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RELIGION AND MODERN STUDIES

Diversity is a great tantalizer. It is the siren of the immense mystery. Though the world has always been religiously plural, religions now find all of their horizons contracting as never before. The last horizon is the horizon of 'exclusivity'.

> Now that my ladder's gone,
> I must lie down where all ladders start,
> In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.[1]

Modern studies of religion are face-to-face with the problem of pluralism. The days of the theoretical claims to 'uniqueness' and 'universality' are numbered. Religious pluralism is not merely a theoretical claim; nor is it a metaphysical concept. The boundaries of the world are broken and religious pluralism has become a human existential problem. Daily encounters occur between various upholders of mutually incompatible world-views:

> The time will soon be with us when a theologian who attempts to work out his position unaware that he does so as a member of a world society in which other theologians equally intelligent, equally devout, equally moral, are Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and unaware that his readers are likely to be Buddhists or to have Muslim husbands or Hindu colleagues—such a theologian is as out of date as is one who attempts to construct an intellectual position unware that Aristotle has thought about the world or that existentialists have raised new orientations or unaware that the earth is a minor planet in a galaxy that is vast only by terrestial standards.[2]

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1. Y.B. Yeats
2. W.C. Smith, an address presented to the Canadian Theological Society, Montreal, May, 1961, and reprinted in *Religious Diversity*, ed., by W. Oxtoby (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 9.

Philosophically, the Existentialists raised new orientations. Modern studies of religion are discovering that the meaning and emphasis of the old philosophical term 'pluralism' has shifted from a philosophical to an existential basis. No longer is the issue merely an intellectual pursuit by a scholastic 'arm-chair quarter-back.' Survival is now the issue. Geographical boundaries no longer segregate and isolate the world's communities. Each individual is now a spiritual neighbour to everyone else and the world is truly approaching a world community.

The Problem

The problem of religious pluralism is the problem of 'the other.'

Where one sees nothing else, hears nothing else,
understands nothing else, that is the infinite.
But where one sees something else, hears something
else, understands something else, that is the small.[3]

What does one say and how does one say it? There are the intolerables, the barbarians, pagans, niggers, goyim, infidels, savages, mlecchas, 'them'—and there is the 'we', who have the answer, the 'we' who are tolerant. Oh Lord, protect us from all those who are content to find the essence of the human being in one particular nationality, caste, creed, or colour, and nowhere else. Those who merely tolerate 'them'—so long as 'them' don't meddle or interfere—have not found the solution to the problem of religious pluralism. Those who will not grant 'them' autonomous and authentic existence are merely accepting, comparing, or rejecting their own preconceived ideas, dressed up in the garb of the 'other.' The problem arises when toleration fails, is not good enough, not adequate to the solution needed.

The pluralism of which we are speaking here, rather, consists precisely in the fact that it is quite impossible to reduce the theologies and their representatives in this manner, in the fact that they exist side by side with one another as disparate and mutually incommensurable.[4]

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3. *Chandogya Upanishad* VII. 24.1.

4. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. XI, trans. by David Bourke, (London : Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1974), p. 7.

Consequences

Any approach to an 'other' must necessarily be mediate. Mediate knowledge is fraught with danger. It is never certain. It has been known to mislead. It can be manipulated. It is a product of the intellect's ability to discriminate, divide, distinguish, and conceptualize. It lives by quantifying, classifying, and analysing. It depends upon an interaction between the observer and the observed, the knower and he known. Yet an insurmountable problem arises in that the objectification of the 'other' demands neutralization of the subject if this knowledge is to reach certainty as to the true nature of the phenomena. Absolute objectivity demands that the observer's subjectivity be excluded. Yet such an absolute integrity of an observed phenomenon cannot be preserved within the domain of logical thought which necessarily demands the observer separate from the observed. "The observed system is required to be isolated in order to be defined, yet interacting in order to be observed."[5] This consequence of mediate knowledge opens the door for the 'we' to interpret, to expect that one day the 'them' will become civilized, will enter the true path, will hear the bells and see the lights and become 'wes'. The chains of exclusivity, the prison of parochialism.

