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3. John B. Cobb Jr., *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

4. Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993).

Religious Taxonomy, Academia, and Interreligious Dialogue

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ABSTRACT Religious traditions have six different ways of being religious embedded in them. Conflict among religious people can even-tuate as much from these different modes as from theoretical differ-ences. Recognizing the different ways of being religious can lead to more productive inter- and intrareligious dialogue.

Interreligious dialogue in depth and without compromise is to me an intriguing possibility well worth pursuing, both from a personal standpoint of faith as well as academically. My interest in it is not simply practical as a means to what is likely to emerge from a meeting of significantly different religious minds and spirits; it is also a theoretical or philosophical interest. My remarks will primarily reflect this philosophical interest, although I happen to be a Christian and my personal interest in interreligious dialogue is in part an expression of my faith. Accordingly, my approach to the questions posed for the session is to attempt to explain how academic theory can facilitate dialogical practice and to argue that it should do so.

Professionally, I have long been interested philosophically in the possibility of empathetic understanding between persons of differing religious and/or metaphysical conviction. Exactly what is its nature? What is its epistemological significance? To what extent, and under what conditions, is it possible? What are the criteria of its successful practice? And what is the ground or basis of its possibility? One aspect of this interest was re-cently issued in a book, *Six Ways of Being Religious: A Framework for Comparative Studies of Religion* (Wadsworth). At an early stage of the editing process, the subtitle of my book was phrased, "*A Framework for Comparative Studies of Religion and Interreligious Dialogue*." The conceptual frame-work conveyed by the book is still intended to facilitate interreligious dialogue, despite the publisher's decision to omit the latter phrase in the interest of simplicity.

In general, the remarks that follow stem from my book, where my argu-

ment in support of them is much more fully elaborated and which anyone interested in exploring them further is welcome to consult.

Many of you knew the late Frederick Streng and his contributions to Buddhist-Christian dialogue and to the philosophical foundations of inter-religious understanding. I mention Fred and his work to acknowledge the formative, influential role of two of his books, *Understanding Religious Life* and *Ways of Being Religious*, on the ideas developed in my book and this article.

RECOGNITION OF GENERIC WAYS OF BEING RELIGIOUS AS A BASIS OF DIALOGUE

In my book I propose recognition of a finite set of generic, yet quite different, patterns of religious practice that (in principle) might be found within any religious tradition (broadly conceived). They are alternative possibilities of carrying on religious life, interpreting the tradition, and coming into rapport with whatever the tradition takes to be ultimate reality. More specifically, I am proposing recognition of *six* generic patterns, six ways of being religious: namely, what I call the way of sacred rite, the way of right action, the way of devotion (roughly in the sense of *bhakti*), the way of shamanic mediation, the way of mystical quest, and the way of reasoned inquiry. These six basic patterns are not exclusive, for very often they are combined, or fused, or taken as complementary—sometimes in the same subtradition, sometimes in the same person. But nonetheless they tend to be distinct and at times any one may be pursued exclusively as the only appropriate way to relate to ultimate reality among sectarian subtraditions of a given tradition or by individual advocates. As far as the framework is concerned, no one way is privileged a priori over another. However, it is clear that different traditions (especially different subtraditions) tend to privilege (one or more) over others. To privilege one over another is, in my judgment, a “theological” conclusion, that is, a matter of faith; it is not a matter for phenomenology of religion (at least as I pursue it) to resolve.

My principal point is that familiarity with (and a developed imagination for) these generic patterns in whatever tradition enables ready acquaintance with and understanding of phenomena exhibiting those same generic patterns in other, very different traditions—for example, the practical lessons of communal (typically monastic) living in pursuit of the way of mystical quest or the practical lessons of socially embodying a transmundane ideal order (even if it be the rustic simplicity of the Daoist sage) in pursuit of the way of right action. By pointing out such significant things in common between distinct (if not disparate) traditions, the framework fosters and facilitates mutual recognition and meaningful dialogue between representatives of those traditions who are involved with these patterns. Contrariwise, unfamiliarity with (and an undeveloped imagination for) any one of these

generic patterns (in terms of their differences from each other) will tend to inhibit or block empathetic understanding and result in reductionist generalizations and false contrasts between traditions. For example, Evangelical Protestants typically have difficulty empathizing with the practice of contemplative meditation in Buddhism as well as in Christianity, and often have no notion that their own emphasis upon emotional catharsis and devotional surrender as the way to connect with God has much in common with certain forms of Pure Land Buddhism. Alternatively, persons into mystical quest often have little empathy toward devotion, right action, or sacred rite as pertaining to anything but the “externals” of religion. Thus, insensitivity to the alternative generic ways of being religious will tend to close one off to meaningful dialogue even when one may be otherwise ripe for it.

