

THE GROUND WE SHARE
ON INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AND UNIVERSAL WISDOM
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My main influence has been Fr. Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine monk who spent the last 38 years of his life in India as one of the founders of a Hindu-Christian Ashram. Fr. Bede taught about what he called the Universal Call to Contemplation, which means that every person is called to share in the grace of the contemplative life, mystical union with God—not just “professional religious” such as monks and nuns. This Universal Call to Contemplation also means that at the heart and at the summit of all the world’s great religions there is a contemplative-mystical core. Here is how he put it in an interview for the video “The Human Search”: “...when we get beyond the multiplicity to unity, we find a common tradition, a common wisdom that we all share.”

In the scholarly world this is known as the perennial philosophy, but it is not a notion shared by everyone. Some rather think that we start out with a problem and our religions are our way of solving that problem, the problem of death, the problem of evil. But I prefer this approach, that we start out with an experience, and our religions, our faith traditions, are our way of understanding that experience and letting that experience transform our lives; then our faith traditions are our way of passing that experience on, articulating it through language, ritual, song, dance and art. As that experience starts to get expressed one person’s version of it looks very different from another’s, and that should be no surprise. For all of his teaching about the universal call, and the universal wisdom Bede wrote in his book *River of Compassion*(which was incidentally a Christian commentary on the Bhagavad Gita!):

The Buddhist *nirvana* and the Hindu *moksha* are not the same, nor are they the same as the Christian vision of God. So the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian are all experiencing the ultimate Reality but experiencing it in different ways through their own love and through their own traditions of faith and knowledge. There are obviously various degrees as well. There is a tendency to say that there are no differences anymore, but I do not think that is true.

And beyond that he added, beautifully:

In a sense, the experienced of the ultimate truth is *different for each person*, since each person is a unique image of God, a unique reflection of the one eternal light and love.

Now, that need not negate our efforts at understanding each other and finding common ground. Our sangha in Santa Cruz has as part of its mission statement that we aim “...to understand the experience of Ultimate Reality as found in all the world’s spiritual traditions.” In order to do that, I need to really try to enter into someone else’s experience of ultimate reality as much as I can. My friends know that there are a few words that really raise my hackles, and they are, “It’s all the same.” No. We have very different experiences and I want to respect those

differences, understand them as legitimate expressions of an experience of the Divine, and even uphold them as someone else's vehicle for union with God. That's when the real work starts, finding "unity in diversity." To use other words of Fr. Bede from his book *Return to the Center*, and so...

I have to be a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Jain, a Parsee, a Sikh, a Muslim, and a Jew, as well as a Christian, if I am to know the Truth and to find the point of reconciliation in all religion.

And so the journey to the center... The challenge for all of us, each of our religious traditions, is to re-discover the depth of our own tradition, the original inspiration. Fr. Bede said,

That is the hope for the future: that religions will discover their own depth. As long as they remain on their surface, they will always be divided in conflict. When they discover their depth, then we converge on the unity... as you go deep into any religion, you converge on the center, and everything springs from that center and converges at that center...

I find this very exciting, because I have been convinced by thinkers greater, holier and wiser than I that we are entering into a new phase in the history of the planet. Without getting into it too deeply here, some call it the Second Axial Period. Whereas the First Axial Period was marked by a birth of a sense of the individual spiritual path, individual ethical responsibility, the birth of the rational mind and self-consciousness, this new period will be and is already marked by a sense of global consciousness. We are now aware that every tribe, nation and religion in some way shares a common history, and that is making us realize that we belong to humanity as a whole and not just to our specific group, be it ethnic, social or religious.

Part of the challenge of this new consciousness in this new period of history is horizontal: cultures and religions (and they often go together) meet even on a surface level and enter into what Ewert Cousins calls "creative encounters." But those creative encounters are not going to make of us one bland world religion. We borrow the phrase from the great paleontologist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: this convergence gives birth to "complexified collective consciousness." That's a mouthful, eh? What it means is that *true union diversifies*; our union, the convergence of our centers of consciousness gives birth to more creativity. At the same time, again borrowing from Teilhard, "everything that rises will converge," that is, everything that is reaching for spirit will eventually meet.

From a vertical perspective (and this is why the cross is a universal, archetypal symbol), this new consciousness is not only communal and global—the horizontal axis—it is also ecological and cosmic. So it is also necessary for us, all cultures and religions, to plunge our roots deep into the earth in order to provide a stable and secure base for future development. This new global consciousness has to be organically ecological, supported by structures that ensure justice and peace. So at the same time, we also need to band together to "bring about a new

integration of the spiritual and the material, of sacred energy and secular energy into a total global human energy.”¹ Thus the need for dialogue, community, and relationship—the phrase of Raimundo Pannikar, “well-worn paths between huts”—with a growing awareness that each person and each group is something of the whole, and is bringing a valuable part of the conversation.

Let me end this introduction with this quote from A.J. Arberry in his classic book on Sufism:

It has become a platitude to observe that mysticism is essentially one and the same, whatever may be the religion professed by the individual mystic: a constant yearning of the human spirit for personal communion with God. Much labour and erudition however have also been expended upon the attempt to shew how one form of mysticism has been influenced by another; while proof is often difficult or even impossible in such elusive matters, it is generally agreed that no religious movement can come into being or develop without having contact with other established faiths or denominations which are bound to leave their impress upon the new creation of thought and emotion. ...While mysticism is undoubtedly a universal constant, its variations can be observed to be very clearly and characteristically shaped by the several religious systems upon which they were based.²

With that in mind, we can talk about the ground we share...

laying a foundation

The foundational text for Catholic Christians is from Vatican II, 1964, *Nostra Aetate*, which states concerning other religions that

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and the doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people. ... The Church, therefore urges her children to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.³

We have to note how groundbreaking this was: in the last throes of our counter-Reformation stance in only 1928, Pope Pius XI, in an encyclical entitled *Mortium Animos*, had denounced ecumenical dialogue!

¹ Ilia Deleo, *Christ in Evolution*, 28

² A.J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*, 11-12.

³*Nostra Aetate*, #2 (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 28 October, 1965)

Based on *Nostra Aetate*, then, theologies of inter-religious dialogue tend to fall in one or another of four groups:⁴

- **replacement theology**: that there is only one true religion which will replace the erroneous one;
- **fulfillment theology**: there is one true religion that *fulfills* all other religions (note the subtle difference);
- **theology of mutuality**: there are many true religions which are called to dialogue;
- **theology of acceptance**: there are many religions which have different ends (note the words “ends” which will be important for our discussion later).

