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THE THREE MEANINGS OF TRUTH IN RELIGION

Most religionists vigorously hold that they *possess* the truth. In contrast the philosophers' claim has usually been less pretentious. They prefer to describe their undertaking as a painstaking *search* for the truth. It has been said that the philosophers who once shared the pulpit with theologians have vacated it, leaving the theologians alone to preach the truth whereas they themselves assume now the humbler task of dealing with *meanings* than with truth. Scientists too do not pretend to expose the plain truth about reality. The search for verisimilitude in science - i.e., "approximation to the truth" - is a clearer and more realistic aim than the search for truth.¹ By and large philosophers and scientists have the wisdom to recognise the limits of their field.

The situation is altogether different in religion. The community of believers takes for granted that its religion is the revealer and the teacher of the truth. Anything less than the truth would not fulfil the vital role that religion is supposed to play in the life of its devotees. "What is truth?" (John 18-38). Pilate's skepticism may have been political, philosophical or scientific but for a religious person this skepticism is intolerable. People give their lives or kill or go to war for the sake of religion. Heretics are burned at the stake, errant theologians are excommunicated, intellectuals who question the official orthodox doctrines are denounced. All this on account of the absolute character of "religious truth." The question of truth in religion can be unnerving for if the supposed truth turned out to be a lie or a fraud there would be a cultural revolution creating a new awareness and mode of life in individuals

As a matter of fact such a revolution is taking place in the Western hemisphere considered till recently as traditionally Christian but now almost entirely secularised. The sociology of religion looks into the causes of this religious metamorphosis. Undoubtedly the

1. Popper, Karl. *Objective Knowledge*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971, 57.

social and historical contexts could help to understand this phenomenon. But the collective upheaval could not have taken place without the conviction shared by a growing number of influential thinking persons that the so called religious truths are of minimal significance for human life or more radically that the concept of religious truth has become obsolete or empty.

In this essay an attempt is made to throw some light on this complex matter of religious truth. It could be that some hold that truth is not the concern of religion but there is a large variety of questionings and opinions found among those ready to validate the concept of religious truth. Is religious truth a truth *sui generis*? Should it be understood as "existential" or "notional" truth? Is religious truth cognitive and verifiable? Or is it non-cognitive and then in what sense true? Should it be reduced to a "pragmatic" sort of truth? What is the meaning of "revealed" truth? If religious faith is a case of interpretative knowing, in what sense can it be called true? The attempt here is to show that the truth of religion has a threefold meaning: existential, essential and transcendental and that the three are interrelated.

Einstein may not be the most qualified person to clear up the obscurities involved in a debate on religious truth but the remark he once made on the subject expresses the malaise felt by many. "It is difficult even to attach a precise meaning to the term 'scientific truth'. Thus the meaning of the word 'truth' varies according to whether we deal with a fact of experience, a mathematical proposition or a scientific theory. 'Religious truth' conveys nothing clear to me at all."² The renowned biologist J. Rostand too has a strong allergy to the notion of religious truth. "I do not believe that man has at his disposal any other way of knowing than reason. I am incapable to take into account a 'revelation' supposed to have occurred to our ancestors in some distant past.... Impossible for me to believe in a truth that would be behind us. The only truth to which I adhere is one that unfolds itself slowly, gradually, painfully, day by day".³

2. Einstein, Albert. *Ideas and Opinions*. Redman, London, 1956, 261.

3. Rostand, Jean. *Ce que je crois*. Grasset, Paris, 1953, 16.

In total variance to these negative assessments is the rather common theological view according to which religious truths 'transcend' the order of philosophical, scientific and common sense truths. According to Paul Tillich, religious truths that issue from the knowledge of revelation are not in addition to what is known in ordinary knowledge; they do not interfere with it just as the truths of ordinary knowledge do not interfere with revealed truths. Religious truths are *sui generis*. They can be communicated only to people who enter into a religious context. They are to be judged according to their own implicit criteria, not by the criteria of any epistemology. They form a category apart and consequently are to be understood in a special way.⁴

There are several reasons that militate against such an a priori approach as a starting point of our investigation. First of all, it should not be taken for granted too quickly that religious knowledge is so unique that it need not conform itself to the rules of ordinary epistemology. Else religions would be defining their "truths" in a way that borders on equivocation. Secondly, too much insistence on the "transcendence" of religious truths may be a concealed attempt to protect religious tenets from criticism. Thirdly, the vast majority of religious persons understand "truth" to mean "statement of fact" whenever they refer to the religious truths they believe in. Theologians should be aware of this usage of terms when they indulge in their subtle speculations.

