

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

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As a Hindu I believe that all religious traditions, including those that are called "primitive" (these days, "primal") provide a way for man to integrate himself into the divine or ultimate reality and that their beliefs and practices exist to provide a path to this reality by way of linking it with the ordinary living process. As a matter of fact, each tradition believes itself to be a valid tradition and within each tradition are to be found men who claim to have experienced this reality. Yet these traditions differ from one another in important ways, both in belief and practice. This is not to say that there are no similarities between them, for in every tradition ultimate reality, that which religion is concerned with, is seen as a reality that is self-existent, infinite, unborn, undying and the like, unlike phenomenal reality that is limited, comes into existence and goes out of it, that is, is space — time — cause bound. It is also seen as a source of utter peace, bliss, love and the like, terms which all indicate a state of harmony that is uncharacteristic of the phenomenal world as experienced by man. Furthermore, it is experienced (except for Theravada Buddhism) as the source of all existence and the ultimate abode of man. But on this core of common reference are built traditions which, in details of their structure, may be very unlike one another, and this may involve even the concept of God which for quite a lot of people is basic to religion. A tradition may be monotheistic, polytheistic and even atheistic, and differences in other respects may be equally far-ranging. In this paper I am trying to find an interpretative framework for the fact that different pictures of a dimension of reality referred to in common by a number of religious traditions exist — a framework that will make clear the reasons for the existence of a variety of pictures while acknowledging the validity of each one of them. (That is, it is not its business to question one tradition in terms of the presuppositions of another.) In this framework the claim that tradition x is the absolute truth will be seen as a declaration of one's own preference for this tradition which does not invalidate other traditions for their own practitioners. Such preferences can justifiably exist here, as they exist elsewhere. (Unfortunately, those who make absolute claims also believe that they ought to change other peoples' preferences to their own.)

The religious impulse exists in every society, and that is why every society develops a religious tradition. This tradition may change or may have to accept change under pressure as the society changes in its economic or political structure, but it comes to be there because every society generates it out of its own needs and perceptions. For man everywhere is confronted with the hazardousness of life and its insecurity, not only because of death which awaits it all through life, but also because of large doses of frustration of both physical and psychological nature (so that material security, while eliminating human misery on one count, does not put an end to it), disease, old age and the like which are apt to make some sensitive people wonder (either consciously or

unconsciously) what it is all in aid of. I find that what lies behind this questioning is the assumption (almost a demand) made by people in all societies, that human beings ought to enjoy uninterrupted happiness instead of having to put up with constant misery and frustration, and that they ought to be secure and even deathless instead of having to live face to face with contingency. So some kind of justification or explanation for what actually happens to exist seems to be called for, which religion provides. And this justificatory role of religion makes some people conclude that what religion deals with is nothing but a projection of human hopes and fears. I believe that it is perfectly possible for this universal human demand for happiness to be based on a fact: that is, for it to arise out of a vague intimation on the part of man of some real possibilities of his own nature which he can understand and get hold of by coming to see a certain dimension of reality which I am calling 'religious reality'. This dimension is such that it transcends space — time — causal categories and something in man has an element of this transcendence of which he is vaguely aware even while he is aware of his contingency as well. It is this mystery, this puzzling character of his own complex being which is both subject to death and yet felt to be in some sense deserving of deathlessness as well that supplies one of the keys to man's urge towards the exploration of a transcendent reality as something that offers a justificatory significance of this puzzle. So this urge appears everywhere on its own strength, which, in effect, is an urge on the part of man to transcend the consequences of his own finitude, unlike other things which may have to be introduced from one place to another. Naturally, on to this reality man can project his own hopes and fears, that is, see it in a certain light that suits his purposes, and he often does that. But the fact that the reality religion explores justifies some of his own demands and needs does in no way imply that this reality cannot be there except as a projection from man. Without these needs and demands man will not make a move towards it but he makes this move because he senses in the first instance that there is something to move towards.

I find the idea unacceptable that a whole dimension of reality, something that happens to be present everywhere and acknowledged out of a society's own internal activity, also something that is everywhere understood as infinite and unconditioned, is nothing but a human creation. So I shall treat it as there, independently of man. As this dimension is conceived differently by different traditions I shall use a term that can be a common denominator between these traditions, "religious reality", to refer to what religion is about and not as God. My use of this term 'religious reality' is similar to the use of 'physical reality' which is the common referent of all physical sciences, which stands for a whole dimension of reality and not any one thing in particular, so that it can be approached in a variety of ways, via physics, chemistry, geology etc., and which exists independently of human activity but is not known without such activity. It is now admitted by many scientists that the way we probe this reality and the presuppositions in terms of which we do this probing, colour or limit in some fashion what precisely we know about it, which is to say that there is something out there independently of us but it can only be received by us in a fashion that is partly determined by the kind of spectacles we put on to see it and we have to have some spectacles or others to view it at all. So it is no longer the fashion in science to talk about 'The Truth' about physical reality although what we do know is still thought to be true. And the unity of physical reality is not thought to be in any way jeopardized — this term can still be used

meaningfully — because we cannot sum it up in terms of one Truth. It is not jeopardized by the fact of its complexity either because there can be complementary conceptions of the same facts studied under different experimental set-ups and techniques, whereby room has now been made in science for alternative descriptions of what is still called by the same name (light ray, for instance). In the same way religious reality can be there independently of man but the precise way in which he knows it — the way that fits one description but not another — is coloured by the specific approaches and presuppositions which are always there and cannot but be there in man's activity of knowing, for there is absolutely no way for man of receiving something neat, minus all interpretation. That which is given to man can thus be received by him in different ways especially if what is given is not any one thing in particular (Even *a* thing can legitimately appear different to different people from different perspectives). If there can be complementary conceptions and descriptions of physical reality there can be of religious reality as well, and there certainly are such descriptions, as embodied in different traditions. This need for use of interpretation applies even more so in the case of religious reality which is understood to be unconditioned, infinite and unlimited while the function of language by means of which we describe things is to delimit and differentiate one finite thing from another in terms of their specific characteristics. Language applies to this reality only through creating models that are originally drawn from the sphere of limited things and are then metaphorically extended beyond this sphere. If we do not prejudge that any one tradition has got the right model — and this judgement is made by people always in favour of their own tradition — we have to acknowledge that a variety of models do exist and that they are found perfectly satisfactory by the people who use them. That is to say, nobody has got God in their pocket, as a friend of mine once put it.