Or, to put it another way, more simply, theologies of religions are often categorized in three models, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

- **exclusivism** holds that there is only one savior and one true religion or church and that no salvation is possible outside of them;
- **inclusivism** maintains that although there is only one savior and one true church, *salvation remains possible outside them*—though it still is always ultimately dependent on Jesus Christ and the Church;
- **pluralism**: holds that there are many saviors and different paths leading to salvation, none necessarily superior to the others.

As the theologian Peter Phan pointed out in his brilliant article “Praying to the Buddha,” there are respected Christian theologians that advocate each of these positions, making credible appeals to both Scripture and Tradition to support their views. And, incidentally, these three positions occur also among theologians of other religions, including Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism.⁵

But apart from this intellectual exchange there is a broader conception of dialogue within the Catholic Church. For example, the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue issued a document in 1984—called, “The Attitude of the Church Towards the Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission”—in which it is stated that the evangelizing mission of the Church is a single reality, but this single reality is “complex and articulated.” And it indicates five principal elements in this mission of evangelization:

- The first one is simply **presence and witness**; one might call to mind Charles De Foucauld and his witness and martyrdom in Algeria; or the Trappist monks who were killed only recently in there as well (as told in the beautiful movie “Of Gods and Men”).

⁴ Paul Knitter in *Introducing Theologies of Religions*.

⁵ “Praying to the Buddha, Living amid Religious Pluralism,” Peter C. Phan (January 26, 2007 / Volume CXXXIV, Number 2 of “Commonweal”)

- The second element of evangelization is a **commitment to social development and human liberation**.
- The third is our **liturgical life, prayer and contemplation**. Please note here, the word liturgy comes from the Greek word *litourgia* meaning a kind of public work or service, such as a library or a power company. The public service that the Church provides is its liturgy, and in this way liturgy is a tool of evangelization.
- The fourth element of our evangelization is **inter-religious dialogue**.
- And finally then comes **proclamation and catechesis**.

Mind you, I was always taught to pay attention to the hierarchies imbedded in Roman documents, so I note that only after presence and witness, commitment to social development and human liberation, liturgy, prayer and contemplation, and inter-religious dialogue, comes proclamation. One might say that all those other things somehow lay the groundwork.

Then in 1991 the same council issued another document entitled "Dialogue and Proclamation." In that document for different kinds of dialogue are described:

- There is first of all the "**dialogue of life**," in which people engage others in their community in a neighborly exchange of daily joys, problems, and concerns.
- There is the "**dialogue of action**," which is a call for Christians to cooperate with those of other faiths in projects of mutual interest.
- There is then the "**dialogue of religious experience**," in which people share spiritual practices, such as prayer and contemplation, with others of different faiths.
- And finally there is the "**dialogue of theological exchange**," which is of course specialists who undertake to enrich each other's conception of their respective religious and spiritual traditions.⁶

Please note again the hierarchy: dialogue of life, then action of mutual interest, religious experience all come before theological exchange and, I want to say, again lay a foundation for the discussion.

What I am mainly concerned with here, from the first document, are the third and fourth aspects of evangelization, namely prayer and contemplation and how they lead into inter-religious dialogue; and from the second document the "dialogue of religious experience," in which people share spiritual practices with others of different faiths.

While I am laying a foundation here let me mention this document, the "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation," which was issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1989. I think we can safely assume that this was very close to the pen of our present pope, Benedict XVI. In chapter V on "Questions of Method" it says that, "The

⁶ "Praying to the Buddha, Living amid Religious Pluralism," Peter C. Phan (January 26, 2007 / Volume CXXXIV, Number 2 of "Commonweal")

majority of the great religions which have sought union with God in prayer have also pointed out ways to achieve it.” The document then goes on to quote *Nostra Aetate*, the same declaration on relations with other religions from the Second Vatican Council, saying,

Just as “the Catholic church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions,”⁷ neither should these ways [with which other great religions have sought to achieve union with God in prayer] be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian. On the contrary, one can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured. It is within the context of all of this that these bits and pieces should be taken up and expressed anew.⁸

So, what we are always aiming for is to learn from other traditions “what is useful,” while remaining faithful to and exploring even more deeply the “Christian conception of prayer,” which may actually appear clearer to us as we explore some of these techniques.ⁱ It seems rather easy for me to change the name of the religious tradition and apply this to Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists...

In the first part of this presentation I will be exploring what we can learn from this universal wisdom gleaned from other traditions, and in the second part the Christian conception of prayer based on some aspects of the Christian understanding of the make-up of the human person that, again, lay a foundation for our understanding of prayer.

Let’s also add that the latest official teaching of the Catholic Church, at least as articulated in *Dominus Iesus*, favors inclusivism while warning against the dangers of pluralism. It categorically affirms the “fullness and definitiveness of the revelation of Jesus Christ” and the “unicity and unity of the church,” stating that “it would be contrary to the faith to consider the church as one way of salvation alongside those constituted by the other religions, seen as complementary to the church or substantially equivalent to her, even if these are said to be converging with the church toward the eschatological kingdom of God.” Now this of course is a good deal more protective and defensive in tone than the documents that came before it, which didn’t seem to feel the need to accentuate our unicity and uniqueness as much, so let’s just note the change of tone and the change of climate and see...

perennial philosophy (universal wisdom) and meditation

Let me repeat: What I am mainly concerned with here are prayer and contemplation and how they lead into inter-religious dialogue; and this dialogue

⁷ Declaration *Nostra aetate*, n. 2.

⁸Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Vatican City, 1989, V.16.

of *religious experience*, in which people share spiritual practices with others of different faiths.

I have been formed in the school of thought that believes there is what we call a “perennial philosophy,” a common core of teachings about the transcendental essence of religion that underlies the world’s authentic religious traditions. Bede Griffiths always referred to it as “universal wisdom,” a term I favor as well. This is a term that was coined in the West by the German rationalist philosopher Leibniz (1646-1716), but made more popular by the 20th century philosopher Aldous Huxley. (I want to add that not everyone is a “perennialist,” but there is a long tradition going back to William James, the author of *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and includes the great scholar of comparative religion, Huston Smith.)

My favorite way to describe this perennial philosophy, this universal wisdom, is this:

- First, there is Spirit (or God, or divine power, however we may name it).
- Second, this Spirit isn’t just outside of us, “supernatural”—it is found within, as St Paul says, “the love of God is poured into our hearts by the Spirit living in us.”
- But, third, we most of us have no knowledge or awareness of this power of the divine within us because we are living in a world, in a state, that is marked by whatever we may call it—sin, delusion, separation. But...
- Our religions teach us, there is a way out of this state of sin delusion and separation, and if we follow that way as laid out by our tradition we will have an experience of this indwelling presence of God, which is an awakening, a rebirth, an enlightenment.

