CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND OTHER TRADITIONS

By JOHN BALL

WILLIAM CANTWELL SMITH suggested[1] that religious truth can be said to centre on persons rather than on propositions. The fundamental religious issue is not propositional truth but rather it is truth-for-us. Some european linguistic philosophers would reject any approach to truth that implied it could be seen as authentic or genuine or real. They would reject as merely metaphorical usage phrases such as true grit, a true note in music, true or false modesty. For them, only propositions can properly be said to be true or false. Cantwell Smith however, draws attention to the arabic word *ḥaqqa* pointing out that, like the Latin word *verus,* it has a wider meaning. It refers to what is real, genuine, authentic, true in itself and of itself because of its cosmic status. God alone is fully true.

Smith then goes on to discuss the arabic word *sadaqq* that refers to the truth of persons. It is used of the man who is true to himself, true to others, true to his situation. This concept of personalist truth is, says Smith, central to Islam. Man is called in his whole life, in the wholeness of his life, to distinguish between the real and the 'phoney', the true and the false. Behind the true is the power of God. 'It would hardly be an exaggeration to see the Qu'ran as a vibrant affirmation that the *loci* of significant truths are two, the world around us and persons. The reality of the former is divine, or is God. The inner integrity of the latter and our conformity to, and commitment to, the real are crucial!'[2]

Within such a context, faith is seen as the recognition of divine truth at the personal level, truth for the person. It involves the recognition of truths as true for oneself, and it further involves trusting oneself totally to this truth. Faith means that I appropriate to myself and actualise within myself this truth.

In contrast to this approach, we have sometimes given the impression that christian faith involves the acknowledgement of

propositional truths. We would assume this acknowledgement bore witness to acquiescence in these propositions, but we have even gone so far as to give the impression that it is the external acknowledgement that really counts. Christian faith has been presented as belief in ten commandments, nine choirs of angels, eight beatitudes, seven sacraments, six commandments of the Church, five glorious mysteries, four evangelists, three persons, two natures, one God (and no proof!). Sometimes when we listen to christian theologians discoursing, we get the impression that the setting forth of the various theological positions and the weighing of their various merits involves no personal commitment at all on the part of the theologian holding forth. Hindu children can get grade A's in advanced level secondary school examinations in Christianity so long as they learn and understand the facts.

Reflection on words of different world religions, on beliefs and practices can enlighten our own understanding of Christianity. Reflection such as Cantwell Smith's on these words of the *Qu'ran* can remind us that Christ used similar terminology. 'I am the truth.' When he asked Peter 'Who do you say I am?' Christ was not asking for a set of dogmatic statements on the nature of the hypostatic union. He was not asking for a propositional answer. Rather he was asking Peter 'Who am I for you?' South american theologians have made us painfully aware that the ability to recite the catechism accurately is no guarantee of a commitment to social justice. Peter's witness after Pentecost was not in terms of truths claimed, rather it was kerygmatic. Peter proclaimed the Good News. Similarly, says Smith, Islam sees itself not as claiming truths, but as bearing witness to truths. All of this might bring Christians to see in a new light statements in the gospels such as 'the man who does what is true comes to the light' (Jn 3,21), 'those who worship must worship in spirit and in truth' (Jn 4,24) and 'the Spirit of truth who issues from the Father will be my witness, and you too will be witnesses' (Jn 15,26).

We have used this relatively lengthy example to illustrate a possible relationship between world religions. Islam can reveal Christianity to itself. Christianity might reveal Hinduism to itself. Gandhi urged all Hindus to study Christ in order to enrich their Hinduism.

There has been, and still is, a variety of approaches to the world religions on the part of Christians. Some see them utterly negatively, even as sin-filled, at best as futile endeavours on the

part of humanity to find God. Given this position, missionary work among non-Christians aims to liberate the adherents of these false religions, all of which include practices that are gravely sinful and doctrine that amounts to mere superstition.[3] For those who view these non-christian religions in such light, there is no valid spirituality to be found in them, no discovery of God possible through them, no coming to divine grace through their practice and certainly no possibility of a Christian sharing prayer with them. As 'there is only one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Jesus Christ' (1 Tim 2,5), so the only authentic and acceptable prayer must be made through Christ. All else is idolatry.

