

# INTERRELIGIOUS Insight

a journal of dialogue and engagement

July 2006 Edition

## CREATIVE ENCOUNTERS

### **The Mystics' Contribution to the Interreligious Movement**

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When the twenty-four year old student Svetaketu returned home after studying all the Vedas, he was a “know-all”, “forbidding and conceited, considering himself well-read”. Recognizing this, his father asked him: “My dear son, have you ever asked for that instruction by which we hear what cannot be heard, by which we perceive what cannot be perceived, by which we know what cannot be known? Svetaketu replied, “What is that instruction?”<sup>1</sup>

Much of the proliferating literature on the relation of religions to each other<sup>2</sup>, learned as it is, seems like Svetaketu to have ignored that instruction, which is the mystic’s experience of oneness or union with all that is. This realization inspired some of the early pioneers of interfaith fellowship and still, I believe, has a significant contribution to make to the interfaith movement.

“The mystical experience,” in the words of Francis Younghusband, who founded the World Congress of Faiths seventy years ago, “is a sense of oneness with the Universal both in its totality and in all its parts.”<sup>3</sup> Like a profound piece of music or a great work of art it cannot be adequately expressed in words.

It was such an experience that changed Francis Younghusband’s life. In 1903, Younghusband, as an officer of the British Empire, led a mission to Lhasa. The day after signing a treaty with the Tibetans, as he wrote later in his book *Vital Religion*, he went off by himself to the mountains, feeling elated by the good will of his former foes. But then “elation grew to exultation, exultation to an exaltation which thrilled through me with overpowering intensity... I felt in touch with the flaming heart of the world.... A mighty joy-

giving Power was at work in the world.... Never again could I think evil. Never again could I bear enmity.”<sup>4</sup>

Younghusband, in convening the World Congress of Faiths, did not dwell on this experience.<sup>5</sup> Instead he talked about his travels in Asia which had brought him into close contact with Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Confucians. “I had deep converse with them on their religions,” he said in a broadcast, “it forced me to see a beauty in the depths of (their religions).”<sup>6</sup> He also spoke of the time when he had been run over in Belgium. “No one enquired... whether my religion was Hindu, Muslim or Christian, and if Christian whether I was Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant... They sprang to my help because of their fellow feeling. I was a human like themselves. What hurt me hurt them.”<sup>7</sup>

Our shared humanity, the enrichment of getting to know our neighbours of faiths other than our own, and the moral values held in common were reason enough to encourage a “fellowship of faiths”. WCF – a pioneering interfaith body – has never required its members to agree on a theory about the relationship of religions to each other, but many of those who have played a leading role have been inspired by mystical experiences similar to those of Francis Younghusband. Kathleen de Beaumont, one of the “wise women” of the Congress when I joined it over forty years ago, wrote of the spiritual awakening “when the flood of Being possesses a person and he becomes aware of union with his Source”. “We believe,” she said, “that, in the Great Unity, we are members one of another.”<sup>8</sup>

Those who have had such an experience find it more convincing than the claims that one religion has a monopoly of truth, even if some scriptures suggest that this is the case. Yet although this approach is subject at present to scholarly criticism, it can claim some theological and philosophical support for it. Moreover, those who experience the oneness of all life are inspired to struggle against all that inflicts suffering on others.

## **GOD IS ALWAYS GREATER**

The Indian Christian theologian, Stanley Samartha, said that Pluralism is “the homage which the finite mind pays to the inexhaustibility of the infinite”.<sup>9</sup> The mystical approach affirms that God is always greater than our understanding and that no doctrine can claim absolute truth. The Church Father Gregory of Nazianzus (329-89) asked:

*By what name shall I call upon you, Who are beyond all name*

*You, the Beyond-all, what name shall I give you?...All names are given to you and yet none can comprehend you. How shall I name you then, O you, the Beyond-all name?*<sup>10</sup>

Many mystics who claim to have experienced the holiness and presence of God agree that language fails them to describe the Holy One – even if many of them have written at length. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c.395) said, “This is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness.”<sup>11</sup> It is, he added, a “luminous darkness”. In Judaism, the concept of Ein Sof was applied to the Being of God as “that which is not conceivable by thought”. The Sufi tradition in Islam has a similar emphasis on the experience of the Divine Mystery, which is never fully captured in words. Despite the longing to see God with the eye of the heart, people will only see what God chooses to show them and not see God as he sees himself.<sup>12</sup> Mahayana Buddhism’s teaching about Emptiness implies that “Truth transcends our ability definitively to grasp, name, or conceive it.”<sup>13</sup> Hinduism speaks of nirguna Brahman – Brahman without attributes and beyond human description.

