

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND THE SCRIPTURES OF OTHER FAITHS

By MICHAEL BARNES

ON 27 OCTOBER 1986 representatives of various Christian denominations and the principal non-Christian world faiths met to fast and pray at Assisi as a witness to their common desire for peace. It was a symbolic act which caught the popular imagination: Pope John Paul sharing a platform with a colourful host of priests, patriarchs and shaven-headed monks. Something very similar happened in Westminster Cathedral on 17 March 1991. This was just a few weeks after the conflict in the Gulf had been halted. Conscious not just of the destruction caused by the war in the Middle East but also of the damage to community relations at home, Cardinal Hume asked for all people of faith resident in the diocese 'to be at prayer together in silence', as it was put on the invitation, for peace and reconciliation.

In its own way the Westminster event was as powerful a witness as Assisi—not just because of the quantity of people who packed the Cathedral that afternoon but because of the quality of the prayer. A minute and a half of silence following the Cardinal's moving and heartfelt address spoke volumes about the sense of outrage at what had been allowed to happen in the Gulf and about the common desire to work together that it might never happen again. But Westminster went one stage further than Assisi. Building on the experience of the diocesan interfaith programme, the gathering listened to readings from the different faiths—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian, Sikh and Baha'i. Hebrew and English, Sanskrit and Pali, Arabic and Punjabi were all heard echoing through the cathedral's PA system, much to the surprise—and edification—of various casual visitors who popped in to pray that Sunday afternoon.¹

read more at www.theway.org.uk

Familiarity with other sacred texts

This article is an attempt to explore and draw lessons from that experience. Increasingly Christians are becoming familiar with the scriptures of other faiths; in some parts of the Christian world sections of the Bhagavad Gita, the Qur'an and various Buddhist *sutras* are better known than the Old Testament.² Their use, however, in the context of worship raises problems. For some the very suggestion that people of different faiths might be able to 'be at prayer together' *at all*—in silence, in different places at the same time, simply listening to readings—is utterly anathema. At the other extreme are those searching for a personal spirituality in an increasingly rootless post-Christian culture, people quite prepared to experiment with everything from TM to T'ai Chi, and who often feel more at home reading the Tibetan *Book of the dead* than in the soporific atmosphere normally associated with Sunday services.

It would be easy to portray the former position as a relic of an outdated Christian exclusivism and the latter an example of the dangerous spirit of the 'New Age'. There are, however, many who find the sharing of faith perfectly natural, an extension of the ecumenical spirit which has made them conscious that there is no necessary contradiction between the diversity of human expression and the unity of all things in God. These are the people who are now beginning to ask serious questions about what is happening when the 'dialogue of experience' provides more than a superficial glimpse into another world. They found Assisi and Westminster literally 'inspiring'; they have no difficulties about seeking inspiration in the classic texts of different cultural and religious traditions. Yet what does it mean to say that a text is 'inspired'? And what are the implications for Christian faith if we admit such a privileged status to the scriptures of other faiths?

In answering these questions this article seeks to make two basic points. Firstly we have to learn to respect the integrity of the traditions of other faiths. However obscure—and some texts can be very obscure—they are, very obviously, records of sacred wisdom which are not to be treated lightly. The Qur'an, the Vedas, the Prajñāparamita Sutras, are more than uplifting bits of literature, slices of pretty poetry—they are the source of life and inspiration to millions. They cannot be wrenched out of context without doing irreparable damage to our appreciation of a highly intricate and often fragile web of faith. The use of sacred texts by people of another faith tradition, whether in formal liturgical practice or by way of general

spiritual reading, means a commitment to value the *whole* of a tradition, not just the bits which appeal. Patience and humility have to go hand in hand with a willingness to learn. We need to go on trying to see what is really there, not what we would *like* to be there or what squares with the prejudices which we often unthinkingly bring to bear on the text. Anything less risks reducing such texts to caricature.

