

WHEN SHIVA HAS BLUE EYES

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THE DIALOGUE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE is a topic both urgent and complex. As the clash of civilizations grows more violent, we feel panic rising within us. Our planet is indeed shrinking. It is becoming clear that we can no longer escape from each other, neither geographically nor psychologically. Either we will learn to collaborate across our cultural diversity, many-faceted as it is, or humanity will not survive another hundred years. Such stark warnings leave us in no doubt that our global future requires the great faiths to grow in authentic, comprehensive, mutual understanding. However, the complexity of such a growth in inter-faith understanding is often underestimated.

Entering Into Interreligious Dialogue

The single term 'interreligious dialogue' refers to encounters of many different kinds. Much depends on the individual personalities involved; however varied our own experiences might be, they can never exhaust the whole range of possibilities.

I have been invited to write about my 'process of entering into and participating in the spiritual world of the other', drawing on my own years of experience of inter-faith dialogue. Inter-faith dialogue is, of course, a vast field. There are different religions, and different varieties within each one. Dialogue, too, takes different forms: sometimes it is academic, centring on research in what is called comparative religion; sometimes it takes place in a deliberately contrived setting, through such events as conferences or joint prayer services; sometimes it just occurs spontaneously, through what arises naturally when people of different traditions live or work alongside each other. Over the last thirty years and more, my experience has included all these three forms of dialogue. This article, however, will draw only on daily life encounters. It will be a highly personal history; it will not include any formal academic theological reflection, or seek to interpret what is happening in any kind of scholarly way.

My entering into and participating in the spiritual world of another tradition was a process I would liken to that of dyeing a piece of white cloth so that its colour becomes orange. Orange coloured robes still distinguish the religious renunciate in the Hindu tradition. Originally, the Hindu monks in India dyed their white cotton clothes bright orange. But they used a natural earth dye, which did not hold when the garments were washed or left to dry in strong sunlight; then they were bleached to near white again. But only to near white, however: always some slight orange hue could still be detected on the cloth. Over many immersions in the dye the colour would become fast; eventually it would fade only a little, even in strong sunlight. My process of entering the religious and spiritual world of the other has been like that: constant immersions, gradually tinting my consciousness with that same hue.

Communication of such personal spiritual experience is possible only through symbols, paradoxes and parables. I have therefore chosen to describe a few simple incidents, symbolic of the process. If we reflect on these incidents, they can show us how significant changes in conviction have taken place, significant growth in understanding the other's world. They show that the dialogue is authentic, that the dye is holding.

Can Shiva Have Blue Eyes ?

It was the first day of the school year in East Palo Alto and a curious group of six year olds was crowded round the desk of their new, young teacher, Cathy. After a long intense scrutiny of her face, a question suddenly popped out at her. 'Miss, what's wrong with your eyes?' Startled, Cathy had no answer, so asked in response: 'What do you think is wrong with them?' 'Miss—they're blue!' Like a shower of ice cold water on a hot day, the realization came to Cathy that in this Afro-American, Hispanic, Asian ghetto, blue eyes were never seen. Sensing the distress her words had caused, the questioner slid a pair of small arms round Cathy's neck and whispered, 'Never mind Miss, they'll turn brown when you grow up'.

We smile at such innocent confidence that we can outgrow the colour of our eyes. Could blue-eyed Cathy ever experience Palo Alto in the same way as her brown-eyed Asian pupil? Could she ever truly enter an Asian experience by undergoing a radical change in her perception and world view? Our topic raises these questions. No one has a direct

experience of external reality; it comes only through an image re-constructed in the individual's unique consciousness. Thus, as all experience of external reality is unique to the individual, is it not an impossibility to enter an experience not our own? Is not the individual's inner psychic reality equally impenetrable, in essence not shareable? It is questionable whether a dialogue of religious experience can require more of the participants than a respectful attempt to understand what significance that experience might have for the other. Race and culture might dictate that lord Shiva has brown eyes, but if the eyes which 'see' Shiva are blue, will not Shiva have blue eyes? This is more subtle than creating a god in our own 'image and likeness'. We seem destined to remain confined within our own experience unless . . .

Suddenly, the ground on which one stands in unheeding confidence is not there.

One does not fall.

