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## Idolatry

In Comparative Perspective

by

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Many years—indeed, many decades—have passed since I last used the word “idolatry”, either in print or, so far as I am aware, even in speaking. My reason for rejecting it as a term has been a conviction that the conception that it usually communicates is one that distorts what it purports to name. The word “idol”, too, from which it comes, is normally illegitimate. On the latter, and specifically on “idol-worship”, my last published remark, twenty or thirty years ago, was: “No one has ever worshipped an idol. Some have worshipped God in the form of an idol; that is what idols are for.” (Even regarding what is mis-named cow-worship, I have also remarked: “The Hindu reveres the cow that he sees, not the cow that we see”.)<sup>1</sup> Much though I admire some of Bishop Heber’s other hymns, such as his widely used “Holy, Holy, Holy”, yet I have certainly objected to the lines that run, “The heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone”, ever since I came to recognize that in that situation it was the missionary, rather, that was blind. Of course, I have not been alone among Christians in feeling restless with the attitude set forth in that type of wording. I once had occasion to trace the gradual modification or outright replacement of those lines or of the stanza in a sequence of versions of the hymn appearing in editions of certain twentieth-century denominational

Some editorial conventions used throughout the rest of this book are not used by Professor Smith, for his own good reasons.—ED.

hymn-books on this continent. (Another line in the same verse had originally affirmed, of the Asian mission field, that nature there is beautiful and "only man is vile". Later versions have emended this to read, "only sin is vile".<sup>2</sup>)

Much of the Christian Church has come to recognize that its nineteenth-century attitude to other religious communities was wrong<sup>3</sup>. One should not dismiss it as at the time ridiculous or stupid: it grew out of compassion and noble concern, and only later came to be recognized instead as arrogance. It was virtue misguided by misunderstanding, distorted by misapprehension. (May we be in that same situation to-day in other matters—or some among us, still in this matter?)

Yet misguided it was. I repeat: Much of the Church now recognizes that its former attitude to other religious communities was wrong. It has been slowly wrestling with the question of what will be involved in setting it right; what new attitude may legitimately replace that old one. Yet it is not merely a nineteenth-century aberration that has got us into trouble, or that needs radical revising. Much more serious and central is the Old Testament source of the error, perpetuated firmly in the New. The inherently pejorative quality of our concept "idol" is built into the Christian inheritance from the Jews, and from St. Paul. (Jesus himself never used the term.) Of the almost dozen Hebrew words translated as "idol" in the King James Authorized Version and the Revised Standard Version, several mean, basically, "iniquity", "vanity", "thing of nought", "object of terror", "horror", "a cause of trembling", "a cause of grief", "abominable"; and words like "defile", "pollute", "abomination", "sin", "abhor", are regularly linked with the word "idol" in the phrase where it occurs. Similarly "idolaters", in the New Testament, appears along with "covetous", "extortioners", "hatred, violence", "liars"; as in "dogs . . . and idolaters".

Christian (and Jewish) failure to understand, let alone to appreciate, what is going on in the spiritual life of communities served by images, is integral to the Bible, and to our tradition. Indeed, the error was a failure to recognize that anything at all was going on spiritually. As a result, the concepts developed have signified the material objects involved but have omitted the transcendent dimension that was their primary significance. The particular concept that we are considering definitely implied an absence of that dimension. The mistake was important, and has had serious historical consequences. It is comparable to the Biblical mistake as to the date and fashion of the creation of the planet earth, whose historical consequences have recently also proven major. The Church has wrestled firmly with the one, and is beginning now with the other. (In both cases, the wrestling met internal opposition.)

Christians have often been accused of being, and have come to recognize themselves as indeed having been, arrogant and disdainful in their fundamental metaphysical view of other religious practitioners. For centuries it was Jews who paid the chief price for this profound Christian error, and the Church has fortunately become repentant, to a considerable degree, about its resulting horrendous treatment of the Jews over the ages. Nonetheless the irony has not

been widely recognized that it was in fact from the Jews that Christians learned this arrogance and disdain, this rejection. It was from their Jewish legacy that they inherited this false judgement on outsiders<sup>4</sup>. The "Noachite covenant", which is sometime supposed to represent a Jewish thesis of universal salvation, in fact explicitly excludes idolaters (and therefore most of the human race). The distorted and distorting interpretation of the place of forms and images in human religious life, and specifically the forms and images of other communities than one's own, is integral to both the Jewish and the Christian religious traditions, and has done untold damage on the human scene through the centuries. (It has been integral also to the primary version of the Islamic tradition; and the rest of the world is beginning to pay the price for modern Muslims' reverting to the traditional Jewish-Christian-Islamic stance on outsiders' spirituality—after a good while when in their case this negative view of idolatry was to some extent modified in the widespread Sufi movement.)

