



**GOD'S**

**FAVOURITE COLOUR**

**IS TARTAN**

**tim firth**

CATHOLICS FOR A  CHANGING CHURCH

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A Both/And Approach to Reconciling  
Religious Differences

*Tim Firth*

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## INTRODUCTION

All human beings share the same spiritual human nature but everywhere we seem to be divided by our religions. Why is it that religions and people of good will reach out for their God but the different paths we take so often end up in intransigence, division and violence?

How can we reconcile what Vatican II called “that ray of truth which enlightens everyone”<sup>1</sup> with the multiplicity of different, genuinely held – but often contradictory – religious beliefs?

Some suggest that since religion is at the root of so much human division, the sooner we grow up and leave it behind the better we will be. But this is no solution because, like it or not, we are and always will be religious beings.

Others, committed to what they believe are the God-given truths enshrined in their religion, see no place for compromise because that would mean a betrayal of God’s truth. This does not help either because it remains stuck at the ‘either/or’ level of “I am right and you are wrong.”

So is there a way through this apparent impasse? I suggest that there is a way by moving beyond religious contradictions and divisions and realising that the opposites and paradoxes of our human experience and religions are contained in the one all-embracing Mystery which many call God. This is beyond our full human comprehension and it could be called ‘the both/and’ way.

I have come to this conviction from my own particular journey which has led me from experiencing the richness and limitations of one religious tradition in my forty plus years as a Catholic (seventeen of them as a priest), through the evaporation of meaning of many certainties of my former years to a place where I seem to have more questions than answers but where – for fleeting moments – I catch sight of the great Mystery of Being out of the corner of my eye: a Mystery which I cannot grasp but which I know is real.

One explanatory note: I use the word ‘God’, not in the specific sense as used by particular religions such as the Trinitarian Personal God of Christianity, but rather in the general sense which the English theologian Charles Davis did when he talked of the sacred as being “the unknown

1. Second Vatican Council, *Declaration on non-Christian Religions, Nostra Aetate*, n 2, ed Walter M. Abbot SJ, Geoffrey Chapman, 1966

beyond which lies higher or deeper than immediate reality. Man cannot master it. It is grasped only obscurely and so is usually apprehended and expressed symbolically.”<sup>2</sup>

## A JOURNEY FROM THE CASTLE TO THE WOOD

Once upon a time there was a magnificent castle surrounded by woods with hills in the distance. The castle was beautiful and very old. It was very safe and could keep out intruders because its massive stone walls were firmly built. Inside it was clean, warm in winter and pleasantly cool in summer. It was dry and kept out the rain and gales which sometimes swept across the woods and hammered at its walls. Everyone who lived in the castle knew what it was for. There was a good community spirit and most who lived there were good people. Each had their place and knew what they had to do, so the castle was well ordered and efficiently run. From its ramparts one could look out over the moat and over the woods outside towards the far away hills.

A boy was born in this castle and he grew up to be an active member of its community. When he was young, he would stand on the ramparts and watch the people who lived in the woods moving about and he would wonder what they were like. He would gaze at the distant hills and would wonder what lay on the other side. When he grew up he enjoyed being part of the expeditions which went out from the castle and saw that the people outside the castle were just like the people inside it. He enjoyed being with them and being closer to nature than he could be inside the castle. Although he enjoyed life inside the castle and had many friends there, he gradually came to realise that for him living in the castle had become like being in a prison and that he felt more at home outside its walls. He knew he had to leave.

So he went to live with the people in the woods. At times he missed the castle, his friends and the work he had done there. At times he even envied their security. But when he looked back at the castle it seemed so small compared to the vast woods and hills – it seemed to have been placed there rather than having grown there like the trees.

Living in the woods was very different. The woods and hills were beautiful too and much older than the castle. The woods were not always safe and he never knew if something unexpected would jump out at him. There were no walls – just vegetation which people could pass through easily. He would often get muddy, cold and wet and became very aware of the chang-

2. Charles Davis, *God's Grace in History*, p 14, Fontana, 1967

ing weather and seasons. As he travelled through the woods he soon discovered that the paths were not always clear and at times he could not see very far ahead – though from time to time he could glimpse open fields or mountain peaks in the distance. He made many friends on his journeys and met many fellow travellers – some of them had ideas which he could not agree with and others were very odd or seemed to have even less of an idea where they were going than he had. The castle had a deep moat of still water but here there were meandering streams of running water. The castle had a plan of its layout but there was no such thing for the wood. When he had looked down when he was living in the castle he would see stone floors or man-made carpets: in the woods he would see the living earth. When he had looked up from the castle walls he had seen the sky and stars and now in the woods when he looked up, he saw the same sky and stars which he had seen from the castle. And he understood that everyone could see the sky and all the stars wherever they were. He had been so sure of where he was when he was inside the castle; now he was not always so sure. Sometimes he would sing the old Negro spiritual: “I wonder while I wander and I wander while I wonder.”

This is my story. Could it be that it is the story of religions today?

### 1. WE ARE BOTH ONE AND MANY

*“God’s favourite colour is tartan”*

(Scottish Proverb)

Any attempt to reconcile religious difference which does not accept the paradox that we are both one and many will fail.

On the one hand we are all spiritual beings which is “that aspect of our nature – complementing the physical and psychological aspects – which awakens us to wonder, gives our lives meaning and calls us towards our higher self, usually expressed as a relationship with the transcendent.”<sup>3</sup> This is where we are one and where the seeds of reconciliation lie.

On the other hand there is religion which “is a human creation that has arrived comparatively recently in human history. It is a particular framework, which includes a belief system, a moral code, an authority structure and a form of worship, within which people find nourishment for the spiritual aspect of their lives and explore their spiritual journey in the company of others.”<sup>4</sup> As Diarmuid O’Murchu says “our religion is the

3. Adrian Smith, *The God Shift*, p 211, Liffey, 2004

4. Adrian Smith, *op. cit.* p 212.

local harbour that points to the vast ocean beyond, without which the harbour would never exist in the first place”<sup>5</sup> This is where we are different but also where the seeds of destructive division can lie.

I have always been very aware of the unity/difference paradox ever since as a small boy during the war I first met black people who were friendly American soldiers stationed near us and my reaction to them has always stuck in my mind – ‘just like me but different’. I was very much part of my first (non-Catholic) school but also conscious every day of difference when Jews and Catholics had to wait outside during morning prayers. One of the most vivid memories from my time in Rome, training for the Catholic priesthood, was the opening day of the Second Vatican Council where many of us students thwarted the non-existent Vatican security and sneaked into St. Peters and were with bishops from all over the world united in celebrating the liturgy in union with Pope John XXIII. Many years later, when I was working for Deloitte, one of the major global accountancy firms with responsibility for their international staff movements and cross-cultural training, I was constantly struck how professionals in the same business could be so different in their approach to their work. The religions can learn much from cross-cultural studies: what we see first in a culture (or religion) are the externals of different languages, rituals, behaviours and customs, but when we go deeper into the next layer of ‘the cultural onion’, we come to the norms, values and assumptions which fashion the externals and at this level similarities become more striking than differences until – at the core – there is the one human nature and at this level we find unity and not difference. Furthermore these studies help us analyse how different religions and cultures react to each other. We can react by withdrawing into our own familiar territory, become defensive and take refuge in our own expatriate group or religion (which perpetuates the divide, misses the chance to learn and – more importantly – rejects the other person.) Or we can observe the other and try to understand their behaviour and the values behind it. This leads to acceptance – though not necessarily agreement – and meeting as people. It is the reverse of what Napoleon said: “Never meet your enemy in the flesh because, if you do, you will realise he is human just as you are.”

