

Protoreligiosity of Non-Violence (Ahimsa/Gandhi) in Theory and Practice for Peaceful Religious Encounters

[Ram A. Mall on Kontrapunkte- global. solidarisch. transformativ.](#)

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“Ahimsa is not the goal. Truth is the goal. But we have no means of realising truth in human relationships except through the practice of ahimsa... Ahimsa is our supreme duty.” - Mahatma Gandhi

1. A few introductory remarks

The central question I ask here and try to answer is: **What is it in the innermost self-understanding of religions, which hinders or promotes interreligious, interfaith and even intrafaith dialogues, communication and understanding?**

The central thesis proposed, discussed and defended here is the following: [Religio perennis](#) (the Vedic motto ‘*Ekam Sad*’, ‘*Sanatan Dharma*’, ‘*una religio*’ of Cusanus) is not the sole possession of any one particular religion, be it Eastern or Western. Different religious patterns are irreducible faith patterns and they have every right to believe in their ultimacy and uniqueness without mistaking this uniqueness for exclusiveness and absoluteness. There is a ‘proto-religious’ ethos, which is the prerequisite for the very possibility of interreligious and interfaith dialogues. And its motto is: Believe and let believe, refraining from the temptation to absolutize your own faith as the only one for the whole of humanity. Religious truth worth the name does not suffer because of its multiple presence in a variety of religions. In a very important sense, it bears the character of a cipher available to a host of religious intentionality getting fulfilled in the manifold Gestalt of various religions.

There are three categories claiming primacy in some form or other when it comes to encounters among religions. These are: identity, difference and overlapping. **Religions and theologies are neither totally identical nor radically different. For, were it so, religious dialogues would become either redundant or impossible.** Thus, there are overlapping religious contents which enable us to enter into religious dialogues in full recognition and respect of the fundamental similarities and illuminating differences among religions.

Recontextualizing and reconceptualizing the [heliocentric theory of Copernicus](#), we are led to the following picture of the relation between different religions (planets) and *religio perennis* (the sun) in the form of the Holy, the Numinous, the Sacred or God. All the different theologies and religions are like different planets going round the one sun of *religio perennis*. No one particular theology or religion can claim this central position all alone relegating all others to peripheral positions. The protoreligious conviction, which is at work here, must not be mistaken to be a religion itself. It is rather an overarching view accompanying and enabling us to enter into peaceful interreligious dialogues. Such a protoreligious conviction of interreligiosity does not give a privileged treatment to any one particular religion or faith. Added to this, it is an [antidote to all sorts of fundamentalism](#) which are found, more or less, in a variety of existing religions even today.

The most fundamental motive of all religions is in some form or other a therapeutic one aiming at overcoming human suffering, limitations, fragilities, ‘[dukha](#)’. All religious experiences fulfil this ever-present religious intention. [Soteriology](#) as an interreligious category, as we shall see soon, binds us in spite of the plurality of religious paths leading to it.

In all religions, faith and experience are intimately connected with each other and usually go hand in hand, strengthening and promoting each other. The question still remains regarding the primacy of the one over the other. Religious models with a claim to revealed truth seem to plead for the primacy of faith over experience in opposition to religious models, e.g. Buddhism, which let experience precede faith. The Buddha, in many of his sermons brings his teachings up for discussion and even places them at the disposal of others.

2. Religious Plurality: The question is not how to get rid of it but how to deal with it

From time immemorial, there has been, in some form or other, religious plurality. Religious plurality is normally taken to refer to the plurality of different religious traditions like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and so on. But there is an intrareligious face of religious plurality in the sense of a plurality of interpretations of the same religious tradition. A few examples may verify this point: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Protestantism and Catholicism, Sunni and Shias in Islam. Those who want to get rid of religious plurality seem to believe that there is ultimately only one religion as the true religion for the whole of humanity. On the other hand, there are those who plead for the plurality of religions under the interreligiously binding attitude to believe and let believe.¹

There may be different possible answers to the question: How come that there is religious plurality at all? Is it simply man-made or is it something, which just happens? The second answer fares better in our context of how to deal with religious plurality. There are two attitudes, which are normally taken with regard to its desirability or undesirability. There are those who say that religious plurality is, no doubt, there but it should not be and one should try to get rid of it. On the other hand, there are those who recognize that there is religious plurality and maintain that it should be. **But the question is really not whether religious plurality should or should not be there.** Any answer to this question is already overloaded with ontological, speculative and theological presuppositions. The real issue is with regard to the reasons behind its being there. And these reasons seem to lie in human nature itself, which is not fully homogeneous. In other words, there is no monistic anthropology. **It is a mistake to take pluralism for relativism.** On the other hand, a certain degree of relativism, as we shall see, goes hand in hand with pluralism. Total commitment to one’s own religion does recognize and respect similar commitments on the part of others.

