in your life
Where from far and near arrive salutations
to which I add mine own.¹⁵

This poem echoes the claim made by many modern Hindus, based on the authority of Ramakrishna's experiences, that all religious paths lead to the same experience of unity with the divine. As the philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) wrote, 'The seers describe their experiences with an impressive unanimity. They are near to one another on mountains farthest apart.'¹⁶

This view has been echoed by some Western scholars in the field. Paul Elmer More in his *Christian Mysticism* (1932) wrote,

There is thus a ground of psychological experience, potential in all men (*sic*), actually realised in a few, common to all mystics of all lands and times and accountable for the similarity of their reports. But upon that common basis we need not be surprised to see them also erecting various superstructures in accordance with their particular tenets of philosophy or religion. At bottom, their actual experiences, at the highest point at least, will be amazingly alike, but their theories in regard to what happened to them may be radically different.¹⁷

In his *The Teachings of the Mystics*, Walter Stace took a similar view. He held that the mystical consciousness does not contain any concepts or thoughts. 'It is not sensory-intellectual consciousness at all.'¹⁸ It is ineffable. Stace distinguished between experience and interpretation.

'On a dark night out of doors one may see something glimmering white. One person may think it is a ghost. A second person may take it for a sheet hung out on a clothesline. A third may suppose that it is a white-painted rock. Here we have a single experience with three different interpretations. The experience is genuine, but the interpretations may be either true or false. If we are to understand anything at all about mysticism, it is essential that we should make a similar distinction between a mystical experience and the interpretations that may be put upon it either by mystics themselves or by non-mystics. For instance, the same mystical experience may be interpreted by a Christian in terms of Christian beliefs and by a Buddhist in terms of Buddhist beliefs.'¹⁹

Stace further suggested that if one could imagine a meeting of Eckhart and St Teresa, it would be surprising if, when they spoke of 'union with God' they were not referring to very similar experiences.

On the other hand, R. C. Zaehner and other writers have argued that there are mystical experiences which are different in kind, not just in the way in which they have been interpreted. Zaehner in his *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (1957), divided mystical experience into three basic types. The first is 'nature mysticism', wherein the mystic is sensibly aware of the external world but experiences no distinction between various external objects or between the world as a whole and the self. The second is 'monistic mystical experience', which also lacks subject-object structure but differs from nature mysticism in being devoid of all perceptual content. In theistic mystical experience 'the soul feels itself to be united with God in love'.²⁰ There is an inherent duality in such an experience. 'Love implies duality, and what if "one without a second" can neither love nor be loved?'²¹

Recollecting Some Personal Experiences

I want, with some hesitation, to reflect on the question of varieties of spiritual experience by recollecting some of my own experiences, including times when I have been present at worship of another tradition than my own Christian one. I am encouraged to do this by words of Frits Staal in his *Exploring Mysticism* (1975) when he writes that 'If mysticism is to be studied seriously, it should not merely be studied indirectly and from without, but also directly and from within.'²² I should add that I was brought up in a Christian home and have never not thought of myself as a Christian, although my faith has developed over the years, particularly through contact and conversation with people whose faiths are different from my own and who have often asked me to join them for times of prayer, meditation and worship.

I think the first experience that I recall was when I was just 18. At the time I had recently started my National Service and had found basic training very difficult – not least because I could not march in step! I had been transferred to the Intelligence Corps and had a weekend leave at home. Tensions there added to my depression and I had gone to bed early and miserable. But before I went to sleep my mother came in to say there was someone on the phone for me. He was one of the few people at the new camp who I had begun to think of as a friend. After the conversation, when I came back to my bedroom, the room was filled with radiant light and I felt a great sense of joy and peace. It was as if my friend was an angel of the Lord to assure me that I was loved and not forgotten.

By the time I went to Cambridge, I had decided to seek ordination, but for a time the joy went out of my faith. I attended College chapel regularly, but it had become a duty and I felt I did not live up to expectations. It had become a burden – shades of Luther and the traditional misinterpretation of Paul's view of the Law. Then, as I often did, I went to the Sunday morning service at Holy Trinity Church. The preacher was Cuthbert Bardsley, then Bishop of Coventry. As he told us how, when he was a prison chaplain, a convict had come to accept the free forgiveness of Jesus Christ, I too knew that I was forgiven and accepted as I was. Discipleship was not to be a way of gaining God's approval, but a joyous expression of gratitude to God who in Christ loved me and accepted me.

