The Real and It's Personae and Impersonae

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What do we mean by 'the Ultimate'? That beyond which there is nothing further. But then this could be simply the physical universe (including ourselves); there may be nothing more than this. However, the term 'the Ultimate' is useful mainly to signal the view that there is something more, something that transcends the physical universe, when the notion of A transcending B means not only that A is other than B but also that A is in some significant sense prior to, and/or more important or more valuable than, and/or explanatory of, B. I therefore propose to mean by the Ultimate that putative reality which transcends everything other than itself but is not transcended by anything other than itself. The Ultimate, so conceived, is related to the universe as its ground or creator, and to us human beings, as conscious parts of the universe, as the source both of our existence and of the value or meaning of that existence.

This concept *may* be uninstantiated. It may be contingently uninstantiated, like the concept of a unicorn, or necessarily uninstantiated, like that of a square circle. But on the other hand it may not be like either of these. Notions of the Ultimate may be adequate or inadequate concepts - wholly or partly instantiated - of an all-important reality which transcends the physical universe and our own psycho-physical selves. Whether such concepts are instantiatable, and if so instantiated, is of course the fundamental issue in the philosophy of religion. I have tried to address that basic question elsewhere. Acknowledging that it remains open, I propose nevertheless to discuss now a further question which arises for those who believe that there is or at least may be an ultimate reality which appropriately evokes human responses of the kind that we call religious.

The concept of the Ultimate to be outlined in this chapter differs in an important respect from those that operate within a particular living religious tradition, entering into its distinctive mode of religious experience, shaping its liturgical language or meditative practice, and being reflectively described in its philosophy or theology. Each of these can be categorized as a primary religious concept defining that (putative) transcendent reality upon which worship or meditation is focused. In contrast to this, the concept to be discussed here has been formed in the attempt to understand the relationship between those primary concepts. It functions within the philosophy of religion when this is not confined to the data of any one tradition but has a global scope. For it is the concept of the ground of this plurality of forms of religious experience and thought - the ultimate reality which is variously conceived, experienced and responded to within the different traditions of the world.

It is the plurality of traditions that creates the problem which, as it seems to me, requires this concept for its resolution. If we can imagine there being only one religion in the world, and all religious persons thinking and experiencing in the same way, it would then be a natural and universal conviction that the Ultimate is as conceived in that tradition. But in fact, as we know, there are a number of religious histories each with its own concept, or indeed family of concepts, of the Ultimate. Hence the problem of the relationship between these and between the modes of religious experience which they inform. And the hypothesis that I want to consider is that what they each describe is not the Ultimate as it is in itself but as it is conceived in the variety of ways made possible by our varied human mentalities and cultures - our different modes of religious experience being in turn made possible by those concepts.

Such terms as the Real, the Ultimate, Ultimate Reality are commonly used to refer to this supposed *ne plus ultra.* None of them will suit everybody's linguistic taste. Accepting this I propose, arbitrarily, to speak of the Real, corresponding as it does in some degree to the Sanscrit *sat*, the Arabic *Al Haqq,* and the Chinese *zhen.* And I shall be distinguishing between, on the one hand, the Real *an sich* - to use an expression which avoids the neuter as well as the masculine and the feminine - and on the other hand the Real as variously thought and experienced within the different religious traditions.

The paradigm of the Real *an sich* and its varied manifestations to human consciousness has to justify itself by its power to illuminate the history of religions. This offers significant pointers to it within each of the major traditions. Thus Christian thought has sometimes distinguished between the Godhead, God in God's eternal self-existent being before or independently of creation, and God in relation to and thus as known by created beings - God a *se* and God *pro nobis;* Judaism, in its mystical Kabbalistic strand, has distinguished between the infinite divine reality, *En Soph,* and the concrete God of the Bible; Islam, in its own mystical Sufi strand, has likewise distinguished between the ultimate reality, *Al Haqq* and the Qur'anic Revealer to humanity; again Hindu advaitic thought distinguishes between

nirguna Brahman, beyond the scope of all human concepts, and *saguna* Brahman, humanly known as Ishwara, the personal deity; and Buddhist thought, in the Mahayana, distinguishes between the eternal *dharmakaya,* which is the ultimate and ineffable Buddha nature, and the *sambhoga-kaya* and *nirmana-kaya,* in which that nature takes the form of individual Buddhas, some of whom become incarnate on this earth; and again, in recent Western thought, Paul Tillich has distinguished between God and the God above the God of theism (1), and Gordon Kaufman between the real God and the available God.[2]