Out of such an approach to the world religions came the attitude to such practices as the chinese veneration for dead ancestors. If this was adjudged a religious practice then it must be reprehensible and be totally rejected, but if merely a social or cultural-secular practice, merely a laudable exercise in filial piety, then perhaps it could be countenanced. This missionary and theological approach assumed a distinction between the sacred and the merely secular. The merely secular is open to assimilation, the sacred must either be utterly rejected or utterly christianized. And the same approach is used in considering marriage rites, initiation rites, ancestor shrines and the healing rites in Africa now. At best, adaptation is possible. At worst, all is of the devil.

Adaptation consists in adapting 'the outer appearance of Christianity to the non-christian peoples within the borders of the desirable'[4] or else the use of externals taken from non-christian societies' social practices whilst altering their inner meaning, adopting the practices and objects of a pagan society and altering them to make them christian. The Pantheon became a christian church, the celebration of the winter solstice became Christmas and May day became Joseph the Worker. In making such adaptation, the criterion to be employed is laid down by Christianity itself. The pagan society is judged by what Christianity brings. The christian religious form practised by the preacher is laid down as the norm. This historical form of Christianity can be slightly modified (*aliquatenus culturae loci conformata*) so that it might be rather more acceptable to the natives (*Ad Gentes* [Vatican II decree on missions] 15,19). The european Christian prays kneeling and with his hands joined. The indian Christian may be permitted to pray in the lotus position provided that it is sure that this indian practice is purified of any possible hindu significance. The outward practice may be

adopted provided the inner meaning is adapted.

A less negative approach is adopted by those who see Christianity as normative but who are ready to measure the non-christian religion by this norm and recognize that, whilst they may be defective, nonetheless, in some measure they do conform to the christian norm. Some of their beliefs and practices are acceptable to Christianity. Thus, there is the recognition that prayer, fasting and almsgiving, concern for beggars generally and the protection of widows and orphans are not confined to Christianity and are practised in many of the world religions. All that would be necessary would be for these things to be done in the name of Christ. Then they would be acceptable without the least reserve. Christian spirituality becomes the definition and norm of all true spirituality.

This normative approach is evidenced in the search some christian theologians engage in, within the language of a pagan people, for words that conform to the theological requirements of the european christian theologian. Thus, in Illongo (the language predominant in the Western Visayas of the Philippine Islands) the sign of the cross becomes *Sang ngalan sang Amay* (so far so good, the illongo word for 'father' is *Amay*) *kag sang Anak* (the illongo word for 'son') *kag sang Espiritu Santo.* At this point it becomes clear that the original spanish missionaries could find no illongo word that they felt adequately corresponded to their spanish trinitarian theology. But this fact should perhaps have made them wary of using *Amay* and *Anak* in this christian context of the sign of the cross. Is the illongo socio-cultural understanding of *Amay* and *Anak* exactly the same as the spanish concept of 'father' and 'son'? And, by extension, does the indian understanding of the lotus position correspond to the european understanding of kneeling? As Victor Turner has made abundantly clear[5], any word, any object, in any socio-culture, brings with it layer upon layer of association and connotation.

William Johnston, a Belfast Jesuit who has worked some thirty years in Japan, writes of this same problem. He set out to write a book on buddhist and christian mysticism but soon discovered this was impossible. It was impossible to find a vocabulary or terminology that would cover both these religious systems.

> The longer I live in Tokyo, the more I become aware of the enormous cultural gap which separates East and West. The way

> of thinking, the words, the manner of expression of Buddhism and Christianity are so different that anyone who tries to write a theological book about both is doomed to superficiality and even to failure. For the fact is that Christians and Buddhists talk different theological languages.[6]

Johnston does not attempt to adapt buddhist thinking to christian thinking. Rather for him, the Christian speaks as a Christian, the Buddhist speaks as a Buddhist whilst they seek mutual understanding co-operation and love. And there is hope in this dialogue suggested in the title of his book, *The inner eye of love.* For the mystic has a third eye, an inner eye, the eye of the heart, the eye of love, and heart speaks to heart. For Johnston, meditation that goes beyond discursive prayer, beyond theological language, is the search for wisdom and the savouring of wisdom found, and this search is common to the great religions. 'My beloved is silent music'.[7] And he derives hope from the oriental word *tao,* meaning 'way'. The greek equivalent ὁδός occurs 880 times in the Septuagint and frequently in the gospels and St Paul. 'I am the way'. The search then is not a search to find items that can be adapted to our european expression of the christian gospel. Rather the shared search arises from an expectation that God must be present in all of creation, and expectation that Christ 'is the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things' (Col 1,15). And the most sublime knowledge of God we come to is by unknowing, so that we are not tied, in this unknowing, to particular theological formulations. This unknowing is the apophatic knowledge of God of the Pseudo-Denis the Areopagite. It corresponds to the position of the fourteenth century english mystic who wrote *The cloud of unknowing,* 'by love we feel him, find him and even hit him in himself'; 'by love he may be embraced and touched, never by thought'. Buddhist writers inveigh against conceptualization as the enemy of the goal which, for Buddhism, is enlightenment. The christian tradition has been to recognize that there is also a kataphatic theology, whereby one uses concepts, though analogically, to make affirmations about God. There is a conceptual tradition that has positive value as well. John of the Cross does use language, however poetical and mysterious, to try to share his experience.

