

The Buddha's 'Undetermined Questions' and the Religions

In considering the 'conflicting truth claims' of the different religions we need not only a theory of religious knowledge but also a theory of religious ignorance. And we have a very good start to this in the Buddha's doctrine of the *avaykata*, the undetermined, or unanswered, questions.

The ten undetermined questions

There are two main texts in the Pali scriptures, Suttas 63 and 72 of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, each with the same list of ten propositions or 'views' (*ditthi*):

1. The world is eternal.
2. The world is not eternal.
3. The world is (spatially) infinite.
4. The world is not (spatially) infinite.
5. The soul (*jiva*) is identical with the body.
6. The soul is not identical with the body.
7. The Tathagata (a perfectly enlightened being) exists after death.
8. The Tathagata does not exist after death.
9. The Tathagata both exists and does not exist after death.
10. The Tathagata neither exists nor does not exist after death.

The issues dealt with by these ten propositions fall into two categories, which I shall call respectively unanswered questions and unanswerable questions. (Whether this distinction was in the mind of Gautama, or in the minds of the editors

of the Pali canon, I do not profess to know.) The Buddha refused to give any teaching about these issues, although the monk Malunkyaputta challenged him, 'If the Lord knows that the world is eternal, let the Lord explain to me that the world is eternal. If the Lord knows that the world is not eternal, let the Lord explain to me that the world is not eternal. If the Lord does not know whether the world is eternal or whether the world is not eternal, then, not knowing, not seeing, this would be honest, namely to say, 'I do not know, I do not see'. And likewise with the other questions (*Majjhima Nikaya*, 63:427). But the Buddha's fundamental point - which was always for him the soteriological point - was that to know the answers to these questions is not necessary for liberation and that to treat them as though they were will only hinder our advance toward liberation. To make his point he told the parable of the man pierced by a poisoned arrow. If he insists, before receiving medical treatment, on knowing who shot the arrow, and of what clan he is, what kind of bow he was using, what the bow string and the shaft of the arrow were made of, from what kind of bird the feathers on the arrow came, and so on, he will die before his thirst for knowledge is satisfied. Likewise, if we distract ourselves from the path to enlightenment by trying to settle these disputed cosmological and metaphysical issues we may well fail to be healed from birth, ageing, dying, grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair. And so these matters are set aside by the Buddha because such knowledge 'is not connected with the goal, is not fundamental to the Brahma-faring, and does not conduce to turning away from, nor to dispassion, stopping, calming, super-knowledge, awakening nor to nibbana' (*Ibid.*, 63:431).

Unanswered and unanswerable questions

This applies to both of the two kinds of issues. The difference between them is, however, of considerable interest. The first, consisting of what I am calling the unanswered questions, are questions to which there is a true answer although we do not in fact know what it is. On the face of it Malunkyaputta's protest is reasonable. The world must be either eternal or not eternal, etc. He reckons that if the Buddha has attained insight into all things he will know which. And indeed it may be that the Buddha does know; this is not clear from the Pali scriptures. But whether or not he knows, he insists that the answer is not necessary for liberation and that to treat it as soteriologically important would only distract Malunkyaputta from a single-minded striving to attain nirvana.

The second kind of issue is illustrated by the question, asked by the monk Vaccagotta, about the state of the Tathagata after death. A Tathagata is a fully enlightened being, a Buddha, and the question concerns the ultimate conclusion of the process of finite human existence. This is not the question of the fate after death of ordinary unenlightened individuals; the Buddha's answer to that was the doctrine of rebirth. In response to Vaccagotta's question he rejects as inapplicable the

entire range of possible answers in terms of which the question was posed - namely, by specifying in what sphere the Tathagata arises after death:

'Arise', Vaccha, does not apply.

Well, then, good Gotama, does he not arise?

'Does not arise', Vaccha, does not apply.

Well then, good Gotama, does he both arise and not arise?

'Both arises and does not arise', Vaccha, does not apply.

Well then, good Gotama, does he neither arise nor not arise?

'Neither arises nor does not arise', Vaccha, does not apply (Ibid., 72: 486).