Ultimately, the main purpose of every religion is the mapping out this way. Equally important, what is not often articulated in various forms of this perennial philosophy, is that that awakening to this indwelling power of Spirit then manifests itself (or is meant to manifest itself!) in love for others as mercy and compassion. As Jesus says, that love of God that is poured into our hearts will then flow out of our hearts like a stream of life-giving water, in love and service, as co-creators, participants in the divine nature, as St. Peter writes.

But, you see, this is a knowledge that only comes out of and then leads to the interior journey, the contemplative path. And it goes hand in hand with the interior way, the way of meditation and contemplation, something beyond our normal spiritual life of ritual and activity, and even of study and teaching. It is a journey to the depths of our own beings to have conscious contact of this Spirit in the cave of our own hearts. It is for this reason that so many of us have studied the great mystical texts of other traditions “which have sought union with God in prayer,” so as to find new ways of expressing this experience. Furthermore, since these traditions have also pointed out ways to achieve that union, and since we reject “nothing of what is true and holy in these religions,”⁹ neither should these ways with which other great religions have sought to achieve union with God in prayer “be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian,” as

⁹ Declaration *Nostra aetate*, n. 2

the CDF wrote. On the contrary, one can take from them what is useful; “these bits and pieces should be taken up and expressed anew” in the light of the Christian understanding of prayer and our ultimate end.

A few concrete examples... First, a beautiful practice that is common in our ashram and others throughout India is the reading of non-Christian sacred texts at the beginning of the liturgy or just before the liturgy begins. The original proposed Indian rite after the groundbreaking Second Vatican Council (which was never fully adopted) had suggested using Indian Scriptures within the liturgy itself, at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Word and not *before* the liturgy. The explanation of this practice given in the introduction to the *pro manuscripto* version of the Indian rite taught that even if we recognize “only ‘seeds of the Word’¹⁰ in these scriptures,” the final manifestation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ “did not render these ‘seeds’ pointless and irrelevant,” since Jesus came to fulfill, not to destroy, just as the New Testament did not abolish the Old but helped us to discover richer and deeper meaning in it. The non-Christian scriptures, “even if they represent only a cosmic revelation, still form part of the dynamism of the Word and are better understood when placed in this context.”¹¹ In other words, as the late theologian Jacques Dupuis explained, we Christians do not and cannot consider other traditions to be equal to the preparation of Israel for the event of Jesus Christ, because those other religious traditions do not have an identical meaning in the history of salvation to that of Judaism, or the same relationship with the “Jesus Christ event.” Nevertheless, all these other scriptures were already oriented to that same event and for that reason those other Scriptures are seen as not just pre-Christian but “pro-Christian.” “They are all authentic ‘evangelical preparations,’ even if in an indirect way, and as such are *destined by God*, who directs all of human history to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.” He is even bold enough to say that they “represent *true personal interventions of God* in the history of the nations that point them towards the decisive intervention of God in Jesus Christ.”¹²

This pithy little phrase “seeds of the Word” is very important for us. It comes from a second century saint Justin Martyr. Justin was a philosopher who came to believe that Christianity was the true philosophy. There are two sides to this conversion: first of all, as he says himself as he is led to his death before the Emperor Rusticus, that he had tried to learn every system before he came to believe that Christianity was the true philosophy. On the other hand, even though he had come to regard Christianity as the true philosophy, *he didn’t dismiss the other philosophies out of hand!* He saw Plato and other philosophies as not only pre-Christian but (as Jacques Dupuis put it) *pro-Christian*. It is from him that we get the Christian use of the phrase *semina verbi* in Latin, or *spermatikos logos* in Greek—seed of the Word, which was already a concept among Stoic philosophers. This “word”-*logos* was the generative principle of the Universe according to Greek thought, the germ from which all else develops. It is this

¹⁰ This term (in Latin) comes from Justin Martyr, *semine verbi*.

¹¹ New Orders of the Mass for India, CBCI Commission for Liturgy, National Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, Bangalore, 1974, p. 13-14.

¹² Jacques Dupuis, *Gesu Cristo incontro alle religioni*, 162-163.

same Word—*logos* that John says in the prologue to his gospel was with God, and was God and become flesh in Jesus. And Justin thought that all those “who live in accordance with reason [*logos*] are Christians, even though they are godless.” Here is a Christian saying that the Word can be detected outside the visible boundaries of Christianity. This predates a later famous phrase of the 20th century theologian, Karl Rahner, “anonymous Christian” by about 1700 years.

I’ve been fascinated by this concept for years, especially in the work that I do, and I must say there are narrow interpretations of it and broad ones. Some say that Justin was only referring to Greek philosophers and not to so-called “pagan religions,” so this is not applicable to other religions. But it certainly seems as if Vatican II had a broader interpretation, and those who I have studied do as well.

With that in mind, one might also rightly question the use of the word “only” in that above-mentioned introduction to the Indian liturgy, as in “*only* seeds of the Word” and “*only* a cosmic revelation”! What is not mentioned is that not only are these scriptures “better understood when placed in the context of the Bible,” but perhaps the Bible too may be better understood when placed in the context of the cosmic revelation and these “seeds of the Word,” helping us to see our own tradition as an expression of a larger movement of the Spirit in humanity.

the *telos*: on the nature of the self

I found a useful distinction in the writings of John Cassian, the great 4th century chronicler of the desert monastic tradition. He and his friend Germanus are in the desert of Egypt to engage in a long series of conversations with the old men (*gerens*—that’s a term of respect, by the way) of the desert, which are passed down to us in a work called “The Institutes.” And their very first recorded conversation with “the most experienced of fathers of the monks” is with Abba Moses who points out to them that every art and discipline has both a *scopos* and a *telos*, Greek words meaning “a goal” and “an end.” For farmers, for instance, the goal is to cultivate the land and till the soil toward the end of having a rich harvest and an abundant crop. A good modern example might be any kind of sporting event: the goal is to score points, but the end is to actually win the game. And Abba Moses says the monastic profession has both a *scopos* and a *telos*, a goal and an end as well. When he asks Cassian and Germanus, “What is your goal and what is your end?” they say that they “bear all things for the kingdom of God.” Indeed, Abba Moses says, that is the end, but you need a goal first, but Cassian and Germanus cannot figure out what that goal is. So he tells them: “The end of our profession...is the kingdom of God...but the goal or *scopos* is purity of heart.”

I think this is a very useful distinction, especially when we are dealing with comparative religion. I think it’s safe to say that we describe the end, the *telos*, in different ways.