Because God can never be fully known, doctrines about God, even scriptures, are secondary authorities. They are like fingers pointing to the moon. This means that we have to recognise the limitations of the dogmatic teaching of our own religion, as well as of other religions. Equally, we should recognise that some aspect of the Divine is revealed in every faith community. The Sufi, Rumi, put this in a memorable sentence when he said of the religions, “The lamps are different but the Light is the same; it comes from beyond.”<sup>14</sup> This means that we can learn from spiritual traditions besides our own. Rabindranath Tagore said that to reject any part of humanity’s religious experience is to reject truth. Likewise Rumi taught that “There is a taste of Divine Being in the heart and soul of every religious community.”<sup>15</sup>

The recognition that there is a taste of the Divine in every religion gives a dynamism to dialogue, which is not just a matter of understanding each other but a shared search for a greater appreciation of the Divine. Just as people can learn to speak a language other than their native tongue, so I believe that with sufficient empathy one can at least to some extent enter into another tradition. I try now to read the Qur’an or the Gita or the Guru Granth Sahib with the same expectancy as I read the Bible. Faith communities are, as it were, trustees of their scriptures and sacred traditions, not just for themselves, but for all people.

Furthermore, it is the sense that the Divine is more glorious than any of our pictures that allows us on appropriate occasions to join in prayer and meditation with members of other religions. George Appleton, an Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem and chair of WCF, said in his welcome at one interfaith act of worship, “We stand in worship before the mystery of the final reality to whom or to which we give differing names, so great and deep and eternal that we can never fully understand the mystery of Being.”<sup>16</sup>

## **FAITH IS A RELATIONSHIP WITH THE REAL**

The mystic experience suggests that revelation should be seen in terms of relationship rather than propositions. Archbishop Michael Ramsey said that, in the Bible, the phrase “the truth of God”

means the reality of God himself, made known in the impact of his righteous purpose upon Israel. To this impact of the reality of God the various books of the Bible bear witness... No words, even inspired words, are wholly adequate to convey the reality of God.<sup>17</sup>

It is the known presence of God to which scriptures point and which it can re-ignite that gives it authority. Another archbishop, William Temple, said “revelation does not offer truth concerning God, but the Living God Himself”.<sup>18</sup> This is why I think for at least some Christians scripture has a secondary or derived authority and why all statements about God have a provisional nature.

Such a distinction seems to be present also in Hinduism. Raimundo Panikkar says, “Vedic faith is not primarily an intellectual assent... Vedic faith is previous to thinking and anterior to willing and deciding.”<sup>19</sup> In Buddhism too, “Enlightenment is not a matter of intellectual content, beliefs, words or ideas,” writes Rita Gross.<sup>20</sup>

Some Muslims make a similar distinction. Mona Siddiqui of Glasgow University said recently on UK radio, “To know Scripture is not necessarily to know God.” There is also a hadith, quoted by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in which God says “when someone recites or reads the Qur’an, that person is, as it were, entering into conversation with Me and I into

conversation with him or her.<sup>21</sup> Irfan Khan, in his *Insight Into the Qur'an*, insists that God wants to talk to us directly and this is what He is doing in the Qur'an. But, he says, many Muslims merely recite it or read other people's commentaries and do not open themselves to direct revelation.

In Judaism, there is the story of Rabbi Elisha Ben Avuyah. His father invited many prominent citizens to his son's circumcision, including two scholars, Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Eliezer. During the festivities, the two Torah scholars sat in a separate room and studied Torah, to the extent that fire from Heaven surrounded them. Avuyah asked the sages, "Why did you come to burn my house down?" They responded, "We are sitting and engaging in words of Torah." When Avuyah realized that such is the power of Torah, he decided his son Elisha would devote his life to Torah. The passage suggests that the study of Torah becomes a vehicle of God's presence.

Religions in all their diversity point beyond themselves to an encounter with the Divine, which can never be fully expressed in words. Almost always that encounter comes as a surprise and as something given from beyond, although the person to whom it comes may have been spiritually seeking for a long time.

### **MANY PERSPECTIVES**

The mystical awareness of the limits of language fits with philosophical questioning of our ability to speak in terms of "absolute truths". In Leonard Swidler's words, truth claims have been "deabsolutized". It is widely agreed that all statements about reality are conditioned by a person's historical setting, intention, culture, class and sex. Moreover, we recognise the limits of language. Reality may be observed from many perspectives, but language can only express one perspective at a time. Yet recognising that religious statements are provisional should not stop us committing ourselves to the truth as we see it. Doctors, for example, know that new treatments may become available, but they subscribe according, one hopes, to "best practice". There was a recent headline, "Scientists place their bets on relative certainty."

### **ONENESS WITH ALL LIFE**

Mystical experience, varied as it is, is usually not only a sense of oneness with the Divine, but with all life. Francis Younghusband, spoke of his experience at Lhasa as not only feeling "in touch with the flaming heart of the world, but of a mighty joy-giving power at work in the world – in me and every living thing." He concluded, "Never again could I think evil. Never again could I bear enmity. Joy had begotten love."<sup>22</sup>

Holy people, traditionally, have withdrawn from the world in their search for the Divine. In recent years, a new pattern of spirituality, which draws inspiration from all the great faiths, has emerged in which the pursuit of holiness takes place in the midst of a non-violent struggle for peace and justice, in the service of the poor and the protection of the environment.