It is my Hindu "prejudice" that being the inexhaustible ground of all existence (or to put it differently, being the ultimate essence of which all things are expressions in different name and form, human and non-human), religious reality constantly reveals itself (or if a personal pronoun is preferred, himself/herself), in what we call the creation — the stellar universe or multiverse, natural, animal and human words and so on, even though it is not to be identified with any of them. But it is only now and then that human beings actually receive this revelation as a personal intimation of an infinite mode of being. Religions that claim revelation are then perfectly justified to claim it but my use of the term "revelation" is such that according to it there is no one uniquely significant and once and for all revelation that happened to some uniquely privileged people or person as a result of religious reality choosing such people or person (or events in their lives) as uniquely fit to be the vehicle of divine self-disclosure. All knowledge, religious or secular, is revelation, insofar as something not yet known is disclosed by its means to somebody or other, and it is perfectly possible for an intimation of religious reality to happen to someone in such a manner — especially if this someone is an individual of exceptional quality for leadership — as to make him believe that he is being uniquely favoured, is being singled out to be the recipient of a unique message from God to hear which will be to everybody's advantage. But believing as I do in the multiplicity of revelations, continuing to happen at all times and places wherever there are individuals ready and able to receive this revelation — without this readiness and ability revelation does not happen — the uniqueness

claimed says something about the individual and the nature or quality of his experience rather than about religious reality as such. The mere fact that all religious traditions claim revelation — some unique and exclusive revelation — shows to my mind that revelation has to be understood from the side of man, *his* reception of divine self-disclosure via his special spectacles rather than just as divine self-disclosure, *as it is in itself*. We may well say that divine self-disclosure is constantly happening in a variety of ways and that it can be received in a variety of ways, depending on who receives it, where and when.

This makes all religious traditions genuine religious traditions based on some disclosure of religious reality which men of these traditions have received in a certain fashion. Multiplicity of revelations received in a variety of ways can happen because although religious reality is unitary in the sense that it is not a collection of things, it is not one thing either, something that can be described by one particular set of epithets. The idea that religious reality must be one, in the sense of a numerical attribute, shows the constraints under which the human mind functions rather than the constraints under which religious reality must exist (if we use one name there must be one thing). Its unitariness lies in its nature as unconditioned, unlimited and infinite being which is all of a piece, so to say, not in the fact of some characteristic which fits one numerical description (oneness) rather than another (manyness). Indeed, in some traditions, as in aspects of the Hindu, it is both one and the many because it is present in all things as their innermost essence while transcending them at the same time. Just as one and the same man X can appear or disclose himself differently to different people on whom he can make different impacts, wife, son, friend, employer and so on one and the same religious reality can hit people differently, if they come from different cultural backgrounds with their own structures of prejudices and preferences, and/or possess different psychic structures of needs, sensitivities, drives and pressures — and both of these act like spectacles in man's viewing of things and assume significance especially when something of more than mundane interest is involved. The fact that nobody knows X in his unity, so to say, something that lies behind the various facets of his nature as revealed in relationships and situations through which people know him does not prevent people from believing that X, who can appear in so many ways, is one and the same person. His being one person does not contradict his having many facets, nor does anybody think that the unity of his being is dissolved unless it fits into one description. This is much more true of religious reality, especially if we think of it as the infinite reality which through self limitation can become the many of the finite world, while remaining infinite itself (the infinite is the limitless and the inexhaustible, not an uncountable number of things, so no amount of finite things can exhaust the inexhaustible or make the limitless limited).

A religious tradition is a human institution and its distinctive teaching starts its career as part of an existing cultural tradition where social (or socio-political-economic) conditions of a certain sort and moral values which fit (more or less) these conditions obtain. It can start by condoning these values or condemning some of them which it believes ought to be replaced by something else for a better organization of life than hitherto obtained in society. Since teaching is one of its main jobs it in its turn takes a hand in shaping the culture in which it arises or it modifies it in some ways. Not only does a religious idea or tradition have a cultural background in which it takes its rise it has also a geographical environment which influences human vision

(ideas which take shape in a desert environment are very different from ideas which arise in a lush tropical climate; this is exemplified in the difference between Islam and Hinduism) and a historical reality of a specific kind which may be exerting its particular kind of pressure on the society and its needs at a particular point in time. All these tend to colour human perception of things (especially things of large significance), for they set the terms of reference not only for noticing things, but also for judging what is or is not important, what is or is not acceptable as part of the existing social reality. But human beings have a conscious individual existence, besides a social one, and their specific psychic endowments and the pressures that these exert on the individual may make them react differently from others in the face of the same situation and some individuals become innovative as a result. This is especially true of exceptional individuals whose perceptions and valuations play an important part in fixing the pattern in which a religious tradition sees the world. I do not mean that these extraordinary individuals are immune in every way from social conditioning to which the rest of us are subject. Even they derive a great deal of their conceptual apparatus, with the help of which they decipher and understand what is going on in an experience, from the culture in which they have been brought up. So even those who start a new tradition retain a great deal of the old, now being discarded in some particulars, in their own system.

Now one of the distinctive things about a religious tradition as distinct from other parts of culture is that there is a definitive claim about it, and most religious traditions believe themselves to be founded on revelation. Some traditions, like the Hindu and the primal religions, are not historically founded, and they are not tied up with the teachings of one person or a group of persons who are historically identifiable. These traditions find their beginning in myths which have the status of revealed truths — for otherwise they may degenerate into fancy and lose their hold — not something that was revealed by God to anyone in particular at any one particular time but truths that validate themselves precisely because they are true and they are to be thought eternally revealed in their capacity as truth. Those religious traditions which are founded at a particular moment in history begin with the teaching and preaching of a particular person or persons who claim that the truth about a transcendent reality has been revealed to them in some special way, through personal enlightenment (as in Buddhism) or as a gift from God (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). The definitive claim of religion including the claim about revelation comes from the understanding of a genuine encounter with religious reality which stamps its own existence on the human mind beyond all possible doubt. The differences come from the fact that each has encountered and received this reality with spectacles on, of a cultural and/or individual nature. To accept this means to accept that there is no exclusive revelation which has got the truth as it is. But it also means that to give up the exclusive claim does not mean to give up the claim about revelation altogether.

I said earlier on that one of the tasks of religion is to find some justificatory significance for facts as they obtain in life. This may relate to different levels of living. Polytheistic cultures (Hindu, primal) seeking a validation of the day to day living process (which is hazardous and so questionable) see the ordinary values of life as connected with divine activity via the conception of gods and goddesses who can confer on men what they need as gifts or withhold them and as a result they are seen as intimately involved in human weal and woe. To see this is to transcend in some degree the consequences of human finitude.

Polytheism thus produces a celebratory attitude to ordinary human activities like harvesting, going hunting, giving birth and even dying, all of which are associated with some god or goddess who is invoked with some show and festivity on each occasion of religious observance, and there are many of these in a polytheistic culture. I consider that it is possible to see religious reality revealed in the process of day to day living and its business in the way that polytheistic cultures do see it there through their myths, symbols and rituals. So I think that monotheistic propaganda against polytheism (as superstition, idolatry and the like) is another instance of cultural preference and prejudice. Monotheistic cultures, for reasons of their own, see religious reality as a person, but assert that there can be only one divine person who does everything singlehanded, it being considered prejudicial to God's power if he had agents (gods) to carry on the day to day administration of the world as polytheism believes. As we shall see there are cultural reasons for the adoption of a single divine figure. But the assumption that a picture in which God not only creates but rules singlehanded is better or more progressive in an evolutionary sense than the picture where He delegates responsibilities to subordinates who are like bureaucratic heads of departments, is without foundation. Polytheistic concern for happiness on earth via ordinary living is dubbed selfish by monotheism yet what monotheism looks for is also happiness, only it is happiness in heaven after death. It is not clear why happiness after death is a nobler concern than happiness on earth through day to day living except when we look into the rationale of monotheism itself which arose in a cultural circumstance where something more than day to day living was at stake.

