

# THE 'INTER' OF INTERFAITH SPIRITUALITY

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**T**OO MANY RELIGIOUS PEOPLE across the faiths take the title of this essay at face value, that is, they suppose that there are various different religious faiths such as Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism and Judaism, and that bridges of different kinds – conceptual, artistic, theological, literary etc. – can be thrown across from convenient moorings on one side or the other. This is seriously to misunderstand the 'inter' in interfaith and any attendant concept of spirituality. There is no such thing or bloc reality as 'Hinduism' or 'Christianity' so that one can talk simply of *the* Hindu view of life or *the* Christian spiritual life. More to the point, there are numerous forms of Hindu, Christian, Jewish etc. religious commitment, numerous kinds of spirituality under the umbrella of a particular religious label.

To realize that this is the case, one does not have to listen to sociologists, historians or ethnographers (though this helps); one just has to keep one's eyes and ears open amid the controversies and alliances of life. People have the facts; it is just that they choose to ignore them. We are taught from an early age that there is only *one* acceptable form of religious commitment, only one way of being holy, only one path to salvation (one's own, of course), and that 'rival' claimants are either the palest of reflections or downright impostors. Yet day after day in our everyday lives we encounter men, women and children, religious and non-religious, who belong to different spiritual traditions from our own and who are every bit as morally upright and spiritually enlightened as ourselves, if not considerably more so. And most of us choose not to resolve this glaring inconsistency; instead, we tend to compartmentalize what we are taught and how we believe religiously from how we interrelate with other human beings in the street, over the shop-counter, in the office, in the classroom and in our homes.

'In our homes': here lies the rub. It is often the case in contemporary society that spiritual allegiances (or non-allegiances) differ markedly within the same family. The husband may be a believer and the wife not

(or she may belong to another faith), and so it may be among the children. Yet family life may be conducted with a friendly intimacy that makes it impossible to justify superior stances when it comes to faith or spirituality. So the first point I wish to make is this – it is a procedural point, but none the less important for that – that we cannot even begin to speak of *interfaith* anything without making proper sense of the *intrafaith* dimensions of the matter.

In other words, not only are religions extrinsically plural phenomena, they are also intrinsically plural. They are extrinsically plural in that we speak of many different religious families: Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and so on. Extrinsic plurality has to do, among other things, significantly with boundaries between doctrinal affinity and to a lesser extent socio-cultural allegiances. But these boundaries are blurred not only at the edges – so that it is human and healthy to speak of ‘Hindu-Catholic’ and Judaeo-Christian allegiances, for example – but also *within* the different families of religious traditions. This brings us to the intrinsic plurality of religions. Within ‘Christianity’, for instance, there is a range of acceptable Christian forms of life, i.e. a range of acceptable Christian spiritualities, just as similar plurality exists within ‘Hinduism’, ‘Buddhism’ etc. If this is correct, then rather than thinking and speaking of religions as unicentric realities doctrinally, cultically, institutionally, theologically, as we are wont to, we must now consider them as *polycentric* phenomena. A religious tradition, say Christianity, has no one doctrinal, ecclesial, or cultic centre, definable as Roman Catholic, or Anglican or whatever. On the contrary, different denominational centres, designedly porous, must enable, in a properly ecumenical context, an increasingly fuller picture of Christian commitment to be built up. It is only in this way that religions will remain viable, that is, by accommodating different forms of religious belief and practice. I have suggested that they already do this – the alternative is an all or nothing policy inevitably ending in self-destructive fragmentation (a number of sensational examples come to mind); what is still lacking is universal acknowledgement that doing this is both legitimate and the only way forward. In short, religions – religious people really – must acknowledge the viability of different spiritualities *inside* the fold, and by extension, *outside* it. Spiritually, this is an extremely liberating perspective to maintain.

So at last we come to the word ‘spirituality’. Like ‘religion’ this is an impossible term to pin down. Buddhists can be very spiritual people, but they tend not to believe in some existing Spirit or spirit. In fact the word ‘spirituality’ has outstripped its etymology (like the word ‘theology’).

What is a spirituality? I cannot define it, at least in an essentialist sense, that is, on the assumption that there are basic characteristics common to all spiritualities which can be identified and isolated. A spirituality is a *way of life*, an active orientation to the world which regulates belief and practice. A spirituality enters into the quality of our relationships with the being of the world: its people, its other forms of life, its structure. But it is a special kind of active orientation: one which exists within the ambience of a transcendent horizon. It is based on a vision of humanity which does not reduce human nature and goals to purely biological, mental, or quantifiable levels. It has a transcendental surplus which suffuses one's whole way of life, moulding one's goals and aspirations and turning one away from ego-centredness to other-centredness, from selfishness to selflessness. This is hardly enough, of course. We have here the structural bones of a spirituality; these must be fleshed out in terms of a concrete faith-response – in terms of a liturgy, cultic practice, doctrinal norms, theological tradition, ethical guidelines, community context; or at least, if one opts out of a particular religious tradition, in terms of a faith-construct of one's own making. Such constructs are bound to be shaped, explicitly or implicitly, out of elements taken from concrete religious traditions. We do not live spiritually in a vacuum. But to live more or less systematically in this way is to have a spirituality.