Vaccha then expresses his bewilderment and disappointment, and the Buddha responds, 'You ought to be at a loss, Vaccha, you ought to be bewildered. For Vaccha, this dhamma is deep, difficult to see, difficult to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond dialectics, subtle, intelligible to the wise . . .' (Ibid., 487) - referring all the time to the mystery of parinirvana, nirvana beyond this life. It is misleading to say that after death the Tathagata - that is, the fully enlightened individual that we know in this life - exists, or does not exist, or both exists and does not exist, or neither exists nor non-exists beyond this life. The Buddha then illustrates the idea of a question which is so put that it has no answer by speaking of a flame that has been quenched. In which direction has the flame gone - east, west, north or south? None of the permitted answers applies. Likewise what happens after the bodily death of a Tathagata cannot be expressed in our available categories of thought. For the analogy of the quenched flame is not intended to indicate one particular answer, namely nonexistence. For 'Freed from denotation by consciousness', Gautama says, 'is the Tathagata, Vaccha, he is deep, immeasurable, unfathomable as is the great ocean' (Ibid., 488).

The difference, then, between the two kinds of *avaykata* is this. The unanswered questions are legitimate questions to which there are true answers, but to which we do not in fact know the answers. It is not excluded, in logic, that human beings might some day come to know the truth of these matters. But it would still be the case that salvation/liberation neither depends upon nor is assisted by such knowledge, and that the search for it as a religious end is not conducive to salvation/liberation. In distinction from these, the unanswerable questions are about realities transcending the systems of categories available in our human thought and language. They are matters which, in St Paul's words, 'No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived' (I Corinthians 2:9). It seems appropriate to refer to the subject matter of these unanswerable questions as mysteries, matters that are beyond human comprehension and expression. But once again we do not, according to the Buddha, need to be able to penetrate these mysteries in order to attain to liberation; and to feel that we must hold a view concerning them is soteriologically counterproductive.

The sciences, then, are left to do their own legitimate work of finding out what the physical universe is composed of, and how it works, without its conclusions affecting either way the dharma, the saving religious truth. The Buddha would not, then, have endorsed the contemporary attempts to use the Big Bang or the anthropic principle or the concept of emergence, or any other aspect of physics or of scientific cosmology, as a new form of natural theology leading 'from science to God'. Nor, on the other hand, would he have supported the labours of theologians over the centuries, using Christian examples, who have developed complex systems of doctrine about the attributes of God, and whether or not God has 'middle knowledge' (knowledge of what all humans would freely do in all possible circumstances), and how one person (Jesus) could have two natures, one human and the other divine, and whether or not the members of the Trinity are three distinct centres of consciousness, etc., etc. All such matters would come, for him, under the heading of speculative views, the pursuit of which is not relevant to salvation.

Living in a 'need to know' universe

Those of us who are not Buddhists should nevertheless be open to benefiting from the Buddha's very challenging insights. It could be that the universe operates on a 'need to know' basis and that what, religiously, we need to know is soteriological rather than metaphysical. If so, the doctrinal differences between the religious traditions, responding in their distinctively different ways to the various unanswered and unanswerable (because wrongly posed) questions, will not affect the all-important matter of salvation/liberation. This is the possibility that I now want to explore.

The 'conflicting truth claims' of the different religions are of three kinds: in ascending order of importance, first, historical issues; second, what I shall call (for want of a better name) trans-historical issues; and third, conceptions of the ultimate reality to which the religions are, on a religious interpretation of them, different responses. I want to suggest that these three sets of issues all concern either unanswered or unanswerable questions, which naturally evoke theories and guesses but concerning which knowledge is not necessary for salvation/liberation.

Historical issues

Consider first conflicts of historical truth-claims. (I mean 'historical' here in the sense of referring to alleged past events in world history which, if they occurred, would have been able, had the necessary technology been available, to be recorded with camera and/or microphone.) There are in fact very few conflicts of this kind between the different traditions. In general the historical affirmations of the religions refer to different and non-overlapping strands of history, and the doctrines of tradition A have nothing to say, either positively or negatively, about the distinctive historical beliefs of tradition B. For example, Judaism tells the story of the conflict between Elijah and the priests of Baal, whilst the Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist scriptures are not concerned to confirm or deny this - it belongs to a quite different universe of discourse from their own. Indeed the only instances I have been able to identify of direct inter-traditional conflict of historical beliefs are the Christian belief that Jesus died on the cross versus the Muslim belief that he only appeared to die (Qur'an, 4: 157), and the Jewish belief that it was Isaac, versus the Muslim belief that it was his brother, Ishmael, who was nearly sacrificed on Mount Moriah. What are much more common are historical disagreements within a tradition, producing splits between rival subtraditions - for example, the Mahayana-Theravada debate as to whether the latter preserves the original teaching of the Buddha; the Catholic-Protestant dispute as to whether Jesus appointed Peter as head of his church and whether the popes are Peter's successors in this office; and the Sunni-Shia dispute as to whether Muhammad appointed his nephew 'Ali as his successor in the leadership of the Muslim Ummah.