Justification for the hazardousness of life may be found on another level, in the fact that this life is a preparation for the life to come (everlasting) after death, a life that is perfect in every way including the prospect of happiness. One gains access to that life not so much by living this life in a celebratory attitude as by doing God's will, this all powerful will being the ultimate criterion of what should or should not exist. And this leads to a monotheistic picture of religious reality, which is one picture amongst others. And here transcendence is achieved through the thought of immortality that one gains after death.

There is yet another level of finding justificatory significance. All this, both its joys and sorrows, has its justification because by learning to transcend the demands that attraction and repulsion make on man he can come to enjoy spiritual freedom and transcendence right here whilst alive. Here religious reality is seen not as a person but as a spiritual principle one can link up with. And this produces delight, bliss, at least end of all suffering, to enjoy which is the aim of all transcendence.

I think that it is possible to say that as religious reality is everywhere understood to be an unconditioned, infinite reality, a religious tradition is not complete unless it sees man's reality as extending into this realm, somehow overcoming the implications of death. Nevertheless to see it as manifesting itself in the finite world as well, thereby 'justifying' human weal and woe, as polytheism sees it, is also religious viewing and from my point of view no less significant as religious perception than seeing man beyond finitude on which the so-called higher religions concentrate.

The fact that there is an ever enduring reality that is radically different from the space-time-cause bound reality of phenomenal existence, and the

perception that man's being is linked with this reality — which is the basic religious perception in one shape or another — may influence man's material as well as his spiritual living, for it can 'justify' the whole of life. And contact with this reality can be made at all levels including the level of ordinary living where polytheism operates. Man's concern for religious reality has relevance for all of life — living in time as an individual with desires that need satisfaction and as a member of a group towards which one has obligations, as well as living in a timeless dimension that can be achieved irrespective of how things are in the world. That the two may not go together, that the one may even negate the other for a time, shows the paradoxical nature of human living which must find a legitimate place for things which appear to contradict one another, as looked at from a limited point of view.

Now I said that there can be alternative pictures of religious reality because it can be encountered with different spectacles on, and psychic constitution and its pressures (something that results from the exercise of certain developmental influences on a given genetic constitution) figure among these spectacles. (To give some examples of how one's psychic constitution influences one's perception of the world. Some find suffering, others bliss as the most pervasive feature of reality. Some like to think of God as 'father', others 'mother'. I believe that these differences lie in differences of psychic constitution and needs rather than in facts about reality.) It is because of the pressures that a psychic constitution can exert on one that a new religion, arising out of an older one, breaks fresh ground through using new metaphors, symbols and models for the understanding of religious reality. It does this while retaining, inevitably, a great deal of the older tradition in the background of which it arises. Christianity, for instance, while breaking off from Judaism on the basis of a personal understanding of religious reality by Jesus, something not shared by the Judaic tradition, still incorporates a great deal of of Judaic cultural forms. Again, Buddhism, while based on Buddha's enlightenment, his personal understanding of the truth, retains a great deal of the pre-Buddhistic religious tradition of India. This is inevitable, for a religious experience has to have some cultural form not only for encountering religious reality and fixing its nature with some degree of clarity in one's understanding, but also in order to transmit this understanding to others as well. And even if one is innovative one cannot innovate a whole medium of understanding and communication, so one fits in one's understanding, however new it may be in some respect or respects, into a given medium (and language) that is already available in the culture.

A new tradition may arise also because the founder of it may find that the prevailing social reality needs a new direction to recover it from its disintegrating tendencies and that this can be done under a new and powerfully integrating symbol. This I believe is the case with Judaic and Arabic monotheism, both of which arose out of their polytheistic past. I do not mean by this of course that the prophets of monotheism sat down and consciously figured out that the idea of one God would achieve the social ideal they were aspiring to and then deliberately introduced it to influence the behaviour of the group. What I mean is rather that the prophets' perception and understanding of their social reality coloured their vision of religious reality which was received in a fashion in which they were predisposed to see it. (This applies to everyone and not to the prophets of monotheism in particular.) The idea of worshipping a supreme personal God who is the sole creator and controller of

man's destiny and who hands over to man a complete and precise set of rules to live by can mobilize society in a way which worshipping of gods can never achieve (so this was forbidden). But even this monotheism which condemns the previously existing tradition of polytheism must retain many of the cultural forms and modes of behaviour of the previous society where polytheism functioned (with some modification where necessary). Because of this every religious tradition, polytheistic or monotheistic, bears unmistakably the stamp of the culture in which it actually takes its rise, even though monotheistic traditions tend to believe that everything pertaining to them have been directly revealed by God, hence they are culture-free (culture is man-made). This presumably is the reason why monotheistic traditions like Christianity and Islam consider that they have a duty to make others, who already possess a religious tradition of their own, to adopt theirs instead — something that polytheistic traditions, openly culture-bound, never consider — without being aware that this is a form of cultural invasion. But the fact that gentiles had to adopt Jewish names and many Jewish customs in becoming Christians and that the forms of their ceremonies like worship, marriage, burial etc., were closely modelled on the Jewish shows that what was being exported was not just a certain belief about God but a cultural tradition as well which replaced the indigenous in large measure. The same is true of Islam. People converted to Islam not only have to take Arabic names; along with the belief in Allah are exported the Arabic script (believed to be God's own choice), forms of greeting, marriage, burial and many other social forms as well which form a part of Islam because they originally formed a part of Arabic culture in the background of which Islam arose. It is because a religious tradition is a cultural tradition that conversion, when not wholesale, creates such rifts in society by uprooting some people from their own cultural forms and transplanting them in forms that come from a different society, thereby creating a new sense of identity among the converted who find the social environment and culture of the country they belong to alien to their mode of being. In India for instance, where both Islam and Christianity succeeded in converting some people but not the whole society, as they did elsewhere, great cultural and social differences have been created among the people of basically the same ethnic group.

As a human phenomenon a religious tradition is a cultural construct in terms of a group of ideas, symbols, models, paradigms etc., the role of which is not only to offer a representation of religious reality in human terms (which however is given a transcendent significance through suitable linguistic devices) that constitutes a strategy by following which this reality can be approached and realized, but also a coherent picture in the light of which human experiences and activities make sense, a picture which organizes apparently unconnected and insignificant events into a definite and meaningful structure. To say that religion is a human phenomenon and as such is a construct is however not to devalue it, and according to me such devaluation does not follow because man has a transcendent dimension to his own being. Hence his quest for transcendence through religion. By saying that it is human I mean neither that religious reality does not exist, nor that it does not reveal itself. All I mean is that like every other aspect of his experience man has to create a conceptual framework to receive intimations of religious reality and the construction of this framework is influenced by a variety of factors both social and individual. And the fact that there has to be created a conceptual

structure through which to receive it does not rob a religious tradition of truth either, in the sense in which this truth is significant for human practice. By truth of course I do not mean correspondence with facts. What I mean is this: the job of a religious tradition is not so much to give information by way of correct description, it is to link men with religious reality through their thoughts, feelings and actions so that their own transcendent nature may be realized. If a religious tradition contains symbols, models etc., which together can be seen to involve a definite strategy of approach to the transcendent dimension of reality, a strategy by following which this reality can be grasped and contact with it established, then it has truth. The fact that religious practitioners belonging to all religious traditions, particularly the people called mystics, have realized their reality by following the conceptual constructs of their own tradition is a "proof" of the truth of these traditions. But none of these traditions contain 'the truth' about religious reality. In an era when science itself — the model of all knowledge — has given up the idea of 'the truth' about physical reality it is perhaps easier than it has hitherto been for some people to accommodate themselves to the idea that something can be true without having to be the truth. Men describe religious reality in a variety of ways from their different backgrounds of life experience, needs and demands and these descriptions may all be true both in the sense that not being one thing religious reality lends itself to be seen in all these ways and in the sense that they may all lead one to make contact with the transcendent dimension of being.