These distinctions were drawn for different purposes, each internal to its own tradition, and accordingly do not precisely coincide with the distinction that I want to draw. They do, however, suggest it to anyone who has the wider problem in mind. We can approach the distinction that we need through the familiar fact that even within a single theistic community of faith different individuals commonly operate with different mental pictures of God. If, for example, it were possible to inspect the images of God in the minds of a typical congregation of worshippers in a Christian church one Sunday morning, we should undoubtedly find wide variations. These images would range from the stern judge who sends misfortunes as punishments and whose presence inspires fear, to the gracious heavenly Father whose warm love envelopes us; and would range in another dimension from God as an invisible Person observing our every thought and act and prepared to intervene in answer to prayer in the affairs of our lives, to God as 'high and lifted up' and 'inhabiting eternity', the maker and Lord of the universe, whose purposes are seen in the grand design of nature rather than in a detailed manipulation of events on earth. No doubt these images can be synthesized in a comprehensive theoretical definition. But the religious activities of worship, and the related forms of religious experience, involve limited images of God varying in their character and in the practical dispositions that they evoke. Nevertheless, it seems natural and indeed almost inevitable, from a Christian point of view, to say that Christians are all worshipping the same God, but each doing so through an image which focuses upon that aspect of the divine nature which is most relevant to their spiritual needs at the time. It is important to add that it is also possible for an image, at the extremes of the spectrum - for example, a Nazi image of God as the Lord of the Aryan race - to be so distorted that it cannot mediate a relationship with God as known in the central Christian tradition. But whilst our human images of the deity can thus be more adequate and less adequate, even the most adequate still require a distinction between God in the divine fullness and God as imaged in a variety of overlapping ways by different individuals and groups. And when we enlarge our field of vision to include the distinctively different but still overlapping concepts of God operating among Jews and Muslims, we shall naturally understand this wider range of differences in the same way though on a larger scale. For the three Peoples of the Book share a common biblical vision of the history of God's dealings with humanity. They manifestly intend to be worshipping the same, because only, deity even though their mental images of that deity differ in the ways that separate the three traditions. For it is part of the distinctively Jewish self-understanding that the divine relationship to humanity is centered in God's dealings with the children of Israel; and part of the distinctively Christian self-understanding that God became incarnate as the founder of the Christian church; and part of the distinctively Muslim self-understanding that God has spoken finally and decisively in the Holy Qur'an. And so within each tradition it is believed that the other two Abrahamic faiths worship the same God through largely overlapping mental images of that God, whilst being, however, in each case mistaken at one key point. Each thus, whilst recognizing a common history, maintains its own unique centrality or sense of superiority.

There is, however, another possible interpretation of the situation, and one which does better justice to the apparently equal quality of worship and religious experience, and of the fruits of this in human life, within the three traditions. This is that their overlapping mental images of God are all produced by the impact of the divine Reality upon these three different streams of religious consciousness, but that the exclusivist interpretation which each tradition has put upon its own self-understanding is a human and limiting contribution. From this point of view God is authentically and savingly known to Jews in the Torah and the Rabbinic tradition; to Christians in the life and teachings of Jesus as mediated through the New Testament and the church; and to Muslims in the Qur'anic revelation through the Prophet Muhammad. But in so far as Jews think of themselves as God's Chosen People in a sense which relegates all other peoples to an inferior relationship to God; and in so far as Christians think of Christianity as superior to all other religions because founded by God in person, with the implication that all human beings should become Christians; and in so far as Muslims think of the Qur'an as God's final revelation, superseding all others, with the implication that all human beings should become Muslims, they are each absolutizing their own human image of God in a way which denies the universal divine love and saving activity.