My awareness in this general area, begun by my travelling outside of Christendom and as an undergraduate at home, was heightened when I lived for some years in India with friends from among its various communities, and it was then given intellectual depth when as a graduate student learning Persian I was introduced to Sufi interpretations. My education in this particular realm was furthered by two things that I learned more recently in my study of Hindu life. One is the ceremony called *pratistha* (this word is used also for the enthronement or coronation of a political ruler) or *pranapratistha*, for the consecrating or sacralizing of an image. Before this ceremony has been performed in any particular case, the image is indeed the wood or stone of which the Bishop of Calcutta wrote in his hymn (but with nobody bowing down to it); after the ceremony has sacrally invited the god or goddess (him- or herself a form [*sic*] of the higher divine; of God, we would say) to take up his or her presence in the image, and has consecrated it, it serves the worshipper as the locus—or: as a locus—of the deity; the consecrated image becomes a potential focus of his or her devotion. It is thus formally true, not merely substantially so, that that worshipper worships not the "idol", but God in that form, called "idol" by those who do not understand. (I was pleased to find my earlier remark, made before I became aware of this procedure, herein corroborated!) There is a counterpart ceremony by which, if required, the image may be deconsecrated. After that, the material itself may be discarded (without the uncouthness that seems to be communicated by signs that one occasionally nowadays sees in our cities where demographic and other patterns have changed, announcing "Church For Sale". Such signs mean, rather: building, previously serving as a Church, for sale).

The other help that I received from Hindu sources arose from my coming across a verse in the *Yogavasisṭha*<sup>5</sup> which says, of the Transcendent (of Brahman; of God, we would say), "Thou art formless. Thy only form is our knowledge of Thee". To me, this has proved a brilliant and immensely illuminating perception: one of the theologically most discerning remarks that I know. Our knowledge of God is always partial, of course; Christian theolo-

gians have known that, and the more profound they were, the more vividly they have recognized it. God does not reveal theologies; He reveals Himself. She reveals Herself, It reveals Itself. Every theological system or idea is a response. It is finite, is mundane, is a human construct. Yet theologies may serve as channels introducing those who ponder them, and especially those who subscribe to them, those who see their significance, to a truth that in turn is more than human; more than finite; to God.

*Theologies are conceptual images of God.*

Like other images, each may be less or more worthy of its Subject. Like other images, each may be of no spiritual significance or truth to outsiders, may not be for them a locus of transcendent transparency. This verse, however, goes further: it speaks not of our overt theological statements, but of our knowledge. Whether articulated in a great or in an unsophisticated conceptual pattern, or not articulated, our knowledge of God—the intellectual's knowledge, and too that of the cobbler—is the form in which ideationally God appears to each of us, less or more richly.

No such form is either final or complete. No such form is negligible.

The ideational itself is of course only one type of form, among others, in which transcendence is apprehended by, is communicated to, human beings. It is a particularly important form, no doubt, for those of us who are intellectuals.

Knowledge, here, is not to be confused with fancy. It is not that our ideas of God are all equally translucent. Only insofar as they are valid (so far as they go) may they be called knowledge. Yet even at that level they remain particular, finite, of this world. It is wrong for our intellects to absolutize their own handiwork.

With recognition of all this goes a deeper sense of truth, and a clearer appreciation of the way that human beings apprehend and express it. In modern comparativist times, we are pushed to a more adequate view of conceptualization and of language, especially of statements; to a "human" view of truth<sup>4</sup>. This view holds that statements are not true or false; that truth and falsity—more accurately, approximations to truth, less or more remote—are qualities not of statements but of what they mean, to those who utter and hear them, or write and read them: qualities of the awareness that they induce in persons. Such awareness regularly varies, for any given statement, certainly from century to century and from civilization to civilization, often from person to person and indeed, in major matters, over the course of an individual person's lifetime.

Persons live their lives on this earth, and in time. This means that they live them in a context that is mundane. They live them to some degree also in terms of a concomitant fact: that at the same time and in addition<sup>5</sup> they are in relation to a reality that transcends time and space and ourselves. We live at an intersection of time and eternity, to use one particular vocabulary. We live, at least potentially, in the presence of God, to use another. Our awareness of the transcendent dimension of our lives and of our world varies. For some persons or groups, for some moments or eras, it is more vivid, more genuine, more

profound, than for others. As a student of the religious history of the world, I observe that despite the variation, radical unawareness of that transcendent dimension has been and is rare.

There has ever been a problem, however, as to how to express—in concepts, in art, in institutions, in activity, in other ways—and how therewith to nurture, that relation to what is more than mundane. Human beings have observably produced, and cherished, a vast number of ways of doing this. These have been in response, one may say, to the transcendence that has entered their lives. Yet historically it is noticeable that these expressions have been in response also in each case to a complex of mundane considerations, conscious or unconscious. Taking a cue from our *Yogavasisṭha* verse, one may suggest that a work of plastic art, an institutional structure, Handel's *Messiah*, a theological system, are all forms mediating less or more well between humankind and God, or from another perspective we should say between God and humankind. Often the most salient mediation is membership in a given community.

To see things so is not to adjudge that all forms are equally valid or effective or acceptable. It is to suggest that there is no fundamental difference in principle between a doctrine and a statue. (There may be considerable difference between their effectiveness in moulding the course of history—for good and for ill.) An artist is not necessarily further from the truth than is an intellectual. The saint, or indeed the humble moral member of the community, may be closer than either the artist or the intellectual. Some statues are magnificent works of art and embody profound insight; others are crude, or awry. (Moreover, some persons or groups may at times nonetheless see more in—through—what seems to be the crudest art.) Similarly with theologies. Both theology and art proffer relative apprehensions of the Absolute.