Maybe it was this background which made a visit I paid to Jerusalem in 2000 such a shattering experience. This city has rightly been described as not just a problem but an emotion. On the one hand it was moving to be in a city which has been inhabited for four thousand years, to sense and almost touch the memorable figures of the past and to remember that in

5. Diarmuid O’Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality*, p 164, Gateway, 1997

this place millions of people — all children of Abraham and members of the three great religions of the Book — had prayed and searched for the one God in the 'Holy City'. But I also felt everywhere the simmering sense of division, hatred and potential violence between communities living next door to each other but separated by a million miles. I knew what Mark Twain meant when he said that "Jerusalem is a city polluted by religion." It was easy to see why the dominant religion here has changed eleven times since the time of Jesus and that each change has been accompanied by another wave of blood and slaughter. Even today in the Holy Sepulchre — the mother church of Christianity — relationships between the Christian denominations are so poisonous that brawls between clergy erupt during liturgical celebrations. I do not find it the slightest bit surprising that the authorities at the time of Jesus had to get rid of him because they could not cope with someone who preached a message of forgiveness and reconciliation. So he — like so many innocents before and since — was murdered in this city in the name of God. 'Holy City' indeed! 'Unholy City' is a more apt description.

One of my companions on this visit was an American colleague of no religious tradition who was utterly puzzled by what we had seen in the city. As she said: "All these people worship the same God but what went wrong?"

What went wrong? Jennifer's question puts bluntly the challenge of being one and many and the price we pay if we forget the lesson of unholy Jerusalem.

We are different from each other because we are part of the natural world which always diversifies — maybe not as spectacularly as insects do with their ten million different species! But we do diversify and we ignore this fact at our peril. Marshal Tito and the Soviet Kremlin, like all empires, tried to impose sameness on different cultures and religions, but when they went the lid blew off and the differences re-emerged. The denial of difference ignores its inevitability: "Whenever I hear about the thousands of species of spider, or the varieties of ants, or moles, or bats, patterns of differentiation so intricate and so varied that no one individual can fully comprehend their staggering complexity, I have to acknowledge that from the least to the greatest, from atoms and amoebas to solar systems and galaxies, the creative generative force seems to delight in the prodigal production of infinite variety. Creating has no truck with uniformity, cloning is an interloper and creativity exults in differentiation. Creativity



is multiple.”<sup>6</sup>

The Oxford philosopher Mary Midgely observes that we tend to erect sweeping monolithic thought patterns (such as the inevitability of progress or the omni-competence of science) which arise for understandable reasons but then gain a life of their own and become intellectual imperialism and imprisonment. Religions can do the same. This imperialism is “exclusive, an either/or approach, the conviction that only one very simple way of thought is rational.” But she also notes that we “do not need to choose one (world view) as infallible. Instead we had better bear them all in mind . . . the river that earlier maps show in different places may actually be several different rivers. Reality is always turning out to be a great deal more complex than people expect.”<sup>7</sup>

Difference is not just cultural, political or religious. It also arises because we look at the world in different ways: a scientist defines the human eye in terms of corneas and retinas but the poet will speak of pools of light and windows of the soul. Different cultures portray the human form in their art to reflect what they consider to be most important – so the small female figurines of the hunter-gatherer period have exaggerated breasts, stomach and sexual organs because womankind was seen primarily as the fertile giver and nourisher of life. The stereotyped, geometrical human portraits of ancient Egypt, which never changed over thousands of years, demonstrate that order, stability and permanence were central to their world-view.

Yet on the other hand we are the same and are meant to be one – not least because we have all come out of Africa.

When I was a hospital chaplain I soon learnt it was not the differences between people which mattered because everyone had the same worries and fears, suffering and pain and all their families had the same concerns and anxieties – well-off or poor, black or white, young or old, man or woman, Catholic, Muslim Jew or Agnostic. At the many funerals I have conducted and attended, the memories which people recall of their lost ones and the tributes they make to them focus more on their humanity as a person than on their achievements. It is as if we need these profoundly emotional moments to remind us that we all share the same human nature and that it is genuine humanity which communicates with us and enriches us rather than our particular achievements.

6. Bill Darlison, *The Penultimate Truth*, pp 31-2, Darlison, Dublin, 1998

7. Mary Midgely, *The Myths We Live By*, pp 21, 24, Routledge, 1997

The Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sachs, has made one of the most helpful theological contributions to getting the balance between oneness and difference.<sup>8</sup> He points out that Genesis at first describes a global world, a monoculture and one Covenant by God with all mankind through Noah. But after Babel, God does not attempt a global Covenant again and there comes about a multiplicity of languages, cultures, nations, civilisations and religions – one of which is his chosen people Israel. Sachs argues that “God, the creator of humanity, having made a covenant with all humanity, then turns to one people and commands it to be different in order to teach humanity the dignity of difference . . . our *particularity is our window on universality* . . . God no more wants all faiths and cultures to be the same than a loving parent wants his or her children to be the same . . . we serve God, author of diversity, by respecting diversity . . . [this issue] has proved to be the most difficult in the history of human interaction, namely the problem of the stranger, the one who is not like us.”<sup>9</sup>

Words like ‘language’ and ‘religion’ are concepts which we develop from the fact that people speak actual languages such as Russian or Swahili. We do not speak language or follow religion: rather we speak different languages and follow different religions.

If the emphasis is primarily on achieving *one* religion – then we slip easily into religious imperialism which is forced on others and attempts to suppress difference. If the emphasis is primarily on the many *different* religions then fragmentation into different beliefs follows without a sense of common bond which inevitably leads to mutual suspicion if not violence. Our challenge is to grasp the paradox that we are *both* many *and* yet one. These often appear to us as opposites. But are they?

## 2. INADEQUATE APPROACHES TO RECONCILING THE ONE AND THE MANY

*“Better to have both rather than one”*

(Principle of theological greed)

Thankfully today many religious believers and those of no religious tradition take seriously the task of reconciling “the ray of truth which enlightens everyone” with the multiplicity of contradictory religious beliefs.

Some attempts tend to originate from outside the religions and have come

8. Jonathon Sachs, *The Dignity of Difference*, Continuum, 2002

9. Jonathon Sachs, *op. cit.* pp 50-52.

about largely because of disgust at the violence and division which religion has caused.

One such attempt could be called 'the lowest common denominator' which seeks to establish agreement on basic beliefs and let the religions go their own way on secondary matters and believers could pick and choose on an *à la carte* basis what appeals to them in the traditions.

But this rather intellectual approach is like a religious Esperanto and will not work for long because it lacks heart and cultural roots and does scant justice to the importance of religion in peoples' lives.

Another is the widespread 'action is more important than beliefs' conviction which stems from the notion that beliefs are the root cause of religious division – an idea well expressed by Prime Minister Atlee who remarked "I don't go for the mumbo jumbo but I go for the ethics of Christianity." This approach often appeals to the Judaic scriptures which are the story of God's actions and guides to right living rather than doctrinal questions of who or what God is.

