

I

Complementary Shards



In this discussion of what should be seen as an appropriate Christian approach to other religions, my plan is to adopt a rather different strategy, either from patterns that used to prevail in the more distant past or from what tends to be most common today. I shall begin by identifying three features of the contemporary situation which have motivated me in this direction. Thereafter, the resultant strategy will be sketched in a way which makes plain why the following chapters take the structure that they do. Although I make generous use of modern studies in comparative religion and Christian theology, where I differ from most practitioners of the former is by insisting on going beyond objectivity into sympathetic identification with the religion concerned; from the latter, I go beyond generalities into recognition of specific areas where I believe God may have spoken through that religion. Accordingly, in each case one or more topic of this kind is identified, though without any suggestion that this is all that might be discovered. The second half of this chapter will address my chosen image of complementary shards to define the relationship but first we need to note some reasons for a change of approach.

Reasons for a Change in Approach

Below I briefly discuss three of the reasons which have led me to rethink how one might best interpret the extraordinary variety of perspectives in the world's major faiths.

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From Distant to Near Neighbour

The first, and perhaps most obvious reason, is the way in which the other has ceased to be remote from ourselves in some distant land but, quite frequently, is our own near neighbour. Post-war immigration resulted in significant religious minorities in most European nations, while Australia and the United States have opened up their borders as never before.¹ In France there are large numbers of Muslims whose roots lie in the country's former colonies in North Africa. In Germany a labour shortage after the Second World War resulted in the large-scale immigration of *Gastarbeiter* (foreign or migrant workers) from Turkey and more recently the admission in a single year of over a million refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis.² Meanwhile in Britain, the country's close relationship with its former imperial territories in the Indian subcontinent resulted in a situation in which, to evoke a familiar contrast, there are now more practising Muslims in the United Kingdom than there are Methodists.³ While in respect of such movements Islam is generally the most numerous, figures for other religions are by no means insignificant. In the United States, for

¹ Australia's white-only immigration policy was gradually dismantled between 1949 and 1973.

² In 2015, *Gastarbeiter* or 'guest workers' was a term and policy adopted between 1955 and 1973. Since then some have returned home but most became either permanent residents or citizens.

³ According to the 2011 census there were 2.8 million Muslims living in Britain, with roughly one and a half million adherents of Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism. In the 2021 census the number of Muslims had increased to 3.9 million (6.5 per cent of the population). The number of Muslims living in the European Union (according to 2007 figures) was 16 million.

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instance, Buddhism and Hinduism can each claim about a million adherents, with Islam currently at 3.45 million. Architecturally significant places of worship have been slower to appear but there are now prominent buildings in quite a number of European and American cities.⁴

Such immigration is of course by no means entirely new. One need only recall Christendom's long shameful relationship with Jews living in its midst.⁵ There has also been a long history of sporadic attempts at interfaith dialogue,⁶ sometimes complemented even today at the practical level in the use of each other's shrines.⁷ However, two features in the modern world are different.

⁴ Two prominent examples in London are the Central London Mosque on the edge of Regent's Park and the Hindu temple, Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, in Neasden. For a rather unusual example, note the creation of a Kagyu monastery of Tibetan Buddhism on Holy Isle in the Firth of Clyde, gifted by a devout Catholic, Kay Morris. She was responding to a vision of the Virgin Mary instructing her to do so.

⁵ Dislike of difference was intensified by the effect of usury laws which allowed Jews to lend but not Christians. There were also various legends of the Jewish ritual murder of Christian children, the most famous being William of Norwich in 1144. All Jews were expelled from England in 1290 and not readmitted until under Cromwell in 1655. England was not alone in this. In Germany the People's Crusade of 1096 resulted in the mass murder of Jews in Mainz, Speyer and Worms, a pattern that was to repeat itself over subsequent centuries.

⁶ On Islam, see David Thomas, *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History* (Leiden: Brill, 5 vols., 2009–13), and his selected extracts, David Thomas ed., *The Bloomsbury Reader in Christian-Muslim Relations, 600–1500* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022). For a book that concentrates mainly on modern developments, T. A. Howard, *The Faith of Others: A History of Interreligious Dialogue* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

⁷ Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu & Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Angie Heo, *The Political Lives of Saints: Christian-Muslim Mediation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

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The first is that, while some minority ghettos still exist, on the whole there is much more integration. Schools are mixed and some attempt is made to provide understanding of the faiths which others practise. So the issue is more ‘alive’ than it would have been in the past where various forms of separate development were practised.⁸ Although a movement like Black Lives Matter indicates that integration still has a long way to go, it is nevertheless the case that those of other faiths have now become prominent in public life and other major positions of influence, as with Rishi Sunak, Chancellor of the Exchequer from 2020 and then Prime Minister from 2022 (a practising Hindu), or Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London since 2016 (a Muslim).⁹ Secondly, it is a world in which ‘Christian’ countries are no longer self-evidently culturally and economically superior. Oil has helped to advance various Arab nations, while China and Japan have already overtaken Britain in wealth, with India projected to do likewise in due course.¹⁰ So even at the pragmatic level there is good

⁸ Although the Ottoman Empire was considerably more tolerant of Jews than Christian Europe, even major centres of population had little interaction. Prior to the First World War, Baghdad had 80,000 Jews out of a total population of 200,000. Salonika was even a predominantly Jewish city.