But although there flowed from this experience a great sense of release, I was never a 'narrow evangelical', because I did not wish to discount other hints of God's presence and of Jesus' love. I have always from childhood had a love of nature and often have a sense of peace when I am alone in the countryside. But one of the most intense experiences of this peace was in India, to which I went to study for a year after my time at Cambridge. I was staying with a Brahmin family and they had taken me to see the great temple at the sacred island of Rameswaram, which is about 100 miles south of Madurai and only 46 miles from Sri Lanka across the Palk Strait. I was sitting alone a little way from the temple whilst my Brahmin friends went into the temple for the *puja*. I could hear the temple bells and the chanting of pilgrims and then I sensed a great peace and unity with all nature. Indeed, I seemed to become one with nature. Later, that and other experiences in India convinced me that the reality of God's presence was not only to be found within the Christian tradition but within other communities of faith and perhaps most of all in service of the poor. I think particularly of a visit to Varanasi and meeting with a Hindu monk who had devoted himself to caring for dying beggars. I shall never forget his radiant goodness.

I had a somewhat similar experience of oneness with nature when I was at Wells Theological College and already – after a year in India – I was somewhat uneasy with the parochialism of the Church of England, although the Church was far more open to the world and to new ideas in the 1960s and 1970s than it is now. I was walking by myself a little way from the cathedral and turned to look back over the city and again I felt this sense of unity with nature and oneness with all people.

I could write of other experiences. For example quite recently in Jerusalem our group visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which, as so often, was crowded and restless. Two of the party had been ill and on the Sunday morning I took them to see this great building. It was almost deserted, except for the chanting of a Syrian mass in the distance. Each of us had, I believe, an intense experience of the presence of the Risen Christ. In fact it was so powerful we did not speak for some time and when we did we hardly needed to speak about it, because we knew at a deep level that we had shared a special moment. On that same

pilgrimage, we went to Sinai and set off at about 3 a.m. on an intensely cold morning to climb the mountain. It was full moon and the peace and beauty of the Holy Mountain was over-powering.

I mention both these kinds of experiences, as I do not think the sense of oneness with nature and the awareness of the Lord Jesus' accepting love were for me identical experiences – perhaps they were not totally without content and so were not 'pure' mystical experiences. Yet they were experiences of a divine reality and have helped me to value the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which speaks of God's presence in nature, in Jesus Christ and in the fellowship of worshippers.

I want, however, to say something of experiences when I have been with people of other faiths. Many people, such as Fr Bede Griffiths or Abhishiktananda or Elaine MacInnes,²³ have testified to the enrichment that flows from such encounters. I think back again to Jerusalem. I was staying with a Jewish lady – a friend of friends – whose father was seriously ill. We went late at night to the Western Wall and, as at that time men and women were not separated, I went with her all the way to the wall and she put a little piece of paper with her intercession into a crack in the wall. No longer was this a tourist site. I knew that the place where I was standing was holy ground. The sense of God's awesome presence was overwhelming.

On another occasion at the end of the eighties I attended the Global Forum – an interfaith environmental conference – in Oxford. I had recently had to take early retirement because of ill health and was feeling rather depressed, as well as experiencing the sense of isolation which is possible at a large conference, where every one else seems so intelligent with brilliant things to say. The morning devotion was conducted by a leader of an African traditional religion. After some time, as we stood in a circle, he invited those who wished to come forward and drink from the sacred cup. After some hesitation, I did so and again, rather like my experience as a National Service soldier, I felt a complete sense of acceptance and inner peace.

Another occasion of which I wish to write, however, has no parallel with other experiences. I had made my way to the holy Hindu city of Rishikesh and was staying at one of the Hindu ashrams. It was a bitterly chilly night and the bedding was cold and damp. I did not sleep well, partly as I was expected to be up very early for the morning *puja* or offerings to the gods. After that we went into a large meditation hall, where there were several hundred monks. After a time I was finding it uncomfortable to sit cross-legged, but I persevered. Then suddenly, the lights were turned off and the whole building was dark. I felt an overpowering sense of the darkness and nothingness and mystery of the Holy One. I know that in several religious traditions Ultimate Reality can only be spoken of in negative terms, '*Neti, Neti*', 'Not this, Not that' – the apophatic tradition. Never before, however, had I sensed the emptiness or nothingness of God. It was a powerful and unforgettable moment. I have not experienced anything like it within Christian worship, although I know some Christian mystics, such as St John of the Cross, speak of it. It recalled for me a moment at Madurai temple when we had been present at a great Hindu festival and I had felt I was in touch with elemental forces which have been sanitised from much Christian liturgy in the West.

