

For the Sake of One God

Notes on Philosophy of Religion

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Transliteration

As to Arabic and Persian words, the Bahá'í transliteration system is used. As to Sanskrit words, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* is followed. As to Buddhism, the Pāli terms, as transliterated in *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, are preferred to the Sanskrit. As to Zoroastrianism, the transliteration used by Gherardo Gnoli in 'Le religioni dell'Irán antico e Zoroastro' and 'La religione zoroastriana', *Storia delle religioni*, vol. 1, pp.455-565 is adopted. As to quotations, the transliterations of the original texts are preserved.

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Philosophers and Religion

Religion never failed to be of interest to human beings, who throughout history never stopped studying it from many points of view, including that of rationality. Daniel L. Pals, an expert in religious thought and theory of religion, writes that

when, on his travels, the ancient historian Herodotus (484-435 B.C.E.) tried to explain that the gods Amon and Horus, whom he encountered in Egypt, were the equivalent of Zeus and Apollo in his native Greece, he was actually offering at least the beginning of a general theory of religion.¹

That was the beginning of the philosophy of religion, which may be defined as ‘a rational study, of a purely philosophical kind, which tries to grasp the essence of religion and aims at stating what religion means, and which is its value in front of reason.’² Philosophers of religion critically examine ‘the concepts and belief systems of the religions as well as the prior phenomena of religious experience and the activities of worship and meditation on which these belief systems rest and out of which they have arisen.’³ In their critical studies of the fundamental religious beliefs, they try to explicate each belief and examine ‘the reasons that have been given for holding that belief to be true or holding it to be false, with a view to determining whether there is any rational justification for holding that belief to be true or holding it to be false.’⁴ They ‘don’t just ask questions: they also rigorously examine the various answers people give to their questions and then ask more questions.’⁵ The foremost items of their discussions are the existence of God, (Brian Davies, William L. Rowe), life after death (Davies, Rowe), God’s prescience and human freedom (Rowe), the compatibility between God’s

goodness and the existence of evil (Rowe), the concept of miracle (Davies), the truth of the Bible (Benjamin R. Tilghman), the relation between religion and science (Tilghman), as well as between religion and ethics Davies, Tilghman.

Also in the century of materialism philosophers turned their attention towards religion, sometimes to justify it, more often to blame it and deny its contributions to human progress. But great changes occurred in the last decades of the twentieth century all over the world in the political, social and ideological spheres and a closer contact among different religions are exposing the limitations of both these justifications and blames.

In a number of countries, where for decades religion has been considered only in the light of specific reductionistic approaches, in the conviction that it could be completely eliminated from society, facts have proved that religion is an essential component of human life. Therefore a debate has been opened on its meaning, with a firm determination to avoid the equivalent deceits of a preconceived atheism and of a univocal defense of any religious denomination at the expense of others. In other countries, where a single religious confession has been, or still is, predominant upon the others, the presence of many followers of other religions, formerly even physically remote, has awakened believers and non-believers alike to the necessity of finding ways towards a peaceful coexistence of the various religious identities.

Therefore the need is acutely felt nowadays to move forward in the critical reflections on religions, with a view to discovering the reasons for the differences among religions and for the conflicts that characterized and still characterize their relations; to distinguishing between essential and secondary aspects of religions; to obtaining a deeper comprehension of the meaning of those personages—the objects of deference and love of their followers and of the indifference or denial of their detractors—who were the Prophets-Founders of revealed religions; to placing religions in their historical perspective, in order to understand, on the one hand, their events and evolution, and, on the other, their role and practical

value in view of the development of civilization; to formulating a definition of religion, whereby the overall meaning of the great historical religious phenomena may be understood; to studying from the rational standpoint such fundamental issues as the Godhead, the human soul, religious ethics, the inner and outer aspects of the religious phenomenon, the relation between religion and science, and religion and politics; to reconsidering the objections raised against religion, and to formulating a judgment on religion and its future in the light of facts as well as previous judgements.

An alternative to skepticism and exclusivism

For a long time religions have been studied from two fundamental points of view, that is, skepticism and exclusivism. The skeptical are the atheists and the agnostics, who often belittle or even deny the relevance of religions in view of the development of civilization, firmly persuaded as they are that as humanity grows to maturity in its use of reason, it may well dispense with a phenomenon that had a meaning at best in past ages. The exclusivistic are some traditional believers, who are staunch in their belief in the validity of their respective confessions whose worth they vindicate to the last, and deny the value of all the others, which they evaluate in the light of the teachings they uphold, always ready to put so-called articles of faith before the results of rational reflection.

In both cases the outcome has been a reductive vision of religion. The reasons are obvious and declared in the case of atheists and agnostics; subtler, but not less dangerous, in the case of believers. In fact religious exclusivism implies a rivalry that somehow diminishes the same concept of religion. How will the ideals of love, unity and fellowship, preached by all religions alike, be ever reconciled with the subtle and hidden, but sometimes gross and open rivalry that divides many self-styled religious persons? And how will a teaching that preaches love but sows strife be ever trusted? The step from this thought to the denial of the relevance of religion in human life and civilization is very short.

However, it seems quite difficult to have a detached attitude towards religion and to avoid any kind of apologetic intention. After all, secularists themselves, in spite of their declared needs of objectivity, have made their choice, be it atheism, materialism, rationalism, or humanism, and uphold it. Therefore they themselves are 'hiding... some secret presuppositions,' that is, 'the belief that ... [they have] finally discovered the one argument, the one method, the one critical theory that explains all.'⁶ Therefore, their assumption that whoever dissents from the prevailing atheistic or agnostic ideas, and thus cannot be defined as 'a secularist,' is anyhow lacking in objectivity in his eventual studies of religions, seems as questionable as the exclusivistic attitudes of the defenders of the various religious denominations.

And thus at this point a preliminary statement seems quite appropriate. The present writer has faith in the relevance of religion. His faith falls within the definition of faith given by William S. Hatcher, Professor of Mathematics at Laval University in Quebec City: 'We can define an individual's faith to be his total emotional and psychological orientation resulting from the body of assumptions about reality which he has made (consciously or unconsciously).'7 The present writer believes in the oneness of religions and most of the ideas he will set forth are inspired by the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. And—as Sir Herbert Samuel (1870-1963), a British statesman and philosopher, said during the first meeting of the World Congress of Faith held in Canterbury in 1936, whose president he was—that religion 'exists almost for the sole purpose of contributing to the fellowship and unity of mankind.'⁸ The reflections that follow serve but one purpose: to point out all the elements of religions that may advance interreligious dialogue and thus promote the progress of religions towards a peaceful coexistence, so that all of them may together accomplish their most important mission, that is, fostering love, unity and fellowship among human beings.

Interreligious dialogue: from exclusivism towards pluralism

The origins of modern interreligious dialogue may be traced as far back as September 1893, when the World Parliament of Religions was first convened in Chicago. At the end of that historical meeting the representatives of the ten convened religions wrote:

Believing that God is, and that he has not left Himself without witness; believing that the influence of religion... is the most vital force in the social order of every people; and convinced that of a truth God is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted by Him,... [we propose] to consider the foundations of all religious faiths,... and thus to contribute to those forces that shall bring about the unity of the race in the worship of God and the service of man.⁹

The Second Vatican Council of 1963-65 marked an important turning point in this dialogue, since the Catholic Church began to soften its former exclusivistic attitude into a new position which was later defined as 'inclusivism.' This change of attitude became evident in a statement pronounced in November 21, 1964, which says:

Those who through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation. Nor shall divine providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the Church to be a preparation for the Gospel and given by him who enlightens all men that they may at length have life.¹⁰

William L. Rowe, professor of philosophy at Purdue University, has considered this statement as ‘an attempt... to address the practical difficulties that confront exclusivism.’ ‘Thus,’ says the philosopher, ‘while denying the *ultimate validity* of other religions, the inclusivistic Christian may still allow that the adherents of... other religions may attain salvation by following the paths to salvation laid down by those religions.’¹¹

Later on, John H. Hick, a leading philosopher of religion and interfaith dialogue, has suggested pluralism as ‘a possible, and indeed attractive, hypothesis... that the great religious traditions of the world represent different human perceptions of and response to the same infinite divine Reality.’¹²

Hans Küng, an eminent Catholic theologian, for his part, has confirmed that inclusivism is not sufficient in view of a sincere and fruitful interreligious dialogue and has suggested a more ‘genuine’ pluralistic attitude. He writes:

As Martin Kampchen, a Catholic theologian living in India, has phrased it: ‘Up till now theology has taken as its point of departure a *mock* pluralism... *Genuine* pluralism, however, recognizes not only the existence of other religions, but their intrinsic *equal value*.’¹³

Pluralism cannot be considered as a totally new idea in the field of religious studies. After February 1870, when Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), the Anglo-German orientalist and comparative philologist, who founded the modern field of comparative religious studies, pronounced his speech at the Royal Institution in London that has been considered as the foundation document of comparative religion in the English-speaking world,¹⁴ scholars of comparative religion have been trying to discover the ‘essence of religion.’ Adriano Alessi, a Salesian philosopher of religion, defines this aspect of philosophy of religion as its ‘eidetic finality’ and explains that ‘it is an attempt to grasp what is the form, the *eidōs*, the essential element of the sacral experience itself (beyond, or better within, the plurality of the elements circumscribing the religious fact).’

He adds however that 'so far it was not established whether such a notion is really possible,... or it is only a bundle of heterogeneous concepts, or it is preached by the various religions in a purely analogical form. This is an open and, for this same reason, unavoidable issue.'¹⁵ Scholars have taken different positions on this issue. Some are optimistic, as the English historian Arnold Joseph Toynbee (1889-1975) who suggests that 'the four higher religions that are alive in our age,'¹⁶ may be considered 'four variations on a single theme.' He writes that 'if all the four components of this heavenly music of the spheres could be audible on earth simultaneously, and with equal clarity, to one pair of human ears, the happy hearer would find himself listening, not to a discord, but to a harmony.'¹⁷ Others like Gerrit C. Berkouwer, a Dutch theologian, on the one hand believe 'that the religions of the world do not present a disconnected and chaotic variety in which there is no perceivable unity,' but on the other declare that 'it has proven exceedingly difficult to arrive at a further pin-pointing of that regularity.'¹⁸ Others finally think that 'it is very probably a mistake to suppose that there is some essence of religion, some central core to be found in all religions of whatever age or place.'¹⁹ In this vein, David Tracy, professor of theology in the Divinity School of Chicago, writes:

There are family resemblances among the religions. But as far as I can see, there is no single essence, no one content of enlightenment or revelation, no one way of emancipation or liberation, to be found in all that plurality.... The belief that ultimately all the religions are finally one is implausible.... The attempt to define a single 'perennial philosophy' grounding all the religions... is a commendable experiment but thus far not a persuasive one.²⁰

In the Bahá'í literature many theological and philosophical concepts may be found on whose ground the pluralistic approach to religion may be developed and clarified, so that it may not be 'simply a

passive response to more and more possibilities, none of which shall ever be practiced,'²¹ but a viable way towards a deeper and more fruitful interreligious dialogue, and all religions may be enabled 'to retain their competing truth claims yet bypass the divisive aspects of those claims in the pursuit of peace.'²²

The Decline of the Credit of Religions and Its Causes

The twentieth century has witnessed a steady decline of the credit of religions and religious institutions and the rise and growth of materialistic philosophies, which have come to consider them 'irrelevant to the major concerns of the modern world.'¹ The main reasons of this phenomenon may be identified, on the one hand, in 'the differences among religions'² and, on the other, in 'the artificial barriers erected between faith and reason, science and religion.'³ Besides that, there is a widespread sentiment that the institutions associated with religions are incapable of jointly suggesting and implementing sound and practicable solutions to the manifold problems afflicting humanity today.

Dissensions among religions

In the past, each religion seemed unshakable in its belief of being the only depositary of truth, the main road towards God, whereas other religions were considered either wholly 'false' or at best minor manifestations of truth. Each religion has stated that its Founder is the one Mouthpiece of God, whereas all the others are, at best, bearers of human verities, nothing more than clever reformers or announcers of lesser spiritual truths, and therefore subordinated to that one great divine Master. This conflict was rampant also within each religion, among all the confessions and sects into which they were split down the centuries. Their followers were as intolerant towards each other as if, or even more than as if they belonged to totally different religious stocks.⁴

As to 'the differences among religions,' 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), the son and appointed successor of Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, ascribed them in 1912 to the prevalent conviction that 'the law of God demanded blind imitation of ancestral forms of belief and worship.'⁵ He remarked that tradition comprises, on the one hand, the body of the interpretations of the Scriptures, given by more or less ancient theologians⁶ and often enunciated in the form of dogmas and, on the other, a set of rituals and ceremonies, crystallized over the centuries into a more or less complicated body of ceremonials. Submission to the tenets of tradition was considered so important that sometimes they were observed even to the detriment of 'the basic foundation of the religion of God, which was ever the principle of love, unity and the fellowship of humanity.'⁷ In a number of confessions, for example, tradition required that strangers should be strictly shunned, in evident contempt of the calls to universal love raised by all Prophets alike. As to rituals, they had taken on quite definite forms and were given such importance that their observance came to be considered fundamental not only to one's religious identity but also one's salvation. See for example certain initiation rites in the various religions, like circumcision in Judaism and Islam and baptism in Christianity, or the holy communion and other Catholic sacraments. Thus traditions turned, down the centuries, within the various religions, into sets of dogmas quite dissimilar and sometimes even opposed to one another in the various confessions, and into bodies of quite diverse and exclusive rites and ceremonies. Dogmas and rites, to which great importance had been invariably attached in view not only of one's religious identity but also of salvation, are so divergent and exclusive that so far 'it has been impossible for the followers of religions to meet together in complete fellowship and agreement.'⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá observes:

Most regrettable of all is the state of difference and divergence we have created between each other in the name of religion, imagining that a paramount duty in our religious belief is that of alienation and estrangement, that we should shun each other and consider each other contaminated with error and infidelity.⁹

Barriers between science and religion

Belief in dogmas pose a further problem. Sometimes dogmas are in conflict with the results of scientific research. The idea that submission to the tenets of tradition is an essential element of religious faith sometimes implies that the faithful accept dogmatic verities 'even when they are contrary to science.'¹⁰ See the various dogmas ensuing from literal interpretations of the Scriptures, for example, the dogma of Mary's assumption in various Christian denominations, or certain Muslim interpretations of the *mi'rāj* or nocturnal ascension of Muhammad, or the idea of the bodily resurrection on the day of judgment upheld by Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and Muslims alike. Thus a conflict between religion and science, faith and reason has arisen and is still going on. This conflict, initially born among the Christians, but widespread today among the followers of all religions, is the cause of grievous splits in the consciences.

Inadequacies of religious institutions

Some people today think that religious institutions, often entrenched in positions of defense of the past and of a fundamental antagonism with science as well as with other religions, cannot meet the needs of a world different from the world even of a few decades ago. The need is deeply felt today for a unity between human beings, which cannot happen with the supremacy of any religious tradition upon the others. And yet the followers of each tradition are waiting for a day of religious unity of the world, but visualize that day as the one of their victory upon the 'unbelievers,' who shall at long last be all gathered under the aegis of the one true religion of God.

Others feel a deep need for rational confirmations of religion. Although science is unavoidably limited in front of the immensity of creation, yet it has come to penetrate with its inquisitive eye areas of knowledge once concealed behind the veil of mystery. Many people therefore wish to achieve a better understanding of

religious myths, which were certainly useful during the infancy of humanity, but are today a factor of conflict, because they are not compatible with the discoveries of science as long as religious institutions insist in interpreting them in the letter. This is still another reason why many turn their backs to religious institutions, which they perceive as incapable of satisfying their inner needs for truth.

The defense of a tradition made up of diverging dogmas, which are often in conflict with science, and of exclusive rituals in the various religions, have turned into a cause of exclusion and division. What is considered a sign of faith on the inside of a religion, is almost always viewed as fanaticism, bigotry or superstition from the outside. An important consequence of such a plight is the blame easily put on religions by many secularists. What is the worth of a religion whose institutions teach dogmas in conflict with science and reason, perpetuate exclusive rituals and uses that are sometimes very close to superstition, preach love but with their intolerance sow conflict? No marvel if many thoughtful people put such questions to themselves; or if persons of science, faced with the dilemma of either accepting irrational dogmas and exclusive behaviors inspired by prejudice against other religions, or choosing the more tolerant ways of an atheistic or agnostic rationalism preferred the latter. One of the many scholars who seem to share these ideas in the Western Christian world is Paolo Brezzi (1910-1998), an Italian historian of Christianity, who however follows a different thread of thought.

He writes that modern atheism is today a wrong and absurd, if you will, but revealing and significant, response... to the deformations of the idea of God occurred during the doctrinal and philosophical development of a number of religious trends, that prevailed during the last centuries in the Christian intellectual world, in the civilization feeding on that religion.¹¹

The Italian economist Aurelio Peccei (1900-1983) also wrote in the same vein:

I am not an expert... but I think I can say that the blame [of the failure of religions] is mostly to be put on the recognized representatives or interpreters of those great religions. Their exclusivism has all too often overstepped the limits of a statement or of a practice of faith and has turned into intolerance.¹²

But perhaps the dilemma of people of thought and science could be solved in a different way: trying to understand whether, and in which terms, tradition may be legitimately considered an essential element of religion. Hick recognizes part of the problem, but does not see any solution. He writes that

we need to make use of the important distinction between, on the one hand, human encounters with the divine reality in the various forms of religious experience, and on the other hand, theological theories or doctrines that men and women have developed to conceptualize the meaning of these encounters. These two components of religion, although distinguishable, are not separable. It is as hard to say which came first, as in the famous case of the hen and the egg.¹³

‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls into question the value of tradition from the religious as well as rational points of view. As to the religious point of view, he says that none of the Founders of past religions left incontrovertible dispositions as to a permanent ‘center of authority and explanation.’ Therefore tradition was produced by people who claimed the right of interpreting their Scriptures, ‘but none of them possessed a written authority from’ their Prophet-Founder. The sundry conflicts which the issue of successorship in the guidance of the community and of the interpretation of the Scriptures has repeatedly stirred up, throughout the centuries and within most religions, seem to confirm his ideas. And thus tradition should not be considered as having the same religious authority as the words of the Prophet-Founder. As to the rational point of view, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that

religious traditions are the report and record of understanding and interpretation of the Book.... Inasmuch as the source of traditions and interpretations is human reason, and human reason is faulty, how can we depend upon its findings for real knowledge?¹⁴

And thus the tenets of tradition should be reconsidered in the light of the new scientific discoveries, 'for science and reason are realities, and religion itself is the Divine Reality unto which true science and reason must conform.' Moreover they should always be subordinated to the observance of 'the basic foundation of the religion of God, which was ever the principle of love, unity and the fellowship of humanity.'¹⁵

Putting back into perspective the value and the meaning of tradition within the various religions could be an important step towards a new approach to religion, more suitable to the characteristics of contemporary society, with its needs for reconciliation between faith and reason and of unity among religions. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said in Paris in 1913:

When the devotees of religion cast aside their dogmas and ritualism, the unification of religion will appear on the horizon and the verities of the holy books will become unveiled. In these days superstitions and misunderstandings are rife; when these are relinquished the sun of unity shall dawn.¹⁶

Differences among the teachings of religions

And yet, apart from tradition, there are meaningful differences even among the teachings set forth by the Prophets-Founders of the various religions, differences that may represent an obstacle in the interreligious dialogue. 'Abdu'l-Bahá justifies those differences explaining that the teachings of religions can be distinguished into two kinds: spiritual and material teachings.¹⁷

Spiritual teachings concern 'the ethical development and

spiritual progress of mankind.’¹⁸ They teach and recommend such fundamental concepts related to the spiritual life of humankind as knowledge of God, faith in God, spiritual perception, love for humanity. In other words, all those human virtues which religions describe as reflections of the attributes of the divine Kingdom. In this respect, religions urge men and women to acquire the virtues characterizing perfect humanity and moral excellence and maintain that only the person who manifests such virtues in the form of thoughts, feelings, words and deeds has fulfilled the purpose of her life, that is, ‘to acquire virtues.’¹⁹ Such a person has attained the eternal life, that is, paradise. The Gospels and the Koran describe this condition through the metaphor of the ‘second birth.’²⁰ Mystic religions mention second birth (*dvija*), enlightenment (*bodhi*), liberation (*moksha*) and *nirvana*. All of them recommend that each human being acquires the virtues characterizing moral excellence and maintain that only the person who manifests such virtues in the form of thoughts, feelings, words and deeds has fulfilled the purpose of his life. In this respect, all religions teach the same spiritual truth, ‘the same spiritual law... the one code of morality.’²¹ Many recognize the essence of the moral codes of all religions in the so-called ‘golden rule’ that recurs, worded in slightly different terms, in all religions of the world: ‘Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you.’ Thus the Hindu *Mahabharata* says: ‘Do not do to others what ye do not wish done to yourself; and wish for others too what ye desire and long for, for yourself—This is the whole Dharma, heed it well.’²² The *Babylonian Talmud* prescribes: ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary.’²³ The Zoroastrian *Dadestan-i-denig* explains: ‘that nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self.’²⁴ The Buddhist *Sigalovada-sutta* advises: ‘In five ways should a clansman minister to his friends and familiars as the northern quarter—by generosity, courtesy, and benevolence... by treating them as he treats himself, and by being good as his words.’²⁵ Jesus warns: ‘Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to

you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.’²⁶ A Muslim tradition relates that Muḥammad advised: ‘Whatever you abhor for yourself, abhor it also for others, and whatever you desire for yourself desire also for others.’²⁷ Bahá’u’lláh writes in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Mother-Book of his Dispensation: ‘Wish not for others what ye wish not for yourselves.’²⁸ These spiritual teachings are not contrary to reason, they are logical.²⁹

Material or practical teachings concern laws governing human relationships and social behaviors, for example, marriage, foods and modes of punishment for offenses, as well as exterior forms and ceremonies, for example, the various expressions of worship. They comprise laws that should meet human needs and situations conditioned upon requirements of time, space and circumstances. Therefore they are inevitably different in the various religions, because they should meet ‘the exigencies and requirements of time and place,’³⁰ which are different in the various religions, born in different ages and places. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: ‘Truth has many aspects, but it remains always and forever one.’³¹ Likewise, the ‘divine religions of the Holy Manifestations of God are in reality one though in name and nomenclature they differ.’³²

A meeting point of all people of faith could be a joint acknowledgment of the fact that inasmuch as spiritual teachings concern the ethical sphere that is universal, they are ‘essential’ and ‘fundamental,’ whereas, inasmuch as material teachings concern practical aspects of life that can be solved in different ways depending on the circumstances, they are ‘accidental’³³ and of secondary importance. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls the former ‘the kernel’ of religion and the latter its ‘shell.’³⁴ Accepting the differences between the material teachings of religions, not in a spirit of mere tolerance, almost patronizingly, but in the name of the spiritual teachings, whose oneness and preeminence upon the relatively less important material teachings has been understood, could be part of a new approach to religion more appropriate to the characteristics of contemporary society with its need for dialogue.

Scripture: The Heart of Religions

Philosophy of religion cannot dispense with studying Scriptures, which represent the heart of religions. We will examine only the following religions: Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Babism and the Bahá'í Faith. Hopefully scholars will also turn their attention towards all the other religions, not only Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism, etc., but also all traditional religions sometimes called 'tribal' or 'indigenous' that have no Scripture. As to Hinduism, it should be reminded that the term Hinduism is a word coined by Westerners to denote the religions of the Hindus. When this word was invented, the ideas on the subject were not very clear in the West and it was thought that all Hindus practiced the same religion, which is not true. Therefore we should better say Hindu religions.

As to Scriptures, four items of fundamental importance are their definition, their authenticity, their language and their interpretation.

Definition

Scripture of a religion is a body of writings that convey the fundamentals of its religious experience and that, in the context of that religion, are recognized as sacred (that is, revealed) and as invested with sacred authority. The contents of most Scriptures were initially transmitted orally and were put in writing only after a considerable lapse of time.

The primal nucleus of all Scripture is mostly represented by words supposedly spoken or written by the Prophet-Founder of a religion. In Hinduism, the four *Vedas*, *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*, convey words recognized by most Hindus

as the most sacred legacy of their ancient bards/seers (*rishis*). Some add to that the monumental epical poem, the *Mahabharata*, of more than 100,000 verses. This poem is considered the most significant mythological document of the Indian golden age, because it contains many myths, legends, elaborate genealogies, as well as moral concepts. It is so important that sometimes it is called the ‘fifth *Veda*.’

In Judaism, the primal nucleus of Scripture is formed by the Torah, that is, the five books of Moses forming the Pentateuch and recognized by the Jews as their fundamental and most sacred Scripture.

Zoroastrians consider the *Yasna* the heart of Avestic literature, because it contains the *Gathas*, seventeen hymns written in an older dialect and supposedly composed by Zoroaster himself, whose opinions ‘handed down, it is not known how and how faithfully,’¹ they convey. In fact the Spitamas, whose descendant Zoroaster is traditionally considered, were not only wealthy breeders, but also ‘of the priestly caste and heirs of an ancient calling to sacred poetry.’² Reformist Zoroastrians think that the *Gathas* ‘should serve as the norm for what the tradition teaches and believes.’³

Buddhists call the core of their Scriptures *Buddhavacana*, that is, ‘that which is understood to have been preached by Buddha Shakyamuni in his ordinary human form.’ Although Buddhists recognize a text as *Buddhavacana* on criteria that are rather loose in comparison with the criteria adopted for the same purpose by followers of other religions, however the first of the ‘four “great authorities”’ from whom they accept a Scripture as *Buddhavacana* is a monk who says: ‘I have heard and learned this myself from the mouth of the Blessed One himself.’⁴

In Christianity, the primal authorities from which the Christian Canon developed in the course of five centuries are ‘the “words of the Lord” (that is, the teachings of Jesus, preserved mainly in oral tradition) and the “testimony of the apostles” (that is, the teachings of qualified messengers).’ And among the numerous criteria of canonicity adopted in the choice of the Canonical writings,

apostolicity ranked among the foremost. Therefore, although we cannot say that the Christian Canon exactly conveys the same words uttered by Jesus, we may recognize it as the record of those sacred words and of the earliest response of Jesus' followers to his revelation. As Harry Y. Gamble, Jr., an expert in religious studies, writes: 'The propriety of the canon's limits was defended on the basis that only these documents derive from the apostles, so that their authority rests on *historical* proximity to the event of revelation.'⁵

As to Islam, Muslims consider the Koran as containing the record of the exact words revealed by God to Muḥammad through the Angel Gabriel.

In the Bahá'í Faith, Scripture may be defined as the authentic texts written by the 'Three Central Figures'⁶ of the Bahá'í Faith, that is, the Báb (1819-1850), the Prophet-Herald, Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the authorized Interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's words,⁷ that are preserved in their original, holograph or authenticated manuscript, in the International Archives Building of the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa. The Bahá'ís do not consider as Scripture anything 'for which... [they] do not have an original text.'⁸

However, all religions also ascribe great importance to a large body of writings produced by human personalities. Those writings are mostly regarded an integral part of Scripture and binding for their followers as the words of their Prophet-Founder. And yet, very often those parts of Scripture are recognized as less sacred than the other parts. Thus, for example, Hindus make a distinction between *sruti*, that is, 'audition,' 'that which is heard,' denoting the Vedic revelation received as an audition by the ancient bards/seers (*rishis*) and then learnt by heart by disciples who listened to it, and repeated it, syllable after syllable from a master; and *smriti*, that is, 'memory,' the interpreted words which form tradition, and whose value totally depends on *sruti*. In Judaism the remaining parts of the Tanakh are recognized 'of somewhat lesser holiness in Jewish thought' in comparison with the Pentateuch.⁹ The Bahá'ís

also ascribe a binding value to the texts directly written or authorized by Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), the appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith from 1921 to 1957, as well as by the Universal House of Justice, their supreme governing Institution. As to all other forms of literature, Bahá'ís may consider them as interesting, but certainly not as authentic, and thus they never recognize them as authorized and binding.¹⁰

Authenticity

Except for the Scriptures of the most recent religions, Babism and the Bahá'í Faith, dating back to the nineteenth century, all existing Scriptures are at least 1300 years old. Among them the Koran seems to be the less problematic from a scientific point of view. All earlier Books pose great problems of authenticity. The Koran was put in writing upon goat bone sheets, or palm leaves, in the course of 23 years (c. 609 to 632 C.E.), by various amanuenses as Muhammad was reciting it. From then on it was carefully memorized and preserved in writing. Its definitive canonical text was completed during the reign of the third caliph, 'Uthmán (644-656 C.E.), and therefore the authorized version of the Koran ever since has been called *Mushaf* 'Uthmán. Minor refinements of a purely grammatical and orthographic nature were made in the tenth century, when a completely voweled and 'pointed' text of the Koran became available. Modern scholars do not recognize it as 'a critical text in the scientific sense,' but as 'a *textus receptus*, with the absolute authority of the consensus of the Muslims that it is indeed the true Qur'an [Koran] in all respects.'¹¹ Therefore, most people think that the Koran really conveys the exact words uttered by Muhammad. As to all the other religions, the words of their Prophet-Founders were initially handed down orally and recorded only in later times.

As to Hindu Scripture, beside the above mentioned *Vedas* and *Mahabharata*, the most important books are the *Upanishads* and the *Ramayana*. The Sanskrit word *veda* comes from the root *vid* (from which also the Latin verb *video*, 'I see,' comes), 'which means

“to perceive, to know, to regard, to name, to find out, to acquire, to grant.”¹² The *Vedas* are the most ancient, and relatively speaking the most authentic, Hindu Scripture. They are a collection of hymns that, according to most Western scholars, were composed in the second millennium B.C. Mario Piantelli, an Italian expert in Indian religions and philosophies, informs us that,

although they are a most precious testimony of the world of the ancient Indo-European oral literatures, which in other countries were lost, however they appear in their present form as the outcome of a centuries-old process that left its traces as a complex stratification, and thus all attempted chronological systematizations are debatable.¹³

The *Upanishads* are a body of mystical commentaries of the Brahmanic doctrines, which were written during the eighth-ninth centuries B.C. by ‘kingly gurus teaching Brahmins.’¹⁴ The literal meaning of the word *upanishad* is “sessions” (sad) “nearby, with” (upa-ni) the master,¹⁵ a name which denotes their mystical character. The *Mahabharata*, ascribed to a legendary personage whose name is Vyasa or Krishna Dvaipayana, dates back probably to the fifth century B.C., and comprises the *Bhagavad-gita* (The Song of the Blessed), connected with Krishna, who according to the Vaishnavas is the eighth and most important *Avatara*, or incarnation, of Vishnu. The *Ramayana*, composed in the third century B.C. by a legendary poet named Valmiki, narrates the feats of the hero Rama, who according to the Vaishnavas is the seventh *Avatara* of Vishnu.

As to the books of the Old Testament, they also comprise many passages, written several centuries after the times the various Prophets to whom they are ascribed, lived. In particular the Pentateuch, the body of texts referable to the Mosaic revelation and traditionally ascribed to Moses,¹⁶ is considered today at least a partially later work. Having all scholars agreed on the fact that the words of the Old Testament were at the beginning transmitted orally, it remains to ascertain the chronology of their written texts.

According to Kung 'The whole process of the formation of the Book of Genesis may itself have taken five hundred years.'¹⁷ According to other scholars 'The most ancient part of Pentateuch dates back to the eleventh century B.C., whereas the more recent parts of the Ketuvim [Hagiographa] date back only to the second century B.C..¹⁸ Most scholars agree with Jonathan Rosenbaum, an expert in Judaic studies, that 'The final collecting, fixing, and preservation of the Pentateuch took place in the Babylonian Exile (Ezra 7: 14, 25)' (586-538 B.C.) and that 'the Hebrew Bible... was not fully defined and limited until more than two and a half centuries after its latest component part (Daniel) was completed.'¹⁹

As to Zoroastrian Scriptures, they comprise a more ancient part, the *Avesta* and a post-Avestan tradition written in Pahlavi, the Middle Persian language of the Arsacid and Sasanian periods (third to seventh century C.E.). The name *Avesta* derives from the Pahlavi word *Apastak*, which probably means 'that which is established' and therefore 'basic text.' Alessandro Bausani (1921-1988), an Islamist and an expert in religious studies, writes that

scholars specializing in the field did not agree either on the meaning of the name *Avesta*, or on the time of its composition, the number of books of which it was composed, the date of the written record of this fundamental text, the language in which it was written, the translation of the various parts, especially the earlier ones—in fact, practically speaking, on anything...

The certainty remains that the definitive written record of the *Avesta*... does not go back further than the fourth century A.D.

He explains moreover that only a few parts of the *Avesta* put in written in the Sasanian age, 'specially those [parts that were] most useful for *liturgical purposes*', remain today, and that those parts are 'hard to understand without the Pahlavî texts... [which were] almost all written around the ninth century A.D.'²⁰ Modern scholars divide the *Avesta* into six parts: the *Yasna*, or Act of worship, a

body of texts to be chanted during the homonymous ritual which implies the offering of *haoma*; the *Wisprad*, or worship of all the Masters, to be chanted on the seven great holy days; the *Khorda Avesta*, or Little *Avesta*, which contains prayers for laymen; the *Sih-rozah*, or thirty days, which mentions the *Yazatas*, that is, beings worthy of worship beside the seven *Amesha Spentas*, and governing the thirty days of each month; the *Yasht*, 21 poetical hymns dedicated to various *Yazatas*; the *Widevdat* or *Vendidad*, or against the *daevas* or evil beings, a Zoroastrian catechism. The *Yasna* also comprises the *Gathas*, the only texts that most scholars ascribe to Zoroaster. They are divided into five groups: seven *Gathas Ahunavaiti*, or hymns having to do with the *ahuna*, the *Mazdaic* prayer; four *Gathas Ushtavaiti*, or hymns containing the term *ushta*, wish, will; four *Gathas Spenta-mainyu*, or hymns of the Holy Spirit; one *Gatha Vohu-khshathra*, or hymn of the Good Dominion; one *Gatha Vahishoishti*, defined by Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, an eminent scholar in Zoroastrian studies, as the Marriage-*Gatha*,²¹ since it was supposedly written on the occasion of the marriage of one of Zoroaster's daughters. The most important Pahlavi texts are the following: the *Bundahishn*, or book of creation, which is considered as the Zoroastrian Genesis; the *Denkard* which offers a summary of all the books of the ancient *Avesta*, comprising those who were lost; the *Zand-i-Vahman Yasn* the Pahlavi Apocalypse; the *Dadestan-i-denig*, or religious sentences, about questions of ritual purity; the sapiential text *Dadestan-i-Menog-i-Khrad*, or sentences of the spirit of wisdom and the *Arda Wiraz namag*, or Book of Arda Wiraz, a pious Zoroastrian who travels in the world beyond, a forerunner of Dante.