One way in which we can express the situation as we have thus far traced it is by saying that each stream of religious experience and thought has generated its own distinctive halo of self-validating mythology or self-enhancing

metaphor - the mythologies of the Chosen People, of the uniquely incarnate God, and of God's definitive revelation to a particular people, the Arabs, in a particular human language. These are nevertheless true mythologies or true metaphors in so far as they evoke an appropriate response of devotion, in Jews to Adonai, the Lord, in Christians to Christ, and in Muslims to Allah. But none of these mythologies, nor the equivalent self-validating mythologies of other traditions, has universal validity, speaking to human beings as such; rather, each is part of the history of a particular religio-cultural form of human life. And when we now take a yet larger view, and include the concepts of God operating within the Hindu tradition - Vishnu and Shiva, Kali and Durga and the many other gods and goddesses of India - we find, at least among reflective worshippers, a general awareness that 'the Real (*sat*) is one, but sages name it variously'.[3] Accordingly Vaishnavites, whose devotional life is focused on the figure of Krishna as the saving incarnation of Vishnu, and Shaivites, with their devotional life focused on Shiva, do not dispute as to which of these is the true God; for they are conscious that both are authentic, though different and distinct, manifestations of the one ultimate reality of Brahman. The same is true within Mahayana Buddhism, in which Amida Buddha and Mahavairocana Buddha have been worshipped as the central Buddha by Pure Land and Esoteric Buddhists respectively for many centuries, and yet their difference in worship has led to no serious conflicts between them. This is because both Amida and Mahavairocana are regarded as different manifestations of the same *dharmakaya* which is in itself empty, open and formless.[4]

Although the Indian and the Semitic deities lack a relationship to a common strand of human history, both groups function in the same way within the forms of life to which they belong. They should accordingly be interpreted on the same principle. Shiva and Krishna and Yahweh and Allah and the Heavenly Father, then, name different concrete images of the Real operating in the religious consciousness and life of different human communities. Each is thought of, experienced, and responded to as the Lord, the object of our devotion, the determiner of our destiny, the Ultimate in relation to us. And from a religious point of view we must say that each is indeed an authentic, life-giving manifestation of the Real within a different strand of human life. We thereby differ from the traditional formulations of faith, not in their affirmation of a transcendent divine Reality, but in the claim made within each tradition that it alone embodies the only fully valid and efficacious form of relationship to that Reality.

This position would seem to be in competition with three others. One is atheism: the Gods are all imaginary projections of the human mind. This is the naturalistic possibility which I noted but set aside at the beginning; for I am seeking here a *religious* interpretation of the phenomena of religion. A second possibility is that of religious exclusivism: our own God - whether we be Jew or Christian, Hindu or Muslim - exists, whilst the others are figments of the human imagination. This possibility, however, is rendered implausible, in my view, by the fact that the effects in human life of devotion to these different God figures are so similar - both the good effect of the overcoming of selfcenteredness and the growth of love or compassion, and the bad effect of providing a validation of collective pride and aggression. If in one case the good is to be attributed to the influence of a real divine being and evil to human perversion, the same should be done in each case - unless there is some clear reason to the contrary; and the only reason offered is each tradition's conviction, in its more exclusivist moods, of its own unique superiority.

The third possibility is polytheism: the Gods are all real as ontologically distinct beings. One could, of course, apply this principle to all of the hundreds of thousands of deities known in the history of religion: but let us simplify our task here by restricting it to the Gods of the great monotheistic faiths. Yahweh or Adonai, then, is a real divine Person, and the Heavenly Father (or perhaps the Holy Trinity considered as a unity) is another real divine Person, and Allah is yet another real divine Person, and God as worshipped by the Sikhs is another, and Shiva and Vishnu yet others. . . .