One of the most puzzling and thought-provoking issues concerning religious truth stems from the manner in which it is obtained. What is its source and origin? Socrates in the West and the *Upanishads* in the East initiated the philosophical reflection on truth. Truth, they discovered, lies concealed within man's heart and mind. It is his responsibility to remove what conceals, to scatter the clouds of *avidya* so that the pure light of *vidya* can shine through. The great Socratic question was: how far does truth admit to being learned? How can one be a teacher of truth? Socrates answered that the teacher is only a mediator whose function does not exceed the part like the one played by the midwife in childbirth. Man the knower is himself the source of truth, even if others help him to

4. Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Vol. II, 129-130.

discover it. If for Socrates truth can be learned from his counsel: "Man, know yourself", then truth is not a commodity that can be obtained from another. "What Buddha discovered", says Rajneesh, "cannot become universal property. It dies with him.... You have to discover it all by yourself again."⁵

While the immanent truth of philosophy is found within the self, the main feature of religious truth is that its source and origin are not the self but another. For this reason it is often labelled the "revealed" truth, the very antithesis of the Socratic truth. It is not discovered but received. Its end-product is not the fulfilment but the conversion of the self. In philosophy the self in dialogue with itself is the begetter of the truth but it could land in either ignorance or isolation. In religion the assumption is that man is unable to come to the truth by himself - truth must come from another and the believer must receive it in faith.

Thus there are two almost antithetical models of truth: the philosophical one which is man-centered and where the self is anchored to its own certainties; and the religious one which gratefully allows an authority or an authoritative word to impose itself on human thinking. The former is characterised by self-identity and autonomy, the latter by otherness and heteronomy. There is the contrast between Socrates and Abraham, the Buddha and the Vedas, between "Man, know yourself" and "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."⁶

Some have spoken of the "scandal" of religious truth: "a great stumbling block to the clever in their desire for self-sufficiency;"⁷ They have denounced the "proud", self-reliant humanistic truth of philosophy and favoured the "humble" and open theocentric religious truth. The philosophers have been faulted for encouraging people in the arrogant confidence in their own power and self-effacing thinkers have been lauded for their openness to the gift of revealed truth.

But there are others for whom the "scandal" of religious truth will continue as long as one accepts its heteronomous character. The notion

5. Rajneesh, B.S. *Book of Books*. Rajneesh Foundation International, Oregon, Vol. III, 288.

6. Neusch, Marcel. *Les Chrétiens et leur vision de l'homme*, Desclée, Paris, 1985, 168.

7. Danielou, Jean. *The Scandal of Truth*. Burns Oates, London, 1962.

of a truth from the outside, imposed on the self, is destructive of man's freedom and is alienating. If God speaks to man he does not destroy man's freedom which he has himself created. According to K. Jaspers God does not speak through the commandments and revelations of other men but in the very being of man's subjectivity through his freedom - not from without but from within.⁸ For H. Duméry the religious person who immerses himself in the ready-made truths prescribed by his Church alienates himself.⁹ Religion cannot dispense man from acting by and thinking for himself. There must be a way to harmonize religious truth with human freedom. One must show that the genuine believer is as free before truth as the unbeliever supposes himself to be. H. Duméry also holds that every human being, whether a believer or not, is called to 'establish' the truth, to take an active part in the discovery of the truth. No truth can impose itself on the truth seeker, no truth can be received passively. There is no pre-existing body of truth that can restrict man's autonomy. There is no notable difference between religious truth and philosophical truth, there is only the one truth established by man himself.

Are these views of Duméry any different from the atheistic philosophies of Nietzsche and Sartre for whom man is the creator of values because there is no God? Actually Duméry's basic statement that truth does not precede man harmonizes with the Neoplatonic tradition according to which God is radically transcendent and attributeless. God is beyond truth, he is not the *locus veritatis*. All the values are established by finite beings. Truth is human and it is constituted by man. It has not to be learned or received from a source foreign to the self.

If one follows Duméry the heteronomous character of religious truth becomes so diluted that nothing is left to distinguish it from any other truth. Then the question arises: why speak of religious truth at all? Why not go a step further and maintain with Don Cupitt that there is no religious truth because truth-seeking is not the business of religion? According to him, God is the guiding spiritual ideal which religious people live by. He is "the religious

8. Jaspers, Karl. *Introduction a la Philosophie*. Plon, Paris, 1951, 122.

9. Duméry, *Faith and Reflection*. Herder and Herder, New York, 1968.

requirement personified"¹⁰ and not an objectively existing super-person revealing truth hitherto unknown. The proper function of religion is not the revelation of any truth but the betterment of the self. Ancient Buddhism understood this well. It did not aim to teach any doctrine or impart any truth but to provide a therapy for the suffering condition of mankind. Don Cupitt would leave the problem of truth to the metaphysician, not to the religious person. "In religion we should give up "Truth", he writes, "and instead think in terms of remedial moves and therapeutic procedures."¹¹