Such historical issues - both inter- and intra-traditional - can only properly be settled by historical evidence. In practice, however, they are not usually today definitively settleable because adequate historical evidence is no longer available. The historian, qua historian, has to be content to live with uncertainty. These, then, are examples of unanswered questions - questions to which there are true answers although we do not, and indeed may perhaps sometimes never, know with certainty what those answers are.

However, it is possible to hold that even though we lack conclusive evidence, such beliefs are nevertheless so integral to a whole religious system that it is necessary for salvation/liberation to hold certain views as a matter of faith. Thus many Christians would hold that if Jesus did not die on the cross, then (a) the New Testament records are unreliable, (b) Jesus' did not die to atone for the sins of the world, and (c) his subsequent resurrection cannot have occurred, and that these implications would be fatal to the system of Christian doctrine. If it is then added that it is necessary for salvation to accept the traditional system of Christian doctrine, it will follow that only those who believe by faith that Jesus died on the cross are able to be saved.

This particular question of Jesus' death raises well some of the issues that we have to look at. As a strictly historical question it is fairly nonthreatening to Christian faith. For the historical evidence is distinctly onesided. Although the Gospel accounts come from two generations after the event, they all concur in affirming a death, as do the letters of St Paul, earlier than the Gospels, and there is also an independent reference in Josephus' *Antiquities* to Jesus being crucified (though there has been much discussion about the authenticity of this passage); and the only basis on which his death is denied within Islam is the theological inference that God would not allow so holy a prophet to be killed. But this inference does not constitute historical counter-evidence. Any strictly historical question mark is a very slight and shadowy one arising merely from the general fact that we cannot attain one hundred per cent certainty about any historical details of the remote past. So there is (in my view at least) no serious purely historical dispute here. There is however a theological dispute. Here I can only express my own view. On the one hand, I have no doubts as to the historicity of Jesus' death on the cross. But on the other hand I think that the ideas that his death was an atonement for human sin, and that his disciples' experience of his presence after his death was a physical experience, are later creations of the church and are optional Christian beliefs.

Those fundamentalist Christians who do affirm that it is essential for salvation to believe the church's doctrines occupy the exclusivist position, mirroring exclusivism within the other traditions, a stance which has always been used to validate ethnic and political hatreds and wars. For my part, I find the idea that God has ordained a scheme under which the large majority of the human race, who were not born into a Christian society, are condemned to perdition, so morally repulsive that it would negate the Godness, or worship-worthiness, of a being who was said to be God. It would thus be, to me, a religiously self-refuting view. I shall therefore pass on to the next type of conflict of belief.

Trans-historical issues

This consists of matters of what I am calling, for want of a better name, trans-historical fact. These are matters of fact which are not settleable by historical evidence. Whether or not the universe had a beginning is such a question. But the Buddha's point was that it is not necessary for, or conducive to, liberation to know whether the universe is infinite in time and/or infinite in space. I would go further and say that no scientific knowledge can in itself be religiously significant except in so far as the religions unwisely adopt dogmatic views, as they have often done, on questions in astronomy, geology, biology, neurophysiology, astrophysics or any other of the special sciences. (They have usually done so because they accepted the science of the time when their scriptures were written as divinely revealed and so have lagged behind advancing scientific knowledge). Religiously, the physical universe is ambiguous, in the sense that everything we know or can conceive of knowing about its physical structure and workings is capable of being construed both religiously and naturalistically. Thus if the postulated big bang of some 13-15 billion years ago was unique, it does not necessarily follow that there is a God who created it; and on the other hand if the universe is going through an infinite succession of expansions and contractions, it does not necessarily follow that it is not a divine creation. Nor is there any objective sense of probability in which scientific discoveries can render the existence of God either more or less probable. The only way to pull a divine rabbit out of the scientific hat would be to reduce the concept of God to that of an aspect of the physical universe - such as energy, or life, or order, or creativity or complexification. Certainly, if we choose to call any of these God, then science can indeed lead us to God. But the move will inevitably be unacceptably reductionistic from the point of view of belief in a transcendent divine reality.