But the flaw in this approach is that human actions are not free floating without value or truth tickets attached. How we act stems from what we consider to be true – as Aquinas said "*agere sequitur esse*" ("What we do follows from who we are"). For example in welfare work, underlying beliefs frequently emerge and cause major disagreements as to what action is appropriate, as in the areas of population control and HIV/AIDS, where many Catholics and Muslims oppose any solutions which involve artificial contraception or are perceived to favour abortion.<sup>10</sup>

Another approach is the 'privatising religion' view which considers religion to be a private matter which should be kept firmly out of the public and political arena – as Elizabeth I said "I do not wish to make windows in men's souls." Modern secular democracies guard jealously their icons of church/state separation and the detachment of religion from political, intellectual and educational affairs and they view with deepest suspicion any attempt – or perceived attempt – by religion to reverse these trends. Hence fear of the influence of the religious right over President Bush, the Western horror of Shariah law and the unease at Pope John Paul II's assertion that the purpose of freedom is for man to seek the truth, which seemed to be an endorsement of democracy only in so far as it permitted the promotion of a particular religious view of the truth and morality.

10. Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, Ignatius Press, 2004 and Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards the World Religions*, New York, 1985

Words like those of the founder of the American militant Protestant anti-abortion group *Operation Rescue* – “Our goal is a Christian nation . . . we are called by God to conquer this country . . . we don’t want pluralism . . . we want theocracy” – set the alarm bells ringing for the modern secular world.

But pushing religion into a corner and hoping it stays there will not work because religious believers will inevitably express their beliefs in action – “Love thy neighbour as thyself” – and this means involvement in the world and its issues. The contribution of the religions to justice and peace work, to reconciliation, to care of the poor and marginalized is often overlooked<sup>11</sup> – it is rarely acknowledged that 70% of the work for Aids sufferers in Africa is carried out by faith-based groups. There are clear signs today that the religions will not be put in their place, as exemplified by Benedict XVI’s opposition to secularism and the “dictatorship of relativism.” Furthermore, while from a Western European perspective formal religion may seem to be fading fast, this is the exception to the world-wide trend. Even in our own continent there are many signs of religious vitality such as the Pentecostalist and Evangelical movements and the spiritual searching of many who “believe even if they do not belong (to a formal religion).” The picture on other continents is one of growth in Islam, Christianity, Evangelical Protestantism and fundamentalism. As Peter Berger has said, “the greater part of the world is as furiously religious as ever.”<sup>12</sup>

These three approaches are ultimately inadequate because they seriously underestimate the place which religion still holds in the lives of many people who believe that the values of God should always take precedence over the values of the world.

Within the religions themselves there are also attempts to cope with our challenge. One could be called ‘guarding the pearl of great price’ which – at least in its Christian form – tends to focus on the gift of salvation through Jesus, often in a rather individualistic way. There is less focus on the outside world which can be forgotten when we are safely tucked up in our own community and our religious concerns looms so large that they obscure the world beyond. Our own religious tradition is at the centre and the yardstick by which we measure the rest of the world.

But staying in one’s own holy huddle fails to grasp that the religions are

11. Douglas Johnston & Cynthia Sampson, *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, Oxford, 1994

12. Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case*, Darton Longman Todd, 2002

in the world and – unwelcome as it may be at times – they cannot duck the questions and challenges which the world throws at it. One such challenge is the need to reconcile religious differences. I was deeply unimpressed when, at an Alpha course meeting, I asked how people who were not Christians or had never heard of Jesus could be saved and the reply was that was God’s problem and not ours. It *is* our problem.

Another approach is ‘the conversion of the non-believer’. If I have been given something precious I naturally want to share it with others and in some religions – such as Christianity and Islam – the missionary command of their founders to make disciples of all nations is clear and unambiguous.

But it seems unlikely that anyone religion will ever actually convert the rest of the world to its own beliefs: after two thousand years of intense missionary activity, Catholicism has spread to only 17% of the world’s population. And even if there was to be only one religion, history shows that it would not be long before it split into competing groups. Furthermore, as we have seen, difference is a human characteristic and one human culture and one global religion is not only unlikely to happen but would contradict our diversifying nature.

Most importantly however, both the ‘pearl of great price’ and ‘the conversion of the non-believer’ approaches remain firmly in the ‘either/or’ and ‘us/them’ mould. ‘We’ are called to change ‘them’ because ‘we’ have the totality of truth and ‘they’ do not. Holding such a view point makes the reconciliation of religious seem a very remote possibility.

A more promising approach at first sight is that of Inter-Faith Dialogue and Ecumenism which have made crucially important contributions towards overcoming religious division. “That they may be One” is not just a compelling call by religious leaders but it has seeped into the consciousness of religious believers and become a hugely effective popular movement where believers of different religions meet, share their spiritual journeys and are increasingly aware that we all worship the One God. In the Catholic tradition the words of Vatican II “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in the [non-Christian] religions”<sup>13</sup> have become the spur to exploring how to hold belief in Christ as the universal saviour while recognising the positive salvific significance of other religions and “the elements of truth and holiness” they contain.<sup>14</sup>

13. Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, op. cit. n 2.

14. Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate*, op. cit. n 2.

The past 'us/them' of "no salvation outside the church" has mercifully gone in favour of inclusive thinking. The Anglican-Roman Catholic (ARCIC) Statements tried to produce a form of words in which both churches could recognise their own beliefs. Catholic theologians such as von Balthasar and de Lubac accepted that other religions could have a valid natural knowledge of God while Karl Rahner went further with his model of the 'anonymous Christian' which acknowledges the supernatural truth in other religions. Bishop Christopher Butler urged that "the church's primary task is not to tell what is invalid but what is valid",<sup>15</sup> and Jacques Dupuis argued that the unique Christ event does not exhaust the activity of the Word and Spirit of God working elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> This approach is refreshing because it takes seriously the *fact* of religious difference and sees in it a way of deepening our understanding of God and of mankind.

But welcome as they are, inter-faith and ecumenical endeavours suffer from inherent limitations. In the first place, by often focusing on creeds and doctrines, the contradictions between the religions are highlighted. In 2002 the world's religious leaders assembled for the second time in Assisi and after the testimonies for peace, the leaders separated to pray. "We have a single goal and shared intention," John Paul II declared, "but we will pray in different ways, respecting one another's religious traditions." He argued that this was not meant to show opposition or disdain for other religions but to protect against relativism.<sup>17</sup> This was a clear instance that the main consideration was fear of watering down one's own creeds rather than taking the risk of letting the Spirit blow where it wills. Secondly religions and theologies have got so hooked on the importance of creeds and doctrines that they elevate them to a level where they appear to encapsulate the truth. But since creeds and doctrines are human words and the product of human reasoning they can never do this and to foster the impression that they can is a deception. Thirdly, this approach takes place *within* particular religious traditions and the focus is on religion which is never more than a means to an end.

But the greatest limitation is that it still remains in the realm of the 'us/them' and 'either/or' and here it hits the buffers and comes to a stop. If this happens to even the best willed religious dialogue, is there a way ahead?

15. Christopher Butler OSB, *The Tablet*: 17 February & 3 March 1973.

16. Jacques Dupuis S.J., *Christianity and the Religions*, Darton Longman Todd, 2001.

17. *The Tablet*, 2 February 2002.



Jacques Dupuis wrote that a 'qualitative leap' is required if we are to develop a deeper appreciation of the religious traditions and entertain more open and fruitful relations with each other.

