

Categorical Analysis of Religions: A Step on the Way toward Interreligious Peace

by
Reiner Wimmer

Introduction

Claims that judgments are true are per se claims for universal and unconditional validity. For the truth claim of an empirical statement or law, a moral or value judgment is conceptually independent of the judging person's individuality and the particular circumstances under which the judgment is being made. Truth claims are not to be tagged with an index of person, time, or situation; for they cannot *as such* be relative to a particular person or group, a specific epoch or culture. Their claim is universal in nature, i.e., they pretend to be true for any person capable of judging. Their claim is unconditional in nature, i.e., they are asserted to be valid irrespective of individuality, situation, and culture. This does not, of course, preclude that certain truth claims will be regarded as valid by some judges at a specific time but as invalid by others at the same or another time, or that something that appears to be true at a certain moment proves to be untrue at a later time. Errors regarding the truth of judgments cannot normally be excluded. But even the statement that we cannot, in general, decree the *truth* of a judgment, but at best its *untruth*, does not change the conceptual fact that the claim for a judgment to be true is an unconditional claim. This fact does not preclude another kind of relativization—or better: relationing—of truth claims: factual judgments may be based on a certain notion of the world's structure, moral judgments on a certain notion of how humans ought to conduct their lives, individually or as part of a community. What is the impact of these fundamental notions? Are they true? Can their truth or falsehood be proven? Or does the fundamentality of these notions preclude the possibility to prove their truth or falseness? Such questions of justification and foundation are often regarded as questions of the “context” within which judgments may be contingent. But such dependence on context is not to be confounded with an alleged dependence on situation.

Questions of this kind impose themselves above all in the case of *religious* truth claims, particularly when these contradict one another or seem to do so. The controversies among religions and religious confessions, which in early modern Europe led to persecutions and wars, in our days no longer threaten the peace of a mere continent, but the peace of the world. Now that the ideologically motivated confrontations have subsided, the *religious* conflict potential seems most threatening. In this contribution I hope to offer a suggestion for reducing this conflict potential. I will not provide epistemological or scientifically based evidence that the opponents in such a controversy are unable to prove the truth claim of their fundamental convictions independently of these convictions, and that it therefore makes no sense for them to insist on their claim. I rather base my contribution on the simple assumption that religions do regularly make such truth claims. I do not intend to examine the fact, much less criticize it. In short, my proposal for reducing conflict potential contains the following thesis:

Religions are not all of one kind; they often belong to different categories. A controversy among them due to their apparently contradictory truth claims can be settled if, in a given case, the religions belong to different categories and if they acknowledge and recognize their categorial differences. For then it is obvious that their respective truth claims refer to categorially *different* matters, so that they do not (and cannot) contradict one another on the categorial level. This is what I will mean by the term “intercategorial compatibility.” Conversely, an interreligious controversy is not easily appeased when it becomes apparent that the religions with conflicting truth claims belong to the *same* category, a case referred to as “intracategorial incompatibility.”

I intend to develop a tenet of the categories of religious ways of life. I will then exemplify this tenet, and examine its adequacy, on the basis of several well-known religions of current and past ages and cultures. Neither on the level of categorial analysis nor on that of phenomenological application do I claim completeness. My proposal can and should be expanded and amended. It serves its purpose if it contributes to shed light on and solve misplaced inter- and intrareligious (e.g., interconfessional) conflicts. Only then can inter- and intrareligious (e.g., interconfessional) dialogues address the real issues, namely those based on truly contradictory and therefore mutually exclusive truth claims. Incidentally, my proposal does not only concern established and in some way institutionalized religions, but also individual religious attitudes, on the condition that they imply a religious truth claim.

As will have become obvious in what has been said so far, the real and imaginary religious conflicts examined here represent only a certain if central type of conflict. This type presupposes that religions and religious attitudes making truth claims exist *at all*; it does not presuppose that *all* religions and religious attitudes make such claims, that religions and religious attitudes consist of *nothing but* their truth claims, or that they distinguish themselves from one another *only* in this regard. It is not even necessary that religions and religious attitudes differ from one another *in this regard*; for it is conceivable that certain religions or confessions differ *only* in genetic, institutional, or ritual respects, and religious attitudes *only* in questions of practice, and that for this difference alone they live in conflict with each other.

I will conceptually and phenomenally distinguish and successively address four such fundamental categories: 1) religions and religious attitudes centered in the conviction that the divine is present *in* life and *in* the world and that an *experience* of this presence is possible; 2) religions and religious attitudes centered in the conviction that human existence as such, i.e., human life, and the world of humankind as a whole, is in itself divine; 3) religions and religious attitudes centered in the faith in the inexperiential and *intangible* only God in His Creation; and 4) religions and religious attitudes centered in the conviction that one must *believe* that the one and only God has become human and has been united with the world.

The sequence of these categories of religious conviction is not arbitrary. Instead, it traces a conceptually and phenomenally reasonable succession from the immanent and multifarious divinities to the immanent and encompassing divinity, from the immanent and encompassing divinity to the God who at once transcends and founds what is immanent, and finally from the thus established duality of God and world or God and humankind in a kind of return of God to immanence: the unity of God, world, and humankind in God's Incarnation and in the community of humankind and the whole of Creation with God.