The doctrine of reincarnation or rebirth is another response to an unanswered trans-historical question. Of course, the Buddha himself did not classify it in this way. It seemed obvious to all within his religio-cultural world that human life is part of a vast karmic process involving repeated rebirths in this and other worlds. Further, during the hours of his progressive enlightenment under the Bo tree at Bodhgaya the Buddha remembered all his previous lives, as recounted in several places (e.g., Majjhima Nikaya 36: 247-8), as also did disciples who had attained to enlightenment (Ibid., 73:496). But so far as the West is concerned the idea of reincarnation conflicts both with traditional Jewish, Christian and Muslim beliefs and with contemporary western naturalism. Thus looked at on the world scale, we have to categorise reincarnation as one of the avyakata or undetermined issues. And if we accept the Buddha's basic soteriological insight, we shall conclude that it is neither necessary for salvation/liberation to know whether reincarnation occurs, nor conducive to salvation/liberation to devote one's energies to establishing such knowledge.

Unanswerable questions

Let us turn now to an instance, not of an unanswered, but of an unanswerable question. Here the Buddha's example was the state of a Tathagata - that is, a perfected human being - after death. This is the question of the ultimate state to which the projectory of human spiritual growth finally leads. And the Buddha said that this cannot be described in our present set of human concepts. None of the options of which we can conceive is applicable. The notion of what we mean by a self either existing or not existing does not apply. What lies beyond what we now think of as the self cannot be expressed in our present conceptual system or pictured with our present imaginative resources: 'Freed from denotation by consciousness is the Tathagata, Vaccha.' And once again the Buddha's point was not only that we cannot at present know what the ultimate state is but also that we do not now need to know, and that it is not conducive to salvation/liberation to speculate about it - and still less (I think we may add) to insist that everyone must accept our own speculation. I shall come presently to the third level of disagreement, which concerns conceptions of the ultimate. But let us pause here to draw some interim conclusions. The belief systems of the great world faiths consist very largely of assertions regarding what I have called matters of trans-historical fact. I shall consider some Christian examples, though each of the other world faiths deals in the same or similar issues. The traditional Christian dogmas include: that the universe began through an act of divine creation; that the first human beings fell from grace, so that all of us since have inherited their original sin; that we can be forgiven by God only as a result of his Son dying on the cross; that Jesus had a virginal conception, a bodily resurrection and a bodily ascension into the sky; that after death, we go either to heaven or to hell (or to heaven via purgatory); that the Bible is the divinely inspired and therefore authoritative Word of God to humanity; that there is no other way in which humans can be saved except by faith in Christ. These are dogmas which nearly all Christians from about the end of the second to about the end of the eighteenth century confidently believed. However, during the last 200 or so years thoughtful Christians have been treating this belief system as more open to development in the light of new knowledge and new thinking than was possible during the ages of dogmatic faith. When the traditional way of construing a basic concept leads to mounting difficulties, it is now regarded as possible to explore other construals of it. The cumulative result has been gradually to disentangle the Christian life from commitment to particular dogmatic answers to both the unanswered and the unanswerable questions. This is the direction in which Christian theology has been going for more than a century,

and in which it seems likely to continue. Accordingly, forms of Christian theology which leave open the unanswered questions, and which respond with what are accepted as mythic stories to the unanswerable questions, are at present being experimentally developed. It will, however, be a long time before any new consensus develops, and when it does, it may well prove to be not another monolithic consensus at all but rather a pluralistic range of differing theoretical frameworks for the same soteriological process. Further, there will probably always be some, indeed probably many, who need a simple, unproblematic belief-system such as the older tradition provided. Indeed in the early 21st century we are seeing a reversion towards fundamentalism all round the world, within Islam and Hinduism as well as Christianity.

Application to Buddhism

Let us now consider how the Buddha's doctrine of the unanswered and the unanswerable questions might apply to the developments in Buddhist thought after his time. I would suggest that any doctrine that generalises dogmatically beyond the scope of experience, including crucially the experience of enlightenment, will be affected by it.