As to Buddhism, the Buddha probably preached in a Middle Indic language, which was the colloquial tongue of his age. After his death his teachings continued to be transmitted orally for a long time. In fact Indian tradition has always attached, and in part even today attaches, a greater significance to oral than to written transmission. Immediately after the death of the Buddha, in 486 or 410 B.C., his disciples convened a Council and collected the earliest texts, in what is considered the earliest outline of the Canon.

According to Bausani, this early Canon was transmitted orally till about 250 B.C., when the Indian Emperor Ashoka, the Buddhist Constantine, convened a Council which established the definitive Canon. This Canon, probably written in the Magadhi language which was used in the court of Ashoka, is now lost. According to Kung, the oldest Buddhist texts were written down in 'Pali, which is relatively close to the language used by the Buddha himself...a hundred years after the death of the Buddha.'²² According to others, the Pali Canon was put in writing only in the first century C.E. in Sri Lanka.²³ The most important extant collection of authoritative texts in Buddhism is the so-called *Pali Tipiṭaka* (Sanskrit, *Tripiṭaka*). The name *Tipiṭaka* means triple basket, an allusion to its subdivision into three separate collections: the *Vinaya pitaka*, the *Sutta pitaka*, and the *Abhidhamma pitaka*.

As to Christian Scripture, Jesus' words were not immediately recorded, they were put in writing only several years after his death, when there was an efflorescence of records of narratives about his life and teachings. We do not know exactly how the present texts of the Canon were formed. Most scholars think that the primal body of the Christian Canon was an early collection of Jesus' sayings (*logia*), which at the beginning was transmitted orally and was variously committed to writing only in later times. On the basis of this ancient text, known among the scholars as 'Q', from the German word *Quelle*, that is, 'source,' which is now lost, as well as of oral accounts, quite a number of more elaborated texts were gradually composed between the second and the fifth centuries. But only 27 of them were selected as Canonical texts. They are the three Synoptic Gospels, according to St. Matthew, St. Mark and St. Luke, the Gospel of St. John, the Facts of the Apostles, ascribed to the author of the Gospel according to St. Luke, the Epistles of the Apostles (fourteen ascribed to St. Paul, one to St. James, two to St. Peter, three to St. John and one to St. Jude) and the Revelation ascribed to St. John the Divine. The other writings, whose production went on for a long time, were declared non authentic and defined as apocryphal, and so far they are viewed

and known as such. As to the chronology of the canonical texts, the Epistles of St. Paul, once considered the most ancient part of the Canon, may date back to c. 50-60 C.E.. The Gospel according to St. Mark was probably recorded c. 70 C.E., and the Gospels according to St. Matthew and St. Luke c. 80 C.E., whereas the Gospel according to St. John may have been written just before the year 100. More recent studies seem to have ascertained that the Gospel according to St. Mark was recorded c. 50 C.E. and thus is more ancient than the Epistles of St. Paul.

Obviously this uncertainty regarding the authenticity of the Scriptures is an obstacle in the critical study of religions. Hopefully all Scriptures will continue to be deeply, carefully, objectively and respectfully studied, in the hope that the greatest light may be shed on their origins and meanings, so that the observation and claim worded by Küng for the Bible may be applied to each and all of them:

only an integrated multi-dimensional approach which combines literary, historical, sociological and theological methods can do justice to Israelite and Judaeon history....

Lay people are usually unaware that the scrupulous scholarly work achieved by modern biblical criticism—which in the process has stimulated and used other disciplines (classical philology, Egyptology, Assyriology and so on)—represented by scrupulous academic work over about 300 years, belongs among the greatest intellectual achievements of the human race.²⁴

And yet, from a rational point of view the authenticity and the consequent validity of Scriptures can be justified on the ground of the validity of their teachings and of the fruits which they produce. In other words, the same observations that, as we will see, justify religion, can also justify its Scriptures.²⁵

Language

In the first place, each Prophet uses the language of the people among whom he was born and lives, not only in its grammatical and syntactical aspects, but also in its broader cultural meanings. He constantly refers to everyday concepts, strictly connected with the culture of his time and place. The language of the Genesis is that of the Jews living 3000 years ago. Jesus speaks the Aramaic of the Jews contemporary with Augustus and Tiberius and addresses a world of simple-minded people, as it transpires from the perusal of his proverbs, short tales and parables relating to everyday life. Moreover he continually alludes to Biblical concepts, quite familiar to his interlocutors. Muhammad uses the literary Arab of the Arabian tribes of the seventh century C.E. and refers to their costumes. Bahá'u'lláh writes in the Persian and Arabic languages of the learned classes of Qajár Persia. In view of a deeper understanding of the meanings of the words of the Prophets, it may prove very useful trying to become more familiar with the culture of those times, although most of the concepts that will be discovered may transcend any limitation of time and place. The following remarks by Hick remind us of the importance of an attentive study of Scriptures in this respect:

Within Biblical Judaism the phrase 'son of God' was a familiar metaphor both for Israel as a whole and for the special status of ancient Hebrew kings and for the religious status of pious Jews in each generation who were truly dedicated to doing God's will. But the original discipleship of the early Jesus movement to one who was, in the Hebraic metaphor, a son of God, came to be at odds with the Hellenistic development of Christianity which eventually won the day and provided the version of Christianity contained in most of the New Testament documents, though not without many evidences of the still active struggle.²⁶

If we think that the literal meaning ascribed to this designation of

Jesus as 'son of God' is one of the pivots of the exclusivistic attitudes of the various Christian churches, we understand the great importance of revising our traditional understanding of all Scriptures in the light of modern concepts, in view of a more fruitful interreligious dialogue.

In the second place, the language of Scripture is very often figurative, implying the use of parables and metaphors. Jesus, for example, made a large use of parables of deep inner significance and he himself explained to his disciples the reasons why he had chosen that kind of expression:

He ... said unto them, because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given....

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.²⁷

Analogous concepts may be found also in the Koran, but similitudes (*mathal*, pl. *amthál*) are mentioned in the place of parables:

These similitudes [*amthál*] do we set forth to men: and none understands them except the wise.

Verily God is not ashamed to set forth as well the instance [*mathal*] of a gnat as of any nobler object: for as to those who have believed, they know it to be the truth from their Lord; but as to the unbelievers, they will say, 'What meaneth God by this comparison [*mathal*]?' Many will he mislead by such parables and many guide: but none will He mislead thereby except the wicked .²⁸

Metaphors and parables, albeit of different types, may be found in other Scriptures as well. They are an ideal instrument to describe spiritual concepts, which transcend material or intellectual reality,

and therefore cannot be explained in direct ways. Moreover, metaphors and parables appeal not only to the world of reason, but also to that of feelings and remembrances. Therefore they can be understood at different levels, depending on the capacities of the reader. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

Consider how the parable makes attainment dependent upon capacity. Unless capacity is developed, the summons of the Kingdom cannot reach the ear, the light of the Sun of Truth will not be observed, and the fragrances of the rose garden of inner significance will be lost.²⁹

Thus metaphors and parables, when used by a Prophet, greatly improve the expressivity of human language. But they may give rise to misunderstandings. In fact any literal interpretation of writings conceived in such terms may grievously misrepresent their meanings. St. Paul may have alluded to this concept when he said: ‘the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.’³⁰ Because of literal interpretations many people have come to the conclusion that the words of Scriptures are in reality ‘myths and unrealizable dreams.’³¹ Bausani writes in this regard:

Any attempt to abolish this symbolism and to fall into literal interpretations not only makes material that which is spiritual, but creates dogmas and, as a consequence, tensions and discord. Thus if certain Jataka Buddhist stories about Buddha’s rebirth in very ancient times as a tiger or a fox are interpreted as symbols, they are of great educational value. Whereas if they are interpreted literally, they are a pack of tales. And thus Buddhism is done wrong rather than good.³²

A number of scholars recommend Scriptures to be read in the light of their metaphorical meaning. Among them, Hick suggests that the doctrine of reincarnation and of Divine incarnation should be revised as metaphors by Hindus and Buddhists, and by Vaishnavas and Christians respectively.³³

Interpretation

Interpreting Scriptures is an arduous task not only because of their language, but for other reasons as well. They convey a broad and complex body of truth which, representing a goal for human knowledge, can hardly be fully understood. Earnest efforts and great attention are required to get as close as possible to their overall meanings, without introducing personal ideas that could distort their purport.

Moreover, Scriptures are conceived in such a way that sentences may be easily extrapolated not only from their specific contexts, but also from the organic body of the overall teachings, which Scriptures impart in a way that we sometimes consider disorderly. Extrapolation can be quite misleading in comprehending the Scriptures.

Finally, Scriptures disclose truth relating to the spiritual sphere, therefore whoever merely understands them from an intellectual point of view, runs the risk of understanding them quite superficially. All Scriptures urge their readers to struggle for an inner knowledge, which is a real gnosis.

But let there be no misunderstandings. The Prophets addressed all people, the learned as well as the unlearned, and thus, as Tracy writes, their texts 'should be intelligible to all' and not only to 'a scholarly elite.'³⁴ Bahá'u'lláh recommends a cleansed and purified heart³⁵ among the foremost prerequisites for such a study. His words may be understood as another way of saying what a philosopher would word, as Tracy did, thus: 'the religious classics demand that we pay critical attention to their claims to truth if we are to understand their meaning at all,' and in this respect 'we must be prepared to risk our present understanding.'³⁶ These are the risks of interreligious dialogue. As Leonard J. Swidler, an expert in Catholic thought and interreligious dialogue, observes: 'there is a risk involved in dialogue that old positions and traditions may be found wanting.'³⁷ But when the preeminent importance of harmony among religions is understood, how shall we refuse to run that risk?

The Story of Religions

The Prophets-Founders of religions as historical figures

All religions were born from a founder, usually called Prophet or sometimes Prophet-Founder. History mentions nine of them: Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh. These personages are the founders of the monotheistic religions of the world, listed in an approximately chronological order. Another revealed religion is the Sabaeen religion, mentioned in the Koran (2:59; 5:73; 22:17 [Rodwell]). It was founded in an unknown time by a Prophet whose name is ignored, and flourished in Chaldaeia, Abraham's country. The Koran mentions as Prophets some twenty figures, such as Adam, Noah, Hud, Šálih, Lot, Yúsuf (Joseph), Shu'ayb (Jetro), Yahya (John the Baptist) etc. But no religion today can be ascribed to them. From the statements of certain Scriptures, whereby God sent Prophets in the immemorial past and will continue to send them in the extreme reaches of future times, we may deduce that there have been Prophets whose traces have been lost.¹ With the exception of the Báb, the Founder of Babism, and Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, who lived in the nineteenth century, the most recent among the Prophets is Muhammad, who lived in the seventh century C.E.. Because of the characteristics of those ancient times, no authentic record remains of them. It is likely that their contemporary chroniclers did not consider them so important as to deserve mention in their works. The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, episodes of whose lives were described also by chroniclers out of the circle of their followers, are an exception. This fact makes their religions of particular interest for scholars of religions. As Edward G. Browne

(1862-1926), the British orientalist who devoted years of studies to the Bábí and Bahá'í religions, wrote:

Now it appears to me that the history of the Bábí movement must be interesting in different ways to others besides those who are directly engaged in the study of Persian. To the student of religious thought it will afford no little matter for reflection; for here he may contemplate such personalities as by lapse of time pass into heroes and demi-gods still unobscured by myth and fable; he may examine by the light of concurrent and independent testimony one of those strange outbursts of enthusiasm, faith, fervent devotion, and indomitable heroism—or fanaticism, if you will—which we are accustomed to associate with the earlier history of the human race; he may witness, in a word, the birth of a faith which may not impossibly win a place amidst the great religion of the world.²

As to Hinduism, it is impossible to identify a single Prophet-Founder for the diverse Hindu religions. Hindu tradition records the names of many *rishis*, the bards/seers who produced the *Vedas*. But it does not give any information about their times, places or characteristics, except for saying that they lived a short time after creation. One of them is Krishna Dvaipayana, also called Veda-vyasa, 'Veda-divider.' The *Vishnu purana* states that he was Vishnu, Himself, in human form.³ Tradition mentions many *Avataras*, relatively similar to the Prophet-Founders of the prophetic religions. Prominent among them is the figure of Krishna, whom many consider the most famous *Avatara* of Vishnu, 'who takes birth among men to uphold the dharma and disperse the forces of the adharmas.'⁴ We do not know much about his life, because various layers of tradition have left their deposits on his figure. Therefore it is quite difficult to write his biography, even if we draw from legendary sources. Krishna is one of the heroes of the *Mahabharata*, and in particular he is a front-ranking figure in the part of this poem known as *Bhagavad-gita*. According to tradition

he was born in Mathura, in Uttar Pradesh, and his father was a prince whose name was Vasudeva, and thus he is also called Krishna Vasudeva. Although documents about him are quite few, some scholar like Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), an Indian scholar and statesman, and Küng state that he is a historical figure. Radhakrishnan ascribes to him 'hymn 74 of the 8th mandala of Rig-Veda.'⁵ As to his chronology, he lived during the legendary wars between the Kauravas and the Pandavas described in the *Mahabharata*. Some scholars say that these wars were fought in the ninth century B.C., others in the fifteenth century B.C., still others in the fourth millennium B.C.. Traditionalists say that Krishna died in 3102-3103 B.C..⁶

Abraham, the founder of Judaism, lived in Ur among the Sumerians and was probably a Sabaean. His arrival in Canaan, recorded in Genesis, chapter 13, dates back to c. 1850 B.C..⁷ Other scholars suggest different dates, spacing from 1996 B.C..⁸ to an age contemporary with the reign of Hammurabi, the Babylonian king, variously dated between 2067 and 1686 B.C.. Küng writes that 'we have hardly any certain knowledge about him as a person; it is impossible to write a biography of Abraham,' but he also adds that

critical exegetes no longer maintain today that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are something like depotentiated gods, purely mythical figures, fictitious ancestors of particular groups.... they seem to have been historical figures, even if all attempts to date them have come to grief.⁹

The exodus of the Jews from Egypt, led by Moses, possibly dates back to 1260 B.C.. The other hypothesis is that it took place during the reigns of Tutmoses III (1502-1448 B.C.), Tutankhamon (1358-1349 B.C.), Ramses II (1310-1234 B.C.) or Seti II (1220-1200 B.C.). But that event is not recorded in the meticulous chronicles of the ancient Egyptians and this fact suggests that those stories related by the Bible could be given metaphorical explanations. Küng remarks that 'there is no evidence for Moses outside the Bible; he himself did not leave any literary work.' But then he adds:

However, nowadays there is no dispute over one thing: that Moses was a historical figure and not, say, a depotentiated moon god, as was claimed in a wild hypothesis at the beginning of this century.¹⁰

As to Zoroaster, the extremely vague and scarce historical information about him mainly comes from what is handed down in the *Gathas*. Bausani writes that ‘the persecuted prophet’s cry of pain, preserved for us in the *Gatha Ushtavaiti* (Y.46.I and foll.), is too sincere and personal to be attributed to an extra-historical abstraction’ and that the names of his relatives mentioned in the *Gathas* ‘have nothing mythological or symbolical about them.’ And he concludes that ‘the general picture suggests a historical reality.’ However, he himself agrees that Zoroaster, “‘the first of the earthly gods” in the Avesta... must very soon have assumed a mythical, semi-divine Nature,’ and that ‘Jesus and the Muhammad of the legend are “historical” figures if we compare them to the Zarathustra of the tradition of the Pahlavi books and of many parts of the Avesta (where he already seems a demigod with only very slight ties with the real world).’¹¹ Du Breuil, professor of philosophy and history of religions at the Columbia Pacific University, confirms that Zoroaster was a historical personage and provides information about his biography. He was possibly born in Bactriana, perhaps in the modern Iranian region of *Khurasán*, from an ancient family of the priestly caste, the Spitama. His name, Zardut in Pahlavi and Zoroaster in Greek, means according to the Parsis ‘He whose light is brilliant,’ and according to the Greeks ‘golden day-star.’ Other scholars more prosaically say that it means ‘camel-driver.’¹² He himself wrote in the *Gathas* that he was ‘a priest’ (*zaotar*).¹³ The precise date and place of his birth are quite uncertain. Paul Du Breuil agrees with other scholars, who place him in Afghanistan in the eighth century B.C..¹⁴ Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), a famous scholar of comparative mythology, considers him ‘an actual character on the plane of earth in the first millennium B.C.,’ who however ‘may not be accurately presented in the meager notices of his life that have come down to us.’¹⁵ Other scholars write that he

‘lived somewhere in Eastern Iran, about 1000 years B.C..’¹⁶ Franz Altheim, a well-known German historian, on the ground of a fragment of Porphyry—a Greek philosopher hostile to the Christians (c. 232-303 C.E.)—discovered in its Arabic version, writes that Zoroaster was born c. 599-598 B.C., began his revelation in 568-569 and died at the age of 77 c. 522-521 B.C.¹⁷ Gherardo Gnoli, an Italian expert in Indian religions and philosophies, concludes that he possibly lived in the first half of the first millennium B.C. and, as to his country, we have to choose a place anywhere in the ‘eastern Iranic horizon reflected in the Avestan historical geography.’¹⁸

The Buddha’s name was Siddhatta Gotama. The earliest complete narratives of his life appeared about five centuries after his death. Therefore there is not much hope to write his historical biography. Tradition says that he was born in the wood of Lumbini near Kapilavattu, from Suddhodana, a high-ranking personage, some sources say the king, of a people known as Shakya, that inhabited a region now on the Indo-Nepal frontier. When he was 29 years old, he left his family and the ease of his home and embarked on his spiritual search for liberation. He achieved his enlightenment at 35 years of age and died at the age of about 80 years, after he ate a dish of mushrooms, or of pork, near Kusinagara in Uttar Pradesh, under two trees of *Shorea* which miraculously blossomed, in the full-moon night of the lunar month of Kartika, as the moon was entering the constellation of the Pleiades. Tradition says that it was the year 486 B.C., but today it seems ascertained that it was the year 410 B.C.. Küng writes that, although there are no documents about his life, yet he was

no myth, but a *historical personality*. Though some critics had denied it, his historical existence was proved around the end of the nineteenth century by E. Senart and H. Kern... But the hard, controversial question is, What can we know about the historical Buddha?¹⁹

Nor is Jesus’ historicity well documented. It is believed that he

was really born in Bethlehem, in the year 4 B.C., and that he was a descendant of David. His historical existence has been proved by Ernst Kaseman, a Lutheran biblical scholar and the Dean of the University of Tübingen, Germany, against the German philosopher Arthur Drews' (1865-1935) denials at the beginning of the twentieth century.²⁰

As to Muhammad, he was born at Mecca c. 570 C.E. and died in 632. In 610 he had his first theopathic experience on Mount Hira. Soon after, he started his preachment that brought him to gradually convert to his new Faith, in the course of 22 years, the rebellious Arabian tribes among whom he was born.

Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad, called the Báb, the founder of Babism, lived in Iran between 1819 and 1850. Born from parents both descendants of Muhammad through Imam Husayn, he belonged to a wealthy family of merchants. Albeit devoid of culture, he very soon became renowned in Muslim circles because of the beauty and depth of his writings, that were often compared to the Koran.

Mírza Husayn-'Alí from Núr, entitled Bahá'u'lláh, was born in Teheran in 1817 from an influent family of the lineage of the ancient Sasanian emperors. Well known in the circles of the Persian court and nobility for his moral and spiritual stature, he was cruelly persecuted as soon as he arose to champion the cause of Babism. He was first imprisoned and then successively exiled from Persia to Baghdád, Constantinople, Adrianople and 'Akká, where he passed away in 1892. During his almost forty years of imprisonment and exile, he wrote the equivalent of a hundred volumes. His writings, all authenticated by himself, expound the teachings of the Faith he founded in 1863.

Usually, each religion ascribes a special meaning to its Founder, whom it considers totally different from the Founders of other religions. For example, Christians regard Jesus a true incarnation of God, whereas, although Muslims honor their Prophet, they would consider a blasphemy even to think in the same way about him. Jews consider Abraham and Moses human beings to whom God directly revealed His will. Buddhists say that the Buddha is a human

being who attained enlightenment through his own unaided efforts. Zoroastrians view Zoroaster as ‘a righteous mortal man who was appointed to prophethood’ and say that ‘his appointment to prophethood resulted as much from his righteousness, divine wisdom, and love for Truth as from *Ahura Mazda*’s benevolent choice.’²¹ Trying to understand who are the Founders of each religion and what kind of relationship unites them with one another, is undoubtedly an important part of any modern philosophy of religion.

In the Bahá’í literature we may find long passages which describe the story of the Prophets-Founders and of their early followers. Those passages concern Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but through their perusal a number of historical events may be identified, recurring, with few variations, in all religions.²²

The Prophets-Founders and their age

At the beginning of each religion, we find its Prophet-Founder living among a people divided into different sects and creeds, ‘enmeshed in superstition and blind imitation’²³ of the past, oblivious of God and neglectful of His commandments, torn asunder by discord, strife and bloody wars and wholly absorbed in pursuing material goals. This concept is shared by Toynbee, who wrote that the great religions were born in periods of decline and moral crisis and at the same time of great technical and material prosperity. He adduced many examples to validate his theory, also that of Christianity, which flourished in the Augustean age, marking both the apogee and the beginning of the moral decline of Roman civilization.

The historical conditions of the times when Krishna was born are not well known. And yet the *Bhagavad-gita* describes wars and immorality before Krishna’s preaching and says that the *Avatars* become manifest in the world in times of moral decline:

Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise
of unrighteousness, O Bharata (Arjuna), then I send forth

(create incarnate) Myself.

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age.²⁴

Abraham was born in Ur, a rich and luxurious town ruled by bloodthirsty Nimrod, whose inhabitants were worshipping idols of clay. Moses lived among the tribes of Israel, captives of the Egyptian Pharaoh, humiliated under his yoke. Zoroaster was born in a troubled feudal epoch, as he himself bears witness in his *Gathas*. The non-migratory populations living in the Indo-Iranic regions were obliged to seek refuge in fortified oasis and fortress-castles among the mountains, because their territories were continuously vexed by the exploits of plunderer-nomads and male bands of fanatics that spread violence, in league with sorcerer-priests (*karapans*) and despotic chieftains (*kavis*). Those bands stole livestock for their sacrifices to their idols, in a rite which involved great libations of *haoma*.

At the time of the Buddha, in Bausani's words,

Indian society was immersed in a grievous feudal conservatism... [its religion] was reduced to a ritualism dominated by the Brahman sacerdotal caste, that had raised sacrifice itself (*bráhman*) to the station of a supreme god or rather to the station of the principle underlying the whole universe... An alliance between throne and altar... a rigorous division in castes... [as well as] the principle of the *karma* and reincarnation, formed a powerful reactionary net.²⁵

Jesus lived in Judaea, at a time when the Jews had fallen from the heights of the glorious days of Solomon to a condition of humiliating subjection under the tyranny of the Roman Empire, and were surrounded by cruel, hostile, conflicting and contending, pillaging and plundering populations. Muhammad preached among the divided and warlike nomadic tribes of the vast desert of the

Arabian peninsula, subjected to the dominion of the Persians and the Romans, so savage and cruel as to encourage the use of burying their newborn daughters alive. The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh lived in the declined Persia of the Qájár age, trenchantly described by Browne and Lord George Curzon of Kedleston (1859-1925), the British statesman.

The Prophets-Founders and their theopathic experiences

Among such peoples a man appears. Sometimes he is a noble-man, like Krishna, the Buddha and Bahá'u'lláh, sometimes a priest, like Zoroaster, or a merchant like Muhammad and the Báb, or a carpenter, like Jesus, or a fugitive 'slow of speech, and of a slow tongue,'²⁶ like Moses. He is not a man of power, and if by chance he wields it by birth, as the Buddha and Bahá'u'lláh both of whom were of noble origins did, willingly renounces it. He does not speak in his own name, but as a messenger of God. He states that God is an unknowable Essence and not only transcends human comprehension, but is also much greater than His messenger himself. However, He loves His creatures and wants them to come as near as possible to Himself. Therefore He graciously reveals His will to His Messenger, so that he may convey it to humankind.²⁷

The experience of divine revelation is variously described. The Bible tells that Moses saw on Mount Sinai 'the angel of the Lord... in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush' and heard the voice of God calling him and conferring upon him the mission of rescuing the Jews from the tyranny of the Egyptian Pharaoh.²⁸ Zoroaster is reported as having seen, when he was thirty years old, *Vohu Manah* (Good Thought), 'the first creation of God,' 'the medium through which God prefers to reveal Himself,'²⁹ in the form of a personage dressed in light, who guided him to the presence of *Ahura Mazda* (Middle Persian, *Ohrmazd*, colloquial *Ormuzd*, Wise Lord, or Lord Wisdom), and of the other six *Amesha Spentas* (Bounteous Immortals), that appeared to him so luminous as to 'shed their shadows on the earth.'³⁰ In the course of seven talks or visions with

Ahura Mazda, on a mystic mount in ‘the forest of the sacred talks,’³¹ he was appointed by *Ahura Mazda* as His Prophet and received the revelation of His message from Him.³² The Gospels relate that while Jesus was coming out of the Jordan’s waters where He had been baptized by John the Baptist, ‘the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him. And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’³³ A Muslim tradition relates that Muhammad heard, in a cave of Mount Hirá, nearby Mecca, the voice of the angel Gabriel saying to him: ‘Recite thou in the name of thy Lord who created;—created Man from clots of blood.’³⁴ And when he came out of the cave, he heard the same voice saying: ‘Muhammad! You are the Messenger of God and I am Gabriel!’³⁵ Tradition says that the Buddha was enlightened under a tree of *Ficus religiosa*, called the *Bodhi* (Sanskrit and Pali, awakened) tree, in a place today called Bodhgaya, in the Indian region of Bihar. He had stopped there to meditate, at a time when he thought that all his ascetic efforts for his liberation had been useless. He spent many hours in tranquil meditation under that tree, in front of the river Nairanjana, the modern Lilajan. When the sun rose at the end of the full moon night of the month of May-June, he was finally enlightened. Tradition says that he then pronounced these words:

I have run through a course of many births looking for the maker of this dwelling³⁶ and finding him not; painful is birth again and again. Now you are seen, O builder of the house, you will not build the house again. All your rafters are broken, your ridge-pole is destroyed, the mind, set on the attainment of nirvana, has attained the extinction of desires.³⁷

Tradition also says that the Buddha was reluctant to divulge the difficult verities which he had come to know and that only after long reflection and the urging of the God Brahma, he resolved to embark upon his mission. Bahá’u’lláh himself describes his experience in the following words:

While engulfed in tribulations I heard a most wondrous, a most sweet voice, calling above My head. Turning My face, I beheld a Maiden—the embodiment of the remembrance of the name of My Lord—suspended in the air before Me.... She was imparting to both my inner and outer being tidings which rejoiced My soul, and the souls of God's honored servants. Pointing with her finger unto My head, she addressed all who are in heaven and all who are on earth, saying: 'By God! This is the Beauty of God amongst you, and the power of His sovereignty within you, could you but understand. This is the Mystery of God and His Treasure, the Cause of God and His glory unto all who are in the kingdoms of Revelation and of creation, if ye be of them that perceive.'³⁸

The descriptions of these events in the various Scriptures are given literal interpretations by most theologians and scholars. Therefore their differences are stressed. But when their spiritual purport is understood, it becomes evident that it is the same theopathic experience described in different words.

The chain of prophetic promises

The Bahá'í literature explains that the Prophets-Founders are joined to one another by a chain of prophetic promises that show all of them as united in utmost harmony and perfect love. In fact the people among whom each Prophet-Founder appears is 'expecting the coming of a promised one'³⁹ and 'each Prophet fulfill[s] the promise of the One Who came before Him,'⁴⁰ whose teachings he confirms. At the time of Moses, the Jews were waiting for the prophecy uttered by Joseph in his deathbed to be fulfilled: 'God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence.'⁴¹ At the time of Jesus, the Jews were waiting for the advent of the promised one by Moses: 'The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me;

unto him ye shall hearken.’⁴² Muslims recognize Muhammad as the object of the prophecy uttered by Jesus: ‘But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.’⁴³ At the time of Bahá’u’lláh, all the world was waiting for a promised Prophet: Hindus were waiting for the Kalki Vishnuyasas, Jews for the Lord of Hosts, Zoroastrians for the Sháh-Bahrám Varjávand or the Saoshyant, Buddhists for the Buddha Metteyya Amitabha, Christians for the return of Christ, Shi’i Muslims for the return of the Imam Husayn.

However, those messianic waits are often based upon literal interpretations of the Scriptures, which imply the expectation of unlikely material portents and cataclysms that never happen. And thus the new Messiah is invariably rejected, in spite of any clear spiritual and rational evidence. For example, the Biblical prophecies about the Messiah state that he shall come from an unknown place, he shall rule with a scepter of iron, shall seat upon the throne of David, promulgate the laws of the Torah, rescue the honor of the enslaved Jews. They promise moreover that during his reign there shall be peace even among the animals and the wolf and the lamb shall share the same fold. Other prophecies foretell that the sun shall become dark, the moon blood, the youth shall have prophetic dreams.⁴⁴ When Jesus was born, the Jews were waiting for those Biblical prophecies to be literally fulfilled, but nothing of what they were expecting happened. Therefore they did not accept his claim to be their Messiah. On the contrary, as soon as he contradicted the letter of the Law, they strongly opposed him. Messianic prophecies can be found also in the Gospels, for example in the prophetic sermon. Usually Christian theologians interpret this sermon to the letter and think that it is referring to the last day, the day of the last judgment. The sermon announces that on that day the sun shall be darkened, the moon shall not give its light, the stars shall fall from heaven, the angels shall sound their trumpets, the dead shall be resurrected and Jesus shall come back to the world

on the clouds and shall judge the alive and the dead.⁴⁵ The Koranic prophecies on the day of judgment are worded in analogous terms: apocalyptic perturbations, cleft heavens,⁴⁶ earthquakes,⁴⁷ trumpet-blasts,⁴⁸ resurrections of the dead⁴⁹ and other portents.

Each new Prophet fulfills the promise of previous Prophets, but at the same time he announces the advent of a following one, who will arise after many centuries. The episode of the sacrifice of Isaac, the son of Sarah—or of Ishmael, the son of Agar, according to the Koran—is followed by a solemn divine promise that is a promise of future revelations:

And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son:

That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;

And in this seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.⁵⁰

And as a matter of fact, Abraham had descendants from three women. Agar, his Egyptian slave, gave him Ishmael. Sarah, his first wife, gave him Isaac. Keturah, his last and less known wife,⁵¹ gave him many children, among them Midian. Each of those three descents gave Prophets to humankind. From Ishmael Muhammad and the Báb came; from Isaac Moses and Jesus came; from Midian came Bahá'u'lláh, who was a descendant of Abraham on Sarah's side as well. Moses presented himself to the Jews in Egypt as a messenger sent by the God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that he might confirm His Covenant with His people.⁵² But at the same time he promised the advent of a future Prophet: 'The Lord God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken.'⁵³ The fulfillment of Moses' prophecy is announced by Jesus⁵⁴ who said again and again: 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or

the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill,⁵⁵ and in his turn he prophesied the advent of a subsequent Prophet:

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever...

But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send you in my name, he shall teach you all things and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you....

Ye have heard how I said unto you, I go away, and come again unto you...⁵⁶

The Koran confirms previous Prophets:

Of a truth they who believe not on God and His Apostles, and seek to separate God from His Apostles, and say, 'Some we believe, and some we believe not,' and desire to take a middle way;

These! They are veritable infidels! and for the infidels have we prepared a shameful punishment.

And they who believe in God and his Apostles, and make no difference between them—these! we will bestow on them their reward at last. God is Gracious Merciful.⁵⁷

And Muslim tradition hands down Muhammad's promise that a subsequent Prophet will arise in the day of judgment. Shi'i Islam calls this Messianic figure Qa'im, Sunni Islam calls him Imam Miḥdi.

Also Hindu religions mention many *Avataras* of God. This concept is typical of Vaishnavism, which believes that Vishnu, the supreme God, intervenes in the world in order to re-establish cosmic order, whenever disorder prevails in the affairs of humankind. Vaishnavas say that Vishnu has become incarnate in the world nine times in the course of the four millions years of the present world cycle. His seventh incarnation is Rama, the hero of *Ramayana*, and the eighth is Krishna, one of the main characters of the

Bhagavad-gita, in whom Vishnu took on human form without curtailing his divinity. At the end of the times he will once more take on the human form as Kalki Vishnuyasas.