### 3. THE WAY AHEAD: THE "BOTH/AND" WAY

*"When we see two people locked in dispute, almost invariably neither is wholly right. The truth lies not so much as at some halfway point between them as in some third position, from which their opposing views can be seen in a wider and clearer perspective which transcends them both."*

(Christopher Booker.)<sup>18</sup>

In the classic film which told the story of the trial in 1925 of a young teacher in the American Bible Belt who was convicted of teaching heresy by teaching Darwin's ideas on evolution rather than creation in seven days, the defending attorney was left alone in the deserted courtroom at the end of the trial. He gathered up his bible and the *Origin of Species* and with a wry smile tucked them both under his arm. He was a 'both/and' man because he knew that both books held wisdom and truth and by having them both he set them both on a wider canvas. To have had only one would have been to miss the whole picture and to have misunderstood the purpose of each book.

So what exactly do I mean by the 'both/and' way? The most helpful explanation is to contrast it with the 'either/or' way. Supplied with sufficient evidence, our reasoning process forces our minds to conclude that such and such is the case. So for example when I see a furry, four-legged animal which purrs I conclude it is a cat and – by implication – I am also saying it is not a frog. This is the principle of contradiction whereby our animal cannot both be a cat and a frog. It is either one or the other. Furthermore, to say that this animal is a frog is a false statement. Religious creeds and doctrines are like this. In the Christian tradition it is accepted that there is enough evidence to state that Jesus is the unique Son of God and the one saviour of all mankind and therefore – by implication – he is not just a good man. Jesus either is the one saviour or he is not. He cannot be both. Or again Catholic doctrine maintains that the substances of the bread and wine in the Eucharist are changed into the substances of the Lord's body and blood whereas the Protestant doctrine holds that the blessing of the bread and wine does not effect such a change. According to the principle of contradiction, only one of these doctrines can be true and the other must

18. Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Continuum, 2004, p.569.

be false or deficient. This is why the principle of contradiction prevents creeds and doctrines going beyond the 'either/or' – because either one doctrine or the opposite is the authentic interpretation of the truth.

It does not follow from this that creeds and doctrines are not important. Quite the contrary. As Kant wisely observed “any religion which declares war on reason will end in dangerous superstition”. All religions develop their creeds and doctrines because we are intelligent beings and will inevitably ask questions about our beliefs: “Are they true?”, “What do they mean?”, “Do they correspond to my experience?” The basic Christian creeds emerged from the struggles with such questions “Was Jesus God or man or both?” or “How can the one God be Father, Son and Spirit?” But these creeds and doctrines, valuable as they are, are on the 'either/or' level.

The 'Eureka' break-through moment for me came when I discovered Cyprian Smith's *The Way of Paradox: Spiritual life as taught by Meister Eckhart*. This thirteenth century Dominican friar understood the reality of God as something that can only be grasped within the tension and clash of opposites and he understood that our spiritual journey is founded on this tension of opposites: “If the eye of the heart were fully open, and we had attained complete divine knowledge, we would see that contraries are all contained finally in an all-embracing unity: God and man, pleasure and pain, success and failure are ultimately one in God . . . God is the coming together of opposites . . . the truth lies not in the affirmation or denial (of a statement) but in the tug of war between the two. This is baffling for the normal human mind which works on the logical principle of contradiction according to which a proposition cannot both be true and false at one and the same time. But according to Eckhart, that is exactly what the highest truth is. It transcends the principle of contradiction and can be grasped only through paradox”.<sup>19</sup>

This is precisely what I mean by the 'both/and' way. It has echoes in the psychology of Carl Jung who distinguished between what he called the 'ego' – which gives each of us a sense of our own individual identity, separate from everyone and everything else in the world (and is the root of our 'either/or' instinct) – and the 'self', which can overcome this dualism because it is the deeper centre of our personality which connects us with our selfless core instincts. It is the self which links us with the totality of life outside the demands of the 'ego'.<sup>20</sup>

19. Cyprian Smith OSB, *The Way of Paradox: Meister Eckhart*, Paulist, 1987.

20. Christopher Booker, op. cit. and Freida Fordham, *An Introduction to Jung's Psychology*, Penguin, 1986, pp. 62-63.



The highest truth and the totality of our selves – which transcend the principle of contradiction – can only be grasped through the mystery of paradox. And nowhere is paradox more important than in the realm of religious truth where there is the paradox of knowing God and yet not knowing God. To claim that the way to the highest truth lies in assenting to one particular set of religious creeds or doctrines is to impoverish the human experience of the highest truth by confining it to just one side of the paradox.

Most religions today recognise that those whose creeds differ from, and sometimes flatly contradict, their own can still find their way to the highest truth. This is a tacit acceptance of the validity of the notion of paradox. It is interesting that the Oxford English Dictionary definition of paradox as “seemingly absurd though perhaps really a well founded statement” suggests that paradox sits uneasily with the sharp edges of statements and propositions. The difficulty of living with paradox is a particularly Western problem with our heritage of Greek philosophy and the Enlightenment. We have become so wedded to thinking of truth as something which is primarily expressed in form of propositions that we view other ways of thinking which do not have the same clear and unambiguous meanings with suspicion as woolly thinking or ducking the issue of what is true. They are dismissed as fables or stories or picture-thinking and are not really true. They are seen as a cloak for relativism which reduces truth to what a person thinks it is. They do not give us the security which unambiguous rational thinking or science provides. They are the things which artists and novelists and film directors and what we arrogantly call ‘primitive’ religions go in for, but they are not ultimately serious contributions to truth. But we should remember that while the early Latin and Greek churches were slogging it out thinking out the doctrine of the Trinity, the Celtic church expressed the same idea, not in reasoned argument, but by drawing a simple symbol of a triangle - thereby saving themselves a great deal of Angst and bad feeling!

The ‘both/and’ way of paradox also guards against the danger of religion becoming reduced to an ideology and a philosophy based on rational arguments and propositions. Paradox reminds us – as Pascal put it – that “the heart has its reasons which reason does not know of.”

The practical counterpart of the ‘either/or’ in human living is the ‘us/them’ mentality. We are social animals and inevitably coalesce into groups, tribes, nations – and religions. So, this easily becomes a cause for division because ‘we have truth’, and ‘we’ are the chosen people. That is why every nation has its war memorials, street names and rituals which

recall its victories in past conflicts.

But there is a greater victory which we humans can achieve. It is the victory of reconciliation. The Oxford Dictionary defines reconciliation as “to make friendly after estrangement . . . to heal . . . to harmonise by argument or practice apparently conflicting facts, statements, qualities, actions”. Those old enough will remember the thrill of hope felt by millions when President Sadat of Egypt and the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin met in person for the first time or when Nelson Mandela emerged smiling from prison without a word of recrimination for the past, but with a message of reconciliation to build a new ‘rainbow nation’. The chapel of New College Oxford has a vast war memorial but underneath there is a smaller one which reads: “In memory of the members of this college, who coming from a foreign land, entered into the inheritance of this place and returning, fought and died for their country in the war 1914-1918”, followed by the names of three German students. Who was the visionary reconciler who caused this second memorial to be added?

Reconciliation is an acceptance of both difference and unity. It is accepting others as they are and not demanding they become like us. It is untidy because it does not have clear boundaries but it leads us deeper into the Mystery beyond in a way that ‘us and them’ can never do.