When the mystic, the lover, the one who has experienced something that we loosely call 'religious', who has had an experi-

ence that seems to take him out of himself, when this person tries to put this experience into words, or when the religion resorts to symbol in articulating this experience, then necessarily the language, the symbols are of the socio-culture of the mystic or the theologian. This language or sign-system is necessarily of a particular cultural process. Thus concretized in a particular historical, cultural, outward form, the experience tends to become to a greater or lesser extent alienated from people of other cultures. It is the necessary manifestation that is culturally alien.

The Bishop of London said in the recent Lambeth synod *à propos* of the problem of bringing the gospel to contemporary english secularized society, 'We cannot chip away at the gospel to make it sit with a philosophy that is basically unbiblical'. But of course, the gospel he is talking of, as it is presented or historically articulated, is one particular historical experience (of first century Palestine) of the reality that is Jesus. Necessarily it was concretized, expressed, given form, in a non-english, non-twentieth-century culture. Either this gospel *must* now 'sit with' a non-biblical philosophy or this gospel will simply be meaningless to contemporary cultures across the world.

There has been a western tradition, possibly under the influence of Plato and Descartes, manifest in Durkheim's sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane, to separate religion from the secular. The popular representation of this process is the confining of 'religious' matters to sacristies and Sundays. A more catholic manifestation of the process might be the belief that priests and nuns alone are called really to be holy and to live a 'spiritual' life apart from the smudge and smell of humanity, bleared and smeared with the toil of everyday life. Within such a tradition, spirituality is confined to activities more or less associated with church buildings. A 'practising Catholic' is then one who goes to Mass on Sundays and holydays. But anthropologists have come to reject Durkheim's distinction.[8] Horton defines religion as 'an extension of the field of people's social relationships beyond the confines of purely human society'.[9] This is an anthropological recognition of what the theologian might describe as the presence of God as the ultimate ground of all being, or, as Cantwell Smith puts it, 'there is a quality or dimension to every human life transcending man's immediate mundane historical existence.'[10] Vatican II recognized that God is close to all who seek him in shadows and images 'since he gives to all men life and breath and all things'. All those who seek

God with a sincere heart and who try to follow their consciences can know the love of God (*Gaudium et Spes,* 16). The Church recognises truth and holiness in all religions (*Nostra Aetate,* 2). She teaches that there are genuine signs of the presence of God in the needs and desires of all (*Gaudium et Spes,* 11). The 1964 Bombay conference on 'Christian revelation and the non-christian religions' said 'The whole of mankind is embraced by the one salvific plan of God which includes all the world religions . . . In every non-christian religion there are positive value and content . . . the Holy Spirit is working in these non-christian religions'.[11]

If we reject this separation of religious/secular, sacred/profane, and if we accept the presence of God in all of life, then we would expect to discover an openness to God, a propensity toward the transcendent in all of life and thus in all cultural processes. Christianity reveals the truth, and christian spirituality leads to a genuine and saving relationship between the Christian and God in Christ. But it does not therefore follow that the historical forms of Christianity and of christian spirituality that have actually occurred have exhausted all truth and all ways to God. If credal statements are bearing witness rather than propositional statements or lists of facts, then the witnesses of different religious traditions and the different spiritual experiences within these traditions clearly need not be contradictory. Any particular historical form cannot exhaust the Absolute.