⁹ There are also some examples in continental Europe, among them Ahmed Aboutaleb, who became Mayor of Rotterdam in 2009, Cem Özdemir, a prominent member of the Green Party in Germany and now Minister of Food and Agriculture, and Rachida Dati, who served as the French Justice Minister from 2007 to 2009. In Ireland, the Hindu Leo Varadkar was Taoiseach (Prime Minister) from 2017–20, while in the Netherlands Kauthar Bouchallikht was the first Dutch MP to wear a hijab. In 2021, in the United States House of Representatives there were three Muslims, two Hindus and one Buddhist, all Democrats.

¹⁰ Current estimates suggest that China will have become the world’s most powerful economy by 2028.

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reason for advocating a deeper understanding of the alternative cultures with which Christians must now engage.

Even where separation through distance continues, a different pattern now exists from what once did in the past. Tourism ensures that, even if there is no immediate interaction with other faiths in one's home environment, these are to be seen in organised visits, for example, to prominent mosques or temples in other lands. It is also the case that the literature of some of these nations has become part of a general cosmopolitan culture. This is especially true of writers from the Indian subcontinent and from the island of Japan.¹¹ Contemporary popular and classical music exhibits a similar range of influences. As examples of the former, think of Leonard Cohen's debt to Buddhism, George Harrison to Hinduism or Cat Stevens to Islam,¹² or again in classical music the fundamental change of view found in the later John Taverner's approach to, and use of, other religions.¹³

Accordingly, just like the mixed character of modern communities, so a shrinking world also argues for greater respect between the religions and a more sustained attempt to understand each other. Such greater awareness

¹¹ Among contemporary Japanese writers, apart from Kazuo Ishiguro, who became a British citizen as a child and who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017, one might mention novelists I happen to have read in translation in recent years: Takashi Hiraide, Toshikazu Kawaguchi, Yasunari Kawabata, Hiromi Kawakami, Haruki Murakami, Sayaka Murata, Yōko Ogawa and Yōko Tawada.

¹² George Harrison practised Hinduism from 1966 until his death in 2001; in 1977 Cat Stevens converted to Islam, thereafter, giving up his singing career; Leonard Cohen lived in a Zen monastery for five years from 1996.

¹³ See further my comments in D. Brown and G. Hopps, *The Extravagance of Music* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 114–16.

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has also brought another consequence more directly relevant to this project: the need for greater humility in approaching what others believe. Most readers will have had encounters in which the religious perceptions of someone of another faith proved no less profound than what was available from within their own faith, or something illuminated which had only been dimly grasped in their own religious practice.

Changing Perceptions of the Origins of the Major Faiths

A second reason for a different approach is change in the understanding of how the major faiths evolved. Historically, each of them had to various degrees settled into acceptance of a rather simplistic view of their own origins. The divine was understood to have addressed lead figures in an uncomplicated way which allowed revelation to be seen as a straightforward gift from heaven that, once delivered, remained easy in appropriation and unchanging in meaning. Modern academic research has decisively undermined any such story. Whatever specific religion one considers, there is a complicated story of development that needs to be told. Think, for instance, of the battles in the early Christian centuries over alternative accounts of Christ's significance, or of Muslim debates in their early centuries about how one Qur'anic text might supersede another or the oral tradition of hadith be used to qualify possible applications.¹⁴ Any notion of

¹⁴ For further discussion of the principle of *naskh* or abrogation in the Qur'an and the clarification of *isnad* or chain of transmission in the oral tradition, see my *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change*

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immediate and uncontextualised exchange between God and humanity has gone. In its place has come the necessity for acknowledging that all ‘knowledge’ of the divine is heavily shaped by the particular settings in which it is received or advanced.

This is an important change because it radically undermines the once common practice of offering the best interpretation of one’s own revelatory texts and practice and the worst for those of other faiths. All now prove to be a mixture, sometimes with the human contribution seen to be most evident in one’s own religion. By contrast, elements in another religion are sometimes better able to be interpreted positively, precisely through now being able to be set within their proper context. For example, although attempts are still made to defend the *herem* or ‘sacred ban’ which involved the extermination of other peoples within Israelite territory or the blood-curdling sentiments with which Psalm 137 concludes, the most obvious explanation almost certainly lies in the resentments of a defeated people and a consequent lust for revenge.¹⁵ As such, while the texts might still be used to reflect on how such sentiments can be overcome, it needs to be declared quite unequivocally that their expression has nothing to do with what God desired to communicate and everything to do with human limitations. Markedly different is what has now become possible in interpreting charges of idolatry against Hindu worship. Not only does such an objection ignore

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 155–67. There is also a brief discussion in Chapter 7 of this work.

