I

Meetings

CHAPTER I

The middle of things

In his collection of essays, *Zen and the Taming of the Bull*, the learned Buddhist teacher Walpola Rahula introduces the well-known series of Zen pictures that illustrate the way to enlightenment. In the version that Rahula discusses, the bull – a metaphor for the unruly mind – is depicted as changing gradually from black to shining white. 'The underlying idea', he says, 'is that the mind, which is naturally pure, is polluted by extraneous impurities and that it could and should be cleansed through discipline and meditation'.[1] The *yogi* or seeker after truth begins by confronting the wild beast, catches it and then tethers it. He ties it to a tree and trains it to follow after him. In the next picture, the bull lies passively by the river while the *yogi* plays his flute. Then we find the bull drinking from the water while the *yogi* sleeps in the background. In the next, bull and seeker stand observing each other. In the penultimate picture, the seeker is alone; the bull has been transcended altogether. The final picture in Rahula's series is nothing more than a round circle; now both bull and self have been transcended and all traces of ego eradicated.

That is as far as Rahula's account takes us. His aim is to link the contemporary practice of Zen, where the emphasis is usually on 'sudden' enlightenment, with the most ancient traditions, particularly his own Theravada, with its disciplines and meditative practices that build up a mindful attention to the present moment. But in the more familiar Japanese versions, which go back to the fifteenth century, a further stage is indicated: what is often called the 'return to the marketplace'.[2] Here we find the *yogi*

[1] Walpola Rahula, *Zen and the Taming of the Bull: Towards the Definition of Buddhist Thought* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1978), pp. 15–23.

[2] In Rahula's book, the origin of the pictures is ascribed to the twelfth-century Zen master Kaku-an Shi-en. The version he refers to was painted by Shubun, a fifteenth-century Zen priest. They may represent a Zen Buddhist interpretation of the ten stages of enlightenment traced by the *Bodhisattva*, as outlined most notably in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. They have become widely known in the West owing to their inclusion in Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), a collection of Zen and pre-Zen writings, published originally in 1957.

encountering others and talking with them. One commentary, by the Zen scholar Yanagida Seizan says:

> The relationship between bull and herdsman is indeed an allegory of the process of meditation, where we succeed in capturing and quieting this present arrogant heart of ours, which runs wild. . . . Zen training only begins when we become aware, in the midst of our dreaming, that the bull has run away from us. . . . [The ox-herding pictures] are an expression of that element in Zen thought which finds the profoundest miracle in the dialogue between plain ordinary people, where any religious coloration of charity, salvation or satori has completely disappeared.[3]

Depicted here is something of the spirit of the Mahayana, with its paradoxical assertion that *samsara* is *nirvana* and *nirvana samsara*. Ultimately, the round of rebirth, life in the world as we experience it, is no different from the truth discovered in that moment of enlightenment. To be enlightened does not entail some escape to a transcendent realm but the attaining of freedom from all forms of attachment – whether from control by the inner passions or, more paradoxically, from the very desire for some 'spiritual realm'. What Buddhists refer to as *upaya*, 'skilful means', is as much a quality of detachment that values the potential for enlightenment in the world of ordinary everyday experience as it is a practical exercise of compassion that leads and teaches other suffering sentient beings.[4]

I begin this book in the 'marketplace of religions' not because I want to short-circuit the complex and arduous process of the journey of faith but in order to draw attention to the intrinsic value of being in the middle of things. The very metaphor of the 'spiritual journey' begs a serious question. The end of the quest is, of course, described in the great religious traditions in different ways – as enlightenment or *Nirvana*, as the beatific vision of God, as eternal life and indescribable bliss. But how is what is, strictly speaking, unknown and beyond experience related to what is known and familiar? Whatever the language that is used, if the end of the journey is indescribable then we have no way of knowing *in advance* whether we are on the right path – let alone whether we have reached the end. Metaphors, of course, always limp and should never be pressed too far. Religious language is not intended to afford an exact representation of reality but to support the life of holiness by providing the necessary

[3] Quoted by Stephen Addiss in his introductory article, 'The History of Ox-Herding Poems and Paintings', in the book accompanying the exhibition *John Cage: Zen Ox-Herding Pictures* (Richmond, Va.: University of Richmond Museums, 2009).