There is no abyss, no darkness. Yet all one's comfortable religious security has gone.

The sense of knowing and understanding the One in Whom one believes disappears into a shivering awesome space without symbols or language.

Nothing of what one had is lost, yet it appears simply not to exist any more.

One does not need to be purified of previous misconceptions.

There is no incitement to argumentation or interpretation, no need to prove why one believes; but one does believe.

This experience is a pure gift and one which, however it might be explained, I would consider an essential pre-requisite for being able to enter truly into the spiritual world of another tradition. During this experience, one is released from carrying one's 'God box'; one is released from the clutter of culture-bound concepts which dictate that Shiva must always have brown eyes. The release is glorious but truly awesome, a searing initiation into a spiritual journey across traditions.

Unless You Become As Little Children

Long before the lecture was due to begin, the hall was already packed. All the Ashram community of sanyasis (monks and nuns), plus lay devotees and a sprinkling of foreigners, sat in silence, crossed-legged on the floor, with focused attention and open note-books on their knees. No word of the spiritual discourse they had come for should be lost! The text being studied was the Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, the longest and probably the most complex of all the Hindu scriptures. Swami Krishnanandaji was a competent lecturer with a good command of English, who would speak for precisely one hour twice in the week. I had at least an elementary knowledge of the Upanishad. I understood Swamiji's English. Between lectures I studied the text again. Yet after attending only four of these lectures I had the sensation that I was sinking into quicksand. As I looked around the audience, their gaze riveted on the speaker and their eyes on fire with joy, I knew that I did not understand the true message the words conveyed.

Perhaps had the text been the gospel of St John, my eyes too would have shown the fire set alight in my heart by the words. I realized that at those afternoon lectures I was sitting among a community of believers to which I did not belong. I had matured in a Christian faith community, not in a Hindu one, so how could these scriptures set me on fire? It is not enough to have an intellectual grasp of another Scripture, to identify its nuances and appreciate its symbolic language. Approaching the scripture of another tradition from a mainly academic stance will leave its inner mystery hidden from view. Encounter with God through Scripture is a foundational religious experience, but religious experiences first arise in the creative imagination, not in the rational intellect. We first assume a religious identity via our family narratives, the stories of our culture which form us in whom to trust, to hate and to believe in. So the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* was put aside for the moment and replaced by *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, a book prepared for mothers to read to their small children. For several weeks, an Indian sister and I read a story each night from that book, until slowly, very slowly, religious consciousness was opened to the Mystery in unfamiliar words and images. The command, 'unless you become as little children', took on even greater significance for us.

It had required a deliberate attitudinal change for us, as adult Christians, to attempt to approach the spiritual world of Hinduism at

the level of primary speech, of pre-conceptual impressions. But from that time on the inner meaning of the Upanishadic texts began to emerge and a sense of communion with the Hindu faith community began to grow. It would take many years and much effort for its maturing, but it brought great joy along the way.

Give Me Back My Jesus!

In an immediate and whole-hearted response to the call of the Second Vatican Council to 'inculturate Christianity', we plunged into deep waters. We attempted to absorb into our personal prayer the religious language of Hinduism. During an intense seminar with this explicit purpose, one participant was suddenly seized by uncontrollable laughter. With tears of mirth running down her face, she explained that, on entering the chapel for evening prayer, she had heard herself pleading, 'O Thou, All-pervading Brahman, give me back my Jesus!'

Laughter is an excellent antidote to fear, but the fear which can grip the emotional core of any Christian risking a deep encounter with Hinduism is no laughing matter. If Jesus is no longer acknowledged as the only, the unique self-revelation of God, then will not our faith be in vain? Have we perhaps built our Christian tradition on an illusion? When Christ is relegated to one among many, would I still choose to be a Christian in today's world? These and many more such questions arise in the darkness of a suddenly shaken religious certitude, a darkness which can be very dark indeed. Can academic theology calm these fears? Asian theologians and theologians in Asia have long sharpened their teeth on this hard bone of contention. The doctrine of the uniqueness of Christ has been both the Christian community's glory and an insurmountable obstacle. It is obvious that no dialogue is possible when one participant's opening statement is: 'I have the whole Truth and the only Truth, so listen to me'. Nor is it possible when one condescends to allow that the other might have a 'partial truth'.