As to Zoroastrians, Zoroaster mentions the Saoshyant, his spiritual son, a cosmic messiah who will appear at the end of times, to accomplish the final victory of Truth over Lie, to preside over resurrection and to assure that 'the world [may] be made wonderful at his wish.'⁵⁸ But modern Zoroastrians seem to view Saoshyant in a different perspective, as also the followers of the other religions do as to their specific prophetic promises. They say that 'the *Gathas* do not mention the name of any prophet before or after Zoroaster. According to the holy scriptures, Mazdaism revealed to Zoroaster is the best religion and ideal way of life.' They also say:

In the *Gathas*, *Saoshyant* is used... always in a generic sense, meaning the pious men who work for the improvement of the world.... In the *Younger Avesta* the situation changed and Soshyos, the Pahlavi rendering of *Saoshyant*, was employed for three specific persons who would come and help or complete the establishment of the divine kingdom on earth.... They are not new prophets and do not preach new religions. They implement the law already revealed to Zoroaster. The *Gathas* remain the only divine code.⁵⁹

The Buddhist Canon mentions a number of Enlightened Ones who appeared before the Buddha and others who will come after him. Heinz Bechert, a German expert in Buddhist studies, explains:

If dharma, the strictly impersonal law regulating the world, and its expression in the Buddha's teaching are timeless, the form of its earthly appearance is as fleeting as everything else. The teaching of the Buddha will be forgotten, the order he founded will cease to be, until at some point in the distant future another being will receive enlightenment and thereby become the Buddha. Buddha

himself said his teaching would last five hundred years.⁶⁰

Analogous statements may be found in several passages of Buddhist Scriptures. For example, the Buddha said in his last sermon:

Only after a very long, endless course of centuries, another Buddha will return upon the Earth of the mortals. A wonderful tree called *udumbara* grows in the Indian country. It bears fruits without any previous blossoming, but when it puts out golden blossoms, it is a sign that a Buddha will be born in the world.⁶¹

Somewhere else it is written:

At that period, brethren, there will arise in the world an Exalted One named Metteyya [Sanskrit, Maitreya], Arahāt, Fully Awakened, abounding in wisdom and goodness, happy, with knowledge of the worlds, unsurpassed as a guide to mortals willing to be led, a teacher for gods and men, an Exalted One, a Buddha, even as I am now.⁶²

Also the words of the Buddha are literally interpreted by most theologians and thus somehow misunderstood.

The Báb presents himself as the Promised Qá'im of Islam and the Herald of a greater Prophet, 'Him Whom God shall make manifest,' and calls upon everyone to obey him as soon as he appears. Bahá'u'lláh claims to be the promised one by the Báb and the fulfillment of the eschatological prophecies of all religions, but at the same time he announces that another Prophet will come after him, albeit not earlier than one thousand years.⁶³ He writes about this future Prophet:

'I am not apprehensive for My own self, My fears are for Him Who will be sent down unto you after Me—Him Who will be invested with great sovereignty and mighty dominion.... Deal not with Him, as ye have dealt with Me.'⁶⁴

The Prophets-Founders as iconoclasts

Each Prophet-Founder reaffirms the same spiritual law that represents the basis of all religions: the teaching of love, unity and fellowship. But at the same time he exposes past mistakes, destroys false religious beliefs, denies a tradition that in his times is mostly made up of dogmas and rituals. Moreover, he abrogates a part of the material teachings inculcated by his predecessor, teachings by then grown obsolete and unfit to meet the needs of a humankind that in the meantime has matured. And finally he reaffirms and deepens the spiritual teachings of previous Prophets, ‘in direct proportion to... [the] spiritual capacity’ of the people to whom he speaks.⁶⁵ Thus each Prophet lays the foundation of a religion that is connected to all the others in a chain of prophetic promises⁶⁶ and in the essential spiritual aspect—the law of the love of God, of the love of humankind, of unity and fellowship among human beings—but is different from them in its practical aspects, that are ever-changing inasmuch as they are conditioned by requirements of time and space. Although the teachings of each Prophet are in perfect spiritual harmony with those of the previous Prophet, yet they are iconoclastic with regard to tradition and the practical aspects of the former religion and therefore, at the beginning, they are opposed by the people to whom they are sent.

Abraham proclaims monotheism and fights against Sumerian polytheism. Moses reconciles the Jews with the religion of their ancient fathers, from which they had departed during their permanence in Egypt, reaffirms monotheism and the value of morality in daily life and fights against idolatry. Jesus, born in a monotheistic milieu, says that he does not intend to deny the law and the Prophets, but only to bring back the Jews to abide by their prescriptions. However, he deepens the concept of love and human spirituality, breaks the law of *shabbat* and abolishes that of divorce. Muhammad confirms all previous Prophets, urges his followers to introduce morality and spirituality into the organization of society, fights against idolaters and refutes a number of Jew and Christian doctrines.

As to Hinduism, Krishna says in the *Bhagavad-gita*:

I proclaimed this imperishable yoga to Vivasvan;
Vivasvan told it to Manu and Manu spoke it to Ikshvaku.

Thus handed down from one another the royal sages
knew it till that yoga was lost to the world through long
lapse of time, O Oppressor of the foe (Arjuna).⁶⁷

Radhakrishnan explains these verses in the sense that the teachings given by Krishna to Arjuna had been also preached in ancient times. But they had been forgotten and thus now Krishna was once more announcing them 'to his pupil to reawaken faith in him and illumine his ignorance.'⁶⁸

When Zoroaster was born, the ancient religion of his people was in grievous decay. The *Zarátusht Námi*, Zoroaster's Persian biography written in the thirteenth century, 'relates that iniquity reigned on the earth subdued by Ahriman, when the Lord decided to incarnate the soul of Zoroaster, "I will create him, so that he may preach solicitude towards all living beings (*Bundahishn*, IV)".' Zoroaster denounced the cruelties and the sorceries of the *karapans*, the priest-sorcerers, and of the *kavis*, the despotic chieftains who were their accomplices. He introduced a completely new religion and ushered a spiritual revolution. Du Breuil writes that he was an iconoclast and that 'he overthrew all anthropomorphic and zoomorphic idols and substituted them with a universal ethos which stigmatizes all former rites.'⁶⁹

As to the Buddha, he too appears in all his stature as the reformer of previous religions changed into strongholds of feudal conservatism in the Indian territory. The Buddha, writes Bausani, 'breaks this social chain and creates a new society.' Moreover, the ancient Indian religions had 'turned into rituals and magic, mainly after they had come in touch with the Dravidian populations that had inhabited India prior to the Aryan invasion,' and thus their original concept of a single unknowable God had been utterly lost. According to Bausani, these are the reasons why the Buddha criticizes 'the concept of *deva*-“god” [of declined Hinduism], as

far as denying it, and replaces it with the inexpressible *nirvana*.⁷⁰

The Prophets-Founders and their persecution

Because of all these innovations each new Prophet's preaching raises a great commotion. Only a few, open to renewal and to a spiritual interpretation of the Scriptures, grasp its meaning and importance. The majority of people is bewildered by the changes he invokes and rejects him. The Prophet-Founders and all those who dare to be his friends become the objects of fierce persecutions. Scriptures, and for some of them history, relate those persecutory events.

Krishna's story is recorded only in traditional accounts, from which we can deduce, according to Radhakrishnan that he

was opposed to the sacerdotalism of Vedic religion... The Gita has references to those who complain about Krishna's teachings and express their lack of faith in him. The Mahabharata has indications that the supremacy of Krishna was not accepted without challenge.⁷¹

Abraham's story is related both in the Koran and the Bible. Born in the Chaldaean town of Ur, inhabited by idolaters, he called his people to monotheism. He went so far as to destroy their idols, so that he may prove their powerlessness, but his act inflamed the anger of king Nimrod and his people. Therefore he was cast into prison and condemned to die by fire. But his life was miraculously saved. Not even this prodigy placated the anger of his people and even his father rejected him. Finally he was expelled from his country and only a handful of people, his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot, followed him in his exile.

The story of Moses is also amply described both in the Bible and the Koran. He had to confront not only the hostility of the Pharaoh but also the incredulity of his own people, always doubtful about the good results of their exodus from Egypt and safe arrival to the Promised Land.

As to Zoroaster, du Breuil informs us that he had to 'face... the opposition of priests and scholars who tried to discredit him, by introducing in his room relics connected with the cult of necromancy.'⁷² Echoes of Zoroaster's anguish come from the *Gathas*, where the Prophet laments:

To what land shall I flee? Where bend my steps?
I am thrust out from family and tribe;
I have no favour from the village to which I would belong,
Nor from the wicked rulers of the country:
How then, O Lord, shall I obtain thy favour?

I Know, O Wise, why I am powerless:
My cattle are few, and I have few men.
To thee I address my lament: attend unto it, O Lord,
And grant me the support which friend would give to the
friend.

As Righteousness teach the possession of the Good Mind.⁷³

According to Bausani these words suggest that Zoroaster 'is the typical figure of a prophet fighting against a hostile environment, in defense of a divine revelation and moral concepts and, above all, anti-magical ideas (wizards are demonic beings).'⁷⁴ When he was 77 years old, he was stabbed by Bratraresh, a priest of the old order, as he was praying in his oratory.⁷⁵

The Buddha suffered because of the jealousy of his rivals, who slandered him in order to discredit him. He suffered because of petty disputes among monks on paltry matters. But most of all he suffered because of his cousin and brother-in-law Devadatta Gaudhiputra, who repeatedly plotted against him and even attempted at his life, in the hope of substituting him in the leadership of the religious order which had gathered around him. Since he failed, he separated himself from the Blessed One and created a rigorist schism which lasted for several centuries.⁷⁶

The sufferings and crucifixion of Jesus are at the core of Christian doctrine. They are the means for humankind's redemption. Christians ascribe such importance to Jesus' crucifixion, that they

took its instrument, the cross, as the symbol of their religion.

Muhammad also had to face the opposition of the establishment. His preaching arose such hostility, that he was obliged to take refuge in a cave and miraculously escaped death. Then he left his town, Mecca, and repaired to Medina, while a number of his followers emigrated to neighboring countries. But still his relentless opponents were not appeased. So grievous was the plight of Muhammad's community, that he was obliged to authorize his companions to take up arms in order to defend themselves from their callous aggressors, who were finally defeated.

Also the two modern Prophets, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, had their share of pain. The Báb was fiercely wronged, imprisoned and finally executed by a firing squad in the barrack-square of Tabriz the 9th of July 1850. Bahá'u'lláh, born as a wealthy nobleman, was deprived of all his possessions, exiled from town to town, and kept in prison for almost forty years. The followers of both of them were so bitterly persecuted that Ernest Renan (1823-1892), the French historian of religion, describes the butchery perpetrated against them in a single day in August 1852 in Teheran as 'a scene perhaps unparalleled in history.'⁷⁷

The Prophets of God and their early followers had not only to endure the persecutions of the representatives of the former religions. They had also to meet the indifference, and sometimes the scorn of the so-called rationalists and agnostics, who having denied the value of their own traditional religions, looked with suspicion and even contempt any idea which may present itself in the same strain as those ideas, which their rationality had brought them to oppose. The initial indifference of most Romans and Greeks to Jesus' teachings is a good example.

The Prophets-Founders as founders of new civilizations

Persecution and opposition seem to sweep away the Prophet and his earliest followers. Yet finally, their staunchness in the new Faith prevails over the opposition of the old world. The new teachings

become established through their intrinsic power and with no other help but the unwavering faith of their upholders. Their diffusion renews spirituality and morality, brings unity among people and races formerly divided, and creates the conditions whereby a new civilization may flourish.

Moses rescued the Jews from their subjection to the Egyptians, and the Jews became renowned not only for their military power, but also for their civilization. They achieved excellence in science, industry and philosophy. At the time of Solomon (tenth century B.C.), Jerusalem was an important and well-known center of learning. Muslim historians state that Socrates (469-399 B.C.) and Hippocrates (c. 460-377 B.C.) attended the schools of Jewish teachers, from whom the former learnt the concepts of monotheism and of the existence of an immortal soul, and the latter, principles of ethics and morality.

Jesus transformed people formerly committed only to material pursuits into spiritual beings. His teachings blended Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Syrians, Assyrians, Chaldaeans and Phoenicians, that once viewed each other as enemies, into a community united in its love of him. Under the influence of his teachings, Emperor Constantine, the first Roman ruler to champion the Christian Cause, dedicated his life to the promotion of the principles of the Gospels, founding public hospitals and philanthropic institutions and establishing the Roman government, which had earlier been an oppressive system, on foundations of moderation and justice. Arab historians ascribe to Galen (c. 130-200 C.E.) the following description of the Christians:

‘we observe a people called Christians, who believe devoutly in rewards and punishments in a future state. This group show forth excellent actions, similar to the actions of an individual who is a true philosopher. For example, we all see with our own eyes that they have no fear of death, and their passion for justice and fair dealing is so great that they should be considered true philosophers.’⁷⁸

Islam should be viewed in its own perspective. Christianity blamed Islam for having spread its influence only through wars of conquest. However, Muhammad made the utmost efforts to avoid bloodshed, but such was the plight of his followers who had taken refuge in Medina from the persecution of the dominant Quraysh tribe, that if he had not consented to a defensive war, they could have been annihilated. As long as Muhammad led his community, only defensive wars were fought. The wars of conquest started only after his passing away. The Koran says: 'And fight for the cause of God against those who fight against you: but commit not the injustice of attacking them first: God loveth not such injustice... But if they desist, then verily God is Gracious, Merciful.'⁷⁹ It says moreover: 'Let there be no compulsion in Religion.'⁸⁰ And yet apart from these clear statements, we have the 'miracle' of those barbarian and bloodthirsty tribes inhabiting the Arabian desert transformed by the Koran into masters of civilization and culture. At a time when Europe was immersed in the obscurity of the Middle Ages, those regenerated tribes renewed the arts, sciences and trade, and created an extraordinary civilization. That civilization brought to collapse the two greatest kingdoms of the age, the Persian and the Byzantine empires, spread all over North Africa, as far as Spain, and exerted a deep influence on Europe itself, where it indirectly produced the efflorescence of the Renaissance.

The same remarks can be extended to the history of Hinduism that came to influence not only India but all South Eastern Asia, as well as of Zoroastrianism that exerted a great influence on the great civilization of ancient Persia. Zoroastrianism, born as the religion of an archaic society of shepherds and breeders, became the religion of the leading people of the Achaemenian empire of Cyrus the Great (d. 530 B.C.), and Darius the Great (d. 486 B.C.), a universal empire that in a short time expanded its dominion to India and Greece.

Buddhism created new societies in South Eastern Asia and exerted a great influence on the formation of Chinese and Japanese societies. Scholars recognize a certain resemblance between the

history of Christianity, which was established in the dominions of the Roman empire through the support of Constantine, and Buddhism, whose diffusion in India was favored by the support of Ashoka Maurya, the grandson of Chandragupta (Greek, Sandrokottos) (d. c. 297 B.C.), who reigned between 268 and 232 B.C. Campbell writes:

A comparison can be made between the destiny of Christianity under Constantine, three centuries after the Crucifixion, and that of Buddhism under Ashoka, three centuries after the First Turning of the Wheel of the Law. For in both cases an ascetic doctrine of salvation, taught to a cluster of mendicant disciples... became an imperial, secular religion of devotionalized good conduct for people living in the world, still in the field of history, not by any means having given up all to shave their heads and carry bowls.⁸¹

In reality it seems that no civilization in the world arose if not upon the foundations of the teachings of a Prophet-Founder. Religions have been powerful instruments for the progress of civilization. They have been collective centers wherein diverse points of view could meet, agree and be unified. They guided humankind in the world of morality. They were the foundation of all civilization and human progress. Bahá'u'lláh writes about Jesus:

Know thou that when the Son of Man yielded up His breath to God, the whole creation wept with a great weeping. By sacrificing Himself, however, a fresh capacity was infused into all created things. Its evidences, as witnessed in all the peoples of the earth, are now manifest before thee. The deepest wisdom which the sages have uttered, the profoundest learning which any mind hath unfolded, the arts which the ablest hands have produced, the influence exerted by the most potent of rulers, are but manifestations of the quickening power released by His transcendent, His all-pervasive, and resplendent Spirit.⁸²

He states moreover that the new revelation he himself has brought to the world has 'proclaimed before the face of all the peoples of the world that which will serve as the key for unlocking the doors of sciences, of arts, of knowledge, of well-being, of prosperity and wealth.'⁸³ And 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarks that 'even the minutest details of civilized life derive from the teachings of the Prophets of God.'⁸⁴

The decline of religions

And yet with the passing of time human interpretations and rituals are added to those pure original teachings, whose splendor is thus obscured. A spiritual decline starts, whereby love for the spiritual teachings of religion is replaced by attachment to the forms and externalism of tradition. Spiritual law, once alive and fruitful, turns into 'what has been called a "paper pope".'⁸⁵ Religion, born as an innovative force, now becomes an instrument of reaction in the hands of a conservative establishment. Love, harmony, unity are forgotten, prejudice and intolerance prevail, 'the materialists appear.... The decline of religion is their time of activity.'⁸⁶ Raffaele Pettazzoni (1883-1953), an Italian historian of religions, writes: 'There is in religion (history demonstrates it) a tendency to stick to dogmatism and exterior formalism, to quench the flame of faith in the dead waters of a stagnant conformism.'⁸⁷ Then a new Prophet arises and the cycle begins all over again, but not from its starting point. The previous teachings in fact have led humankind a further step forward in its collective growth. If it was not so, religion would be of no use whatever.

The historicity of religions

We thus come to a Bahá'í teaching which is very important in view of a pluralistic approach to religion. Religions are not free from the fate of all earthly things. They are a part of history, and as such subjected to a cyclic trend. They are born, they grow, yield their fruits, and decline, as any other reality pertaining to history. The

archetype of religion is eternal, but its phenomenal, historical expressions are transient and subjected to changes, decline and corruption. Therefore since religious truth is intended for, and adapted to humankind, it is not absolute, but relative. God does not reveal Himself only once in the course of human history. His revelation is systematic, continuous and progressive. God's Prophets, whose mission is to reveal increasing and more complete measures of truth and divine will to humankind, succeed one another in an uninterrupted chain. Each new religion does not aim at 'overthrowing the spiritual foundations of... [previous] world's religious systems,' but at renewing them, restoring the primal purity of their teachings, restating their fundamentals, and widening their basis. Thus it reinvigorates their life. When a new Revelation appears, the ancient religions do not die, but are reborn, in the same way as a child does not perish in the adolescent, nor the adolescent in the man. All religions are divine in their origin and aim at the same purpose of educating the human spirit. In this respect, their functions are complementary and they are all equally precious to humankind. History of religions can thus be seen as the succession of 'different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible.'⁸⁸

According to Bausani, in this historicization of religious truth, a reconciliation may be attained which many consider as impossible, 'a reconciliation and a solution of the eternal dilemma between historicism, whereby nothing is fixed, and an idea of religion, whereby whatever does not pertain to a certain age, person, Church or community is mistaken.'⁸⁹

In the light of these reflections, it seems that most difficulties which we have to face in our rational studies of religions depend on a past and present confusion between religion as an archetype, and religions as historical phenomena, as well as on the opinion, common both to upholders and detractors of religions, that religious truth is, or claims to be, an absolute, and not a relative truth. Therefore an absoluteness was and still is expected from religions, which does not pertain to any phenomenal reality.

In a critical study of religion, one should remember that religions change in the course of the centuries and therefore one should distinguish, as much as possible, the original teachings of a religion from all traditions that have been superimposed on it. Those traditional layers are indeed of human origin, are made up of human projections, are the results of human needs. But the teachings given by the Prophets-Founders, they are divine. Their divine origin is proved by their pervasive influence, their power to transform individuals and peoples and to create civilizations. And religion is that pure teaching, and not any other superimposed human product. As Bausani writes: 'it is quite unfair to define *religion in itself*, experimentally using the declining facts of the present day dying religions.'⁹⁰

Any agency given to a human being, as excellent as it may be, is undeniably capable of abuse. Human beings and not the agency are responsible of that abuse. Also religions were abused. It is through the study of such abused religions that many scholars were led to think that any relation between religion and science, religion and politics, religion and society, religion and culture is detrimental.

Moreover, each religion has its own mission and should be judged only in the light of that mission. For example, as Shoghi Effendi wrote, Christian revelation 'stressed, as its central theme, the necessity of inculcating a high standard of morality and discipline into man, as the fundamental unit in human society' and Islam introduced 'the conception of the nation as a unit and a vital stage in the organization of human society, and embodied it in its teaching.'⁹¹ Therefore if someone would maintain that since the world is still troubled by injustice and so many wars, Christianity has failed in its mission, we could answer, in Bausani's words:

Obviously, should we think that the mission of Christ was to establish unity and peace in the world, we should conclude that, after almost two thousands years of continuous wars and schisms, his results are to be considered as disastrous. But should we take the point of view of what I would call 'sacred historicism' and uphold

the concept... that the mission of Christ was above all to *realize personal sanctity*, to sanctify the individual, then we could well say that the existence of but *one* person, St. Francis, is sufficient to demonstrate that Christianity was successful.⁹²

In fact no past religion could have led to the pacification and unification of all humankind, because of the characteristics of those ancient times.⁹³ In all those religions peace and unity were only an eschatological promise, projected into a remote end of time, which is clearly described as the end of an aeon, of a prophetic cycle.⁹⁴

What is Religion?

The contents of revelation

The contents of revelation are twofold: theoretical and ethical. Revelation conveys, on the one hand, a metaphysical science, describing spiritual reality, for example the qualities of God and of the spirit, and on the other, 'a social ethics and any required instruction for that social ethics... to be realized in the world.' This spiritual *law* revealed by the Prophets embodies '*lines of action*, meant for the world to be changed,' so that all human beings may be enabled 'to live together in a sanctified society.'¹ It is not 'a mere code of laws,'² but a spiritual instrument through which the mystical goal of all religions—personal and collective salvation—may be attained. Bausani finds here the solution of what he defines as the 'highly controversial issue of the Law,'³ that is, of that Christian concept whereby the coming of Jesus had made obsolete the Mosaic Law. *Law, he writes, does not bar 'the way towards God,'⁴ on the contrary, it is the way towards God. As a matter of fact, the function of revelation is*

not much to reveal 'scientific' verities about the (unknowable) essence of God, but to sanctify human beings. The Divine Manifestations⁵ ... tell us not much what we should know, but what we should do, in order to sanctify ourselves and society.⁶

Each Prophet reveals the divine teachings to human beings and urges them to obey those teachings, because through such obedience they will come closer to Him. In this respect the Law is the essence of the mystical Way that leads unto God.⁷ In the course of the process of our approaching God, we are gradually released from the inferior level of our existence, the material level, defined as 'evil,' and

gradually acquire divine qualities, defined as ‘good.’ Christians call this spiritual process ‘salvation.’ This is the essence of a Covenant between God and humankind that characterizes all religions. God requests humankind to abide by His teachings revealed through His Prophet and promises that humankind will thus be saved. In some religions, such as Christianity and Buddhism, it is a personal salvation or sanctification, in others, such as Islam, it is the community (the *ummah*) that is saved or sanctified.

Hindu religions teach the existence of a God (*Brahman*) unknowable in His essence. According to the Vaishnavas, He reveals Himself in times of moral decline through His *Avataras*, who remind humankind of the eternal principles of true religion (*dharma*).⁸ This concept is explained by Küng thus:

Man’s faith is awakened by the word of revelation, as set down in the holy scriptures. Through the *grace* (*prasada*) of God, the Lord, the spirit/soul is granted the knowledge of salvation. Though darkened by ignorance and snared, through the body, the senses, and desires, in the deceptive (but real) world of Maya, the soul is enabled to find the way of salvation, leading to the goal, redemption. This goal is...a personal service rendered to the Lord, both here on earth and eternally in heaven. The individual, who is completely imbued and controlled by God—and separate from him—strives not for identity, but *union* with God.⁹

In the Old Testament the first example of the Covenant may be found in the *Genesis*, when

the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof

thou shalt surely die.¹⁰

A second example is the story of Noah, the Deluge and the ark. At the end of the Deluge, ‘God blessed Noah and his sons and said unto them... And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you.’¹¹ Then come the Covenant with Abraham¹² and that with Moses on Mount Sinai:

And Moses went up unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel;... Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people; for all the earth is mine.¹³

As to Zoroaster, the second *Gatha Ahunavaiti* alludes at a primal dialogue, which seems as taking place in a world of visions, among *Ahura Mazda*, *Vohuh Manah* and Zoroaster. *Ahura Mazda* asks *Vohuh Manah*: “‘Who has been found by thee, Good Purpose [*Vohuh Manah*], who might give these (offerings) for mortal men?’” And *Vohuh Manah* answers: “‘This one, Zarathushtra Spitama, has been found here by me, who alone has hearkened to our teachings. He wishes, O Mazda, to chant hymns of praise for Us and for Truth. So let us give him sweetness of utterance. ’”¹⁴ Part of the contents of that dialogue is described in the first *Gatha Ushavaiti*, where Zoroaster proclaims six times:

As the holy one I recognized thee, O Wise Lord [*Ahura Mazda*],

When I saw thee at the beginning, at the birth of existence.

With those words he introduces six visions, during which *Ahura Mazda* reveals to him His spiritual verities. He writes that he saw *Vohuh Manah* coming to him and asking him:

‘Who art thou, whose art thou? Shall I appoint by a sign
The days when inquiry shall be made about thy living
possessions and thyself?’

And he answers:

‘I am Zarathustra, first,
A true enemy to the wicked with all my might,
But a powerful support for the righteous,
So that I may attain the future blessings of the absolute
Dominion
By praising and singing thee, O Wise One!’

He accepts the fact that

Suffering among men will be caused to me by my zeal
To carry out that which you tell me is the greatest good
And to carry out what thou didst say to me: ‘Come to learn
what is Righteousness!’

But he also knows for sure that

Yet not in vain shall have been thy command: ‘Get thee on
thy way
Before my Discipline comes, followed by destiny with great
riches,
Which shall portion out between the two camps the
destinies of salvation and doom.’¹⁵

He writes moreover in the third *Gatha Ushtavaiti*: ‘I will speak of
the beginning, \ of the things which the Wise Lord has told me, he
who knows.’¹⁶ And finally this is the promise made by Zoroaster in
the fourth *Gatha Ushtavaiti* to whoever will abide by the will of
the Lord, Ahura Mazda:

He who for me, who for Zarathustra,
According to Righteousness will bring to pass
That which is most renewing by the will (of the Lord),
To him as a reward, when he attains the future life,
Shall come two pregnant cows with the ox and all that he
desires through the Mind.
This thou hast revealed to me, O Wise One [*Ahura Mazda*],
thou who knowest best!¹⁷

Bausani observes:

If we consider the liturgical hymns of the Avesta (*Yasna*) and especially the parts written in more archaic language (the Gathas), we witness the emergence of the distinct and marked personality of a prophet-reformer, Zarathustra, appointed by a supreme God, Ahura Mazda ('wise lord') to speak to men through revelation.... The first good step to take is to follow the word of the Wise Lord (*Ahura Mazda*) and his laws as revealed by Zarathustra....

The good and the bad will be rewarded and punished according to their works, until the achievement of a total and future renovation of the world... a purification... towards which the hopes of the world tend.¹⁸

'Abdu'l-Bahá numbers the Buddha among the 'holy Manifestations'¹⁹ Who have been the Sources or Founders of the various religious systems,²⁰ that is, Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. However, as has been said, many others are of a different opinion. In this vein Bechert writes: 'The Buddha... was no one's envoy or agent, and he received a revelation from no one. He simply pointed the way to insights that he had achieved entirely on his own.'²¹ The issue of the Buddhist teachings about God and revelation is intricate, and even within Buddhism itself there is not a univocal interpretation of those teachings in the different traditions which developed in the course of the centuries, due also to the fact that the Buddha did not appoint any successor. Therefore those issues will only be briefly referred to. First of all, we cannot say that the Buddha denies the existence of God or of an immortal soul. As Piantelli points out, he simply refuses to answer a number of questions 'regarding such issues as the endless or limited duration of the world that he stigmatizes as pointless, and he turns to silence (which in India does not necessarily mean 'no') or specifically denies each different possible answer.'²² A number of scholars tried

to explain the reasons of this silence of the Buddha. For example John Huddleston, a Bahá'í scholar, writes:

The records of...[the Buddha's] teachings rarely make direct reference to a God, but close perusal shows that (contrary to the opinion of many) there is an underlying assumption of belief in God, and it has been suggested that reticence on this subject may have been designed to make a clear distinction between this religion of ethics and the corrupt superstitions of the prevailing religion, so as to prevent the former being eventually subsumed by the latter.²³

Raimundo Panikkar, an Indo-Hispanic Catholic theologian, says: 'It is in order to defend the absolute transcendence of the divinity... that the Buddha consistently denies it.'²⁴ Bausani writes that the Buddha criticizes 'the concept of *deva* "god" [of declined Hinduism], as far as denying it, and replaces it with the ineffable *nirvana*... which resembles the unknowable essence of God, or the unknowable beatitudes of the life beyond, of monotheistic religions.' He suggests that, if only the doctrine of *nirvana* is emphasized, 'it becomes quite similar to the doctrines of pure monotheism. But preaching monotheism in India during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., would have led to a dangerous confusion with quasi-idolatrous henotheisms.'²⁵ In the same trend, Keith Ward, an eminent writer on comparative religion and Christian issues, writes: 'The disputes about the nature of Suchness in Buddhism reflect disputes within Christianity about the nature of God.'²⁶ And finally Moojan Momen, an expert in religious studies, writes: 'the Buddhas have assured us that behind this impermanent world and its illusions there is a reality, the Absolute Reality; and because of this it is possible for us to escape from the sorrow caused by the chances and changes of this world.'²⁷ He quotes in support of this thesis 'the famous verse in the Udana passage in the *Khuddaka Nikaya*,' which says:

There is, O monks, an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated,

Unformed. Were there not, O monks, this Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, there would be no escape from the world of the born, originated, created, formed.²⁸

As to the Buddhist concept of revelation, a number of scholars agree with Ward on the opinion that Buddhism also is founded upon the authority of a founder, the Buddha,

the only one who is enlightened. In that sense, Buddhism is a revealed religion, founded on the authority of a particular person who claims to know what is ultimately true. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he refuses to speak of such things as 'ultimate truth,' and simply speaks of the way to overcome anger, fear and the ultimate emptiness of desire.²⁹

Bausani, while suggesting a different idea of revelation than the Christian concept, writes that

revelation is... not the revelation of a metaphysical and transcendent science, but the revelation of the divine will. God does not tell us what we must believe about him... but what he wants us to do. Is it not essentially the same thing that the antimetaphysical original Buddhism had stated in a different linguistic and expressive structure?³⁰

The intriguing issue will remain a topic of discussion, also because the Buddhist Canon is a large and complex Scripture, that grew in the course of many centuries. Panikkar writes:

After all, it is common knowledge that there is not *one* Buddhism, that the so-called primitive Buddhism continues to be puzzling, that the authentic doctrine of the Buddha is very far from being identified.³¹

And Piantelli explains:

The doctrines really taught by the ascetic Gautama may

be hardly reconstructed on the ground of the available records, which were put in writing a long time after him and were conditioned by the needs of the 'monastic' establishments of the different schools... Those schools justified their own dogmatic choices anachronistically ascribing their terminology and fundamental problems to their Master himself.³²

In the Gospels, the Covenant of the Old Testament is renewed by Jesus who says that he came to confirm the Law of the Prophets,³³ but also announces a new Law, whose obedience will disclose the gates of the Kingdom. Jesus' Covenant is symbolically sealed during the Last Supper, when he offers a chalice full of wine to His disciples saying: 'this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.'³⁴

Also the Koran repeatedly mentions the Covenant:

God hath promised those of you who believe and do the things that are right, that He will cause them to succeed others in the land... and that after their fears He will give them security in exchange: They shall worship Me: nought shall they join with Me: And whoso, after this, believe not, they will be the impious.³⁵

The Koran mentions previous Covenants as well:

And remember that we have entered into covenant with the Prophets, and with thee, and with Noah, and Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus, Son of Mary: and we formed with them a strict covenant,

That God may question the men of truth as to their truth. But a sore torment hath He prepared for the Unbelievers.³⁶

The Báb writes:

The Lord of the universe hath never raised up a prophet nor hath He sent down a Book unless He hath established

His covenant with all men, calling for their acceptance of the next Revelation and of the next Book; inasmuch as the outpourings of His bounty are ceaseless and without limit.³⁷

Bahá'u'lláh writes in one of his prayers:

I testify, O my God, that this is the Day whereon...
Thou didst manifest Him Who is the Revealer of
Thyself and the Treasury of Thy wisdom and the
Dawning-Place of Thy majesty and power. Thou didst
establish His covenant with every one who hath been
created in the kingdoms of earth and heaven and in the
realms of revelation and of creation. Thou didst raise
Him up to such heights that the wrongs inflicted by
the oppressors have been powerless to deter Him from
revealing Thy sovereignty, and the ascendancy of the
wayward hath failed to prevent Him from
demonstrating Thy power and from exalting Thy
Cause.³⁸

Revelation and ethics

The laws that are at the core of the Covenant also are at the core of ethics and morality. A number of scholars agree with G. Lynn Stephens and Gregory Pence, the American philosophers, that 'there is no simple, one-size-fits-all story to tell about the relation between religion and morality throughout all the world's religions.'³⁹ However, none can deny that the idea of love is a part of all religions, whatever meaning they ascribe to their own morality. Hick observes that all religions recommend 'love, compassion, generous concern for and commitment to the welfare of others.'⁴⁰

The *Rig Veda* says:

Assemble, speak together: let your minds be all of one accord,
As ancient Gods unanimous sit down to their appointed share.
The place is common, common the assembly, common the
mind, so be their thought united...

One and the same be your resolve, and be your minds of
one accord.