Mahatma Gandhi once said:

*Man's ultimate aim is the realization of God and all his activities, social and religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavour, simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can be done only by service to all... If I could persuade myself that I could find Him in a Himalayan cave, I would proceed there at once, but I know that I cannot find*

*Him apart from humanity.*<sup>23</sup>

The Sikh teacher Baba Virsa Singh encourages everyone at his ashram to share in household chores, farming, and practical service to the poor, in accord with a verse in the Sikh scriptures which says,

*One who serves and seeks no recompense*

*Finds union with the Lord.*<sup>24</sup>

Maha Ghosanda, a Buddhist leader, came back from a monastic life in exile to help his people of Cambodia in their agony. And the Dalai Lama has said that he has been inspired by the Bodhisattva's vow,

*May I become at all times, both now and forever,*

*A protector for those without protection,*

*A guide for those who have lost their way,*

*A ship for those with oceans to cross,*

*A bridge for those with rivers to cross,*

*A sanctuary for those in danger,*

*A lamp for those in need of light,*

*A place of refuge for those in need of shelter,*

*And a servant to all those in need.*

The Qur'an recognises that "It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the West" but besides the basic beliefs of Islam, the righteous person "gives away wealth out of love for Him (Allah) to the near of kin and the orphans and the needy and the wayfarer..."<sup>25</sup> Jalal al-Din Rumi tells of the time when God rebuked Moses, saying, "I am God, I fell sick; but you did not come." Moses asked God to explain. God said again, "Why didn't you kindly ask after me when I was sick?" Moses answered, "O Lord, you are never ill. I don't understand: explain the meaning of these words." God said, "Yes, a favourite and chosen slave of mine fell sick. I am he. Consider well: his infirmity, his sickness is my sickness." This is reminiscent of Jesus' parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The righteous are surprised when the king says to them "I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your home, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me." Then the king explains, "I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me."<sup>26</sup>

The real test of our interfaith work is what it does to reduce violence and to relieve suffering. As Gandhi puts it in his Talisman,

*Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man whom you may have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him.*

In my book, *A Heart for the World: the Interfaith Alternative*, I try to move on from the generalised agreement on morals enshrined in the Global Ethic to see what the faiths say on issues such as the use of force, globalization and the environment. There is, I believe, enough agreement for us to present a radical alternative to the policies being pursued by our governments. As Hans Küng says in his Foreword, there is a loss of hope, we need to recapture this and present a vision that will empower people to work for change.

A prerequisite of this is to abandon exclusivism, to recognise the validity of other faith communities and to learn from each other. The mystic's vision, I believe, gives a spiritual

dynamism to the interfaith movement, which is missing from the necessary and welcome but limited promotion of good religious relations. This is why a small voluntary body, such as the World Congress of Faiths, still has a distinctive contribution to make to the world-wide interreligious movement.

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## NOTES

1 Chandogya Upanishad 6.1.3

2 A recent summary of varying Christian attitudes is to be found in Paul Knitter's *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002.

3 George Seaver, Francis Younghusband, John Murray, 1952, p. 324.

4 Francis Younghusband, *Vital Religion*, John Murray, 1940, pp. 3-4.

5 See Marcus Braybrooke, *A Wider Vision*, Oxford: Oneworld, 1996, p. 20.

6 Cited in *A Wider Vision*, p. 19.

7 Cited in *A Wider Vision*, p. 20.

8 Both references are from the WCF's journal, *Forum*, No. 21, June 1954, p. 21.

9 Stanley Samartha, *One Christ, Many Religions*, Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991, p. 4.

10 English translation is by Mary Rogers in *World Faiths*, No. 99, Summer, 1976.

11 *Life of Moses*, 2.163.

12 Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, New York: Paragon House, 1994, p. 277.

13 Sallie King, *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, Ed. Paul Knitter, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005, p. 97.

14 R. A. Nicholson, trans., *Rumi: Poet and Mystic*, London: Unwin, 1978, p. 166.

15 Rumi, *Mathnawi*, II, 3606, cited by Mahmut Aydin in *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, p. 224.

16 George Appleton, *World Faiths*, No 81, Autumn, 1970. Cited in *A Wider Vision*, pp. 122-23.

17 *New Peake Commentary on the Bible*, p. 6.

18 William Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, 1935, p. 322.

19 Raimundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977, p. 178.

20 *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, p. 82.

21 Hadith Qudsi is recorded in *Badi'u-z-Zaman Furuzabfar*. Cited by Cantwell Smith in his translation in *What is Scripture?*, London: SCM Press, 1993, p. 90.

22 A Wider Vision, p. 22.

23 Harijan, August 29, 1936.

24 Adi Granth, Gauri Sukmani, M.5.

25 The Qur'an 2, 177.

26 Matthew 25.35-40.