Thus, first, to say that we find ourselves to be part of a vast continuous process of interdependent change (*pratitya samutpada*), in which there is no *aseity*, or self-existence, but everything is mutually co-constituted by everything else, is to affirm a doctrine based upon experience and the analysis of experience. But to go beyond this to assert that this continuum of *pratitya samutpada* is uncreated, and not structured towards any end or fulfilment, is to go beyond the witness of experience. The existence of a creator is not dogmatically denied, according at least to some well-known scholars of Buddhism. Thus Edward Conze, who was himself a Buddhist, wrote that 'Buddhist tradition does not exactly deny the existence of a creator, but it is not really interested to know who created the universe. The purpose of Buddhist doctrine is to release beings from suffering, and speculations concerning the origin of the universe are held to be immaterial to that task' (*Buddhism, Its Essence and Development*, Harper Torchbooks, 1975, p. 39). I suggest that dogmatic insistence upon the nonexistence (as also of the existence) of a creator, and a dogmatic insistence that the universe does not have a teleological structure moving towards what we can refer to, in Buddhist language, as universal nirvana, would be to go beyond what is known within Buddhist experience. In practice, not many Buddhists doubt that there is such a soteriological structure; but to insist that such views are essential in order to find liberation would be soteriologically counterproductive. But further, consider the doctrine that the ultimate reality indicated by the Mahayana term *sunyata* ('emptiness') is identical with *pratitya samutpada*, the world process. Is this a truth necessary for liberation, or an optional speculative view? One possible Buddhist position, I suggest, is that the ultimate reality, *sunyata*, is manifested within Buddhist experience as *pratitya samutpada*, but is not exhausted by or limited to the world process. Rather, it is itself beyond all concepts, including the concept of *pratitya samutpada*, being empty of everything that human thought can attribute to it. Thus Masao Abe in his important paper 'A Dynamic Unity in Religious Pluralism: a Proposal from the Buddhist Point of View' (in *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, ed. John Hick and Hasan Askari, Gower 1985), suggests that *sunyata*, which is ultimate reality, the Real, is manifested as the various personal Gods, and presumably also (though he does not say this) the nonpersonal Absolutes, of the different world religions. It is the ground of these different experienced manifestations within human consciousness. If he were to add that the absolute of distinctively Buddhist experience, namely *pratitya samutpada*, is also a manifestation of *sunyata*, we would then have what would in principle be a field theory of religion. We would be saying that the ultimate reality, in itself inexperienceable and beyond the scope of human conceptualization, is experienced in a range of different ways made possible by the different spiritual disciplines and systems of religious thought. There are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and other theistic experiences of *sunyata* as a personal deity. There is the advaitic Hindu experience of *sunyata* as Brahman. And there is the Mahayana Buddhist experience of *sunyata* as the world-process, *pratitya samutpada*. Here the ultimate is experienced as wholly immanent within the immediately experienced. But the kind of theory I am now suggesting would not claim that this is the only authentic mode of experience of the ultimate. Rather, there is a range of different but, so far as we can tell, equally valid modes.

Application to Christianity

So what I am suggesting in relation to questions of trans-historical fact is that it would be a mark of wisdom and maturity frankly to acknowledge our ignorance. We should recognise that there is a range of possibilities, and should not try to insist that everyone - neither all Christians nor (still less) all human beings - must affirm the position which appeals most to ourselves. Rather, we should realise that it is not necessary for salvation/liberation to know whether, for example, the universe had a beginning and will have an end (as western thought has generally supposed), or whether on the contrary it goes in a beginningless and endless series of cycles (as eastern thought has generally supposed). Further, we should take very seriously the Buddha's insight that to regard such questions as soteriologically vital can only hinder the salvific

process. And concerning the unanswerable questions - unanswerable because posed in human terms about realities which transcend our human conceptualities - it would again be a mark of wisdom and maturity to accept our ignorance. We do not know, for example, the nature of the ultimate eschatological state - whether it is a state of what we now call ourselves, whether it is in what we now know as space or in what we now know as time, and so on. The questions that we pose about it may be so wide of the mark that any answers to them are worse than useless. If a caterpillar could ask, concerning its own future post-chrysalis state, how many legs it will then have, how fast it will be able to walk, and what kind of leaves it will be able to eat, the Buddha would say, 'Number of legs, speed of walking, eating of leaves, Vaccha, do not apply. Freed from denotation by caterpillar consciousness is the butterfly.'

The suggestion, then, that we derive from the Buddha's words is that we should sit very lightly to our inherited Christian dogmas concerning creation, fall, eschatology and method of salvation. In this last item I would emphasise the word 'method'. The fact of salvation/liberation, in the concrete sense of the progressive transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness, or (in Christian terms) to God-centredness, is not in question. It is an observable fact - observable indirectly in its fruits in human life. But the dogma that this is made possible only by the death of Christ is a distinctively Christian theory; and it is to this and to all such theories that we should sit lightly, realising that each has been developed in the context of a particular tradition and has its use only within that context. The reality of salvation/liberation is limitlessly more important than particular theories about it; and to try to insist that all Christians, or all human beings, must accept the traditional Christian theory, or family of theories, would be - and has I think in fact been - soteriologically counterproductive.