A second consequence associated with the problem of the 'other' is that proofs become necessary. The history of 'proofs' is replete with controversy. "In the beginning. . ." there was no 'other'. From the perspective of the greatest universal, there is no 'other'. However, common daily experience tells us that there is an 'other'. Multiplicity exists in and through a conscious experience of it. Yet, to cite but one example, i.e., Bertrand Russell's logical atomism, it is possible for multiplicity to exist without friction. More to this later. A final consequence of the 'other' is that it emphasizes the uniqueness of each community and points to the differences between them. It highlights different descriptions and reveals how their points of view differ. In itself this is not bad, but it should be balanced by perspective.

One of the goals of the modern study of religions is to show how varying and even conflicting perspectives can be understood and appre-

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5. **H. P. Strapp, "S-Matrix Interpretation of Quantom Theory,"** in *Physical Review,* vol. D 3 (March 15, 1971), pp. 1303-1320.

ciated within a context which is intelligible. Common sense realism demands that multiplicity is real and fundamental. Common sense pragmaticism demands that a solution be found so as to enable some sort of unity-in-diversity to survive. If no solution can be found, then humankind will have to begin again—after having destroyed itself.

Solution

Though not the only solution, what appears to be the most satisfactory solution to the problem of the 'other' seems to be to posit that there is a unity in diversity.

> God's voice speaks in many languages, communicating itself in a diversity of intuitions. The word of God never comes to an end. No word is God's last word.[6]

> Truth is one, the wise speak of it in many ways.[7]

In order to account for granting an equal status to the various religious communities, one may posit that there is only one Reality. On the tree of this one Reality, with its one root, grow the many branches of faith and profession in the world.

> Behold but One in all things; it is the second
> that leads you astray.[8]

Religious pluralism is a fact. One solution to the problem of the 'other', if I may label it so, is offered by the 'primitive approach'. It is the time-honoured 'law of the jungle,' Darwin's survival of the fittest. Any confrontation with an 'other' will end in either conversion or conquest. The strong survive. The fact of pluralism is but a concession to be tolerated until the arsenal of the 'we' is adequate to exterminate the 'other'. The history of religions is replete with examples of the primitive approach: The Crusades, *Jihad,* skirmishes among the various territorial gods of the Ancient Near East, Hitler, Torquemada etc. The primitive approach is basically an effort to reduce all reli-

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6. Abraham Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays in Applied Religion,* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), p. 182.

7. *Rg Veda* X. 114.5 and I. 164.46.

gions to one religion. Such an approach is obviously unacceptable to all but the strongest religion(s). Yet there is an even greater objection to this solution in that it is a violation of the principle of freedom which is so vital to any religion. Any solution built on a foundation of coercion cannot last. The very nature of the religious enterprise guarantees such.

Earlier we pointed to Bertrand Russell's logical atomism as an example of multiplicity existing without friction. We can label this solution the 'permissive approach'. In many ways this approach resembles the solution of 'unity in diversity'. However, here the emphasis is on 'diversity.' All the various religions systems are allowed to co-exist. 'Allowed' is not quite the right word however, for diversity is built into the very essence of the system itself. If it was not, this approach would be but a subtle variation of the 'primitive approach. As soon as even one system stopped 'allowing' or 'tolerating' the 'other' systems, the 'law of the jungle' would reappear. Thus, the co-existence of plurality here is not built upon a mutual agreement to accept certain presuppositions. This approach is not ultimately satisfactory because, unlike Russell's atomic facts, religions are fundamentally conglomerates. Some are big and powerful and others are small and meek. Co-existence allows each to exist, but does not place any limits upon the birth, growth, and decline of a given religion. Thus, while the concept sounds democratic, in actuality it is not. There is no 'one man—one vote'. A large religion will obviously have more power and more responsibility than a smaller one. This is an unavoidable fact of the world. Perhaps the world is not meant to be radically democratic. All may be equal in the eyes of God, but absolute equality does not exist within the domain of humankind.