Even if we admit the desirability of one religion for all of us, the question still remains how to realize this goal. And any claim to an exclusive absoluteness as a method to reach this goal is violent just to start with. Here the regulative idea of unity is mistaken to be uniformity. Added to this, the crux of the problem is that more than one religion enters the field with such a claim. There is thus a plurality of such claims. What we then get is a multiplicity of ‘absolutes’. Thus, instead of our violent attempts to get rid of religious plurality, it is better

¹ Cf. Mall, R.A.: Der Hinduismus. Seine Stellung in der Vielfalt der Religionen. Darmstadt 1997.

and more peaceful to get rid of our homemade absolutist claims to truth in singular. This is the best way to peacefully meet the challenge of religious plurality.

It was William James who spoke of a 'distributive pluralism' and wrote: "[The only thing I emphatically insist upon is that it is a hypothesis fully co-ordinate with monism... Reality may exist distributively, just as it sensibly seems to, after all. On that possibility I do insist.](#)"²²

In spite of the fundamental similarity in our common search for religious ultimates in all religions, the possibility of the plurality of these ultimates is a real one. Not only the names of these ultimates are different. They are different even as ultimates.

The conviction, the attitude of protoreligiosity and interreligiosity, as we shall soon see, pleads for religious pluralism in contrast to religious exclusivism. Acceptance of religious plurality as an empirically and [phenomenologically](#) given anthropological constant leads to tolerance and furthers the cause of a peaceful encounter among religions, thus minimising the threat of a 'clash of religions'.

3. Uniqueness with or without absoluteness

The debate with regard to the possibility or impossibility of interreligious, inter-faith and intrafaith dialogue is in full swing today. The numbers of meetings, congresses and other forms of get-together are far too numerous to be listed here. **There is but a certain uneasy feeling that the majority of these meetings seem to take place at a 'hardware' (surface) level, missing the dialogue at the 'software' (deeper) level.** I often ask myself whether it is possible for hard-core absolutists to enter into a sincere, authentic dialogue. Those who tend to believe in the impossibility of inter-faith or even intrafaith dialogue seem to posit a radical difference among religions. In order to understand the real message of a particular religion, so they maintain, one has to believe in the sole truth of that religion. This really leads to some sort of a [hermeneutics](#) of identity, which has as its motto: Only a believing Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and a Hindu can understand the respective religion. Such a move is a deadlock for interreligious dialogues and is doomed to failure. Such a position really entails some sort of a windowless monadic understanding of religions. It is high time to bid farewell to religious monologues. **In order to enter into a fruitful interreligious dialogue, the most suitable step is, as mentioned above, to refrain from overrating the similarities and differences among religions and concentrate on the overlapping contents, which enable us to understand the other religion in full recognition of the fundamental similarities and illuminating differences among them.**

It goes to the credit of modern Europe, its sciences and technology that we have an unprecedented global cultural and religious encounter. The universalistic bent of the European mind seems to be partly disillusioned because Europe is forced to realize now that the days are gone when Europe alone was destined to make and influence history. This goes to define the present global context, which in its turn contextualizes globally important themes like culture, philosophy, religion, ethics, art, literature and politics. The demand for universal validity and acceptance turns out to be paradoxical, and the need for a binding pluralism seems to be the only via media for interreligious dialogues. There is an intercultural and interreligious challenge facing all cultures and religions today with a word of caution not to be too provincial and chauvinistic.

² James, W.: A Pluralistic Universe. London 1916, p. 328.