I work toward describing that end for the different traditions with anthropology. Why? Mystics and other spiritual thinkers have always explored human nature and find out what is the meeting ground between the divine and the human,

meditate on human nature as a way to probe the sacred vocation of every person, the sacred vocation of all life. We are not just asking, “what is Ultimate Reality, what is God?”; we are asking, “Who am I and what does all this have to do with me.” (Or, “Where am I and why am I in this hand basket?”) Here is my favorite comparison about the end—the nature of the self.

For instance, the Upanishads of Hinduism have what we call a metaphysical approach. There is Brahman—the ground of being, similar to Meister Eckhart’s notion of the *bullitio/ebullitio* as we shall see below: within the Divine there is an unceasing dynamism, an unceasing inner creativity, a rolling boil. The created world is the “boiling over” spilling out from God’s inner boiling. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad for example teaches that,

*As threads come out of the spider,
as little sparks come out of the fire,
so all the senses, all the worlds, all the gods,
yea, all beings issue forth from the Self.¹³*

The Upanishadic teachers are always asking the question, “What is the Self? What is the true nature of the Self?” Then they make the interior journey through the layers of consciousness (as described for instance in the Katha Upanishad: beyond the senses is the mind, then the intellect, then the dawning of self-consciousness, then the store consciousness, then the Great Person, the *Purusha*). Their answer is “essentialist”: the Atman is the universally abiding, unchanging self that underlies and sustains all thing, the ground of consciousness. And this ground of consciousness is the same as Brahman, the ground of being—*ayam atma brahma*. Atman is the real Self and it is—at least from the viewpoint of the strict *advaitin*–non-dualists (Sankara et al) identical with the Divine. And we, the individual self, disappear when we realize that identity with the Divine like a drop of water into the ocean. So the most ancient Indian traditions speak of an unchanging self or soul—the Atman as the “real,” that which does not change, but only the Paratman, the Self of God not the *jivatman*, not the individual self. (Mind you this is only one *dharshana*–philosophy of the six major ones of India. It just seems to be the most popular in our day and age and culture.)

The Buddha’s teaching is actually a highly radical in its break from this “essentialist thinking,” which conceives as the “real” as that which does not change. The Buddha’s view was that *everything changes!* Even the so-called “Self,” the Atman. Instead of trying to describe what the Self or soul was, the Buddha concentrated on *how it worked*, how it functions, because for him Self was a process, not some kind of fixed immutable unchanging essence, as a matter of fact one of the marks of existence according to the Buddha was *an-atta*—that’s Pali instead of Sanskrit for no atman! No self! Actually for an odd play on words, one Buddhist scholar (John Peacocke) says that this word *anatta* which we usually translate as “no-self” actually is better translated as “not-self.” The Buddha is not necessarily saying there is no self; he is only saying that anything we can grab onto is “not-self” because the Self is a process, not some kind of

¹³ “Breath of the Eternal,” 141.

fixed immutable unchanging essence. The self is a composite of *skandhas*—heaps of aggregates that are not fixed but always changing: forms, sensation, perception, mental formations, consciousness. The self exists but only as a set of interrelated processes not any kind of unchanging thing. You might even say that, whereas Hinduism teaches of a ground of being and a ground of consciousness, for the Buddha there is no ground! There is only change. Our everyday world, “the Wheel of Life,” is characterized by “dependent origination” or “co-dependent arising”; all things arise together, connected to each other. And so *dukkha*—suffering arises out of causes and conditions—clinging to some notion of “self” and expecting-hoping that it will last, and as soon as we figure out that there is nothing that is permanent and lasting, and accept that fact, we stop suffering.

The 13th century Zen master Dogen teaches it this way: we are a relativity, a constantly shifting self in a constantly shifting world. The spiritual life means unmasking the emptiness of the self we thought we were—self-abnegation, selfless-ness, no-self-ness. Dogen calls it “casting off body and mind.” Awakening then is awakening to the non-dual person, realizing that there is no split between body and soul, that they are not two things. But also we and others, and other created things are not two either: there is an interconnectedness between self and others and world.

Usually Buddhism teaches that all sentient beings have Buddha nature. Dogen says something a little different: every creature is Buddha Nature, so not just sentient beings but all things, animals and plants as well as rocks and human beings, gods and angels. “Has” means there is some eternal self, some hidden unchanging nature, it could be understood that we have some hidden potential like a seed that when it is nourished blossoms into a Buddha! Whereas even some traditional Buddhists tend to teach that we can seek liberation from the ever changing by finding the permanence of “Buddha nature,” for Dogen that is a Buddhist heresy: there are no eternal substances neither within us nor within the world. All there is, is impermanence, so Dogen uses the phrase *mujo-bussho*—“impermanence Buddha nature.” Buddha nature is impermanence.ⁱⁱ

Western thinkers tend to work from a body-mind dualism, and to some extent this abides in the prophetic religions as well, Judaism, Christianity and Islam: there is something within us—“mind” or “soul”—that is a timeless reality, a substance that is preserved beneath and despite the endless changes that occur in us, psychically and physically, our “Eternal soul.” But I am being convinced over and over again more and more that biblical anthropology, especially Christian scriptural anthropology knows nothing of this (and I really only feel as if I can speak for Christian anthropology, my own tradition). As the great Anglican scripture scholar N. T. Wright writes “ultimate salvation is not in heaven but in the resurrection into the combined reality of a new heaven and new earth.” He says the rather shocking thing that “the traditional preaching about everyone having a ‘soul’ which needs saving” is “almost hopelessly misleading. He has given me a whole new vocabulary for something toward which I have been sneaking for some time now, what he calls “eschatological integration.” If we take specifically St Paul’s anthropology seriously as well as his mystical intuition, Paul teaches that “God’s ultimate future for the cosmos is the joining together in

the Messiah [that is, in Christ] of all things in heaven and earth," and thus for the human being the ultimate future also is "the full integration of all that we are made to be." And he uses the word I used earlier, the *telos*, and describes an appropriate Christian anthropology like this:

God, says Paul, will be 'all in all'; and for Paul it is the body, not just the soul, the mind or spirit, which is the temple of the living God. The body is meant for the Lord, he says, and the Lord for the body.

Hence the belief in bodily resurrection. Therefore the central message of the New Testament isn't that we are supposed to escape the world and go to heaven, but rather that God's sovereign, saving rule will come to birth, as Jesus prayer and taught us to pray, "on earth as it is in heaven." "The story of all four gospels is not the story of how Jesus came in Jesus to rescue souls for a disembodied, other-worldly heaven."¹⁴

In Christianity I see at four different models operative.