If spiritualities derive from faith-responses, and faith-responses derive from religious traditions (directly or indirectly), then viable spiritualities are necessarily open-ended. They are provisional structures of our existence, supportive planks circumspectly, exploratively pushed forward as we seek to make progress across the treacherous quagmires of experience. As such, living a spirituality is not without risk: the risk of heading in the wrong direction, of leaning too heavily on flimsy evidence, of losing one's balance. Interestingly, scriptures acknowledge this risk-factor in metaphors of 'the path'. One is required to be alert during the spiritual journey. 'Arise, wake up,' cautions the *Katha Upanishad*, 'sages say that that path is hard going, like the sharp edge of a razor, difficult to traverse' (I.3.14; cf Mt 7:13–14). The spiritual life is not a psychological crutch. It develops successfully – we develop through it – by critical reflection, trial and error, guidance from more advanced and experienced practitioners, inspiration and assistance from on high. A Hindu spirituality, for instance, develops through dialogue with other forms of Hindu spirituality; it must also be open to dialogue with reputedly non-Hindu modes of religious faith. The same logic of open-endedness applies for the one as for the other. Since it is necessarily open-ended if it is to survive, the spiritual life develops through assimilation and rejection according as circumstances dictate.

(i) 'Assimilation': this is not intended to be an imperialistic process. In other words, the 'other's' point of view should not necessarily be denatured to such an extent that it loses its distinctiveness as 'other' so as to be absorbed into the unchanging forms and structures of one's own perspective. Here is an example. In some Christian churches in India today, there is a movement to indigenize the Christian faith, to indigenize Christian spirituality. Very commendable in principle, I believe. For too long (indeed since its inception), the Christian faith in India has been regarded – with justification – by the vast majority of Indians as an alien phenomenon in the cultural fabric of the land, and there have been various attempts ideologically to marginalize or exclude it from the body politic. Some of the most disturbing attempts at such exclusion have taken place in recent, post-independence history. But how is this indigenization to proceed? By syncretistically including Hindu symbols, liturgical practices, theological ideas into Christian thought and worship? There is no true assimilation here; and there will be no true indigenous faith as a result. Such a faith will disintegrate in time. Then by seeking to integrate the extraneous elements without deference to their original provenance, their continuing life outside the 'host' community, and perhaps most important of all, a reconstructed theological basis legitimating the process of (non-imperialistic) assimilation? By this I mean that if certain Hindu religious symbols or concepts are used by Indian Christian communities in their thinking and worship without sensitivity to what these symbols and concepts have meant (and continue to mean) in their *Hindu* context and without reference to what their 'donor' community of Hindus thinks of such appropriation, and, indeed, without a serious attempt to (re)-structure and propagate a theology enabling these sensitivities to be accommodated, then assimilation has taken place which will be a continuous source of mutual alienation inside the Christian communities concerned and an ongoing irritant to the Hindus outside. Some examples of this are: the mystic syllable *Om*; the ochre robe of the renouncer; the lotus; the idea, derived from some Hindu theological schools, that the deity can be represented as female. Such thoughtless assimilation is entirely counter-productive. And from my experience of attempts to indigenize the Christian faith in India, it is my firm impression that insufficient thought in this regard has characterized most of these attempts.

The point is that if it is to be characterized as respecting the other as other, assimilation must be based on the perception of one's underlying theology as inherently *provisional* in important structural respects. This provisionality has to do with the sensitivities mentioned above. Such

theologies must wrestle with (and come up with) *non-exclusivistic* answers to questions concerning the availability of 'salvation' to all peoples, and the means to this salvation as respecting the historical realities and contingencies of those to be saved (i.e. salvation cannot depend on history being taken seriously for one people – the 'chosen people' – and not seriously for everyone else by being available ahistorically through the back door, for example by means of death-bed inspirations, post-mortem revelations and so on). I suppose it can be said that such faiths or spiritualities adopt a specific approach to the place of the *intra* as well as the *inter* in the context of what it means to be spiritually oriented.

(ii) But proper assimilation entails appropriate rejection. The spiritual life is a process of selective development. Integration cannot be indiscriminate else growth will be cancerous. The position of the 'other' is not appropriate for one in every respect, nor infallible. One develops from where one is, that is, within a received framework of belief and practice. It is within the terms of this framework that progressive integration can take place. The requirement is, however, that this framework be sufficiently provisional and flexible for genuine integrative growth to occur by means of an open-ended process of dialogue.