If the antirealist Don Cupitt excludes the question of truth from religion the reason must be found in his understanding of "truth" in its primary sense of "correspondence or reference to the facts" and in the context of religion as "reference to an objective absolute, God." Since for him religion has no referent he concludes that the concept of religious truth is meaningless. Other antirealists do not agree. To them the concept of religious truth does not have the sense of correspondence but of coherence. Religions are true in that they constitute coherent systems, intelligible wholes. These antirealists theorize on the basis of Wittgenstein's epistemological claim that knowledge has no foundation. Therefore philosophers and even more so theologians must abandon all attempts to determine the objective truth or falsity of any statement. Most basic human beliefs, religious and other, are groundless. People are educated into forms of life and into ways of looking at the world, and they express their own experiences in their own language. They only need to understand how languages express the various conventions of life. Some may be outsiders to a certain convention, unfamiliar with its specific language-uses. They would be the unbelievers. They would only need to learn the language, in this case the language of the believer. Initiated into the new language of religion they are able to understand what religious truth is without having to renounce the philosophical and other truths they held before. But in no way can one come to the "absolute" truth, a meaningless concept for the "coherence theory." One ought to be content with a variety of truths, religious and other, each relative to a specific form of

10. Don Cupitt. *Taking Leave of God*. SCM Press, London, 1981, chap. 7.

11. Don Cupitt. *What is a Story?* SCM Press, London, 1991, 141.

life and none having the right to pass judgment on or to evaluate the other.

This is the line of thought followed by G. Moore in his study of how people believe in God, which he concludes with this statement: "people do not discover religious truths, they make them."¹² A religious truth makes sense for the believer because he accepts the language of his religious form of life, the language of the believing community of which he is a member. Thus the unbeliever who does not accept these religious truths has no quarrel with them because he does not belong to the religious community in which they are formulated. If one plays a game can he have a quarrel with some one also who plays another game? people have established the rules of their own games and any one is free to enter the fray or refuse to participate. Religions are such games in which, according to G. Moore, "the priests have the important function to be the grammatical experts who know what religious terminology must be used."¹³ Take it or leave it, enter into an understanding with that language and accept to be a part of that community of believers if you so wish... but in any case, as Wittgenstein used to say, "leave everything as it is."

This is where the coherence theory of truth in religion leads to: the disconcerting conclusion that religious truths are more conventional signposts, arbitrary rules of the game of life. One is left with the impression that wanting at all costs to uphold the concept of religious truth these antirealists have emptied it of all its substance. Was not the logic of Don Cupitt preferable? If you are an antirealist for whom there is no objective transcendence, no God, then you must have the daring to exclude truth from religion. Religion should not interfere with knowledge and overstep its limits. It should accept that faith being non-cognitive is unable to settle the question of truth.

But have we the right to espouse a purely intellectual, cognitive concept of truth? If not, there may be a way open to a new understanding of religious truth. The truth of religion would be other than a cognitive truth. The usual presupposition is that truth is in the field

12. Moore, Gareth. *Believing in God*. T & T Clarke, London, 1988, 287.

13. *Ibid.* 277.

of knowledge. But the modern pragmatist approach is that truth is richer and more extensive than knowledge. It refers to a variety of personal experiences which enrich human life. Thus truth is not only mental and abstract, it is also existential and participative. There is no doubt that knowledge is a valuable mode of experience but it is not the only way to have access to reality. There are other forms of experience that are valuable and "true" for the development of the human condition.¹⁴

Now religion is characterised by faith. The pragmatist would say that faith is not a mode of knowledge. Nonetheless it is a specific and highly valuable human experience, just like art and love. Religions must surrender their knowledge-claims to science, philosophy and ethics. They are not meant to increase knowledge but to enrich men's perception beyond knowledge. "Religion which claims to know is not fighting a losing battle, it is fighting the wrong battle."¹⁵ Everything that pertains to the field of knowledge must be accessible to all human beings and not to the adherents of a particular religion. If religion has a distinctive contribution to make to the welfare of humanity, it is surely not in the field of knowing. This does not mean that it has no concern for truth. Religious faith, just like art, love or knowledge gives a kind of truth: the "religious truth" which has nothing to do with the intellectualistic truth of knowledge. Though no "knowledge" of God is true, yet faith in God or the religious experience of God is. The existence of God is a religious truth not a philosophical one as it is attested by an act of faith and not demonstrated by rational knowledge.

The trouble with this pragmatist view of truth is that it is based on a confusion between truth and value as if the two concepts were inter-changeable. To define truth as the verifiable useful thing is to abandon the quest of meaning for a concern with criteria. For the pragmatist statements become true when they are confirmed by testing.¹⁶ Truth is made by constant acts of verification. Religious truth is made when it contributes to the well-being of man.

14. Fontinell, Eugen. "Religious Truth in a relational and processive world," *Cross Currents*, Summer 1967, 284-315.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Gariner, Martin. *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener*. The Harvest Press, Brighton, 1983, 32-48.