For quite some time, the problem of religious uniqueness has become a very controversial topic within the intrareligious, intrafaith scene of Christianity. There are two contrary positions. John Hick, the famous theologian and philosopher of religion pleads for a pluralistic theology with its central motto: “[God Has Many Names](#)”. The protagonists of the pluralistic theology of religions speak of „[The myth of Christian Uniqueness](#)” (New York 1987) with its claim that Christianity is ultimately the only true religion with an absolute universal claim.³³ Just three years later, Gavin D’Costa, a student of Hick edited a book entitled: “[Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a pluralistic Theology of Religions](#)“ (New York 1990). Interfaith and intrafaith encounters seem to join hands here. There is a common structure running through both forms of encounters. We normally tend to underrate the importance of intrafaith dialogues. **What we badly need today is an honest questioning of taking uniqueness to be absoluteness beyond the different forms of ‘religious correctness’.**

Without going into any detail of the controversy here as to whether the claim to Christian uniqueness or the claim to a pluralistic theology of religions is a myth, the interreligious orientation I am pleading for here favours the position taken by Hick as a whole. But the question for me still remains: **What does uniqueness really stand for?** In a sense, all religions are unique as alternate religions with their inner irreducible character of ultimacy. On the other hand, uniqueness may claim to be in sole possession of the one absolute religious truth. It is this second sense, which goes against the Gandhian idea of the supreme religion of non-violence (ahimsaa parmo dharmah) and jeopardizes peaceful encounters among religions. For [Gandhi](#), the most primordial religiosity, the protoreligiosity is the religiosity of [non-violence](#). „Listening to Asia“, the main title of this congress, may also stand for listening to Gandhi in this respect. [Compassion](#) and non-violence seem to be two sides of one and the same religious coin. Christianity and Buddhism go hand in hand in spite of their theistic and atheistic anchorage. In other words, all religious experiences are also spiritual but all spiritual experiences are not necessarily religious in a strictly theistic sense. “Listening to Asia” may thus also mean that it is too narrow a definition of religious experience to essentially relate it to God. In search of the essence of religion common to all religions, we can hardly take it to be a belief in God, for that would exclude such widespread religions like Buddhism.

4. Cultural and religious encounters yesterday and today

When we follow, for example, cultural and religious encounters on the Indian sub-continent in the past we find different patterns of encounter. When the [Aryans](#) from central Asia came to India, they met the old culture of the [Dravidian](#) people. Although they suppressed the original Indian culture, they did not extinguish it. The origin of the caste system can also be traced back to this encounter. Hindu culture, thus, is a mixture of Aryan and non-Aryan elements. In spite of many difficulties, India has always been experimenting with internal and external multiculturalism and multireligiosity guided by the pan-Indian [rigvedic dictum](#) of ‘one truth under different names’ (Ekam sad vipra vahudha vadanti).

After the victory of [Alexander the Great](#) there was a short but intensive encounter between Indian and Greek culture. The [well-known dialogue \(in Pali called Milinda Panha or Questions of King Milinda\)](#) between Nagasena, the Buddhist monk-philosopher and Menandros, the Greek ruler in the northern part of India, exemplifies this. We have many reports of this time. The debate of King Milinda is famous in world literature. **Here we find a**

³ Cf. John Hick, Paul Knitter (eds.): *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness. Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, New York 1987.

very paradigmatic philosophical, intercultural, political and religious pattern of discourse between the king who was very much interested in philosophy and religion and the Buddhist monk-philosopher Nagasena. I would like to quote the relevant portion in short:

*Then the king said, " Venerable sir, will you discuss with me again."
"If your majesty will discuss as a scholar, yes; but if you will discuss as a king, no."
"How is it then that scholars discuss."
"When scholars discuss there is summing up, unravelling; one or other is shown to be in error and he admits his mistake and yet is not thereby angered."
"And how is it that kings discuss."
"When a king discusses a matter and he advances a point of view, if anyone differs from him on that point he is apt to punish him."
"Very well then, it is as a scholar that I will discuss. Let your reverence talk without fear." -Pesala, B.: *The Debate of King Milinda, Delhi 1991, p. 4 f.**

Nagasena here lays down the very conditions for the possibility of an honest discourse, which of course does not demand only intellectual honesty but also the cultivation of ethical and moral qualities which turn intercultural and interreligious debates and dialogues from a way of thought to a way of life. His message is to recognize and respect other possibilities as genuine alternative ways of human beings.