Secondly, a Christian must be sure to maintain the integrity of the Christian tradition. The canon of scripture represents a sacred revelation and, although there are different emphases within the Christian Churches, all are agreed that through these words a privileged and authoritative access to the Word of God is made available to human beings. Just as the New Testament enlightens the meaning of the Old, so the Christian will find religious inspiration in the words of other religions in so far as they can be read in the light of the Word, Jesus Christ.³

The integrity of other faiths

In examining, albeit briefly, the first of these points we need to note that the concept of 'inspiration' can mean very different things to, and even within, particular religious traditions. Indian scriptures are vast and diverse. In theory the Veda represents the primordial revelation or *śruti*, literally 'what is heard' by the ancient seers. In practice, devotional texts, such as the much-loved *Bhagavad Gita* or vernacular hymns and poetry like the Tamil *Tiruvacakam*, are more important in everyday popular religion. The Buddhist *sutras*, especially of the Mahayana schools, somehow manage to combine both. In their simplest form they present the teaching of the Buddha on a number of different subjects. But, since the Buddha insisted that he only taught what was necessary for salvation, they are to be understood in a pragmatic sense as appropriate for particular, but not necessarily all, individuals. Sometimes the Buddha's teachings are given a highly provisional status as 'skilful means'. Paradoxically, then, they need to be understood within the same tradition of Vedic revelation which, in so many ways, they reject. 'Buddha' comes from a word meaning, literally, to awaken; as the Vedic seers felt themselves to have 'heard' the eternally existing primordial truth, so the Buddha's enlightenment is an awakening to what has always existed since time immemorial. Christians naturally tend to think of truth in cumulative terms: there is always more to be learned and more to be discovered. In thinking about revelation we are by

nature eschatologically orientated. Here, however, the Indian tradition tends to be more protological. Truth is not something towards which people progress but something which becomes more and more obscured as time moves on. As the great cycles of creation turn and turn again, and one age inexorably gives way to another, people become more and more ignorant until, in due course, a new act of realization or awakening to truth renews the cycle. In Buddhist terms, a Buddha appears in the world to proclaim *Dharma*, Truth, out of compassion for all sentient beings.

Thus, if we want to speak of revelation in Indian religion we need to note that this is not the 'unveiling' activity of an all-powerful deity, but the personal regaining by great saints of an eternal truth which has been temporarily forgotten. The seers are the creators, or rather re-creators, through human language, of the Divine Word. Islam, however, comes much closer to the Christian idea of a people gathered together by the powerful Word of God. If the central religious figure in Indian religion is the mystic who hears the word and makes it present in his own person, in Islam, as in the other two religions of the book, it is the prophet who recites the words he has been taught by God. The very word Qur'an means 'recitation'; Allah is the revealer, the angel Gabriel the intermediary, Muhammad the messenger. There is no sense of the human discovery of primordial truth in the Qur'an. The recitation of the word is an occasion for calling people together and is therefore to be understood as an event, a making present of God's will, rather than an access to God's *truth*. In Indian religions there is a clear continuity between primary and secondary scriptures (between *śruti*, what is 'heard', and *smṛti*, what is 'remembered'); the two fade into each other since, in principle, any inspired work can lead to the saving knowledge. In Islam, however, there is a distinction between what is revealed and what is inspired. The *Hadith*, based on the sayings and actions of the Prophet and his companions, are to be used in interpreting the text of the Qur'an. In practice these traditions, which give rise to the *Shari'a*, the law which seeks to provide for every aspect of the life of the people, are complementary to the Qur'an but, as human words, are not to be confused with the words of Allah. In matters of exegesis, however, Islam is no more monolithic than mainstream Hinduism; Sunnis, for instance, emphasize the role of traditional commentaries and law while Shi'ites place greater weight on the mediation of the imams to provide a fresh and vital link for each succeeding generation with the event of the Qur'an and the experience of Muhammad.