The first is the famous Pauline anthropology of spirit, soul and body. But this does not mean three separate abstract-able elements, but instead sees the human person as a complex "differentiated unity," who can be viewed from different angles as onemight turn a gemstone around. We see in the second story of creation in the book of Genesis that the breath (spirit) breathed into the clay (matter/body) makes the *nepesh* (soul, psyche). Here is my mathematical/chemical equation: matter + spirit=living soul. When spirit enters matter it becomes a living thing.

Second then we speak of image and likeness—we are made in the image of God and by righteous living we move to likeness. Hence the first story of creation, *let us make the human being in our own image...* St Hippolytus wrote that "...when we have been deified and made immortal, God has promised us a share in his own attributes. The saying 'Know thyself' means therefore that we should recognize in ourselves the God who made us in his own image..."¹⁵ Of course Christians believe that Jesus is the "image-ikon of the unseen God" (see Colossians 1) and we are the "image of the image," moving from image to likeness. St John says in his epistle, *We shall be like him for we shall see him as he is* (1 Jn); or from the great saint Clare of Assisi: "[Jesus] is the brightness of eternal light and the mirror without cloud... [So] look into that mirror every day and study well your reflection..."

A third image that works for me is this notion of "ground" [*grunt*, it sounds better in German!] common to the 13th century mystic Meister Eckhart as well as the more modern theologian Paul Tillich. So Meister Eckhart says, "God's being is my life. If my life is God's being, then God's existence must be my existence

¹⁴ Rt Revd Prof N. T. Wright, "Mind, Spirit, Soul and Body: All for One and One for All. Reflections on Paul's Anthropology in his Complex Contexts." Society of Christian Philosophers: Regional Meeting, Fordham University, March, 2011, 2-3.

¹⁵ From "On the Refutation of All Heresies," Cap. 10, 33-34.

and God's self identity is my self-identity..."; and "Truly you are a hidden God, in the ground of the soul where God's ground and the soul's ground are one ground." Eckhart speaks of a *bullitio* and an *ebullitio*—*eggressus–regressus*, a boiling and that which boils out, and exit and a return. At some point in our boiling out we turn around and look back and see where we came from and begin the return.

And finally, a fourth image, probably most important of all—and this I believe we share with Judaism and Islam, the prophetic traditions: union with God. How is this return to God described? We don't believe that the Ultimate Reality is the dissolution of the self into the Great Self like a drop of water back into the ocean. Nor do we believe that there is no self, obviously, or that the self is only made up of changing substances. We believe that the individual self abides and the ultimate state is to be in union with God, in a kind of mystical marriage. (And so also the writings of the great Sufi poets.) The great monastic saint Bernard of Clairvaux wrote eloquently and at great length on this mystical marriage. He claimed that "we become one spirit with God." But here is an even more shocking writing from St Basil the Great: "Through the Spirit we acquire a likeness to God; indeed we attain what is beyond our most sublime aspirations—we become God."¹⁶

Now: are these three—the *advaitin* Sankara, the Buddhist, and the follower of Jesus—having the same experience but simply expressing it in different terms? The Hindu *advaitan* might say that the end is to awaken to the fact that I am Brahman, that nothing is real except Brahman, and that this awakening destroys ignorance and we are freed from the endless cycle of birth and death. A Buddhist might say the end is to awaken to the fact that there is no abiding "self" of God or of any human being, and that all things are in a constant state of flux; to accept that fact and to surrender to it is the state of *nirvana*, supreme bliss. For a Christian (a Jew and a Muslim might also agree) that *telos*—end is often described as a kind of mystical marriage, a sublime experience of the Absolute in personal relationship. So, we do describe the *telos*—the end of the spiritual life in very different terms, even within our traditions. I always like to say, let's not argue about these articulations of the end; let's just bow respectfully to each other's poetry.

But what we discover to our amazement along the way is how similarly we describe the *scopos*—the goal, the proximate end, you might say, as well as the way to that goal! First let's talk about the *scopos*, and then the way to it. Let me give you an example. I ran into this beautiful phrase that I think is a wonderful brief universal description of the goal of the spiritual life: "To learn oneself is to forget oneself." Before I tell you where that comes from let me give you some examples from other traditions.

Of course, Jesus in Matthew 10:39 (among other places) says: *Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life...will find it.*

¹⁶ From the treatise *On the Holy Spirit*, Office of Readings, 632.

From the Tao Te Ching #7: *The self is realized through selflessness.*

From the Katha Upanishad: *By study of the yoga of the self, the wise know that which is hard to see, that which is deeply hidden, which lies in a cave of the heart and rests in the depths, the ancient deity—and pass beyond joy and sorrow.*

From the Bhagavad Gita Chapter 4: *All the actions get dissolved entirely of those who are free from attachment and have no identification and no sense of mine with the body, whose minds are established in the knowledge of the Self, and who work merely for the sake of sacrifice.*

From the writings of the Sufi mystic Abu Hamid al-Ghazali: *You are created by two things. One is your body and your zahir—your outer appearance, which you can see with your eyes. The other is your batin—your inner forces. This is the part you cannot see, but you can know with your insight. The reality of your existence is in your inwardness. Everything is a servant of your inward heart.*

Or better yet, al-Bistami's pithy phrase: *Forgetfulness of self is remembrance of God.*

Now back to the first one I mentioned—that was from the 14th century Japanese Buddhist master Dogen, who is considered the founder of Japanese Zen: *To learn the Buddha Way is to learn one's self. To learn one's self is to forget one's self. Or, as a modern Zen teacher, Yamada Koun Roshi, said, The practice of Zen is to forget the self in the act of uniting with something—Mu, or breath counting, or the song of a thrush... Concern about me and mine disappear.*

So, what these traditions agree on is the goal, the necessity of going beyond the small self, what Islam calls the *nafs* (that is the great *jihad*, by the way, as you may know, according to a hadith of the prophet Muhammad—the *jihad al-nafs*, the conquering of the self), or what Merton called the “false self,” what we usually identify as the self, to experience this deeper reality—perhaps we could call it our real self, Christian's might say with St Paul that it is “hidden with Christ in God,” or our spirit, our Atman, our Buddha nature.

Here is Sri Aurobindo:

The One Spirit who has mirrored some of His modes of being in the world and in the soul, is multiple in the Jiva. That Spirit is the very Self of ourself, the one and the Highest, the Supreme we have to realize, the infinite existence into which we have to enter. And so far the teachers walk in company, all agreeing that this is the supreme object of knowledge, of works and of devotion, all agreeing that if it is to be attained, the Jiva must release himself from the ego-sense which belongs to the lower Nature of Maya.¹⁷

¹⁷ Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, 412.