Mahmud of Ghazni, a line of Turkish chieftains started attacking India from 997. He made seventeen raids on India. This war was the beginning of establishing Muslim foreign rule in India, which lasted till it was replaced by British rule. **In spite of the religious troubles facing India even today, Hindus and Muslims have often lived together in an interculturally and interreligiously oriented multicultural and multireligious society.** Akbar, the great Mughal emperor is famous for his tolerance. Sufism is one of the best examples besides cases of reciprocal influences in art, music and architecture.

European colonization of non-European countries was more radical and aimed at the europeanization of the whole world. It is true that India has westernized herself to a great extent but it is not true that India has europeanized herself. **Europeanization stands for the software of Western culture and religion, whereas westernization for the hardware of it.**

There have been, on the other hand, cultural and religious encounters in human history which were quite pernicious in character, for example, the encounter of Arab-Islamic culture with that of ancient Iran or the encounter between European culture and the cultures of American continents. Here too, the question is: What is it which stands in the way of a peaceful encounter among cultures and religions?

Historical events are polyperspectival. One and the same event can be characterized as fortunate or unfortunate depending on the optics of the victor or vanquished. The discovery of America was a stroke of good luck for the Europeans but very bad for the indigenous population of America.

It is undoubtedly true that nearly all cultural encounters show signs of tension and violence. But the question, which can be legitimately put is this: Why do certain encounters end in a partial or total destruction of one or more cultures? The reason might be found in the very nature of the cultures encountering each other. One of the main reasons for the destructive character of cultural and religious (even political) encounters must lie in the exclusively

absolutist truth-claims made by certain cultures and religions. When cultures and religions meet in the spirit of tolerance, interculturality and interreligiosity, they further the cause of cooperation and communication between cultures and religions. In spite of the tensions between Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism in China, all these three *Weltanschauungen* succeeded in living together. The spirit of the Chinese saying must have been of great help: three teachings, one family. The overlapping sense of the idea of one family allows us to recognize and respect other ways on an equal footing.

As mentioned earlier, religious encounters today take place or at least should take place in an atmosphere of reciprocity with full recognition of fundamental similarities and illuminating differences. The category of religious diversity today is no more negatively connoted; it rather stands for a secular and also sacral virtue and plays a leading role in interreligious dialogues. On the Indian sub-continent, the rise of religions like Buddhism and Jainism made one thing abundantly clear: to be religious is not necessarily to believe in God. The categories of spirituality and religiosity may but need not go together. This is a lesson, which monotheistic religions are more in need to learn. **It is the spiritual ethos of non-violence as mentioned above, which is the very basis of interreligious dialogues.** Interreligious and interfaith encounters today are no more one-way road. In the spirit of an interreligiously oriented hermeneutics, the insider and outsider perspectives of religions are committed to recognize and respect each other for the sake of a peaceful encounter among them. Mere self-referentiality will not be enough.

5. Interreligiosity: A Conceptual Clarification

The meeting of different cultures and religions, which has happened to us in the wake of European modernity calls for an intensive, reciprocal, qualified and responsible dialogue on the part of all concerned. In order to clarify the concept of interreligiosity I will first try a negative and then a positive description of it.

What interreligiosity is not

1. Interreligiosity is not the name of a particular concrete religious tradition be it Eastern or Western. In other words, it is not a 'trans-religiosity' over and above all religions dictating a priori, *ab ovo* what religion is and has to be.
2. Interreligiosity is also not an addition to the religions already existing. In other words, it is not a religion itself, which one may claim to belong to.
3. It is also not just an eclecticism of different religious traditions juxtaposed together.
4. Interreligiosity is also not just an abstraction, a formal attitude, a state of indifference or just a mere idea or a formal conceptual construction. A mere nominal and analytic definition will not suffice.
5. It is also wrong to misread interreligiosity as a mere reaction, a kind of makeshift response in face of the pressing multireligious encounters all over the world.
6. Interreligiosity is also not some sort of a cheap aesthetization. It should not be confused with romanticism and taken to be a trendy expression.
7. Interreligiosity as understood here does not start with the presupposition of an ontology and / or theology of One God under different names, implying some sort of a deductive religious and theological model.