Some of the interfaith services in which I have participated have been intensely moving and inspiring, but there are two other moments that I would like to mention. One was at Hiroshima and the other recently at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Japanese friends from Rissho Kosei Kai, a modern Lay Buddhist movement, travelled with me to Hiroshima and took me to meet

one of their members who was a *hibakusha* or survivor. She shared her experiences of that terrible day, August 6th, 1945. She spoke of her parents' death, of her own pain and isolation and the repeated illnesses and other burdens that she had had to bear. Yet she always spoke without resentment and without bitterness. Then together, we walked around the Peace Park with its various reminders until we paused in silence at the Monument of Prayer. In the silence there was a sense of that peace that passeth all understanding. It did not answer all the intellectual problems of why such suffering and why such hatred – but it was like the assurance that Mother Julian heard that 'Sin is behovely, but all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.'²⁴ At Auschwitz-Birkenau, that grim memorial to the depravity and bestiality of which human beings are capable, I felt that same reassurance – the Silence of Eternity which is present even in our deepest griefs and sorrows.

Some Reflections

Several of the experiences I have mentioned have come at times of doubt or depression or of extreme emotion, as at Hiroshima and Auschwitz. This, I gather, follows a pattern discerned in the analysis of the archival accounts of the Religious Experience Research Centre. The experiences have come as a surprise and a reassurance, not resolving the situation or my intellectual questions but, as with the answer to Job, speaking to me at a deeper level of my being. Such experiences are not to be sought for, but are a gracious gift at moments of deep need. The experience of God's presence in times of worship and contemplation have been more a recollection of that presence known at other times rather than a fresh experience.

Several of the experiences have come either at moments when, afraid that I was going beyond my Christian tradition, I have hesitated to enter into deeper fellowship with people of another faith or at moments of deep meaning in the company of people of another faith. Because of the experiences I have now no doubt that the same divine reality is close to men and women wherever they seek that Presence.

Yet the experiences are not identical and I do not think that this is a later reading into the experiences. As I recall them they have such freshness and immediacy that I feel almost as if I am re-living them. Nelson Pike, against Stace, suggests that union experiences are not wholly incommensurable with ordinary sensory-intellectual consciousness.²⁵ As we have seen, R.C. Zaehner distinguished three types of mystical experience, although his distinctions have been questioned by other scholars. One, which he called the panenhenic or natural mystical experience, is 'the experience which leads to the "knowledge" that behind the multiplicity and diversity of all finite things there is an all-embracing unity'.²⁶ This, I believe, was the experience that I had at Rameswaram and at Wells. The second experience is the monistic experience, associated particularly with the Advaita tradition of Hinduism, which Zaehner describes as 'the isolation of the soul from all that is other than itself'.²⁷ One of the best 20th century descriptions of that experience is that of Ramana Maharshi,²⁸ who at the age of 17 had a sense of his own death. He realised then that although the body dies, the identity of the self is one with the Self (*atman* as Brahman). My own experience at Rishikesh perhaps came closest to this, although interestingly I interpreted it with reference to the apophatic tradition in theism. Other experiences have been clearly theistic – a sense of the presence of God, mediated through Jesus Christ. For Zaehner, the major distinction between monistic and theistic experiences is that, while both are experiences within the self, theistic mysticism maintains the distinction between man and God, whereas monistic mysticism obliterates it. In Zaehner's view, theistic mystical experience is a richer experience. Zaehner

writes of the monist, 'so long as he sticks to his monistic view of life and feels that his philosophy is confirmed by his experience, then I do not think that his bliss can be identical with that experienced and described by the Christian and Muslim mystics ... whose bliss consists rather in the total surrender of the whole personality to a God who is at the same time Love'.²⁹

The experience of God as abundant Love is at the heart of my spiritual life. I hesitate, however, to assert that it is a higher experience than the monistic one. I do, however, in my own case recognise varieties of spiritual experience – yet each points to that Mystery of which no words can adequately speak. There is that which gives to the experiences a oneness and yet each has its distinctiveness.

In a similar way, in our sharing with people of other faiths, we need to acknowledge both the oneness and distinctiveness. Some of the pioneers of interfaith work emphasised the oneness, whereas today the distinctiveness of religious traditions tends to be stressed. Yet at the 1936 World Congress of Faiths, Rabbi Dr Israel Mattuk said, 'I should no more want a world with one religion than I should want only one coloured rose in my garden'.³⁰ The particularity and distinctiveness of faith traditions are to be treasured. To say that religious experience is really the same is to ignore the particular context and history which has shaped and preserved each faith's own core experience – such as the disciples' encounter with the Risen Christ or Mohammed's sense of the Unity of God. It is all that flows from that core experience that members of a faith community have to share with others. As the American Catholic R.E. Whitson put it, 'Each of the world religions is unique and universal: unique in that the core of each is a distinct central experience – not to be found elsewhere – and universal in that this core experience is of supreme significance for all men (*sic*)'.³¹ I do not wish to argue which core experience is the more significant or profound. That seems to me as unhelpful as suggesting Western art or music is 'better' than Oriental art or music. Each religious tradition is to be valued in its own terms and for its potential enrichment of humankind as a whole.