I shall now go into the conceptual structures of some religious traditions, the models, paradigms and the strategies they use, to see how they each organise the religious life of man by offering him a coherent picture of what it is all about. There are, of course, a number of ways different from mine in which these religions may be approached and no doubt some people may feel that I have not mentioned what is really important in their tradition. This paper however is not a comparative study which sets out to show how a particular tradition is better than others. As I believe that each tradition is a distinct conceptual structure which can be validly pursued by people in quest of transcendence if they find they can respond to it, I am looking at these traditions just to find out what these pictures are as distinctive strategies that so powerfully influence people in their thoughts, feelings and actions, thereby organising their life in a certain fashion. Although religious reality exists independently of man the fact that man does not operate in a vacuum and that his approach to things is always via his understanding, needs and capacities — and social conditioning — to receive and to respond to intimations of reality means, inevitably, that there will be a number of pictures. These pictures are true in the sense that they can achieve what they set out to achieve as used by different men of different social backgrounds and psychic needs. But if they are to do their job men have to treat them *as if* they are descriptively true as well, in the straightforward sense of corresponding with facts. For they are like a ladder which a man has to use to reach a certain height and a ladder cannot be dispensed with whilst one is climbing.

I find that each picture has a paradigm on the model of which it raises a conceptual structure, apart from a ritual and moral structure, all of which together constitute a distinct strategy. All this is needed for it is not enough for self-conscious man to act and feel, he must have some understanding of what is going on if he is to get organised in his effort to reach transcendence. The

teaching of a tradition is like a strategy for it sets the stage, so to say, in a certain fashion (conceptually speaking) and charts out paths by following which man's religious goal can be pursued in a meaningful way. There thus has to be a picture even though this picture is never true in the sense that it corresponds point to point with facts as they are independently of any approach that man makes to them. The setting and the path go together so that man's craving for understanding, his emotions and his need for action are satisfied in a coherent manner. Because each tradition offers man an internally coherent picture and a path of approach to transcendence that agrees with this picture that most people brought up in a certain religious tradition find it perfectly satisfying (those who do not have psychic needs to which the picture does not speak), whilst others looking at it from the point of view of a different picture and a different strategy can find it to be full of holes. But the tendency to pick out one or two things from a tradition and then subject it to criticism because they do not satisfy some demands that a different tradition makes should be resisted. To understand a tradition it should be seen as a whole and the most important thing to understand about it is whether or not it actually does lead man to transcendence, for this is what a religious tradition is about, when all is said and done. A tradition different from ours may not appeal to us but it obviously appeals to those who belong to it. If any change is to come it must come from inside, when people feel it no longer satisfies their needs. But any attack from outside is a different matter, being inspired by prejudice and the personal preference of the attacker. However, the fact that there are alternative strategies for conquering the vast and unknown terrain that is man's religious life and its goal of transcendence does not mean that we cannot be attached to ours with perfect good sense, that another strategy may not make sense to us which we may decide to leave well alone, in the same way that we leave other peoples' music alone if that appears to lack certain qualities that our ears expect.

Let me now introduce the traditions I am going to speak about — Hindu, Buddhist, Christian. First the Hindu and the trouble with this tradition is that there is not one picture in it but several. However, there is a dominant picture which is coherent with a number of Hindu assumptions and it is this that I shall bring out. The paradigmatic concept in this tradition is being, and organic being at that, something that repeats the same essence in all its constituent parts, which therefore possess an identity of essence despite being different from one another in their appearance and function, like the tree, its trunk, branches, roots, leaves and so on. Being is inexhaustible and everenduring like the tree perpetuating itself through the seed in a circle — from the tree to the seed and the seed to the tree and nobody can say which comes first — and this process need never come to an end. Being is full, pregnant with all possibilities like the seed with the huge tree that grows out of its invisible essence. This paradigm of organic being fits a tropical environment like India, where its characteristics are most evident. Religious reality is of course not finite being like the tree. It is understood here as elsewhere to be unconditioned, unlimited, infinite and these characteristics are found to be those of pure consciousness. But the way infinite being functions and relates itself to the world is understood in the image of organic being and its functioning and the reality that is conditioned and finite are thought to be manifestations of its infinite potentiality for being. Creation is thus understood as self-manifestation that happens through a process of self-limitation, at different levels of being marked

by different name, shape and function. This of course does not exhaust the inexhaustible, nor reduce the infinite in its own being to the finite (the analogy used in the Upanisads is that of the spider creating a web out of its own substance, which activity however does not touch the being of the spider). All things finite and limited are no doubt subject to destruction and in destruction all manifestations go back to their unmanifest ground, the infinite reality that itself is subject neither to beginning nor to end. So in fullness of time it brings forth the world again, out of its own spontaneous need for manifestation, and thus it goes through alternative periods of creation and destruction in a neverending cycle. Because all things are expressions of everenduring being, nothing comes out of nothing and nothing finishes in nothing either. And nothing is arbitrary; all things function according to a law inherent in their own being (*rta, dharma*) and this includes the law of cause and effect. It is a part of this law-governed being that a thing dies in one form to be reborn in another until such time that it goes back to the source in that particular phase of the cycle that is destruction. But while the phase of creation lasts the death of one thing always means the birth of another, these two being related specifically as cause and effect in an enduring organic structure of interdependence in which separateness of thing has a relative but not an absolute significance (like the separateness of the trunk and the branches). A human being containing in himself both the finite (mind-body) and infinite (self) dimensions of being is also subject to this cycle of birth and death in so far as he is finite. In his case he is said to be reborn (although we can equally say that *another* individual is shaped out of the material left behind by him, but the paradigm involved is seen better in the expression, 'the same thing in another form'). Apart from the physical body which goes back to the elements at death, there is in man an elaborate psychic structure created by his own desires and activities, and although this too is material, it is much more subtle than the physical elements and it does not die with the death of the physical body. This, called the subtle body, takes on another physical body — it could not vanish into nothingness — to work itself out, and so it goes on from birth to death and death to birth again. But self-conscious man is also infinite in his being and he can realize himself as pure being, pure consciousness and pure bliss. On such realization desires cease to operate, no more subtle body is formed and the individual finally merges with the infinite. Thus, the realization of man's spiritual nature is realization of man's identity with infinite being which is seen to permeate all things. He is thus non-dual with all things and there is, finally, no separate destiny for him. Once this is realized man is freed of his usual bondage to nature thereby realizing transcendence even while remaining in the body. A state of transcendence is a state of bliss, for bliss is inherent in the fullness of infinite being (all craving is based on the perception of a lack or gap), that which needs nothing to complete itself.