The upshot of all this is that I long felt that we had good reason to dismiss "idolatry" as a concept. As an interpretation of others' religious life, it simply would not do. Its characterizing of what it has purported to describe has been doubly in error: it has been intellectually wrong, and morally wrong. For it misunderstands what those involved are in fact involved in. And its built-in denigration of them as persons or communities is grossly arrogant, repugnantly insensitive.

To employ the words of my subtitle: in comparative perspective, the term "idolatry" appeared to be ruled out.

My choosing the term, nonetheless, as title for my presentation here might seem, therefore, surprising. At least, it was so to me. The choice represents a new sense of two matters, which I shall endeavour to explain. Rather than our dropping the term altogether, in comparative perspective it may indeed be seen as serving a new purpose.

First, there is here something not unusual in religious affairs: namely, that while participants in a given group vision may be limited or awry in their apprehension of the life of outsiders' communities, their discernment regarding matters within their own group may be sharp—because of that very vision. Further, their unawareness that certain concrete items are symbols for others

may or indeed will lead to their failure to appreciate those items' role; yet they may in turn employ those same concepts in a transferred, and therefore recognizedly symbolic, fashion in relation to themselves. Christians have failed to sense what is going on in a foreign community served by what they call "idols", and they accordingly use the term literally to denote for those outsiders the external form. Such Christians have used the same term metaphorically, however, to connote a phenomenon in their own community, describing not its empirical condition but its spiritual overtones.

My immediate proposal is to suggest that in its metaphorical sense, our words "idol" and "idolatry" might prove helpful. One could say more firmly that they can prove indeed helpful in this second, transferred, usage. Let me explain.

Since the Western traditions mistakenly imagined that those whom they called idolaters had no transcendent reference, and specifically that the images had none, the word "idol" came to mean secondarily human attachment to some mundane thing without any such reference, or instead of it. Accordingly, putting one's faith in, giving one's allegiance to, material wealth, or worldly fame, or sensual pleasure, rather than to God or to spiritual pursuits, has by Christians, Jews, and Muslims been called a form of idolatry. In a similar way treating the sacraments, for instance, or any holy thing, as if it were merely magical rather than spiritual, as if its significance or power lay in itself rather than in its relation to God, has also been called a form of idolatry. (In pre-cumenical days, many Protestants used to imagine that for Roman Catholics the crucifix or the rosary simply served as an idol; while Catholic leaders would themselves say that this was a potential danger for Catholics insufficiently sensitive to the cosmic divine action represented by these sacramentals, or to the divine presence mediated through it. Comparably, Protestants, who ideally are invited to hear God speak through the Bible<sup>10</sup>, are potentially prey to bibliolatry—idolatry of the Bible—insofar as they think of the Bible not as pointing to God and opening up for us a way to approach and know Him/Her/It and His will and Her love for us and Its self-giving to and in us, but as if the Bible itself constituted an absolute.)

"Idolatry", by definition, in its literal usage denigrates one's neighbour by leaving out the transcendence of his or her position. Yet by the same token, in its metaphorical usage the word may prove helpful for oneself by calling attention to the danger of leaving it out.

I am not here suggesting that other people, or other communities, are always virtuous, while one is oneself always wicked, or one's own group is so. Morally, this would be perhaps a preferable stance to its more traditional contrary, which has through much of their history plagued the three Semitic world traditions: that we are right, they (more recently, you) are wrong; more stridently, that we are saved, you are damned. Apart from moral considerations, however, such self-deprecatory humility is not theoretically right. Rather, my thesis is that all of us on earth are prone to an error, one that Western theology, unfortunately, has tended at times to bless: the error of

identifying with the divine, with the truth, with the final, with transcendence, the particular form in or through which we have been introduced to it, by way of which It or He or She has come into our particular lives—rather than relating that form to It/Him/Her, subordinating it, relativizing it in relation to the Absolute that it serves.

We come now to the heart of my presentation. Twenty-some years ago I wrote *The Meaning and End of Religion*, of which the thesis in a nutshell was that, seen in world-history perspective, what have been called the religions of the world are indeed parts of this world, are temporal, contingent, mundane, while their primary significance lies in their role as mundane intermediaries between humankind and God. Their two component elements, which I dubbed cumulative tradition and faith, play a role in this supremely significant matter. I might now speak rather of three component elements, counting community as in significant ways distinct from tradition, rather than subsumed under it, with participation in community as a major element. Traditions, and communities, have the demonstrated capacity to elicit and to nurture faith, the term that I gave—misguidedly, some have said; but the wording is of secondary importance—to that relation of human beings to God. The particular argument can, of course, be disputed (though few have disputed it directly). Certainly some have resisted my suggestion made with it that we should drop the concept of a variety of "religions". What is substantial, however, implicit in that work and explicit now in this presentation, is that it is a mistake to identify one's own "religion" or tradition with God, or with absolute truth; to regard it as divine, rather than as an avenue to, or from, the divine.