What is fundamental about reconciliation is that recognises that relationship is the essence of all being. It takes two to tango otherwise there is no tango. So, by definition, relationship implies at least two. There can be no relationship if there is no other. Relationship implies both union and otherness. Martin Buber, the Austrian Jewish thinker and mystic, spent a life-time pondering the relational nature of being and in his famous work *I and Thou* he reflects that “I-Thou establishes relation . . . here is the cradle of real life . . . the Thou meets me through grace, it is not found by seeking, but I step into direct relation with it . . . all real living is meeting . . . the relation to the Thou is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge and no fancy intervene between *I and Thou*<sup>21</sup>

Buber gives us the clue in our wrestling with the dilemma of unity and religious difference -namely that personal relationship is the platform on which everything else rests. Creeds, doctrines and community are but the clothes which religion wears and which should never be the primary focus. Religion must not be like the fool in the Zen proverb: “I pointed to the moon and the fool looked at my finger”. The ‘either/or’ are the clothes but the I-Thou of relationship and paradox are the “cradle of real life” because

21. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, T & T Clarke, 1958.

there we discover both union and difference.

At the heart of Hinduism there is the trilogy of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu. At the heart of Christianity there is the trinity of Father, Son and Spirit. These profound religious myths – echoed in different ways in most religions – try to express that the nature of the ultimate Mystery of Being or God is relationship where there exists both unity and difference.

#### 4. THE 'BOTH/AND' WAY OF BELIEVING

*"Mystery is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be enjoyed"*

(Brian Boobhyer)

Believing is one of our most basic human activities and religion is one of its expressions. The briefest glance at some of its main characteristics demonstrate it to be – together with loving – the most profound 'both/and' way.

In the old film *Quo Vadis*, the Emperor Nero, played by Peter Ustinov in his inimitable style, entered a great hall packed with Roman courtiers. As he settled back on his couch, he picked up some rose-tinted spectacles, looked through them at the assembled guests and remarked, "all the same old rose-tinted faces."

Believing is like that. Who or what we ultimately believe *in* provides us with a basis for living and a convincing interpretation of life. It is the way we look at reality, the way we interpret the world around us and the way we deal with the questions which living raises.

It is an activity, a verb which indicates an ever-changing and open-ended process common to all humanity – as opposed to the articulation of this process in our 'beliefs'. These are expressed in creeds, doctrines and practices (sometimes called 'the faith') which are all nouns indicating static realities based on the 'either/or' principle of contradiction. Believing unifies: beliefs can and do divide. We need to move beyond our different 'either/or' beliefs to the realisation that we all believe in one ultimate reality. As the Hindu Vedas puts it: "The truth is one, though the sages speak of it by many names." If we fail to do this, the comment of Ludovic Kennedy will come true: "Believing may be what people die for but doctrines can be what people kill for."<sup>22</sup>

Many factors move us to believe in *this* interpretation of reality rather

22. Denis Lucas, *A Vital Distinction: Faith and Belief*, The Month 1989

than *that* interpretation and they all carry us beyond the 'either/or' way. In the first place our minds must be convinced that it is not against reason to believe. If we are not intellectually convinced, believing becomes like a formless jellyfish stranded on the beach – a shapeless lump but with the dangerous poisons of irrationality or unchecked emotion. It would literally be madness to believe in something which our minds told us was not true or did not exist – in the same way that it would be nonsense to love someone who did not exist. But – and this is the crucial point – believing is not the last step of the reasoning process as in our judgment that "This is a cat" or "Two plus two equals four." If believing were only this, it would be the same as scientific or philosophical judgments. Believing is more than such judgments but is re-assured that it is not contrary to reason to believe in realities which cannot be fully comprehended by our minds. The intellectual part of believing is like the buttresses of a building which support it: take them away and the building may well collapse, but they are not the building itself.

Believing is to enter into an 'I-Thou' relationship. It is like knowing a person as opposed to knowing *about* them. Christians believe *in* Jesus, not because he offered an ethic or creed to accept but because they love him. Little children, to whom belongs the kingdom of God, the mentally handicapped and the uneducated, may know little *about* God but they know God. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest writers *about* God, rated as straw all his scholarly work about God. The Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan describes believing as the process of achieving human authenticity by entering a relationship of love when we move beyond the immediate physical world by our minds asking the 'what?' and 'why?' and 'how?' and 'whether' questions and our reflecting on morality questions when we ask the 'is it worthwhile, is it good?' questions. "All this is our capacity for self-transcendence. That capacity becomes an actuality when one *falls in love*. Then one's being becomes being-in-love. Such being-in-love has its antecedents, its causes, its conditions, its occasions. But once it has blossomed forth and as long as it lasts, it takes over. It is the first principle. From it flow one's desires and fears, one's joys and sorrows, one's discernment of values, one's decisions and deeds . . . only secondarily do there arise the questions of God's existence and nature and they are the questions of the lover trying to know him."<sup>23</sup>

Another crucial factor in believing is trust – 'walking to the edge of the light and taking one more step'. It has been wisely said that the opposite

23. Bernard Lonergan SJ, *Method in Theology*, pp.104-116, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972.

of believing is not doubt but certainty – not being like the dwarves in Nania who “could not be taken out because they feared being taken in.” To trust is to take risks: our minds may tell us it is reasonable to believe but do I take the step of actually believing? I am not forced to believe because I have a free choice. Will I respond to that ultimate reality (or God) which I believe *in*? Will I enter into that relationship which will give me everything but will also make costly demands on me? Will I let myself fall in love and be carried beyond the conclusions of my mind into the embrace of the mysterious? Or will I withdraw, refuse and remain safely in familiar territory where I can be sure, comfortable and ‘certain’? Abraham is called the father of all believers because of his trust, Martin Luther understood believing above all as being ‘fiduciary’ (trusting) and Catholic tradition is clear that “We believe that what God has revealed is true, not because of the intrinsic truth of things is recognised by the light of natural reason, but because of the authority of God himself who reveals them.”<sup>24</sup> As the theologian Brian Cantwell Smith has explained, the traditional phrase ‘*Credo ut intelligam*’ (‘I believe that I may understand’) should be translated as “I commit myself in order that I may understand” because ‘*credo*’ (‘I believe’) comes from the two words ‘to give’ (‘*do*’) ‘my heart’ (‘*cor*’).” You must live in a certain way and then you will encounter within a sacred presence.<sup>25</sup>

Believing is life-giving because it nourishes our whole being and generates energy – not just when we are fit and well, but also when we are suffering, grieving, failing or frightened. We have an in-built compass to believe in what our instinct tells us will give us life and hope. I hope we have all felt the thrill of simply knowing that what I believe in is true. Rather like Achille Ratti (the future Pope Pius XI) when he was climbing in the Alps and was surprised by a magnificent panorama on reaching a ridge, whereupon his guide simply said “*Ici nous prions*” (“Here we pray”). These ‘*Ici nous prions*’ moments are when we are confronted by the unrestricted horizon of the Mystery of Being – what Augustine called the ‘illumination’ of our whole being and not just of our reason.

Believing is in stark contrast to the ‘either/or’ way because it holds onto paradoxes and apparent contradictions in a way that reasoning cannot: “Believing is knowing, yet not knowing; being sure, yet unsure; having certainty, yet being uncertain; and always the end is shrouded in mist.”<sup>26</sup>

24. First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, n 3, Documents of the Catholic Church, Ed J. Neuner SJ & J. Dupuis SJ, Mercier, 1953.

25. Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase*, p 328, Harper Collins, 2004.

26. Rex Chapman, *Saint Julian's Newsletter*, September 2005.

Our 'either/or' minds are uncomfortable with loose ends and unresolved questions but believing is full of these because it has not arrived – and never will – at defined and non-negotiable certainties. Why?