In commenting upon this possibility let me distinguish it from the hypothesis that I am advancing and show why the latter seems to me preferable. There is a sense in which, for example, the Yahweh of the Hebrew scriptures and the Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gita* are two different Gods. Yahweh is known only in his relationship to the Jewish people; he is a part of their history and they are a part of his. The universe of discourse which he inhabits is that of distinctively Jewish faith, and the strand of history in which he has operated runs through the Middle East and into the Jewish diaspora. Krishna, on the other hand, belongs to a different universe of religious discourse; and the strand of history within which he has revealed himself is that of ancient India. We have here two spheres of religious consciousness which do not at any point touch one another. Yahweh exists within and indeed as the center of the Jewish world-view, and only a Jew can know Yahweh as his or her God. Krishna, on the other hand, exists within and at the center of the quite different Vaishnavite Hindu world-view, and only Hindus can know Krishna as their God. Thus far it looks as though there are here two autonomous language-games which should not be confused or mixed, even though they are indirectly related as distant members of the wider family of religious language-games. But

nevertheless, when we see them both within the same field of intellectual vision a problem becomes evident. Within the Hebrew would view Yahweh (or Adonai) is believed to be the sole maker of heaven and earth,[5] and in the world-view of the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna is believed to be the sole source of the universe.[6] If, then, we take the polytheistic view that Yahweh and Krishna both exist in some relatively straightforward sense, one (at most) can be the true creator or source of the universe, whilst the other must either be a deceiver or be deceived. Thus the worshippers of either Yahweh or Krishna must be worshipping a false god. And yet each is at the center of an equally rich and spiritually sustaining religious life within which men and women are – and, so far as we can tell, are to an equal extent - brought to a self-giving love of God and to compassion towards their neighbours. The fruits of faith do not distinguish between the two Gods as respectively real and unreal, authentic and spurious. It therefore seems to me that the two viable options at this point are the naturalistic denial of both as figments of our imagination and the religious acceptance of both as authentic manifestations, or 'faces', or personae, or appearances to human consciousness, of the Real *an sich.*

Let me now adopt one of these terms and develop a little the idea of a plurality of divine personae. By a human persona I mean a public mask or social role which has developed in one's interaction with others and which has its existence within the ongoing process of a system of personal relationships. A permanently solitary consciousness - if we can imagine one - would have no persona since it would not exist in relationship to other consciousnesses. Personality is essentially interpersonal and presupposes a common world within which social life can take place. Accordingly the various divine personae, Yahweh and Krishna and Durga and Allah and Shiva and the Heavenly Father (or the Father, Son and Holy Ghost) and so on, have been formed in the interaction between the Real and different human religio-cultural communities. They exist at the interface between the Real and the various streams of historical consciousness. Thus the Yahweh persona has come about and developed in the impact of the Real upon the distinctively Hebraic consciousness of the Jewish people through the centuries; whilst the Krishna persona has come about in the impact of the Real upon distinctively Indian consciousness within the Vaishnavite tradition. And the reason why the Real is so preponderantly thought and experienced as personal in the history of religions is presumably that as persons most of us need, in our relationship with the Real, a personal cosmic presence to address and to be addressed by. Accordingly the different divine personae have formed as manifestations of the Real in relation to the different streams of human life. They are the Real as known, necessarily in human terms, within this or that religious tradition.

Can this paradigm of the Real becoming manifest in different ways which have been partly formed by our human contribution to awareness of It, be applied also to the thought and experience of the non-theistic traditions - advaitic Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism? I have suggested that the Real as perceived through one set of religio-cultural 'lenses' appears as a range of personal deities, who are the personae of the Real. Can we also say that the Real as perceived through another set of religio-cultural 'lenses' appears as a range of non-personal absolutes, which are the impersonae of the Real? I believe that we can - though only after two obstacles have been surmounted.

