

NAMES -- FORMS -- ESSENCE

From the traditions other than Christian and Hebrew the number of personages with powers and life-styles paralleling those of Jesus is past counting. As with the Hebrew Prophets and other ancients of Israel, the religious quest, the experience of Divinity, the nearness and Bliss of the Godhead is vitally present clean through and all across the stage of human history.

One is impressed with two things about man's religious quest as viewed in as full perspective as is possible with our limited insight. The first thing that impresses one is the seemingly inexhaustible diversity of names and forms. Hindus speak of 1008 Names of God. The Old Testament uses Names for Him running into well over a score. If we were to list the Names of the Three Persons of the Triune God from the Christian tradition, probably a whole page could be filled. Buddhists, strictly speaking, are not theists at all, but the appellations they use for Dharma are many and those for Bodhisattvas are past counting. Mohammedans use one Name for God, but if the appellations they use for Him are regarded as quasi-Names, as indeed functionally they are, then one has to reckon with many more Names for the Godhead. Zoroastrians or Parsis can add more to the list. Finally, add to this the Names and appellations which primitive and ethnic groups throughout history have used, with more or less precision, to indicate Divinity and the whole list already compiled might be doubled in length.

In other words, when we are speaking of the Names men have used for calling on and indicating the Godhead, no matter how vaguely or how precisely

apperceived, we have to understand that the sheer number of them is countless. Moreover, the inflections of meaning, the varieties of emotion contained in these Names and their patent and latent evocative powers/clear up and down the continuum of man's cognitive capability ^{are} as awesome to contemplate as ^{they are} impossible to comprehend. The intellectual and emotional power of the manifold Names of God, taken as a whole, exceeds in potency all the wave-lengths of the whole electromagnetic spectrum. In speaking of the Names of God, we are dealing with what is vaster than the vastest, more manifold than the manifoldest. God Himself is in His Name, as Rabbi Heschel loved to point out.

The forms invented or generated by man's spiritual yearning are as plentiful as the Names he has given the Godhead. Indeed, the diversity of these forms is probably more apparent to the Western eye than the diversity of Names. All the scriptures, all the languages, all the works of art, all the liturgies, all the buildings, all the devotional literature, all the theologies, all the rules and regulations -- who can dilate on the manifoldness of man's religious forms? Truly, they are past reckoning.

If, as is both possible and instructive to do, one takes a taxonomic approach to the names and forms of man's religious questing, the resulting phylogenesis will be at least as astonishing in its immensity, alone, as out familiar biological taxonomic chart is -- and as little comprehensible, not to mention visible, in its entirety. I would estimate that a Theological Taxonomy of human history will exceed in both quality and quantity a Biological Taxonomy of the whole planet.

To expect to wrest a visible, administrative unity out of mankind's fecund genius for religious ramification, such as the theoreticians of the World Council of Churches intend just for the Christian tradition, is to hope that Life will cease. It is a call for the primal forces of reality to suspend their impetus and operation, both! Presumably, the theoreticians expect reality to suspend itself voluntarily, although it may be reasonable to surmise that, in the event reality fails to respond positively to their call against it, they could, after the manner of Canute, contemplate turning their propensity for violence -- lending weapons, training and logistic support to insurgent groups in non-industrial nations -- against a recalcitrant, primordial power, which other people have sometimes called God, for the purpose of exterminating it. Indeed, just the thought of wresting visible, administrative unity out of the nominal and formal diversity of mankind's religious questing must be regarded as of the same logical type as those efforts, of recent and unhappy memory, by certain political persons of a totalitarian bent to wreak political unity upon humankind through the agency of tanks and howitzers. This sort of wrong-headedness is the result of a preoccupation with outsides and a denial of insides. It is a spectacular epistemological error. It is, in fact, irreligion.

The first thing, then, that impresses one surveying the religious quest of mankind is the scintillating fluorescence, the immense irradiation, the permanent, almost profligate proliferation of its names and forms. It is rather like Bach's Fugues. Had Bach lived indefinitely, is it likely he would have run out of themes? One would have to say that, in all probability, it is likely he would not. On his death-bed he was composing a Fugue,

what he intended as The Art of Fugue. Mankind, as a whole, is by so much more prepotent in religious names and forms. And, his genius in this area does not appear to have any outward limit. It is as fundamental as the primordial process of evolution and involution, itself.

Now, the second thing that impresses the observer of man's religious questing is how truly simple and unitary it is. If one were to begin listing the essential elements of religion, one could probably count them on one hand. And again, if the Goal of religion is remarked or if the experience which the aspirant is seeking is indicated essentially, one could probably count these with one finger, or, at the most, three fingers joined at the base in one hand.

For example, the essential elements. Well, 'start with Love. Then, Faith. Then, Bliss. Then, Wisdom. Then, Truth. Probably any other virtue can be counted as a constituent element of one of these. For example, renunciation is the teeth of Faith. Can the number of these be reduced by consolidation? Well, while it is unnecessary, it probably can be done. Truth can be taken as an element of Wisdom, Bliss as an element of Love and Wisdom as an element of Faith. Or, they can be consolidated however else one wants to. But probably, one is going to emerge from the consolidation of essential elements of religion with Love alone or Love and Faith or Wisdom and Bliss or Wisdom alone. It will depend on one's own spiritual insight. And it does not really matter. The point is that the essential elements of religion are not many at all but actually very few, which may have something to do with the difficulty we have seeing to grasp them, which, in turn, would account for their lack in popularity.