Any taxonomy is liable to be misused, and this taxonomy is no exception. So, precaution is in order. It is easy, terribly easy, to take the categories of the taxonomy to be more real and determinative than the particular phenomena they are employed to illuminate and to presume that the taxonomist or comparativist understands the phenomena better than participants do. Care must be taken to ensure that the taxonomy and its categories are used responsibly, in a manner that does justice to the phenomena and to participants, in all of their distinctive particularity.

Taking these precautions into account, responsible employment of the framework does point out and open up for exploration significant commonalities of religious life and practice between traditions—specifically commonalities between practices from different traditions that exemplify the same generic way of being religious. At the same time, recognition of such commonalities does not entail the insignificance of the many differences that remain. Specifically, the framework leaves open and undetermined the nature of ultimate reality, leaving it to representatives of different faith perspectives to wrestle that question out among themselves; it does not assume or imply that there is some one ultimate reality (e.g., “the sacred”) to which different conceptions of ultimate reality all must refer. Rather, it respects the autonomy and integrity of each religious tradition’s characterization of ultimate reality and its core system of symbols that are taken up and interpreted by its participants somewhat differently in its several subtraditions. That is to say, responsible use of the taxonomy enables recognition and appreciation of deep commonalities—in terms of shared patterns of religious practice, for example, between monastics, between shamans, between philosopher-theologians, between liturgists, between bhaktas, and between activists—without threatening compromise to significant differences in belief, say, about the nature of ultimate reality. In this respect, the framework helps to remove one of the common obstacles to interreligious dialogue: the fear that finding commonality with the alien tradition will sacrifice or compromise some essential distinctive teaching of one’s own tradition.

RELIGIOUS COMMON SENSE

The taxonomy prompts its user to differentiate on the one hand matters pertaining to these generic patterns of religious life—which it is important to remember are diverse, *finitely* diverse at least in terms of the six ways of being religious—and on the other hand matters specific to each tradition, to the system of symbols making it up, to convictions specifically about the nature of ultimate reality, to what makes Christian belief and practice Christian, and to what makes Buddhist belief and practice Buddhist. The latter sort of matters may of course also be fruitfully compared in depth, and many studies have done so and will continue to do so—often identifying similarities where none were thought to exist and differences beneath what were first thought to be commonalities. But the former, less ultimate or penultimate matters have a particularly important role to play in establishing mutual respect and common understanding between traditions, independently of the contingent convergence of teachings specific to traditions. Being independent of the specific content of one's faith commitment, they amount to a common ground on which persons of disparate faith commitment already stand. They constitute the domain of what may be called religious common sense, the domain of commonsense understanding and wisdom pertaining to one or another generic way of being religious.

By *religious* common sense I mean matters that in principle are mutually recognizable, recognizable in common, between representatives of wholly distinct religious traditions—in this case matters that are involved with the same way of being religious in the respective traditions. Such matters are common, yes (at least in principle), but are more than likely not shared by all varieties of a given tradition (broadly conceived), let alone all religious persons. They are common (again, common in principle) to participants and subtraditions pursuing the same way of being religious in different traditions. I suggest that they are the foundational basis, or at least one of the crucial foundational bases, of interreligious dialogue—even when they are not recognized by way of reference to my taxonomy. Yet recognition of the full range of what the framework of the six ways of being religious specifically brings to light will do much to facilitate and further that dialogue.

To what extent will an understanding of the framework contribute to dialogue? Anything that directly facilitates empathetic understanding in this connection would seem to be of direct help in sorting through misunderstandings, finding points of commonality, and pinning down actual (and not merely apparent) differences. Some things have already been mentioned. The framework guides and educates one's imagination for alternative kinds of religious practice. The framework specifically suggests that dialogue is best served by bringing together people pursuing *the same way of being religious* within the different traditions, rather than trying to get, say, a Roman Catholic sacramentalist to dialogue with a Theravadin hermit-monk,

or a master of Japanese *Shugendo* to dialogue with a Reformed Protestant pastor. Too often, it seems to me, dialogue founders, or comes close to foundering, because attention is not given to avoiding crossing generic ways, and thus avoiding unnecessary clashes of religious sensibilities. By bringing together representatives of the same or similar ways of being religious—contemplative monastics with contemplative monastics, activists with activists, bhaktas with bhaktas, shamans with shamans, liturgists with liturgists, philosopher-theologians with philosopher-theologians—there is much more likelihood that commonalities will be found and appreciated, providing a more amicable basis for determining, weighing, and appreciating each other's differences, not to speak of mutual learning, collaboration, and growth.