Even such a cursory glance at two very different traditions should be enough to show that the place of sacred texts can only be properly understood when taken together with other major foundational concepts, such as the nature of Ultimate Reality, of the human person, of human fulfilment and destiny. Christians tend to read the texts of other faiths with Christian spectacles, expecting something akin to bible stories and the sayings of Jesus. We are hardly likely to understand the faith of Hindus, still less to appreciate the wisdom of their scriptures, if we seek in the Veda only for a compendium of moral truths or cogent reflections on the mystery of daily existence. Similarly we show little respect for the integrity of Muslim faith if we criticize the Qur'an for its lack of inspiring stories and nuanced theology.

The integrity of the Christian tradition

This takes us on to my second point: maintaining the integrity of the Christian scriptures. In learning to appreciate the beauty of a text and its morally uplifting quality, we will gradually develop an openness and regard for the tradition as a whole, learning to understand its nuances and the subtle variations of its themes and symbols. At the same time we cannot avoid reflecting on the dialogue which this opens up with those texts which are formative of Christian faith. As a Christian I will begin to understand the reasons why people of other faiths value their scriptures; in accepting that God may be speaking to them through their scriptures can I also accept that God may be speaking to *me*?

Implicit in what we have already said there is, of course, a theology of religions.⁴ Just as there are different approaches to other faiths so there are different attitudes to the values of their scripture. Two extreme theological opinions illustrate the point. The one opposes Christian faith in a radically exclusivist fashion to the unbelief of non-Christian religions; the other relativizes all religions in favour of an ill-defined 'religiousness' which is indifferent to, because incapable of judging between, matters of truth and falsity. Neither allows us to develop a dynamic theology of revelation capable of maintaining a creative relationship between sacred texts; either the would-be dialogue is turned, by definition, into a monologue, or it is reduced to a mere juxtaposition of morally improving sayings and folk-tales.

In between, however, there is room for exploring a great deal of common ground between different attitudes to sacred scriptures. Such texts, whether the Qur'an or the Veda or the New Testament,

are sacred because they give a certain fundamental coherence to the religious tradition. The way they are understood and valued, let alone the material they contain, varies from faith to faith, but they do have this one thing in common: they are all in some sense authoritative. This is clear from the profound respect in which the actual words, and sometimes the written texts, are held. Sometimes they are used liturgically, as in Islam, directing the worship of the community; sometimes they are used devotionally, as in some forms of Mahayana Buddhism, assuming the status of cult objects like statues and relics. But, whether we think of the Indian concept of timeless *śruti* or of the event of the Qur'an revealed in time, inspired scriptures can be said to perform the same *function* in all faiths. To say that a text, whether oral or written, is inspired means that it has a privileged place in the recording, and therefore the evoking, of the formative experience of a community.⁵

To have learned to listen to another sacred text is to recognize that the Spirit of God is at work in the community which has been formed by that text. It is to accept in a practical way the theological premise that the Christian may not put an arbitrary limit on the extent of the activity of the Spirit of God. Here we must be clear. Sometimes Christians have got hold of a very strange idea of their vocation. Whatever else a missionary Church may do (and there can be no end to the ways in which it seeks to share its joy in the Risen Lord) that vocation begins and ends with praise of God for what God has done. So often Christians act and speak as if they know for certain where the Spirit is at work. Such an attitude can be arrogant and presumptuous. The Spirit, after all, 'blows where it wills', and is not to be treated as part of the domestic furniture of an all-powerful Church. The Church serves the Spirit, not the other way round. But, while we may not presume to predict where the Spirit is at work, *at the very least* we must admit that where a people of faith is gathered to recite and listen to the age-old wisdom of their holy books the Spirit is present—even if we cannot fully comprehend how the Spirit may be speaking to them. Such a humble act of faith is demanded by the Good News proclaimed in the pages of the bible: that God 'has no favourites' but wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Can we speak in this way with Christian integrity? To say that the hymns of the Veda or the *suras* of the Qur'an are the inspired words of God does not mean compromising Christian faith. It may, however, mean revising our understanding of the way revelation actually 'happens' in order to show how the God who reveals himself in Christ may also be speaking through non-biblical texts.