The first obstacle is the question whether what is experienced in non-theistic mysticism is indeed believed to be the Ultimate. So far as Hindu mysticism is concerned the answer is non-controversially Yes. Brahman is thought of as the Ultimate Reality. But what of Buddhism? Here we must remember that there is (as in the case of the other great traditions) not simply Buddhism in the singular but Buddhisms in the plural. The full range of meditational practices and philosophical interpretations inspired by the Buddha covers territory on both sides of the border between what I shall call the naturalistic or humanist, and the transcendental or religious, types of world-view. As I am using the terms, humanism or naturalism does not require a concept of the Ultimate; whereas religious, or transcendental, world-views do - each religious tradition having its own distinctive variation. There is, then, a humanist form of Buddhism which consists essentially in the practice of meditation without any associated transcendental beliefs. The fruit of meditation in the purification of the mind from the corrosions of ego-anxiety, and a consequent non-judgmental acceptance of this transitory world of which we are part, is an end in itself. The trappings of *zazen* drawn from Japanese monastic life - the meditation hall, the discipline, the drums and chants - are accepted as helpful aids to meditation; and such traditional Buddhist ideas as innumerable rebirths, the heavens and hells, the gods and bodhisattvas, are demythologized and regarded as popular aids to the imagination. All this is within the humanistic or naturalistic assumption that we are simply fleeting moments of consciousness, here one moment and gone the next, within the continuously transforming field of energy which is the physical universe.

I accept that Buddhism permits this kind of humanistic development; and indeed it is this that constitutes much of its attraction to many Western minds reacting against simplistically literal understandings of theism. However, I question strongly whether the main streams of Buddhist thought have understood themselves in this way.

Notes

In the Pali scriptures of the Thervada, *nirvana (nibbana)* is certainly sometimes presented in purely negative terms as simply the cessation of the grasping self and its attendant anxieties. It is the 'blowing out' of the ego with its inevitable sorrows. But there is also in the tradition a strong element of positive and indeed transcendental teaching about *nirvana.* Thus the Buddha declares, in a famous passage, 'Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a notcompounded. Monks, if that unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded.[7] Again, in the *Maijhima-Nikaya nirvana* is described as 'the unborn... unaging... undecaying... undying... unsorrowing... stainless',[8] and in the *Samyutta-Nikaya* as 'the further shore... the unfading... the stable ... the invisible... the taintless... the peace... the deathless... the excellent . . . the blissful . . . the security . . . the wonderful . . . the marvellous... the free from ill... the island... the cave of shelter ... the stronghold... the refuge... the goal'.[9] This sounds more like transcendental-religious than naturalistic-humanist language. And it is, I think, so understood by most of the leading Theravadins of today. For example, Narada Mahathera, in his commentary on *The Dhammapada,* speaks of *nirvana* as 'the permanent, immortal, supramundane state which cannot be expressed in mundane terms'.[10]

This positive use of the concept of *nirvana,* as pointing to the ultimate ineffable reality with which religion is concerned, was further developed within the Mahayana. Edward Conze summarises:

> The ultimate reality, also called Dharma by the Buddhists, or Nirvana, is defined as that which stands completely outside the sensory world of illusion and ignorance, a world inextricably interwoven with craving and greed. To get somehow to that reality is the supremely worthwhile goal of the Buddhist life. The Buddhist idea of ultimate reality is very much akin to the philosophical notion of the 'Absolute', and not easily distinguished from the notion of God among the more mystical theologians, like Dionysius Areopagita and Eckart'.[11]

And when we turn to Zen, which is the strand of Buddhism that is most readily open to a purely humanistic interpretation, we find members of the very influential Kyoto school speaking of religion as 'man's search for true reality', indeed for the 'Great Reality' (Keiji Nishitani),[12] and saying that 'nirvana is nothing but Ultimate Reality' (Masao Abe).[13] They emphasize that the characterization of Reality as *sunyata* (Emptiness, Void, Nothingness) is a way of expressing a transcendence of all human thought forms. As D. T. Suzuki wrote, 'To say that reality is "empty" means that it goes beyond definability, and cannot be qualified as this or that.' Again, *'Dharmakaya or prajna,* being "emptiness" itself and having no tangible bodily existence, has to embody itself in a form and be *manifested* as a stalk of bamboo, as a mass of foliage, as a fish, as a man, as a Bodhisattva, as a mind, and so forth. But these manifestations themselves *are* not the *Dharmakaya* or *prajna,* which is more than forms or ideas or modes of existence.'[14]