[4] See the account of the training of the *bodhisattva* as taught by the *Avatamsaka Sutra* in the essay by Luis O. Gomez, in Takeuchi Yoshinori (ed.), *Buddhist Spirituality*, vol. i, *Indian, Southeast Asian, Tibetan, Early Chinese* (London: SCM, 1994), pp. 160–70.

signposts. *Nirvana* in this sense is a regulative concept, what Steven Collins calls the 'limit condition' that gives the early Buddhist tradition its coherence.[5] It only makes sense within the framework of the terminology established in the Buddha's first sermon, the 'setting in motion of the wheel of truth', the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Such language is given its own peculiarly transformative power by both the link that these words forge with the originating witness of the Buddha and the time-honoured tradition of practice that has preserved them. The Buddhist meditator comes to learn that the disciplines that lead to the conquest of self have to be set within a broader contemplative context of mindfulness of the whole of reality. Rahula's pictures make it seem like a straightforward linear progress. That would be to forget the key word 'return'. In returning to the world of the everyday, prepared to share the fruits of the *Buddhadharma* with others, the mindful meditator has become deeply conscious of the paradox that that world was never left in the first place.

Not that this is a peculiarly Buddhist insight. Speaking out of a very different religious world, Martin Buber recounts stories of the Hasidim that stress, he says, not any esoteric teaching but the 'mode of life' that shapes a community. God is not the utterly transcendent mystery but a familiar companion, to be discerned as much in the ordinary activities of life as in moments of other-worldly bliss. The conviction that there is no essential distinction between sacred and profane generates a certain sacramental quality in Hasidic mysticism. 'Everything', says Buber, 'wants to be hallowed, to be brought into the holy, everything worldly in its worldliness . . . everything wants to become sacrament'.[6] These are words that might have come from a St Teresa of Avila, words that speak of a profound awareness of the sacred at home in the everyday, of the Word of God alive and active among the 'pots and pans' of daily distraction. If this is mystical experience, then it challenges our idea of what makes for the holiness of things. In fact,

[5] Steven Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge University Press, 1998). Collins begins Part 1 with a comment on Wittgenstein's celebrated observation at the end of the *Tractatus* that 'whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'. What it *is* possible to speak about, insists Collins, are the patterns of imagery that make up the 'collective memory' behind a religious tradition like Pali Buddhism.

[6] Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman (Horizon Press: New York; 1960), p. 181. For Buber's collections, see *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1947) and *The Later Masters* (New York: Schocken Books, 1948). The first volume of Buber's interpretation of Hasidim is to be found in *Hasidism and Modern Man*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman, 2nd edn. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1988). See also Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber's Life and Work: The Later Years, 1945–1965* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1983), especially pp. 177 ff.

of course, it witnesses to something more elusive, and more profound – what in Christian terms might be called an incarnational sensibility. When Christians gather to celebrate the Eucharist they are not taken out of the everyday but plunged more deeply into it.[7] Christianity, says Karl Rahner, in an essay on 'The Foundation of Belief Today',

> calls for a whole-hearted and straightforward profession of hope, amidst all the mysterious twists and turns of our life, and assures us that in this mystery there lies what we call God, eternal life, ultimate value and the salvation of our being.[8]

Within the ordinary lies the extraordinary. To be more precise, within the embrace of all manner of limitation, from the weakness of the will to the more intractable traumas of particular histories, lies the possibility of true human freedom. The challenge, as Rahula tries to show, is how to practise the traditions and disciplines in such a way that one is for ever coming back to the world of everyday experience with a fresh vision and renewed energy.

THEOLOGY OF THE ORDINARY

This book carries the title 'interreligious learning' – and already I hope I have given a taste of the sort of cross-religious reflection that is to come. In what follows I seek to map out something of an impalpable process of learning, as much about the self as about the other, from the initial curiosity excited by the challenge raised by the strangeness of another religious world to the leaps of the imagination that generous engagement always demands. Throughout I am guided by the conviction that it is the very *ordinariness* of life in the marketplace that builds interreligious understanding and turns out to be theologically significant. By contrast, Western culture, fixated on much-hyped extraordinary 'events' and heightened states of consciousness, sees the religions as alternative versions of some 'spiritual commodity': less the cultural axis around which the marketplace revolves than competing brands in the curiously anodyne 'retail outlets' of town-centre shopping malls. For every Zen practitioner prepared to delve into the traditions created by Bodhidharma, Hakuin and Dogen, many more remain content with the 'beat' version:

[7] In the words of Timothy Radcliffe, the Eucharist is a 'transformative event' that brings the Word alive. See 'The Sacramentality of the Word', in Keith Pecklers (ed.), *Liturgy in a Postmodern World* (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 133–47.