This is a new language about truth! We have seen how some antirealists, determined to keep the concept of religious truth, have shifted from the traditional meaning of truth as correspondence to the idealist meaning of coherence. Both they and the pragmatists are probably guilty of going against what is called "the ethics of terminology," the moral obligation to respect the common sense meaning of terms.¹⁷

Nevertheless the questionable concept of religious truth in pragmatism has a positive aspect. It draws attention to the existential character of religious truth. We now turn to this question: what does it mean to state that religious truth is an existential truth?

Unlike science or philosophy, religion is concerned with the personal and existential situation of man in the world and with regard to his final destiny. Religious beliefs deeply affect the life of individuals. The truth that religion conveys is a lived truth, not a verbal truth. It is not the truth of propositions but the truth concerning man's vital commitments. Kierkegaard's uncompromising stand on the existential nature of religious truth is well known. According to him, the mark of the believer is not the knowing of truth but the *being* in the truth. Religion is a matter of personal relationship with God in pure faith, not the adherence to abstract dogmatic propositions and the profession of creeds. Religion is a personal experience and its truth is existential, not the intellectual truth of objective correspondence or internal coherence.

Kierkegaard with passion took upon himself to attack the regularly recurring temptations to de-existentialize and de-vitalize the truth of religion. The temptations are particularly experienced in the world religions of the dogmatic type such as Christianity and Islam. The Hindu and Buddhist traditions in religion, less heavily dependent on doctrine and history, have given a greater emphasis to the existential character of religious truth. From the Upanishads to S. Radhakrishnan,¹⁸ the essence of religion has been defined as a quasi-mystical experience

17. Ibid.

18. Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli. *East and West in Religion*. George Allen & Unwin, London, 1954.

of the divine, a practical wisdom that defies all conceptualisations and the vicissitudes of time and space. The truth of religion is realized in the immediacy of the religious experience.

Some upholders of the existential truth of religion are prone to identify truth with Being or actuality. To be true or to live in the truth is to subject oneself to an experience of complete harmony and even fusion with the encompassing reality. "*Satyam* is *Sat* and *Sat* is *Satyam*:" truth is reality and vice versa. According to Krishnamurti what the intellect grasps and conceives is always partial, it can never be the truth for truth is a totality. To "search" for truth is as ineffectual as it is meaningless because the truth is already there. There is nothing to learn. Either one lives in the truth here and now or not. Truth is a matter of actual awareness, passive alertness to the presence of Reality. For Rajneesh too religious truth cannot be acquired or transmitted as in the case of philosophic and scientific truths which are accumulated and passed on from generations to generations. Religious truth has to be experienced all over again by each and every individual person. It is personal, actual and incommunicable because it is existential.¹⁹

Can we, therefore, say that we have exhausted the subject of religious truth in stating that it is an existential truth? If the question of religious truth is only raised existentially - and that means subjectively only - then there is no reason to deny that an individual is in the truth even if he would happen to be related to what is not objectively true. One cannot follow Kierkegaard when he simply identifies truth with subjectivity, sincerity or truthfulness.²⁰ Truthfulness is the subjective side of truth, not its definition. The positive contribution of Kierkegaard and the existentialists in the present debate is unquestionable: they have rightly emphasized the importance - specially in religion - of the subjective involvement in the affirmation of an objective truth. But they have overlooked the fact that if religion is "existence", it is also "essence". There is not only the "how" of religious truth but also the "what" of it. What is its mode and content? The believer is told to be in the truth. But

19. Rajneesh, B. S. *Book of Books*. Rajneesh Foundation International, Oregon, 1984, Vol. III.

20. Bretall, Albert. *A Kierkegaard Anthology*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1961, 190.

what truth? It may be well and good to state that religion is an "experience" but what is it an experience of? There is no doubt that the question of "content" is of paramount importance in any reflection on religious truth.

The truths of religion are often described as "revealed" truths that the believers accept in faith. It looks as if the believers come to these truths not by knowledge but by faith; they do not discover them, they receive them. This has led to the saying that faith begins where knowledge ends. That is, one has to cross the field of the cognitive to enter into the land of non-cognitive faith. Now unless the concept of truth be arbitrarily distorted, as is done by pragmatism, it is not possible to maintain that revelation accepted by faith is true if it is non-cognitive. If the notion of "revealed truths" is to be upheld the precondition is that faith has to be a genuine mode of knowing. After all the modes of knowing are manifold. Why restrict then to sense experience, reason, intellectual intuition....? Do not interpersonal relationships disclose that as long as love is wanting an important aspect of reality remains undisclosed? Love has a significant role to play in the discovery of truth about persons. Likewise should one not acknowledge the cognitive value of religious faith with regard to transcendent realities?

