

Faith Meets Faith Series

The Myth of Religious Superiority

Multifaith Explorations
of Religious Pluralism

*Edited by
Paul F. Knitter*

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The Next Step beyond Dialogue

JOHN HICK

Interfaith dialogue has been going on now on a growing scale and on many levels for more than a generation, and it must continue increasingly in the future. So to speak of the next step beyond dialogue is not intended to mean the end of dialogue and its replacement by something else. It is a way of enhancing dialogue, not replacing it. It is the step from dialogue between people who each believe, at the back of their minds and usually without saying it aloud, that theirs is really the one and only true or fully true faith, to dialogue between people who accept the genuine religious equality of the other, so that they can then benefit freely from one another's distinctive spiritual insights and be free to join together in facing the massive social and economic and political problems of the world.

So clearly this next step is not the different religions all becoming one, uniting to form some kind of new global religion. On the contrary, their plurality and diversity are positive and valuable. The variety around the world of our different ways of being human, which are the great cultures and religions of the earth, is something to celebrate and understand, not something to try to iron out.

In exploring the next step I use the word *salvation*, acknowledging, of course, that it is not a universally used term but one most at home in Christian discourse. Salvation, then, is the aim of each of the great world religions. Each has a keen awareness of the reality of human suffering and of the human neglect, cruelty, injustice, exploitation, sheer ignorance, or thoughtlessness that cause most of it. They all recognize that there is something deeply and tragically defective in our ordinary human situation, both individually and collectively. They conceptualize this in various ways. Some express it by saying that we are fallen and therefore sinful beings; others that we are frail, fallible creatures, made out of the dust of the earth; others that all life is, in the Buddhist phrase, *dukkha*, defective, involving all manner of suffering; others again that we are living in blindness to the reality of our own deeper nature and of the larger reality of which we are part. These are

all ways of pointing to the same observable facts. But in the face of this dark side of life, which is all too evident, each of the great traditions nevertheless stands out as a form of what we can call cosmic optimism in that it proclaims the real possibility, which can even begin to be realized here and now, of a limitlessly better state. And in each case, the movement toward that state consists in a progressive transformation from natural self-centeredness to a new orientation centered in the Ultimate Reality on which the religions are focused from their different angles.

RELIGION: THE OUTER AND THE INNER

Let us distinguish between two different aspects of religion. One is the religions as socio-religious entities existing over against one another and interacting with all the other factors that go to make up human history. They have their own boundaries, even in principle their list of members, and they are related to each other as distinct and often rival institutions. It is religion in this sense that is studied by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists and is therefore the aspect of religion most studied in the universities. Whether a religion originated with an individual founder or holy book, or developed through a long line of sages or prophets, in each case it has become embodied in a continuing human institution or institutions. And in all human institutions, including religious ones, there has been a human-all-too-human influence on their development over time. Inevitably they reflect not only the best but also the worst in human nature.

And so we find that the religious institutions, as enormously powerful factors in human history, have not only done a great deal of good but also a great deal of harm. On the one hand they have been instruments for social cohesion, defining a tribe or a nation, and they have through the centuries provided a framework of meaning for the lives of hundreds of millions of people, challenging people morally and giving them comfort and support in time of trouble. They have played a central role in the formation of civilizations, in the development of language, education and science, the creation of hospitals and universities, and in inspiring literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture. But on the other hand they have been instruments of social control by a dominant class; they have supported, and indeed embodied, the centuries-long patriarchal male dominance over women; and they have divided people into rival groups and have been used to validate and intensify almost all human conflicts, as we see so tragically in many parts of the world today. God has been claimed to be on both sides of every war, so that it has been said that the only industry that God seems to support is the arms industry! But if we ask, with all this in mind, whether institutional religion has done more good or more harm to humankind over the centuries, it seems to me that the goods and evils are of such different kinds as to be incommensurable, so that it is not really possible to reach any straightforward verdict.

But this institutional aspect of religion, with all its goods and evils, is only half the story. The other aspect is something for which we do not have an ideal word, but which can vaguely be called spirituality, meaning each individual's inner response to the Divine, the Transcendent, Ultimate Reality, the Ultimate, the Real. For all the world religions speak in their different ways of a limitlessly important reality that both transcends the material universe and is also present within it. There is no common term for this. Here in the West we most naturally speak of God. But in the global context we must do so as our way of referring to the Ultimate Reality, without prejudging whether that reality is an infinite person, or indeed three infinite persons in one, or is a trans-personal reality beyond the distinction between the personal and the impersonal. This is because with our knowledge of Buddhism, Taoism, Jainism, and some forms of Hinduism it is no longer possible to equate religion with belief in a personal God. And because it is so hard to speak of God without that implied connotation, I am going instead to speak of the Ultimate—not because this is better than the other terms but simply because one has to settle upon one of them.