Adaptors have tried to force non-european historical manifestations into the patterns of historical christian manifestations instead of letting shared prayer and shared silence lead us along different paths that will converge on the one God. Historical articulations will, precisely because of the layers of connotations intrinsic to the different behavioural and representational patternings of the different cultural processes, involve differences. Islamic prayer, almsgiving and fasting might well be an articulation of a transcendent experience that has its object in the one God and Father of us all. And christian prayer and almsgiving and fasting might well be another articulation of a transcendent experience that has its object in the same God and Father. Yet it is misleading to assume that the different culturally constrained articulations of the experiences are altogether the same, or that they can be adapted to fit one another. Because of the unity of underlying source of the islamic and the christian meanings, there is no need to abandon either tradition in the sense of a destructive rejection. The Vatican

II document *Nostra Aetate* 4, paraphrases Romans 11: 'The Jews still remain most dear to God because of their fathers for he does not repent of the gifts he makes nor of the calls he issues'. God's bond with the jewish people is not abrogated by the coming of Christ. Neither is God's bond with other peoples, his revelation through their way-of-being-in-the-world abrogated by the coming of Christ. 'We must look for God as he reveals himself and this is not exclusively in the christian bible'.[12]

Spirituality involves the epiphany and the glorification of God. But we cannot predetermine where God will work his plan nor limit where his glory is to be made known. That God was in Christ is a central affirmation of Christianity. If the claim is made that in Jesus and in him alone is there to be found any genuine knowledge of God, then all other spiritualities are mere fabrications and misleading. But if Jesus is seen rather as a definite focus for the Christian of God's working and presence in our world and if the Christian interprets the Incarnation as evidence of God's loving concern for the whole of creation, then the Christian will expect to find God revealed to him in other religions, and he will expect this revelation to enrich his understanding of the revelation he has experienced in Christ.

Our sharing in prayer will be for mutual enrichment. Since God calls all peoples, there must be, in every human experience, that which will allow of its coming to the fullness of God. For Christians this fullness is Christ and, prior to any proclamation of Christ, the Christian will hold that there are unknown dimensions of Christ and he will expect that, after proclamation, he will be surprised at an unforeseen incarnate Christ. This is the 'inaccessible future' towards which Christianity grows, inaccessible since it lies in the hands of God and yet already present in that it lies within the different cultural processes. There is a unity of creation and redemptive history. The Christ through whom all things came into being is Christ the redeemer. Hence we look for traces of God's activity in Christ in the religions of the world. As long as there are people in this world they will incarnate God in ever new ways and there will be seen ever new revelations of the fullness of his truth. And the Christian will call these new insights 'christian', not because he claims a monopoly of prerogatives for himself as an adept of Christianity, but rather because he sees these insights as endowed with the richness of that reality for which he has no other name than 'Christ'. The Christian witnesses to a new

dimension of what remains for him the same reality.

> The Church is faithful to its universal vocation, not by a missionary conquest of other religions, but by its christian presence which is the seed and promise of new historical creations which will be a chinese, and indian, an arab, a japanese Christianity.[13]

This might all seem to be something of a dream, wishful thinking, especially when we see the intricacies of inter-religious theological statements. But, as we have shown, the theological statements are couched in language that concretizes the socio-cultural process and that therefore has inbuilt socio-cultural differences. But there is still an underlying unity, the unity of love. We can return to Cantwell Smith's insight with which we began this essay, an insight that shows us a way round the problem of adaptation. We can return to his insight and consider the mutual doing of the truth in love. There is only one love. Love of neighbour and love of God are one love. Together we can share in the service of the little ones of this world, knowing that what we do to the least of these little ones we do to God. Sharing in silent presence and service among those most in need we can share in the love of God witnessed to by all the world religions.

NOTES

[1] Smith, W. Cantwell: 'A human view of truth' in Hick, John (ed.): *Truth and dialogue* (London, 1974) pp 20–44.
[2] *Op. cit.*, p 24.
[3] E.g. Hacker, P.: *Theological foundations of evangelization* (St. Augustin, Steyler Verlag, 1980), p 88.
[4] Väth, Alfons: *Das Bild der Weltkirche* (Hanover, 1932), p 138.
[5] E.g. in Turner, Victor W.: *Forest of symbols* (London, 1970).
[6] Johnston, William: *The inner eye of love* (London, 1981) p 16.
[7] Quoted in Johnston, William: *Silent music* (London, 1977) p 10.
[8] E.g. Evans-Pritchard, E. E.: *Theories of primitive religion* (London, 1965) p 64.
[9] Horton, R.: 'A definition of religion and its uses' in *Journal of the Anthropological Institute,* 1960, vol 90, p 211.
[10] Smith, W. Cantwell, *op. cit.*, p 161.
[11] Fransen, Pie: *Intelligent theology* vol 3 (London 1969) p 178.
[12] Zaehner, R. C.: *Our savage god* (London, 1974) p 16.
[13] Geffré, C.: 'Theology in the age of China' in *Concilium* 12 (1979), pp 6, 80.