This infinite being is sometimes pictured as God, a personal being, sometimes as a suprapersonal principle of pure being, consciousness and bliss. But in either case the whole of existence is his/its self-manifestation — the lower nature of God as the Gita puts it — and man is non-dual with this reality. Even when religious reality becomes God the creator, no absolute distinction is made in the Hindu tradition between the creator and the created (because of the paradigm of organic being), and all things are in God at all times. And although with God comes grace, this does not upset the law of being of things and man has to work out his *karma* before grace operates or along with its

operation.

Man can and must realize his infinite nature and his freedom. Nevertheless his finite nature too deserves some consideration (nothing can be in vain, organic being being "programmed" to work itself out). So man's material nature (the mind-body complex, not just the body) must be given its due satisfaction through pursuit of goals like *dharma* (rightful living in society), *artha* (satisfaction of material needs) and *kama* (enjoyment of pleasures). An individual may legitimately strive for these, and at this stage worship of various divinities who symbolize these values is relevant, but always with the understanding that in the end they have to be transcended (for most people that end may lie many lifetimes away). Rightful living in society means moral obligations towards the wellbeing of others and built into the idea of man's *dharma* are various duties of an obligatory nature (these may differ between groups and individuals). And as the goal of transcendence says that there is no ultimate difference between one individual and another, its pursuit requires non-violence and compassion, if not positive action for the well-being of others (as the Gita recommends). Nevertheless, as far as the goal of liberation (*moksa*) is concerned man is himself his primary responsibility for he has to reshape his lower being through long practice in order that liberation from it can be achieved. This is important even in a scheme where God operates and in the Gita Arjuna is advised to practice both devotion and *yoga*.

The reason for man's unhappiness is two-fold. There is, so to say, a structural source of man's misery. Manyness through which the phenomenal world exists is by itself a source of conflict and tension — this is recognized in the position that God becomes both the demon and the demon killer, for without such opposites the drama of life does not unfold. Indeed the world as we know exists through the play of opposites, such as good and evil, and only in transcendence can one escape the limitation — one thing is not another — involved in this situation. Transcendence is thus not conceived as good; it is beyond description in such terms as good and evil and all other opposites. The Hindu tradition thus does not posit a kingdom of heaven on earth at the end of all development (there is a golden age which comes at the beginning of a cycle of creation and then progressively deteriorates until destruction happens). The other cause of man's unhappiness lies in himself, in his own desire for more and more pleasure and other 'good' things which he believes will fulfil him as an individual being. This of course is built into man's nature and so has to be given some recognition. But this particular source of unhappiness can be taken care of, for ultimately man has to transcend his individuality in the infinity of being and when this happens everything of the phenomenal world is also seen as suffused with this reality. Such a man transcends desire and thus phenomenal manyness ceases to be a source of trouble for him. And he is supposed to be able to take delight in all things because of an underlying sense of non-duality and non-possession with which he lives and this liberates him even when alive.

The Hindu picture of the Supra-personal nature of reality (at least one picture), its cyclical conception of time where things come and go but which in itself has neither beginning nor end, its doctrine of rebirth (which means the reshaping of one material in different forms) and *moksa* where the finite self of man enters the infinite reality (self) abandoning name and form, as do rivers the sea and the like, all fit into the organic paradigm. The creation myth in the Rigveda (and elsewhere) where the dismembered limbs of the sacrificed

Purusa (Self) becomes the whole existence, gods, nature, animals, men and their social existence and so on does in fact use an organic model. And in the Chandogya Upanisad the example of the seed is actually drawn on. Uddalaka Aruni asks his son Svetaketu to break up a seed and tell him what he finds there. The son says that he finds nothing, to which the father replies, 'as from the non-visible essence of this seed arises the huge Nyagrodha tree, so from the (invisible) Self arises the whole world, that thou art'. The idea is that of self-perpetuating indestructible being, its fullness and wholeness in which individuality has a limited significance only (he too comes and goes), where the truth of being lies in being beyond measure, and this too is within the reach of man's experience.

All these taken together make a coherent picture of how things are and why they are what they are. And the picture constitutes a definite strategy for man to adopt in his fight against unhappiness and in his quest for transcendence. But this picture is however unacceptable both to the Buddhist and the Christian who use different paradigms in their quest for significance and transcendence — 'nothing' for the Buddhist in place of Hindu 'Being' and personality as centred in emotion and will in place of Hindu suprapersonal pure being, consciousness and bliss for the Christian.

Buddhism is a religion insofar as it involves man's transcendence of his human condition into an unconditioned state, but in its Theravada variety it does not talk of a transcendent reality beyond man. Even in Mahayana where an absolute reality that is radically different from the phenomenal reality of our experience is posited, the idea of it as a positive reality does not enter much into the picture that is offered of what reality is like. The burden of Buddhist picture-making is borne by negative concepts such as that of change, fleetingness, soullessness, nothingness (void) and the like, the last used to describe both phenomenal and absolute reality. Buddhism uses a different picture and a different strategy from Hinduism in making man understand the fact of his suffering and helping him to transcend it. For Hinduism the important concept is fullness of being and if man can find identity with this being his problem is solved. Buddhism on the contrary finds the concept of nothingness (*Sunya*) much more revealing, not only as the real nature of man (what he takes to be his being is really nothing) is so far as he is in phenomenal existence (Theravada) but also as regards transcendent reality with which he is non-different (Mahayana). Nothing (no-thing) of course does not mean non-existent — man who is nothing exists — it means non-being as a permanent, substantial thing, fulfilling a particular description. And this use of a negative concept in building a picture of what this place is like also means a negative strategy to be used in man's search for transcendence. As Buddhism looks at man his problem arises precisely from believing that he has an enduring identity, call it self, soul or ego (these terms being used interchangeably since being positive they are all without a referent; and this practice makes havoc of Hinduism where they each have a different referent when Buddhists contrast their beliefs with those of Hinduism), the strategy of Buddhism is to tell man what is is not (a self) rather than what he is (Self), that is to say explain what is going on in terms of nothing rather than of being, and this negative strategy is called for by the nature of Buddhist metaphysics. Despite the Buddhist disclaimer there is a metaphysics involved — that is to say, a doctrine about the nature of reality — and this metaphysics asserts that everything is suffering (The First Noble Truth). It is not simply that suffering is present in life in large

doses, as most people would accept on reflection and as Hindu schools like Samkhya and Nyaya say, the very nature of existence is said to be suffering and this is not evident. It is Buddha's own intense sensitivity and his internal pressures which made him take the position that suffering is like fever (he thought of himself as a physician, curing people of ill-health) which must be gotten rid of. His personal reaction to suffering was a factor in the creation of Buddhist metaphysics over and above the general religious position that it cannot be a man's real destiny that he should be unhappy.