The point being granted, even a cursory consideration of the so called revealed truths of religion brings to light the twofold way in which they are received by believers. Now these two modes are so dissimilar and contrasting that the evaluation of their respective truth-value needs a separate treatment. In the one case the believer accepts the truth through the testimony of other persons: holy men, prophets, "divine incarnations" and chiefly through the traditions established and transmitted by a community of believers. The large majority of Hindus, Muslims and Christians take for granted as truth the "faith of their fathers." This is an undeniable and highly significant phenomenon which all by itself should be eye-opening in the quest to understand religious truth. In the other case the believer directly and personally enjoys an experience of the numinous, a gratuitous "mystical" insight of Transcendence. In this case the religious truth is perceived inwardly without mediation while in the first case it is received in an indirect, mediative, external manner. While the prophetic or Abrahamic religions endorse more the con-

cept of external revelation with its corresponding attitude of faith-testimony, the oriental religions espouse inner revelation and its corresponding faith-experience. Their holy men and women are not "prophets" who transmit a message but "seers" who invite others to open themselves to the same insights.

Let us consider first the situation of the large, majority of believers. They accept to endorse the revelatory experiences of a few privileged direct knowers. Theirs is the case of "repetitive" revelation that comes after and is grounded on the "primary" revelation of the direct knower, the immediate experienter. This terminology is suggested by the theologian J. Mcquarrie for whom "the expression 'repetitive' is to be understood as meaning much more than a mechanical going over again. It implies rather going into some experience that has been handed down in such a way that it is, so to speak, brought into the present and its insights and possibilities made alive again."²¹ But even if the believer is invited to "repeat" an original experience, not only to adhere to doctrines or to profess a creed, it remains the experience of another. What guarantee has he of the truth-value of the original experience? There can be no underestimation of the difference between direct revelation, a *sui generis* experiential mode of knowing, and the willing acceptance in trust of another's testimony. The first is experience and the second is belief. What is the value of belief in the pursuit of religious truth? How can one receive the testimony of another as true? What guarantee has one that a borrowed truth is true? It has been said that belief takes root in ignorance, that we believe because we are not capable of knowing so that if we knew there would be no need of belief. But because belief is borrowed and indirect it cannot be claimed as certain truth. How can one come to the truth by adopting the knowledge of another through belief? The second-hand truth of "repetitive" revelation held by the large majority of believers does not offer even the minimum guarantee required for a firm foundation of religious truth. It would appear that "primary" revelation alone is safe and dependable.

The above thesis, however, fails to do justice to the positive role played by belief in human knowing in general. Firstly, it wrongly

21. Mcquarrie, John. *Principles of Christian Theology*. SCM Press, London, 1966, 84-95.

assumes that human knowledge is a purely individual achievement with no social involvement of any sort in it, as if every single person had to know everything directly and personally. Secondly, it takes for granted that knowledge to be true must be certain, an improper confusion of truth and certainty. Thirdly, it presupposes that certainty cannot be gained by the indirect, derivative, second-hand type of knowledge such as belief.

What do we do when we say: 'this is a truth of faith' or 'what we believe in is true'? We point to the way in which a certain truth is reached, not by self-discovery but by the mediation of another in whom we trust. The revealed truth is not our truth but the truth of another. The source of truth is not the believer but the one in whom the believer believes, those who claim to "see" the truth but have a first hand knowledge of it. Left to himself the believer is not in a position to ascertain whether or not what he accepts in trust from another is true or false. Of course, there are some areas of relative knowledge open to his critical scrutiny. He can evaluate the trustworthiness and credibility of the revealer. He can find out whether what is known by faith is in open contradiction with the existing truths of science and philosophy. Nonetheless even if he obtains assurances on these two counts the paradox of his position remains: how can what is not directly known be accounted for as truth?

As a matter of fact the believing attitude is not the prerogative of the religious person. Most of human knowledge is only "belief". Rare are the cases where he can say that he really knows. Almost all what he takes to be true has its source in second-hand knowledge, borrowed knowledge, belief. It is simply natural and spontaneous for man to believe. It is also necessary because belief is the basis of all successful human collaboration. By himself a man is unable to have first-hand knowledge of everything. He has neither the time nor the expertise to verify all the theories proposed by others. Human progress in all fields is made possible only through collaboration and there can be no successful collaboration unless there is the belief that what others say is true. Remove belief from human interaction and individuals are reduced to isolated islands.²²

22. Barden & McShane. *Towards Self-meaning*. Logos Books, Gill & Mcmillan, Dublin, 1969, chap. 8.

If belief is a normal and common way to come to the truth it is secondary and derived. It is made possible by the primary way of reaching the truth: the direct knowledge that another possesses and communicates. A truth cannot be "believed" by every one: there must be one person at least who "knows" the truth directly, one who is for others the source of truth. Just as we readily believe in most of the countless statements made by others in all spheres of knowledge and thus reasonably agree to collaborate in and for the truth, so also as religious believers we reasonably give our consent to the revealed truths. In both cases truth is received in faith and trust provided that the credibility of the original knower is sufficiently established.