¹⁵ Deut. 20. 16–20, Ps. 137. 8–9. Both texts probably originate from the period after the collapse of the southern kingdom of Judah.

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the various ways in which the imagery seeks to point beyond itself, it also needs to be conceded that there is no less danger of idolatry within Judaism and Christianity. Thus, on the former point so many images are provided and with such variety that it is impossible to absolutise any single one. Again, on the other side ‘respect’ for the biblical word can all too easily collapse into a veneration that prevents the text from escaping such limited perspectives.¹⁶ In short, it is necessary to see both divine and human at work not only in one’s own faith but also more widely. Such changes in understanding bring with them two important consequences

First, it means that all claims to religious truth need to be properly set in context. In other words, such comparisons need to always be adjusted to take account of relationships with the wider cultural context. While major differences may still remain, even against such deeper settings, this is not always so. Sometimes as a consequence of such contextual analysis greater harmony between apparently competing revelations may well be the result. In an earlier book I took advantage of this possibility to suggest that the varying treatments of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in the three Western monotheisms are not in fact as opposed as initially might appear (Islam even focuses on a different son, Ishmael).¹⁷ This is because their surface differences reflect different embedded traditions which nonetheless can each be seen to move

¹⁶ The question of images is discussed further in Chapter 3 on Hinduism.

¹⁷ Strictly speaking, the Qur’an does not name the boy, but subsequent tradition moved overwhelmingly in favour of Ishmael as ancestor of the Arabs.

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eventually towards the same basic principle: that the most profound form of sacrifice is self-sacrifice.¹⁸ That is where the implication of the story is finally taken to point in all three cases, even if in its earliest written form in Genesis 22 the dilemma had been made to centre round the father rather than the son. Islam's focus primarily on the elder son is matched by later Judaism's re-orientation towards an older Isaac,¹⁹ while Christians of the patristic world saw in the victim a 'type' or anticipation of Jesus' own sacrifice. Although Hinduism offers no direct parallels, there is a similar emphasis on the value of self-sacrifice.²⁰

It might well be possible to extend this kind of conciliatory move more widely, even in the case of what seem apparently intractable divergences. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the Hindu assumption that an impersonal Brahm is ultimate and Islam's strong stress on Allah as a single person certainly sound sharply divergent. But, as we shall see later, by reflecting on internal discussion and practice within the three faiths some limited degree of reconciliation could become possible. Even so, such partial conciliation hardly amounts to exactly the same affirmation. Likewise, at first sight the Hindu doctrine of avatars might be thought to offer some appropriate parallels to the Christian doctrine of the incarnation.²¹

¹⁸ Discussed at length in my *Tradition and Imagination*, 237–60.

¹⁹ In one text (Genesis Rabbah) it is even inferred from the timing of Sarah's death that Isaac was in fact 37 years old at the time of the incident.

²⁰ As in the various stories associated with Prajapati's creation of the world: Rig Veda 10.21 & 10.90.

²¹ Krishna, for instance, is reputed to have been the eighth avatar or 'incarnation' of the god Vishnu. The two major differences from the Christian doctrine are the lack of historical foundation (though this

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But, while accommodation might appear possible for Hinduism as it has in its treatment of Buddhism,²² Christianity presents two seemingly insuperable obstacles: its strong stress on both historicity and uniqueness. No doubt there are comparable sticking points across the various religions. As I shall explain in the second part of this chapter, I do not think that in such circumstances reduction to the lowest common denominator is the right answer. Instead, adherents of the different faiths (including Christians) should remain committed to their own perspective but at the same time more open than they were in the past to the possibility of learning how revelation may have operated elsewhere.

Secondly, although from a purely human perspective such an analysis could (as in the Isaac example) be wholly positive in offering additional possibilities for reconciliation, it actually adds to the difficulties of making coherent sense of the workings of the divine. Of course, at one level we may speak of divine respect for the human condition. God does not wish to overthrow the ordinary processes of human cognition. Instead, individuals are allowed to discover divine reality at their own pace and that of their culture rather than according to any absolute standard. Yet, although such a way of proceeding may be taken to demonstrate deep respect for the integrity of human beings as they are, such a proposed perspective would still raise some difficult questions. Not least is the issue of what advantage there might be in allowing such

would be challenged by many Hindus) and the insistence that none of the god's powers remained in abeyance.

²² Buddha is treated as yet another avatar of Vishnu.