Because believing is a relationship and like all relationships, it waxes and wanes and changes and if it does not, it enters a state of equilibrium – which a fellow student of mine in Rome once said is an apt word for death. This is why at one time of our lives we can believe – despite difficulties and doubts – because the tide for believing is stronger than the tide for disbelieving – as I found in my own life when I could carry on as a Catholic priest in good faith while dissenting from many church teachings, such as its view of artificial contraception, or the replacing of the vision of Vatican II with the centralised authoritarian rule of John Paul II. But when the basic believing relationship shifts or – for whatever reasons – loses its meaning, then we have to move on to a new stage – as I had to, when the understanding of God as a person, Jesus as uniquely divine and the universal saviour and the church as being of divine origin ceased to be convincing interpretations of reality and a basis for living. I could no longer in good conscience call myself a Catholic or a Christian – nor was I being honest to Catholics who shared their confidences with me or came to confession, assuming that I as a priest shared their basic beliefs, when in fact I no longer did.

For a time after leaving the church, everything in me seemed to be crying out 'There is no God' – at least not in the sense that Christians understand that word. Maybe this was because until this point what I believed in had been so identified with the God as expressed in the creeds and beliefs of Christianity, that when those beliefs ceased to reflect what I ultimately believed in I mistook this vacuum as a sign of not believing. But gradually it dawned on me that I had now to trust in a new and more unconditional way that there was a meaning to life and existence than when I had had the life-giving support of the believing Christian community and its traditions as well as the securities of my own beliefs and intellectual convictions. Believing became more risky without the certainties of the 'either/or' and more beset with puzzling paradoxes. The greatest of these is being in awe of the Mystery of Being which is a reality which we humans call sacred – a reality which we do not create, a reality which is bigger than we are, a reality we cannot comprehend but which nonetheless we are part of and connected to, a reality which lays obligations upon us if we are to be truly human: yet at the same time we get glimpses of this Mystery (whom many call God) through good people and their witness, through symbols, art, metaphors or stories as much as

through the wisdom of the religions. It is not just 'both/and' but 'both/and, and, and, and . . .'

This short autobiographical excursion into one person's (unfinished and changing) believing journey perhaps illustrates the glorious jumble of factors which add up to throwing the switch for us to believe in this ultimate reality and this particular interpretation of it – factors which will carry more or less weight for each one of us because each of us is unique. There are the intellectual and the trusting elements already referred to, but there are also the 'cloud of witnesses' to reassure us that our religious tradition is not deluded, there are those people whose way of life demonstrate to us that believing works in practice. There are the many cultural and historical traditions which make us feel comfortable within a particular believing tradition – as the Dalai Llama once said that the basic reason he was a Buddhist was that he was born in Tibet! There are the predispositions of our own personalities which made the dynamic and passionate Paul so different from the gentle author of the fourth gospel and led each of them to give their own slant on believing in Jesus.

But there is another essential element to believing – it is a seeking of value and what is good. It is the basis of moral living.<sup>27</sup> It is not enough to say "I believe" – after all Pol Pot and Hitler believed. Believing lays obligations on us so that we are not totally free agents. It brings with it what Bonhoeffer called 'the cost of discipleship' or what St. Paul and Vatican II called 'the obedience of faith . . . by which man entrusts his whole self freely to God.'<sup>28</sup> Obedience comes from the Latin 'ob-audiens' which means 'listening' – listening to our consciences and attending to the Mystery of Being (or God). Peter Berger in his *Rumour of Angels* describes a number of 'signals of the transcendent' – "phenomena found within the domain of our natural reality but which appear to point beyond that reality" – and one of these is the 'argument from damnation', by which he means our disagreement and condemnation of certain actions within ourselves or in others which is an "absolute and compelling necessity, irrespective of how the case is explained or of what practical consequences one may wish to draw from it."<sup>29</sup> When we disagree with or condemn an action as evil, it is not on the 'either/or' basis of contradictory beliefs but because of the absolute nature of the Mystery of Being itself in which we

27. Bernard Lonergan, op. cit., p 104

28. Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum* n 5, op. cit.

29. Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels*, pp 70 & 85-6, Pelican, 1971.

believe – the Mystery which we saw above is where unity and difference both exist. We are crying out against the violation and betrayal of Mystery itself: either through the betrayal of unity by tearing apart of what is meant to be one through violence or lack of love, or by suppressing or controlling the unique difference of other people by treating them as objects or violating their reputation, traditions, religion or possessions.

The ‘both/and’ way of believing is key to the reconciling of religious difference. When we share the experience of believing – rather than just comparing beliefs – and share as fellow believing people, we find that we are one in our beliefs in a way we never dreamed of and we gain deeper insights into that ultimate Mystery in which we all believe in one way or another. To hear a Christian or Muslim speak of the love they have for God or Allah and the presence of God or Allah which they have felt in their own lives, reveals to me that ultimate reality is all about relationships. To hear Jews speak of the enduring trust they have in Yahweh (despite the horrors which have been inflicted on the their race) reveals to me that there is an ultimate reality which gives meaning to life – even if I do not understand. To hear former Christians, or Christians who feel alienated from their churches, tell of how they have had to set out on a new spiritual journey – often full of uncertainty and often lonely – reminds me that we can never rest satisfied that we have grasped the ultimate reality. To hear those who follow the wisdom of the old religions, or find wisdom in the so-called ‘New Age’ ways, speak of how we humans are linked to the whole cosmos, to nature and all life, reminds me that the ultimate reality in which I believe in is not revealed to just one faith-tradition but is primarily revealed in creation itself. To hear artists describe how through their art and creativity they discover more of the unseen mystery of life and existence, reveals to me that the ultimate reality in which I believe is never capable of being adequately described in words alone. To see those who deny that there is any God or a reality beyond this life – or those agnostics who say they do not know whether such a reality beyond actually exists – and yet who are totally committed to working for justice and peace or the alleviation of suffering, reveals to me that the ultimate reality in which I believe is the call to love one another.

As Jean Vanier, the founder the *L’Arche* communities, once said, “Too much inter-religious dialogue begins with theology and spirituality, in a comparison of belief systems and so gets stuck. You get to a point where you ask ‘Are Jesus and Muhammad the same?’ Either you say yes or you say no. Better to ask ‘What does it mean to be a human being and how do



human beings grow? What is freedom, what is human maturity?' Religious beliefs can be tackled later after the discovery of a shared humanity and the mutual acceptance of the other."<sup>30</sup>

## 5. THE 'BOTH/AND' WAYS OF PRAYER, ART, MYTHS, STORIES AND SYMBOLS.

*"The moment we want to say who someone is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is and we begin to describe a character or type with the result that his uniqueness escapes us. We can surmount this problem only with a story: who somebody is we can only know by knowing the story of which he himself is the hero."*

(John Navone)<sup>31</sup>

In comparing religion with prayer, art, myths and symbols the most obvious difference is that religion is so often divisive, whereas the others tend to unify across cultural and religious boundaries. The root reason for this difference is the importance which the religions attach to their creeds and doctrines – based as they are on the principle of contradiction – and so remaining trapped in the impasse of the 'either/or'. Although not intending to, religion can give the impression that human knowledge – and the principle of contradiction – is placed above the unknowable and paradoxical Mystery of Being and attempts to fit this Mystery into human thought patterns. This is to crave 'certainty' as a top priority and to fear journeying into the uncharted waters of unknowable Mystery.