But the parallelism between ordinary belief and religious belief stops at a particular point. While ordinary beliefs remain always open to possible direct verifications, religious truths accepted in faith cannot be directly verified. Indeed in religion the revealer in whom the believer trusts is more than the original knower of man's ordinary beliefs, his unique religious experience of transcendence is incapable of possible verifiability. To believe in the message of a religious revealer is different from accepting in trust the information given by a chemist or a historian. In the latter case the believer has neither time nor interest to verify what he is told. But he knows that at any time verification is possible and that is why he does not scruple for a moment to accept the information, the "beliefs". If he accepts belief as a valid though secondary way to reach the truth it is only because the possibility of verification exists. But what about the religious believer for whom such a possibility of verification does not exist?

It must be conceded that the religious truth accepted from another in faith is not directly verifiable. Is there nothing then to guarantee that religious beliefs are true? Should one conclude that beliefs "by proxy" or faith-testimony are unsure ways to come to religious truth? If so the large majority of believers who follow the traditions of their respective religions would be in the wrong. But one misleads by trying to limit truth to the verified or the verifiable. Truth should not be confused with the way in which it can be known and in any case it will always remain more extensive than the verifiable. Also one should always keep in mind that religious knowledge aims at the transcendent, beyond the empirical and the rational. So if

the epistemology of religions has to follow the rules of ordinary epistemology to a large extent, there comes a moment of parting when one can expect it to follow its own path. Further and most importantly the believer who accepts in trust the religious truth from another is himself called to "go into" these truths in such a way that they are brought into the actuality of his own life. In other words the believer himself is invited to be an "experiencer". For religion cannot be merely a matter of notional truths learned from others, it has to be mainly a matter of existential truths. The truth-testimony of repetitive revelation must become the truth-experience of primary revelation and this is now what we need to assess.

The experiencer of direct revelation perceives meanings that transcend ordinary meanings. An ordinary meaning is, for instance, that 'our enemies have lost the battle' but the prophet states that 'God has punished our enemies'. How does he know it? How is his statement to be ascertained? How is one to distinguish revealed nonsense from revealed truth? The problem is all the more intriguing because the experience of revelation is never general and universal but is limited to certain persons and circumstances. Moreover, according to a common theological view, revealed knowledge is experienced as a gift or "grace". This means that the light of knowing does not come from the knower himself as is the case in ordinary knowledge but from that which is known. The usual epistemological relationship of an active subject in mastering an object or in dialogue with another person is turned upside down. In a revelatory experience what is known, the transcendent, is what grasps and overwhelms the subject.²³

However, if one holds that the gift-like character of revelatory knowledge is central to its understanding, it follows that the radical heteronomy of this particular kind of knowing prevents it from self-authentication. Direct revelation would not differ essentially from the indirect, repetitive revelation. In both truth comes from the other, either from the original knower or from the transcendent source. This means that there would be no sure way of knowing whether a particular revelatory experience is valid or illusory. We are unable to evaluate these experiences since they are due to pure

23. Mcquarrie, John, *Ibid.*

"grace". Is this conclusion to be received with resignation? Is it in the nature of religious faith that it should demand unconditional commitment even in the absence of conclusive proof?

It is probably unwise to overstress the grace-like features of revelatory experience. A too objectivist approach to the problem can only lead to a dead-end. When the prophet declares that "God has punished our enemies" it makes more sense to evaluate his saying as a case of perhaps profound or mysterious but still subjective interpretation rather than an objective statement forced upon him from the outside. The revealing experience does not consist so much in seeing "another" or recording what "another" says as in seeing the same in a different way. Like the poet who does not perceive another world but whose vision is transfigured by some sort of inner inspiration, a person who enjoys a revelatory experience is a "seer" who interprets reality and events in a way different from that of the common person. The grace-like character of direct revelation should be understood in a more subjective way: it is a quality that affects the subject of the experience rather than its content. The heteronomy of revelation should be understood in a more subjective way as the transfiguration of the experiencer. Only then can the process of arriving at the truth-value of religious knowing advance further.