Religious studies are looking for a model which includes the greatest comprehensiveness with the greatest simplicity. The American Jew, Abraham Heschel, argues that it is the will of God for there to be more than one religion. He argues that while outer rituals and dogmas separate people, a deep inner spiritual intuition unites them into one pluralistic community of spiritual persons.[9] The British philosopher/ theologian John Hick said: "We have to realize that the universe

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9. Abraham Heschel, *Man is not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), p, 171.

of faiths centres upon *God*, and not upon Christianity or any other religion."[10]   This would seem to imply that the various religious systems are but varying manifestations of the one God.   Certainly the models proposed by Heschel and Hick have gone a long way from the narrow dogmatici.m of the 'we'.   However, they fall short of being the most comprehensive because they are bound to a theistic structure.   The idea that God is an *a priori* is quite unacceptable to systems like Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta.   Therefore, someone like Paul Tillich, to name but one Western representative, who conceives the Absolute (God) in a very abstract philosophical manner, provides a more comprehensive model.

Thus the question of the existence of God can be neither asked nor answered.   If asked, it is a question about that which by its very nature is above existence, and therefore the answer—whether negative or affirmative—implicitly denies the nature of God.   It is as atheistic to affirm the existence of God as it is to deny it.   God is being itself, not *a* being.[11]

The logic of one Reality putting forth various expressions points to the instrumental character of those expressions. Being instrumental, the expressions need not be circumscribed by the confines of a single country or community.   Religious expressions do not belong peculiarly and eternally to one single part of the world.   Any given religion seems to have a given life-span and to serve a particular need, mentality and milieu.   Religions have a beginning and an end.   Many have already come and gone—outliving their particular need or use.   But the logic of unity in diversity seems to imply that within each branch there flowed and flows the same life-sustaining sap.   Like so many waves of the same ocean, the various religions of the world and their revelations appear related to the eternal sea of Reality.

The problem of religious pluralism is the problem of the other. The 'other' is a fact and yet the 'otherness' of the 'other' must somehow be overcome.   Violence is not a viable solution.   Tolerance is not a

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10.   John Hicks, ''Whatever Path Men Choose Is Mine,'' reprinted in *Christianity and Other Religions,* ed., by John Hicks and Brian Hebblethwaite (Glascow :   Fount, 1980), p. 182.

11.   Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* vol. I, (London :   Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 12.

lasting solution. Even if the 'other' is empirically irreducible, still its 'otherness' is susceptible to comprehension.

If the word 'existential' points to a participation which transcends both subjectivity and objectivity, then man's relation to the gods is rightly called existential. Man cannot speak of the gods in detachment. The moment he tries to do so, he has lost the god and has established just one more object within the world of objects. Man can speak of the gods only on the basis of his relation to them.[12]

Likewise with the 'other'. Resistence is the human drama of building an image. The image is a wall erected by the 'we' mentality to protect itself from what it sees as a threatening 'otherness'. It is not the 'other' that is threatening, but the idea of 'otherness'. As long as this resistance is present, any talk of a real relationship is meaningless. The wall, the image, the resistance exists because 'we' don't want to be hurt. Yet, ironically, it is this very self-contraction which is the only thing capable of truly inflicting hurt. A Christian, a Jew, a Buddhist, a Hindu cannot hurt one by merely existing as a Christian, or a Jew, or a Buddhist, or a Hindu. It is one's resistance that hurts. When one has expanded wide enough to encompass the entire universe, then the entire universe is yours. Religions of both the East and West have asked that one love one's fellow beings as oneself. When the 'other' is given equal status as oneself, then truly 'otherness' will have been overcome. To live in the knowledge, in thought, word, and deed, that everyone shares in, in relationship, the same Self, then the problem of religious pluralism will no longer be a problem.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 238.