Allow me to make these generalizations more specific. As I have pursued my investigation into the same generic ways of being religious in different traditions, several interesting things have become apparent. First, *the same range of qualitative variation in practice of, and participation in, any one of the six ways* seems to occur from one tradition to the next. All of us recognize that any religious practice can become corrupt and occasionally is in fact corrupt. So also, any such practice can be well or virtuously pursued in a number of respects. Second (something not often realized), *a similar concern with evaluating these qualitative variations* seems to be made from within the traditions in which they occur. Sometimes these evaluations will be made on the basis of the specific canons of authority of the tradition in question, as we might well expect. But at times these evaluations appear to be made on the basis of generic, commonsense considerations, specifically considerations relating to the type of practice involved (the generic way of being religious). Third, in situations of open and respectful dialogue between followers of the same type of practice (the same way of being religious) in different traditions, there frequently occur *common or mutual assessments of qualitatively varying examples of the practice*, which constitute a meeting of minds and spirits across the boundaries of traditions concerning the merit of the example practices. At present, these three findings are based on unsystematic observation and anecdotal evidence plus phenomenological consideration of the range of possible variation of any given practice. They should be researched empirically, and I believe they can be researched systematically with relatively little difficulty. In any case, my contention is that they intimate the existence of *a fund of commonsense religious wisdom*, relative to each of the six generic ways of being religious, to which members of any tradition pursuing that way of being religious has access. Such commonsense religious wisdom is capable of serving as an interreligious basis for recognition of a number of generic virtues and generic vices (qualitative variations in practice) for each generic way of being religious.

Commonsense considerations regarding virtues and vices in the practice

of any way of being religious are not just a hodge-podge of maxims and rules of thumb. Many appear to be groupable around three basic parameters of assessment (sliding scales of qualitative variation): from competence to incompetence; from a balanced synthesis of the finite, tangible, this-worldly aspects of the practice and the nonfinite, intangible, otherworldly aspects to imbalance in one direction or the other (specifically, imbalance in the direction of finitude or in the direction of infinitude); and from selfless pursuit of religious practice to ego-centered practice. What each of the parameters involves in a more concrete way becomes clear only when they are applied to the different ways of being religious.

For example, pursuit of the way of sacred rite in a given instance can be carried out with flawless competence that draws no attention to itself, or with bumbling incompetence that embarrasses all participants, whether it be a Roman Catholic Mass or a Rinzai Zen tea ceremony. So also, either can be pursued in a manner that deliberately furthers a person's ulterior self-interest (whether it be power, influence, or seduction) at the expense of other persons, or for the sake of value and meaning intrinsic to the rite itself. Further, either can be practiced in a way that manifests preoccupation with particular rules at the expense of the ideal spirit to be realized, or in a way that is so caught up in religious ecstasy that important "mundane" details are overlooked and other participants become confused or lost. Alternatively, consider, each with his congregation, an Evangelical Protestant pastor on the one hand and a Jodo Shinshu priest on the other. Here too crass self-interest can corrupt, say, a counseling relationship between pastor/priest and devotee. Virtue would mean genuinely caring for the spiritual/emotional well-being of the devotee in question. Competence here, involving care for and management of the full spectrum of religious emotions, is a very different thing from the competence of a master liturgist, whether Buddhist or Christian, and incompetence as well, though it might be possible to find both forms of competence in the same person. The vice of imbalance in the direction of finitude here might mean the cultivation of certain devotional feelings regardless of the deeper connection with love of God on the one hand or the compassion of Amida on the other. The vice of imbalance in the direction of infinitude might mean being so caught up in the ecstasy of assurance at entering the Pure Land or Heaven that one loses cognizance of responsibility for one's family members and fellow devotees. So also, commonsense vices and virtues characteristic of the other generic ways of being religious, while relative to each way, tend to fall along the same three parameters. Recognition of the typical variations in practice of each of the six ways and of the generic considerations that constitute criteria for their assessment constitute not merely a kind of common sense but common sense of an evaluative nature, *a commonsense religious wisdom* relative to each of the six ways, a commonsense religious wisdom that is accessible and therefore discoverable within any religious tradition where those ways occur. It constitutes a basis for qualitative assessment of practice not from

within unique traditions but from within a generic way of being religious, a basis common to all traditions and subtraditions that incorporate that way of being religious.