When one overlooks names and forms and gets down to examining fundamentals and essences, the overwhelming diversity of the former disappears on the instant and one is left with a few fictile facts that, for all the world, soon take on the tone and tint of irreducibles. In other words, instead of heading toward religious diversity, now we are heading toward spiritual unity, arising in our own common cause and need and unimpeachable yearning.

Now, look at the Goal. Many highly educated Churchmen regard the Goal of other religions as different from the Goal of Christianity. They even regard the Church as comprising only Christians. Well, this just is not true. A paucity of experience combined with an immodest dose of intellectual hauteur -- ego -- causes us to think this way. Even a cursory examination of the lives and teaching of the great saints and sages is going to show one that there is only one God and that He is referred to and spoken of by those with genuine experience in very much the same manner world-wide. One cannot rely for witness to this fact on those tepid religious who, today, write our books and preach our sermons. One has to examine the life and witness of the best examples of the spiritual aspirant to get a feeling for the essential singularity of their Goal. These men and women -- the best, the finest, the most imbued with wisdom -- are united in affirming that there is but One God, One Goal and one essential purpose of this life -- to reach that Goal, to live in the constant awareness of us in Him and Him in us, of no distinctions, in fact.

We cannot let the diversity of names and forms delude us into believing that the Goal, therefore, is diverse, if not contradictory, as between the religions of man. To allow this delusion to invest our minds will not be

regarded as a sign of high intelligence. Into how many forms can sugar be shaped? Into how many pots can clay be made? Verily, countless. But the essence of each shape, each pot, is the same: sugar or clay. So with the Goal of man's spiritual quest. God is Love. Love slakes the thirst of a God-yearning man. That is, what slakes his thirst is God Himself. Now, Love is the same the world over. Every man, every beast, every rock, plant and river can feel and give Love. It is the same Love all over. The same God. The same Sweetness. The same Goal.

This truth, alone, makes sense of any and every missionary endeavor. If Love were not the universal language and solvent of humanity and the world, no man would ever take step one of a missionary nature.

Theologians and scholars claim that there are different Goals as among the religions of man. What they are really saying is that they do not want to have to go out and earn an honest living, doing honest work that is of genuine benefit to humanity. They are like computer technicians who deliberately miswrite programs so as to keep a job -- debugging programs. Not the least credence should be given to the vaporings of such people, and, really speaking, when they are declaiming their nonsense, they should be told to shut up and behave themselves.

Finally, experience. Here we get down to fundamentals of an indisputable kind. Here we have the common, convincing witness of men and women of God across time, across space, across creeds, across every obstacle and barrier of reason and the mind. ← Experience -- the one phenomenon which unites all men, everywhere, in the bonds of brotherhood and life. The

experience of men and women of God is what urges us onward. We can see it. We can feel it. We can touch and taste it. We can empathize with it and recognize it as our own, as belonging positively and permanently and preeminently to something of which we, too, are a piece and a part and a parcel. God is intangible. But, our neighbor, who is the Image or Reflection of God, is quite tangible, and especially his and her religious experience is. God is everywhere present because the neighbor is.

The religious experience of mankind, while outwardly diverse, is, inwardly, both simple and unitary. It can be described in a million million ways, but, inwardly, it is the awareness of who one is. This awareness is called Wisdom or Knowledge or Truth or Self-Realization. It is Truth. It is Consciousness. It is Bliss. But the point is, it is experience. It is not thought about or thought of or understood or comprehended or deduced or induced or dissected by any of the paltry instruments of knowing possessed by man. He who would tell you in so many words what it is is a fool or a charlatan. But even the meanest, worst person can recognize the presence and feel the power of the experience called Divinity. The religious experience of mankind is the surest indicator of his solidarity. He all has it. He all is it.

So, when we survey the religions of man and observe their qualities, we notice, first, a stunning diversity of names and forms, but we notice, also, a simple, unitary commonality of essence (Love, Faith, Wisdom, Bliss, Truth), Goal (God) and experience (Self) in the very midst of all the diversity of names and forms.

This is a paradigm of reality itself -- unity inside diversity, Verity encased in variety, God inhering in Creation, that is, in man, as butter inheres in milk. We must, accordingly, take every care to expect an indefatigable expansion of the external diversity and an inexorable, immutable concentration on and of the internal unity. Teilhard declared no more than this. Ultimately, our attention should be diverted entirely away from the variety and caused to focus irrevocably on the Verity. This is the course pursued by every aspirant, one way or another, sooner or later. It is also, and therefore, the primal epistemological model for all scholarship. It is the epistemological key for untying the knot represented by Christian and Islamic statements regarding the nature of Jesus of Nazareth: look inside, look for essences, even if, as happens, you have to peer inside the Abyss of Darkness.

We are now a good step closer to untying the strands of that knot. We have to look for what these statements and the formal theological constructions surrounding them have in common. In a word, we have to look at people and their feelings, at history and its deep, primordial freshets of life, at Truth and its non-duality. That is our leverage on the problem.

En pasi panta Theos. In all things the One God. Shema Israel Adonai
Elohenu Adonai ehadth. Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, The Lord is One.