Once it is admitted that revealed knowledge is a case of interpretative knowledge the question about the truth of religious knowing becomes the question about the truth of interpretative knowing. In a certain sense any kind of human knowing is an interpretative act by which one gives meaning and significance to the data. Religious knowing is no exception. It is an apprehension reached by an act of interpretation, though not an interpretation of finite situations but the interpretation of an all-encompassing situation of being in the presence of the divine. The religious person aims at a total and special interpretation of reality. The problem is that this creates the possibility of different judgments and conclusions. Various contradictory interpretations are possible: the difference is not of logic, reason, arguments, etc.... so that in each case the evidence remains ambiguous. Should one not say then that religious

interpretations have their social and psychological usefulness but have no claims to be true?²⁴

To assess the truth-value of an interpretation one must take into account not only or even principally the conclusion of the interpreter, i.e., the content of the interpretation, but also how the interpreter came to his final statement.²⁵ In other words, in the case of interpretative knowledge, specially in religion, the existential situation of the interpreter must be taken into account for a fair evaluation of the truth. His answers are less important than the questions that led him to his particular interpretation. Now in religion those questions deal with the ultimate meaning of existence. Indeed no objective religious truth, the answers and conclusions of the interpreter, can be isolated from its subjective counterpart of human authenticity. Religious truth is the synthesis of an existential situation of universal significance and a particular objective historical context. It is primarily the truth of the question and only secondarily the truth of the particular answer given to the question. It is the same truth that animates the Christian, the Buddhist and the Muslim: the human longing to find a resolution to the enigma of existence. This common existential truth has taken shape according to different cultural and historical contexts. The same question has produced a variety of answers. The existential truth of the question has produced a multiplicity of "religious truths". How could it be otherwise? For the religious person who shares his conviction with a community of believers does not live with mere questions and riddles but needs answers and conclusions, however imperfect they may be. His religiosity calls for the systematic, propositional, cultural forms of a particular religion. The many "essential" truths of religion provide a concrete embodiment of the existential truth of the religious experience. The mistake would be to take the formulations of truth as final and absolute, to forget that they are historically conditioned and therefore limited, particular and ever open to revision.

The locus of religious truth is situated primarily in the question of the interpreters and secondarily in the many answers that they

24. Hick, John. *Faith and Knowledge*. Collins, Glasgow, 1978.

25. Vass, George. "On the Historical Structure of Christian Truth" *Heythrop Journal*, 1968, 129-140, 274-289.

give to the question. The truth of religion appears to be one and the same at the initial stage of the subjective universality of the religious experience. But as soon as this existential truth leaves its pre-categorical stage and is conceptualised and systematised it is broken into the many partial "essential", truths of the various religious world-views. The "unum verum" of religion seems to have been lost. The unavoidable process of historicisation of the truth, the fragmentation of the religious experience into a variety of contradictory world-views seem to seriously imperil the credibility of religious truth in general. Should one not think that the transition from existence to essence, from experience to rational conceptualisation, brings about a withdrawal from the zone of truth into the static unrealistic world of ideas? Nietzsche considered that the human intellect in its effort to conceptualise is more the vehicle of lies than of truths, that attempts at systematisation institute an order behind which man can entrench himself for rest and safety. The truth of religion would then evaporate as soon as it crosses the boundary that separates experience from systematisation. The question only would be true and all the answers would be lies! To be honest a religious person would have to remain silent lest he be seen as an impostor as soon as he professes his religious convictions.

A more balanced view does not take the human intellect as such a bad counsellor. Its conceptualising function is always useful to come to the truth, even if it is never sufficient and constantly demanding. It enlightens reality without representing it. Though ideas and systematisations in religion and other areas of life are inadequate, without them there would be no instruments to gain knowledge. They are true up to a point and for a limited time and through them one can reach limited certainties.

The role of the "essential", notional truths of religions is invaluable for formulating and circumscribing the universal existential truth of the religious experience. There is no reason why the claim of these religions to be "true" in that way should not be honoured provided they recognize that their truths are partial and limited, that their expressions of truth are not the only ones. Religious fanatics are exclusivists who believe in the absolute truth of their own narrow religious world views. There can be only one true religion, their own, so they claim. As a matter of fact religious truths are found everywhere but the problem is to discover the concord among them.

This is achieved through interreligious dialogues in a spirit of intellectual charity and by genuine efforts at mutual understanding. Thanks to the art of dialectics apparently contradictory religious ideas can be appreciated as complementary viewpoints. But despite the best will among the participants of dialogue for the unity of truth, despite their efforts to harmonize the multiple categorial truths of religions, they can never accomplish the final synthesis: the *unum verum* of religion. The notional truths of religions are bound to remain what they are: approximations of the truth, perhaps better and better expressions of it, yet never able to coincide with it.

The final word about religious truth is that it exceeds the existential truth of the religious experience as well as the essential truths of religious systematisations. It is *the* Truth of transcendent awareness. Its locus is neither the pre-categorial nor the categorial but the post-categorial. It is the objective, a-historical, transcendent Truth of all religions as well as the final answer to the initial religious question. Truth at this level is the correspondence, the reference, the conformity of the religious aspirations to the Absolute Reality. It excels both the existential truth of the question and the notional truths of coherent systematisations proposed as answers to the question.