THE UNPRIVILEGED STATUS OF THE ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

I want to make clear that I have no illusions about my being the discoverer of what I am here calling religious common sense, or that an understanding of my framework of six ways of being religious is somehow prerequisite to finding features of what I am calling ways of being religious in common between wholly distinct religious traditions. It is all already there and has been there for ages, and most of it, in bits and pieces, has already been recognized by this observer, that participant in interreligious dialogue, this or that scholar in religious studies, and so forth. The framework only presumes to put the bits and pieces together to enable recognition of the larger picture—that there is indeed a commonsense foundation for empathetic understanding of religious insiders by outsiders (specifically insiders of other traditions) and for interreligious dialogue—a foundation in religious common sense, in generic patterns of possible religious practice that appear to be built into the human religious condition.

The domain of religious common sense, which I contend is one of the crucial foundations of interreligious dialogue, is by no means a territory to which the academic comparativist has sole access. It is accessible, little by little, to anyone involved in an ongoing practice of one or another way of being religious in a given tradition who exercises a modicum of reflection and thoughtful judgment on the range of variation and diversity in practice within their own subtradition, as to what constitutes better and worse practice in that way of taking up their tradition, though they may not recognize it as such or differentiate it from the specific teachings of their tradition. Where they can begin to do the latter, is when they have opportunity to observe phenomena associated with the same way of being religious in another tradition. Then they can begin to see that what they may have supposed was “common sense” relative to their own tradition is not unique to it at all and perhaps begin to differentiate generic matters from matters specific to their tradition.

There is, of course, no doubt that the academic comparativist (so far as he is truly skilled at empathetic understanding) is in a much better position to notice these commonsense matters than is the participant, especially the participant who is uninvolved in interreligious observation and dialogue. In that sense, the comparativist has an advantage. But my point is that this advantage is simply a relative one. With respect to religious common sense, the academic comparativist has no privileged perspective. The content of religious common sense is neither his invention nor his peculiar property. With respect to it, she or he is only a facilitator of its recognition by others. She or he is a sort of broker of empathetic understanding and dialogue, a

kind of mediator, who can be extraordinarily helpful at times but is by no means absolutely essential.

The sort of empathetic understanding in religious studies that we seek is better understood as a matter of relationship between persons (relative, to some extent, to who is understanding whom, when and under what circumstances) than as some kind of ideal objective description. As I see it, we in religious studies are principally about the business of promoting, fostering, and facilitating mutual understanding among people amidst their manifold cultural differences. Our role, as I have already suggested, is to be a kind of broker of these relationships, to help people understand their own and each other's cultural and religious "otherness," helping make possible a meeting of different minds and spirits. And, as greater understanding and thoughtful reflection are brought to bear on religious practice, wisdom tends to result and the commonsense quality of religious practice tends to improve. Thus, in promoting understanding and thoughtfulness, whether intentionally or not, academic comparativists cannot help but foster a critical perspective into these relationships: namely, what makes for a more thoughtful, more humane, and qualitatively improved religious practice that takes into account all that the comparativist brings to bear on the phenomena in question. Academic comparativists at their best do not simply hold up a mirror to things as they are, even if they could. Surely that is one of the considerations that make our work responsible and worthwhile.

CONCLUSION

Insofar as significant dialogue and mutual understanding do occasionally take place between members of disparate religions, then we are not cut off from each other in separate islands of discourse as some postmodernists would claim, with the academic discourse of the comparativist simply one more (secular) island. Sometimes we can and do find matters, significant matters, in common, not just between followers of different religions but also between them and the comparativist as one more human being in the mix. And because empathetic understanding of the religious "other" is never for all time, or all circumstances, or all varieties, or for all persons at once, the model of an objective scientific description and explanation, carrying with it the notion a privileged standpoint of the ideal detached observer, is also inappropriate. Between these two extremes—the one extreme of the ideal objective observer and the other extreme of being simply one "subjective" perspective among others—there is a middle way for the academic comparativist: as a witness to and advocate of religious common sense. Given that role, even if she is not directly involved in fostering and facilitating interreligious dialogue, she cannot help but contribute to it indirectly. As far as I am concerned, that is a worthy and welcome consequence.

My hope is that the framework of six ways of being religious will effectively contribute to that end.