[8] Karl Rahner, *Experience of the Spirit: Source of Theology*, *Theological Investigations*, vol. xvi (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), p. 22.

Zen-generated forms of meditation as a lifestyle choice. Sales of books on Islam may have rocketed in the months after 9/11, but how much was this generated by a genuine concern to understand the deepest inspirations of Islamic civilisation, and how much by a morbid fascination with a tradition that could stir up suicide bombers with visions of virgins in paradise? Religion is trivialised when reduced to a cultural straitjacket for the psychologically immature or an alternative therapy for the spiritually jaded.

The various forms of interreligious dialogue that have grown up in recent years, not just the formal debates between the theologically expert but those rooted in neighbourly concern and commitment to common action, challenge this type of neo-orientalist fantasy. Before religions like Buddhism and Islam can be categorised as systems of belief, they are communities of faith, groups of struggling human beings who, like their Christian dialogue partners, seek to bring certain sources of wisdom – rituals, texts, devotions, legal and commentarial traditions – into a correlation with the exigencies of everyday life. However different their practices of faith may be, and however different the questions they ask, they do share a desire to make intellectual and affective sense of *this* world and *this* moment. Exactly how that commitment to an informed and responsible everyday life is informed by visions of a future state varies from tradition to tradition. The mistake, however, is to think of the great or 'world religions' as different configurations of certain purely 'religious' or 'spiritual' phenomena. While religions are often rightly understood as conservative forces within society, it does not follow that they are unchanging and monolithic; indeed, forms of revivalism are always growing side by side with new developments that in some ways mirror the spiritual eclecticism of postmodernity. At stake here is not just the definition of religion or how the history and relationship of the great religions is to be narrated, but theological questions that arise from the interpersonal relationship, questions about *human meaning*.

I will return to these themes – essentially the clash between two different conceptions of 'religion' as it faces modernity – in more detail as we proceed. In this first chapter, I am concerned with the task of theology – what Rowan Williams refers to as the work of the religious intellect.[9] I write from a Christian perspective but with the conviction that the sort of

[9] Notably in a lecture given at Birmingham University, 11 June 2003, 'Christian Theology and Other Faiths': 'Theology, the work of religious intellect, tries to work out what the implications are of seeing everything in relation to a holy reality that is never absent.'

questions with which this book is concerned cross religious boundaries – if only because, whether we like it or not, Christians and others live as neighbours in the middle of things. We do not share common beliefs, we do not even share a common religious language with which to speak of ultimate reality. Even to talk of 'we' is problematic – for what makes for 'us'? Yet the demands for mutual learning and understanding are real. All communities of faith have to learn how to respond generously yet with integrity to the questions that others put. All face similar issues that the life of faith and the pursuit of holiness raise – questions about truth and language, reason and revelation, grace and freedom. These and other themes are implicit in what follows, but comparative questions as such are not my main concern. If theology is the work of religious intellect, then it is important to reflect on the experience of being in dialogue and the activity of learning that any interreligious engagement provokes. To that extent I am concerned less with the common ground between religions or points of particularity and difference than with putting together the terms of what Charles Taylor calls a 'social imaginary'.

Our commentator on the ox-herding pictures noted that Zen thought finds its 'profoundest miracle in the dialogue between plain ordinary people'. The world of everyday 'ordinary' experience may seem prosaic and uninteresting but it betrays its own inner harmonies without which enlightenment and learning would be impossible. A 'social imaginary', Taylor tells us, is something much deeper than the 'intellectual schemes' that people think about when in 'disengaged mode'. It is about what is implicit in the ways people behave and react, what gives their actions a certain cognitive and affective coherence. To be more specific, he is thinking of

> the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations.[10]

Religiously inspired practices, from 'internal' rituals and prayer to forms of dialogue with those external to the community, develop over time. And not the least important aspect of any theology of religions must be a reflection on what makes life coherent – what gives it a sense of 'moral order', to use Taylor's term. However, this is precisely *not* to say that

[10] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 171. See also Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 23.

practices drive theory, any more than the other way round. Rather, the relationship is reciprocal. Ordinary life or life in the marketplace is driven by certain implicit understandings of what makes for harmony and order. To bring these to light means giving attention to two dimensions of any 'social imaginary': on the one hand, assumptions about the meaning of existence and what makes for human flourishing, and, on the other, the context of practice that shapes, and is in turn shaped by, such assumptions. Through a process of questioning and engagement, comparison and dialogue, the 'religious intellect' is brought to bear on the complex dialectic of theory and practice that gives meaning to people's lives.