This sequence does not, however, designate a relationship by implication. The experience of the divine presence *in* life and *in* the world neither presupposes nor implies the experience of the world's divinity (without therefore precluding it), just as the belief in the presence of the only God neither presupposes nor conceptually precludes the belief in His Incarnation. Conversely, one can argue that the higher steps require or include the lower ones, although this requirement or inclusion is in each case of a different kind: very clearly, the belief in God is a conceptual precondition for the

belief in His Incarnation. Both forms of belief take for granted, owing to their belief in Creation, the notion of the world as a totality (at least the *notion*, if not the transcendental *experience*). While God's Incarnation does not presuppose the *experience* of the divine present *in* the world and *in* life in the strict sense of the first category, it seems to approach it, affirm it, and also correct it on a different plane, that of *faith*.

The categories are not equidistant. The first two and the last two share certain traits, with the result that the difference between these two pairs is greater than that between the two members in either pair. The commonalities and corresponding distinctions concern (a) the *act* or *state* and (b) the *content* of religious conviction. The first two categories present an act or state of the *experience of the divine*, the latter two categories, an act not of experience but of *belief* in the strict, religious sense of the word, an act or state of belief not in the divine in an *apersonal* sense of the word, but in God in the *personal* understanding of the word. The difference between the two groups is decisive owing to the epistemological and ontological transcendence of *God vis-à-vis world* and *humankind*. Therefore, neither the reality of God in Himself nor that of His Incarnation can be experienced, it can only be believed.

I The Tangibility of the Divine Presence in Life and in the World

Kant presents us with a singularly concise testimony of a dual experience of the divine in the sense that is relevant here. In the "Conclusion" of his 1788 *Critique of Practical Reason* he writes:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within. I have not to search for them and conjecture them as though they were veiled in darkness or were in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence. The former begins from the place I occupy in the external world of sense, and enlarges my connection therein to an unbounded extent with worlds upon worlds and systems of systems, and moreover into limitless times of their periodic motion, its beginning and continuance. The second begins from my invisible self, my personality, and exhibits me in a world which has true infinity, but which is traceable only by the understanding, and with which I discern that I am not in a merely contingent but in a universal and necessary connection, as I am also thereby with all those

visible worlds. The former view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates as it were my importance as an animal creature, which after it has been for a short time provided with vital power, one knows not how, must again give back the matter of which it was formed to the planet it inhabits (a mere speck in the universe). The second, on the contrary, infinitely elevates my worth as an intelligence by my personality, in which the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world, at least so far as may be inferred from the destination assigned to my existence by this law, a destination not restricted to conditions and limits of this life, but reaching into the infinite.¹

Kant says: The two things—the starry heavens above and the moral law within—are neither imaginary nor a mere emotion, neither excogitated nor merely surmised like objects postulated in scientific theory or metaphysics. They are experienced as exceedingly real, exceedingly impressive, and exceedingly significant. I constantly see them before my eyes, provided I turn my attention to them; they fill my mind whenever I approach them in a contemplative attitude; and I link them directly to my existence since they concern me immediately in my dual nature as a sensual-corporeal and as a spiritual-moral being. These things fill Kant, as he says, “with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them.” What imposes itself here as exceedingly real, exceedingly impressive, and exceedingly significant does not recoil from our critical reason, does not prove to be a phantasm or a theoretical construct. Instead, it is confirmed by reflection; reflection even heightens the experience of its reality, impressiveness, and significance.

Unfortunately, Kant does not tell us what exactly he means here by “reflection.” I presume that he does not mean reasoning, the putative *explanation* of such conditions and experiences by means of general *theories* as they are fashionable today, be they of psychological, sociological, or biological nature. Such theories, along with the intellectual climate that spawns them and supports them, offer in effect very welcome *occasions* for strict reflection on the conceptual-categorical possibilities of such experiences, while accounting for the very subtle self-interest I may have in such experiences. The reproach of escapism often raised against such experience is notorious. Here as in many other cases, self-critical reflection amounts to an act of purification of motives and notions.

¹ I. Kant, Ac. ed., vol. V, 161s.; *The Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (London: Longmans, 1954 [1909]).

The category of the innerworldly divine encompasses, however, other phenomena that seem less accessible than what has been demonstrated with Kant's example. I am thinking of all that both fascinates and alienates us in animistic and polytheistic religions, where the divine manifests in manifold objects, localities, animations, ensoulments, and personifications. One would wish to bear in mind the philosophically significant investigations undertaken by Rudolf Otto² and Walter Friedrich Otto,³ by Ludwig Wittgenstein⁴ and Peter Winch,⁵ by William James⁶ and Hermann Schmitz.⁷ The necessarily limited space of this essay does not permit more than some brief hints.

Generally speaking, we are dealing here with what grips and affects us emotionally, spiritually, or physically, what gladdens or dismays us, what makes us feel beside ourselves in sudden joy or panic, what concerns us seriously and makes us think. In this way we experience what is poignant in the world primarily as apersonal: it is what attracts or startles us in the experience of a gladdening or dismaying situation (a wide sunny landscape, an abruptly befalling catastrophe), what causes us to feel timidity or embarrassment in the face of another person (a natural beauty or strong personality), what outrages or disgusts us in another person and leads to conflict and strife.