Suffering can belong to being but not to nothing, hence the importance of the concept of nothing in overcoming suffering, the paradigmatic concept in Buddhism. Suffering is caused by clinging to life and its desires and this clinging happens because one believes that one is an enduring being who feels desires and to whom pleasure and pain belong. To help him overcome suffering is to make him see that everything including his own being is a fleeting process where one thing follows another according to the law of combined dependent origination but nothing lasts nor does anything belong to anything. Reality consists of moments and each moment arises and disappears without merging with anything else. Man's perception of himself and of the world as enduring — this enduring quality is essential for the pursuit of happiness through fulfilment of desire — is caused by illusion, the sanskrit word for which is *maya*.

I believe, along with others, that the use of this term *maya* as illusion (seeing the rope as the snake, a Buddhist example adopted by Samkara) happened in Indian culture first in Buddhism and it arose there as called for by its negative strategy. The Hindu tradition of the Vedas, Upanisads and the Gita, where everything is said to share in the being of the full, uses a positive strategy of telling man that he is the full. In these scriptures the term *maya* (*ma* = to measure, to limit) means the creative power of the one to produce itself in the form of the many through self-limitation while not ceasing to be the one (the full remains the full, as the Upanisads say). So *maya* is a magic-like quality, nevertheless, it is a positive power, that which goes into creation (or manifestation). Buddhism uses this term as illusion — it leaves aside the question of creation — because according to it the picture of the phenomenal world as consisting of things and persons is literally an illusion created by each man's mental and conceptual activity either wholly or partly — partly when it is thought that reality in itself is a process of fleeting moments and man creates out of these an enduring world by means of conceptual activity (as says the *Nyayabindu* of Dharmakirti) or wholly (as says Yogacara) when it is thought that an objective reality does not exist at all, it is wholly created by man's, each man's, projection of his latent desires and impulses onto the external world. Even when the term '*maya*' in the sense of illusion enters into the Hindu tradition via Gaudapada and Samkara, it still does not become a matter of individual construction or projection, because of the grounding of the Hindu tradition in the concept of being (*sat*), which Samkara did not discard, rather than nothing (*sunya*). It has in Hinduism a cosmic dimension and as such its structure is supposed to lie in some inconceivable mixture of being and non-being rather than being simply non-being, as in Buddhist philosophical thought. The concepts of illusion and suffering go together. For if life is nothing but suffering then the best strategy to adopt towards life is that it is an illusion. Because of this strategic relationship between the two terms the adoption of the Buddhist concept of '*maya*' also meant the adoption of the Buddhist concept of

suffering and in Post-Samkarite Hinduism (following Samkara) there has been a tendency to interpret even the Upanisads as saying that everything is suffering, while it seems to me quite clear that Pre-Buddhist Upanisads, at any rate the ones that even the Hindus believe are most important, say that everything is joy. Samkara's colossal influence on Hinduism means that its own positive structure and strategy have been obscured in the eyes of many Hindus themselves, not to speak of non-Hindu interpreters who identify Hinduism with Samkara's teachings.

The Buddhist doctrine of no-self fits Buddhist metaphysics that all is suffering and the understanding of the religious goal in negative terms, *nirvana* (extinction of suffering) is part of the same strategy leading man away from rather than towards something. Happiness or bliss suggests positive being that endures while extinguishing all that makes for ignorance and suffering has no such implied suggestion. Not that '*nirvana*' is never conceived as happiness in Buddhist writings (especially Mahayana writings) but the burden of the teaching — insofar as it is distinctively Buddhist — is not so much directed towards the achievement of an enduring state of being that is also delight or bliss, but getting rid of all that makes for suffering (attachment to self particularly) and this is in perfect accordance with the rest of the Buddhist picture. Of course in Mahayana Buddhism there is an idea of an absolute reality that supposedly has absolute being but characteristically the term used to refer to it is '*sunya*', the void or the nothing. No doubt out of this void everything comes but what I am saying is that the picture that a religious tradition builds and more particularly the language it uses in building this tradition, has to be internally consistent (in the main, nothing human is wholly devoid of contradiction), and the use of a negative term even to describe absolute reality is an example of this interrelatedness of concepts in a certain structure that human beings create as an explanatory tool in their search for transcendence.

Consistently with this structure where "suffering" plays a key role, the concept that embodies the predominant Buddhist value is "compassion" rather than "love". In Mahayana the "*Sunya*" (Tathata, Dharmakaya etc.) takes on the significance of Brahman of the Upanisads for all things arise out of it, abide in it, and go back to it, and so on. Yet it is thought to be very different by the Buddhists, because it is part of another tradition conceived around a different paradigm, and any suggestion by Hindus that the *Sunya* is the same as brahman or *Atman* (Self, not self) is vehemently resisted by Buddhists and understandably so, because the Hindu terms, themselves positive, denote positive realities, both at the infinite and finite level and they do not fit into a structure that uses a negative strategy, they stick out as "alien". The same with the idea of *nirvana*, which is supposed to be an uncompounded, unborn, undying, unconditioned (not the negative manner of description) state, and Hindus often find that to achieve *nirvana* is to be established in an infinite or deathless state of being which must already be in man. (Finite man can achieve a deathless state by God's grace who being all-powerful can confer this on man, but there is no God in the Buddhist scheme and the potentiality for whatever man can achieve by his own effort must already be in man.) But the suggestion that Buddhism while denying self (or individual soul) does admit the reality of Self without using this term — for Self is not an entity either material or spiritual, it is all permeating spiritual energy itself, called Self because it is of the nature of pure consciousness — is protested against by

Buddhists. What is distinctive of the Buddhist tradition is its negative strategy of leading man away from his normally desired goals rather than towards a goal. *Nirvana* means a state in which nothing that bothers man and thereby causes him suffering remains. This is thought to be enough as a description of transcendence, and it is enough for the tradition in its own terms. A great deal of conceptual contortion had to be resorted to by Samkara when he introduced the negative way of Buddhism through the use of such terms as '*maya*' (illusion) and '*avidya*' (ignorance) into the essentially positive structure of Hindu thought where everything shares in the essence of Brahman. *Maya* could not be an attribute or power of Brahman (because it is illusion), it could not be man-made because man is its product, and so has to crop up in some inconceivable way, do its job and then disappear. *Maya* is accounted for in Buddhist thought with perfect consistency, it is the result of human activity, carried out by each mind individually, as it gets on with the job of phenomenal living. Because Buddhism is not grounded in a positive metaphysics it does not have to give any explanation of how and why the human mind indulges in illusory activity, it just does and that is all we need to know. The Buddhist thinkers were not thus involved in attempts which look like eating one's cake and having it as well, as in the case of Advaita of the Samkara variety, because here Brahman is the sole reality, and yet most of us live under *maya* all the time — nobody knows where it comes from or can know — and this is not supposed to affect the sole status of Brahman in any way.