United be the thoughts of all that all may happily agree.⁴¹

The ideal of the true faithful (*bhakta*) is described in the *Bhagavad-gita*:

He who has no ill will to any being, who is friendly and compassionate, free from egoism, and self-sense, even-minded in pain and pleasure and patient.

The Yogi who is ever content, self-controlled, unshakable in determination, with mind and understanding given up to Me—he, My devotee [*bhakta*], is dear to me.

He from whom the world does not shrink and who does not shrink from the world and who is free from joy and anger, fear and agitation, he too is dear to Me.

He who has no expectation, is pure, skilful in action, unconcerned, and untroubled, who has given up all initiative (in action), he, My devotee [*bhakta*], is dear to Me.

He who neither rejoices nor hates, neither grieves nor desires, and who has renounced good and evil, he who is thus devoted [*bhakti*] is dear to Me.

He who (behaves) alike to foe and friend, also to good and evil repute and who is alike in cold and heat, pleasure and pain and who is free from all attachment.

He who holds equal blame and praise, who is silent (restrained in speech), content with anything (that comes), who has no fixed abode and is firm in mind, that man who is devoted [*bhakti*] is dear to me.

But those who with faith, holding Me as their supreme aim, follow this immortal wisdom, those devotees [*bhakta*] are exceedingly dear to Me.⁴²

The Torah prescribes: ‘And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.’⁴³ And moreover: ‘Thou shalt not avenge nor bear any grudge against

the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, I am the Lord.’⁴⁴

Zoroaster speaks of *Vohu Manah*, ‘the Good Mind, which is God turned towards man, God revealing himself to man and helping man,’ that is, God as love, and of *Armaiti*, translated as ‘meekness’ (Bausani), ‘tolerance’ (Marcello Meli), ‘devotion’ (Mary Boyce, du Breuil, Duchesne-Guillemin), ‘piety’ (Duchesne-Guillemin), ‘universal love and tranquility’ (Farhang Mehr), that is, human love for God. And he writes:

When, O Wise One, shall Devotion [*Armaiti*] come with
Righteousness?
When with the Dominion the good dwelling rich in
pastures?
Who are they that will give safety from the bloodthirsty
wicked?
Who they to whom the doctrine of Good Mind will come?
Those are the future saviours of the peoples
Who through Good Mind strive in their deeds
To carry out the judgment which thou hast decreed, O Wise
One, as Righteousness.⁴⁵

And this is a part of the Mazdean creed, as set forth in the *Avesta*, which is repeated by every Zoroastrian even nowadays:

I profess myself a Mazda-worshipper, a follower of Zarathushtra, opposing the Daevas [the demons], accepting the Ahuric doctrine; one who praises the Ameshas Spentas [the Bounteous Immortals]. To Ahura Mazda, the good, rich in treasures, I ascribe all things good,... to the Just One, splendid, glorious,... whose is truth, whose is the light.... Spenta Armaiti [Holy Piety], the good, I choose for myself. Let her be mine!... I pledge myself to the well thought, I pledge myself to the well-spoken word, I pledge myself to well-acted act. I pledge myself to the Mazda-worshipping religion, which throws off attacks, which

causes weapons to be laid down... which is just, which of all faiths which are and shall be is the greatest, the best, the fairest, which is Ahuric, Zarathushtrian.⁴⁶

As to Buddhism, the *Sutta-nipata* says:

Just as with her own life a mother shields from hurt her own, her only, child, let all embracing thoughts for all that live be thine—an all-embracing love for all the universe in all its heights and depths and breadth, unstinted love, unmarred by hate within, not rousing enemy.⁴⁷

Jesus confirms the Mosaic commandments of love and says that ‘on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’⁴⁸ He says moreover: ‘all ye are brethren... and one is your Father, which is in haven.’⁴⁹ And St. Paul explains that God ‘hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth.’⁵⁰

The Koran urges human beings to love each other for the sake of their love of God:

...he is pious who believeth in God, and the last day, and the angels, and the Scriptures, and the prophets; who for the love of God disburseth his wealth to his kindred, and to the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer, and those who ask, and for ransoming; who observeth prayer, and payeth the legal alms, and who is of those who are faithful to their engagements when they have engaged in them, and patient under ills and hardships, and in time of trouble: these are they who are just, and these are they who fear the Lord.⁵¹

And it says moreover:

Mankind was but one people; and God sent prophets to announce glad tidings and to warn; and He sent down with them the Book of Truth, that it might decide the disputes of men; and none disputed but those to whom the

Book had been given, after the clear tokens had reached them, —being full of mutual jealousy.⁵²

The themes of universal love and the oneness of humankind are the pivot of the Bahá'í teachings. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

The Tongue of Grandeur hath... in the day of His manifestation proclaimed: 'It is not his to boast who loveth his country, but it is his who loveth the world.' Through the power released by these exalted words He hath lent a fresh impulse and set a new direction to the birds of men's hearts, and hath obliterated every trace of restriction and limitation from God's holy Book.⁵³

Likewise 'justice, sincerity, faithfulness, knowledge, wisdom, illumination, mercy and pity, coupled with intellect, comprehension'⁵⁴ as well as the other most important human virtues are highly appreciated in all religions. We suggest that two aspects may be distinguished in the different moral standards inculcated by the various religions. One is related to the essence of humankind, the other to its different historical expressions. The former may be found in all religions as the one underlying law of love, unity, fellowship and peace among human beings. The latter mirrors forth the different aspects of the history of a humankind that always lived in separated groups with different needs. Thus different attitudes developed in the various religions. And whenever two religions came in touch, those differences were taken as elements of religious identity, and given greater importance than the most important and unchangeable law of love. And thus those differences of secondary importance became the cause of conflict and exclusion.

The Prophets or Manifestations of God

The nature of the Manifestations of God

Who are the Prophets? What give them the right to speak in the name of God, to blame past traditions, to change previous religions,

to call for allegiance? Which are the differences between them and the great philosophers and spiritual leaders? How could their teachings become established in human societies in spite of the opposition they had to meet at the beginning? So far in the Western world there are very few deep scholarly studies on the Prophets that may assist us in understanding the elements which they have in common. Therefore we will try to summarize a few concepts, which are at the core of the Bahá'í teachings,⁵⁵ and may be useful in view of a pluralistic approach to religions.

The Prophets present themselves, as has been said, as mediators between God and humankind. A Prophet can be compared to 'a polished mirror... manifesting the attributes of God.'⁵⁶ The Prophets manifest the attributes of God, whose perfect Image they are, like a mirror, placed before the sun and reflecting its attributes. Therefore they may be better called Manifestations of God, a word that seems more adequate than the term Prophet, which seems restrictive.

The Manifestations of God have a threefold reality:

- (i) their physical or material reality, that is, their body: they were born, grow and die, they eat and drink, they become fatigued and take rest, they fall ill and then recover, they experience joy and pain, as any other human being. In this respect they cannot be distinguished from a human being, with the result that most of those who meet them do not recognize them as Manifestations of God, but regard them as normal human beings.
- (ii) their human reality, that is, their soul, their individuality. This is that power of rational perception which makes human beings unique creatures on the earth, because they can perceive metaphysical reality, unlike the animals that can perceive only physical reality. In this respect the Manifestations of God are, on the one hand, similar to human beings, on the other, wholly different from them. They are similar to human beings because,

since they are endowed with a soul, they 'have a special individuality'⁵⁷ as any other human being. Thus although they are all conjoined in their manifesting a single universal divine Reality, yet they differ from one another in their individual characteristics. Scriptures, and for some, history, describe them as personalities quite different from one another. Islam, for example, ascribes a special title to each of them. Abraham is the Friend of God, Moses is the Interlocutor of God, Jesus the Spirit of God, Muhammad the Apostle of God or the Seal of the Prophets. They are wholly different from human beings, because the power of rational perception enables human beings to know the qualities of things, and not their essence. Moreover, human knowledge is always acquired through experience or by learning from other fellow-beings. On the contrary, the power of rational perception of the Manifestations of God is a knowledge of the essence of things and not of their qualities. It is not 'a power of investigation and research,' like that of an ordinary person, but a kind of innate 'conscious power,' very similar to 'the consciousness that man has of himself.'⁵⁸ Last but not least, in the Manifestations of God the expression of the mental powers of the soul (imagination, thought, understanding and memory) through the instrumentality of the brain does not produce, like in human beings, a limited mind, wherefrom the self in its worse and limiting aspects is generated, but engenders a universal divine mind. Therefore the Manifestations of God are free from the limitations of the self with its train of natural emotions.⁵⁹

- (iii) their divine reality, that is, the Logos. Although a number of saints make extraordinary spiritual progress, no human being partakes of the Logos that characterizes the Manifestations of God and makes them different from ordinary human beings. Understanding the concept of Logos is fundamental to the purposes of philosophy of religion and of the comprehension of the nature of the Manifestations of God. This concept will be briefly explained. God is unknowable and transcendent in

His Essence. And yet we are used to ascribe to Him names and attributes: Creator, All-Knowing, Provider and many other. These attributes either refer to what we understand of them in our human limitations, or are intended to deny in God such imperfections as are known unto us. These attributes can be viewed in two respects: in their essence, and in this case they are identical with God's Essence and therefore utterly unknowable; or in their appearance as active attributes. These active attributes can be compared to the rays emanating from the sun; they manifest the quality of the sun (light, heat, energy), but are not identical with its essence. In a necessarily limited definition, the Logos is the station wherein God's essential attributes express themselves as active attributes; it is God's first emanation; it is God in His action of knowing and loving His own Self.⁶⁰ The Logos is therefore a reality without beginning or end; it is eternal. And yet it is inferior to God in His Essence, because it is created, whereas God is uncreated. The Manifestations of God partake of the reality of the Logos and therefore of its attributes. Thus they are endowed not only with the knowledge of the essence of things, but also with the spiritual power required to change things according to their will. This power is sometimes defined in Scriptures as Holy Spirit. Through the power of the Logos the Manifestations of God can influence humankind as a whole and each individual human being. This is the power that transformed a fisherman as simple as Peter in the Prince of the Apostles. This is the power that enabled the followers of the Manifestations of God to withstand persecution and to defy the forces of opposition, without the assistance of worldly powers. This is the power that caused the great civilizations to arise and grow upon the foundations of the teachings of the Manifestations of God.

Thus the Manifestations of God partake of the divine reality of the Logos and therefore are substantially different from any human being. And yet they do not partake of the Essence of God and thus

cannot be identified with Him. The relation between the divine Essence and the Manifestations of God is a relation of emanation. The Manifestations of God are not an incarnation of God,⁶¹ but the manifestations of the Logos, God's first emanation. They can be compared, we repeat it, to 'mirrors which have acquired illumination from the Sun of Truth, but the Sun does not descend from its high zenith and does not effect entrance within the mirror.'⁶²

The divine nature of the Manifestations of God enables them to reveal to humankind as much of spiritual reality and divine will as human beings need in order to grow on the material, intellectual and spiritual levels in that specific time of their civilizing process. Thus the Manifestations pursue, through their words and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the same aim, to 'bestow universal education upon man and cause him to rise from the lowest levels of savagery to the highest pinnacles of spiritual development.'⁶³ They do this through their words, which are the kernel of Scriptures, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, which they bestow upon humankind.

These explanations about the nature of the Manifestations of God open a way towards a solution of perplexities that puzzled the minds of many thinkers throughout the centuries.

The Manifestations of God have a twofold nature: human and divine. In their divine nature they are Omnipotent, All-Knowing, All-Merciful, as God Himself. Indeed in this respect and in relation to humankind they are God, Whose perfect Image they are. And for this reason they can call for utter allegiance from human beings. In their human nature they are creatures, and therefore in relation to God they are the quintessence of humility and submission, virtues which they teach to humankind through the example of their acceptance of a troubled and sorrowful life, notwithstanding their omnipotence.

In their mutual relations the Manifestations of God can be viewed in two different perspectives: the stations of unity and distinction.⁶⁴ In their station of unity, all the Manifestations of God, partakers of the Logos and therefore all-knowing and omnipotent,

are mouthpieces of the same God, bearers of the same spiritual truth of love, unity and fellowship, spiritual teachers of humankind, infallible, holders of an absolute power on human beings, who are expected to submit wholeheartedly to their bidding. Whatever they say is 'truth' to be accepted without any discussion, as different as it may be from the teachings of tradition or even of a previous Manifestation. Their common purpose is one: to educate humanity. In this respect they are the spiritual teachers of humankind. In their station of distinction, 'each and everyone of them hath been the Bearer of a specific Message... [of] a divinely revealed Book.'⁶⁵ Each of them reveals different aspects of the same Reality, according to the requirements of time and place. Therefore, they differ from one another, and their absolute authority may be considered as limited in time.

The educational function of the Manifestations of God justifies their multiplicity. If they are the Teachers of humankind, it is unlikely that God sent just one of them in a unique time in the lengthy history of humankind on the earth. Since God provided for the education of humankind from the very first instant of its creation, the Manifestations of God cannot be only those that are recorded by history. The traces of some of them must have gone lost. Others will come in the future, in order to guide humankind in its long future journey. The 'chain of successive Revelations'⁶⁶ vanishes in the past in the earliest stages of human history and in future epochs as yet to come.

The infallibility of the Manifestations of God

The infallibility of the Manifestations of God is a cause of perplexity in a culture that has struggled in the last centuries to get rid of the authoritarian principle of the *ipse dixit* and totally rely on the light of reason. And yet this infallibility is the foundation of 'the whole theory of Divine Revelation'⁶⁷ and thus of religion itself. In fact, denying the infallibility of the Manifestations of God is tantamount to denying also their functions as mediators between God and

human beings and as educators of humankind. On the contrary, if they are infallible, also their Scriptures are infallible and thus vital sources of guidance and knowledge for humankind. The theme of the infallibility of the Manifestation of God is of such importance that it deserves more attentive philosophical and theological studies.

The above mentioned concepts enable us to revise this fundamental position of all religions in a more rational perspective. The authority of the Manifestations of God descends directly from God, it is the consequence of their divine nature, the expression of the Logos in them. Undoubtedly the validity of this assertion can be weighed upon the balance of reason, but it may be confirmed only through the lesson of life. History alone can deny or prove the infallibility of the words of the Manifestations of God.

As to the prevailing concept that if two Manifestations of God preach different teachings, they cannot be both infallible, this dilemma may be solved, if we consider that all of them reveal the same spiritual teachings. In this respect there are no contradictions among them; at most the teachings of a latter Manifestation may perfect those of the former ones. As to material teachings, they differ from each other for historical reasons. In this respect the Manifestations may be viewed as ‘the real Physicians bringing divine remedy and healing to the world of man.’⁶⁸ A physician prescribes different remedies for different diseases and no one would doubt of his skillfulness, because he treats different diseases with different medicines. Why, then, should we think that all Manifestations should set forth the same material teachings, when they came to the world in different places, times and circumstances?

Proof of the Manifestations of God

Since the issue of the infallibility of the Manifestations of God is the kernel of religion, many religions, in particular Judaism, Christianity and Islam, list a series of ‘proof’ on whose ground they aim to demonstrate that their founder is a true Manifestation of God. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions, and comments upon, three kinds

of such proof: the fulfillment of former prophecies, the deeds of the Prophet, the influence of his teachings.⁶⁹

Prophecies, worded in an obscure, often ambiguous language, whose interpretation is quite difficult, do not seem important, from a rational approach to this issue.

Deeds are more important, not so much their so-called miracles, convincing only to incidental eye-witnesses, as their behavior. The Manifestations of God lead a life of utter consistency with what they teach. In particular they show 'great strength and endurance'⁷⁰ under tests and trials. Zoroaster was stabbed while he was praying. Jesus gave his life on the cross. The Báb was shot by a firing squad. Bahá'u'lláh accepted forty years of imprisonment and exile. All the Manifestations of God have willingly accepted any kind of tribulation, so that they may remain faithful to their mission as Educators humankind.

Their teachings, that is, their fruits, are a very important proof. Since their teachings are in complete accord with the human needs of the age, they are a vital demonstration of the soundness of the claims of the Manifestations of God as divine Teachers of humankind. In Jesus' words:

Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothes, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?

Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.⁷¹

The influence of the teachings of the Manifestations of God seems to be their soundest proof. The martyrs are the first who bear witness to the power of the teachings of the new Manifestation of God. Men and women, who had been weak and helpless, grow into heroes and heroines; ignorant become learned; enemies change into friends; evil-doers turn into holy persons. The history of all religions is rich in examples. In the course of time the influence of the teachings of the Manifestation becomes manifest in other ways

as well. The inspiration of their faith generates artists, scientists, statesmen. A new vital and luminous civilization flourishes. Previous limitations are overcome and new goals achieved in every field. This happened at the time of each Manifestation of God. After Moses, the light of David's and Solomon's civilization was lit. After Jesus, the civilization of Ambrose and Augustine, Tertullianus and Lactantius flourished. After Muhammad, the flower of Islam blossomed in the Near and Middle East and that of Renaissance in the West. As it was already pointed out, great civilizations arose also after the coming of Zoroaster, Krishna and the Buddha.

A definition of religion

What is religion? The issue of the definition of religion is quite important. In fact, as Bausani remarks, certain scholars gave such restrictive definitions 'that they fatally imply that the only religion worthy of this name' is their own 'and that the others are "false religions," nay, they cannot even be called religions.' Bausani mentions, as examples, the following definitions: "a body of metaphysical doctrines and sacramental instruments required for the ultimate purpose of man to be attained, that is, *the salvation of one's soul* and such condition of ultramundane bliss as is *paradise*," 'a body of doctrines and practices apt at "saving us",' 'a body of metaphysical doctrines informing us about our life in the world beyond and telling us how we will *save our souls*.' Then he remarks: 'Religion... has nothing to do with complicated cognitive, gnostic lucubrations, about how God or the world beyond are.' And finally he adds:

We have no reasons, nowadays, to consider our religions, with their dogmas and rites conditioned on the time and place of their growth and development, as the one Religion, the Universal Religion. It is now proved from the point of view of history and *de facto* that the three most famous 'universal religions,' like Christianity, Islam

and Buddhism, are not real and actual 'universal' or 'world' religions, if we do not want to deceive ourselves and if we want to give a really global meaning to the term 'world.'⁷²

The Bahá'í literature offers a number of definitions of religion which are perfectly consistent with the concepts on the Manifestations of God and the history of religions which have been previously summarized. According to the Bahá'í teachings religion cannot be a set of dogmas, beliefs, and rituals, a body of 'dogmatic and theological superstitions,'⁷³ a supine imitation of tradition. In fact such religion does not fulfill the purpose wherefore religions were founded, that is, to promote the development of individuals and society, to change human thoughts, characters and actions, 'through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers,'⁷⁴ through a gradual approaching unto God.

Firstly, religion is the body of the teachings of a Manifestation of God that convey to humankind 'the revelation of the will of God.'⁷⁵ This body of teachings revealed by a Manifestation of God provides a description of spiritual reality and of the divine will for humankind. It is a real science of spiritual reality,⁷⁶ a priceless source of knowledge. Evidently, it cannot be contrary to 'true science [which] is reason and reality.' Therefore, any alleged religious teaching which 'is at variance with science is only human invention and imagination, unworthy of acceptance.'⁷⁷

Secondly, the foundation of all religions is love, and their fundamental purpose is the gradual promotion of the oneness of humankind through the instrumentality of love, the supreme unifying power. In this respect, religion can be described as 'the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things,'⁷⁸ 'those necessary bonds which have power to unify.'⁷⁹ Therefore, religion is not only a body of theoretical teachings, but also a power which can 'effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions.'⁸⁰

Finally, since religion inculcates the highest standard of morality, it is also 'the world of celestial attributes,'⁸¹ 'the science

of the love of God' and, in this respect, it is 'the outer expression of divine reality'⁸² and 'the truest philosophy.'⁸³

Thus we come to a complex definition of religion. Religion is the body of teachings revealed by God to humankind through a Messenger and mostly condensed in one or more Holy Books. These teachings describe 'the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things' and therefore they are, on the one hand, 'the science of reality' and the 'truest philosophy' and, on the other, 'the outer expression of divine reality' and 'the science of the love of God.' They have the power to guide all those who put them in practice to the highest possible level of morality in that period of human collective development, through the acquisition of divine virtues, first of all the virtue of love with its important consequences of unity, fellowship and peace among human beings. Therefore, religion also 'is an attitude toward divinity which is reflected through life.'⁸⁴ For all these characteristics, religion is 'the greatest bestowal of God in the world of humanity.'⁸⁵

In the light of this definition, whichever religion consists merely of such man-made, irrational dogmas and exclusive rituals and ceremonies that create conflicts among human beings and between science and religion, fails in its fundamental purpose, that is, to convey truth, to raise humankind to the highest possible level of morality, to create fellowship, harmony and peace among human beings. Such a religion is 'human invention and imagination unworthy of acceptance... its nonexistence would be a blessing and benefit to man.'⁸⁶

Should any religious phenomenon that does not meet these prerequisites be removed from the list of religions? Evidently a distinction should be made between 'religion' and 'religious tradition.' Religion is the body of the teachings of a Manifestation of God, his Revelation. Tradition is the body of the comments on the life and teachings of the Manifestation of God set forth by theologians in the course of the centuries, as well as a body of rituals that developed about them. The limits of tradition are due to several reasons. Historical reasons: tradition comes after the primal teachings of the Manifestation of God. The religious identity

of the earliest followers of the various religions, mostly considered as their respective Fathers, was defined on the ground of their allegiance to the primal teachings of the Founder, and not to tradition. Rational reasons: when the primal teachings of a Manifestation of God are faithfully adhered to, they have the power to create a higher level of unity. When the ideas of tradition are brought to their extreme consequences, they have the power to create a quite inferior level of unity, circumscribed within the boundaries of that tradition, but they often have the power to divide from other traditions. Spiritual reasons: tradition is the result of the efforts of human beings, who, as holy as they may have been, still occupy a lower spiritual station when compared to the high station of the Manifestation of God. Traditional reasons: each religion considers the words of its Founder the most sacred part of its spiritual heritage, and recognizes later commentaries of those words to be of lesser holiness in comparison.

Thus tradition cannot be an essential part of religion, unless it has been incontrovertibly sanctioned by the Manifestation of God himself, in the eyes of anyone and not only within the context of tradition. It cannot be an essential part of religion if it does not hold in the light of rational search. It cannot be an essential part of religion if it is not a cause of universal love and harmony, of praiseworthy virtues. Whichever tradition does not meet these prerequisites cannot be recognized as an essential part of religion. Therefore, this definition does not exclude any revealed religion. On the contrary, it exposes the limits of tradition, when it is a source of religious prejudice and conflict, which pave the way to upholders of materialism and detractors of religion. Thus, for example, we should distinguish between Islam, that is, the message which Muhammad received from the Angel Gabriel, as expounded in the Koran, and the development of Islam, that is, the history of what human beings did with the Koran's message in the course of the centuries. But this distinction today does not seem very clear either to the theologians of the various religions or to scholars of religion, be they philosophers or historians.⁸⁷

On the contrary, the above mentioned definition underlines the

fundamental oneness of religions. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: ‘The foundation of the religion of God is one,’⁸⁸ because ‘the divine religion is reality, and reality is not multiple; it is one.’⁸⁹ And Shoghi Effendi writes: ‘all established religions... [are] divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.’⁹⁰

The Contents of Religions

Methodological hints

A number of issues related to the contents of religions will now be examined. The issues worthy of being examined are manifold, complex and ample. The present writer certainly cannot exhaustively examine or justify them, or solve the sundry points of seeming conflict among the different conceptions of the various religions. He only intends to examine some of them and point out topics that deserve to be deepened, to find, on the one hand, logical explanations, and on the other, threads through which the different perspectives may be connected to one another, even when they may appear irreconcilable.

Some methodological hints which may be useful for a solution of those divergences have been recently drawn from the Bahá'í literature and set forth in the form of three theories, 'cognitive relativism, the essence-attribute distinction, and complementarity,' suggested by Bahá'í scholars as 'hypotheses that should be tested, developed, and refined in the context of interreligious dialogue.'¹

The theory of cognitive relativism, used by Momen in his study of the conflict between the two conceptions of God, the dualist conception of Jews, Christians and Muslims, and the monist conception of Hindus and Buddhists, derives from the Bahá'í principle that absolute truth is unknowable and that whatever we may know of the spiritual verities is always relative to our level of understanding. Therefore, in this perspective, even the words of the Manifestations of God cannot be considered absolute. In fact, since they are addressed to human beings, they are worded in terms suitable to them, and therefore relative. And thus, as interesting as all discussions on theological issues may be for speculative minds,

still, their value is quite relative. And very often when two tendencies of thought have developed on a theological issue, both parts may be right, each from its point of view. Relativism does not imply indifference to the ideas of the other, but the capacity of looking at a problem from other points of view as well.

The theory of the essence-attribute distinction derives from an explanation of the difference between essence and attribute given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the Essence of God is intended as the perfect divine Reality, whereas the attributes are intended as that Essence as known and understood by human minds. Since human minds are limited and imperfect, their perception of the divine Reality will be limited and imperfect, and will be different from that infinite and perfect Reality, that therefore remains unknowable.

The theory of complementarity derives from many passages from the writings by Bahá’u’lláh, where he explains how the same reality may appear as different depending on the context. For example, in the *Seven Valleys* he explains how each man is a father in relation to his children, and a son in relation to his father.³ In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* he explains that the Manifestations of God may be considered divine in relation to human beings, in front of whom they represent the Divinity, and human in relation to God, whose creatures they are.⁴

God

According to many philosophers of religion, although the issue of God and His existence is fundamental in religions, it does not concern their discipline. In fact, each religion is founded on the assumption of the existence of God or, of an unknowable, indescribable, absolute Reality, through which human beings may transcend the impermanence and contradictions of this world. Therefore the exposition of, and discussion on, the proof of God’s existence are left to theology and metaphysics. But philosophers of religion cannot certainly dispense with studying the concept of

God as taught by the different religions. In fact if all Scriptures are expressions of the divine Word, no contradiction should exist between the concepts of Divinity as expounded in the various Holy Books. At most their expositions of those concepts could be, on the one hand, complementary and, on the other, gradual and progressive.

Among those who embarked upon such kind of search is Ward, who at the end of his study writes that he has discovered in the religious traditions which he has examined ‘convergences of thought which make it reasonable to speak of them as ultimately concerned with one common object and goal of human existence.’⁵

Among the most important subjects regarding Divinity that emerge from the study of the Scriptures are: the oneness of God, His creative activity, the nature of God and the relation between God and human beings.

The oneness of God

The issue of the oneness of God occupies a central position in prophetic religions. Abraham is considered the founder of monotheism. However, certain traditions link the religion he founded with an earlier religion associated with Noah and another one, even earlier, associated with Adam, perhaps going back as far as the fourth millennium B.C. Moses defends the monotheistic concept of Abraham against the polytheism by which the Jews are surrounded. At the same time he broadens that concept, contributing to the idea of a personal God, Who directly takes care of His people. The Old Testament describes this God as a stern Father, Who punishes human disobedience, but also is merciful. Jesus presents himself as the Son of God and deepens the concept of a Father God, Forgiver of sins, Healer of human ills, Who protects *all human beings* in the universal embrace of His love. The Koran stresses the oneness of God, in order to rectify the trinitarian concepts formulated by the Councils of the Christian Churches.⁶ This concept is pointed out by Toynbee who writes that ‘Islam was a reaffirmation of the unity of God, against an apparent weakening in Christianity’s

hold on a vitally important truth, which had been won for Mankind by Judaism.’⁷ The Bahá’í Faith confirms the concept of One personal God, Who has a Plan for His creation, and recognizes His transcendence, supremacy, freedom and utter inaccessibility to human minds.⁸

The Hindu religions are quite diversified in their vision of God. In the past, a number of mistakes were perpetrated in their evaluation, also for the fact that they are so numerous that it is quite difficult to study them without getting confused. The first mistake was that they were considered polytheistic. This was not only due to the fact that Hindus worship many different gods and practice rituals that seemed strange to the first Western peoples who met them. It was also due to the many gods mentioned in their Scriptures, and thus many scholars insist on considering primitive Hinduism a polytheistic religion. But more attentive studies have shown that Hindus believe in one God, whom they call *Brahman*. All the other gods they worship are but aspects of the one God. For this reason many considered Hinduism a form of henotheism. It was moreover observed that the magic and idolatrous aspects of some of the Hindu religions are part of a popular religiosity that may be compared, *mutatis mutandis*, to certain forms of devotion which also are common among the followers of some prophetic religion. Bausani suggests that ‘even the most primitive peoples believe a given stone or puppet or fetish to be merely a supernatural place of power, and not a god, or much less God.’ And he compares their devotion to that rendered by many literate and illiterate believers to the relic of a popular Italian Saint.⁹

In the Buddhist Canon the attitude towards God is such that some scholars were led to think—as it was said—that Buddhism is a philosophy rather than a real religion, while others defined it as a religion of ‘the silence of God,’ and still others considered it an atheistic or a non-theistic religion.¹⁰ The issue continues to be an object of discussions. But many scholars are now inclined to think that the Buddha chose to keep silent about all issues related to transcendence because of the historical circumstances of his times,

and that he decided to divert the attention of the people from absurd and fruitless metaphysical hairsplittings and direct it towards more important ethical issues. The same scholars remark that the essence of Buddhist religiosity is identical with that of any other religion. Buddhism also teaches that human beings can escape the intrinsic sufferings of the material world, if they follow a path of inner purification announced by a charismatic personage who is an Enlightened One, a path that leads towards an Absolute of such transcendence that It cannot even be given a name.

As to the God of the Zoroastrians, the old idea that the religion founded by Zoroaster is dualist is now obsolete. Bausani wrote in 1959 that *Ahra Mainyu* or *Ahriman*, the evil spirit, wherefore Zoroastrianism has been defined as a dualist rather than as a monotheist religion, 'in some of... [the Zoroastrian] texts... seems to have an only slightly accentuated function than our own "devil"'.¹¹ This dualism becomes more evident with the Sasanian religious renewal (third century C.E.), known as Zurvanism or Zervanism. Therefore it seems to be a later superimposition over an original monotheism. This concept is upheld by du Breuil as well, who writes: 'An unfortunate confusion, due to the Magian syncretism between Zoroastrianism and Zervanism, ascribed to Zoroaster the fatherhood of dualism.'¹² The French scholar clearly explains that Zoroaster taught the existence of a supreme God, *Ahura Mazda*, creator and lord of the cosmos, about whom Zoroaster says in the fourth *Gatha Ahunavaiti*:

He who first through the mind filled the blessed space with
light,
He it is who by his will created Righteousness,
Whereby he upholds the Best Mind.
This thou hast increased, O Wise One, by thy Spirit
Which is even now one with thee, O Lord!¹³

This God generates a Holy Spirit, *Spenta Mainyu*, and an Evil Spirit, *Ahra Mainyu* (Pahlavi, *Ahriman*). The latter, endowed with freedom, decides by his own choice that he will oppose the former,

who is his twin. Then *Ahura Mazda* creates the material world, the 'space-time,' where the fight between the two may take place. This fight will finally culminate, at the end of time, in the victory of the good, promoted by *Ahura Mazda* through the *Amesa Spentas*, the six Immortal Saints created by Himself, as well as through the cooperation of the good among human beings. Therefore, according to du Breuil, 'the one God of Zoroaster maintains his sovereignty on the cosmos, which metaphorically becomes his garment, and on which his moral transcendence will totally dominate.' *Ahura Mazda* differs from the God of Biblical religions in that Zoroaster does not emphasize the divine power that operates in the world of material creation. According to Zoroaster, 'who was so attentive to the ethical dimension, the most significant act of God was just that he was the august creator of Good Thought (*Vohu Manah*).'¹⁴ Zoroaster says in the fourth *Gatha Ahunavaiti*:

Through the mind, O Wise One, have I known thee as the
first and the last,
As the father of the Good Mind [*Vohu Manah*],
When I perceived thee with mine eyes as the true creator
of Righteousness,
As the Lord in the deeds of existence.¹⁵

Finally the Zoroastrian scholar Farhang Mehr clearly writes:

Some scholars have suggested that by admitting two primordial spirits—Good and Evil—Zoroastrianism is a dualist religion. Zoroastrians have reacted sharply to this contention....

Believing in the basic tenets of monotheistic religions—the transcendence and eternity of the creator, revelation, God's message, and life after death with reward and punishment—Zoroastrianism must be classified as a monotheistic religion.¹⁶

It seems therefore that the concept of the oneness of God is more or less evident in all Scriptures and that the old

misunderstandings regarding the supposed polytheistic or dualistic ideas of some religions have been solved. One topic remains still open to discussion, the alleged atheism of Buddhism.

God as creator

The concept of a Creator God is present in all Scriptures. It is mostly expounded in the form of a myth. The scriptural myths of creation have been for a long time literally interpreted. This has implied on the one hand an increase of the divergences among the various religions, and on the other, a polemical debate between upholders and detractors of those myths. The former recognized the literal interpretation of the creative myths as an article of faith. The latter upheld a scientific vision which seemed in open conflict with the myth. The echoes of the discussions between creationists and evolutionists in the Christian world are still alive. Fiorenzo Facchini, an Italian anthropologist, wrote in 1985:

Advocates of scientific creationism, keeping to literal interpretations of the first chapters of the Genesis, claim the scientific nature of its account of creation...

Though the scientific nature of the 'creationistic theory' is upheld by its advocates, nevertheless they adopt an unscientific approach, in the strict meaning of the word, and in their eagerness to give at least a scientific semblance to their claims, they advance opinions on the theory of evolution, denouncing paleontological gaps and not yet explained issues of biological theory. Their statements are amazing, even ridiculous: for instance they maintain that fossils were created by God in order to test the believers' faith.¹⁷

Critical studies of the last decades identified an underlying unity beneath the extraordinary variety of the creative myths of humankind. Campbell writes:

The comparative study of the mythologies of the world compels us to view the cultural history of mankind as a unit; for we find that... [a number of] themes...have a worldwide distribution—appearing everywhere in new combinations while remaining, like the elements of a kaleidoscope, only a few and always the same.¹⁸

Moreover, in the last years, new tendencies have developed in the different religious traditions in the metaphorical interpretation of Scripture and thus of the creative myths as well. These two developments imply that, on the one hand, interreligious dialogue and, on the other, the relation between faith and reason are facilitated.