But what in all this is *the divine*? Where Kant's examples may still be accessible in this sense, the above-mentioned experiences are much less so. This is different with the so-called "primitive peoples." For the Greeks, who

² Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, translated by John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

³ Walter F. Otto, *The Homeric Gods: The Spiritual Significance of Greek Religion*, translated by Moses Hadas (New York: Octagon Books, 1983, 1954). *Theophania. Der Geist der altgriechischen Religion* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1956).

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, in: *Schriften* 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1960), 9-83 (English: *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden, introd. Bertrand Russell [Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1999]); "A Lecture on Ethics," *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), 3-12; "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," *Synthese* 17 (1967), 233-253.

⁵ Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," in *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 8-49.

⁶ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Modern Library, 1994).

⁷ H. Schmitz, *System der Philosophie*, vol. III/4: *Das Göttliche und der Raum* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1977, 1995), Ch. 1: "Das Göttliche" (1-206); *Der unerschöpfliche Gegenstand. Grundzüge der Philosophie* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1990), Ch. 8: "Theologie (Das Göttliche)," 439-453.

are much closer to us, their early poetry as well as Homer's and Hesiod's epics about the Olympian gods point us to such an experiential basis, albeit one that in these writings is imaginatively developed: Events present themselves as powerful and compelling, proving their numinous nature in human-superhuman, *personal* and *divine* form: as Aphrodite, as Aidos, as Ares, as Eros. The ancient Greeks witnessed in the multiplicity of their gods all that is fascinating and startling in the world. They did not restrict themselves to momentary experience, but eternalized it by means of a repetitive veneration of the gods irrespective of special occasions. In this way one could say that the religious spirit of the Greeks, which when deeply stirred regarded everything as divine, perpetuated this attitude in such a way that it became itself a source of emotion: an enduring divine presence; for "everything is full of gods."⁸ Walter Friedrich Otto expresses these levels as follows:

What excites humans in their core is the awe of eternal forces that, being divine, are effective everywhere. The same *eros* who grips humans is an original power and archetype of the world edifice, as shown in the beginning of Hesiod's *Theogony* and in myriad other testimonies. And the same or something similar holds true for the other [gods and goddesses].⁹

For the Greeks, "the depths and widths of the world" thus open up in a way that transcends any immediate personal affect:

In this we encounter the essence of the Greek experience of the divine. The gods show him who looks into their faces the infinite richness of being. They show it each according to his or her particular character: *Apollo* shows the world's being in its clarity and order, existence as cognition and knowing song, as purity and freedom of demonic entanglements. His sister *Artemis* reveals a different purity of world and existence, an eternally virginal, playful, entrancing one. From *Athena*'s eyes flashes the magnificence of the masculine, reasonable deed, of the eternal moment of all victorious achievement. In the spirit of *Dionysos*, the world steps into the light as an original world, in original savagery and boundless gladdening. In the name of *Aphrodite*, the world is golden, all things show the face of love, of divine magic that invites surrender, fusion, and union.¹⁰

⁸ Cf. Thales of Milet according to Aristotle in *On the Soul*, and, *On memory and recollection*, translated by Joe Sachs (Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 2001).

⁹ W. F. Otto, *Theophania*, 41f.

¹⁰ W. F. Otto, *Theophania*, 81.

Two quotations from *Theophania* and *The Homeric Gods*, W.F. Otto's chief works, demonstrate how this perception of the divine is all-encompassing and thereby always wholly present, founding a life-pervading spirituality:

The world realities are actually nothing but gods, divine presences and revelations. Each one of them is in all its spheres and levels full of the god who manifests in the elemental realm as in flora and fauna and shows himself in a human face. And it is always the *whole world* that one of the gods opens. For in his particular revelation all things are enclosed.

And this myth proves its character as a genuine interpretation of world affairs insofar as it seldom introduces anything that, seen from the outside, must be designated as a miracle. As miraculous as everything presents itself when seen from the inside, it stands naturally before the senses, and vice versa: what we consider natural and seek to comprehend *is the divine*.

Beside the ancient Greek and Roman religions, the Hindu religion with its tradition of more than three thousand years offers a further example of the religious category of the innerworldly divine. These religions seem at the same time to offer examples for *intercategorical compatibility*. A tendency toward a mutual transfer and amalgamation of divine persons and ritual practices is common in the two ancient Mediterranean religions. This tendency seems to rely on the dual insight (a) into the substantial identity of their religious truth claims and (b) into the uncompleteness of the phenomenology of the innerworldly divine, which allows these religions unproblematically to integrate into their own religious cosmos what is initially foreign. Similar amalgamations are reported about the Hindu religion. The religious world of Hinduism is admittedly much more complex than that of ancient Greece or Rome: the multiplicity of gods and rites becomes transparent for the apersonal, formless unity of the originally divine foundation of the world, with regard both to ritual and spiritual practice and to metaphysical speculation. In this sense, Hinduism also partakes of the second category of the innerworldly religious.