All the various religious movements of the world, Christian and other, have been constructed, and have kept being constantly re-constructed and modified, by human beings—in response (in part) to something that transcends the movement and that they have recognized as transcending it. I have no urge to contend that religious people have not been helped, year by year, in this constructing and re-constructing by what Christians call the Holy Spirit (though they have also been limited at each point by their own finite capacities and misguided by a variety of other intertwining considerations that have impinged).

For Christians to think that Christianity is true, or final, or salvific, is a form of idolatry. For Christians to imagine that God has constructed Christianity, or the Church, or the like<sup>11</sup>, rather than that He/She/It has inspired us to construct it, as He/She/It has inspired Muslims to construct what the world knows as Islam, or Hindus what is miscalled Hinduism, or inspired Bach to write the B Minor Mass or Ramanuja to write his theological commentaries, or Pañcapana (if it was indeed he) to build Borobudur—that is idolatry.

The forms that have been called idols can in fact be very good things, I have argued. All the above have indeed been good things (even though the mundane elements in "Christianity" and "Islam" and "Hinduism" are many and some of them have been deeply deleterious). It would be wrong to call them idols. To mistake them, however, for God Himself, or mistakenly to elevate any one of

them to some divine status, is to commit the fallacy of looking at the window rather than through it to God, and giving to it the honour, dignity, deference, due only to God.

Each "religion" is an "idol" in the best sense of the word, if one were going to use these words at all. Exclusive claims for one's own is idolatry in the pejorative sense.

To return to the particular question of theology, earlier raised. Theologies, we observed, and each specific doctrine, are conceptual images of God. Thus even for those few nowadays who do not make the recent error of reifying their religion, it is nonetheless easy to idolize the conceptual content of a theological position or tenet. Ironically, theologians themselves have sometimes emerged as prone to this, regarding as definitive the theoretical dimension of Christian truth. This is perhaps particularly the case since the Enlightenment, which began by recognizing the transcendent role of Reason in human life; its heirs have tended to identify the rational with the true, rather than as a great mediator of truth. For intellectuals, the rational is probably its greatest mediator. Some intellectuals, even, would in this fashion absolutize—idolize—the role of rational *propositions*—a still lower form of the rational. Certain theologians have absolutized not only Christian theology as such, but even particular doctrines within it. This elicits the derogatory sense of the word "dogmatic". Such an understanding of doctrine or dogma is a clear instance of an idolatrous attitude, in the negative sense, towards an image, in this case a conceptual image.

Surely those of us who theologize know that doctrines are human products, made by us (so that for us it is a bit silly, let alone, idolatrous, to treat them as final). They are not themselves transcendent, though we may hope and strive that they may serve to communicate or to mediate truth, which is transcendent.

For Christians to see Christ as divine is a perception (put then in conceptual terms): a perception that their own personal experience, and two thousand years of Church history, elicit and confirm. It is, however, impossible to *perceive* him as the sole such mediator; although one can hold this as a theological proposition, inferred by logic from what one does see. One cannot perceive the non-divinity of Krishna, or of the Qur'ān. (That these are not forms of God for oneself one may know. Whether they are or are not for other people one has to ascertain by investigation.) To believe that other groups' forms are *not* divine is a purely doctrinal construct. To hold that Buddhist, or post-Biblical Jewish, life is not the locus of God's salvific activity, fully comparable to God's activity in Christian life, is a sheer man-made\* hypothesis. The

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\*The editors of this volume objected to my use of the term "man-made" here. I am not aware, however, of any woman theologian who has formulated this doctrine, so as to have us think of it as woman-made. Some women have held the doctrine, once it was propounded by male theologians; and hold it to-day. Yet might one not feel permitted to hope that as women participate more fully and creatively in the on-going theological process of the Church, a more compassionate position on the matter, one advocated by both men and women, will become standard?

position has—inescapably—no direct grounding in reality. The doctrine of the divinity of Christ is a conceptual form of Christians' knowledge of God. The doctrine of other religious patterns' non-divinity is an intellectual formulation of ignorance: an ignorance of the life of those for whom those patterns are rich<sup>12</sup>.

We may repeat, then, our previous assessment, but relating it this time specifically to doctrinal matters. Every positive theology, Christian or other, and each positive doctrine, is an "idol", in the best sense of the word, if one were to use that word at all. Exclusive or final claims for one's own doctrine, or for any, is idolatry in the pejorative sense.

Our conclusion, then, is this. In comparative perspective, one sees that "idolatry" is not a notion that clarifies other religious practices or other outlooks than one's own; yet it can indeed clarify with some exactitude one's own religious stance, if one has previously been victim of the misapprehension that the divine is to be fully identified with or within one's own forms. Christians have been wrong in thinking that Hindus are formally idolaters. We would do well, on the other hand, to recognize that we Christians have substantially been idolaters, insofar as we have mistaken for God, or as universally final, the particular forms of Christian life or thought.

Christianity—for some, Christian theology—has been our idol.

It has had both the spiritual efficacy of "idols" in the good sense, and the serious limitations of idolatry in the bad sense.