And again, I wish we had a better word for the inner response to the Ultimate than *spirituality*, which is often used so loosely today—I have even heard in a TV commercial of the spiritual aspect of painting your toenails—but even so *spirituality* is probably a better word for my purpose than such alternatives as *piety*, *mysticism*, *religiosity*, or *faith*.¹

The relationship between these two aspects, the outer reality of the historical religious institutions and the inner reality of spirituality, is twofold. On the one hand, the development of religious institutions was always inevitable because we are inherently social beings who need one another and who need to do things together, so that human response to the Ultimate was originally communal before becoming individual. And fortunately, within the great organized and institutionalized religions, despite all their faults, there has always been space for the spiritual life. But on the other hand, the spiritual life can also occur outside the institutions, though—it has to be added—when it does it is still parasitic upon them for the preservation of scriptures, for the accumulated wisdom of the past, for methods of prayer and meditation handed down within the institutions. So these two aspects of religion, spirituality and the institutions, need each other. But I also want to affirm strongly that the spiritual life, the transforming personal response to the Ultimate, is the living heart of religion and that the institutions, while necessary, are secondary; when they make themselves primary as absolute authorities they become potentially dangerous centers of power.

¹ *Faith* is the word used by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his distinction between the “the cumulative traditions” and “faith.” It was he who brought this very important distinction to the notice of us all in his classic book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, and in speaking of the religious institutions and spirituality I am repeating his distinction in different terms.

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

Now when we stress the priority of the spiritual over the institutional, a conception of religion comes to light that is rather different from our usual Western way of thinking. We see this other understanding in China during the centuries when it was quite normal to be a Buddhist, a Confucian, and a Taoist. Again, in Japan today great numbers of people practice both Buddhism and Shinto. And in India the many different strands of religious thought and practice that are lumped together under the Western-invented name of Hinduism, such as the Vaishnavite and Shaivite streams of devotion, are not so much rivals as regional variations.

So on this other conception of religion, the different faiths are not seen as bounded entities set over against one another but more as spheres of spiritual influence—the influence emanating from the teachings of the Buddha, the influence emanating from the teachings of Confucius, and the Taoist influence emanating from the *Tao Te Ching*, and so on. Now while one cannot belong simultaneously to two different institutions with mutually exclusive memberships, one *can* live within two or more overlapping spheres of spiritual influence. One and the same person can respond to the influences that come from a variety of different sources, and indeed many of us and probably a growing number of us today are doing just that. In this model of religion the institutions still have their place. They are still necessary in preserving communal memories and providing communal symbols and rituals, but they are no longer closed entities whose established structures and professional priesthoods so easily become opposed to one another. For while religious institutions have almost always divided humanity, the inner openness to the Ultimate that I am calling spirituality has no tendency to divide people into opposing groups. Spirituality does indeed take characteristically different forms within the different traditions, but these differences are complementary rather than contradictory.

MY RELIGION SUPERIOR TO YOURS?

However, here we are in the West with the prevailing understanding of the religions as bounded entities existing over against one another. Seen in this way, each is a unique totality of forms of spiritual practice, revered scriptures, treasured creeds, stories and myths, familiar symbols, systems of doctrine, moral codes, great paradigmatic figures, remembered histories, cultural ethos, authority figures. And in this situation the pluralist view is that it is a fundamental mistake to elevate any one of them—always of course one's own—as uniquely superior to all the others.

Why is that a mistake?

A great deal depends on whether we adopt a top-down method, starting with an established system of doctrines and making deductions from it, or a from-the-ground-up method, starting with the observable realities of human life and asking what they imply. Using this second method, I start from the obvious fact that the religion to which anyone adheres—and equally the religion against which anyone reacts and which they reject—depends in the vast majority of cases on where they were born. Someone born into a Christian family in Italy is much more likely to become a Christian than a Buddhist. If in Pakistan, much more likely to become a Muslim than a Jew. If in Thailand, much more likely to be a Buddhist than a Christian. And so on. The point is well made by a twelve-year-old boy I've been told of, born into a Christian family in Cairo, who remarked one day, "You know, if I'd been born next door I'd be a Muslim." Individual conversions from one faith to another do of course occur all the time in all directions, and whenever this happens I think we have to assume that it is a right move for that individual; but this remains statistically insignificant in comparison with the massive transmission of faith from one generation to another within the same tradition. The fact is that in the vast majority of cases we *inherit* our religion along with our nationality, our language, and our culture.