God's nature

There are two fundamental visions of the nature of God: personal and impersonal. According to the concept of the personal God, typical of prophetic religions, God is a supreme and omnipresent Reality in the world, Who created with consciousness, love and determination, and Who has a Purpose and a Plan for His creation. This conception implies that the individual will never become totally absorbed in the Divinity. Bausani considers Koranic theology 'among the most radical formulations of a personalistic theism in the entire history of religions.'¹⁹ The Koran stresses the absolute freedom of the Divinity whose actions are wholly arbitrary. 'God doth what He will' and 'ordaineth what He pleaseth.'²⁰

According to the concept of the impersonal God, typical of mystic religions such as some of the religions of Hinduism, God is an indescribable, absolute, abstract and impersonal Reality, whose part everything is. This conception implies that the soul (*atman*) can become merged with the Absolute (*Brahman*). It is typical of the *Upanishads*, where it is written:

Now the sign of this Being [*Brahman*] is: 'Not this, not this' [*neti neti*]. For there is no other, more appropriate description than saying 'Not this, not this.' Then as to the

name [of *Brahman*], it is 'the Reality of Realities' (Truth beyond truth). For creatures are the realities and He is their Reality.²¹

However, a further mistake to redress regarding the Hindu religions is the belief that all Hindus adopt the monist conception. On the contrary, we can distinguish among the Hindus at least three trends of thought. The first, whose foremost representative was the philosopher ankara (c. 788-820 C.E.), upholds a complete identity between *Brahman* and *atman*, the Absolute and the self, and therefore it is a form of monism. The second, associated with the philosopher Ramanuja (1017-1137 C.E.), upholds that both *atman* and *Brahman* have a personal existence, but the *atman* is wholly dependent on *Brahman*, whose quality it is. This trend of thought is followed by the Vaishnavas, who have theistic ideas, that is, they believe that *Brahman* becomes manifest in the world as *Bhagavan* or *Īshvara*, the Lord. The third trend of thought, associated with the philosopher Madhva (thirteenth century), upholds that the I-Thou (*atman-Brahman*) relationship persists also in the final union between a worshipper and God, and thus it is a form of dualism.

It is a common idea that there cannot simultaneously be truth in religions that uphold antithetical thesis, like those of a personal or impersonal God. For this reason some scholars, animated by the commendable intention to find unifying aspects in the different religious traditions, tried to show that the personal vision of God is also present in those traditions which are usually described as upholders of the impersonal conception.

The Bahá'í Faith offers a number of important hints for a different solution of this problem. The first is the following answer that 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave to an inquirer:

Thou hast written concerning the Impersonality of the Divinity. Personality is in the Manifestation of Divinity, not in the Essence of the Divinity. The reality of the divine world is purified and sanctified from limits and restrictions.

But the pure Mirror, which is the Manifestation of the Sun of Truth and in which the Sun of Truth is manifest in full appearance—that mirror is restricted, not the lights.²²

The second is the theoretical hint offered by the above mentioned theory of cognitive relativism. The third is a practical hint. The Bahá'í Scriptures have already unified the different, personal and impersonal, ways of viewing the Divinity in the hearts and minds of the Bahá'ís of various religious backgrounds, each of whom feels free to view God in his own personal or impersonal way, in the light of the reassuring words written by Bahá'u'lláh:

Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art Thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even to hint at the nature of Thine Essence. For whatever such strivings may accomplish, they never can hope to transcend the limitations imposed upon Thy creatures.

And also:

The meditations of the profoundest thinker, the devotions of the holiest of saints, the highest expressions of praise from either human pen or tongue, are but a reflection of that which hath been created within themselves, through the revelation of the Lord, their God.²³

The same attitude would also exert a pacifying influence on the relations between religious traditions, without requiring any substantial renunciation from anyone of them. They should only accept the idea that the 'other' way of viewing God is one of the many possible ways of viewing God for a limited humankind. If holiness is the goal of the lives of the faithful, having a theologically uniform view of God is not an indispensable prerequisite for a holy behavior, that is, a behavior in the observance of the law of universal love and fellowship. If we will experience our own love for 'our God' in our inmost selves as well as in the practice of our daily lives, we also will be able to understand that our love is identical to the love of the 'others' for 'their own' God, Who is the

God of all, as each person perceives Him in one's heart. A beautiful verse of the Koran says: 'Call upon God (Allah), or call upon the God of Mercy (Arahman), by whichsoever name ye will invoke Him: He hath the most excellent names.'²⁴

The relation between God and humankind: revelation

The issue of the relation between God and humankind is explained in two different ways in prophetic and mystic religions. Alessi explains that in prophetic religions

the dialogue of interpersonal communion between the believer and God... does not exclude but assumes the mediation of other creatures, in particular of the community of believer, that is, the *ecclesia*. In its context a relevant position is ascribed to the prophets who, having been conferred by the Most High the mission of speaking in the name of the divinity, become preferential intermediaries between God and men.²⁵

Among prophetic religions, the Bahá'í Faith teaches that human beings can know God through His signs as manifested in the world of creation. The signs of God are manifest in the world of creation as a whole, which somehow reflects the divine attributes, in human beings themselves, created in the image of God, and last but not least they can also become manifest in society, whenever it is organized in such a way as to reflect the divine attributes of order, justice, harmony, fellowship, love and unity. But the first and foremost of those signs are the Manifestations of God, that reveal unto human beings whatever they can know and understand of God, the unknowable Essence, and of His will. All those who abide by the guidance vouchsafed by the Manifestation of God, cooperate in the realization of God's Plan for His creation: guiding the world of creation towards a more and more complete expression of the divine attributes, an expression which reaches its apex on earth in the acts of everyday life of human individuals and society. Since the Manifestations of God come one after the other in order to

promote a gradual development of humankind, we can speak of 'progressive revelation.'²⁶

In mystic religions, the purpose of human life is that each of us may become conscious of the identity between one's personal self (*atman*) and God (*Brahman*) through one's compliance with the principles and the laws of *dharma*, as conveyed by Scriptures and tradition. No intermediary is required for the individual to realize this purpose. This conception is part of Hindu religions and Buddhism. But Hindu religions are not univocal in this vision. For example, the Vaishnavas, as has been said, accept the idea of a personal God who becomes incarnate in the world and recognize Krishna as one of His most important *Avataras* and the *Bhagavad-gita* and the *Bhagavata Purana* as their fundamental Scriptures beside the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. The resemblance with certain aspects of the conception of prophetic religions is significant.

As to Buddhism, the Buddha said:

The Tathagata, brethren, who being *Arahant*, is fully enlightened, he it is who doth cause a way to arise which had not arisen before; who is the knower of a way which had not arisen before; who doth proclaim a way not proclaimed before; who is the knower of a way, who understandeth a way, who is skilled in a way. And now, brethren, his disciples are wayfarers who follow after him. That, brethren, is the distinction, the specific feature which distinguishes the Tathagata who, being *Arahat*, is fully enlightened, from the brother who is freed by insight.²⁷

These and other words ascribed to the Buddha lead some scholars to think that he himself may be numbered among the Manifestations of God, in the sense that has been previously explained.

The soul

Human beings occupy a special position in God's plan for His creation. All Scriptures agree in placing them halfway between the material world and the worlds of the spirit. On the one hand, there

is the human body, made of 'the dust of the ground,' in the words of the Old Testament,²⁸ created 'of dried clay' or 'from clots of blood,' in the words of the Koran;²⁹ on the other, there is the soul, the breath of life which God breathed in that body. Christian Scriptures do not frequently mention 'the soul, but address Adam as a 'living soul,'³⁰ and thus implicitly state that human beings are essentially souls and show the Kingdom of God as their real dimension and true destiny. The Koran describes the soul as an evolving spiritual entity. At the beginning we have 'the soul which is 'prone to evil';³¹ then we have 'the self-accusing soul,'³² which, being conscious of both its potentialities and imperfection, reproaches and blames itself, and strives in order to grow better; in the end we have 'the soul which...[is] at rest,' which has attained the goal of the good-pleasure of God through its submission to His laws and to which the Koran addresses the following words: 'Return to thy Lord, pleased and pleasing him: Enter thou among My servants! and enter thou my Paradise!'³³

Also Zoroastrianism teaches that there is an immortal soul and that the souls of the righteous will enjoy the bliss of holiness in the world beyond, whereas the souls of the evil will be subjected to the consequences of their deeds. More specifically, according to Zoroastrians, human beings have an immortal soul, which they call *Urvan* or *Ruwan*. This soul has a mortal body and a number of powers at its disposal. These powers are: *Ahu*, the vital spirit, which gives life to the body and enables the soul to act through the body; *Vohu Manah*, the good mind, through which the soul thinks and reasons before taking decisions; *Baodhah*, perception, which enables the soul to be enlightened through meditation and personal mystical experience as well as through the blessings of *Khvarenah*, the divine grace; *Daena*, the self, or the conscience, which has the potential capacity of guiding the soul towards right moral choices and at the same time is modified by the moral choices of the soul. In traditions later than the *Gathas*, the soul is assisted in its moral choices by its *Fravarti* (Avestan *Fravashi*), variously described as a divine spark lit in every creature, or as the pre-existing celestial

archetype of every living being, or as a guardian angel that protects every human being on earth. At the end of its earthly life, each soul will reap the fruit of its earthly existence. It will not be judged by God, but will find itself in a spiritual condition dictated by 'a superior order as regular as the order that rules the cosmos.'³⁴ In a myth of poetical beauty, *Daena* is compared to a feminine figure who will welcome the deceased at the dawn of the third night after his/her passing, on the bridge of judgment, the *Chinvant* Bridge (perhaps, the bridge of the separator), which he/she should cross in order to enter the world beyond. She will appear as a beautiful maid to the virtuous, but as an ugly fiend to the wicked.

As to Hinduism, the immortal soul of human beings (*atman*) is identified with the universal conscience of the Absolute (*Brahman*), and thus all human beings are recognized as equally sharing in the divine Being. But human beings do not possess an intrinsic consciousness of this identity. On the contrary, they tend to identify themselves with their apparent selves (*jiva*), which give them the illusion of their psycho-physical identities as real, independent and permanent entities, and bind their souls to earthly existence and rebirths. According to the law of *karma*, any deed performed in obedience to the *dharma*, traditional law, implies the sacrifice of the apparent self (*jiva*), its gradual conquest and the eventual conscious perception of the identity between the soul and the Absolute. This process leads the soul towards the goal of its liberation from the material world (*moksha*). On the contrary, any action against the *dharma* prevents the soul from realizing its identity with the Absolute, allows the apparent self (*jiva*) to coordinate people and things around itself and develops such selfishness as binds the soul to the cycle of existences.

This conception of the soul is the matrix of the doctrine of rebirth, a doctrine which was seemingly conceived in the Hindu world in order to explain why, although all human beings partake in the same *Brahman*, they are born under such different destinies. Thus many human pains, which are seemingly unjustified and incompatible with the existence of a good and just God, are

explained by the law of *karma*, that is, they are the results of deeds against the *dharma* performed in former lives. Moreover, since all events of our lives are the results of our actions, this doctrine gives hope for a better future in another life and a motive for struggling during the present life for such better future.

The doctrine of rebirth, typical of mystic religions, was also upheld by a number of philosophers of ancient Greece, such as the Orphics, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato, Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists, who were possibly influenced by Indian thought. Prophetic religions like Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith refute this doctrine³⁵ and explain seemingly unjustified human pains in wholly different ways. For example, seemingly unexplained and useless human anguish may fall within the Plan of God for His creation to be perfected. And anyway those religions teach a radiant and willing surrender to the divine will, which they describe as the essence of faith and one of the most important virtues to acquire during the earthly life.

This different vision could be a reason of conflict, at least in the ideological field, between the two groups of religions. Therefore the doctrine of rebirth is one of those conceptions which should be more carefully studied by all, particularly in the context of the religions that uphold it, in the light of both Scriptures and reason, and in the spirit of a peaceful interreligious dialogue.

As to Buddhism, a discussion on the issues regarding the existence and immortality of the soul is still going on within and without the Buddhist world. A number of scholars maintain that one of the fundamental concepts of early Buddhism is the 'radical denial of the *atman*, that is, of the substantiality of any form: there is no soul, no self, no substance.'³⁶ Other scholars, like Küng, observe that 'we can scarcely find our way back now to a clear picture of what Buddha himself and his first disciples thought about it. Since he was in general ill-disposed toward such metaphysical questions, he was presumably not at all interested in giving an unequivocal clarification.'³⁷ Others, like the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (c. 150-250 C.E.), maintain that the Buddha 'could have

occasionally denied the existence of the soul for pedagogical reasons, in view of contesting improper explanations.³⁸ In this vein, Bausani suggests that the Buddha may have denied the concept of the existence of the individual soul for two fundamental reasons: one of a social and political nature, and the other of a metaphysical and theological nature. From the social and political point of view, the Buddha wanted to modify the patriarchal and reactionary asset which ancient India had assumed as a result of an unfortunate alliance between religious and political power. One of the most important aspect of this asset was the rigid division of society into castes. Through his denial of the concepts of an individual soul (*atman*) and of god (*deva*) upheld by the ancient culture, and his suggestion that whoever would follow the spiritual path he taught could be saved, the Buddha eliminated the concept of caste.³⁹ From the metaphysical and theological point of view, the Buddha wanted to do away with the metaphysical and philosophical lucubrations which burdened the ancient religion of the Hindus of his times. For these reasons, in order to avoid dangerous confusions with the theories preached in his times, he preached the impermanence of the individual soul (Pali, *anatta*; Sanskrit, *anatman*), and described the soul as a combination of *khandhas* aggregated as elements. According to Bausani, the Buddha wants to suggest the idea that neither the human soul, nor its condition when it had reached *nirvana* can be described.⁴⁰

The concept of the soul as expounded in the Bahá'í literature is elaborate and complex and cannot be explained in all its details in this context. In brief, in that literature the soul appears as a divine emanation, wherefore its relation to God 'is similar to that of the ray to the sun—the effect to the primal cause.'⁴¹ This relation is similar to the relation between God and any of His creatures. But whereas other creatures reflect only one of the attributes of God, the human soul reflects them all, that is, 'for each name, each attribute, each perfection which we affirm of God there exists a sign in man.'⁴² For this reason the human soul—a sign of God—is described as the 'collective reality,' the center where 'the perfections

of God, the divine virtues are reflected or revealed,' upon which God has engraved 'the mysteries of the divine Kingdom.'⁴³ The soul is a ray of the divine Sun of Reality; though it does not partake in the essence of the Sun, it however possesses all its attributes, first among them consciousness.⁴⁴

In the stage of its earthly life, the soul is associated with a body, assigned to the soul as an instrument through which it may become conscious of its own potential divine attributes. The soul therefore is the self *par excellence*, the spiritual self, the divine identity created by God and endowed with attributes that are reflections of the divine attributes. However, the soul manifests itself also as 'natal self,' 'the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on.'⁴⁵ Religions reveal to human beings the road through which their spiritual self may prevail over their 'natal self.' This is the road of selflessness implying, on the one hand, utter submission to the divine will as expressed through His Manifestation and, on the other, the mastery over the 'natal self,' a condition that promotes the full and free development of the spiritual qualities of the soul.

Human life is therefore a stage of learning for the souls, when they can grow in their consciousness of their own attributes. During this process the souls are guided by the Manifestations of God that show to them the path towards the consciousness of their real essence. The souls are free to follow that guidance or to ignore it. But when they follow it, their spiritual progress becomes easier and quicker. That progress becomes manifest in the form of spiritual feelings, words, deeds and behaviors.

In general, the existence and immortality of the soul are fundamental teachings of all religions, intending as they do to raise human beings to the spiritual level whereto their souls belong, and which is much higher than any material and intellectual level.

Ethics

Religions are the instruments whereby God realizes His plan for human beings: enabling their souls to return, by an act of conscious will performed for the sake of the love of God, to the worlds of spirit, wherefrom they emerged as unconscious. Human souls achieve this goal as they learn how to express, in the earthly plane of their existence, the divine qualities with which they are endowed. Therefore, God reveals through the Founders of religions concepts through whose knowledge and enforcement human beings are enabled to return unto Him. Thus the ethical teachings are a fundamental part of His religions, which in this respect can be defined as 'an attitude towards divinity which is reflected through life.'⁴⁶

A certain progressivity may be discovered in this revelation of the will of God. If we study the ethical teachings of all religions, we discover a gradual uplifting of the ethical standards and a simultaneous widening of the spheres within which human beings are required to abide by those standards, in the successive religions which appear in the world one after the other.

The study of the Bible clearly reveals progressive ethical concepts. The story of Adam which opens the Old Testament has been the object of several, mostly literal, interpretations in the Christian world. The fundamental lesson which that world seemingly learnt from this story is that a divine curse fell upon the whole of humankind because of a transgression perpetrated by Adam, goaded by an Eve that had been seduced by Satan. That curse was then rescued through the unique and unrepeatable event of God's incarnation in the Son and his self-sacrifice as a ransom on the cross, so that humankind might be redeemed from its ancestral sin. This interpretation of the myth of Adam and Eve was never shared by the Jews, although their scholars have been reading and studying it for almost three millennia. Joseph Herman Hertz (1872-1946), who was chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, writes:

One searches in vain the Prayer Book, of even the Days of Penitence, for the slightest echo of the doctrine of the Fall of man. 'My God, the soul which Thou hast given me is pure,' is the Jew's daily morning prayer. 'Even as the soul is pure when entering upon its earthly career, so can man return it pure to his maker' (Midrash).⁴⁷

We have thus good reason to wonder whether this story could have a different meaning. Some took the hint from the fact that the Hebrew word 'adam' is the name of Adam, but at the same time means 'man.' This could mean that the Bible intends Adam as the prototype of all human beings. In this vein Küng writes that

the so-called 'creation story' in Gen. 2-4 is not a fairy-tale account of a first human being in the garden of paradise. It is concerned to define the human situation; it is about the adam who is the prototype of all human beings.⁴⁸

In the light of these observations, a number of modern scholars, like Huddleston, interpret the story of Adam and Eve as 'the first time man began to understand the difference between good and evil, right and wrong.'⁴⁹

In the myth of Adam and Eve also the figure of Eve is quite important, an evident prototype of the other part or, of another aspect of humankind. Adam-Eve could be therefore interpreted as a primal human psychophysical unity, whereby Adam symbolizes the spirit and Eve, the soul. The soul is bound to the material world, whereof it is conscious, ignores the spirit, wherefrom it comes, and at the beginning is unaware of its own origin. The world, in the form of a devil-snake, tempts her through the fruits of its tree and, exploiting her curiosity and ignorance, incites her to infringe the (psychological-spiritual) space which her Creator has forbidden to her. Thus soul-Eve enslaves spirit-Adam to the material world. The unhappy condition of exile and remoteness from a celestial (spiritual) world, wherefrom soul-Eve also comes, in which she finds herself after her transgression teaches her the difficult consequences of breaking the law and indirectly encourages her

not to break it in the future.⁵⁰ This interpretation invests the myth of Adam and Eve with universal connotations, similar to those of other creation myths handed down by other traditions. It is a further contribution to a comparison invoked by modern scholars and summarized in its overall meaning by Campbell in the following words:

And it is time, now, to regard each [the various religious views] in its puerility, as well as in its majesty, quite coldly, with neither indulgence, nor disdain. For although life, as Nietzsche declares 'wants to be deceived and lives on deception' there is need also, at certain times, for a moment of truth.⁵¹

After Adam, humankind became corrupt and God swept it away by the deluge. Noah alone was spared. At the end of the deluge God entered into a Covenant with humankind through Noah. This Covenant, on the one hand, assured that God would make that 'neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to destroy the earth'⁵² and, on the other, obliged human beings to fulfil a number of obligations which Küng defines as 'an **ethic for humankind**' and comments upon thus:

One could describe these ordinances of preservation as a minimum **basic order of reverence for life**: not to murder ('since God has made human beings in his image' [Genesis 9:6]) and not to eat the flesh of animals who are still living. In rabbinic Judaism, at a later date, seven 'Noachid commandments' were derived from these moral obligations. They have been handed down in different versions: as well as the prohibition of murder there are prohibitions against theft, fornication, idolatry and blasphemy and the commandment to observe the law (to set up courts).⁵³

As to the overall meaning of the story of Noah, it could teach the

consequences for a society that forgets the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, and transgresses the limits of moral law. Obviously, the story suggests also the idea that the remedy to such a plight and the method whereby a balance may be restored and preserved within society is to abide by a covenant whose contents are essentially ethical.

According to the Jewish interpretation of the Bible, ‘before many generations pass away, humankind once again becomes arrogant and impious, and moral darkness overspread the earth. “And God said, Let Abraham be—and there was light,” is the profound saying of the Midrash.’⁵⁴ With the description of the story of Abraham, the concept of the Covenant between God and human beings becomes more evident. God requests human beings to obey His laws which He bestows upon them for their own good and pledges that He will assist them in their spiritual growth. Abraham is understood by the three monotheistic religions as a model respectively of ‘loyal obedience to the law... unshakable faithfulness... unconditional submission (= Islam),’⁵⁵ virtues that he showed through his willingness to sacrifice his son, be he Isaac or Ishmael, on the altar of God. These virtues may be considered the kernel of the ethics of Abraham’s religion and the foundation of the ethics taught by all prophetic religions.

On the Sinai the Covenant between God and human beings is made plainer through Moses. God will be loyal to His pledge that He will safeguard His people, if His people will in their turn be loyal to their pledge to abide by the clauses of the Covenant. These clauses are the ‘Ten Words,’ the laws of the Decalogue, along with some expansions. Küng describes them as

a pödeictic commands which express universal ethical and religious principles, a basic order which is established under the will of Yahweh. Torah, translated *nomos* in the Septuagint and ‘law’ in English, originally did not mean a corpus of law, but **instruction** generally: guidance for a truly human life which was made possible and demanded by God.⁵⁶

Those laws are essentially ‘the bulwark against the devastations of animalism and godlessness,’⁵⁷ but at the same time they ‘keep the religion of Abraham—monotheistic and ethical—pure of the corruptions of the decaying religions of the region.’⁵⁸

As to Zoroastrianism, Campbell describes it as a ‘radically new teaching’ characterized by a ‘treatment in purely ethical terms of the ultimate nature and destiny of both mankind and the world,’⁵⁹ a ‘potent mythical formula for the reorientation of the human spirit... pitching it forward along the way of time, summoning man to an assumption of autonomous responsibility for the renovation of the universe in God’s name.’⁶⁰ The world has become corrupt because *Ahra Mainyu* (the Evil Spirit) has prevailed over his twin *Spenta Mainyu* (the Holy Spirit). Humankind is called to cooperate with *Spenta Mainyu* so that he may defeat his brother and peace, order and justice may be established in the world. Each individual is responsible of his/her commitment to cooperate with the powers of good. The third *Gatha Ahunavaiti* says:

Hear with your ears that which is the sovereign good;
With a clear mind look upon the two sides
Between which each man must choose for himself,
Watchful beforehand that the great test may be
accomplished in our favour.⁶¹

Once one’s orientation has been chosen, one’s ethical commitment—that may be synthesized as ‘good thoughts, good words, and good deeds’⁶²—is but a consequence. The *Gathas* say: ‘He who would bend his mind till it attains to the better and more holy, must pursue the Good Religion closely in word and act. His will and wish must be consistent with his chosen creed and fealty.’⁶³ The Good Religion implies for a pious person to cooperate with *Spenta Mainyu* in the establishment of peace, order and justice in the world by conforming to certain virtues, such as sincerity (truth is vital in view of the good, the whole cosmic struggle is between the forces of good and evil or of truth and falsehood), honesty, trustfulness, moderation, education, commitment to work, thoughtfulness for the well-being of others, generosity.

As to Jesus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that he 'founded the sacred Law on a basis of moral character and complete spirituality, and for those who believed in Him He delineated a special way of life which constitutes the highest type of action on earth.'⁶⁴ Jesus himself synthesizes his own ethical teachings thus:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,
and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy
neighbour as thyself.

On these two commandments hang all the law and the
prophets.⁶⁵

Many other passages of the Gospels describe the daily behavior of a person who wants to inherit the kingdom of God. An incisive summary of those teachings is conveyed in the following words by Huddleston:

[Jesus] called on men to love God, to develop their spiritual qualities and to be prepared to accept persecution rather than deny their Faith. He pointed out that man could not develop his spiritual qualities if he was preoccupied with material things. Outward form is not enough; there is a need for the heart to be pure and free of hatred and lust.... To love God is to love all men (including those previously considered to be enemies) because all are the children of God. We should treat others as we would that they treat us, be slow to judge, be merciful and forgiving, return good for bad, and act as peacemakers.⁶⁶

The Koran confirms the ethical standards of previous religions. As Küng points out, a list of prescriptions and prohibitions very similar to the Decalogue may be easily identified in Sura 17, which presents an Islamic code of behavior:

In the Name of God, the merciful Lord of mercy.
Set up no other deity alongside (the one) God.
Your Lord has commanded that you serve no one but Him.
Show kindness to your parents. Give to the kinsman his
due and to the needy and the wayfarer.
Do not kill your children for fear of poverty. Do not kill
any man—a deed God forbids.
Do not come near to adultery.
Handle the property of the orphan with integrity.
Keep your bond. For you are accountable.
Give full measure when you measure and weigh with just
scales. Do not pursue things of which you have no
knowledge.
Do not strut proudly on the earth.⁶⁷

Moses' ten commandments are therefore accepted as such by
Jesus and may be identified in the Koran as well. Thus Küng's
ideas 'of a **common basic ethic** of the three prophetic religions'⁶⁸
may be fully agreed upon.

In comparison with the two previous prophetic religions, the
Koran reaffirms that all of us are responsible for our own actions:

No soul shall labour but for itself; and no burdened one
shall bear another's burden.⁶⁹

The Book of Islam moreover recognizes all human beings as equal
in front of God, because all of them descend from 'one man'⁷⁰ and
were created as 'one religion [*ummah*, lit.: nation, community]',⁷¹
and widens the sphere of action of ethical laws. As Bausani points
out, Islam 'through its militancy opened towards the world, lays
the foundation of the sanctification of the collectivity, of the
ummah.'⁷²

A prejudice about Koranic ethics that should be exploded is
the idea that Islam is intrinsically bloodthirsty. Many Koranic
passages prescribe behaviors of an evangelical nature. For example:

This is what God announceth to his servants who believe and do the things that are right. Say: For this ask I no wage of you, save the love of my kin. And whoever shall have won the merit of a good deed, we will increase good to him therewith; for God is forgiving, grateful.

Be good to parents, and to kindred, and to orphans, and to the poor, and to a neighbour, whether kinsman or new-comer, and to a fellow traveller, and to the wayfarer, and to the slaves whom your right hands hold; verily, God loveth not the proud, the vain boaster...

...be helpful to one another according to goodness and piety...

The faithful of both sexes are mutual friends: they enjoin what is just, and forbid what is evil...

...better and more enduring is a portion with God, for those who believe and put their trust in their Lord; And who avoid the heinous things of crime, and filthiness, and when they are angered, forgive... he who forgiveth and is reconciled, shall be rewarded by God himself; for He loveth not those who act unjustly.

A kind speech and forgiveness is better than alms followed by injury. God is Rich, Clement.⁷³

As to the concept of the 'holy war,' the holy war was intended as the duty of fighting against the corruption of pagan beliefs, and not as the right of imposing Islam. Moreover, tradition relates that when Muhammad returned from Medina, after one of the earliest battles, he said: 'I have returned from the lesser holy war to the Greater Holy War.' His words have been later explained in the sense that the Greater Holy War is the struggle against one's passions in order to remain steadfast in the 'way of God.'

In this regard, Bausani sets forth an interesting idea. He defines Islam and Judaism as 'primary monotheisms,' because they arose 'as revolutionary reactions to a *pagan* religious *milieu*,' and

classifies Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith as secondary monotheisms, because they arose among monotheistic peoples. He explains that because of the environment where primary monotheisms arose, they had to fight the archaic, pagan religiosity that surrounded them, and therefore 'usually they are warlike in character ("idols must be destroyed").'⁷⁴

As to the Hindu religions, the Absolute (*Brahman*) dwells everywhere, specially in human beings. Human beings should therefore simply regain their lost consciousness of the presence of the Absolute in their souls (*atman*). The way towards salvation is the same as the quest for the self. If a human being will establish a link between one's self and the Absolute, through one's mind, then the illusory self will be dissolved and the ultimate goal of life, which is worshipping God as 'a reflex of the same mystery as oneself,'⁷⁵ will be attained. The *Bhagavad-gita* states:

For him who has conquered his (lower) self by the (higher) Self, his Self is a friend but for him who has not possessed his (higher) Self, his very Self will act in enmity like an enemy.

When one has conquered one's self (lower) and has attained to the calm of self-mastery, his Supreme Self abides ever concentrate, he is at peace in cold and heat, in pleasure and pain and dishonour.⁷⁶

The ways to salvation or liberation from the self and suffering are three: the way of knowledge (*jnana-marga*), the way of action (*karma-marga*) and the way of the love of God (*bhakti-marga*).

The way of knowledge (*jnana-marga*) is that way through which the seekers aim at better knowing their own inner reality through asceticism or yoga, so that they may conquer their emotions and always act according to the dictates of wisdom. Thus their soul will escape the illusion (*maya*) that the material world is real, will achieve a condition of inner peace and love and will come in touch with the Absolute. Among the prerequisites for this way is inner purity.

The way of action (*karma-marga*) is suggested in the *Bhagavad-gita* which says: ‘without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment.’⁷⁷ This means that the self is forgotten and the action is performed only because it is considered as correct in the light of the *dharma*. Shankara says:

‘Liberation is accomplished by wisdom, but wisdom does not spring without the purification of the heart. Therefore, for the purification of the heart one should perform all acts of speech, mind and body, prescribed in the *smritis* and the *smritis*, dedicating them to the supreme Lord.’⁷⁸

The way of love (*bhakti-marga*) is accessible to everyone and is followed by most people. Radhakrishnan writes that ‘bhakti is derived from the root, *bhaj*, to serve, and means service of the Lord. It is loving attachment to God.’ He then explains that ‘when the soul surrenders itself to God, He takes up our knowledge and our error and casts away all forms of insufficiency and transforms all into His infinite light and the purity of the universal good.’⁷⁹ Therefore this way is ‘devotion to God, love for God, and being loved by God.’ For this goal to be achieved, such prerequisites are required, as ‘a pure life (*carya*)... and a God-related activity (*kriya*), which includes, most notably, the giving of gifts, prayer and ritual in the home and in the temple as well as study with a spiritual teacher.’⁸⁰

It is not difficult to identify essential ethical aspects behind each of these ways expressing the *pietas* of Hindu religions. This ethics is based upon the observance of *dharma*, intended as both ‘the order that supports the universe’ and ‘virtue in accord with cosmic law.’⁸¹ And thus *dharma* has the characteristics of an ethical code, implying that virtues should be realized and suggesting the idea that ethics is part of the cosmic order. A deeper study of Hindu religions under this respect is beyond the scope of this script. We shall content ourselves with two excerpts from the *Bhagavad-gita*, which illustrate respectively the ethical meaning of religion and the fundamental aspects of such an ethics:

Fearlessness, purity of mind, wise apportionment of knowledge and concentration, charity, self-control and sacrifice, study of the scriptures, austerity and uprightness.

Non-violence, truth, freedom from anger, renunciation, tranquillity, aversion to fault finding, compassion to living beings, freedom from covetousness, gentleness, modesty and steadiness (absence of fickleness).

Vigour, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, freedom from malice and excessive pride—these, O Pandava (Arjuna), are the endowments of him who is born with the divine nature...

Therefore let the scripture be thy authority for determining what should be done and what should not be done. Knowing what is declared by the rules of the scripture, thou shouldst do thy work in this world.⁸²

As to Buddhism, the Buddha announced the Four Noble Truths that represent the foundations of the Buddhist Canon, in his first doctrinal discourse, the so-called ‘Sermon at Benares.’ The Four Noble Truths are: ‘The noble truth as to “suffering” (*dukkha*); the noble truth about the “origin of suffering” (*dukkha-samudaya*); the noble truth about the “end of suffering” (*dukkha-nirodha*); the noble truth about the “path leading to the end of suffering” (*dukkha-nirodha-gamini-patipada*).’⁸³ In summary the meaning of these truths is as follows. The first truth is: ‘Birth is painful, old age is painful, disease and death are painful; association with what one dislikes is suffering; separation from what one likes is suffering; not to get what one wants is also suffering. In short, every part of us, because we grasp hold of life, is subject to suffering.’⁸⁴ The second truth states: ‘it is ignorant craving which leads to rebirth. This is associated with desire and attachment, the seeking of pleasure everywhere, the craving for happiness in this life or a future one.’⁸⁵ The third truth teaches that suffering disappears only through ‘the complete turning away from desire, the extinguishing,

rejecting, abandoning of desire.’⁸⁶ The fourth truth explains how this liberation can be attained, that is, through ‘the middle path... a path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana.’⁸⁷ As Campbell points out, at the beginning of Buddhism ‘the view that the mendicant life, with control of the senses, etc., was the one true way to that state of spiritual isolation (*kaivalyam*), which is the one true goal for man’ prevailed. And yet, as early as the times of king Ashoka (third century B.C.) ‘a contrary ideal and mythology were already beginning to develop around the figure of the man living in the world as the Buddha lived for innumerable lifetimes... gaining nirvana not by the cessation, but by the performance, of acts.’⁸⁸ After all, the Buddha himself is reported in the *Buddhacarita*, a *Mahayana* text, as having said:

‘Ho! Ho! Listen now to my words.... It is by meritorious acts that all is achieved. By such acts, through many lives, I became first Bodhisattva and am now the Victor, All-Wise. Therefore, as long as life remains, acquire merit!’⁸⁹

Buddhist ethical way may be summarized in the five rules (*panca-sila*) laid down by the Buddha for laymen, a minimal standard of personal behavior. These rules are: do not kill, do not steal, do not perform immoral sexual acts, do not lie, do not make use of intoxicants. And yet Buddhism implies also that ‘since all beings are different and are at different stages of the way to liberation, there is no code of laws that are equally valid for each one. Rather... Buddhist ethics is a “tiered ethics”.’⁹⁰ Through an increasing adherence to Buddha’s prescriptions, a human being may achieve the four inner attitudes, called *brahma-vihara*, which are kindness to all beings (*metta*), compassion to all suffering (*karuna*), the sharing of joy (*mudita*), and equanimity to friend and foe (*upekkha*), representing both the way and the goal of Buddhist ethical efforts. It does not seem difficult to find resemblances between the way of liberation taught by the Buddha and the ethical prescriptions of the other religions. As to the dilemma whether this path was discovered

by the Buddha through his unaided efforts or through the assistance from a higher Source, the Buddha is described as having been enlightened because he became aware of ‘an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed’⁹¹ that he already had in himself. And what is revelation if not that the Absolute enlightens the inner reality of a being who already has this Light in himself, because he was created as such?