For a comprehensive understanding of the religious phenomenon it would be meaningless to take the two first stages as the final ones. The antirealist perspective adopted by Don Cupitt rejects *the* Truth of religion. It spurns all reference to an objective Absolute and as a consequence it becomes senseless to uphold the notion of religious truth at any level. For the realist standpoint taken here the ultimate level of religious Truth obtained by a transcendent awareness is the fulfilment of the two first stages that have been preparatory. For here the unity of religious truth, the *unum verum*, is restored, existence and essence are reconciled, and participation in an all inclusive world reaffirmed. Indeed at the level of trans-categorial awareness a particular religious viewpoint does not imply the denial of another. Categorial logic and categorial oppositions are inoperative at the level of the transcategorial which overflows the bounds of any particular worldview without disallowing its relative value. "The true Christian or Hindu ... is not the person who affirms a particular worldview and thereby denies others but

the person who, in trans-categorical freedom, realizes that a particular worldview is the vehicle to Infinite Being."²⁶

Generally, the absoluteness of religious Truth reached by transcendent awareness is attainable only within the relativity and particularity of history and culture. More often than not the contents of each religious worldview are highly valuable, they are indispensable as the particular mediators for the awareness of the transcendent and absolute Truth of religion. With K. Jaspers one can adopt the useful concept of "ciphers" to convey the idea that the particular propositional truths of religion are the bearers or the vehicles of the message of the transcendent religious Truth. The doctrines, beliefs and rituals of the various religions are the language that serves to express the inexpressible religious experience "below" as well as the unfathomable Absolute "above". But while Jaspers confines the function of ciphers to the mediation of a movement of purely human and immanent transcending, we see the role of ciphers as mediators of an objective transcendent Reality, the symbolic language that points to the ineffable Absolute.

Existential truth, essential truth, transcendental Truth: the distinction of the three interrelated possible aspects of the religious truth can serve now as a key to understand much of people's attitude towards religion. For the sake of clarity let us call the truth of the religious experience, the primordial question A; the notional truths of a coherent religious worldview that have arisen from the experience: B; the religious Truth of reference to the Absolute through transcendental awareness: C.

1) The first possibility is the outright rejection of A, B and C: a brand of atheism and irreligion surprisingly insensitive even to the issues dealing with the ultimate meaning of human existence. 2) A much more common attitude is A alone without B and C: a concern about human destiny, a quest for meaning and coherence, an awareness of the precariousness of human life, an anxiety in the face of finitude and transience. The religious truth is endorsed, so to say, but only at its initial stage of questioning. The question is left without answers. The religious longing remains unre-

26. Gangadfan, A., "The Ontological Relativity of Religious Meaning and Truth," *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, 1982, Vol. X, n. 1, 1-25

solved, leaving man with the bitter taste of ultimate absurdity. With A isolated from B and C, the religious experience is a painful truth that some accept with resignation. Others, like the Buddhists, and Don Cupitt, offer "psychological remedies." 3) The large majority of undiscerning believers belong to the category B without A and C. They are religious by birth and upbringing. They never question their particular religious orthodoxy which they naturally take to be the absolute truth. They are inclined to intolerance and fanaticism. For them religion is not rooted in experience but given in ready-made creeds and Sacred Scriptures. 4) When B is accompanied by A, when the truths of one's religion are related to a personal religious experience, the believer can no longer maintain an exclusivist stand. He is aware to some extent that he participates in the universally subjective religious quest. He is able to understand religions other than his own: after all they all spring from the same basic experience. From an enemy (B only) the other becomes a brother (B with A), for what he experiences as a person and shares with other persons is more important than the ideas and doctrines he holds. 5) When A and C are taken together without B, it means that the existential truth of religion finds its fulfilment in the transcendent awareness of the Absolute without any need of formulations, conceptualisations and systematisations. Religion to be true must remain personal, silent, unexpressed. It is the religion of the heart that one practises in private. This is the thesis of those who favour secularisation in religion. There is no need of "the religions" to be a religious person. In fact the truth of religion will be better served and preserved if it is liberated from the contradictory "truths", or lies of religious systems. Religious truth is existence and transcendence, in any case personal and private. It has nothing to gain by becoming social, public, exteriorised, communicated . . . 6) According to a few, C alone, without A and B, describes well what the religious truth is: a sudden irruption of the transcendent that nothing has announced or prepared for, an unexpected "being in the Truth," the actual realisation of a Presence or the passive alert awareness of Reality. 7) Finally, when A, B and C are found together, the religious truth is lived in its totality, in the integrity of its experience, sustained by a particular religious systematisation and fulfilled in the acknowledgment of and reference to an objective transcendent Reality. The mature religious person knows how to

observe the religious requirement to the fullest extent within the necessarily limited but unavoidable historical and cultural context, in a spirit of tolerance and openness to other religious views, ever ready to dialogue with a serene and composed frame of mind, confident that all people of good will share in the one Truth of transcendent awareness.