### CHRISTOLOGICAL COROLLARY

It has been widely felt that the divinity of Christ is centrally at stake in the pluralism debate; even, that this is the crucial matter. The divinity of Christ is not, however, at issue in these discussions. In fact, in some ways it could become a serious distraction to the question before us. For their conviction, or recognition, of Christ's divinity is what prevents many Christians, they have felt, from recognizing as a divine fact—metaphysically valid, acceptable in the eyes of God—what they cannot avoid recognizing as a human fact: namely, the pluralism of the world's spiritual life. For they are imprisoned in the fear that to do so would mean a surrendering of their precious treasure of Christ as Himself divine.

Of course, there are others, both inside and regretfully outside the Church, who are deeply restless, in modern times, at what they regard as this untenable, this outdated, dogma. We would contend that the fear of the one group, and the restlessness and disparagement of the other, are both overcome in a sound pluralistic awareness. (After all, pluralism recognizes and comes to terms with diversity within, as well as among, religious groups.)

To begin at one extreme: some might feel that the general orientation set forth in this presentation would, if adopted, involve a notion that Christ would

then be thought of as an idol. Now any *doctrine* about the nature of Christ is a conceptual image. The *figure* of Christ is another matter, though not unrelated. An in some ways comparable question, canvassed of late, is whether it be appropriate to consider the doctrine of Christ incarnate as a myth. This too might be thought to be engaged here.

It is not evident that these matters impinge on our present concern: pluralism. The questions, as I have suggested, no doubt are related to our outlook; yet the answer that one gives to them affects perhaps only obliquely the central focus of this essay, on Christian relations to other forms of faith. Let us consider these points.

First, has the figure of Christ served as—has it been—an idol through the centuries for Christians? Obviously, the answer depends on what the word “idol” is understood as meaning. As we have seen, the prevalent usage of this term has been to designate something conceived by the speaker to be mundane and not transcendent. Normally, the speaker’s further implication is that the worshipper, in turn, mistakenly conceives it as transcendent and not mundane. In standard Christian orientations, Christ has been held explicitly to be not one or the other, but both. Indeed, a deal of highly serious thought has gone into, and a deal of rich inference—theoretical, affective, and practical—has been drawn out of, the affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ was and is simultaneously very God of very God and also flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone. I have complained above that Christians (along with Jews and Muslims) have failed to recognize that Hindus, for example, perceive what these Near Eastern religious movements call “idols” as in fact simultaneously both also; and that therefore it has been an error to employ this derogatory term to characterize these communities’ religious practice and piety. It may be that both Christian theologians and academic intellectuals will come to use the word “idol” in a changed meaning, to designate Hindu and other such forms once they have fully recognized that in fact those forms indeed are, and are perceived by worshippers as indeed being, materially mundane and at the same time substantially transcendent or the locus or channel of transcendence. If this happens, then certainly Christ should be spoken of as an idol too.

This development in vocabulary does not, however, appear to be happening. What seems to me more likely is that the term is on its way out, as too contaminated by its original meaning, traditional usage, and residue of connotations to be any more useful. It should be used in relation to all traditions, or to none. This is the fundamental point.

Some Christians would like to retain the term “idolatry” in its pejorative sense only—so deeply has its negativity become ingrained—as a stick with which to beat immoral things like Nazism and other over-weening nationalism. This, however, is like telling anti-Semitic jokes about non-Jews on the grounds that they are making a forceful and isolatedly valid moral point. To say that Nazis are like Buddhists simply will not do.

Of course, there have been times when the Christian emphasis on the human, or on the divine, of the two natures in the hypostatic union of Christ was

particularly heavy, almost to the exclusion of the other and therefore of the confluence. The main thrust, however, has been precisely on the point that here the divine and the human, the transcendent and the mundane, meet. Christians have tended to speak of this as a ‘mystery’, which is of course neither unreasonable nor unhelpful; yet such a phrasing is in danger of falling victim to and perpetuating the modern-Western propensity to perceive the spiritual as separate from the rest of our life, even as a bit odd. One might find it more reasonable and more helpful to rejoin most of the rest of the human race in seeing transcendence as closely interwoven with, for human beings a fundamental and standard part of, the everyday; and recognizing the irreligious or insouciant, rather, as something deviant, virtually bizarre. Human life, even more than the universe at large, is indeed mysterious. Yet should that not be, not a private persuasion, but the starting point of all our intellectualizations—in science and everywhere else?

I myself certainly see the figure of Christ in the piety of hundreds of millions of Christians over the centuries as a form in which transcendence, God, has participated in our lives (and/or vice versa: a form in which we have participated in its life). In fact, it would seem to me obtuse for anyone to fail to see this, and silly to deny it (for any perceptive Muslim, for example, or atheist). I speak as an historian. (As an historian also of language, I recognize the problem here of vocabulary, for either affirming or denying this.) More specifically, Roman Catholics speak of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Personally I would be more inclined to speak of the real presence of God in the lives of those with faith participating in the Eucharist, a presence mediated through that rite or in the interaction between the persons and the rite; but to pursue that matter here would take us too far from our present task. In any case, I am certainly impressed by, for instance, Ramanuja’s, or for that matter the Bhagavad Gita’s, insistence on the real presence of God in all religious forms—some would add, for the devotee—and indeed in some fashion in all the created or objective world. However that be, the important point is that transcendence, God, is—has been, historical observation may affirm—really present not only in the Eucharist but in much of for instance Bach’s music or in the giving of a cup of cold water and other moves or movements of justice and compassion, or in community or in systems of ideas—to differing degrees for various people at different times. (No one, so far as I recall, has ever argued that all religious forms are always equally effective; that God is equally successful every day in all His/Her/Its attempts to bring human beings into salvific relation to Himself/Herself/Itself.)