Thus it seems that there is deeply embedded in the Buddhist tradition the belief in an ultimate Reality, the eternal *dharmakaya* or Buddha nature, also characterized as *sunyata,* with which unity is attained in the final experience of enlightenment.

But what of the distinctive Mahayana discovery, central to Zen, that *nirvana* and *samsara* are one? What is discovered is a way of experiencing the world as it is, in its pure 'suchness'. This 'suchness', or as-it-is-ness, is also its 'emptiness' of any substantiality or permanence, and this 'emptiness' is, paradoxically, fullness of 'wondrous being'[15] in the ever-new reality of the present moment. This depth of reality is experienced by transcending the normal ego point of view, in which everything is perceived as it affects the self, and seeing things as they are for their own sake in their presentational immediacy. Like other modes of Buddhist experience this can be interpreted, or contextualised, both religiously and humanistically. For Zen-humanism the experience of the world in its full wonder and beauty is an end in itself, devoid of any implications concerning the structure of the universe beyond the evident fact that its incessant flow includes this present moment of experience. Religious Zen, on the other hand, also finds in this experience of the world a clue to the nature of reality transcending our own individual experience, as to be rejoiced in because it offers the bliss of *nirvana* to all conscious beings. Such an affirmation of the good in the sense of the to-be-rejoiced-in character of reality as a whole - not just good for a fortunate few but eventually for all -in is of the essence of religion. For if the goodness thus affirmed is secure and reliable it cannot be a mere chance moment waiting to be dissolved again in a structureless flow of change. To affirm the goodness of the universe - which William James, in my view rightly, identified as the essential message of religion[16] - is to affirm an ultimate reality transcending the flux of change and chance, a reality which is in its relation to us to be rejoiced in. And in the Buddhist tradition this eternal reality is variously known as *nirvana,* the *dharmakaya, sunyata.*

Thus it seems to me that our hypothesis, in its application to the non-theistic traditions, is able to surmount this first obstacle. In Hinduism and Buddhism there is an affirmation of the Ultimate either as the infinite consciousness of Brahman or as the ultimate reality of the Dharmakaya, expressed in the universal Buddha-nature which is our true being.

The second obstacle arises from a general difference between the traditions of Semitic and of Indian origin. If by the mystical we mean, as I think we should mean, simply the top end of the scale of intensity within the experiential element in religion, then mysticism plays a much more central role in the eastern than in the western traditions. Hinduism centers upon human consciousness, in all its emotional, volitional, intellectual and intuitive modes, and offers a transition from the anxiety-ridden delusion of *maya* to the blissful self-consciousness of the *atman,* which is one with Brahman, the Ultimate itself. Buddhism likewise centers upon our present consciousness, suffering from the anguished fears and worries generated by the self-concerned ego. For the ego is attached by a thousand bonds of grasping desire and fearful avoidance to a world that it cannot control, so that the ever-changing stream of life, involving the ineluctable possibilities of sickness, poverty, shame, injustice, and the inevitabilities of old age, decay and death, are felt as a perpetual threat. All this is the *dukkha* from which we can be liberated only by transcending the self-centerd point of view and entering into the egoless state of *nirvana.* Thus, for both the Hindu and the Buddhist traditions, right experiencing is an end in itself, whilst right believing has a subsidiary and instrumental value in pointing out the way to liberation.