II Experiencing the Divine Nature of World and Human Existence

In our own cultural sphere, Simone Weil's remarks about the world's beauty and the love of the world¹¹ provide an apposite *spiritual* testimony

¹¹ Simone Weil, "Formes de l'Amour implicite de Dieu," in *Attente de Dieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1966), 122-214, esp. 146-174; English: *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

of this experience, whereas a felicitous *philosophical* testimony can be found in the observations of the early Wittgenstein, especially in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, in the last of his pre-*Tractatus* diaries, and in his “Lecture on Ethics” presented at Cambridge in 1929-30.¹² I would like to quote two paragraphs from the *Tractatus*. Sentence 6.44 reads: “Not as the world is, but *that* the world is, is the mystical.” No. 6.45 contains the following two sentences: “The contemplation of the world sub specie aeterni is its contemplation as a limited whole. The feeling that the world is a limited whole is the mystical feeling.” These are enigmatic utterances. They sound like statements but are to be understood as terminological definitions. Wittgenstein is concerned with a definition of the term “the mystical” as a designation of the world’s existence and as a designation of the “feeling” during the contemplation of the world as a limited whole. He describes this sensation in his “Lecture on Ethics” as a personal experience:

[...] when I have it I wonder at the existence of the world. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as “how extraordinary that anything should exist” or “how extraordinary that the world should exist.” I will mention another experience straight away which I also know and which others of you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling absolutely safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say “I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens.”

Thereafter, Wittgenstein explains why he thinks that “the verbal expression which we give to these experiences is nonsense.” I wish to illustrate this not in his but in my own words. Note that I am beginning with comments on the use of the word “world,” from which I move on to an analysis of *judgments* about the world—more precisely: of absolute value judgments about it. Wittgenstein proceeds similarly: he defines the expression “the mystical” and then demonstrates the *content* of mystical experience of the world in sentences that, taken as judgments about the world, he declares to be nonsense.

The term “world” in formulations like “the contemplation of the world sub specie aeterni” or “the sensation of the world as a limited whole” refers to the totality of all that individual humans can encounter during their lifetime, within which they live and evolve (historically speaking), and to that which is accessible to their experience and cognition in past, present, and future—i.e., the totality of the transcendental *conditions* of experience of the world and of life. As such the world is not only the sum of objects, situations, and processes *in* it, nor is it itself an object, situation, or process.

¹² For bibliographical information please refer to note 4 above.

For objects, situations, and processes can be distinguished only *in* the world in acts of demonstration, attribution, or predication. Since the world is nothing of the sort, the expression “the world” is not a proper noun, although it looks similar to expressions like “the sun” and “the earth.” We adopt the usage of the expression “the world” in a *synsemantic* manner, i.e., in whole sentences of a certain kind, i.e., in what Wittgenstein calls “grammatical” sentences, whose meaning is determined by conceptual logic. Such a sentence could read: The world is the epitome of all that and through which humans can experience and discern. Or it could take the form of a value judgment: The world is good (or evil). In a “theological” formulation: The world was created by God.

Admittedly, the unique logical-conceptual status of the expression “the world” is leveled in the superficial grammar of sentences like the ones quoted above, which make the world appear as an object (and the expression “the world” as a nominator) which can be assigned or denied a predicate. These sentences seem like common descriptive or evaluative sentences. One should note, however, that they do not describe the world in a usual way or make statements about it, since neither the noun (“the world”) nor the predicates (“is the epitome of all that ...,” “is good,” “was created by God”) distinguish anything in particular from anything else *within* the world. They do not serve the attribution or differentiation of facts that can only be addressed *in* the world. Instead, the above-mentioned predicates are conceptual and grammatical in nature, while articulating (in experiencing individuals, groups of such individuals, or a whole culture) a fundamental view of the world as a whole that, speaking with Kant and Wittgenstein, could be called “categorical” or “transcendental.” These expressions manifest a certain attitude toward the world or express an experience in it, as when Wittgenstein speaks of “the experience of *absolute* safety.”

What are we to make of such avowals? Pronouncements like “Life/the world/existence is good/beautiful/magnificent/a miracle/secure in God’s hand/absolutely safe,” “Life is not worth living, not lovable,” “I despair of life” constitute absolute—absolutely positive or absolutely negative—value judgments. The judgment is unconditional, absolute, because it depends neither on criteria grounded in *specific* situations or events *in* life or *in* the world, nor on their final balancing. It would thus be a fundamental misconception to justify a negative attitude to one’s own life by pointing to its finiteness or one’s own mortality. But those who attempt to manufacture the positive evaluation of their lives by ignoring their mortality would commit an equally grave mistake.

An absolute value judgment cannot be founded on the comparison of different worlds or different lives either; for each subject, each human existence has but *one* world and *one* life. In this sense, my existence, my world, my life are unique: it is the existential place of Heidegger's "Jemeinigkeit des Daseins." Other persons' lives and worlds touch my life and my world, but they are not accessible to me in their innermost nature. Every one of us can only live his or her own life, and everyone can take a stand in unconditional judgment only on his or her own life. This means that there are no scales, no criteria for such comments; they are not to be understood after the fashion of commonsensical judgments.