But the religions must make this journey if their differences are ever to be reconciled. They need to learn from the 'both/and' ways of prayer, art, myths, stories and symbols because (particularly in Western Christianity – where the theologians have mainly been men) they have tended to see religious truth as primarily being enshrined in propositions and creeds and so give us a lop-sided, left-brain, yang, verbal and analytic view of truth.

Bede Griffiths once said "This represents Christianity; this represents Buddhism; this Islam; this Judaism; but at the centre, at the heart, is where we all meet." This is why many religious leaders – such as Rowan Williams – constantly urge the followers of different religions to pray together and so experience together the reality on which all religion is

30. Jean Vanier, *The Tablet*, 20 March 2004

31. John Navone SJ *Towards a Theology of Story*, p 70, St. Paul, 1977

built.

One of the most ancient descriptions of prayer in Christian tradition is '*Lex orandi, lex credendi*' ("How we pray forms what we believe" or "The norm of prayer establishes the norm of belief"). Prayer is the life-blood of all religion and this early church tradition reminds us that when we pray, we reach out directly to who or what we believe in and that we leap-frog the beliefs and doctrines and go straight to the centre. Formal religious believers or not, we all pray in one way or another and we are all like children who spontaneously cry out 'Mama' – before we reflect on who 'Mama' is.

An old man, who would sit for hours in church, was once asked what he did. He replied: "I look at Him and He looks at me." This is the essence of prayer. It may be aided by beautiful liturgy, by books and talks about prayer, by creeds and by reflection but, as *The Cloud of Unknowing* puts it, "of God himself, no man can think. He may well be loved but never thought. By love he may be grasped and held, by thought never . . . in this work, thoughts shall be put down and covered with a cloud of forgetting. You are to step above them boldly and eagerly."<sup>32</sup> This is why prayer is often described as going into a void beyond the securities of knowing: "One who enters the world of contemplation must be prepared for paradox. All is nothing; light is darkness; wisdom is foolishness; the two (God and man) are one; we know by unknowing; we are familiar with a God who is the mystery of mysteries . . . to rational consciousness this is fantastic but to the person who prays at the level of the spirit, this reconciliation of opposites is a non-problem."<sup>33</sup>

If prayer is the deepest way of reconciling the 'either/or' contradictions of religion, then art, stories and myths and symbols run it pretty close. The paradigm shift we need in reconciling religious difference will come if, rather than focusing on creeds and doctrines, we immerse ourselves in the universal languages of art, stories and symbols which predate the emergence of formal religion and – like religion – are also human ways of expressing the ultimate Mystery of Being and trying to make sense of existence and life and cope with what Freud called "the trauma of self-consciousness."

Art, myths and symbols are 'bottom-up' in the sense that they start from and express universally shared human experiences and questions,

32. Readings from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Darton Longman Todd, 2004

33. William Johnston SJ *Arise My Love*, p 91, Orbis, 2001

whereas religion is a 'top-down' deduction from what are believed to be God-given first principles. This difference stems from differing views of the notion of the revelation of the Mystery of Being (or God) beyond or beneath the surface of life. Most religions contain the concept of revelation which is understood as coming to man 'from outside'. It is the way God invites human beings into a relationship with him by making himself known to a particular group of people through chosen individuals, holy books and sacred rituals. The danger of this view of revelation is that 'we' (not them) are the prime recipients of God's revelation and that revelation is thought of as revealed truths. This leads straight back to the 'us/them' and 'either/or'. Archbishop Temple rightly pointed out that "There is no such thing as revealed truth. There are truths of revelation, that is to say, propositions which express the results of correct thinking concerning revelation, but they are not themselves directly revealed."<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, more and more theologians today understand that the whole of human life and the whole cosmos is the primary revelation of our relationship with the Mystery of Being (or God) and that each of the religions are particular "crystallizations of the universal revelation in particular times and cultures."<sup>35</sup> This is a crucial insight because it places the religions as part of the wider revelation and not as separate, parallel or privileged revelations. Revelation is a process of unveiling or uncovering our relationship with the Mystery of Being within human experience and life. This is the canvas of art, myths and symbols which is universal because it is as wide as human life and the cosmos in which we all share.

It is this universality of art, myths and symbols as part of the great process of revelation which makes them radically ecumenical and able to jump the boundaries between the religions. They all tell of the essential similarity of the spiritual journey of every human being and so speak a universal language – Beethoven speaks universally; the same principles of geometry are found in Stonehenge, the Egyptian Pyramids, the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, the Kaaba in Mecca and Chartres Cathedral because their architects all believed that by building on geometric proportions – the same proportions God used in building the cosmos – they were building truth. After all St Augustine considered numbers to be the thoughts of God and numbers are universal. There is no such thing as Christian mathematics or Hindu geometry or Islamic beauty or Buddhist

34. Adrian Smith, *op. cit.*, p 136

35. Diarmuid O'Murchu, *op. cit.*, p 96

music – there are just mathematics, geometry, beauty and music.

Art, myths and symbols are the ‘both/and’ way in practice. They are paradox made concrete because they live with loose ends and unresolved questions. Indeed, without paradox and the holding of opposites, there would be no music – which is the counterpoint between sound and silence – and there would be certainly no myths without their portrayals of the opposites of good and evil, life and death, love and hate, light and darkness.

Furthermore, these ways remind us that to be human is to be on a spiritual journey and not to have arrived at definitive conclusions. They remind us that we are invited to continue that journey of discovery because we are in the paradox of both knowing and not yet knowing. Every form of art is a search for the spiritual – actors perform it; writers, story tellers and poets put it into words; musicians and singers give it sound; painters give it texture and shape; dancers, clowns and mime artists give it movement; sculptors and architects give it physical form – the journey will never end as long as there are humans to make it. That is why it has been said that every story starts with the word ‘And’.

In his famous book, *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell demonstrates that myths speak to all cultures across all the divides of culture and religion – not just because they resonate with the universal archetypes of the human psyche – but because by describing the hero’s journey they trace the same path as our own spiritual journeys and those of the great spiritual teachers and saints. Be it Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, the Buddha, Krishna, Balia’u’llah or me, there is the call to leave ordinary life; struggles and temptations with forces outside or within ourselves; a “crossing of the threshold of adventure”; union (at-one-ment) with the deepest reality or God like Jesus on the cross or Buddha beneath the Bo tree of enlightenment; the re-crossing of the threshold back to ordinary life in order to share with others the gifts we have received – often at the cost of suffering or even martyrdom.<sup>36</sup> If the religions focused more on their own stories and myths and, better still, learnt the stories of other faith traditions, they would become more aware that we are all treading the same spiritual path in the same way and they would communicate far more effectively with those of other religions or none.

There are many ways of communicating wisdom and glimpses of the ultimate Mystery of Being. While most religions recognize that ritual, music, dance and beautiful buildings do this by engaging the affective

36. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Fontana, 1991

sides of our nature, the supreme arbiter of orthodoxy is still often regarded as being found in the sharp-edged definitions of creeds and doctrines which admit of only one literal truth, of only one meaning and only one authentic interpretation – all of which are based on the ‘either/or’ principle of contradiction. But there are other ways of communicating wisdom and glimpses of God – the ways of describing rather than defining, the way of metaphors and images which are the way of art, myths and symbols. These ways do not duck the issue of truth nor are they just touchy-feely add-ons to doctrines and creeds. It has been rightly said that “Myth is doctrine expressed in narrative form”<sup>37</sup> and that metaphor is the language of believing. “The reality which myth presents in symbolic form is the unknown transcendent reality which lies beyond observation and simple deduction . . . which is perceived and represented in events and not in abstraction and the event is portrayed in the form of a story.”<sup>38</sup> The very word symbol (from the Greek *symballein*) means to throw together the reality signified and its physical form or action – rather like the traditional definition of a sacrament as an “outward sign of inward grace” which links a human action with the reality to which it points.