The problem, for our present topic, pluralism, is not with whether the figure of Christ has served as a form in which God has entered history and been active within it. It is certainly not with *how* this has been done. Rather, our concern is with whether this has been and is one form among others. Some Christians have insisted, or have wished to hold, that there have been, are, no other forms; or, less logically, no forms other than this one plus certain further forms derived from or subordinately related to this one (e.g., the doctrines of the

Westminster Confession; the beads of a Christian rosary; a particular Sunday morning service; membership in the Roman Catholic Church . . .). Other Christians would concede—recognize—that there have been other forms, around the world and over the centuries, yet would urge a category difference between the instance of Christ and all the others.

I myself—after studying the history of the Islamic and the Christian movements and having friends in both groups—am not able to think of any reason that one might reasonably have for denying that God has played in human history a role in and through the Qur'ān, in the Muslim case, comparable to the role in the Christian case in and through Christ. That, of course, could be discussed (preferably, with those familiar with the facts). In any case, my thesis is that the germane issue here is not how one perceives Christ, or the figure of Christ, and how one formulates that apprehension conceptually; but rather, how in relation to that, one perceives and characterizes God's other activities over the course of human history.

One might call it idolatrous of Christians to regard the figure of Christ as divine insofar as they do not sense the role of the Holy Spirit in that understanding. *Mutatis mutandis* for Muslims with the Qur'ān. In the case of Islam, outsiders can readily see that the modern world is in danger of suffering from the consequences of such idolatry. Christians themselves, and the West generally, have been slower to see the damaging consequences in their own case.

No doubt, some Christians have understood Christ Himself, or various Christian authorities, as saying that God has acted effectively only in this one case, or surpassingly so. It is equally true that some Muslims have understood the Qur'ān or various Islamic authorities as saying much the same thing in their case. A claim to uniqueness is not unique. Its incidence is simply one of the significant facts of which the modern mind takes note before theorizing about religious or spiritual matters. It is, of course, true that Christ is unique. It is also true that the Qur'ān is unique, or K'ung Fu-tse. (This question of uniqueness has been further considered in our note 12.)

The notion "idolatry" means, or at least has meant: to treat, mistakenly, something mundane as if it were divine. (The Islamic counterpart concept involves not only *sanam* and *but-parasti* but *shirk*.) Since in actuality religious life proceeds symbolically, with various mundane things serving particular groups or persons for centuries as symbolic representations or channels of the divine, perhaps our question might be said to become: does a given person, or group, at a given moment, or era, fail to recognize the symbolic as symbolic, and therefore treats it as if it were itself divine, rather than as mediator.

More nuance than this, however, is requisite. A better question might be: to what extent is such an error being made in a particular instance. For actually the dividing line has normally not been sharp, to make it a yes-or-no affair; it is a matter, rather, of degree. Socrates held that we always choose what we think to be good, though we be often mistaken. In our terms here: whatever we deem good is always to some extent for us an idol of what is truly The Good. (Since nothing actual is ideal, it is wrong to confuse one's views with absolute truth, or

one's judgements with absolute value.) One need not necessarily agree with the Socratic view of all our human choosing; yet we may recognize that in religious life over the centuries and around the globe people have regularly had a sense of transcendence, of God's presence, in and through the symbolic forms, as well as at times—commonly: at the same time—seeing those forms themselves as embodying God.

Traditionally, Christians would modify the Greek-derived position above to hold: nothing actual is ideal, except Christ. (Muslims: except the Qur'ān.) Still more nuanced, then—and some would judge, better—would be a thesis that one might call intermediary: that one or another or all such forms are God-given. The Bhagavad Gita propounds, and at sustained systematic length the Hindu theologian Ramanuja, for instance, affirms, that God graciously condescends actively to take the form, however petty, that His worshipper treats as housing Him. Historically, Christians have tended to hold that their own forms—Presbyterian or Roman Catholic or more generally Christian—are given by God, others' forms are not (Jews and Muslims similarly). Thus idolatry might along these lines come to be understood more fully as meaning: to treat (mistakenly, would one wish to add?) something mundane as if it were itself divine, as well as seeing—feeling, worshipping, obeying—the divine Itself through and beyond that form. (Thus Tillich speaks of symbols as "participating" in what they symbolize; although personally I find that inadequate.)

Our point here is that there are, and in practice certainly there have been, many ways of interpreting doctrinally what is going on in the spiritual life either of humankind at large or more narrowly within one's own community. (Christian theologians, for example, have differed among themselves.) Whichever of the ways one chooses, it is delinquent not to be ready to relate it to other positions elsewhere on earth.