If there are no criteria for the truth or falsehood of absolute value judgments, then their truth claim is unredeemable and these judgments appear unfounded and irrational. One should, however, qualify the impression of irrationality, for we are not dealing with a negative lack of reason which in itself could not be rationally justified. Instead, the inability to justify or refute these judgments is reasonably and sufficiently founded in the nature of the object itself. It is therefore appropriate to speak not of "irrationality" but of "arationality" or "transrationality."

How do absolute value judgments come about at all, if everything that is factual, invariably applies only *within* life and the world, if we can have *no factual but only a transcendental—mystical—experience of our lives and our world as a whole*? I contend that basically *any* commonsensical experience can prompt an absolute value judgment; but it can only *prompt* it. Religious traditions like Daoism, Zen Buddhism, or Christianity confirm this: every act (Augustin and the Zen Buddhists say: even excretion), every event (Pope John XXIII and the Zen Buddhists say: even dying) can prompt enlightenment (*satori*), or gratitude, or a glorification of God.

Evidently, the absoluteness of such judgments does not represent transcendence. But because this absoluteness is in its origin purely subjective (purely a subject's product), and because it regards the whole of world and life, it is not innerworldly either. One can justifiably follow Wittgenstein and call it "mystical" or "transcendental,"¹³ or join Kant in calling the idea of this world a "transcendental idea."¹⁴ Still one must distinguish between the *objectivity* of this idea, the *subjectivity* of the experience of the world's divinity as immanently absolute, and that *ontological absolute* which is commonly called "God." *Ontological absolute* means: a being that is in and of itself, that is *ontologically* (not logically) necessary; a being that, if it *is*,

¹³ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, no. 6.421.

¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 321ss., B377ss.

cannot not be and whose existence cannot be recognized by humans; a being that is, in other words, ontologically and gnoseologically transcendent. Since humans cannot experience God, they must believe in Him, believe that He is He who is there par excellence,¹⁵ and that everything is owed to Him.

As a candidate in the second religious category, I would choose that form of Daoism which, often called “philosophical,” is handed down to us in the writings of Laozi and Zhuangzi, as well as that form of Buddhism, occasionally called “meditative Buddhism,” which we encounter in Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen. The popular, “religious” Daoism as well as many popular forms of Buddhism with their veneration of gods and saints belong rather to the first category of the religious. But they, too, like the Hindu religion, may be permeable for experiences of the second category.

Chinese Daoism and Indian meditative Buddhism have very different cultural and metaphysical roots. In their contemplative practice, however, as well as in the goal of that practice—the enlightenment experience that is often labeled as an experience of “cosmic all-one-ness”—they seem to converge: be it as an experience of the unspeakable “dao,” the “way” of heaven that operates in everything and therefore draws everything behind it, knowingly or not; or be it as the experience of “nothingness,” that is: as the insight that everything, including one’s own person, is “empty,” “without substance,” plainly contingent, without any last reason pertaining to the individual. (This does not imply Nihilism and is not interpreted as an experience of meaninglessness.¹⁶) One is therefore not surprised to find that, despite the difference of their metaphysical foundations, Daoism and meditative Buddhism influenced and enriched one another on occasion of their first encounter in China. Chinese Chan Buddhism, as we know it through the mediation of Japanese Zen, is a result of this encounter of Buddhism and Daoism.¹⁷ With regard to their metaphysical starting points they may be intracategorially incompatible; with regard to their practice and its goal, however, and in light of their shared, fertile history, they must be recognized as intracategorially compatible.

¹⁵ Cf. *Exodus* 3:14.

¹⁶ Cf. Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, translated and with an introduction by Jan van Bragt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

¹⁷ Cf. Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History*, vo. I-II (New York: Macmillan, 1988-1990).

III Belief in the Presence of the One Intangible God

The religious conviction that world and life are directly or indirectly owed to God does not function as an explanation, the more so as the world as a whole and life as a whole neither need nor allow an explanation. For world and life are a cohesive whole encompassing anything that requires explanation or can serve to provide it. In this respect, world and life are complete. Were one to imagine the world as incomplete, then its complement would be part of it. The religious attitude toward the world as a whole, particularly the conviction of its absolute dependence on God, cannot be proven on the basis of any specific characteristics; for absolutely everything is (directly or indirectly) owed to God. This conviction therefore cannot be scientific, since scientific statements never can refer to the world as a whole. Just as it cannot be scientifically confirmed, it cannot be scientifically refuted. Such a conviction therefore cannot serve as a so-called “explanation” of the world’s origin or existence—at least not in the scientific sense of the term “explanation.” Darwin’s theory of evolution, to point to an ongoing controversy, or the cosmological notion of a universe originating according to its own laws, can never enter into competition with the theological notion of Creation. God’s continuous Creation of the world, the *creatio continua* that in God’s eternity is a single act, represents at best a *religious* explanation of the world, which, as mentioned above, cannot compete with scientific explanations insofar as these are incapable of referring to the world as a whole. For the beginning of our cosmos in the so-called “big bang” is, after all, not an absolute beginning. Science can ask what lay before it without necessarily having a scientific answer to this question.