(And let's at least give a brief mention to the fact that also at the level of ethics we find quite a common articulation of the fundamentals of morality among the great traditions, especially some form of what we call the Golden Rule: *do not do to others what is displeasing to yourself*. This too is an example of the *scopos*, this proximate end.)

It could very well be, as the theology of acceptance that we noted above would posit, that we not only articulate the end-*telos* differently, but that the many religions actually *have* different ends. Who I have studied more than anyone on this is Bede Griffiths, himself a great master of comparative religion and dialogue, and he says it in a kind of startling but, not surprisingly, personalist way:

The Buddhist *nirvana* and the Hindu *moksha* are not the same, not are they the same as the Christian vision of God. So the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian are all experiencing the ultimate Reality but experiencing it in different ways through their own love and through their own traditions of faith and knowledge... In a sense, the experience of the ultimate truth is different for each person, since each person in a unique image of God, a unique reflection of the one eternal light and love.¹⁸

And yet, amazingly, we somehow have a similar notion as to what the goal is, the way, even practical applications of that way, and we can share with each other wisdom about that way. And ultimately, that is the purpose of every religion: to make this known and to map out the path of return.¹⁹

This is what I mean by the perennial philosophy and universal wisdom, that there is a common core of wisdom to the spiritual life, in some way a wisdom that both precedes and goes beyond our dogma and doctrine, our ritual and language, because it grows out of the experience of union with the Divine or Absolute Reality. When we read the mystical literature especially of the contemplative traditions, we find this resonance. I can say it no better than my confrere Fr. Bruno Barnhart:

Not only is the Mystery present in a different way in each tradition, but *we are to learn from all of them*, from the primal, tribal religions as well as the highly developed traditions of Hinduism and Christianity. The way to the realization of the Self, however, is simple: *it is the way of surrender* [hence, "to learn oneself is to forget oneself"]: a surrender which proceeds through ever more interior stages. The personal way must also correspond to the traditional wisdom, according to one of the great traditions, of faith. The great religions begin with a mystical experience and then develop into complex systems of thought. It is necessary, if we would know the Mystery, that we *penetrate through the exterior shell of the rationalized system* to realize within oneself the original experience: that is, to participate in the divine life which has been shared among human

¹⁸ Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion*, 130

¹⁹ Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Center*, p. 99ff

beings. This is the kingdom of God and the essential message of all religion. (Emphases mine.)

He goes on to say that external religion, with its rites, dogmas and institutional structures, as important as it is, only exists to bring us to the personal experience of this mystery. All the external forms, all the 'language' of religion, can and must be revised over and over again so that we can communicate the mystery to the people of a new age. But we first have to acknowledge that the mystery "already dwells in the heart of every human being." First of all "the church must awaken to this 'universal revelation.'"²⁰

What many of us Christians have found is that, instead of challenging our belief in Christianity, this approach actually strengthens our belief because we see how our own tradition is an expression of this universal call, this universal wisdom. While we're on that note, I find quite often when dealing with people of other traditions I am involved in a kind of apologetics. But not the kind of apologetics we usually think of this day and age, not limited to trying to defend this or that particular dogma or doctrine of Christianity, but trying to show that *Christianity is itself a legitimate expression of this perennial philosophy!* Because I meet many people who have decided it is not.

praxis

But not only that: as I already mentioned, not only can we benefit from reading and meditating of sacred texts from other traditions, as the CDF put it in that letter concerning meditation, other traditions which have sought union with God in prayer have also pointed out marvelous ways to achieve it. Since we reject "nothing of what is true and holy in these religions",²¹ neither should these ways—ways with which other great religions have sought to achieve union with God in prayer—be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian. On the contrary, we "can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured. It is within the context of all of this that these bits and pieces should be taken up and expressed anew."²²

This is another level: first there is the *telos*—the end about which we may not agree on an articulation. Then there is the *scopos*—the proximate end where we actually do find some agreement, at the level of anthropology, psychology, and ethics. What we also can share is a kind of "spiritual technology," if you will, what I heard a Buddhist describe as "the mechanics of meditation," the practical tools that we have found lead us to that end of union with the Divine. To give a practical example, I may quibble a little bit with how *ashtanga* or eight-limbed yoga describes the *telos*, the end of the spiritual life (or not...), but there is nothing that I have found in the eight limbs of ashtanga yoga that mitigates against it being used as a useful spiritual practice for me as a Christian: the

²⁰ Bruno Barnhart, *The One Light*, 397.

²¹*Nostra aetate*, n. 2.

²²"Letter," V.16.

restraints, the disciplines, the postures and breath control practices, the sense withdrawal and the three pronged limbs of concentration, meditation and *samadhi*. Or we may not agree with Buddhism on our words to describe the *telos*, the end, but how many folks have benefited greatly in the past decades from the mechanics of meditation from the Zen tradition.

What is the way to this place in us, this consciousness beyond self, deeper than the small self with which we usually identify?

The Greek word *praxis* that I used above corresponds to the Sanskrit word *sadhana*, which I usually translate simply as “practice” or, as Baba Hari Das loves to emphasize, “daily practice.” This is a specific term from Hindu and Buddhist Tantrism, but has come to mean directed spiritual practices, *tapas*—austerities in general. Strictly speaking a guru or teacher initiates one into practices appropriate to one’s state in life, personality, lineage/tradition and desired goal. Every religious tradition marks out a path to this return, practices, spiritual disciplines. It seems to me that what has been so attractive to Westerners about the Asian traditions is their “practices,” practical spiritual disciplines that aim at the cultivation of the whole person, in ways that Christianity has not always done in a healthy way. I ask myself, as a Catholic (monk and priest, even), without losing sight of our specifically Christian perspective and understanding of anthropology and the goal of the spiritual life—and perhaps with a better understanding of both our anthropology and our goal (“return to, union with God”)—what can we learn from other traditions? And also, of course, what have we to share?

the gift of contemplative prayer

A quote from Fr. Bede:

My view is that the deeper your contemplation, the nearer you are to God. The nearer you are to God the more open you are to the world, and that is where the hope lies.²³

Fr. Thomas Keating asks: “What would be the major elements of a spiritual life that is rooted in its own spiritual tradition and at the same time is in dialogue with the other world religions?” And as contemplative communities what ought to be our relationship to “the world of ours as it moves into the new millennium with the enormous baggage of human problems that seem to be almost without end? What can the Christian contemplative tradition give to this world that is coming?” Well, Fr. Thomas says, the great gift that contemplative prayer can offer is simply this: *the experience of Divine Presence*, because it is exactly this experience that is lacking in the post-modern world— *the experience of Divine Presence*. And who else is going to be able to bring this realization of Divine Presence back into society but those who themselves have experienced the Divine Presence? So the question then really becomes *how*? How are we going to share this “reign of God” that has been entrusted to us? In what mode are we

²³ Bede Griffiths, 1984, Shalom News, Kansas City, KS, 5-6.

going share this reign of God that points to the heart of the world its own contemplative dimension?