The Bahá’í Faith, the latest among revealed religions, claims to be the heir of all previous religions. Its ethical concepts, epitomized in a book entitled *The Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh*, are the same as the ethical codes of all previous religions. They revolve around the principle of the oneness of humankind, viewed not merely in its social aspects, but mainly in its spiritual implications. The concept of the oneness of humankind upheld by the Bahá’í Faith cannot ‘be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men.’⁹² It implies the awareness of the real organic oneness of humankind, in its origin from one God and in its love for that one God. This love is true only when it is manifested through thoughts, feelings, words and deeds that demonstrate it. Ethics implies also this love to be enlightened by the light of knowledge, with all its consequences of learning, wisdom, understanding and so on, and sustained by will power, that is, by action. This ethics is not binding only in the sphere of individual relations, but also in the context of human society, viewed as an organic entity formed by individuals that are necessarily connected to one another. And so social efficiency, and the survival of society, are—according to the Bahá’í teachings—conditioned upon the personal and collective observance of the same moral code, that is, on the one hand, by individuals and, on the other, by social groups and entities as well as by governing political institutions. This moral code is viewed as a reflection on the human level of the model of harmonious oneness which is manifest throughout the world of creation. And yet in the individual ethical code the concept of mercy prevails, whereas in the social

code justice is more important. The Bahá'í Faith provides moreover for a certain graduality in the enforcement of its laws in the world.

In this succession of religions, a number of progressively widening circles wherein religious laws are expected to be enforced may be identified. Bausani suggests that such process went through four stages:

1. Ancient local laws promulgated by early prophets, about whom tradition records a little more than their names (laws of the individual, Adam; of a tribe, Noah; of a group of tribes, Abraham, and so on).
2. A law given to a people (Moses), the Chosen People, a primal model of a primitive national community.
3. The law of Muhammad, whereby the mere racial bonds of the Chosen People are substituted by the membership in a common supra-racial nation, the *ummah* or community of brothers, whereas any other local or tribal bond is broken off.⁹³

As to Christianity, he says that it

could accept the Pauline dogma of the refusal of the law because its central law, its primary goal (and I admit that in this regard it is a unicum among monotheistic religions) was to create *the greatest individual power and sanctification* in view of a new practical organization of mankind under God's orders. Christ introduced only slight changes into Mosaic Law: he abolished divorce, excesses in the law of the Sabbath, etc.... But he changed, he greatly changed, the individual attitude towards God and religion, in view of *the new law*.⁹⁴

Bausani then identifies a fourth stage in the Bahá'í Faith that implies 'the revelation of a new *law*... that unites *all* mankind in a single great nation.' He adds moreover that, according to the concept of progressivity in religion, it cannot be excluded that 'after a thousand years a new law will come and broaden the scope of the organic

dominion of God.’⁹⁵

A final consideration on religious ethics is to be made about its particular function and pregnancy. In fact the best legislation and the most perfect education seem incapable of promoting and preserving morality in society. It seems that human beings do not recognize any external imposed code, but are more inclined to give spontaneous inner responses to a morality founded upon an inner faith in God, in His revelation and in the law of love, which is its essence. History teaches that whenever ethics is dissociated from religion, it is deprived of firm foundations and of an indispensable driving power. In fact the Manifestations of God do not reveal only a code of laws, as perfect and important those laws may be. They also bestow the inner force required for individuals to exercise the necessary efforts for those laws to be enforced. That is faith in its affective aspect. In this sense religion is a moralizing factor of the greatest value and proved effectiveness.

Inner and Outer Aspects of Religions

Some aspects of religions, beside being a reason of dissention among the followers of the various confessions, have also been among the factors which alienated thoughtful people from religion. A more reasonable approach to these issues will hopefully not only advance the cause of interreligious dialogue, but also reconcile to religions those who had withdrawn therefrom in the name of reasonableness.

Inner aspects

Faith

Many definitions of 'faith' have been suggested in the course of time. Most of them emphasize the connection between faith and religion, the opposition between faith and reason, the voluntary aspect of faith, and a passion extended as far as fanaticism and intolerance. An analytical study of these definitions is beyond the scope of this script, which only aims at investigating whether the concept of faith really implies all the negative connotations which have been attached to it by its detractors.

William S. Hatcher suggests the following, above mentioned, definition of faith:

We can define an individual's faith to be his total emotional and psychological orientation resulting from the body of assumptions about reality which he has made (consciously or unconsciously).¹

In the light of this definition any form of knowledge is a kind of

faith. What we know is what we have understood through the instrumentality of our cognitive powers and criteria. Our cognitive powers and criteria are limited and enable us to acquire a knowledge which is quite relative. Therefore the certitude of our knowledge depends on the harmonization of any newly acquired information with all previously acquired data, in whose context the new information acquires meaning and value. Obviously the value of this certitude depends on the validity of the assumptions we have made. Likewise 'the quality of men's faith differs considerably depending on the degree to which the basic assumptions on which a given faith is based are justified.'² Therefore it seems that much of the blame put on faith should be rather put on its contents.

Let us take as an example the words written by Dario Bernazza, an Italian essayist, who is not a professional philosopher but may be considered a spokesman for prevailing beliefs of contemporary society. He writes:

What is faith? It is a belief in the unfailing existence of things that cannot be demonstrated as 'real' through proof (otherwise it is not faith, but confidence or ascertainment). Faith, therefore, implies believing in anything and in its contrary... *faith begins there where reason stops.*³

Then he lists a number of alleged verities of faith, among which only one is philosophical in its origin, the existence of the soul, whereas all the others are dogmas of a definite religious confession. Therefore the real object of his blame is not faith in itself, but its contents. In fact he himself demonstrates throughout his book that he is animated by an 'impassioned and honest' faith in human intellect. The idea comes into one's mind that even they who have faith in human intellect can be irrational, inasmuch as the fruits of human intellect do not seem to be as absolute as its defenders (we are tempted to say, at least in this respect, fanatic defenders) pretend. The flaws with which they charge faith are the same unsurmountable limitations of human beings and thus of their intellect itself.

At least three aspects can be distinguished in the concept of

faith: an intellectual aspect relating to knowledge, an affective aspect relating to love, and a practical aspect relating to action. In its cognitive aspect, faith is a form of knowledge, the knowledge of the concepts that are its objects. In the case of religious faith, those concepts are God, transcendence, the soul, the bond between God and humankind, virtues, spiritual laws, etc. In its affective aspect, faith is a form of love. In the case of religious faith, it is love of transcendence, of God, of His Manifestation, of the word of the Manifestation, of humanity. In its practical aspect, faith is action in obedience. In the case of religious faith, it is obedience to the word of the Manifestation of God and thus it is ethical behavior. These three aspects of faith supplement each other. In particular, the love of God, on the one hand, generates the indispensable forces for the efforts required so that a theoretical and practical knowledge of spiritual reality may be acquired and, on the other, it promotes the process of personal sanctification resulting in the enhancement of the intuitive powers, which in its turn implies that same knowledge to be broadened and deepened.

In its cognitive aspects faith can decline into irrationality, absolutism, fanaticism and intolerance. But this also depends on its contents. Religious faith is by definition faith in the law of love, unity and fellowship, which is the kernel of religion. We do not see how human beings can be fanatic in such a faith, without denying the whole contents of their faith. In other words, whosoever is fanatic, and thus rigid and intransigent, in his/her faith in love, actually has no faith in love, because love means also mercy, understanding, tolerance. But whosoever has set his/her faith on a religious tradition made up of absolute dogmas, exclusive rituals, particular forms, can very well be fanatic. His/her fanaticism arises from his/her belief that these dogmas, rituals and forms are more important than the law of love with all its implications. In reality, the blame put by many thinkers on faith is not to be put on faith in the kernel of religion, but on faith in its outer and formal aspects, at the expense of its kernel, which is the law of love, unity and fellowship. In that case, faith becomes divisive, can turn into

fanaticism and intolerance, can be a cause of conflict and war.

But whenever the contents of faith are in conformity with the admonitions of the Manifestations of God, which are focussed on love, unity and fellowship, faith becomes a driving power of the greatest value. Faith assists human beings in expressing spiritual qualities whereby they are potentially endowed and which distinguish human beings from animals: love, fellowship, kindness, wisdom, prudence, justice, steadfastness, constancy, initiative and any other human virtue, combined with consciousness and will. Far from being a hindrance in daily living, such a faith is a precious factor of personal growth and fulfillment. According to Bausani

the essence of divine religion is... faith in a God who is unknowable in his essence and manifests himself in personalities that must be followed, not as though they were philosophers or scientists, but as bestowers of laws of ethics and sanctity. Whatever may be added to this essence creates fanaticism and violence. And human history has unfortunately added much to this divine kernel. Suffice it to mention the complicated dogmatic lucubrations that, in many forms of religion, regimented 'faith' within fanatic doctrinal frames.⁴

In conclusion, faith in itself is neither good nor bad. It is like our right hand: it can caress or hit, heal or kill. But is there any one who does not want to have it? It is just in front of the wrongs perpetrated by fanatics that we understand the great importance of the contents of our faith. Therefore we also understand how important is that we follow the guidance of reason while choosing the object of our faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: 'weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion. If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is truth! If, however, it does not so conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance!'⁵

Faith in miracles

An aspect of the irrationality of faith that gave rise to long discussions is faith in miracles. A miracle is intended as an

extraordinary event taken to manifest the supernatural power of God fulfilling his purposes... an event or effect in the physical world deviating from the laws of nature.⁶

Faith in miracles may seem irrational and illogical, or somehow a limitation of God's omnipotence not only to the deniers of the supernatural, but sometimes also to those who have a certain idea of the Divinity. In reality faith in miracles implies the belief that God is omnipotent and therefore His power is beyond any limitation. In fact if God is the Creator, He also created all the laws operating in the universe, and therefore He is their Lord and can do with them as He likes. Human beings, in their limitation, cannot understand the purpose of God and His wisdom. Therefore many things in the world of creation remain inevitably covered by the veil of mystery. Mystery is part of human life and depends on human meanness when compared to the greatness of God and of His Manifestations. We will never know everything. What we do not know and understand is mystery. And miracle is part of that mystery. Therefore, reason can assist us in understanding that miracles are possible, although it is evident that God does not use them as a regular channel to reveal His will and power to humankind.

The irrationality of faith in miracles is something quite different. It is irrational to think that miracles can be a proof of the greatness of the Manifestations of God. In fact whoever did not witness a miracle can well deny that it ever happened. At most a miracle can be a proof only for eye witnesses, but not for all those who are informed about it through the medium of a third party. However it seems that miracles are not very important even for eye witnesses, if it is true, for instance, that the Jews accepted Jesus to be crucified after they saw him working so many miracles. And finally, as extraordinary as a miracle may be, still it is a physical event and therefore its value and importance are quite limited. Let us think for example of a blind person who miraculously recovers his/her sight. Undoubtedly after a few years he/she will lose it again, when he/she will die. But let us suppose that a spiritually blind person is suddenly enlightened and achieves spiritual understanding. This new light will never fade away, not even after physical death.

Undoubtedly inner sight is much more important than outer sight.⁷

Another irrational aspect of faith in miracles is that often believers have a strong faith in miracles supposedly performed by representatives of their confession, but they deny those which are ascribed to others. Thus Christians are absolutely sure of Jesus' thaumaturgical powers, but skeptical about the miracles ascribed, for example, to Muhammad or the Buddha. However, it is evident that all the Manifestations of God, endowed as they are with the power of the Logos, can do whatever they want. And thus they also can operate miracles. And as a matter of fact all of them performed the miracle of changing hearts, of creating great civilizations. And yet the Scriptures, in referring the wonders worked by the Manifestations of God, may have intended to speak also in a metaphorical sense: a resurrected dead person might denote a person immersed in the spiritual death of materialism and subsequently quickened to spiritual life.

In reality, whenever faith in miracles goes beyond the above mentioned logical terms, it results in an irrationality that in certain respects is childish. It could well be the expression of the immature faith of a person who forgot the preeminence of the spiritual world and overestimated the importance of material life. The believers who invoke a miracle have not yet attained such complete submission to the will of God, as is one of the fundamental expressions of a mature faith in God. They are asking God to do what they themselves want, ignoring that they would do much better to submit to His will.

Fear of God

If religion is based upon a Covenant between God, the Omnipotent, and human beings, helpless creatures, obviously human beings are afraid of the other contracting party, all the more so in case of their unfaithfulness. As any other aspect of religiosity, fear of God can assume different connotations depending on the different degrees of personal development. Is it fear of God the feeling experienced by primitive human beings, who have just vaguely grasped the

meaning of the Covenant, when confronted with the most awesome expressions of the forces of nature which they have deified? The concept of the fear of God is possibly unwelcome to modern Westerners because of these immature aspects. But certainly in the case of mature human beings, who have achieved a certain degree of progress in the development of their rational faculty, fear of God is a quite different attitude. In their case fear of God is an awareness of the consequences of their possible unfaithfulness to the Covenant. In a sense this fear of God could be compared to the awareness of the consequences of natural laws. No one would jump from the fifth floor in view of a faster descent, well aware of the fact that the law of gravity would cause him/her to crash against the ground. And no one would certainly feel ashamed of such a fear. The same thing is true in the spiritual sphere. Breaking a divine law does not imply immediate and evident consequences, but in time it exercises devastating effects upon the soul. Fearing God means being afraid to break His spiritual laws, for fear of the consequences. This feeling is quite healthy, it is a real protection, wholly justified in a weak creature in front of its omnipotent Creator. Bahá'u'lláh wrote: 'The essence of wisdom is the fear of God, the dread of His scourge and punishment, and the apprehension of His justice and decree.'⁸ And Shoghi Effendi explained that

the majority of human beings need the element of fear in order to discipline their conduct... Only a relatively very highly evolved soul would always be disciplined by love alone. Fear of punishment, fear of the anger of God if we do evil, are needed to keep people's feet on the right path. Of course we should love God—but we must fear Him in the sense of a child fearing the righteous anger and chastisement of a parent; not cringe before Him as before a tyrant, but know His mercy exceeds His justice!⁹

Inner transformation

The inner experience of religion comprises a further quite important aspect: the process of personal transformation occurring in whoever follows the teachings of religion with pure intentions, that is, animated only by an unselfish love for the Manifestation of God.

The Bahá'í concept of the dynamics of spiritual transformation can be summarized as follows. We human beings, on the one hand, are the fruit of the world of creation whose qualities our bodies share; on the other, our souls are potentially possessed of the capacity of manifesting the qualities of the spiritual worlds. The instrument through which we can set in motion and operate the process whereby our divine potentialities will be manifested, is our power of understanding. We can avail ourselves of our power of understanding in order to recognize the Manifestation of God, who—as has been said—reveals a body of teachings and laws representing a reflection of the great laws and truths of the world of the Kingdom, through whose implementation we will obtain practical results in our lives: personal excellence and collective progress. At the same time the Manifestation of God puts at our disposal—if we are but willing to reap them—the forces through which this transformation may occur: the forces of the Holy Spirit and the spirit of faith. We can obtain those powers through our willing compliance with the method prescribed by the Manifestation. Recognizing the Manifestation of God is therefore ‘the first step in the path of God, but the distance of the way is great.’¹⁰ Since this transformation is a process of growth, it complies with the laws of evolution in the same way as any other process of this kind. It is gradual and may be compared to the growth of a ‘seed,’¹¹ which, cultivated by the farmer, germinates, grows and yields its fruits by virtue of the energy poured out by the sun, and of the mineral substances absorbed from the air and the soil—thus expressing its potential qualities. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes this process as a process of approaching God, and He adds: ‘nearness is likeness,’¹² because ‘the Prophets teach us that the only way to approach God is by characterizing ourselves with the attributes of divinity.’¹³ Such can (and must) be this likeness that one’s existence may become ‘non-existence,’ ‘for when the ray’—‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes—‘returneth to the sun, it is wiped out, and when the drop cometh to the sea, it vanisheth and when the true lover finds his Beloved, he yieldeth up his soul.’¹⁴

This subject has not been sufficiently studied by scholars of religion, who usually delegate it to those who are interested with the mystic and Gnostic aspects of the various religions. In reality the capacity of transforming human beings is an integral part of the concept of religion, whose purpose is 'to bring man nearer to God, and to change his character.'¹⁵ Without this power, there is no religion, but at most ideology, doctrine or tradition.

Religions claim to have a great power of transformation and in this sense present themselves as factors of moralization and growth. But the study of their history seems to demonstrate that they practically and fully manifest this power only in certain times of their historical evolution. When they turn into dogmatism and externalism, that power becomes dramatically diminished. Religions turn into conservative forces and thus represent an obstacle in the process of human growth. And besides, civilizations contemporary with such religions are bereft of a vision of life that may be shared by the majority of people; therefore they are affected by deep moral and spiritual diseases.

The issue of inner transformation deserves further investigation. But in the context of an introduction to philosophy of religion it can be left at this point, a call for a critical review of Scriptures and history of religions in this respect.

Obedience and freedom

The issue of the relation between faith in a religion, which implies obedience to its precepts, and the need of personal freedom have embarrassed the consciences of freethinkers of all ages. The terms of the problem are so well known that it is not worth expounding them here, and moreover some of the main reasons of those perplexities have been previously examined.¹⁶ We will briefly examine only two aspects of this issue: the meaning of the authority of the Manifestation of God and the definition of freedom.

In the light of our previous definition of the Manifestation of God, the words of a Manifestation of God convey an accurate description of reality and are a priceless source of knowledge. If it

is true that none of those words can be in conflict with human intellect which is their addressee, it is evident that any seeming contradiction is to be ascribed to the limitations of human intellect and not to an impossible mistake of the Manifestation of God. In other words, any human perplexity in front of whatever a Manifestation of God may have said and a person does not understand are to be ascribed to human limitations. The acknowledgement of this fact does not imply a curtailment of human freedom, it is only an acknowledgment of the limits of human intellect and an encouragement to rise above them.

And in reality human freedom cannot be viewed, in the perspective of a religious vision of life, in the same terms as it is viewed in the perspective of any materialistic or spiritualistic philosophy. That kind of freedom—that is, thinking, saying and doing whatever a person likes, with the only limitation not to harm others—that some secularist philosophies regard as desirable for human beings, according to religions, is pure utopia. Creatures are always subjected to their Creator. According to the religious vision of life, the essence of freedom is for a person to acknowledge the supreme authority of the source of the Holy Word and to freely choose to express this acknowledgment in one's life. Therefore the first and foremost among human liberties is exercised in searching for truth. In this search we should be audacious and even temerarious. Only if we are free from prejudice, will we be able to recognize the Manifestation of God and come closer to truth. Recognizing the Manifestation of God and obeying his laws imply for us to willingly renounce unbridled liberty of our instincts. But this renunciation bestows upon us an inner freedom that enables us to live in peace and harmony with ourselves and our fellow-beings on the earth. Such freedom should produce, in the promise of religions, the fruit of a personal as well as a collective, material, intellectual and spiritual progress. If it does not, something went wrong in the free use of our human faculties while submitting to the authority of the Manifestation.

All Scriptures promise freedom through submission to God,

whereas secularist philosophies promise freedom through submission to the self, which they call conscience. See who keeps its promise in the great and inexorable play of life and history. But even in purely rational terms, freedom as described by many secularist philosophers is nothing but enslavement to one's own image as a rational, self-subsisting individual, who does not recognize the authority of the Manifestation of God above his/her conscience. The self has become god. But the self does not seem a god generous in its gifts of outer and inner harmony.

The issue of conscience is undoubtedly of fundamental importance. But it is so wide that it cannot be dealt with briefly and exhaustively. A few considerations emerging from Bahá'í literature will prove sufficient for our argumentation.

There is no inborn conscience, intended as an instinctive awareness of the difference between good and evil. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

There are some who imagine that an innate sense of human dignity will prevent man from committing evil actions and insure his spiritual and material perfection. That is, that an individual who is characterized with natural intelligence, high resolve, and a driving zeal, will, without any consideration for the severe punishments consequent on evil acts, or for the great rewards of righteousness, instinctively refrain from inflicting harm on his fellow men and will hunger and thirst to do good. And yet...[we] observe in infants the signs of aggression and lawlessness, and that if a child is deprived of a teacher's instructions his undesirable qualities increase from one moment to the next. It is therefore clear that the emergence of this natural sense of human dignity and honor is the result of education. Secondly, even if we grant for the sake of the argument that instinctive intelligence and an innate moral quality would prevent wrongdoing, it is obvious that individuals so characterized are as rare as the philosopher's stone. An assumption of this sort cannot be validated by mere words,

it must be supported by the facts. Let us see what power in creation impels the masses toward righteous aims and deeds!¹⁷

Conscience is acquired through education since early childhood. Therefore it is important to give an early spiritual education to children, that is, to educate them to the love of God and to submission to His will as expressed by the Manifestations of God as soon as possible. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

It is extremely difficult to teach the individual and refine his character once puberty is passed. By then, as experience hath shown, even if every effort be exerted to modify some tendency of his, it all availeth nothing. He may, perhaps, improve somewhat today; but let a few days pass and he forgetteth, and turneth backward to his habitual condition and accustomed ways. Therefore it is in early childhood that a firm foundation must be laid. While the branch is green and tender it can easily be made straight.¹⁸

Also fear of God and the sense of shame, which are very important for an internal discipline of human behavior, are a consequence of education. Bahá’u’lláh writes:

The fear of God hath ever been a sure defence and a safe stronghold for all the peoples of the world. It is the chief cause of the protection of mankind, and the supreme instrument for its preservation. Indeed, there existeth in man a faculty which deterreth him from, and guardeth him against, whatever is unworthy and unseemly, and which is known as his sense of shame. This, however, is confined to but a few; all have not possessed, and do not possess, it. It is incumbent upon the kings and the spiritual leaders of the world to lay fast hold on religion, inasmuch as through it the fear of God is instilled in all else but Him.¹⁹

And moreover:

That which is of paramount importance for the children, that which must precede all else, is to teach them the oneness of God and the laws of God. For lacking this, the fear of God cannot be inculcated, and lacking the fear of God an infinity of odious and abominable actions will spring up, and sentiments will be uttered that transgress all bounds...

The parents must exert every effort to rear their offspring to be religious, for should the children not attain this greatest of adornments, they will not obey their parents, which in a certain sense means that they will not obey God. Indeed, such children will show no consideration to anyone, and will do exactly as they please.²⁰

Since ontogenesis summarizes phylogenesis,²¹ the above mentioned concepts imply that humanity has acquired its conscience through its collective education by the Manifestations of God. This collective conscience is handed as a precious legacy from generation to generation through education. But at the same time, since humankind steadily grows, its collective conscience must be constantly renewed and widened. The progress of human conscience depends on the balance between the preservation of universal principles handed down by previous generations and the change in secondary teachings which need to be abandoned. Progressive revelation absolves this important function.

A vision of the world

Each Manifestation of God teaches a comprehensive and sound vision of the nature of the world, human beings and society. The system of beliefs arising from that vision gives a meaning and purpose to life. The believers are unified by their faith in that vision, by their adhesion to that system. They speak a common language. Their assumptions are similar and therefore their communication is easy and prompt. That vision and those beliefs are a very powerful collective center. Moreover, since the mission of the Manifestation

of God is to create harmony, peace and unity, whosoever lives in the light of that vision and those beliefs lives in harmony and peace. Under such circumstances the social milieu is quite favorable to the intellectual and moral development of individuals. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

The divine religions are collective centers in which diverse standpoints may meet, agree and unify. They accomplish oneness of native lands, races and policies. For instance, Christ united various nations, brought peace to warring peoples and established the oneness of humankind. The conquering Greeks and Romans, the prejudiced Egyptians and Assyrians were all in a condition of strife, enmity and war, but Christ gathered these varied peoples together and removed the foundations of discord—not through racial, patriotic or political power, but through divine power, the power of the Holy Spirit. This was not otherwise possible. All other efforts of men and nations remain as mere mention in history, without accomplishment.²²

The study of a religion during its growth and consummation discloses the uplifting sight of a flourishing, prosperous and strong civilization. But the study of a religion in its decline is a saddening experience. The Bible says: ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish.’²³ In fact when a society loses trust in its system of beliefs and values, in the words of Douglas Martin, a distinguished Bahá’í personage, ‘the members of those societies cease to make the required sacrifices to maintain essential social relationships. When this happens a society loses the cohesive power that sustains it, and disintegration sets in.’²⁴ This phenomenon is typical of the historical ages preceding and immediately following the advent of a Manifestation of God, which in the Bahá’í literature are compared to the winter season.²⁵

Bausani examines the reasons why, in his opinion, human beings have repeatedly come to refuse such visions in the course of the centuries. He writes:

In my opinion one of the most evident reasons... is that, as we go back in time, religious conceptions propounded to men are more and more mythical and primitive and man is not wrong in refusing them one after the other, while searching for an absolute, worth to be given such a name.²⁶

In other words, since revealed truth is relative, the civilizing thrust brought by a religion together with its suggested vision, leads humankind to progress in the course of time and, because of this progress, to go beyond its propounded vision towards a broader perspective. Therefore religions are periodically renewed through the advent of a new Manifestation of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

the religion of God is one, and it is the educator of humankind, but still, it needs must be made new. When thou dost plant a tree, its height increaseth day by day. It putteth forth blossoms and leaves and luscious fruits. But after a long time, it doth grow old, yielding no fruitage any more. Then doth the Husbandman of Truth take up the seed from that same tree, and plant it in a pure soil; and lo, there standeth the first tree, even as it was before.²⁷

Outer aspects

Since religion is the outer expression of divine reality, its relations with the material world are of vital importance. If religion has to become effective in the world, it must manifest itself in outer forms that may reflect its inner reality.

Prayer and meditation

Prayer in its essence is an inner attitude, whereby a person momentarily withdraws his/her attention from earthly things and turns it towards God, as in a conversation, to voice his/her wishes in the hope and expectation that He will grant them, and also to express his/her feelings of love, allegiance and gratitude. As the faithful advances in his/her spiritual growth, his/her prayer rises

from an invocation for satisfaction of a material need, to the expression of feelings of contrition for a past transgression, to a supplication for aid so that a spiritual gift may be granted, to the voicing of feelings of personal helplessness, to an anthem of praise and thanksgiving to God for His generous bounties, to the contemplation of His manifest Beauty in the world of creation and in his/her innermost being. Therefore the perfect contents of a prayer cannot be other than a yearning for a further approach unto God in one's radiant acquiescence to His will. Any other thought is the expression of a lesser degree of spiritual maturity.

Prayer is usually performed through the most typical among the human means of communication, that is, word. However, on the one hand, there are 'silent' prayers, that are not directly voiced through spoken words, but expressed only through 'prayerful' thoughts. On the other hand, ritual prayer sometimes implies the performance of gestures that have symbolic meanings. For example prostration in Muslim prayer (*salat*) may be considered a symbol of submission to God. It is evident, therefore, that the words of a prayer are but means, instruments, and not essence. In reality, prayer rises 'above words and letters' and transcends 'the murmur of syllables and sounds,'²⁸ up to the level of a pure condition of self-effacement and communion with God. Sometimes this condition is also called contemplation. Here the most important function of prayer is realized, that is, contributing to create that 'mystic feeling which unites man with God,' 'that state of spiritual communion' that is 'the core of religious faith.'²⁹

Beside individual prayer there is also collective prayer, which represents in all religions an occasion of unity for the community of the faithful. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that when all 'gather together, and, harmoniously attuned one to another, engage in prayer,' the result is 'that out of this coming together, unity and affection shall grow and flourish in the human heart.'³⁰

Prayer is part of all religions and its meaning is always more or less the same. As for its forms, they are quite different. But these differences are part of externalism. Far from taking them as a reason

of conflict, they should be viewed as part of the cultural wealth of humankind. If they go beyond the limits of the laws and fundamental concepts of all religions, they do not fall within the concept of religion, but are one of its spurious expressions. They are spurious also when greater importance is attached to rituals than to inner feelings.

Closely related to prayer, specially in its aspects of contemplation, meditation is paradoxically a passive activity. It consists in withdrawing, by an act of will, one's attention from physical and intellectual things, and trying to get in touch with the worlds of one's inner nature and of the Spirit. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said:

The meditative faculty is akin to the mirror; if you put it before earthly objects it will reflect them. Therefore if the spirit of man is contemplating earthly subjects he will be informed of these.

But if you turn the mirror of your spirits heavenwards, the heavenly constellations and the rays of the Sun of Reality will be reflected in your hearts, and the virtues of the Kingdom will be obtained.³¹

Meditation can be used in every field, not only in the realm of religious truth, but also in the spheres of arts and sciences. It is like a mirror that reflects the objects put before it. In the realm of religion, meditation is intended as a meditation on religious truth, on the words of the Scriptures, on the spiritual meanings of reality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggests the following subjects for meditation: 'the problem of the reality of the spirit of man; of the birth of the spirit; of its birth from this world into the world of God; the question of the inner life of the spirit and of its fate after its ascension from the body... the essential nature of the Divinity, of the Divine revelation, of the manifestation of the Deity in this world.'³²

Meditation seems to be relatively more widespread among the followers of the mystic, than among those of the prophetic religions, to which however it is far from being extraneous.

In the twentieth century that has mostly followed the ways of secularism, critical studies on prayer have been neglected. The meaning of prayer may be more easily understood if its primary function is considered. That function is not asking for a material or spiritual wish to be granted, but contributing to create that ‘mystic feeling which unites man with God,’ that ‘state of spiritual communion,’ that is ‘the core of religious faith.’³³ Therefore, the irrational aspects of prayer, the expectation that it may operate pseudo-spiritual or material miracles is of wholly secondary importance. We should only explain how prayer can fulfil its purpose of nourishing the faith in the heart of the believer. To get an idea, we may refer to the dynamics of inner growth and to its moving power, that is, obedience to the divine laws. As the believers accept the discipline of the divine laws for the sake of the love of God, they discover in themselves the spiritual qualities with which they have been endowed. They discover them through their deeds. For example, whereas they thought themselves to be fearful, the power of faith helped them to perform a courageous action, and thus to find in themselves a spiritual quality, courage, which they thought they did not have. Likewise, in the concentration and detachment from physical things required for prayer, the believers acquire capacities of detachment from physical reality and refine their sensitivity to the spiritual dimensions. In other words, prayer helps the development of an instrument which all human beings have at their disposal, but which they usually do not use. This instrument has been called insight, inner or spiritual perception, active imagination (Henri Corbin) or, in metaphorical terms, inner eye, inner mind. In the Bahá’í literature it is described as the capacity of knowing reality ‘without instruments and organs.’³⁴ This inner perception is quite helpful to understand those spiritual issues which are the primal objects of religious meditation. It is the instrument of a knowledge which mystics qualify as experiential—one of the highest peaks of religious experience—and which nourishes faith, as a mystic feeling of communion with God. The power of inner perception enables great artists to create their best works, or some

scientists to make their discoveries. Three well-known examples of scientific discoveries which were the result of insightful experiences are the formulation of the law of harmonic motion by Galileo Galilei, the famous Italian scientist, while observing a swinging chandelier in the Cathedral of Pisa, the formulation of the law of universal gravitation by Isaac Newton looking at a falling apple, the formulation of the theory of relativity by Albert Einstein after a dream.

Serious studies on this topic are very few, and therefore for the time being no conclusion can be drawn in the light of rationality. However what we know about it does not allow us to ignore its existence. It is now up to scholars to shed the light of reason on this subject which has been up to now confined to occult sciences.

Service

Another fundamental aspect of the outer expression of religion is service, that is, placing oneself at the service of religious institutions, in order to promote their purposes in the world. In the past, service was chosen as a way of life by people who renounced any other activity, that is, clergy. Undoubtedly the function of clergy has been very important for human growth. The importance of clergy cannot be judged only in the light of the repeated and prolonged abuse of its function by a number of its unworthy representatives, who made it an instrument of personal glorification, power, oppression. Although Bahá'u'lláh excludes the presence of a clergy in the context of his religion, he writes about Muslim priests: 'Those divines... who are truly adorned with the ornament of knowledge and of a goodly character are, verily, as a head to the body of the world, and as eyes to the nations.'³⁵ Clergy should be viewed in the light of its historical function.