For Judaism, Christianity and Islam, on the other hand, experience has generally been secondary to right belief or right behaviour. In Christianity right belief has been given a primary place, so that those who harbour 'wrong beliefs' have in the past had to be cast out of the Church as heretics, at one time with dire consequences. In Judaism participation in the ritual life of the people through the centuries has generally been regarded as more important than the holding of correct beliefs; orthopraxy has had priority over orthodoxy. In Islam certain basic beliefs - above all in the uniqueness and absoluteness of God and in God's revelation through the Prophet - have been seen as essential; but beyond this the stress has been upon the activities of prayer, fasting, alms-giving, pilgrimage and the organization of life in an Islamic pattern. Of course, there are profound mystical strands within each of these traditions of Semitic origin. But, historically, those strands have had a marginal place and have not infrequently been objects of suspicion or even hostility on the part of the orthodox.

Now mysticism, such as is central to the non-theistic strands within Hinduism and Buddhism, reports a direct, unmediated, often unitive, awareness of the Ultimate. The subject-object relationship is said to be transcended. There is no longer an epistemic distance between the human consciousness and the Ultimate itself, and accordingly no scope for a human activity of interpretation. Thus according to *advaita* Vedanta liberation involves the experience of oneness with Brahman; and according to Buddhism the attainment of *nirvana* is the experience of one's eternal Buddha nature, or (in Zen) of the ever-changing world, no longer seen in the distorting perspective of the ego, but experienced now as itself *nirvana.* But such a unitive and unmediated experience of the Ultimate does not fit the model that we have adopted for the theistic forms of religious experience, namely a reality, itself beyond the scope of human thought and experience, being mediately known in different ways from within the different religio-cultural streams of life. Thus far, then, it would seem that the model will apply to the theistic but not to the non-theistic religions.

However, recent epistemological discussions of mysticism have suggested that an interpretative element is always and unavoidably present even in the ostensibly unitive experience. For the mystic is still an embodied human mind; and this always functions in accordance with its own inherent structure, its cultural formation and it’s individual experience. And there is considerable evidence that a person who has been spiritually trained by an *advaitic* guru, whose mind has been steeped in the Vedas and Upanishads and the writings of Shankara, and who has for years practiced a form of *advaitic* yoga, will have a characteristically different experience of the Ultimate from one who has been spiritually trained by a Zen master, whose mind is steeped in Zen literature, and who has practiced *zazen* for years in a monastery or meditation center. The one will have a distinctively *advaitic* experience of the Ultimate as Brahman, the other a distinctively Zen experience of the Ultimate as the pure 'suchness' of everything seen as 'wondrous being', devoid of all ego-distortion. The strong correlation of the type of experience with the spiritual practice and its associated philosophy unmistakably suggests that the two minds bring their Vedantic or their Zen ideas and modes of apperception with them into their mystical experiencing, determining the form that it takes.

It therefore seems to me that the second hurdle can also be surmounted. There does seem to be in the non-theistic forms of religious experience a culturally variable human contribution paralleling the culturally variable

contribution to the different kinds of theistic experience.

There are, then, according to the hypothesis I am outlining, a plurality of impersonae as well as of personae of the Real. None of these is the Real *an sich;* but each of them is the Real as it affects a particular stream of religious consciousness. In Kantian terms, the noumenal Real is experienced - that is, enters into the phenomenal or experienceable realm - through one or other of two basic concepts - the concept of deity, or of the Real as personal, and the concept of the absolute, or of the Real as non-personal. (The term 'absolute' seems to be the nearest we have, although it is by no means ideal being less congenial to Buddhist than to Hindu thinking). However, we do not experience deity or the absolute in general. The human mind is always conscious of either in a specific way and as having a particular character. And because there are many consolidated historical forms of human mentality, reflecting the different ways of being human that have developed over the millennia, the history of religions shows a corresponding range of divine personae and of metaphysical impersonae.