As for Christianity it has its roots in Judaism and naturally many of its characteristic features — when seen particularly in the context of non-theistic religions — derive from the cultural tradition of Judaism in which Jesus and his disciples were brought up. I have therefore to say something about Judaism before I say anything about Christianity. The rise of Judaic monotheism out of its polytheistic past and its portrayal of religious reality as a single and sole source of power (such that God can have no intermediate agents, so the worship of polytheistic gods was forbidden) which is modelled after human personality, minus of course human limitations and conceived in moral terms, so that human suffering can be understood as punishment for wrongdoing, is, as I look at it, related to Jewish circumstances to which this model perfectly fitted. For only the idea of God as an all-powerful provider who also judges and punishes, and not gods, could mobilize the Jewish people for the kind of heroic endeavours they had to make to establish themselves as a nation (their own variety of transcendence one could say). The Jewish tribes were a group that was emerging out of a nomadic existence, needing a homeland to call their own but being constantly thwarted through captivity, exile, etc. What such a people needed was a picture of religious reality as an all-powerful political sovereign (hence terms like 'King', 'Lord' etc.) in a position to choose a particular group of people for a special relationship in the form of a contract in which both sides have obligations, 'King' to provide the people with a land (land that was already inhabited but reallocation was well within the power of an all-powerful political sovereign) and the people to do his bidding. And to make this picture stick the Jewish prophets had to forbid polytheistic worshipping. This is different from Hinduism where the idea of one God exists side by side with the idea of many gods, for naturally dealing directly with one source of power whose will is law was much more relevant for the Jews. Human suffering is caused by not acting according to this law, equally, fulfilment of this will means 'Kingdom of heaven' on earth where perfect

happiness and accord will prevail.

Here we get a different myth (the Biblical) from the Hindu as regards creation. God creates the world out of nothing by an act of will for a purpose which is to grant man happiness. Creation is particularly for the happiness of man who is made lord over the rest of creation and the first couple, Adam and Eve, were placed in a paradisiacal place, the garden of Eden, where, if they lived according to the will of God, they could live happily ever after. But man acts against the will of God, eats the fruit of the tree of knowledge and this act of sin — sin, not because the activity itself was so dreadful but because it was against God's will — thus deserving punishment, that of fall into earth, where he has to suffer. The rest of mankind inherits this sin from Adam and thus suffering has become a normal feature of human existence. Because suffering is deserved it is thought to have a beneficial effect (unlike the case in Buddhism which without the idea of original sin, could find no justification for it), that of cleansing man of his impure will, will that goes against God.

According to the Jewish cultural tradition God will redeem Jewish society, not just provide a land, but usher in a garden-of-Eden-like existence where all conflict and suffering will end (that is man will transcend his human condition) and this will happen through the activity of prophets who act as God's agent. Jesus was born in a cultural atmosphere where a messiah who would accomplish this purpose of God was expected. But he did not fulfil Jewish expectations — despite his messiah like qualities, one of which was his deep sense of being in contact with God — indeed he attacked some elements of the existing tradition as Buddha did the Hindu, and thereby he became the founder of a different religious tradition. The new tradition however retained a great deal of the old, as Buddhism did of Hinduism. Jesus called God not only 'Lord' (a predominantly political epithet suited to Jewish purposes), but father who was concerned with everyone, not just the Jews who thought themselves to have been particularly singled out by God, and so as the son of God he was claimed by his disciples to be divine himself. (Because of the absolute distinction made here between the creator and the created someone who was called 'the son of God' had to be different in substance from the rest of mankind). His teaching was also concerned with the total destiny of man and his transcendence of the human condition, not so much in terms of happiness in earthly matters, on which he does not seem to have laid especial importance — he even preached poverty, abandonment of home and family in search of God and the like — but everlasting happiness in heaven after death which God can grant man through his grace (those who fail to receive this grace through not acting according to God's will, will suffer eternal damnation in hell). God will establish the Kingdom of Heaven amongst redeemed mankind and the way to redemption is through Jesus and his teachings. Christianity believes that God sent his Divine Son especially for this purpose and it sees the crucifixion as a divine act of suffering — something that God the Son voluntarily went through — which will cleanse those who follow him of sin and make them fit to be recipients of grace. Because suffering is here seen to result from human transgressions and human beings cannot help but transgress because of original sin, this act of self-suffering of God whereby man can be relieved of sin and redeemed from a life of eternal suffering is an extraordinarily powerful and moving image for those who accept the rest of the Christian picture into which it fits. I mean the idea of God as a loving, personal being whose primary purpose

in creating a world is human happiness which is spoiled by man's own willful action that goes contrary to God's plan so that God out of his unbounded love sends his Son to undergo suffering himself and thereby redeem mankind.

The paradigmatic concept in the Christian picture is that of personality as the centre of will and emotion rather than of consciousness, as in the Hindu picture, the reason why the way of knowledge or enlightenment does not have here the same importance as it has in Hinduism. This paradigm makes the Hindu idea of self merging with the Self unacceptable, instead it gives Judeo-Christianity its overall moral orientation, where personality as the centre of will remains dominant. God the divine person has a definite purpose and a definite will and it is important to him that these are not upset. Man in his will must follow the divine will and the standards for his action have been disclosed in the Ten Commandments given to the Jews. (Because in this picture moral values are derivatives of religious values Christianity considers that people whose religious myths do not have a high moral component are lacking in morality.) The moral orientation of Judeo-Christianity makes loving one's neighbour the foremost religious requirement (apart of course from loving God), hence the especial importance of charity, alleviating suffering and generally of doing good. (These are not absent from Hinduism and Buddhism but they do not have the central importance there as they have in Christianity.) If there is a path to God's grace, apart from prayer and worship, man's concern about his neighbour's happiness is that path. This moral orientation is shown in the purposiveness that permeates this tradition, also in its seriousness. (The Hindu idea of creation as play is wholly unacceptable.)

This paradigmatic concept of personality as will and emotion fits all characteristically Christian doctrines: the importance of love as a person to person reaction (rather than bliss of the Hindu tradition which is more like being in love with the totality of existence and which characteristically comes through knowledge), creation out of nothing as an act of will (rather than spontaneous self-manifestation), sin as the source of man's trouble (rather than ignorance), grace of God received as a favour from a superior will (rather than self-realization achieved by oneself in which one becomes pure consciousness), salvation in which the individual lives on as an individual in the presence of God (or Christ) and other individuals (rather than liberation, in which the individual freed of will and emotion merges with the totality). Hence also the importance of the resurrection of the body, for one can hardly visualize an individual centre of will and emotion without a body. And I think that it is this consciousness of human personality as will and emotion that makes service to others (rather than meditation) of such central significance. For although will and emotion are to be retained they must also be purged and their impurity transcended — a way to which is service to others. But what is to be transcended is not the personality itself, only those elements of personality which keep man from loving God and others. The Christian picture like other pictures is a self consistent one, and understood in terms of its paradigm it makes sense of life, where it has gone wrong and how it can be put right.