Seeking an interfaith theology of revelation

There is, however, no single theology of revelation. As Avery Dulles has shown in his account of different 'models' of revelation, here we find a distinct pluralism within the Christian tradition. For the most part the terms of the debate are set by confessional concerns and denominational emphases. Thus there is a model of revelation based solidly on the distinction between 'natural' and 'revealed' theology; God the infallible teacher communicates himself through clear and distinct propositions. Another model is based on interior experience: God is the 'visitor of the soul' who reveals himself in particular visions, signs or feelings. Superficially this seems more encouraging. If in the former model a clear divide is posited between Christian revelation and those faiths which, by definition, must be considered devoid of a divinely authorized scriptural tradition, in the latter a continuity is assumed; it is possible to hold that both biblical and non-biblical faiths bear witness to God's self-revelation.

This, however, can be at the cost of substituting what Dulles calls a 'natural élitism for the biblical idea of election'.⁶ The trouble with this approach is not so much that it sells the bible short but that ultimately it is based on a model of truth which ignores the historical and social dialectic which forms human consciousness. Any theology of revelation, and especially one which would build bridges between different faith traditions, must take seriously what the tradition says about itself and its origins. It must, in other words, account for the process by which a religious community is formed. This is the heart of the matter. Thus Dulles shifts the terms of the debate to look at the way in which revelation can be said to occur, leading to a particular type of religious discourse—what he refers to as 'symbolic mediation'.

According to this approach, revelation never occurs in a purely interior experience or an unmediated encounter with God. It is always mediated through symbol—that is to say, through an externally perceived sign that works mysteriously on the human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can clearly describe or define.⁷

Such a way of understanding God's self-communication fulfils the basic requirement of any theology of revelation, namely that it links the tradition, the familiar world, with the present and continuing experience of the community, a world which is often strange and threatening. Sacred texts are the records of the key symbols which

evoke memories and form consciousness in a particular way. This is as true of Islam and Vedic Hinduism as it is of Christianity, but let us stick with a Christian example for the moment.

One of the major themes of Jesus's preaching, the Kingdom of God, does not refer to a single idea with a single clear meaning. It has a number of connotations, depending on particular context. In the teaching of Jesus, particularly in the parables, it very often has a provocative or catalytic function, forcing people to use their imagination in order to broaden their vision of the way God interacts with their world. It points the way forward but, precisely because it is a familiar metaphor, it also links the present with the past. Such symbols, often in a dialectical fashion, link the Christian community with its Jewish roots.

The same point applies to the way in which other faith communities are formed; the Buddhist teaching about *Nirvana*, the image of the Hindu god Siva, are potent symbols into which the community is drawn, whether through the spirituality or practice of ritual, meditation or devotion. In these terms revelation is less an 'unveiling' of a truth which is normally kept hidden, and more an invitation to participate in the life-giving discourse of a particular community. Quite simply; symbols have a power to integrate and reconcile.

Thus a Christian theology of revelation—let alone one which seeks to maintain the integrity of other faiths as well as Christianity—has to attend to the originating event and the subsequent interpretation of that event *together*. The two are part of a single creative process. Reading a religious text, still more hearing it recited, is somewhat akin to the way in which I might approach a piece of poetry. The very form of a poem is more than merely descriptive or referential: it appeals to the imagination, asking me to participate in the feelings of the author, yet to invest that text with my own feelings. The text thus passes on to me a particular framework in which the imagination can operate, thus demanding a response. In this sense, can we not talk of poetry as possessing a revelatory function—recording an 'originating event', but also extending its range of possible meaning? Meaning does not just descend fully-formed from 'out there' but neither is it formed within an 'independent' self-constituting human consciousness.