What can we say about the Real *an sich?* Only that it is the ultimate reality that we postulate as the ground of the different forms of religious experience and thought in so far as they are more than human projection. To affirm the Real is to affirm that religious belief and experience in its plurality of forms is not simply delusion but constitutes our human, and therefore imperfect, partial and distorted range of ways of being affected by the universal presence of the Real. But we cannot apply to the noumenal Real any of the distinctions with which we structure our phenomenal, including our religious, experience. We cannot say that it is personal or impersonal, one or many, active or passive, substance or process, good or evil, just or unjust, purposive or purposeless. No such categories can be applied, either positively or negatively, to the noumenal. Thus, whilst it is not correct to say, for example, that the Real is personal, it is also not correct to say that it is impersonal - nor that it is both personal and impersonal, or neither personal nor impersonal. All that one can say is that these concepts, which have their use in relation to human experience, do not apply, even analogically, to the Real *an sich.*

Thus the Real *an sich* cannot be the object of a religious cult. We cannot worship it or achieve union with it. We worship one or other of its personae, or we seek union with one or other of its impersonae. And in so far as a deity or an absolute is an authentic manifestation of the Real, promoting the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, the form of worship or of meditation focused upon Him/Her/It constitutes 'true religion'. In principle we are free to choose between the personal and non-personal manifestations of the Real; and among the personae, to choose which God or Goddess, or group of deities, to worship; and again, among the impersonae, to choose to meditate towards the realization of Brahman or of Nirvana. In practice, a small minority do so choose; and it may be that that minority is becoming bigger. But for the large majority of us it has always been the case that the choice is in effect made by birth and upbringing.

What I have been outlining is a theory or hypothesis, a possible framework for thought concerning the religious life of humanity. What use might such an hypothesis have?

(I) It may satisfy our intuition that each of the great world faiths has such value that it is false and harmful to regard any one of them alone as true or authentic and the others as false or inauthentic. The hypothesis spells out to some extent the insight expressed by the Muslim mystic Jalaluldin Rumi, 'The lamps are different, but the Light is the same; it comes from Beyond'.[17]

(2) At the same time the hypothesis can remove any temptation to think of the different traditions as 'all the same' or 'all alike', and can free us to notice and to be fascinated by all the differences that the phenomenology of religion reveals.

(3) The hypothesis may thus provide a framework for inter-faith dialogue and an explicit basis for the hope that each tradition may learn from and be changed by its encounter with the others. For if each represents a different human perspective on the Real, each may be able to enlarge its own vision by trying to look through the lenses that others have developed.

1. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1952) p. 190.
2. Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972) p.86.
3. *Rig Veda,* I, 164, 46.
4. Masao Abe, 'A Dynamic Unity in Religious Pluralism', in John Hick and Hasan Askari (eds), *The Experience of Religious Diversity* (London: Gower, 1985) pp. 178-9.
5. Genesis 1:1.
6. *Bhagavad Gita* 9, 4.
7. *Udana*, 80.

8. Maijhima-*Nikaya,* I, 163. *The Middle Length Sayings,* trans. I. B. Homer (London: Pali Text Society, 1954- 56) vol. 1, pp. 206-7.
9. *Samyutta-Nikay'a,* iv, 369-71. *The Kindred Sayings,* trans. C. A. F. Rhys Davids (London: Pali Text Society, 1950-56) Part I, pp. 261-3.
10. Narada Mahathera, *The Dhammapada,* 2nd edn (Colombo: Vajirarama, 1972), pp. 2~5.Edward Conze, *Buddhism, Its Essence and Development*(New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975), pp.110-l1
12. Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness,* trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1982), pp.6 and 20.
13. Masao Abe, 'God, Emptiness, and the True Self', in *The Buddha Eye,* ed. Frederick Frank (New York: Crossroads, 1982), p.65.
14. D. T. Suzuki, 'The Buddhist Conception of Reality', in ibid., pp.103 and 97.
15. 'True Emptiness is Wondrous Being', *Mojingengenlan.*
16. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; London: Collins, 1960), beginning of Lecture XX.'The One True Light', in *Rumi: Poet and Mystic,* trans. R. A. Nicholson (London and Boston, Mass.: Mandala Books, 1978), p.166.

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