He then goes on to suggest that we might rightly ask whether in this new millennium if it still should be the purpose and aim of the religions of the world, or for that matter even of special spiritual disciplines such as yoga or Zen meditation, “to make disciples or converts as we have been instructed to do up ‘til now. Rather, he suggests, in light of the historical development of global consciousness that is now emerging, is there perhaps *“a new understanding of the Gospel that is now required, in which we see Christ himself emphasizing [instead] that all men and women are brothers and sisters.”* Could it be that the *first duty* of the world’s religions in our time may not be to *propagate* themselves so much—though this can be done with prudence and charity—but to *create communion* between the world’s religions. (Remember those foundational steps in dialogue we noted earlier.) The other world religions must first of all be considered “as our brothers and our sisters, greatly loved by God,” with something to contribute to us, and something to contribute to the world at large as well. Perhaps what is needed first and foremost in our day and age is collaboration between all those who have true human values at heart, and especially collaboration among those who have a long tradition of spiritual experience. Why? Because, as we Catholics say and I think others from other traditions could say, we reject “nothing of what is true and holy in these other religions. As a matter of fact, we have a high regard for their manner of life and conduct; we have a high regard for their precepts and the doctrines, which, even though they are different from our own teaching in many ways, nevertheless “often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people.” As a matter of fact, we Catholics are *urged* by our church “to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of these other religions.” While witnessing to our own faith and way of life, we are urged to “acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians,” in their social life and culture as well as in their spiritual traditions.²⁴ This is the great treasure of humanity that now needs to be shared. As Fr. Thomas says, “Perhaps for the first time in history we [could] manifest that all of the human family are the children of God, and that each religion has its part to play in revealing the true God, and that above all it is God’s will that we live together in peace.”

Unfortunately, up until now the major religions of the world have been one of the chief sources of violence in our world. At least part of the reason for that is because the greatest security that most people experience is in their religion, so any real or perceived threat to one’s religion feels like a threat to a greater security. This, if we are honest, is one of the reasons we tend to be over-protective and somewhat over-idealistic about our own particular tradition, not necessarily because we ourselves are so religious or deeply spiritual, but because we want the security of being right, and maybe even a certain feeling of superiority, that we are somehow better than everybody else. As Ken Wilber writes, (in an essay entitled “Translation versus Transformation”) religion in its primary stages often acts as a way of creating and building up a sense of a

²⁴Nostra Aetate, #2

separate self, conforming to a certain image, archetype or model. Then that separate self or the collective of separate selves that gets created by our religious belonging has to be fortified, defended and promoted.

On the other hand, what we often find happens through the *contemplative* experience is just the opposite—that sense of a separate self begins to dissolve! And with that these (what Fr. Thomas calls) “rigidities and exaggerations” that we use to defend and promote our tradition also start to relax a little bit—sometimes a lot!—and suddenly, through having had an experience of the ineffability of God, experiencing God’s mysterious fathomless depths, we simply stand in awe, humbled at the mystery that surrounds us, in all of created reality as well as the mysterious depths of the person standing in front of us. And we realize with humble relief that we don’t, as a matter of fact, have the cosmos all figured out. As a Christian I might even be able to admit equally suddenly that, yes, the fullness of the *godhead dwells in Jesus bodily*, as Paul described it, and yes, there may be nothing that can be added to the revelation of God in Christ, but no, *we have not yet fully understood what either one of those things really mean!* But perhaps through the eyes of another tradition a fuller understanding of the revelation of God in Christ is finally being unveiled for us, perhaps some aspect of our own tradition that had remained thus far inchoate.

the trinity and aspects of divinity

My favorite example of this is Raimundo Pannikar’s approach to the Trinity. In an article entitled “Toward an Ecumenical Theandric Spirituality,” he describes three aspects of the divinity and three forms of spirituality that correspond to those three aspects: the Father as relating to the silent apophatic dimension, the Son as relating to the personalist dimension, and the Spirit as the immanent dimension.

- The silent apophatic dimension he relates to the Father, since the Father expressed himself only through the Son and of himself has no word or expression. This apophatic spirituality is similar to the Buddhist experience of *nirvana*, and also to the silence of the Taoist and the Upanishads. Pannikar says specifically Buddhism could be considered the religion of the Father, and in the Buddhist silence the Christian can glimpse a reflection of the depths of the Father since the Buddhist moves to the experience of apophatic silence by negating the way of the Word, of thought of *logos*.
- The personalist dimension Panikkar relates to the Son, since the Son is the personal mediator between God and humanity, through whom creation, redemption and glorification flow. This is especially helpful in our dialogue with Judaism and Islam, even when our differing understandings of the revelation of the Word (which we share with them as children of Abraham) break down because, “The Jew and the Muslim see ultimate reality expressed in the word of God; and the Christian in the person of Christ, who is the personal Word of the Father. The Word of God, then, is personal and intensifies personality since it differentiates at

- the same time as it unites.” This could actually be an aid in dialogue with the devotional strains of all popular religions, certainly that of Hinduism.
- The immanent dimension Pannikar relates to the Spirit, since the Spirit is the union of the Father and the Son, which in turn has its resonance in the Hindu doctrine of advaita, non-duality of the individual self and the Absolute. “...the advaitic Hindu seeks undifferentiated union with the Absolute; in this he or she reflects the spirituality of the Spirit since the Spirit’s work is primarily that of union.” I would add to this also the sense of immanence in the tribal traditions, and the primal peoples.²⁵ⁱⁱⁱ

The Trinity has a twofold universality that enables us to see the great spiritual traditions as dimensions of each other. First of all, it reflects essential aspects of the religious experience itself (a universality) and so is found as a pattern throughout the world’s religions and philosophies. And, following on that, the Christian notion of the Trinity can provide a kind of overarching pattern for seeing the spiritual attitudes that are fundamental to humankind, as they have been identified in the major religions of the world, in relationship to each other when we see them operating together in the Trinity. More importantly, it could be that we Christians may not even know or understand the depth of the mystery of the Trinity until we have opened ourselves to and responded in depth to the Trinitarian dimensions as found in these other traditions. What can Taoism and Buddhism teach us about who and what we call the Father? What can Islam and Judaism, let alone the devotional-*bhakti* elements of other traditions such as Hinduism, teach us about devotion to Jesus? What might the native, primal peoples teach us about the Holy Spirit?