At this point we may consider the following objection. Some thinkers maintain that the space between families of faiths or spiritualities, the *inter-* rather than the *intra*-space we have been talking about, is basically unbridgeable. This is because the realities between such spaces are supposedly conceptually and linguistically incommensurable; as such they are experientially incommensurable. So spiritualities, which are experiential realities, can neither be communicated nor shared cross-culturally or trans-religiously. Such positions, in the theological sphere, are usually maintained *a priori*, on the basis of faith in a revelation which is *sui generis* and hence qualitatively superior to all other faiths (e.g. H. Kraemer), or faith in a linguistic matrix (e.g. the Christian idiom) which is salvifically the only efficacious one (e.g. G. Lindbeck). This exclusivistic theological stance is underpinned by the claim that faiths, as life-orientations, come as wholes, as one structural package; either we live and accept them as wholes or not at all.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that conversion cannot take place. It can and it does of course. But it occurs as a rejection of the total structure of one's past faith (marginal features in this regard, such as patterns of dress and food, apart) and the acceptance of a whole new package.

But this stance is untenable for a variety of reasons. Theologically, for the Christian at any rate, it fails to make sense of the claim that the God whom Jesus called Father, who wishes all to be saved, has anything like

an effective saving will in history. For if the theological stance in question is true then it is also true that most human beings have either been damned (for as non-Christians they have not openly acknowledged Christ as their saviour) or are being saved mysteriously and ahistorically (perhaps through specially tailored moment-of-death or postmortem experiences). Sociologically, this position is at odds with the now accepted view that religions are not 'unitary structures', 'wholistic packages'. On the contrary, as I have indicated, they are plural polycentric realities, intrinsically and extrinsically. They are devices to help us make sense of and indeed mould experience. They comprise a host of micro-centres, conceptually, liturgically, doctrinally and so on which are the products of the continuous interweavings of a contingent history. As such these microcentres cannot but coexist inconsistently and non-systematically, in spite of valiant efforts on the part of theologians to systematize. Such systematization, as an interpretive 'meta'-exercise, is inevitably artificial and removed from reality to a significant degree. The stance is also challenged by history, for experience teaches that faiths have neither originated nor developed as unitary wholes; they are the ongoing products of continuous interrelationship with each other. All in all they are syncretic realities, the complex result of countless transcultural conceptual, linguistic etc. overlappings, compromises, interactings. Thus it was that Thomas Merton, shortly before his death, could encounter the Dalai Lama, and testify to experiencing a *spiritual* bond, a togetherness, which defied conventional theological analysis but which had all the marks of authenticity.<sup>2</sup> In the face of such testimony we must say either that advanced spiritual practitioners do not know what they are talking about – which is difficult to believe – or, in the light of the cumulative evidence mentioned thus far, that the exclusivistic espousal of incommensurability is untenable.<sup>3</sup> It is in fact untenable because we remain, at the end of the day, human beings with a common basic structure of what it is to be human, and because we have the capacity, attested by history, to reach out, to communicate with each other, within the shared boundaries of this *human* space, its endlessly varied particular cultural and other embodiments notwithstanding.<sup>4</sup>

Thus a sound interfaith spirituality is possible, a spirituality which subsumes the whole experiencer, and provides a salvifically enabling orientation to life. It is possible because there seem to be no sustainable a priori objections to its occurrence, and because it has occurred and continues to occur (as testimony from the lives of spiritual practitioners indicates) in the history of religions. Not only is it possible, it is also desirable, the more so in today's inter-communicational world. If

spirituality is an open-ended orientation, as I have contended, then it cannot a priori exclude interaction with any other accredited form of the spiritual life, intra-, inter- or even extra-religiously (viz. the spiritualities of those who belong, or claim to belong, to no specific faith). Not only is it desirable, but it may even be necessary, for one's own spirituality to survive. If one refuses to consider another way of the spiritual life as a possible partner in genuine dialogue, one's own orientation will cease to be open-ended; as a result structurally it then embarks on a course of increasing narrowness, stunted growth and final ossification. One feature that does seem to emerge from surveys of religious experience across the boundaries of space and time is that the divine reality – this is now a theistic way of putting it – does not exist aloof, apart from the whole reality of human existence in our world. On the contrary, I believe that one must interpret this experience as indicating that though it is generally claimed that the 'divine reality' is not in any way reducible to human and other mundane structures without remainder, it is no less a universal claim that this (ultimately) *tremendum et fascinans mysterium* is grasped a little more nearly the more the human reality, for all its concrete specificities and contingencies, continues to be explored, sought after and revered. Interfaith spiritualities, then, must be here to stay.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'The more one penetrates different religions and tries to understand them in their total peculiar entity', declares H. Kraemer, 'the more one sees that they are worlds in themselves, with their own centres, axes and structures, not reducible to each other or to a common denominator which expresses their inner core and makes them all translucent', *Religion and the Christian faith* (Lutterworth Press, London, 1956), p. 76. The (added) italicized phrases indicate how Kraemer viewed religions as incommensurable, monolithic entities. For an exclusivist this has ideological advantages.

<sup>2</sup> See Merton's posthumously published *Asian journal*, edited by Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (Sheldon Press, London, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> Thus conversion is a circumstantial thing. It can be an all-or-nothing affair, but it can also be an accretional process, the final gestalt incorporating old elements and structures re-deployed if transformed.

<sup>4</sup> For more on this, see the author's 'Seeking others in their otherness', *New Blackfriars* (March 1993).