The possibilities and requirements of equality between human beings and of collective participation, typical of the contemporary world, seem to point out the opportunity of a service intended as accessible to everyone, without any need for it to be institutionally ascribed to any specific social category. The recent great

development of voluntary work in all parts of the world seems to demonstrate that this development is possible and desirable in all the world and thus among all religions.

Institutions

The spirit infused by the Manifestations of God into the world cannot permeate humankind for which it is intended and exercise an enduring influence upon it, until it incarnates itself in a visible 'order,' with its institutions, identifying itself with the principles of that order and operating in conformity with its laws.³⁶ Viewed in this perspective, religious institutions are in themselves effective instruments of civilization and progress, when their representatives abide by the spiritual laws of the Scriptures. But whenever those representatives miss the 'kernel' of religion and attach themselves to its 'shell,' religious institutions turn into instruments against truth. The story of the Manifestations of God demonstrates that they were invariably persecuted by the clergy of the previous religion, the jealous custodians of an establishment that the new revelation could not but derange. Abraham was exiled from Ur because he broke the ancient idols of his town. Zoroaster was stabbed in his back by a priest of the old religion. Jesus was crucified at the request of the great priests Annas and Caiaphas. The Báb was shot at the instigation of the Shí'í clergy. And eminent Muslim priests were among the fiercest opponents of Bahá'u'lláh and relentless persecutors of his followers.

Also the history of religious institutions should be studied in the light of the concepts we have previously mentioned. They have a specific function depending on the time and place of the religion they belong to. Therefore they pertain to history, and as such are not absolute, but relative realities, and thus subject to constant changes. Moreover, their validity strictly depends on the authority of the Manifestation of God. It is likely that past religious institutions were opposed by some of the followers of their own religion because their scriptural foundations were not sufficiently strong and many of their developments had been the fruits of human

contributions. Moreover human contributions have often implied an undeniable estrangement of those institutions from the spiritual teachings of their own Prophet-Founder, with all the unavoidable consequences.

For example, some thought that the inspiring, but vague words that Jesus addressed to Peter: 'And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,'³⁷ conferred to Peter the right to be considered as the Vicar of Christ, yet they were not enough to justify the complex institutional structure elaborated by Peter's successors. In fact the Popes met great difficulties in affirming their authority, and for this reason a number of confessions arose within Christianity.³⁸ The Koran is more specific in the administration of the Cause of God, but does not give precise written provisions as to the succession to the Prophet. And for this reason also Islam was very soon torn by grievous inner divisions. In the Far East similar vicissitudes occurred within Buddhism. According to certain sources, Devadatta Gaudhiputra, a cousin of the Buddha, repeatedly tried to kill the Buddha so that he may succeed him as the leader of his community. And when the Buddha passed away, his leadership did not pass to Ananda, seemingly described in the Buddhist Scriptures as his favorite disciple, but to the rigorous Mahakassapa.³⁹

The blame put on religion is in reality almost always put on those institutions, when they trespass the bounds of the original teachings of their respective religions or become corrupted. Jesus himself, who was always so meek, uttered very harsh words against the Scribes and Pharisees of his time.⁴⁰

The reasons for the vagueness of the past Manifestations in issues of such vital importance as religious institutions or successorship, are not set forth in the Scriptures. If we assume that revelation is a work of God and that human beings cannot understand all divine purposes, the explanation of those reasons seems destined to remain a hypothesis. Undoubtedly it cannot be ascribed to an alleged imperfection of the Manifestations. Perhaps

it depended on the characteristics of those ancient times, when many things remained quite indefinite.

Religion and science

The conflict between religion and science, faith and reason has inflicted great harm upon the cause of both religion and science, and upon the cause of all humanity.

Some of the reasons of this conflict have already been briefly examined. It is not so much a conflict between science and religion, but between science and religious tradition. In reality there cannot be any conflict between science and religion, as by definition both of them describe reality. Religion describes spiritual reality, science describes material reality. Both of them are reality, albeit of different degrees. Since material and spiritual reality are parts of the same world of being, they cannot be in conflict with one another.

The most evident reasons why a tradition in conflict with science was formed over the centuries, may be due to the mistakes in the interpretation of the Scriptures. As already remarked,⁴¹ but it seems worth repeating it here, Scriptures are written in a language that can be easily misunderstood.

First of all Scriptures convey spiritual verities transcending the physical world and human experience. Those verities cannot be expressed as though they were mere philosophical concepts, or else they would be grievously curtailed in their infinite meanings. That is why the language of Scriptures is a language of parables and metaphors. Figurative language has greater possibilities of expression, but it can be misunderstood.

A further limitation concerns history. The Manifestation of God uses the language of the people he directly addresses. Hence the difficulty in understanding Scriptures written in such remote ages.

Another limitation relating to history is the authenticity of Scriptures. A number of Scriptures have been recorded in ages so remote from the times of the Manifestation of God to whom they are ascribed, as to give rise to serious doubts about their accuracy in conveying the original thought of their Source.

Moreover, it seems that the Manifestations of God preceding Islam did not leave precise and clear provisions concerning the right to succession in the spiritual authority and to the interpretation of their words.

Finally, although Scriptures are the vehicles of divine verities, however they cannot be identified with Truth Itself, that is God. They are His emanation, according to the capacities of the creatures to whom they are addressed. On the contrary, those words are mostly given a universal and absolute value which they cannot have. If they are adapted to the capacities of the creatures for whom they are intended, words addressed to different people, living in different ages are different from one another.

And thus Scriptures should be read anew with wide open eyes and minds disencumbered from the influence of the past. The necessity of grasping the meanings of the figurative language should be kept in mind, in the assurance that those words cannot convey ideas, which reason, 'the most precious gift bestowed upon man' by God, cannot understand.⁴² Otherwise they would be misleading and therefore useless.

Moreover, however absurd it may seem to the detractors of religion, the development of monotheistic religions promoted scientific development. Bausani remarks:

Since monotheism concentrated all the sacred outside the world, it desacralized and demythologized visible realities, and made them accessible to experimental studies, perhaps for the first time in human history. How could botany or zoology develop, when animals and plants were considered as sacred or, in general, how could natural sciences develop when nature was recognized as sacred in itself ? With the advent of monotheism nature is not sacred, but at best created by a sacred one, who is outside nature and only one.

The persecutions against science which occurred in the three monotheisms, once they were theologized and

repaganized,...are typical of re-paganized... philosophized monotheisms.⁴³

These monotheisms have worked out catechisms of 'orthodox dogmatic propositions,' to be accepted in order to be saved. Modern culture, with its conflict between religion and science, was born as a rebellion against the reactionary aspects of these theologies, which nonetheless are the fruits of human minds and not of the original teachings of the Manifestations of God.

In reality religion encourages science, inasmuch as it teaches and promotes virtues which are precious for persons of science, such as honesty, courage, humility, constancy, love for the world of creation and knowledge. Religion enlightens science. Inasmuch as it suggests a definite standard of values, religion shows also the directions to be followed in the use of science, so that technology may not turn into a factor of destruction, but may foster progress and well-being for all humankind.

There is a further aspect of the relation between religion and science. Having demonstrated that religion cannot be regarded as 'the product of human striving after the truth, as the outcome of certain climates of thought and conditions of society,'⁴⁴ but is the fruit of the divine revelation, of the creative Word of God, it is evident that Scriptures are a priceless source of knowledge even for persons of science who aim at investigating more and more deeply the mysteries of the universe. How can the believers, while engaged in a scientific study, whatever it may be, ignore the revealed verities? How can they fail to look for a correspondence between revealed verities and a truth acquired through their scientific investigation? We rather wonder how free and exhaustive may be the investigation of those people who choose to exclude the data of revelation, in their belief that all reality is restricted within the limits of its material aspects. Is not their position a kind of dogmatism, precisely a materialistic dogmatism?

The solution to this dilemma seems to be intellectual honesty and purity of intention, for both scientists and believers. In this

attitude, the two aspects of an individual can meet with no conflict, no contradiction, no fetters of dogmatism, on the one hand, and, on the other, of restricted visions proposed by other human minds, that can be certainly challenged, because they are so different from the infallible divine universal mind of the Manifestations of God.

Religion and politics

Religion has been accused of being, in the hands of the clergy and the establishment, an instrument of power and oppression over the people. This accusation implied the spread of a further concept, that is, that religion should not deal with politics. This assumption, in Christianity, seems strengthened by the well known Evangelic statement: 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.'⁴⁵ And history seems to confirm it. Religions have always been identified with the institutions associated with them. And those institutions usually wielded political power, exercising it often in oppressive and tyrannical ways. Therefore it has been said: Let them not deal with politics!

And yet religion, as has been previously defined, is also a form of policy, a divine policy. The Manifestation of God, with his mission of guiding human beings towards good, is in reality the founder of a universal policy, comprising all the vital forms of human relations. In reality, all the Manifestations of God have taught virtues required for human aggregation in groups. Love, justice, trustworthiness, the respect of authority, detachment while acting, are all virtues of primary importance in the social and political spheres. Moreover, the Manifestations of God progressively taught human beings to aggregate in widening groups: family, clan, city-state, nation, humanity. Thus they gave an orientation to the efforts of politicians, who more or less consciously worked for those aggregations to be concretely realized.

As a matter of fact religion deals with politics, and thus its institutions cannot dispense with this important function. They should encourage all human beings, and specially those in power,

to abide by the fundamental teaching of all the religions of the world, that is, the law of love, of unity and fellowship. Also this misunderstanding arose because of tradition and of institutions that grew under the banner of religion. Those institutions strictly adhered to the outer aspects of tradition, and forgot the more important teachings about ethics and spirituality. But in this age with its urgent need for globalization, all the religions of the world can make a vital contribution to the solution of the enormous problems that afflict humankind. On the one hand, they can assist in the education of human beings so that they may live their world citizenship in its deepest spiritual meaning. On the other, they can encourage all those who are in power to abandon the ancient 'reason of State' political criterion and to conform their conduct to the same ethical standards to which each citizen of the world is expected to adhere. Therefore it is vital that the universality of the ethical standards inculcated by all religions may be clarified, explained and understood, so that the rampant relativistic concept of morality may soon become obsolete.

Judgments on Religion

Unfavorable judgments

Some philosophers have expressed a number of unfavorable judgments on religion, especially after the age of the Enlightenment. They said that religion arises from human beings themselves and came to the point of denying that it can effectively contribute to the development of humankind. They often stated that it leads human beings to believe in myths contrary to truth, induces them to resign to poverty, deflects their endeavors towards the defense of dogmatism, intolerance and fanaticism. Those unfavorable judgments on religion have been defined as ‘reductive,’ inasmuch as they imply that religion is ‘a body of elements that ultimately are not religious,’¹ ‘an epiphenomenon, which temporally stands for the really real: society and its needs to affirm itself, the psyche and its demands, economy and its control.’² Alessi distinguishes five kinds of reductionism: anthropological, psychological, sociological, moral and rationalistic.

Anthropological reductionism

The upholders of anthropological reductionism state that religion originates from humankind and in humankind, and deny it to be a transcendent reality. In the ancient world this thesis is upheld by Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570-470 B.C.), who considers the gods products of the minds of human beings, who imagine them as similar to themselves;³ by Critias, the Sophist (c. 461-403 B.C.), according to whom ‘the ancient legislators feigned the divinity as a kind of inspector of human deeds, so that no one might injure or betray his fellow man, for fear of the vengeance of the gods;’⁴ by the Cyrenaic Euhemerus (c. 340-260 B.C.), who asserts the various divinities to

be the outcome of a sublimation of the heroes; by the Latin poet and philosopher Titus Lucretius Caro (98-55 B.C.), according to whom religion is the outcome of human awe for impressive and awesome natural events. This position was renewed by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who revived the words of the Roman poet Publius Papinius Statius (45-96 C.E.) who said: 'Fear as first created gods in the world,'⁵ and by David Hume (1711-1776), who states that religious ideas arise from the constant hopes and fears affecting human beings regarding their future as well as from their natural curiosity in front of the unknown world. The highest expression of anthropological reductionism is Ludwig Feuerbach's (1804-1872) atheistic humanism, whereby 'religion is the consciousness of the infinite; hence it is, and cannot be anything other than, man's consciousness of his own essential nature, understood not as a finite or limited, but as an infinite nature.'⁶

In the trend of anthropological reductionism, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) writes that religion with all its prohibitions, far from assisting human beings in expressing their potentialities, hinders them and leads them to Nihilism. He recommends abandoning religious ethics, because it is the ethics of slaves and the origin of guilty feelings, and to adopt the so-called ethics of the masters, which consists in an irresistible will of living.

Psychological reductionism

The upholders of psychological reductionism justify religion on the ground of psychic phenomena. Among them, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) says that there is a close connection between the repression of the instincts and Oedipus complex, on the one hand, and the origin of religion, on the other, and states that religion is a compensation of repressions and an obsessional neurosis. Karl Jung (1875-1961) thinks that the ideas of religion and of God are inscribed in the human soul and that historical religions are 'symbolisms raised to the status of systems, formally drained of their original psychic charge... a necessary stage in human history that yet should be surpassed.'⁷

Sociological reductionism

The defenders of sociological reductionism explain religion from a mere social point of view. This position is upheld by Emil Durkheim, (1859-1917), a French sociologist, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939), a French philosopher, and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942), a famous anthropologist, the North American sociologists Victor L. Berger (1860-1929), one of the founders of the U.S. socialist party, and Robert N. Bellah (b. 1927), and particularly by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and all the exponents of the Marxist school, as Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), Nikolaj Lenin (1870-1924), Stanislaw Ossowski (1897-1963), a Polish philosopher, and Dmitrii Modestovich Ugrinovich, a Russian social theorist. Durkheim said that religion is ‘the myth which society makes of itself.’⁸ The Marxist school viewed religion as an ‘opium of people,’ an alienating and mystifying superstructure, to be determinedly fought. In fact the Stalinist edition of the *Soviet Encyclopedia* defines religion as ‘a deformed, fanciful reflection of the natural forces to which men are subjected, in human consciousness’ and also ‘a belief in the existence of supernatural forces (gods, spirits, souls and so on)... [that] is antiscientific by definition.’⁹

Moral or ethic reductionism

Moral or ethic reductionism interprets religion as an expression of human moral activity. This conception has its greatest exponent in Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and is upheld also by Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), Wilhelm Windelband (1848-1915), Paul Natorp (1854-1924), Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923), German Neo-Kantian philosophers, as well as by John Dewey (1859-1952), the American philosopher. According to Kant, religion in its essence is a form of morals. He distinguishes between revealed and natural, or rational, religion, and parallels the former to heteronomous morals, that is, the morals determined by the influence of external agencies, and the latter to autonomous morals, that is, the morals determined

only by the light of reason. Therefore he subordinates the morals of revealed religion to those of philosophy. Moreover, according to Kant, there is no possible relation between God and human beings; therefore there is no revelation. His opinion on historical religions is thus unfavorable. Kant writes:

Friends of mankind and of all that is most sacred for it, accept that which seems to you as worthy of faith after a careful and sincere examination, be they facts or rational principles; but do not deny to reason that which makes of it the highest good on earth: the privilege of being the ultimate touchstone of truth.¹⁰

Also the Neo-Kantians share this opinion of philosophy's supremacy over religion. They think that the highest form of religion prescind from God and refers to human beings.

Rationalistic reductionism

The defenders of rationalistic reductionism intend to interpret religion on the ground of purely rational categories. In the ancient world, this position characterizes Neo-Platonism and the Gnostic sects, in their pretending that salvation may be attained through knowledge (gnosis). Later on, a number of German mystics, like Meister Eckhart (1260-1327), and Italian philosophers like Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), seemingly identify religion and philosophical knowledge. The Enlightenment introduces, with John Locke (1632-1704) and Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), the concept of natural religion, that is, the idea that religion is born from needs of human thought, and with Voltaire (1694-1778), deism, that is, the idea that God does not intervene in the world and thus there is no revelation. Idealism represented by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944) and Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), views historical religions as a necessary and positive stage in the process of the development of human self-consciousness; and yet foretells that religion will be outdated by philosophy. Epigones of rationalistic

reductionism are Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951).

Limitations of reductionism

It is not our intention to confute each of the arguments advanced by those philosophers. Only a few general remarks will be expressed. In the first place, those philosophers did not examine the original messages of religions, but mainly religious traditions. And when they explored inner religious experiences, they did not consider the differences of those experiences in the light of the levels of spiritual and intellectual maturity of the examined subjects. Therefore each of their arguments may be valid in relation to its own examined subjects, but it may not be valid, if the original message of a religion or a spiritually mature believer are examined. In the second place, those arguments have been mostly formulated by thinkers who had already made their atheistic, materialistic or rationalistic choice, or, as Tracy writes, who were 'hiding... some secret presuppositions,' that is, 'the belief that... [they had] finally discovered the one argument, the one method, the one critical theory that explains all.'¹¹ When we study them from this point of view, they turn out to be as apologetic and biased as some defenses of institutional religions set forth by thinkers who had chosen the path of one among the various religious traditions.

Now the ideological climate seems to have changed in the West. Western civilization went through a long stage of hegemony of different systems of thought which denied the value of religion. But today there is a general mistrust in those ideals that represented the foundation of the social systems of the world in the twentieth century and that seem now obsolete. As Martin wrote in 1992:

The loss of faith in the great world views on which the social systems of our world are founded is not confined to one part of that world; it is universal. Whether those systems of thought are pseudo-scientific like Marxism, or purely pragmatic like capitalism, or humanistic like Liberal

Democracy, or quite pathological like Nazism and Fascism, they have lost their hold on the minds of those who once worshipped at their altars.¹²

In this climate of disillusion, and at the same time of a certain detachment from the old religious traditions, perhaps it is easier to consider religion in a new light: on the one hand, using reason to study religions in their spiritual messages, divested of all those human superstructures, which are indeed alienating and mystifying; on the other, getting rid of any prejudice, be it materialistic, atheistic, positivistic, rationalistic, or humanistic. Does God exist? This is the first question that should be answered. Everything else follows as a result.

Justifications

Religion is the instrument whereby God educates humankind. Education, whose purpose is *educere*, to bring forth human potentialities, aims at realizing a transformation in human beings. Therefore religions should transform human beings as individuals and humankind as a whole, assist them in expressing their potentialities. This concept is explained by Bahá'u'lláh with the following words:

And yet, is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent.¹³

Religion is justified, if it is capable of absolving its task, if it is capable of improving individuals, of improving society. A religion that is the cause of the brutalization of individuals, that hinders society in its aspirations and possibilities of progress towards peace,

harmony and unity does not accomplish its task. It is not justified. It is not a religion.

Individual transformation

Individual transformation is a result produced by the power of faith in the Manifestation of God. Individuals, inspired by this power that transcends their weak possibilities, are assisted in developing the spiritual qualities of their souls and in mastering the animal qualities of their egos. This transformation, as gradual as it may be, is radical, and affects their thoughts, feelings, words and deeds. It implies a constant individual, intellectual and spiritual growth. This is the power of religion, which both personal experience and history confirm. Hick writes in this regard: 'the great religious traditions are to be regarded as alternative soteriological "spaces" within which, or "ways" along which, men and women can find salvation/ liberation/ enlightenment/ fulfillment.'¹⁴

Collective transformation

The religious community that arises about a Manifestation of God is the first nucleus of a future community. Martin defines it as 'the spearhead of the evolution of the consciences.' Its members can be compared to a leaven, that will transform the lump into bread. That community can also be compared to the earliest expression of an evolutionary stage of life on earth. However feeble and insignificant it could appear, it 'was the future and everything else had meaning because of it. It was where evolution was going; the trees and mountains, however beautiful and imposing, represented where evolution had come from.'¹⁵ The same concept is explained by Erwin Laszlo, the foremost exponent of systems philosophy and general evolution theory, in the context of his systemic theory of evolution:

In the language of the new sciences of evolution, they [the earliest followers of a Prophet-Founder] can be the small,

initially peripheral fluctuation which can be suddenly amplified in a complex dynamical system when that system becomes critically unstable, and which, amplified and spreading, can determine the course of the coming bifurcation. Acting with sound knowledge, sound faith and firm determination, men and women of good will can load the dice of social change, bias the statistics of evolutionary transformation, and achieve a humanistic end that is consistent with the great patterns and modalities of evolution that hold good on Earth as in the vast reaches of the cosmos.¹⁶

Also this capacity of creating civilization is demonstrated through history. Bausani writes:

The miraculous development of the 'holy people,' Israel, is still under the name of the great exile, Abraham. The enslavement and degradation of Egypt were changed into freedom and victory; and in the spiritual world this victory and this freedom have a symbolic name, Moses, an obscure shepherd. No need to mention the great impulse given by Christianity to Western civilization. And yet the name of Jesus was an object of ridicule and scandal. And above other horizons the spiritual suns of Muhammad in Arabia, Zoroaster in ancient Iran, the Buddha and others, were sources of education and liberation for their peoples.¹⁷

Therefore all historical religions are authentic and we cannot accept the opinion of Brezzi, who says that 'it is better consider them all as authentic but as evolving towards the one true religion [Christian religion], and as realizing, in different degrees, the unique essence of religion.'¹⁸ These words, written in 1968, are still up-to-date and emblematic of the attitude of many 'orthodox' exponents of most religious denominations, who are still unable to accept the historicism of revelation, which seems on the contrary quite important for a deeper understanding of the oneness of all the religions of the world.

A final objection

A final objection often raised against the exponents of religion, is that there is a large gap between their deeds and their words. In fact it is undeniable that the spiritual teachings of religions recommend love, unity and fellowship. It is also undeniable that such qualities are quite rare in the world, even among the exponents of religions. Under this consideration is based another commonplace, but fundamental, discussion, that is, the nature of human beings, the incurableness of the ills afflicting them, which are viewed as intrinsic to human nature.

All religions teach that human beings are characterized by a dual nature: a material, animalistic nature, which is the root of selfishness, and a divine, angelic nature, which is the source of any human need for improvement. The purpose of our life is to subdue our material nature to our spiritual nature, so that the selfish aspirations of the former, which are very similar to the aspirations of the animal world, may be subordinated to the needs of improvement of the latter and we may learn to express, through the instrumentality of our bodies and in the form of thoughts, feelings, words and deeds, the divine qualities that God has enshrined in our souls. Therefore human life is a constant struggle between our divine nature and our material nature. And yet in this struggle, our material nature will never be completely overcome. Spiritual perfection is impossible, it is but a goal towards which we should struggle. Religions, with their prescribed codes of behavior, show the way towards this unattainable spiritual perfection. In fact all religions prescribe a moral code, whose enforcement implies, on the one hand, the control of the qualities of our material nature, such as hate, greed, hypocrisy, falsehood, deceit, etc. and on the other, the development of the qualities of our divine nature, such as love, generosity, sincerity, truthfulness, loyalty, as well as any other human virtue. Here we can seemingly find a plausible answer: perfection is a goal towards which we strive, in the full awareness that we will never achieve it.

The entire human history should be studied anew in the light of these observations and of the discoveries of modern science. Human life is very ancient, millions of years old. From the primal *Australopithecus*, whose traces were discovered in 1974 in the Omo valley, to modern humanity, who could say that there was no evolution, that there was no improvement? Perhaps today someone holds this opinion just because humankind is so changed, such are the goals of intellectual and moral perfection within the reach of modern humanity that—in comparison—the present situation seems very similar to the situation of those primordial days. These great changes are a result of the education of humanity and undoubtedly religions gave a fundamental contribution to that education, specially in its moral and spiritual aspects.

Among the many lessons taught by the twentieth century is the lesson of the children-wolves, human creatures abandoned in the Indian forests by their parents, deprived of any resource whereby they could provide them, and so to say adopted by animals. Precociously deprived of the benefits of human education, they are a little more than animals and unfortunately destined to remain as such for the rest of their lives, even if they are later exposed to human education. Perhaps if Rousseau had met them, he would not have had such a great faith in natural religion and he would have understood that human intellect, which he cherished so much, is a *tabula rasa* upon which beautiful drawings may be more easily drawn under the enlightening guidance of the Prophets-Founders of revealed religions.

A last consideration. Some uphold that, since today the ills of the world are so many, religions have failed. For example, Hick writes:

Whether... [the religious traditions] are more or less equally valid human responses to the Real cannot be answered *a priori* but only on the basis of observing their fruits. In my opinion the true answer is that, so far as we can tell, the great traditions exhibit a rough salvific parity.

They seem to be more or less equally productive of the outstanding individuals whom we call saints, more or less equally effective in providing a framework of meaning within which spiritual growth can take place, and also more or less unsuccessful in transforming societies on any large scale—for it is, alas, so much easier for evil than for good to be institutionalized.¹⁹

A possible answer to these observations is that each religion has its own mission, and thus it should be judged in the light of that mission. In view of the characteristics of those remote ages, no past religion seems to have had the mission of bringing peace and unity to the whole of humankind. This goal in those ancient religions is, if anything, part of an escatological vision, that is, it is intended for a remote end of the times. However, in the course of the centuries, the organization of society has undeniably improved. And these improvements give us hope in further future improvements, within the limits of an unattainable perfection.

What future for religions

The anti-religious campaigns of formerly powerful governments having failed, the numbers of those who are willing to bet that religions will sooner or later totally disappear from the world are steadily decreasing. Many however still wonder which will be their future. Among the followers of the various religious traditions the idea is still deep-rooted that one day their own religion will be universally recognized as it is in their eyes, the best of all. This idea is understandable. However, it gives the impression that the various religions are all contending with one another for supremacy and that is an obstacle for their wholehearted cooperation and complete rehabilitation. Therefore, among the many major topics demanding a prominent place on our agenda for improving the relations among religions is the following: is it possible to discover in the various Scriptures a vision of the future that implies a peaceful harmonious coexistence of all religions?

A detailed study of the escatological teachings of the various Scriptures is beyond the scope of this script. In general, they promise a 'last day' when the good will prevail in the world. And one of the most important characteristics of that remote 'last day' is the advent of unity and peace among human beings. Can our Scriptures, inspired by the same One God, the Father of all human beings, and therefore permeated by universal love, possibly foresee a future of unity and peace in the supremacy of one of the religious traditions upon all the others? Can they possibly augur and describe a stage in human civilization characterized by harmonious coexistence of religions that are identical in their essence and different only in their secondary teachings? Can the recent changes in the geographical distribution of, and relations among, the peoples of the world possibly represent an opportunity for us to build that future of unity and peace?

If that must be our commitment in the next decades, it seems that we will more easily attain our goal, if each of us endeavor to take out the essence of his/her religion—the eternal law of love—and to give to the differences among religions the weight they deserve, without making them a reason for confessional pride or contention; if each of us stop thinking that the one God in Whom we all believe, from Whom everything good comes, made a difference among the various parts of the world, and favored one of them and neglected others; if each of us will extend the common call of all the Scriptures, that we consider our neighbor as a brother or a sister, to all human beings in the world, beyond any theological difference. Our endeavors will have more chance of being successful, if each of us recognize that 'the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God' and that 'the difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed.'²⁰

Then it will be much easier to 'consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.'²¹ It will be

much easier to realize the auspice worded by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1913 when he said:

All must abandon prejudices and must even go into each other’s churches and mosques, for, in all of these worshipping places, the Name of God is mentioned. Since all gather to worship God, what difference is there? None of them worship Satan....

All of the leaders must, likewise, go to each other’s Churches and speak of the foundation and of the fundamental principles of the divine religions. In the utmost unity and harmony they must worship God, in the worshipping places of one another, and must abandon fanaticism.²²

It will be much easier to abandon

any intention to belittle any of the Prophets... to whittle down any of their teachings, to obscure, however slightly, the radiance of their Revelations, to oust them from the hearts of their followers, to abrogate the fundamentals of their doctrines, to discard any of their revealed Books, or to suppress the legitimate aspirations of their adherents.²³

Then all interreligious dialogues, be they in large assemblies created for interfaith discussion, such as the Interreligious Assembly convened in the Vatican City between October 24 and 29, 1999, ‘on the threshold of the third millenium,’ or among institutions, as those promoted by the Vatican and the World Council of Churches, or in the various communities, as the interreligious meetings organized by the Roman St. Egidio community or by the various Bahá’í communities spread all over the world, be they intended to realize social projects or to encourage the spiritual meeting of the believers of different denominations, will certainly produce such a condition of harmony and peace among human beings that each faithful will again be able to raise, in total freedom, his/her prayers to the one God of humankind in the same, precious accents that

she was taught by her parents in his/her early childhood.

Thus if a critical study of religion must grasp the essence of religion and judge religion in the light of its essence, we may conclude this brief introduction to such a complex issue saying that religions can be and will be a cause of unity and peace, and thus a great animating force of human history, provided they emerge from the dogmatic strongholds where they have remained secluded down the centuries and draw from such authentic spiritual vision, as they themselves teach, and such eternal spiritual and moral laws, as are common to all of them. Those laws remain the only chance of salvation for a humankind that with its autonomous morals has ended up in infinite problems seemingly without solution.

* * *

Glossary

Adharma (Sanskrit). ‘That which violates the universal Order, or the law (*Dharma*)’ (Pio Filippini-Ronconi, ‘Glossario dei termini sanscriti,’ in *Upanisad*, p.669).

Arahat (Pali, Sanskrit, *Arhat*). ‘In Buddhism, one who is worthy of reverence because he has attained the penultimate state of perfection’ (*The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. ‘Arhat,’ p.87).

Arjuna One of the warriors who took part in the wars described in the *Mahabhrata*. In the *Bhagavad-gita* Krishna, whose close friend he is, encourages him to fight his battle against his own relatives.

Avatara (Sanskrit, descent). ‘The earthly manifestations (or “incarnations”) of a Hindu deity.... [By about the 4th century. C.E.... an earthly manifestation of Vishnu due to his free choice... and taking the form of a full human life... for the sake of a specific cosmic purpose’ (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. ‘Avatara,’ p.113).

Bhagavata-purana. Sanskrit mythological text, pertaining to the category of *smriti*, written between the ninth and the tenth century C. E., whose central deity is Krishna/Vishnu.

Bhakti (Sanskrit). ‘Faith, as an inborn partaking (*bhaga*) of divine life; later, “love-surrender” to the divinity, chosen as the one object of adoration... and of inner identification’ (Filippini-Ronconi, ‘Glossario,’ in *Upanisad*, p.677).

Bharata ‘The tribe which took part in the war described in the *Mahabharata*’ (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. ‘Bharata,’ p.142).

Bhikkhu (Pali, Sanskrit, *bhiksu*). ‘Male/female members of the Buddhist sangha, usually translated as “monks”, “nuns”’ (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. ‘bhiksu/ bhiksunai,’ p.144).

Bodhisatta (Pali, Sanskrit, *bodhisattva*). In Mahayana Buddhism ‘any being who, out of compassion, has taken the bodhisattva vow to become a Buddha for the sake of all sentient beings’ (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v.

‘Bodhisattva,’ p.155).

Buddhacarita (Acts of the Buddha). ‘A biography of the Buddha in the style of Sanskrit epic poetry (*mahakavya*) written by Asvaghosa about the 2nd century. C. E. ... a literary and religious classic, the work of a talented and skilful poet who was also an adherent of the faith’ (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. ‘Buddhacarita,’ p.170).

Dharma (Sanskrit, Pali *dhmma*). ‘In Hinduism, dharma is a fundamental concept, referring to the order and custom which make life and a universe possible, and thus to the behaviours appropriate to the maintenance of that order. Hindus therefore refer to what Westerners call “Hinduism” as *sanatana dharma*, everlasting dharma.... In Buddhism (Pali, *dhmma*), the Hindu sense of cosmic law and order is retained, especially as it works out in karma and reappearances according to the law of karma. But it was rapidly applied also to the teaching of the Buddha... who is himself a manifestation of the truth that is dharma. Dharma is then understood as the practice... of that truth, and as its realization in stages... up to nirvana, of which in this way dharma becomes a synonym’ (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. ‘Dharma,’ p.275).

Dogma ‘Something held as an established opinion; especially, one or more authoritative tenets... a point of view or alleged authoritative tenet put forth as dogma without adequate grounds: an arrogant or vehement expression of opinion... a doctrine or body of doctrines of theology and religion formally stated and authoritatively proclaimed by a church’ (*Webster New International Dictionary*, s.v. ‘dogma,’ p.668).

Dvija (Sanskrit). Literally twice-born. An epithet of the three superior castes, inasmuch as their males are considered as having born twice through their initiation to the *Vedas*, which implies for them to learn by heart the whole of the *Veda* belonging to their family line.

Haoma (Sanskrit, *soma*). ‘The exhilarating elixir of the Indo-Iranic religion’ (du Breuil, *Lo zoroastrismo*, p.17).

Ikshvaku Son of Manu and the founder of the royal family of Rama as well of the Shakya stock, whose Kinsman the Buddha was.

Jataka ‘Jataka (“birth-story”). A story of the previous incarnations of the Buddha. Many of these stories exist, and it is thought that some may originally have been Indian, pre-Buddhist, fables and fairy tales. Some are found virtually unchanged in Aesop’s collection’ (*Oxford Dictionary of World*

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Religions, s.v. 'Jataka,' p.493). See also *Tipitaka*.

Karman (Sanskrit, Pali *kamma*). 'Karman, the law of consequence with regard to action, which is the driving force behind the cycle of reincarnation or rebirth... in Asian religions. According to karma theory, every action has a consequence which will come to fruition in either this or a future life; thus morally good acts will have positive consequences, whereas bad acts will produce negative results. An individual's present situation is thereby explained by reference to actions in his past history, in his present or in previous lifetimes' (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. 'Karma, kamma,' p.535).

Khandha (Pali, Sanskrit, *skandha*). 'In Buddhism, the five aggregations which compose or constitute human appearance' (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. 'Skandha,' p.907). They are material composition, sensing, perception, mental formations producing character and consciousness.