Whether the doctrine of Jesus Christ as the Son of God Incarnate is to be viewed as a myth is, as noted, a comparable problem. Again the answer of course depends on what the term "myth" is taken to mean. For some, it is drastically unacceptable because for them the term is again pejorative. In this "myth" case, however, present-day Christians have inherited the concept not from the Bible or the religious tradition, with the concomitant emotional strength of connotation that such inheritance imparts, but from nineteenth-century pre-critical (pre-historical, pre-pluralist) Enlightenment rationality. Nonetheless the force of that heritage is by no means to be under-estimated, though it be less for those of us as intellectuals who are rationally critical within that tradition. Like many historians of religion, I myself am one of those for whom the term "myth" is not inherently pejorative. Yet I recognize that there are others for whom it has primarily or only negative connotations, or even denotation. I have a higher sense of the cosmological status of myth than do many. Moreover, as earlier suggested, I have a lower sense of the cosmological status of propositions than do most; certainly than do most modern anglophone philosophers. Although truth is in my perception eternal, there is no proposition, and no myth, that is not historical, contingent. The capacity

of either of these to approximate to truth—more strictly, to communicate to human beings an approximation to truth—is always a function of time and place, and of the particular persons or groups involved. Also historical, even relatively recent, is the rise of clearly distinguishing, indeed of mounting a stark contrast, between myths and prosaic (“true”) propositions; and the wide adoption and sense of the importance of that distinction or contrast.

Also historical, but much more recent, of our own day, is that some intellectuals and theologians are beginning to recognize myths as myths in a laudatory sense, and specifically to regard the doctrine of God incarnate in Christ as mythic in this laudatory sense. At least, they are beginning to perceive that it would be helpful, and even that it may have become requisite, that we do so—in principle, all of us. Along with that would have to go the concomitant recognition that historically myths can communicate approximations less or sometimes more close to truth than do or can propositions. That many, inside and outside the Church, should see the incarnation and other doctrines in this way could be a great step forward in a number of cases. Among those inside, the number of cases is perhaps growing in which it would be such a step forward, for themselves and even more so in their relations with their neighbours; among those outside the Church, it would surely be so for all concerned. (For world peace, this development may even be requisite. *Mutatis mutandis* for the Qur’ān.)

I leave these matters aside, however, since the important issue for our purposes here remains that of whether one applies such orientations to the religious life of all communities, or instead endeavours to exempt one’s own, giving it a privileged status or supposing that God has given it that. There have been many ways of understanding the particularities of any given tradition, of turning perceptions into theses (in the Christian case, whether Christological, eucharistological, or whatever). We cannot settle disputes among them here. *Nor need we*. Rather, we both can and need recognize that whichever way one adopts, it applies comparably for other traditions.

## NOTES

1. These two remarks appeared as follows. On “idols”: *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) p. 141 (same page in the various 1978 editions); (New York: New American Library [Mentor Books], 1964; London: New English Library, 1965) p. 127. On “cows”: *Questions of Religious Truth* (New York: Scribners, and London: Gollancz, 1967), p. 17. The conviction has been fairly common in the Muslim Sufi tradition for centuries. Recently I was delighted to find it set forth in virtually the very words (sc. their Arabic equivalent) of my ’63 comment, by—surprisingly—the nineteenth-century Muslim political activist and North African resistance leader—and mystic—the amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir (ibn Muhyī-d-Dīn al-Ḥasanī). Not only did he write that God appears (*zahara*) to Christians—finitely, particularly—in Christ, to Zarathustrians in fire, and so on, and “to the worshipper of every thing in that thing, be it stone or tree or animal or the like, in such a way that worshippers do not worship the particularized finite forms in and of themselves; rather, they worship what is manifested (or: what is revealed—*mā tajalla*) to them in that form, of one or other of

the characteristics of the true God—who transcends! . . . Thus the object of worship for the entirety of worshippers is one and the same” (*Mawqif* 246). Moreover, this writer is led into this exposition by his striking interpreting of what is widely known as the first assertion of the Muslim so-called “creed”, “There is no god but God”. This is often read, rather, with exclusivist emphasis. ‘Abd al-Qādir cites it directly from a Qur’ān verse (directly from God Himself, as it were); and affirms it as meaning that it is always God that is manifested, however limitedly, in every god. (The mistake, he says, is to imagine that He is particularized therein.) *There is no god that is other than God*. See al-Sayyid al-Amīr ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jazā’irī, *Kitāb al-Mawqif, fī al-taṣawwuf wa al-wa’z wa al-irshād* ([Damascus:] Dār al-Yaqzah al-‘Arabīyah [1911], 2nd edn., 1966), 3 vols., pp. 560–61 (= vol. 2, but the volumes are paginated consecutively). There is a French translation: Emir Abd el-Kader, *Écrits spirituels, présentés et traduits de l’arabe par Michel Chodkiewicz*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982, where this *mawqif* is selection 29, pp. 131–34.

2. For some of the details, see my *Meaning and End* . . . ; of the 1963 and the various 1978 editions, note 43, p. 313; of the 1964 and ’65 editions, pp. 320–21.