Although Christian theologians have addressed this issue with scholarship and reverence, many Christians, especially those committed to inter-faith collaboration, remain unconvinced by their arguments. So indeed do our Hindu sisters and brothers, even when they appreciate the Christian initiative. One such initiative was a book

entitled *Krsna and Christ*, written by an Indian Jesuit.¹ We gave a copy to a widely known Hindu author and spiritual guide, who read it with enthusiasm, extolling its skill, insight and sensitivity. However, there was one occasion on which he recommended the book to a Hindu audience as ‘excellent’, but then, on leaving the auditorium, smiled and added, ‘Ah, but . . . he does not believe in Sri Krsna’.



Krsna

In the spontaneous dialogue of everyday life, one can simply acknowledge with joy that the other does believe in Krsna. It is then easy to accept that, for them, Sri Krsna provides an intimate meeting with the God of Love; he is the core expression of their religious experience, setting alight the fire of the spirit burning within them. And when the same fire of the divine love is burning within us through our relationship with the Christ, the joy between us is authentic. There can be no fear of loss of Christ for us, when we recognize that what has been gifted to us through the historical Jesus, God can gift to our neighbours through the mythical Krsna.

¹ Ishanand Vempeny, *Krsna and Christ: In the Light of Some of the Fundamental Concepts and Themes of the Bhagavad Gita and the New Testament* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1988).

Only In This Life

On a very hot summer afternoon two weary young men were working at the reception desk. It seemed that a higher than usual number of difficult and discontented foreign visitors had shouted at them that morning, and a great effort was now required to maintain their polite and gentle responses. As the last complaining visitor left, patience was exhausted, and one of the men slammed a book down on the desk, swore under his breath, and began to kill all the mosquitoes he could. I was sympathetic, but, to my surprise, his companion shook him by the shoulders with the words: 'Man, what are you doing! Do you want to take another birth?'

This was not said in jest. The ever-present awareness that one might be caught in the cycle of re-birth has profound consequences. Nothing is more serious for the orthodox believer in the traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism than the karmic residue of one's actions. Whether the final goal is expressed in terms of *Moksha* or *Nirvana*, escape from the fate of endless numbers of re-births is a crucial motivational force in life. For the Hindu consciousness, it is fear which churns the ocean of *samsara*, of rebirth. For centuries, Christians too were reared in fear, in the fear of plunging into a hell from which there would be no escape.

The emphasis in Christian theology has now moved towards confidence in the loving forgiveness of God, but the individual must still make the leap into that consoling embrace. The God of Love is present in the Hindu tradition in the form of Lord Shiva or Sri Krishna, and the devotee lives in the hope of final union with him. Whether the motivational force is the desire for union or the fear of not achieving it, a way out of the re-birthing cycle has to be found; and every effort is made to ensure that it will be in this present life-span.

In recent years we have witnessed an increasing number of western Christians fascinated by a superficial flirtation with the doctrine of re-birth. Doubts about the truth of the allotment of a single life-span raise questions as to how it might be possible to be Christian yet believe in re-incarnation. However, for the man or woman whose psychological unconscious has been formed by the doctrine of the inevitability of numerous lives, this is very far from a superficial theory or an easier option. As a foundational conviction, it defines all relationships to persons, to oneself, to material reality and to God. All relationships are clearly acknowledged to be for only this one of many lifetimes.

The six year old son in our neighbour's family had recently drowned in the river Ganges. Sitting in silence on the floor cutting vegetables with his mother, I heard her whisper, 'I know little Ramu is alive'. A Christian interpretation of her words might express the belief that her son was now eternally at home with God. For her they meant that she was sure Ramu had already taken another birth, one she hoped would be closer to final freedom. Accepting Ramu's new life-span in a new family demanded from his mother an unconditional psychological detachment—a detachment made possible by the strength of her reliance on God as the sole meaning of all relationships.