So what are the implications of this? Let me put them in Christian terms, though they can equally well be put in the terms of any other faith. Most Christians assume, or are certainly supposed to assume because of the claim that has traditionally been made, that there is a significant religious advantage in being a Christian rather than a Jew or a Muslim or a Buddhist, etc. The strongest form of this is the belief that only Christians go to heaven, all the rest to hell. But today the mainline Christian churches have moved a long way beyond that and have now mostly settled down in the belief that, on the one hand, salvation for anybody is brought about solely by Christ's atoning death on the cross, but nevertheless, on the other hand, that non-Christians can also benefit from Christ's saving work because of the universal presence of the Holy Spirit at work throughout the world. But they still believe that there is a significant religious advantage in being a member of the Christian church. To quote the 1997 statement of the Vatican's International Theological Commission, *Christianity and the World Religions*, "the universal presence of the Spirit can not be compared with his special presence in the Church of Christ. . . . Only the Church is the body of Christ, and only in it is given in its full intensity the presence of the Spirit" (p. 54). And the mainly Protestant World Council of Churches in its most recent Baar Statement on this subject in 1990 recognized truth and wisdom, love and holiness within the other religions, but added that this "is the gift of the Holy Spirit"—the second Person of the Christian Trinity.

This is at present, I would say, the majority view among both Catholic and Protestant theologians and church authorities. The prevailing view, in other words, is that non-Christians can be included within the sphere of Christian salvation—hence the term *inclusivism*. But Christianity nevertheless retains its unique centrality and normativeness and, to be frank, its

superiority. If we take the analogy of the solar system, with God as the sun at the center and the religions as the planets circling around that center, inclusivism holds that the life-giving warmth and light of the sun falls directly only on our earth, the Christian church, and is then reflected off it in lesser degrees to the other planets, the other religions. Or if you prefer an economic analogy, the wealth of divine grace falls directly upon the church and then trickles down in diluted forms to the people of the other faiths below. And the very serious question that we have to ask is whether this is an honestly realistic account of the human situation as we observe it on the ground.

How can we judge? Only, surely, by the observable fruits of religion in human life. I think these are well described by the Christian writer Saint Paul as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22–23), to which we have to add today the search for social and international justice and peace. These are values common to all the world religions. And what has made me, personally, come to doubt the assumption of the unique superiority of my own Christian faith is that these observable fruits do not seem to be specially concentrated in the Christian church but, on the contrary, seem to be spread more or less evenly around the world, with its different cultures and religions. Obviously this can be argued. I would only say that the onus of proof is upon anyone, of any religion, who claims that the members of his or her religion are in general better human beings, morally and spiritually, than the rest of the human race.

Let me put it again in Christian terms. If we take literally the traditional belief that in Christ we have an uniquely full revelation of God and an uniquely direct relationship with God, so that in the church we are members of the body of Christ, taking the divine life into our lives in the Eucharist, and living under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, then surely this ought to produce some noticeable difference in our lives. Christians *ought* to be better human beings than those who lack these inestimable spiritual benefits. Or does the new situation inaugurated by the life and death of Jesus make no practical difference? But in that case, what is its value? So we are stuck on the horns of a dilemma. We either have to claim, against the evidence of our experience, that as members of the body of Christ Christians in general are better human beings than non-Christians, or we are going to have to rethink those of our traditional doctrines that entail that.

But let me add at this point that there is a perfectly good sense in which for me—and “me” could be anyone—my religion is the truth and the true path of salvation. I was born into it, it has formed me and nourished me, it has so to speak made me in its own image, so that it fits me and I fit it as probably no other can. And this is true from within each of the world religions. The upshot is that normally we should each remain within our inherited faith and use its resources to the full. But what the pluralist insight is telling us is to recognize that exactly the same applies to the people of other faiths. They too have been formed by their own faith, and for them it is uniquely special; for them it is salvific.

A NEW FRAMEWORK OF UNDERSTANDING

So how do we go about forming a new framework of understanding? Two ways are in fact being actively explored—different but complementary.