The result of these reflections is that humans cannot encounter God *in* the world, in contradistinction to the Greek gods, the newly fashionable angels, or the divine energies beloved in esoteric circles. In ontological and religious regards, all these belong to the first category. What makes a difference in the description of the world is not the existence or non-existence of God, but the existence or non-existence of such innerworldly deities and divine powers. This implies, among other things, that the “belief” in divine beings can be principally justified or falsified through an examination of the world, which (despite the Scholastics’ and Rationalists’ claims to the contrary) is not true of the belief in the existence of God. As a result, there can be no external or internal experience of God, because experiences invariably refer to facts *in* the world, including at best—as a boundary experience in *transcendental* and *mystical* experiences—the world *as a whole*. Admittedly, such an experience of the world as a whole

articulates itself, under the sign of monotheistic faith, as “the experience of absolute security of the world (or of my life) in God,” as “the experience of redemption (of self and world),” or, in Christian terms, as the conviction that “nothing can separate me from Christ’s love,” whatever happens to me or whatever I do in my life.¹⁸

If, however, God is strictly transcendent in anthropological and epistemological respects, how can the “good tidings” known in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity be perceived and accepted as *subjectively and objectively divine*—i.e., as stemming from God and being about God, as his self-revelation and therefore as absolutely valid in claim and content? The answer to this question must be: only in faith. This answer, however, seems circular. It is indeed circular when examined in the light of common epistemological standards; but then these apply only under innerworldly circumstances. For, provided we believe, we encounter here the seeming paradox that everything including faith is owed to God, although under the aspect of its independence and completeness, it does not need God. This means that the “message of the revelation” has to be added to the reality of world and life, as Protestant word-theology emphasizes. We are indeed dealing only with a *message*, not a demonstration of God. That this message is divine, that it is a revelation, can only be claimed in faith. This means that acceptance of the message in faith does not rely on human capacities and achievements, although it has to be *human* faith. In the court of reason, a mere “natural” belief would be demonstrably illegitimate, insofar as it is without foundation and therefore, unfounded. Faith has to be God-given, and it must (among other things) accept this divine origin as part of its content. Hence, faith is part of the divine message, part of the divine self-communication.

My analysis of the third category may in parts give the impression of drawing on the linguistic and theoretical foundation made available by the thinking characterizing the Atlantic region, which in its depths is still affected by Christianity. This impression is not deceptive. Nevertheless, the analysis claims to be adequate not only with respect to the Christian conviction of God’s existence (if we leave aside the specifically Christian belief in God’s Incarnation, which belongs to the fourth category), but also as regards Jewish and Muslim belief in a one and only God. The reason usually given for the intracategorical compatibility of these three religions is their shared reference point, Abraham as the father of belief in a single god. But each of these religions claims divine revelations of its own: For Judaism, which emerged from ancient Israeli religions, it is the revelation to Moses of

¹⁸ Cf. St. Paul, *Rom* 8:35-39.

God's law for the chosen people; for Christianity, it is the revelation of God's salvific plan for all humankind in the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ; and for Islam, it is the revelation to Mohammed the last prophet of the sole all-merciful God in the Qur'an. The contents of these specific revelations differ from one another; in the history of the controversies between these religions, they were profiled as mutually exclusive. Neither Judaism nor Islam accept Christianity's claim that Jesus was the messiah or the son of God. Christianity in turn rejects the authority of the Torah and the Qur'an for its members and claims to possess the final, definitive revelation. Islam considers the Qur'an as the fulfilment of divine self-revelation and guidance for humankind, which corrects the two preceding scripture-based religions by renewing the original revelation offered at the beginning of human history. On the level of their specific revelations, the three Abrahamic religions must thus be regarded as intracategorially incompatible.

IV The Belief in the Presence of God Incarnate

In Christianity, God becomes anthropomorphic, takes human form. To Jews and Muslims, the Christian belief in the divine Trinity and in the Incarnation of God's Son in Jesus of Nazareth seems like a revocation of God's singularity and transcendence and therefore a return to polytheism. Yet, like the other monotheistic religions, Christianity upholds not only the createdness of the world and humankind, but also God's singularity and transcendence. Christianity focuses its belief precisely on what is most deeply objectionable, on what because of its contradictory nature is ostensibly unthinkable: that the transcendent God has become human. Primarily unthinkable is the event itself, secondarily, its motive: *Cur Deus homo?* In the first place: it cannot be that somebody is at once God and man. The offense, the scandal begins already with the conceptual clash, not with the motive for Incarnation. It centers in the claim of a divine love of humans who are sinful and have thereby abandoned God, rather than in what St. Paul emphasized as the foolishness of the Cross and of Jesus' death. In Christian belief, only Jesus can be claimed and professed to be both Man and God. Christian theology does indeed narrow the gap between God and humans: a person who is baptized, who believes, and who loves is the temple of the Holy Spirit, a limb in the *corpus Christi mysticum*, God's son or daughter and Jesus' brother or sister. The Church Fathers and Christian mystics do indeed speak of the "divinization" of humanity, of God's or

Christ's indwelling in the soul, of humankind's union with God or marriage with Christ. Nonetheless, orthodox Christian mysticism and Church doctrine maintain the awareness of a fundamental distinctness of God and humans. Particularly in the reformed churches, this awareness of a distinctness is heightened to an awareness of the immeasurable chasm that only God can bridge. The Christological formulas of the Council of Chalcedon do not make the unfathomable union of God and humankind in Jesus tangible; they merely strive to retain the paradox, so that nobody may seek alleviation at one or the other side, in Docetism on the one hand or Arianism on the other. "[...] Christ is one and the same [...] in two natures unmixed, unchanged, undivided, inseparable." Can one really believe that which seems to be so contradictory?