At the level of daily life encounters, there seems to be no value in attempting by some form of intellectual gymnastics to reconcile these two totally distinct views of human existence with each other. They converge naturally in the Now, in the realization that we can live only in this present moment. Thus those belonging to a tradition which emphasizes the necessity of living many life-spans are given this advice: 'if you want to know about your past lives, look to your present life, for it is the result of the ways you have lived. If you are curious about future lives, look to your choices now, for they will determine the future.' For those convinced that each of us has only one life-span on earth, the ethical consequence is substantially the same: 'look carefully to the way you live each moment, for you have no other moment'. Experience of God and freedom are possible only in this life, whether it be one's only lifetime or one of many.

Double Belonging?

For the first time, a large Hindu ashram in North India was hosting a Hindu—Christian dialogue meeting. A heavy weight of religious leadership from both sides was present. The conferences and plenary sessions were studiously reverential but also, on the whole, stimulating. At the coffee breaks, yellow clad Brahmarchyis moved among the participants offering the familiar trays of tea and biscuits. Engrossed in an interesting conversation during one such break time, I had already taken a cup of tea, but as I unmindfully reached for a biscuit, I was stopped by a loud coughing noise attracting my attention. I looked a question at the young monk with the tray, and he responded: 'Mataji (mother), it is Friday'.

Orthodox Hindus will fast twice in the month, on the eleventh days of the light and dark halves of the lunar calendar respectively. In our

small ashram we followed the Christian tradition of fasting on Fridays. The young monk who had reminded me of this was well known to us. He and several of his companions would often walk down to us when they had a little free time, to share their doubts, their joys, their spiritual journey, or the difficulties in relationships with others in the ashram. They hoped to find with us encouragement in their vocation to *Sanyasa*, and we had also lived and learned in their ashram. We knew about their spiritual practices and hopes as they also knew about ours. More important than the knowing about each others' convictions was the fact that we cared about each others' spiritual journeys.

Two years ago, an international meeting of Christians involved in inter-faith interaction was held in Belgium. The chosen theme was the possibility and consequences of a 'double belonging'; it had arisen as an important contemporary concern at a previous meeting. Can a person identify meaningfully with two different socio-religious traditions at the same time? Can a person be simultaneously a member of two different religious communities? In the context of the violence of contemporary multi-cultural society, this question demanded an urgent response. The issue has many difficult facets yet carries a vital hope. If a 'double belonging' is possible, then spontaneous and effective mediators could arise between faith traditions that are in conflict. Political mediation has so often failed in these situations, as have the peace-making initiatives of religious authority. Mediation needs understanding, and understanding must go beyond surface attempts at reconciliation or integration. The basis of such a 'double belonging' could only be a strong belief in the oneness and transcendence of the Ultimate Reality to Whom we all belong.

Such persons with the freedom to move naturally and simultaneously within more than one tradition might appear, tragically, to be very rare among us. Yet, without moving from the formal world of Hinduism, the young monk in the vignette quoted above had moved into another community by his understanding of, and desire to preserve, the spiritual journey of a Christian in the Christian tradition. At such a level, surely all of us could become effective mediators, by holding a 'double' yet equal concern, each for the other. And yet how far we seem to be from this possibility. When Jews become concerned that believing Muslims are faithful to their authentic spirituality, and their Islamic brethren equally concerned that the Jewish community deepens its intimacy with the One God both worship, then at last Jerusalem

might be a city of peace on earth. Our violent times demand no less a transformation than this.

Does It Work?

Struggling to place the heel of her right foot behind her right ear, the new student in the Yoga class challenged the master: ‘how do you know that this thing works?’ His response was patient: if something has been practised for three millennia, and is currently helping people across all cultures and religions, it surely works—otherwise humanity would have abandoned it long ago.

Every day, in all aspects of contemporary society, we witness the effects of the rules of profit and achievement. As we do so, we feel the truth of this master’s statement. Humanity has little tolerance for what does not achieve its goals. *Yoga* opens up different possibilities. The effort to achieve is a major block to the practice of *Yoga*. It is the very cessation of effort which transforms a physical posture into a yogic *asana*, into a spiritual practice.

There have been many approaches to the dialogue of experience in recent years, but none of these has been more widely used by western Christians than the paths offered by the various Yogic systems. People in ever increasing numbers find that they are led to a deeper religious experience within their own tradition by these practices—practices which were inspired by the Hindu tradition. Gradually these practices can effect a profound transformation.