Ewert Cousins says, “Often the partners discover in another tradition values which are submerged or only inchoate in their own.” This is why Wm Johnson insists on the *need* that Western Christianity has for Asian mysticism, as I would say, to uncover the rest of the Gospel, to unfold the inner meaning of the Gospel in a way that we may not have found words for yet.

the experience of the soul in its depths

But, to be in dialogue with the other world religions requires this *experience*—i.e. not just notional knowledge but experience—because in their own way each of the great spiritual traditions of the world in their higher spiritual disciplines have experienced this depth, and we Christians are sometimes sadly lacking in bringing that same depth of experience to the conversation. What we’re trying to say here is that it is not at the level of doctrine or dogma, nor is it at the level of ritual or language or culture expressions, that we are necessarily going to find agreement—nor should we try to force it all to agree and simply say “See it’s all the same!” because it’s not, and to say so is an insult both to one’s own tradition and to the other’s. As Bede Griffiths wrote in from *Return to the Center*

Where then is this eternal religion—the *sanatana dharma*...—to be found?
It is to be found in every religion as its ground or source, but it is beyond

²⁵ Ewert Cousins, *Christ in the 21st Century*, 82

all formulation. It is the reality behind all rites, the truth behind all dogmas, the justice behind all laws. But it is also to be found in the heart of every [person]. It is the law 'written on their hearts.' It is not known by sense or reason but by the experience of the soul in its depths.²⁶

He then goes on to quote William Law's *Spirit of Prayer*, which I paraphrase for you here:

Your natural senses cannot possess God
nor can they unite you to God;
no, your understanding,
your will and your memory,
can only reach after God,
but they cannot be the place of God's dwelling in you.

But, there is a root or depth in you
from whence all these faculties come forth,
as lines from a center
or as branches from the body of the tree.
This depth in you is called the Center,
the Fund, the Bottom of the soul.
This depth is the unity,
this depth is the eternity,
I had almost said the "infinity" of your soul;
for it is so infinite that nothing can satisfy it or give it any rest
but the infinity of God.²⁷

It is at this depth that all true religion is to be found, and this depth is also the source from which all true religion springs, and the goal to which all true religion aspires. And, most importantly, this depth is present in the heart of every person. Fr. Bede says it was from this Center that we fell and it is to this Center that we must return. And ultimately, the purpose of every religion is to make this known and to map out the path of return.²⁸

To paraphrase Fr. Bruno again: Not only is the Mystery present in a different way in each tradition, but we are supposed to learn from all of them, from the primal, tribal religions all the way up to the highly developed traditions of Hinduism and Christianity. The great religions all begin with a mystical experience and it is only then that they develop into complex systems of thought. But if we really want to know the Mystery we have to "penetrate through the exterior shell of the rationalized system to realize within our self the original experience." And that is experience, at least as it is articulated by St. Peter, is to participate in the divine life which Jesus came to share with and among human beings, *that you may become partakers of the divine nature*. This is the reign of God and the essential message of all religion, the central message of the Gospel.

²⁶ Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Center*, 99ff

²⁷ William Law, *The Spirit of Prayer*, Ch. 11

²⁸ Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Center*, 99ff

External religion, including ours, with its rites, dogmas and institutional structures,

...exists only to bring people to the personal experience of this mystery. External forms, the 'language' of religion, must be continually revised to enable them to communicate the mystery to the people of a new age. [But] the mystery, however, already dwells in the heart of every human being, and the church, that is *we*, must awaken to this 'universal revelation.'²⁹

dialogue does not accept superficiality

Who else might agree with this is Pope Benedict himself. He gave a general audience in St. Peter's Square May 14, 2008 on a little known but very influential ancient Christian mystic known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Pseudo-Dionysius' theology is the foundation of what we call apophatic theology which is "marked by the conviction that it is impossible to say who God is, that only negative expressions can be used to speak of him; that God can only be spoken of with 'no,' and that it is only possible to reach him by entering into this experience of 'no.'" The Holy Father goes on to say that Dionysius the Areopagite has a new relevance today: just as in his own day he was a mediator between the spirit of Greek philosophy and the Gospel, today he could be "as a great mediator in the modern dialogue between Christianity and the mystical theologies of Asia, because, Pope Benedict says, there is "a similarity between the thought of the Areopagite and that of the Asian religions. And here he says we can begin to understand "that dialogue does not accept superficiality" because (I must tell you hear in my written text I always put important points in bold face or italics, but in this following paragraph I found that I wanted to put the entire paragraph in italics or boldface...)

Precisely when one enters into the depths of the encounter with Christ, an ample space for dialogue also opens. When one finds the light of truth, one realizes that it is a light for everyone; polemics disappear and it is possible to understand one another, or at least, speak to one another, draw closer together. The path of dialogue consists precisely in being close to God in Christ, in the depths of the encounter with him, in the experience of the truth, which opens us to the light and helps us to go out to meet others—the light of truth, the light of love. In the end, [Dionysius] tells us: Take the path of the experience, of the humble experience of faith, every day. Then, the heart is made big and can see and also illuminate reason so that it sees the beauty of God.

Let me repeat: An ample space for dialogue opens up when one enters into the depths of the encounter with Christ. When one enters into the depths of the encounter with Christ, we find the light of truth, and we realize that it is a light for everyone and suddenly the polemics disappear, and it is possible to understand to one another, or at least to speak to one another and draw closer

²⁹ Bruno Barnhart, *The One Light*, 397.

together. And when one enters into the depths of the encounter with Christ, the experience of truth, we find the path of dialogue, we open to the light, and that experience helps us to go out to meet others. So, Dionysius tells us and the Holy Father affirms, take the path of experience, the humble experience of faith. It will make your heart big, and we will be able to see, and the heart will be able to illuminate our reason so that we can see the beauty of God.

The great Franciscan saint Bonaventure, himself highly influenced by Dionysius, writes about this way beautifully in his treatise "The Journey of the Mind to God":

Seek the answer in God's grace, not in doctrine;
in the longing of will, not in the understanding;
in the sighs of prayer, not in research;
seek the bridegroom, not the teacher;
darkness, not daylight;
and look not to the light
but rather to the raging fire that carries the soul to God with intense fervor
and glowing love.
Let us die, then, and enter into the darkness,
silencing our anxieties, our passions,
and all the fantasies of our imagination.³⁰

The deeper our contemplation, the nearer we will be to God; and the nearer we are to God the more open we will be to the world, and that is where the hope lies.

³⁰ *Itinerarium*, "The Journey of the Mind to God."