If the analogy holds then this process must be present in some sense in all religions. No person of faith stands outside a religious tradition and then somehow comes to faith through some discrete experience or mental state known as 'revelation'; rather it is the tradition—what

Keith Ward calls the 'iconic vision: a vision of the temporal in the light of eternity'—which forms faith, 'the response of self-transcendence'.⁸ In this sense religions are not to be understood as different expressions of some sort of 'common core' experience or essence but, as George Lindbeck puts it, in cultural-linguistic terms. That is to say: 'Like a culture or language, [a religion] is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities'.⁹ In a revealed religion such as Christianity this means that the tradition of faith has the leading function in the forming of religious communities and the foundation of Christian identity. But, at the same time, all revelation is a continuing reinterpretation of ancient memories, a regeneration of the past in the present and for the present. Faith, the response to and correlate of revelation, is not a special *gnosis* which can be safely abstracted from the messy historical conditions of human limitation.

Thus we can talk about revelation in dialectical terms as that which generates meaning in a religious community. On the one hand, the community is put in touch with that formative event which defines the community; a particular people of faith can no more stand outside its own language of faith than any individual can claim an autonomy of consciousness. On the other, the event is being constantly reinterpreted, answering questions, raising different ones and developing further possibilities for religious living. Or, to put it another way, the activating of past memory unlocks a power for confronting the present.

To read the texts of another tradition with the faith of one's own is to recognize that all people of faith stand within a religious tradition which can be spoken of as a 'revelation'—at least in the sense that it generates *and goes on generating* meaning. Of course the points of divergence and disagreement between faiths remain; in fact, on this model of revelation the differences become more obvious. But that is all to the good. Interfaith dialogue, whether in formal conversation or in the prayerful contemplation of the Word speaking through other sacred texts, is never an invitation to syncretism. Rather it confronts tradition with strangeness in confidence that God's revealing work goes on precisely in this interaction. People of faith will naturally take their appreciation of the symbols of another tradition back into their own familiar world. Such is the work of the Spirit known as inculturation—but that, perhaps, is another story.

NOTES

- ¹ A summary of the Assisi event and material collected for use in liturgical and interfaith events is available in *Resources for interfaith worship and catechesis*, published by the Westminster Interfaith Programme, London.
- ² Considerable discussion has been given to this crucial aspect of the interfaith dialogue in India. Cf especially J. Vempany, *Inspiration in the non-biblical scriptures* (Bangalore, 1973); D. S. Amalorpavadass, *Research seminar on non-biblical scriptures* (Bangalore, 1974). A brilliant example of a Christian presentation of a non-Christian text is Raimundo Panikkar's encyclopaedic presentation of the Vedas, *The Vedic experience, Mantramāñjari*, subtitled *An anthology of the Vedas for modern man and contemporary celebration* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977).
- ³ Cf the discussion in Michael Amaladoss, *Making all things new* (New York, Orbis, 1990), pp 34-42.
- ⁴ There is a rapidly increasing literature on the theology of religions. The best general survey of the area is Paul Knitter, *No other name?* (London, SCM; New York, Orbis, 1985). My *Religions in conversation* (London, SPCK; TN, Abingdon, 1989) tries to take the debate further than the conventional division of theological opinion into the threefold division of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.
- ⁵ The theme of the ritual function of sacred texts has been developed in my *God east and west* (London, SPCK, 1991), esp. pp 31-56. Cf also Harold Coward, *Sacred word and sacred text, scripture in world religions* (New York, Orbis, 1988).
- ⁶ Avery Dulles, *Models of revelation* (New York, Doubleday, 1983), p 79.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p 131.
- ⁸ Keith Ward, *Images of eternity* (London, 1987), pp 164-5.
- ⁹ George Lindbeck, *The nature of doctrine* (London, SPCK, 1984), p 33.