To summarize briefly the cumulative wisdom gained through these practices over millennia would seem an impossible task. However, the essence is captured in the opening sutra of Patanjali’s *Ashtanga Yoga*, the first codification of Yogic practice. Here the goal is defined as *citta vritti nirodha*, that is, the stilling of the fluctuations of consciousness. The whole system trains a continuous awareness and stilling of the body, psyche, and soul, in order that the practitioner might enter the depth of consciousness and stay in reverential awareness of the One who dwells there. This experience is described as the Great Silence, a contemplative encounter where all words and concepts lose their potency. Perhaps it is only in the experience of God the Great Silence that we find the way to dialogue across the differences created by our over-abundant religious words.

Standing Still and Passing Over

As was said at the beginning, these small vignettes taken from events in daily life are so ordinary that their significance could easily be overlooked. Yet they indicate that gradual transformation of consciousness which allows one to open oneself without fear to the full gift of God's self-revelation.

By chance, this reflection was written 37,000 feet above the ground, on a direct flight to Rome. Nothing in my personal experience of interreligious encounter has been subjected to so much scepticism, envy and distrust on the part of the Christian community as the possibility of entry into a Hindu guru-disciple relationship. If 'Rome' is to veto anything in the dialogue of religious experience, it will surely be this. In spite of varied and theologically sophisticated explanations of this ancient and revered way of encounter, there remain gross fear and ignorance of even its most basic conditions. True, there are valid reasons for this in the Christian West, where the available models are usually of two types, both inauthentic. Either we have endless scenes of childish, emotional masses slavishly following their pop-idol gurus, or else we encounter the perennial spiritual tourists, surfing the guru scene, comparing notes and avoiding commitment. In either case, the sincere Christian will rightly have been repelled by these inaccurate interpretations of a universal religious inheritance.

The term *guru* indicates one who leads from darkness to light. The purpose of the relationship is to draw the disciples out of their own inner darkness, the darkness of ignorance of their true nature, into the light of the mystery of God's indwelling presence. Passing on the doctrines of a specific religious tradition is not the essential goal of this relationship, although the specific experience developed mainly within the Hindu tradition. This tradition has linked the relationship between the guru and disciple with a rite of final initiation. This rite, *Sanyasa diksha*, holds a most important place in the Hindu religious identity, but in fact, the rite *per se* is not an indispensable condition of the guru-disciple relationship. Guru and disciple recognise rather than choose each other. Theirs is a spirit-to-spirit encounter which depends entirely on each one's conviction of God, surrender to God, the One-without-a-Second.

It is said that authentic gurus are rare but that true disciples are even more rare. Where Gurus have been widely recognized as authentic, they remind us all quite simply that, although for the Christian Christ may be God, God is neither a Hindu nor a Christian, neither a Muslim

nor a Buddhist. In the spirit-to-spirit dialogue of guru and disciple, we witness an experience of passing through and beyond the traditions, without the integrity of these traditions being harmed.

By chance, for that morning's meditation a small black and white photograph of the Guru had been placed directly ahead. There was no previous practice of using contemplation of the image of the guru as access to inner stillness, so the ensuing experience was totally unexpected. From one instant to the next, the 'name and form', the human reality of the Guru, had dissolved. Immediately after, the name and form of the meditator dissolved also. Everything remained the same; everything had changed. Blue eyes can indeed mature into brown eyes and yet, paradoxically, remain blue. The meaning of the shivering, awesome space became clear.

Blue eyes can mature into brown eyes and yet paradoxically remain blue. Passing into the experiential religious world of the other is not a skill, or combination of skills, which can be learned. One must be led the whole way. It is a passing beyond the ghettos of religious pluralism. One cannot pass over from one tradition into just one other. One can only pass from one tradition into all other traditions.

And So

Unavoidably, some of the examples included here are enmeshed in history and outmoded social situations. I realize that I leave many questions unanswered, many trains of thought stopping short of their destinations, often deliberately so. If this article seems to you to have romped through the more serious theological reflections and hazards of interreligious dialogue with the unburdened heart of a child picking daisies, I shall be glad. If you have intuited that such freedom of heart is gained only via the most profound encounters involving body, soul and psyche, I shall be grateful. Of its nature, the process hinted at is both personal and enigmatic; it occurs in a space where in truth there is no way, only the going.

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