A thorough analysis shows that there is no *logical* contradiction. A logical contradiction exists whenever contradictory statements are made about one and the same object. The Christological dogma, however, distinguishes between the divine and human natures within the unity of Christ's person. The contradictory predicates apply to Christ in different respects.¹⁹ What is more, these predicates are specified: neither are the two natures described with mutually exclusive and therefore contradictory predicates, nor is a predicate said to apply to only one nature but not the other. Rather, a specification takes place on the basis of the fundamental categorial distinction between Jesus' divinity and humanity. This results not in contradictory but in analogous predicates—predicates whose analogicity must be qualified with regard to their object, i.e., with regard to the theology of Creation and to Christology. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 has agreed on the following formulation for this qualification: *Inter creatorem et creaturam non potest similitudo notari, quin inter eos maior sit dissimilitudo notanda*—"Between creator and creature there can be noted no similarity so great that a greater dissimilarity cannot be seen between them."

Through His Incarnation, God has not only taken on a life among humans, He has also entered into closer association than ever before with all human beings and all of humankind. "For, by his Incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man," as the Second Vatican Council teaches in *Gaudium et Spes*. Next to Jesus, God has acquired numerous sons and daughters, above all those who believe in Him

¹⁹ Admittedly, the *communicatio idiomatum* allows to exchange predicates: what can be stated about Jesus the human being may also be stated about Jesus as God and vice versa, for the God Incarnate is after all a single person.

and His Incarnation. This Incarnation has not ended with Jesus' death. Instead, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit engenders a *corpus mysticum* in which human beings are united, through God's spirit, to a single spiritual body. This spirit of love is the soul of Christ's collective body. United with Jesus in life and death through his body in the Eucharist and in the spirit-gift, humans participate in God's life in this world and He in theirs. This mutual inclusivity is the crucial content of the Incarnation. Humankind's destiny and God's destiny are interwoven in Jesus and his spirit.

God's (individual) Incarnation in Jesus and His (collective) indwelling first in the community of believers (the Church), then, at the end of time, in humanity as a whole,²⁰ gives the faithful an awareness of a loving community with God and with humanity. Knowing that God is so close to all human beings as to share their fate, believers are enabled not only to master their lives and all that befalls them, but to comprehend it as a special favor and grace for which thanks are due, even where some situations make this difficult. Glorification and gratitude must be learned throughout life.²¹ God's conduct, occasion for ever renewed amazement, consists in its core in the fact that He does not shy away from shouldering and partaking in living circumstances dominated by suffering, affliction, death, carelessness, viciousness and cruelty as well as political opportunism and cynicism—circumstances in which the radically and diabolically evil has its place and time. The Christian Bible expresses this repeatedly: in Jesus' Passion, in the Apocalypse of John, and most impressively perhaps in brief phrases in poetry or prose such as that from the epistle to the Philippians, where St. Paul confesses in a hymn addressed to the original congregation:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!

²⁰ Through the *apokatastasis panton*, the restoration of everything (cf. *Acts* 3:21).

²¹ Cf. the final stanza in Hölderlin's poem *The Course of Life*: "The gods say that man should test / everything, and that strongly nourished / he be thankful for everything, and understand / the freedom to set forth wherever he will." Hölderlin's words chime with *1 Thess* 5:16-22.

The epistle to the Hebrews seconds this:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered. [...] When Christ came into the world, he said: [...] a body you prepared for me [...] I have come to do your will, O God.'²²

Traditional Christian theology has tended to emphasize the role of atonement in Jesus' life and death. In our days, the focus is rather on God's *philanthropia*,²³ as an accomplished and unsurpassable expression of friendship and love extending to the surrender of life, a sacrifice for which there is no good reason from the human point of view. Moreover, the books of the New Testament interpret God's Incarnation as a progressive self-revelation through His body (the Church) and through His love (the Holy Spirit), in the sense of God's progressive conciliation with humankind and the whole of Creation. Christendom's mystic theology and mystic practice have always focused on this core: on Jesus' oneness with his Father in the gospel of St. John, the oneness of the faithful "in Christ" in the epistles of St. Paul, the oneness of Christ and cosmos in the epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians. Like the Church Fathers of patristics before them, the medieval Christian mystics speak of the "birth of God" in the human soul.