One is to start from within one's own faith and work outward, so to speak, by exploring its resources for an acceptance of the salvific parity of the other world faiths, the acceptance of them, in other words, as equally authentic paths to—to use the term again—salvation. For each tradition does in fact have within it strands of thought that can be developed to authorize the pluralist point of view. This can only be done within each faith in its own terms and by its own adherents. But those who use scripture, whichever scripture it may be, to prove their point, in practice use it selectively, highlighting what supports their point of view and tacitly leaving aside what does not. We all do that, either consciously or unconsciously. My own hunch is that our basic point of view comes first and then selects its appropriate scriptural backing and theological interpretation. It is for this reason that I myself prefer to concentrate on advocating the basic pluralist point of view, confident that once this is accepted the theologians and exegetes, who operate when necessary as theological “spin doctors,” will sooner or later find ways to give it the stamp of official approval.

So the way that I myself prefer is to set forth the intellectual grounding for religious pluralism. Some, I know, feel that philosophical thinking in this area is not necessary, or even not desirable. Others of us, however, feel that we have an obligation to try to make intelligible sense of the global religious situation, with all its complexities of similarity and difference. So let me very briefly outline my own suggestion.

I take my clue from something that is affirmed within all the great traditions. This is that the Ultimate is in itself beyond the scope of human description and understanding. As the great Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas said, God “surpasses every form that our intellect reaches.”² God in God's ultimate eternal self-existent being is ineffable, or as I would rather say, transcategorical, beyond the scope of our human conceptual systems. And so we have a distinction between God in God's infinite self-existent being and God as humanly knowable. We find this in some of the great mystics, who distinguished between the Godhead, which is the ultimate ineffable reality, and the known God of the scriptures and of church doctrine and worship, imaged and understood in our limited human terms. We find parallel distinctions within the other great traditions. Within the mystical strands of Judaism and Islam the distinction is between, on the one hand, *Ein Sof*, the Infinite, or *al Haq*, the Real, and on the other hand, this infinite reality as revealed within our limited human thought forms and languages. The great Jewish thinker Maimonides expressed this as a distinction between the essence and

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 14:3.

the manifestation of God. Within Hinduism it is the distinction between *nirguna* Brahman, Brahman without attributes and beyond human description, and *saguna* Brahman, which is that same reality as humanly known as the realm of the gods. And within Mahayana Buddhism it is the distinction between the *Dharmakaya*, the ultimate ineffable reality, and its embodiment in the realm of the compassionate *Buddhas*.

So we have a distinction between the Ultimate as it is in itself and that same ultimate reality as it impinges on us and is imaged by our little human minds. Our awareness of the Ultimate is thus a mediated awareness, receiving its form, and indeed its plurality of forms, from our human contribution to our awareness of it. The basic principle that in our awareness of anything the very activity of cognition itself affects the form in which we are conscious of it, is well established today in epistemology, in cognitive psychology, and in the sociology of knowledge. But it was brilliantly stated centuries ago by Thomas Aquinas in his dictum that “things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower.”³ In ordinary sense perception the mode of the human knower is much the same throughout the world. But in religious awareness the mode of the knower differs significantly among the different religious traditions, which have been formed and developed within different historical and cultural situations. So my suggestion, my hypothesis, is that the world religions are oriented toward the same Ultimate Reality, which is, however, manifested within their different thought-worlds and modes of experience in different ways. There is a fascinating saying in the Hindu scriptures, “Thou art formless. Thine only form is our knowledge of Thee.”⁴

To make in another way the point that we are related to the Ultimate through our varying concepts and images of it, consider the history of the Christian awareness of God. The concept of God within mainline Christianity today is above all that of a limitlessly loving God. But for several centuries in medieval Europe the Christian understanding of God was very different. God was thought of as the terrible judge, an object of fear and dread. The evils that befell society, the plagues and droughts and diseases, were assumed to be divine punishments. God must be very angry with his people, it was thought, because he visited so much suffering on them. When illness or calamity came to someone it was believed that this was a punishment for the person’s sins. And Christ was likewise seen as the terrible judge whom they would face on the day of judgment. It was seriously and terrifyingly believed that the great majority of people were going to burn forever in hell. And for mercy people looked, not to Christ, but to their local saint or to the Virgin Mary. It was only in the thirteenth century that the image of God as love and of Christ as love incarnate began to be recovered, the image that we treasure today. Now is it God who has changed over the centuries, or our human images of God? Surely the latter. So in this historical perspective we

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II/II, Q. 1, art 2.