Yet, whilst recognising the distinctiveness of religious traditions, I am wary of a post-modernist approach which seems to deny any universals or which appears to isolate one community from another. I do believe that a person of one faith can to a considerable extent sympathetically enter into a spiritual experience which is rooted in another faith tradition and I am conscious of a special sense of oneness with nature when I have been privileged to share in Shinto rituals. Indeed, the variety across faiths, which to some seems to divide them, can also be found within the language and tradition of each faith.

As a follower of one path, my contact with other traditions has helped me to discover both new riches in my own faith tradition and new experiences which I have subsequently integrated into my own spiritual practice – just as Fr Bethune has integrated Zen practice. For example, my practice of contemplative prayer has been shaped by what I have learned from Hindu friends or my awareness of nature has been increased by sharing in native Canadian and native American ceremonies. I do not think this is Christian imperialism or appropriation of another tradition. I recognise that there are those for whom 'interfaith' becomes its own spiritual path. For others learning of and sharing in another tradition can open one's eyes to new spiritual dimensions, which may already be in one's own tradition, although one may have been blind to them. This is why I believe spiritual sharing by members of different faiths is a means to spiritual growth. It may not only deepen our understanding of each other, but also our appreciation of the Divine mystery.

The True Meeting Point

There is, I believe, enough in common for us sympathetically to be able, at least in part, to enter into the spiritual experience of another tradition than our own and to appreciate its worth, but there is enough that is different to save us from superficial uniformity. The true meeting point is 'in the cave of the heart' as each of us goes towards the inner depth or centre of our faith experience.

The way for a religion to break through its own particularity, as Paul Tillich wrote some years ago, 'is not to relinquish one's own religious tradition for the sake of a universal concept which would be nothing but a concept. The way is to penetrate into the depths of one's own religion, in devotion, thought and action. In the depth of every living religion there is a point at which religion loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity, elevating it to spiritual freedom and to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of human existence.'³² At that point religious adjectives do indeed become irrelevant. They may describe our path, but not our goal.

'The function of religion', as John Hick has written, is to bring us to a right relationship with the ultimate divine reality, to awareness of our true nature and our place in the Whole, into the presence of God. In the eternal life there is no longer any place for religions; the pilgrim has no need of a way after he has finally arrived. In St John's vision of the heavenly city at the end of the Christian scriptures it is said that there is no temple – no Christian church or chapel, no Jewish synagogue, no Hindu or Buddhist temple, no Muslim mosque, no Sikh gurdwara. ... For all these exist in time, as ways through time to eternity.'³³

NOTES

1. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Collins 1961 edn, p.329.
2. Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, Introduction. 1946. See further discussion of the term *Philosophia Perennis* in the *Oxford Dictionary of Religions*, Ed John Bowker, OUP 1997 or *Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions*, Ed Rosemary Goring and Frank Whaling, Chambers 1992. There is also a taped lecture in the RERC tape library (AH22 1991) by Professor Keith Ward on *The Perennial Philosophy*.
3. See my 'Inter-faith work needs its Mystics', *World Faiths Encounter* No.16, March 1997, pp.36-42
4. See Marcus Braybrooke, *A Wider Vision: A History of the World Congress of Faiths*, OneWorld, 1996, p.22.
5. Sermon at King's College Chapel, June 1972. I am aware that Bishop Appleton's use of 'His' is unacceptable today and that the personal way of speaking of the Ultimate is unacceptable to Buddhists.
6. See my *The Explorer's Guide to Christianity*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1998, pp.1-24.
7. See for example the introduction to *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, Ed Robert K.C. Forman, Oxford University Press, 1990.
8. William Wordsworth, 'Lines composed ... above Tintern Abbey', 1798, line 113.

9. Quoted in *Can We Pray Together?* British Council of Churches, 1983.
10. Pierre F. De Bethune, 'The Bond of Peace, A Few Theological Reflections about Interreligious Prayer', *Pro Dialogo/ Current Dialogue*, Bulletin 98, 1998/2, p.160.
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