3. This statement applies chiefly to Church leadership, not only in the liberal (“mainline”) Protestant Churches but also in the Vatican; and especially to intellectuals and serious theologians. Some would note, against our observation, that a sizable, and perhaps growing, number of ordinary Church members are currently re-affirming, at times with some vehemence, the old-time exclusivist stance. Over against this development one must reckon the uncounted number of those who have abandoned the Church for reasons that include their discerning Christian intolerance as intolerable. Further, one must recognize that if the exclusivists become dominant in the Church, countless more persons will leave it.

4. For the King James Authorized Version, the fourteen words are *āwen*, *ēmah*, *ēl*, *‘līl*, *gillūl*, *ḥammān*, *miphleṣeth*, *ṣīr*, *semel*, *shiqqūṣ*, *rāphīm*, and various forms of the root *‘-ṣ-b*. (Cf. Robert Young, ed., *Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, Edinburgh, 1879, and many subsequent editions; mine is the 22nd American edition [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973], where the relevant entry is p. 507. It is not, however, fully accurate: for instance, Ezekiel 18: 15 has been missed, and some verses show only one of two appearances.) Of these Hebrew terms, three derive from notions of ‘forming, fashioning’; one is of unknown etymology; the other ten are from roots signifying “trouble, sorrow, wickedness”, “terror, dread”, “to shudder”, “worthlessness”, “detestable”, and so on (cf. Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Lexicon* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1906, and many subsequent revised editions], s.vv.). In the Revised Standard Version, a few of these words are, or are occasionally, rendered differently (e.g., *ḥammānīm* as “images”, II Chron. 34:7), but in most cases “idol” is retained and indeed the English term is used on the whole somewhat more often than in 1611. Thus it similarly replaces a few times the earlier “(graven) images” (e.g., Isaiah 40:19), and equally often replaces “vanity” (e.g., II Kings 17:15); once (Ezekiel 43:9) the newer version proffers “idolatry” for the former quite straightforward “whoredom” (for *zenūth*—a word that occurs also, in the identical context, two verses earlier and is there rendered by the RSV as “harlotry”).

5. The last is from Revelation 22:15. The term occurs otherwise in the New Testament at I Cor. 5:10, 5:11, 6:9, 10:7, Eph. 5:5, and Rev. 21:8.

6. This has been noted, also, by outsider observers. For example: “The Jews first invented the myth that only one religion can be true”—Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *The World’s Unborn Soul: an inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936, p. 10.

7. *Yogavāsistha* 1:28. I have used the following text: *Srīmad-Vālmiki-Mahārṣi-*

*Pranītaḥ Yogavāsīṣṭhaḥ*, Sanskrit text with the commentary *Vāsīṣṭhamahārāmānaya-anāīṭparayaprakāśa*. Ed. Vāsudeva Lakṣmana Paṇṣīkar. 2nd edn. (Bombay: Tukārām Jāvajī), 1978. Part 1, p. 144.

8. Cf. my "A Human View of Truth", *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses*, 1 (1971): 6-24, reprinted in John Hick, ed., *Truth and Dialogue: The Relationship between World Religions* (London: Sheldon, 1974) (= *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions: Conflicting Truth-Claims* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974]), pp. 20-44 (cf. pp. 156-62). Cf. also my introduction to the Propaedia, Part 8, "Religion" ("Religion as Symbolism") in *The New Encyclopædia Britannica*, pp. 498-500; and other writings, from *The Meaning and End to Faith and Belief*.

9. To phrase the situation in this fashion is imperceptibly to take sides in a question of priorities; a question that many thoughtful human beings throughout history have answered differently from this. Or we may say: to use this wording is to make a concession to the current secular or secularized conviction, which sees the mundane as the primary, if indeed not the sole, dimension of human life. It would be asking perhaps too much from modern readers to say, "... this is in addition to their being in relation ...".

10. By both Luther and Calvin, among others.

11. This too I contended twenty-some years ago in my *Meaning and End of Religion*; for instance in its remark, "God . . . does not reveal a religion, He reveals Himself" (1963, 1978, p. 129; 1964, 1965, p. 117), and nothing in my observations or listening since has done anything but confirm that view. In this present study I have added that God does not reveal theologies.

12. One has to recognize that historically many Christians have derived considerable spiritual strength and emphasis from their conceptualization that they have been accorded quite special treatment by God, available to no one else in like measure (or in any measure); that the Church constitutes a decidedly chosen people. The case is similar with Muslims, and others. The positive aspects of this erstwhile notion have in modern times become quite overbalanced by the negative. Whatever its import in the past, its way of formulating the perception that various groups have of their place in the universe has become a millstone around our necks and must be thrown off—valid though the perception on which it was based, or the transcendent ground of that perception, in part be. This particular way of formulating one's grateful awareness that one's relation to God is (as it is always) special is to-day morally intolerable, politically disastrous, and theologically awry. Nonetheless, the widespread role of such exclusivist ("we/they") thinking in past human religious (and other) history requires study. For an understanding of the human condition, the theory's many forms have been too important to be shunted aside as without significance—even, religious significance.