Christian faith and Christian practice draw an additional consequence from this cosmic and universal dimension of the Incarnation. Particularly the "old churches"—the Oriental Churches, the so-called Orthodox Churches, and the Roman Catholic Church—stress the sacramentality of certain rites that are central to the devotional and salvific practice. Such sacraments are real symbols, i.e., signifiers that bring about what they denote. With some exaggeration, one could speak of the "materialization of the Incarnation." This becomes particularly poignant in the Eucharist, in which, according to the understanding of the old Churches, the faithful are not merely *reminded* of Jesus' last supper with his disciples, but invited to experience the *presence* of the historical meal and of Jesus himself: throughout the ages, Jesus shares a meal with all who are respectively present, by taking on the form of bread and wine. Another application is Christ's effective presence in the sacrament of marriage, which materializes not only through the mutual

²² *Hebr* 5:7-8, *Hebr* 10:5-8; compare also *Ps* 40:7-9.

²³ Cf. *Tit.* 3:4.

and free consent of the partners, but also through the sexual act and thus imitates and realizes Christ's bridal relationship to his Church in a real-symbolic way.²⁴

Conclusion

The emphasis on Christian real symbolism closes the circle of the categories of divine manifestations. We set out with phenomena *in* our lives, *in* our world, which in different ways claim to be taken seriously in an unconditional sense and therefore can be called "divine." We have now returned to this beginning. What counts here, however, are not specific *experiences* but a particular *faith* through which these experiences are interpreted or which even takes their place: the belief in God's Incarnation. Experiences of the divine in the world can enter into competition with faith whenever they are interpreted as mutually exclusive, as is documented in the history of the confrontations between ancient Israel, Christianity, and Islam with the animistic and polytheistic religions of their surroundings. But this entry into competition is not inevitable: those who believe in the one and only God are capable of seeing and acknowledging the experiences of the divine in the world and in the life of their unbelieving cousins as (anonymous) signs of God's presence—anonymous in the sense that the people having this experience are not aware of it *as* a sign of such a presence. The people having such an experience, in turn, can choose not only to accept (in the sense of "tolerate" or "endure") such interpretations on the part of the believers, but may integrate it into their self-conception and thus become believers in the monotheistic sense. They will not thereby disavow their experiences of the divine, but see them in a new light, lift them to a new stage, while divesting them of their magical and objectified polytheistic properties. In view of the internal logic of its faith in God's Incarnation and despite the manifold historical measures suggesting the contrary, Christendom should be capable of acknowledging, not merely tolerating such ex-

²⁴ Cf. *Eph* 5:30-32: "For we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church." The Roman Catholic Church in its canonization and veneration of sanctity does not follow this theological insight into the sanctification of marriage through Christ: there are no saintly Christian couples that are saintly *as* a married couple. Marie Noël rightfully regrets this in her diary, comparing this deficit with the situation in the Hindu religion; cf. *Notes for myself* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968).

periences of the divine as authentic experiences, all the more since they present a genuine *praeparatio evangelii* insofar as they are open for an incarnatorial interpretation.²⁵

As is well known, both ways of religious concretization and materialization—the faith-based and the experience-based way—share the danger of externalization: of ritual and liturgical mechanization and folklorization or of magical and sacramentalistic instrumentalization and particularization. Understood and implemented as authentic claims, all four ways of divine presence share the tendency of constant realization, even if this manifests itself only in single events and practices. “Here, too, are gods,” says Heraclitus.²⁶ And in the gospels as well as in St. Paul we are told “to pray always.”²⁷ Even if the experiential character of epiphanies, theophanies, and enlightenments is underscored by their momentary, sudden, and short-lived nature, reflection and a contemplative or cultic realization in the repetition and perpetuation of these events quickly makes it clear that the divine, the mystic totality of being, the sempiternal God, and Christ himself are always and everywhere present: a constant presence that demands constant spiritual awareness—both *attente* and *attention* in the sense of Simone Weil. The categorial distinction of different conditions of the divine thus marks a shared spirituality of awareness: the divine *is*—in whatever category—omnipresent; therefore it *should* come into focus in any human presence, always, in every quotidian moment.

I close with a well-known Hasidic story:

When Rabbi Yitzhak Meir of Ger was a little boy, his mother once took him to see the Maggid of Koznitz. There someone said to him: “Yitzhak Meir, I’ll give you a gulden if you tell me where God lives!” He replied, “And I will give you two gulden if you tell me where God doesn’t.”²⁸

²⁵ First steps in an official document of the Roman Catholic Church are found in a declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the relationship between the Church and non-Christian religions, *Nostra aetate*. Simone Weil has undertaken an impressive attempt to acknowledge extra-Christian experiences of the divine from an incarnatorial logic; cf. my study *Simone Weil interkulturell gelesen* (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2007).

²⁶ William Harris, *Heraclitus: The Complete Philosophical Fragments*, fragment 74, at <http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Philosophy/Heraclitus.html>.

²⁷ Cf. *Lk* 18:1, *1 Thess* 5:16-18, *Eph* 6:18, *Col* 4:2.

²⁸ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), vol. 2, “The later masters.” Cited in Eugene B. Borowitz and Frances Weinman Schwartz, *The Jewish Moral Virtues* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 303.