Parallel considerations apply, of course, to the dogmas of the other great world faiths, though I do not have space to develop these here. But the outcome, so far as interfaith relations is concerned, is that the kinds of doctrinal differences that we have been considering should be matters of keen speculative interest rather than matters of ultimate concern in which our religious existence is felt to be at stake.

Different conceptions of ultimate reality

Finally, let us turn to the most fundamental differences of belief between the great traditions, namely, their different conceptions of the ultimate reality to which the religions constitute our human responses. In speaking of the ultimate focus of religious thought and experience, I propose to use the term 'the Real'. Is the Real, then, personal or nonpersonal? If personal, is it the Adonai of rabbinic Judaism, or the Holy Trinity of Christianity, or the Allah of Islam, or the Shiva or Vishnu of theistic Hinduism, or the wah guru of Sikhism? If nonpersonal, is it the Brahman of advaitic Hinduism, or the Tao of Chinese religion, or the Dharmakaya or Sunyata or Nirvana of Buddhism? The hypothesis that I should like to consider is that the nature of the Real in itself, independently of human awareness of it, is the ultimate unanswerable question. Our human concepts, drawn as they are from our earthly experience, including personality and impersonality, do not apply to the Real in itself, but only to the Real as humanly thought, experienced and responded to within the different traditions. 'Thou art formless', says the Hindu Yogava'sistha, 'Thine only form is our knowledge of Thee' (I: 28). In Buddhist terms we could say: The Real is sunyata, empty, formless, but takes different forms within human experience. And in theistic terms: the Godhead in itself is unknowable, but in relation to human consciousness it becomes the range of divine personae worshipped within the different theistic traditions. Such manifestations are formed at the interface between the Real and the various streams of human life. They consist both in the personae of the Real - Adonai, the Holy Trinity, Allah, Vishnu and so on - and its impersonae, Brahman, the Dharmakaya, the Tao and the rest. And our concepts - such as personality, consciousness, goodness, love, justice, power, unity, plurality, substantiality - apply literally, in either the univocal or the analogical mode, to these manifestations. But in speaking literally in these ways about a manifestation of the Real we are at the same times speaking mythologically about the Real in itself. Thus, that the Real is love is literally true of its manifestation as the heavenly Father of the New Testament or as the Krishna of the Bhagavad Gita, and mythologically true of the Real in itself; and that the Real is rahman rahim (gracious and merciful) is literally true of its manifestation as the Allah of the Qur'an, and mythologically true of the Real in itself; and that the Real is being-consciousness-bliss (satchitananda) is literally true of its experienced manifestation as Brahman and mythologically true of the Real in itself. By 'mythologically true' I mean tending to evoke in the human hearer an appropriate dispositional response. For in so far as the personae and impersonae of the Real are authentic manifestations of it, they are in soteriological alignment with the Real, so that a right response to one of these manifestations constitutes a right response - not the only right response but a right response - to the Real. Thus in responding to the heavenly Father as love by loving our neighbour, or in responding to the Dhama by seeking to attain unselfcentred existence, we are responding rightly to the Real. If this is so, the different conceptions of the Real, in terms of which the different forms of religious experience and response are structured, are not literally true or false descriptions of the Real but are mythologically true in so far as they are

soteriologically effective. And there is no evident reason why a variety of such mythological conceptions of the Real should not prove to be equally soteriologically effective and hence equally mythologically true. To what extent this is in fact the case cannot be decided a priori, but only by observing the fruits of salvation/liberation in human life, individual and communal, within the contexts of the different traditions. Such a comparative assessment is extremely difficult, except as a very rough impression. I would only say that we have at this point no adequate reason to think that any of the great world traditions is soteriologically superior to any other.

Conclusion

To conclude, then, I have suggested that the doctrinal differences between the great world faiths consist in different responses, formed within different cultural histories, to a range of unanswered and unanswerable questions. These questions are either good questions to which we do not at present know the answer, but in relation to which a variety of hypotheses and guesses are permissible, or questions to which there can be no non-misleading answer because the terms in which they are posed are not applicable to the realities to which they refer. Although dogmas concerning these realities are therefore not appropriate, myth-making is not only appropriate but needed, and religious myths are true in so far as the dispositional response which they tend to evoke makes for the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centeredness.

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