We need to place greater importance on the fact that all religions are based on symbols and stories of the effect of the divine on human lives: creeds and doctrines come later. At the heart of the Jewish and Christian religions are the biblical stories of salvation: when the Jewish faithful tell the story of the Exodus at Passover or when Christians tell the story of the Last Supper in the Eucharist, it is not just a re-telling of past events but a re-living of them now. Jesus, like all great spiritual teachers, used stories above all in his teachings because they touch and transform the human heart more than logical principles rationally argued. The stories of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29) or the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11) convey the meaning and implications of the second commandment more than the rather bald command of “love thy neighbour.” That is why at a pantomime the children cheer the goodie and boo the baddy because the story is teaching the difference between good and evil.

The ‘both/and’ ways of art, myths and symbols speak for themselves. They communicate directly and there is no one definitive interpretation. Different people see quite different things in the same painting or the same story and this underlines the fact that different people (and different

37. Maurice Wyles, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p 153, ed John Hick, SCM 1987

38. *Dictionary of the Bible*, p 598, ed J. L. McKenzie SJ, Geoffrey Chapman, 1966

cultures) will be attracted by different portrayals of the one ultimate reality. Just as the one diamond has many faces so there are many different ways up the one spiritual mountain, but art, myths and symbols do not claim that their way is the only comprehensive way nor indeed the superior way and so provide a further lesson for the religions to learn from.

The religions can also learn from art, myths and stories that by their direct communication of glimpses of the Mystery of Being, they have not accumulated the sometimes burdening baggage of detailed doctrines and teaching hierarchies. It is inevitable in religions that creeds and doctrines will emerge as their followers ponder on the meaning of their beliefs which, in most religions, has brought into being a teaching authority to maintain the genuine meaning of the faith-tradition and its sacred writings and to guard them against error. But these must always be secondary to the direct relationship with the Mystery of Being, and the freedom which that brings, and which art and myths often promote more effectively than religion which can often become bowed down under the burden of constraining beliefs and orthodoxy.

The universality of art, myths and symbols build a loose, universal community which has no exclusive membership or marked boundaries. Religion on the other hand forms the basis for a strong community tradition and identity, whose flags are their creeds and rituals and which tend to be exclusive. It usually has definite membership boundaries and so people are 'in' or 'out'. The community and sense of belonging which religion provides is necessary and can be essential for a person's spiritual journey, but any religious community should only be a community within the wider community of humanity with its universally shared heritage of art, myths and symbols.

But the most significant lesson for reconciling religious difference which even this very brief survey of the 'both/and' ways of prayer, art, myths and symbols can provide is the realisation that we do not have the satisfaction of knowing we have solved the problem of religious difference in a neat and tidy way. But it gives us another and more important realisation – namely that we humans and our religions should not be concerned with making claims that we have the truth but rather accepting that we have been claimed by the truth which is one, though we know it by many names and through many images.

## A JOURNEY TO THE MYSTERY WITHIN AND BEYOND

In many ways the chances of a radical breakthrough in reconciling religious difference looks bleak: Shia and Sunni Muslims in Iraq are slaughtering each other in their hundreds in the name of 'true' Islam, the Anglican Communion is tearing itself apart over gay bishops and clergy and many Catholic thinkers still have to look over their shoulders to see if (and when) the Vatican will crack down on them. The more dogmatic a religion is, the more it is wedded to the 'either/or' way and the less it can genuinely accept the *fact* that religious pluralism is showing us that there are *meant* to be different ways into the one Mystery of Being and different expressions of it. Fundamentalism in its Hindu, Islamic, Evangelical Protestant and John Paul Catholic forms seems alive and flourishing.

But there are also many signs of a major shift towards what I have called the 'both/and' way. More and more religious believers can no longer rest content with the notion that their own tradition has the exclusive fullness of the truth nor can they accept any longer that the mutually exclusive claims which the religions make is a nourishing spiritual way forward. Huge change is happening in our time – as happened before when the Christian religion expanded into the New World and discovered millions of people who had never heard of Jesus and so had to reconsider (and eventually reverse) the doctrine that "outside the church there is no salvation." Many religious believers and non-believers know they can no longer define their own beliefs and everything and everyone else in relation to those beliefs – anymore more than people could ignore the discovery that the earth was not the centre of the universe but one of many planets going round the sun.

Religion is being called to make a journey if it is to remain true to its real nature. It is an urgent call which has been well described by the Quaker thinker, Harry Underhill, commenting on a lecture on 'Duality' which Bede Griffiths gave shortly before his death: "Bede concluded that if the human race did not go beyond its dualities, it would destroy itself. He was not referring just to 'our limited concepts of God and religion' but of the whole world around us. Bede's final message was to be true to the wisdom of one's own tradition, but to go beyond its limitations to a greater Oneness, for it is there you will meet the Other and form sacred union. The difficulty about moving from dualism to non-dualism is that it means letting go of who we think we are and our accepted identity. At the same time, without an identity, we cannot exist in any recognisable way. The solution to this paradox lies, not in abandoning identity, but in its

maturation . . . from alienated competing pieces in a world of chaos and confusion to elements of a mysterious Wholeness of Life wherein we find our fulfilment and destiny. As St. Paul said “When I was a child I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things” (1 Cor 13:11). Or as Bede would say: “Be true to your roots, but go beyond their limitations.”<sup>39</sup>

The reconciliation of religious difference will only come about if religious believers and non-believers alike trust enough to make the journey to the Mystery which is *both* within us *and* beyond us and embraces our differences in its Oneness.

39. Harry Underhill, unpublished notes, 2006.



## PUBLISHING

As part of its work to promote the renewal of the Church and the pursuit of justice and peace, CATHOLICS FOR A CHANGING CHURCH publishes the following booklets (available @ £2.00 [incl. p. & p.] from the address below. Nos 1-9 are, however, now out of production):

- 10 *How Must the Church Change?* Rafael Esteban M.Afr., 1998
- 11 *The Future of the Ministerial Priesthood*, Rafael Esteban M.Afr., 2000
- 12 *The Future of the Papacy*, Rowan Williams, 2000
- 13 *The Papacy – Myth and Reality*, Eamon Duffy, 2000
- 14 *Seeing Sin Where None Is*, Elizabeth Price, 2001
- 15 *Ministry for a Changing Church*, Paul Hypher, 2001
- 16 *Saying No to Rome*, J. S. Spong, [reissue of no. 8] 2002
- 17 *From Hierarchy to Communion*, Adrian Smith M.Afr., 2002
- 18 *Apostolic Succession*, Giles Hibbert O.P., 2003
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- 23 *Books for Questioning Catholics*, Ann Barton [compiler], 2003
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- 25 *Being Church*, Owen Hardwicke, 2003
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- 41 *“God’s Favourite Colour is Tartan” – reconciling difference*, Tim Firth, 2007
- 42 *Getting Priesthood Right*, J. Fitzpatrick, S. Bryden-Brook, 2007



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