At the end of this chapter I return to Taylor's provocative thesis about religion and modernity, so carefully developed in *A Secular Age*, in order to give some theological shape to a question that has long fascinated me – a question as much about human growth and transformation as about theology and the philosophy of religion. What happens to faith when it becomes 'inter-faith'? This is not just a practical question about how one language of faith can speak to and learn from another, or a philosophical question about how different languages can speak truthfully. It is more specifically concerned with what the effort of communication, to speak across cultural and religious gaps, does to the way I regard my own tradition. Set alongside that question is another, an ethical question that is perhaps more intractable: what the effort of communication does to the other. Does interreligious learning simply instrumentalise the other? Such questions lie behind the themes discussed in the chapters that follow and will, I hope, become more explicit as we proceed. What will emerge will be less a theology than a spirituality of dialogue – an account of the transformative practices of learning in community that are undergirded by ritual, worship and prayer.

Here, however, I want to stay with the developing tradition of Christian discourse about the other that is seeking its own proper integrity. In this chapter, I offer no more than a sketch of the theology of religions that has emerged in Christian circles in the last few decades. This will give something of the background to a certain trajectory that I will characterise at this stage as moving from a liberal normative pluralism to a much more tradition-centred form of post-liberal theology, and particularly what in recent years has come to be called 'comparative theology'.

THEOLOGY AND THE DIALOGUE OF RELIGIONS

Christian engagement with other religious traditions is as old as Christianity itself and has generated a variety of theological responses. The popular

'threefold paradigm' typology, usually ascribed to Alan Race, has the great merit of gathering various different ideas and approaches into a single coherent pattern.[11] The first two positions, 'exclusivism' and 'inclusivism', take their rise from a question that derives from Christian soteriology: can the non-Christian be saved? 'They' are deliberately placed outside the boundaries of a Christian world or they are given a secondary place within. The first option is to draw very strict lines of demarcation; the second option is more benign: to extend the boundary, recognising 'aspects' of Christian identity in the other. The third pattern, named simply 'pluralism', begins from different premises – and is consciously *not* centred on Christianity as the normative tradition of faith.[12] Following the thesis of John Hick, the pluralist hypothesis states that there is no fundamental difference between religions; all are simply descriptions of a more or less common core or experience. Three theological positions are thus run together as stages of development. A hard-edged evangelical tradition gives way to a more generous Catholicism, but this is shown to rest ultimately on a claim to Christianity's unique finality; the saving truth of Christianity is present to people from other faith traditions in an implicit or 'anonymous' way. In due course, given the increasingly manifest similarities between Christianity and other faiths to be discerned in our contemporary world, it seems only reasonable to shift away from such an insistence on the ultimate superiority of one tradition and cross a 'theological Rubicon' into a much simpler world where Christianity is acknowledged as but one of many religions.[13]

[11] The threefold paradigm typology has proved remarkably resilient. It was first proposed by Alan Race in his *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM, 1983) and later developed in his *Interfaith Encounter: The Twin Tracks of Theology and Dialogue* (London: SCM. 2001). Without using the typology form, much the same approach is to be found in Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?* (London: SCM, 1985). A similar approach, but with a very different reading, is taken by Gavin D'Costa in *Theology and Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985). D'Costa provides a brief critique in 'Theology of Religions', in David Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 626–44. The most thoroughgoing critique from a Roman Catholic perspective, and setting the debate within the broad perspective of theology of religions, is that of Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Orbis, 1997), especially pp. 180–201. Attempts to move beyond the paradigm approach include Michael Barnes, *Religions in Conversation* (London: SPCK, 1989) and James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1999). The most thoroughgoing reprise, bringing the story up to date, comes from D'Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), especially pp. 1–45.

[12] 'Pluralism' is, however, not understood in any univocal sense. There are variations within the pattern – and, indeed, within the different religions themselves. See, e.g., Paul Knitter (ed.), *The Myth of Religious Superiority* (New York: Orbis, 2005).

[13] The image of the 'theological Rubicon', an irrevocable step into a new way of conceiving interreligious relations, occurs first in John Hick's essay 'The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity', in John Hick and Paul Knitter (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London: SCM, 1987), pp. 16–36.