My contention, of course, is that each tradition offers a consistent picture, built under the image of a paradigm and it satisfies man's need for transcendence of his normal 'creativity' and limited existence subject to sin, suffering, ignorance, death and the like. One may think of this transcendence

as living in heaven beyond death or as a state of mind this side of death, but it is linked with the understanding that there is a transcendent dimension of reality, a dimension that is infinite and unconditioned, where death has no meaning. Each picture gives some kind of meaningful structure to human experience by tying it up with larger processes thereby offering both a reason for human suffering and a way to happiness. None of the pictures can be said to be the truth about religious reality but none is a pure fabrication either. Rather each represents man's attempt to receive a reality which has no shape of the human variety (being infinite and unconditioned) by shaping it according to an interpretation framework that is conditioned by both cultural and psychological factors. Because there is such a variety of cultures and psychological types and needs among human beings a variety of pictures is inevitable. Buddhism, for instance, was forced to develop a saviour figure within its own cultural milieu (as one variety among others) and there are people in non-Buddhist countries who feel considerable attraction for the Buddhist picture precisely because it has no figure of God. Those who are attracted to the idea of transcendence without God usually believe that Buddhism is a rational religion, hence more acceptable. I do not see that a tradition is more 'rational' if it does not contain God, and in any case, transcendence, the basic religious need, has not much to do with rationality. Both acceptance and non-acceptance of God as a symbol of transcendence can be a matter of cultural conditioning, and when a matter of personal choice, both result from a characteristic psychic structure of needs and pressures. But because a psychic structure does exist that needs to pursue transcendence without God a religion without God has to be there.

I have said that the 'truth' of a tradition lies in its capacity to offer man transcendence in one form or another, that is, of the human limitations that make him subject to suffering and death. (Even the willing acceptance of these is a form of transcendence for it requires the human spirit to hold its own above what can reduce him to despair, almost to nothingness.) However, one has to treat the picture that a tradition involves *as if* it is descriptively true in the way of one-to-one correspondence while one is pursuing transcendence with its help. But the *as if* nature of this correspondence makes it possible for contradictory ideas to exist side by side as part of different traditions. Take such ideas as rebirth (Hindu/Buddhist) and resurrection of the body (Christian) or Soul (Christian), Self (Hindu), no-self (Buddhist). People feel that either Hinduism/Buddhism are right in saying that rebirth takes place or Christianity is right in saying it does not, both ideas cannot be talking truth, and if we let both be, we imply that both are true. The same with the other set of ideas. If it is the case that an individual soul along with its resurrected body lives on for ever it cannot be the case that the liberated individual merges with Absolute Being. Again, if it is the case that there is a soul or even self (entity or not) present in the individual it cannot be that he is nothing but a fleeting but continuing process of sensation, perception, conception, feeling and consciousness.

This problem arises if these ideas are to be treated as descriptively true in respect of something that can have only one description, not if the reality is so big that there can be a number of alternative descriptions. If these are seen as part of a larger picture in which they make sense, a picture which satisfies man's need for transcendence by not only making him understand in a coherent fashion that there is an infinite and unconditioned reality with which he is

linked, but also delineating a path through which an experience of transcendence can be lived, they can also be taken as true in their capacity as alternative pictures of something which has no one description. (I prefer to say that this infinite and unconditioned reality has many descriptions as approached via many spectacles, rather than it is beyond description. If we take the statement that it is beyond description seriously and then refrain from making any statement at all, man's religious life will come to a standstill.) The point of these descriptions as a coherent picture is to help man to get hold of the dimension of transcendence both as a reality beyond him and a reality within. (Within and beyond are metaphors.) And the ideas that occur as part of this picture like rebirth or resurrection cannot be understood except in the context of this whole picture. I, for instance, accept rebirth (rebirth is not needed in the Christian picture, the reason why it was dropped) because it makes sense within the Hindu picture which will lose its coherence without this idea, and not because it is impossible to picture what happens after death as the end of time on earth for a particular life. The fact, as it is in itself, may be so "strange" and so complex that it may be described both as the happening of another birth and the non-happening of it. As we cannot get hold of it *as it is in itself*, we have to adopt one idea or other as part of a larger picture into which it fits. And the larger picture is itself a possible way of describing something that is, in itself, beyond measure, hence describable in many ways.

As for whether man has a soul or not, this matter too is obviously quite capable of alternative descriptions. Man is what he is and intelligent, and I should think equally rational, human beings reflect on what he is and come to these conclusions; that he has a soul (Christian) and that he has no soul (Buddhist). Both, however, agree that man can achieve a transcendent dimension of being, here or in heaven, and it is in organising this idea consistently with other presuppositions (cultural, psychological) that the Christian and the Buddhist come up with different descriptions. Man's being however may be so paradoxical and so complex that both descriptions may fit it depending on our presuppositions as to which aspect of man's being we would pick for our attention. But the no-soul idea does not fit the Christian picture, so the Christian can leave it alone, equally the idea of a soul does not fit the Buddhist picture and he too can leave it alone. As I said earlier, the 'truth' or 'falsity' of these ideas cannot be determined except in the context of a whole picture that has its own presuppositions.

Now we know that presuppositions cannot be proved so arguments about which is the best picture, not to speak of the true picture, are of no avail. No system can prove its presuppositions in terms of the system itself. For instance, it is not possible for Christianity to "prove" that personality as the centre of will and emotion is the thing of ultimate value, least of all by using Christian argument; nor is it possible for the Hindus to "prove" that the cyclic perpetuation of organic being from the tree to the seed and seed to the tree and its perpetuation of the same "message" or essence in all its constituent but diverse elements is the right image under which to understand the functioning of infinite reality in the finite realm. And to question any of these in terms of another system is equally futile, it really means not trying to understand it at all. The presuppositions of these systems are neither self-evident, nor can they be established through inference. To claim revelation does not help, for everyone can and does claim it. Nor does it help to appeal to rationality, for every intelligent and reflective person who accepts his own tradition can find

good reasons for its acceptance. I have heard the claim of superior rationality not only from Buddhists, but also from Christians and Muslims. I am quite sure I can easily make out a case on behalf of Hinduism, at least to my own satisfaction, and nobody does any better.

What I am talking about, of course, is relativism, but not pure relativism that says you can say what you like because there is no criterion of truth that operates here. The "truth" of a religious tradition is relative to a culture and its needs, it is also relative to personalities and their needs. Nevertheless, there is a religious reality which is transcendent in the sense that you cannot size it up in finite and limited terms (it transcends space — time — causal categories). So a conceptual structure that a religious tradition is must be such that it opens up to this reality, that the ideas used in its structure are coherent and they make sense in the light of human experience, that they speak to the human need for transcendence helping him to get hold of that dimension of his being which is deathless amidst death, explain the fact of human suffering, and show a way to peace, bliss, love and human belongingness together in a common world (shared by animals and plants as well). These concerns actually do present themselves in religious traditions and they are not a matter of my personal preference. So we are not devoid of all standards, what we do not have is a standard that will pick out one of these traditions as 'the truth'.

There are two more remarks before I close. I have said that a religious tradition is a construct. Nevertheless, it is not something that is consciously and deliberately put together. The presuppositions (model, paradigm) that underlie a religion operate spontaneously and they come to be applied, even the first time round, automatically, out of the depth of one's being, so to say, rather than as a result of deliberation. Nevertheless, the depth of one's being is not a vacuum, it has already been fashioned by nature (genetic constitution) and nurture (culture), and it can function at the unconscious level with perfect logic and intelligent comprehension.

Lastly, I have often heard the opinion that there is such a thing as a mystical experience which is exactly the same for everyone, even though people make it different by applying, subsequently to the experience, different interpretations. I do not myself believe this: there is no way of getting at religion or any other dimension of human experience except through an interpretative framework. So even religious experiences come in different shapes. However, there is enough common between the different descriptions for us to legitimately give the same name, "religious reality" (transcends space — time — causal categories) to what they refer to.

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