⁴ *Yogava’sistha*, I, 28.

can see the divine presence being mediated to us in terms of our changing human images of God. We are related to the Ultimate through a screen of human concepts and images, and these concepts and images vary not only between the traditions but also even within them.

So the model that seems to me best to make sense of the total situation is that of one Ultimate Reality being humanly conceived and imaged or symbolized within the different major streams of religious life that we call Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so on. Or in the more poetic words of the great Muslim Sufi thinker Rumi, speaking of the religions of the world, "The lamps are different but the Light is the same; it comes from beyond."⁵

ALTERNATIVES?

If this seems a startling suggestion, what are the alternatives? One alternative is obviously the antireligious view that all the God figures and non-personal absolutes witnessed to by the religions are illusory, all products of the human imagination. But in this book we are not dealing with that prior question; we speak and write as people committed in each case to a positive faith and have come together to think through the problems that face us. So a second possibility is that the God or absolute of my own tradition, whichever it may be, is real and all the others illusory. But this is the traditional absolutism that we have left behind. A third possibility is to say that the Holy Trinity, Allah, Vishnu, and so on are different names for the same deity. One of my own earlier books has the unfortunate title *God Has Many Names*—which I blame on the publisher! But the Gods as described in the different scriptures are clearly not the same. They each have a different and unique personal profile and record of historical interventions in human life on earth. The strictly unitary Allah, for example, is manifestly not the same as the Holy Trinity. So different names is not the answer.

Yet another possibility is the ultra-pluralism that says that all the God figures and non-personal absolutes are alike real.⁶ That is, the Holy Trinity is one reality, Allah is another reality, Adonai, the Lord blessed be he, of rabbinic Judaism is another reality, Vishnu another, Shiva yet another, Brahman another again, and likewise the Tao, the Dharmakaya are all different realities. But consider the implications of this. Would it mean that the Holy Trinity

⁵ R. A. Nicholson, trans., *Rumi: Poet and Mystic* (London and Boston: Unwin, 1978), 166.

⁶ This is suggested by implication by Mark Heim (*The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001) when he proposes that the different ends sought by the different religions—the Christian heaven, the Muslim paradise, the Buddhist nirvana, etc.—are all equally real. For in order for them to be real the universe must be organized by the Christian Trinity, the Qur'anic Allah, the eternal Dharma, etc., and it cannot be organized by more than one of them.

presides over and is worshiped in Christian countries, the Allah of Islam in Muslim countries, the God of the Sikh faith in the Punjab, while the transpersonal focus of Buddhist meditation is real in Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Tibet, parts of China and Japan, and so on? This would be not only polytheism but also (to coin a phrase) polyabsolutism.

But is it a coherent possibility? I think not, for three reasons. One is that the monotheistic Gods are each defined as creator of everything other than God, and there can logically only be one such creator. A second is that a universe organized as the *non*-theistic traditions affirm is incompatible with there being even one such monotheistic God, let alone several. And third, several faiths are today mixed together in many countries and many cities, so that we would have to take the division of divine jurisdictions down to different cities and even to street level and indeed to individual houses. The picture becomes more and more incoherent the more it is spelled out. So, if we do not want to say any of these things, then what can we say? I suggest that the best religious account we can give of the global situation is that of a single ineffable Ultimate Reality whose universal presence is being differently conceived and experienced and responded to within the different human religious traditions.

WHY IT MATTERS

So that's my suggestion. But others among us have different suggestions, as is evident in the pages of this book. So let me end by asking, Why does all this matter? Indeed, does it matter? Well, yes, it does matter a very great deal. We live as part of a worldwide human community that is at war with itself. In many places men, women, and even children are killing and being killed in conflicts that are both validated and intensified by religion. And this is possible because each faith has traditionally made an absolute claim to be the one and only true faith. Today to insist on the unique superiority of your own faith is to be part of the problem. For how can there be stable peace between rival absolutes? In the words of the Catholic theologian Hans Küng: "There will be no peace among the peoples of this world without peace among the world religions."⁷ And I would add that there will be no real peace among the world religions so long as each thinks of itself as uniquely superior to all the others. Dialogue between the faiths must continue on an ever-increasing scale. But the only stable and enduring basis for peace will come about when dialogue leads to a mutual acceptance of the religions as different but equally valid relationships to the Ultimate Reality.

⁷ Küng, *Global Responsibility*, xv.

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