Mahayana (Sanskrit, Great Vehicle). The form of Buddhism prevailing in Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan. The other major form of Buddhism is *Theravada* (Pali, teaching of the elders), often referred to by *Mahayana* Buddhist as *Hinayana* (Sanskrit, Small Vehicle), prevailing in Sri Lanka and South East Asia. *Theravada* Buddhism is more ancient than *Mahayana* Buddhism, accepts as Scripture only the Pali Canon and claims to have preserved the words of the Buddha himself. *Mahayana* Buddhism accepts also other kinds of texts, and thus is accused by *Theravada* Buddhism of having lost the original teachings of the Buddha. Other major groups exist in Buddhism besides these two. And all these groups, in their turn, are subdivided in several schools.

Mandala (Sanskrit, circle). Each of the ten books or 'circles' into which the 1,028 (or 1,017) hymns of the *Rig Veda* are grouped.

Manu The Hindu Adam, son of the solar god *Vivasvan*, the progenitor of humanity and ruler of the earth, father of *Ikshvaku*.

Maya (Sanskrit). 'In the early Vedic literature, maya generally means supernatural power or magic. It also carries the connotation of deceit or trickery. In the *Bhagavad-gita*,... is the power to bring things into apparent form' (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. 'Maya,' p.629).

Metteya (Pali, Sanskrit, *Maitreya*). 'One of the five earthly buddhas, the embodiment of all-embracing love, who is expected to come in the future as the fifth and last of the buddhas' (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*,

s.v. 'Maitreya,' p.606).

Nibbana (Pali, Sanskrit, *nirvana*) 'In Hinduism nirvana is the extinguishing of worldly desires and attachments, so that the union with God or the Absolute is possible.... In Buddhism... [it] is the condition of absolute cessation of entanglement or attachment, in which there is, so to speak, that state of cessation, but no interaction or involvement' (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. 'Nirvana,' p.703).

Pali 'The language used in the canonical books of the Buddhists, composed in North India. This "Middle High Indian" was the literary form of the language spoken in Kosala, the country now called Uttar Pradesh (Oudh, etc.), which was the *lingua franca* of North India from the 6th or 5th to the 2nd century B.C.' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'Pali,' vol. 11, p.94).

Parable 'In a restricted sense a parable is a vivid illustration of a spiritual truth by means of a story couched in everyday terms and simple language' (Richard Henry Backwell, *The Christianity of Jesus*, p.68).

Sacraments 'The Sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions' (*Catechismo of the Catholic Church*, 1131).

Sakyamuni (Pali, Sanskrit, *Sakyamuni*). The wise of the Shakya, a title of the Buddha denoting that he stemmed from the tribe of the Shakyas.

Siddhattha (Pali, Sanskrit, *Siddhartha*). 'Personal name of the Buddha. It means "he whose aim is accomplished"' (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. 'Siddhattha,' p.898).

Sun of Truth In the Bahá'í literature, the locutions 'Sun of Truth' or 'Sun of Reality' seem to denote the Logos, the Word of God. Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.74. Cf. also Savi, *Eternal Quest*, pp.38-9 and n40.

Tanakh An acronym denoting the Hebrew Bible, in which 'ta' stands for Torah, 'na' for Nevi'im (the Prophets) and 'kh' for Ketuvim (the Hagiographa).

Tathagata (Pali, Sanskrit). 'According to Buddhist tradition, the title chosen by the Buddha for himself. The title was intended to convey his identity as a perfect being, though the precise meaning of the word remains problematic'

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(*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. 'Tathagata,' p.956).

Tipitaka (Pali, Sanskrit, *Tripitaka*, Triple Basket). The threefold collection of canonical texts in Buddhism. It comprises the *Vinaya pitaka* (the basket of that which separates), that explains the rules governing the monastic discipline and behavior, the *Sutta pitaka* (the basket of *suttas*), containing the discourses (Pali *sutta*, Sanskrit, *Sutra*), and the teachings of the Buddha recited by Ananda immediately after the death of his Master, and the *Abhidhamma pitaka*, that presents the teachings of the *Sutta pitaka* in an intellectual and systematized form. The *Vinaya pitaka* comprises the Book of duties and 20 Treaties on monastic life. The *Sutta pitaka* is formed by five *Nikaya*, or collections: *Digha nikaya*, *Majjhima nikaya*, *Samyutta nikaya*, *Anguttara nikaya* and *Khuddaka nikaya*. The *Digha nikaya* (Long Collection), is divided into three sections and comprises the *Sigalovada-sutta* (code for lay Buddhists), which often appears separately. The *Samyutta nikaya* (unified collection), comprises almost 3000 discourses (*suttas*), among them the first sermon of the Buddha. The *Khuddaka nikaya* (short collection) comprises the *Dhammapada* (Teaching of the Verses), 426 verses (*gathas*) on fundamental teachings, the *Udanas* (solemn utterances), 80 sayings of the Buddha, the *Sutta-nipata* (collection of *suttas*), and the *Jatakas* (v.).

Typology of religion.

Monist and dualist religions.

Monist religions. Religions that do not see a substantial difference between the human self and the Absolute. The purpose of human life is to acquire wisdom, through which human beings become conscious of their true nature and thus of their sameness with the Absolute.

Dualist religions. Religions that have a dualist vision of the universe, whereby human beings and the universe are wholly distinct from the Absolute, that is, God Creator. The purpose of human life is to be saved by abiding by the will of God during the earthly life.

Monotheist, henotheist and dualist religions.

Henotheist religions. Monotheistic religions whereby 'faith in one God coexists, in a more or less disguised, conscious and accepted form, together with the acceptance of other inferior divinities' (Alessi, *Filosofia della religione*, p.76).

Dualist religions. 'those historical forms of belief whereby sacred reality is perceived, lived and experienced as a dual divine principle responsible of

human life and the destiny of the universe' (Alessi, *Filosofia della religione*, p.57).

Mystic and prophetic religions.

Mystic religions. Religions, as the religion of the *Upanishads* and Buddhism, characterized by their belief in a mystical way through which a person may get rid of ignorance and be merged with the Absolute.

Prophetic religions. Religions like Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam and the Bahá'í Faith, which arise about a Prophet who reveals the divine will to which human beings should submit themselves in order to be saved and come closer to God.

Traditional and founded religions.

Traditional religions. They have no historical founder, or, if they have one, he is a legendary or mythological hero, like Graeco-Roman religion and Hinduism. Various forms of traditional religions also are to be found among the Africans, some Asian tribes, the Australian aborigines and the Amerindians. Most of them are characterized by the absence of Scriptures.

Founded religions. They have an historical founder, like Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam and the Bahá'í Faith.

Traditional and universal religions.

Traditional, or indigenous, or primal religions. This definition does not imply 'that these religions are static and unchanging,' but is meant to distinguish them 'from the major world religions which have spread themselves more widely across many different cultures and which tend to be, therefore, less confined to and by any one specific sociocultural matrix' (Peter Clarke, 'Introduction to New Religious Movements,' *The World's Religions. The Study of Religion, Traditional and New Religions*, pp.149-53). These are the Australian Aboriginal, African, Melanesian, Maori and North American, Mesoamerican and South American religions. Usually they do not have Scriptures.

Universal religions. In common usage the locution denotes 'independent religious traditions practiced throughout the world.' (Seena Fazel, 'Is the Bahá'í Faith a World Religion?', *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 6.1 [March-June 1994], p.3). Among the scholars it denotes religions which meet the following requirements: widespread geographical distribution, remarkable sociocultural diversity, a universal message, that is, 'a doctrine of salvation that is sufficiently transparent to be potentially available to adherents in a variety of cultural contexts' (Timothy Fitzgerald, 'Hinduism and the "World

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Religion” Fallacy,’ in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 20, p.104). Momen defines as world religion ‘one which satisfies the need and fulfills the expectations of all types of humanity, i.e., it must be true to the various viewpoints of the different types of human soul-psyche complex’ (Momen, ‘Is the Bahá’í Faith a World Religion?,’ in *Soundings-Essays in Bahá’í Theology*, pp.55-64). World religions are Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as, only for certain authors, Sikhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and the Bahá’í Faith.

Vaishnava. The followers of Vaishnavism ‘one of the three major forms of Hindu devotions (bhakti), along with Saivas and Saktas. Vaishnavism is the cult of Vishnu... later associated with Krishna-Vasudeva’ (*Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, s.v. ‘Vaisnava,’ p.1012).

Vishnu Purana. Sanskrit mythological text, pertaining to the category of *smirti* (tradition), written between the third and the fourth century C.E.

Vivasvan. In Hindu mythology, a solar god and the father of Manu.

Notes and References

Philosophers and Religion

1. Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, p.4.
2. Emilio Brito, 'Filosofia della religione,' in *Religioni*, p.17.
3. John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, p.1.
4. William L. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, p.2.
5. G. Lynn Stephens and Gregory Pence, *Seven Dilemmas in World Religions*, p.ix.
6. David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, pp.100-1.
7. William S. Hatcher, 'Science and Religion,' *World Order*, vol. 3.3 (Spring 1969), p.14.
8. Herbert Samuel, quoted in *Proceedings of the World Congress of Faith*, p.311.
9. Neely's *History of the Parliament of Religions*, p.24.
10. *The Documents of Vatican II*, p.367.
11. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, pp.177, 178.
12. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, p.119.
13. Hans Küng, *Christianity and World Religions*, pp.180-1.
14. Cf. Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p.xi.
15. Adriano Alessi, *Filosofia della religione*, p.34.
16. In his book Arnold Joseph Toynbee mentions Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism.
17. Arnold Joseph Toynbee, *Study of History*, vol. 7b, p.428.
18. Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, pp.160-1.
19. Benjamin R. Tilghman, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, p.227.
20. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, pp.90, 92.
21. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, p.90.
22. Suheil B. Bushrui, 'World Peace and Interreligious Understanding,' in *Peace Education: Contexts and Values*, p.219.

The Decline of the Credit of Religions and its Causes

1. The Universal House of Justice, 'The Promise of World Peace,' in *Messages of the Universal House of Justice*, p.685.
2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.161.
3. The Universal House of Justice, 'Promise of World Peace,' in *Messages*, p.684.

NOTE AND REFERENCES

4. This situation was mentioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in his Western speeches, pronounced between 1911 and 1913 during his travels in the West to promulgate the oneness of humankind and of religions. Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp.230, 265-6, 322-3, *Paris Talks*, p.135, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on *Divine Philosophy*, pp.37, 56.
5. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.161
6. Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.22.
7. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.443.
8. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.443.
9. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp.161, 443, 403.
10. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.144.
11. Paolo Brezzi, ‘La problematica religiosa del nostro tempo’, in *I Propilei*, vol. 10, p.883.
12. Aurelio Peccei, *Cento pagine per l’avvenire*, p.37.
13. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, p.114.
14. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp.385, 386, 22.
15. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp. 373-4, 443. As to the relation between religion and science also see below pp.134-7.
16. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p.149.
17. Cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings*, pp.283-95, *Some Answered Questions*, pp.47-8, *Promulgation*, pp.97-8, 106, 168-9, 338-9, 364-6, 379, 393-4, 403-5, 445, *Paris Talks*, pp.142-3, *Divine Philosophy*, pp.64-5.
18. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.97.
19. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 177.
20. Cf. John 3:1-15; Koran 29:19 (Rodwell).
21. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 142. For a further discussion of the topic of religion and ethics see below pp.65-9, 97-112.
22. *Mahabharata*, quoted in Bhagavan Das, *The Essential Unity of All Religions*, p.398.
23. *The Babylonian Talmud* 1:31a, quoted in Nahum N. Glatzer, *The Judaic Tradition*, p.197.
24. *Dadestán-i-denig* 94:5, in *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 18, p.271.
25. *Sigalovada-sutta* 31, quoted in Edwin A. Burtt, *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, p.110.
26. Matthew 7:12 (King James Version).
27. *Sukhanán-i-Muhammad* [Sayings of Muhammad], no. 306.
28. Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, par. 148.
29. Cf. H. T. D. Rost, *The Golden Rule*. For a deeper discussion of the issue of ethics and religion see below pp. 65-9, 97-112.
30. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.365.
31. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.53.
32. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.151. For the Bahá’í concept of Manifestation of God see below pp.69-74.
33. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp.338, 97.

34. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.379.

Scripture: the Heart of Religions

1. Alessandro Bausani, *Religion in Iran*, p.14.
2. Paul du Breuil, *Lo zoroastrismo*, p.20.
3. James W. Boyd, 'Zoroastrianism: Avestan Scripture and Rite,' in *The Holy Book in Comparative Perspective*, p.111.
4. Reginald A. Ray, 'Buddhism: Sacred Text Written and Realized,' in *The Holy Book*, pp.150, 155.
5. Harry Y. Gamble Jr., 'Christianity: Scripture and Canon,' in *The Holy Book*, pp.37, 48.
6. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.130.
7. Cf. letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Shoghi Effendi, *Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand*, p.71.
8. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p.208.
9. Jonathan Rosenbaum, 'Judaism: Torah and Tradition,' in *The Holy Book*, p.16.
10. Cf. letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights of Guidance*, p.440.
11. Frederick M. Denny, 'Islam: Qur'an and Hadith,' in *The Holy Book*, p.92.
12. Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*, p.189.
13. Mario Piantelli, 'La "religione vedica",' in *Storia delle religioni*, vol. 4, p.17.
14. Campbell, *Oriental Mythology*, p.203, n70.
15. Pio Filippini-Ronconi, *Upanisad antiche e medie*, p.16.
16. Cf. Exodus 24:4-8; 34:27-8.
17. Hans Küng, *Judaism*, pp.23, 25.
18. *Religioni*, s.v. 'Giudaismo,' p.295.
19. Rosenbaum, 'Judaism: Torah and Tradition,' in *The Holy Book*, pp.13-6.
20. Bausani, *Religion in Iran*, pp.11, 13, 14, 15.
21. Cf. *The Hymns of Zarathustra*, p.151.
22. Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions*, p.333.
23. Cf. Damien Keown, *Buddhism. A Very Short Introduction*.
24. Küng, *Judaism*, pp.26, 24.
25. See below pp.144-6.
26. John H. Hick, 'Interfaith and Future,' *Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol.4.1 (1994), p.3.
27. Matthew 13:11, 3 (King James Version).
28. Koran 29:42 (Rodwell); 2:24 (Rodwell).
29. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.149.
30. 2 Corinthians 3:6 (King James Version).
31. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol.1, p.212.
32. Alessandro Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahá'í*, p.378.

33. Cf. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, chapter 19.
34. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, pp.103, 102.
35. Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p.192.
36. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, pp.98, 103.
37. Leonard J. Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection*, p.3.

The Story of Religions

1. See below p.74.
2. Edward G. Browne, 'Introduction,' in *A Traveller's Narrative*, pp.8-9.
3. Cf. *Vishnupuranam*, p.178 passim.
4. Robert C. Lester, 'Hinduism: Veda and Sacred Text,' in *The Holy Book*, p.140.
5. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, 'Introductory Essay,' in *Bhagavadgita*, p.28 n7.
6. Cf. Küng, *Christianity and World Religions*, p.278.
7. Cf. *La Bibbia di Gerusalemme*, p.2662.
8. *A Dictionary of the Holy Bible*, s.v. 'Abraham,' p.10.
9. Küng, *Judaism*, p.7.
10. Küng, *Judaism*, p.48.
11. Bausani, *Religion in Iran*, pp.23, 24, 28.
12. Gherardo Gnoli, 'Le religioni dell' Iran antico e Zoroastro,' in *Storia delle religioni*, vol. 1, p.470.
13. Cf. *Yasna* 33:6, in *The Hymns of Zarathustra*, p.51.
14. Cf. du Breuil, *Lo zoroastrismo*, p.12.
15. Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, p.209.
16. *Religioni*, s.v. 'Zoroastrismo,' p.371.
17. Cf. Franz Altheim, 'L'Antico Iran,' in *I Propilei*, vol. 2, p.163.
18. Gnoli, 'Le religioni dell'Iran antico e Zoroastro,' in *Storia delle religioni*, vol. 1, p.473.
19. Küng, *Christianity and World Religions*, p.317. Emile Senart was a French Indianist (1847–1928); Hendrik Kern, a Dutch scholar (1833–1917).
20. Cf. Küng, *Christianity and World Religions*, pp.317, 318.
21. Farhang Mehr, *The Zoroastrian Tradition*, p.55.
22. Also Campbell discovers common features in the biographies of 'World Saviors of the period from c. 500 B.C. to c. 500 A.D., whether in India, as in the legends of the Jains, or in the Near East, as in the Gospel view of Christ' (Campbell, *Oriental Mythology*, p.253). Cf. also Jalil Mahmudi, 'The Institutionalization of Religion,' *World Order*, vol.2.1 (Fall 1967), pp.16-25.
23. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.55.
24. *Bhagavad-gita* 4:7-8.
25. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.23.
26. Exodus 4:10 (King James Version).

27. Many will object that this concept is ill-suited to Buddhism, considered by some as a philosophy, and not a religion (William Donald Hudson, 1974), by others as an atheistic (Gerardus van der Leeuw, 1956, Helmuth von Glasenapp, 1966) or non-theistic religion (Damien Keown), and by still others as a religion of the 'silence of God' (cf. Alessi, *Filosofia della religione*, pp.68-75). For further comments upon this controversial issue see below pp.61-4.
28. Exodus 3:2; cf. Exodus, chapters 3-4 (King James Version).
29. Mehr, *Zoroastrian Tradition*, pp.26, 56.
30. Marcello Meli, 'Introduzione,' in *Inni di Zarathushtra*, p.ix.
31. *Vendidad* 22:19, in *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 4.
32. Cf. Mehr, *Zoroastrian Tradition*, p.42.
33. Matthew 3:16-7 (King James Version).
34. Koran 96:1-2 (Rodwell).
35. Bausani, 'Introduzione,' in *Il Corano*, p.xxv.
36. The Italian historian of music Massimo Mila (1910-1988) explains that in this sentence 'desire for existence that, together with pleasure and greed, draws human beings from rebirth to rebirth... is compared to an untiring builder, who always rebuilds the building of human passions and prolongs it to the infinite, arousing, through the satisfaction of some of them, other continuously arising new passions' ('Nota introduttiva,' in Hermann Hesse, *Siddharta*, pp.xx, xxi).
37. *Dhammapada* 153-4, in *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 10.
38. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp.102-3.
39. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p.165.
40. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.197.
41. Genesis 50:25 (King James Version).
42. Deuteronomy 18:15 (King James Version).
43. John 14:26 (King James Version).
44. Cf. Joel 2:1-5. The prophecies of Joel are confirmed in Acts 2:14 etc.
45. Cf. Mathew, chapter 24; Mark, chapter 13; Luke, chapter 21.
46. Cf. for example Koran 69:16 (Rodwell).
47. Cf. for example Koran, chapter 99.
48. Cf. for example Koran 20:102 (Rodwell).
49. Cf. for example Koran 39:61-2 (Rodwell).
50. Genesis 22:16-8 (King James Version).
51. Cf. Genesis 25:1-4.
52. Cf. Exodus 3:16; 6:2-8.
53. Deuteronomy 18:15.
54. Cf. Acts 3:22, 4:20-2.
55. Matthew 5:17 (King James Version).
56. John 14:16, 26, 28 (King James Version).
57. Koran 4:149-50 (Rodwell).
58. *Yasht* 19:11, quoted in *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, p.90.

NOTE AND REFERENCES

59. Mehr, *Zoroastrian Tradition*, pp.53, 54.
60. Heinz Bechert, 'Buddhist Perspectives,' in Küng, *Christianity and World Religions*, p.305.
61. Alessandro Bausani, *Buddha*, p.59.
62. *Digha nikaya* 3:75-6, in *Dialogues of the Buddha*, vol. 3, p.74.
63. Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, par. 37.
64. Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p.117.
65. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings*, p.87.
66. This connection is not as clear among mystic religions and prophetic religion, as it is among prophetic religions. This fact may be due to the difficulties in communication in those remote times, which kept almost wholly apart those two different stocks of religions.
67. *Bhagavad-gita* 4:1-2.
68. Radhakrishnan, in *Bhagavadgita*, p.151.
69. Du Breuil, *Lo zoroastrismo*, pp.19-20, 39-40.
70. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.22, 24, 25.
71. Radhakrishnan, 'Introductory Essay,' in *Bhagavadgita*, p.29.
72. Du Breuil, *Lo zoroastrismo*, p.25.
73. *Yasna* 46:1-2, in *The Hymns of Zarathustra*, p.75.
74. Bausani, *Religion in Iran*, p.18.
75. Cf. Mehr, *Zoroastrian Tradition*, p.48.
76. Cf. Bausani, *Buddha*, p.45.
77. Ernest Renan, *The Apostles*, p.283.
78. Quoted in 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p.84. Cf. Richard Walzer, *Galen of Jews and Christianity*, p.15, stating that Galen's summary here referred to is lost, being preserved only in Arabic quotations.
79. Koran 2:186, 188 (Rodwell).
80. Koran 2:257 (Rodwell).
81. Campbell, *Oriental Mythology*, p.293.
82. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp.85-6.
83. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p.96.
84. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, p.96.
85. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.438.
86. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.179.
87. Raffaele Pettazzoni, *Religione e società*, p.170.
88. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p.114.
89. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.74.
90. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.28.
91. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, pp.119, 120.
92. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.349.
93. Shoghi Effendi said: 'In the "Bayán" the Báb says that every religion of the past was fit to become universal. The only reason why they failed to attain that mark was the incompetence of their followers' (letter written on behalf of

Shoghi Effendi, in *Compilation*, vol. 2, p.4).

94. Cf. Bausani, *Saggi*, pp.492-3.

What is Religion?

1. Bausani, *Saggi*, pp.85, 103, 300.
2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, par. 5.
3. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.298.
4. Cf. Friedrich Gogarten, *Die Verkündigung Jesu Christi*, p.58.
5. The Prophets-Founders of revealed religions. See below pp.69-76.
6. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.491.
7. Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, pp.39-40.
8. Cf. *Religioni*, s.v. 'Induismo,' p.317. See above p.31-2, 36.
9. Küng, *Christianity and World Religions*, p.229.
10. Genesis 2:15-7 (King James Version).
11. Genesis 9:1, 9 (King James Version). Also cf. Genesis 6:5-22; chapters 7, 8, 9.
12. Cf. Genesis 12:1-3; 15, 17, 22.
13. Exodus 19:3, 5 (King James Version).
14. *Yasht* 29:7-8, quoted in *Textual Sources*, p.41.
15. *Yasna* 43:5, 7-8, 10-1, in *Hymns of Zarathustra*, pp.135, 137.
16. *Yasna* 45:3, in *Hymns of Zarathustra*, p.93.
17. *Yasna* 46:19, in *Hymns of Zarathustra*, p.83.
18. Bausani, *Religion in Iran*, p.17.
19. For the Bahá'í concept of Manifestation of God see below pp. 69-76.
20. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.197.
21. Bechert, 'Buddhist Perspectives,' Küng, *Christianity and World Religions*, p.293.
22. Mario Piantelli, 'Il buddhismo indiano,' in *Storia delle religioni*, vol. 4, p.294.
23. John Huddleston, *The Search for a Just Society*, p.26.
24. Raimundo Panikkar, *Il silenzio di Dio*, p.61.
25. Bausani, *Saggi*, pp.25, 24, 374.
26. Keith Ward, *Images of Eternity*, p.75.
27. Moojan Momen, *Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith*, p.23.
28. *Udana* 8:3, in *Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, p.98; also quoted in Momen, *Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith*, p.23.
29. Ward, *Images of Eternity*, p.68.
30. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.26.
31. Panikkar, *Il silenzio di Dio*, p.26.
32. Piantelli, 'Il buddhismo indiano,' in *Storia delle religioni*, vol. 4, p.283.
33. Cf. Matthew 5:17; and moreover Acts 3:21-2.
34. Matthew 26:28 (King James Version).
35. Koran 24:54 (Rodwell).
36. Koran 33:7-8 (Rodwell).

NOTE AND REFERENCES

37. The Báb, *Selections from the Writings*, p.87.
38. Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p.26.
39. Stephens and Pence, *Seven Dilemmas in World Religions*, p.141.
40. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.316.
41. *Rig Veda* 10.191:2, 3, 4 (Griffith).
42. *Bhagavad-gita* 12:13-20.
43. Deuteronomy 6:5 (King James Version).
44. Leviticus 19:18 (King James Version).
45. *Hymns of Zarathustra*, p.15; *Yasna* 48:11-2, in *Hymns of Zarathustra*, p.39.
46. *Yasht* 12:1, 2, 8, 9, quoted in *Textual Sources*, pp.57-8.
47. *Sutta-nipata* 149-50, in *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 10, vv.149-50.
48. Cf. Matthew 22:35-40.
49. Matthew 23:8-9 (King James Version).
50. Acts 17:26 (King James Version).
51. Koran 2:172 (Rodwell).
52. Koran 2:209 (Rodwell).
53. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, pp.87-8.
54. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.465.
55. This subject is examined in 'Bahá'u'lláh,' pp.47-94 and in Julio Savi *The Eternal Quest for God. An Introduction to the Divine Philosophy of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1989), pp.100-14.
56. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.25.
57. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.155.
58. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp.218, 157.
59. For a more detailed explanation of these concepts see below pp.96-7. Cf. Savi, *Eternal Quest*, pp.87-9.
60. In the metaphor of the sun, God is the sun in its essence; the Logos is the image of the sun we behold in the sky, when, through our powers of sense and rational perception, we perceive the rays emanating from it.
61. Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, pp.22-3, *Gleanings*, p.49.
62. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.114.
63. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp.84-5.
64. Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p.152-3, 176-81.
65. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p.74.
66. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p.74. cf. also Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p.58.
67. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights of Guidance*, p.477.
68. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.204.
69. Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, pp.341, 364, 411; *Some Answered Questions*, pp.37-8, 100-102; *Divine Philosophy*, pp.39-40.
70. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p.56.
71. Matthew 7:15-7 (King James Version).
72. Bausani, *Saggi*, pp.17-8, 210-1, 345-6, 216, 471, 79-80.
73. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p.171.

74. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Compilation*, vol. 2, p.238.
75. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.315.
76. Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.297.
77. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.107.
78. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.158.
79. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p.157.
80. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p.240. Bausani says that religion is 'a power which can improve the character of human beings and society, and bring "absolute unity in diversity"' (Bausani, *Saggi*, p.90).
81. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p.171.
82. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp.277, 140.
83. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.31.
84. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p.16. Bausani says that religion is a line of action that bestows an 'ethical and religious power' that can gradually guide humankind towards the attainment of its oneness (cf. Bausani, *Saggi*, pp.103, 216, 271).
85. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.361.
86. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp.107, 117.
87. Cf. 'Bahá'í Scholarship', Messages from the Universal House of Justice, pp 388-9.
88. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy* 145.
89. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 198.
90. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, p.58.

The Contents of Religions

1. Seena Fazel, 'Interreligious Dialogue and the Bahá'í Faith: Some Preliminary Observations,' in *Revisioning the Sacred*, pp.137-52.
2. Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp.146-50.
3. Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, pp.26-7.
4. Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, pp.176-81.
5. Ward, *Images of Eternity*, p.181.
6. Cf. Koran 4:169 (Rodwell); 5:72-81 (Rodwell).
7. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History. Universal Churches*, vol. 7b, p.427.
8. Bausani describes 'an evolution in monotheism. Founded among the people of Israel, initially in national and racial forms, it was universalized by Christ. Afterwards the Christians made a god of him under Greek and philosophical-Gnostic influences. Islam purified Christian theology from all Gnostic, neoplatonic and manichaeistic influxes and re-established the absolute sovereignty of the one transcendent personal God, whereby will is more important than anything else' (Bausani, *Saggi*, p.26).
9. Bausani, *Saggi*, pp.270-1.
10. See above pp.38 n27, 63-6.

NOTE AND REFERENCES

11. Bausani, *Religion in Iran*, p.19.
12. Du Breuil, *Lo zoroastrismo*, p.35.
13. *Yasna* 31:7, in *Hymns of Zarathustra*, p.111.
14. Du Breuil, *Lo zoroastrismo*, pp.33, 36-7
15. *Yasna* 31:8, in *Hymns of Zarathustra*, p.111.
16. Mehr, *Zoroastrian Tradition*, pp.36, 37.
17. Fiorenzo Facchini, *Il Cammino dell'Evoluzione Umana*, p.224.
18. Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, p.3.
19. Bausani, 'Introduzione,' in *Il Corano*, p.lvii.
20. Koran 2:254 (Rodwell); 5:1 (Rodwell).
21. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 2.3:6.
22. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas*, vol.1, p.204.
23. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp.3-4, 317-8.
24. Koran 17:110 (Rodwell).
25. Alessi, *Filosofia della religione*, pp.46-7.
26. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p.73-4. In the light of this concept all the Manifestations of God are equal. See above p.73-4. In this respect, Bausani says that the branch of religious sciences which studies the Divinity could be more accurately defined as 'a semiology of God, that is, a science of His signs, rather than a theology of his unknowable essence' (Bausani, *Saggi*, p.490).
27. *Samyutta nikaya* 3:60 in *The Book of Kindred Sayings*, vol. 3, p.58.
28. Genesis 2:7 (King James Version).
29. Koran 15:28 (Rodwell), 96:2 (Rodwell).
30. 1 Corinthians 15:45 (King James Version).
31. Koran 12:53 (Rodwell).
32. Koran 75:2 (Rodwell).
33. Koran 89:27-30 (Rodwell).
34. Du Breuil, *Lo zoroastrismo*, p. 47.
35. As to the Bahá'í arguments against rebirth cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp.281-9.
36. Panikkar, *Il silenzio di Dio*, p.66.
37. Küng, *Christianity and World Religions*, p.326.
38. Panikkar, *Il silenzio di Dio*, p.66.
39. Cf. Bausani, *Saggi*, pp.25, 23.
40. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.25. pp.373-74.
41. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in 'Survival and Salvation,' *Star of the West*, vol. 7.19 (2 March 1917), p.190.
42. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.196.
43. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, pp.418, 69, 303.
44. Cf. Savi, *Eternal Quest*, p.148.
45. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Compilation*, vol. 2, pp.18-9.
46. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p.16.

47. Joseph Herman Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, p.196.
48. Küng, *Judaism*, p.31.
49. Huddleston, *The Search for a Just Society*, p.12.
50. Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp.122-5.
51. Campbell, *Oriental Mythology*, p.34.
52. Genesis 9:11(King James Version).
53. Küng, *Judaism*, p.33.
54. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, p.200.
55. Küng, *Judaism*, p.14.
56. Küng, *Judaism*, p.42.
57. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, p.196.
58. Huddleston, *The Search for a Just Society*, pp.12-3.
59. Campbell, *Occidental Mythology*, p.190.
60. Campbell, *Oriental Mythology*, p.8.
61. *Yasna* 30:2, in *Hymns of Zarathustra*, p.103.
62. *Arta i Viraf Namak (Arda Wiraz namag)* 4:7-33, in *The Book of Arda Viraf*, pp.154-5.
63. *Yasna* 48:4, in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 31, p.155.
64. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, p.82.
65. Matthew 22:37-40 (King James Version).
66. Huddleston, *Search for a Just Society*, pp.43-4.
67. Koran 17:22-38 (Kenneth Cragg), as quoted in Küng, *Judaism*, p.43.
68. Küng, *Judaism*, p.42.
69. Koran 6:164 (Rodwell).
70. Koran 39:8 (Rodwell).
71. Koran 10:19 (Rodwell).
72. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.6.
73. Koran 42:22 (Rodwell); 4:40 (Rodwell); 5:3 (Rodwell); 9:72 (Rodwell); 42:34-5, 38 (Rodwell); 2:265 (Rodwell).
74. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.382.
75. Campbell, *Oriental Mythology*, pp.12, 14, 15, 14.
76. *Bhagavad-gita* 6:6-7.
77. *Bhagavad-gita* 3:19.
78. Radhakrishnan, 'Introductory Essay,' in *Bhagavadgita*, p.70.
79. Radhakrishnan, 'Introductory Essay,' in *Bhagavadgita*, pp.60, 62.
80. Heinrich von Stietencron, 'Hindu Perspectives,' in Küng, *Christianity and World Religions*, pp.221, 222.
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82. *Bhagavad-gita* 16:1-3, 24.
83. *Digha nikaya* 2:302-3, in *Dialogues of the Buddha*, vol. 2, pp. 335-6.
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91. *Udana* 8:3, in *Minor Anthologies*, p.98; quoted in Momen, *Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith*, p.23.
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93. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.200.
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95. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.201.

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3. Dario Bernazza, *La soluzione del problema Dio*, pp.56-7.
4. Bausani, *Saggi*, p.408.
5. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.144.
6. *Webster's New International Dictionary*, s.v. 'miracle,' p.1441.
7. Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp.100-2.
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9. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Compilation*, vol. 1, p.306.
10. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'Join the Army of Peace,' *Star of the West*, vol. 13.5 (August 1922), p.113.
11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.91.
12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.148.
13. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p.93.
14. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p.76.
15. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Compilation*, vol. 2, p.434.
16. See above pp.11-4.
17. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp.97-8.
18. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p.137.
19. Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, pp.27-8.
20. Bahá'u'lláh, in *Compilation*, vol. 1, p.248.
21. Cf. Ernst Heinrich Haeckel, *The History of Creation of the Development of the Earth and its Inhabitants by the Action of Natural Causes*.
22. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p.158.
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25. Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p.352, *Paris Talks*, pp.32, 128, *Promulgation*, pp.10, 94-5, 126, 165, *Some*

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 37. Matthew 16:18 (King James Version).
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 40. Cf. Matthew, chapter 23.
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3. Cf. 'The Fragments of Xenophanes,' nos. 5-7, in *The First Philosophers of Greece*, pp.67, 69.
4. Critias, quoted in Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 9:54.
5. Publius Papinius Statius, *Thebaid* 3:661.
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9. *Bol'shaya Sovetskaya Enciklopediya*, s.v. 'Religija.'
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