What interreligiosity is:

1. Interreligiosity stands for a positive proto-religious attitude, conviction, insight that *the one religio perennis (sanatana dharma)* is not the sole possession of any one particular religion.
2. Interreligiosity thus precedes the particular forms of pluralistic theologies of different concrete religions.
3. Interreligiosity thus favours the concept of a pluralistic theology of religions and says ‘yes’ to uniqueness and ‘no’ to absoluteness.
4. Interreligiosity as the most primordial form of religiosity is the commonly shared religious and theological framework providing the grounds for the possibility of peaceful interreligious encounters.
5. The concept of one universal religion acceptable to all is quite misleading. It is not only the factual presence of religious pluralities from time immemorial which belies this idea.
6. Interreligiosity with its recognition of different religions as alternative soteriological models is an antidote to religious exclusivism and fundamentalism.
7. All religions entail a doctrine of salvation but not all doctrines of salvation are religious. Buddhism and Jainism are cases in point.
8. The universality of interreligiosity as a pre- and protoreligious attitude comes very close to Jaspers’ notion of the Encompassing, the all-Embracing (*das Umgreifende*), to Otto’s idea of the Holy, to Eliade’s concept of the Sacred. They all transcend particular religiosities and yet comprehend them. Interreligiosity as understood here is, in the last analysis, a phenomenologically oriented and originally given existential experience with a transformatory effect on the participants in an intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Interreligiosity conceived thus is a way of life.
9. Drawing on the well-known distinction between two forms of an ethico-religious pattern in Indian thought, we may very well relate interreligiosity to *sadharana dharma* and the particular religiosities to *vishesha dharmas*.
10. Interreligiosity is committed to the supreme value of the religiosity of non-violence (*Ahimsaa*), making it incumbent upon all of us to refrain from violence not only with regard to the life of others but also with regard to the religions and faiths of others. In its positive connotation, this means recognition and respect for others.

In his brilliant article entitled “Implicit Religion and the Meaning of Interreligious Dialogue”⁴⁴ Dupre’ rightly speaks of the necessity of interreligiosity preceding explicit religions. “By implicit religion”, he writes, “ I refer to all those phenomena (or complexes of phenomena) which are not explicitly recognized as religious phenomena by those involved but are, nevertheless, forms and modes of religiosity, regardless of whether they appear within the context of traditional religions or outside of it.” (p. 132). Far from any ontology or metaphysics, the idea of interreligiosity proposed here is some sort of an ‘originary experience’ in the spirit of Husserlian phenomenology. There is always a temptation to ontologize interreligiosity in order to unify the visions of ultimate reality. But unification is a dogmatic and ideological move which fails to recognize the plurality of visions of the ultimate reality. Hindu and Buddhist visions are in the last analysis incompatible but what still binds them is their being visions after all. This aspect of interreligiosity enables us to recognize and respect other religions in spite of the incompatibilities, which are unique to them. Interreligiosity further warns us not to confuse uniqueness with absoluteness. History amply

⁴ Cf. Dupre’, W.: “Implicit Religion and the Meaning of Interreligious Dialogue”, in: *Studies in Interreligious dialogue*, 1/1991/2, Amsterdam, pp. 129-145.

witnesses that such confusion has been (and often still is) the source of conflicts between religions and theologies.

6. The Concept of an interculturally and interreligiously oriented „analogous hermeneutics of overlapping contents” beyond the hermeneutics of total identity and radical difference

The globally present multicultural and multireligious context today has made one thing abundantly clear: The de facto intercultural and interreligious hermeneutic situation has outgrown the Greco-European and Judaic-Christian-islamic interpretation of culture, philosophy and religion. It calls for a deconstruction of an exclusive relation between truth and tradition. Truth *of* the tradition and truth *in* the tradition are two different things and must not be confused with one another. It has been a historical contingency that certain cultures and religions succeeded in defining truth in terms of their own cultures and their cultures in terms of truth.

The word [hermeneutics](#) is, no doubt, Greek and Western but the idea and the practice of it is an anthropological constant.

Indian thought, for example, possesses a very rich hermeneutic tradition. The science of hermeneutics as an art of interpretation and understanding undergoes a fundamental change in the global context of interculturality and interreligiosity today and it experiences an unprecedented widening of horizon” which does not necessarily go hand in hand with a real “fusion of horizon” (Horizontverschmelzung - Gadamer). This means that every hermeneutics has its own culturally sedimented roots and cannot claim a universal acceptance unconditionally. Any dialogue, most importantly of course the intercultural and interreligious one, has to take this insight as a point of departure.

The way cultures and religions meet and address each other today is of a different quality for it takes place in the spirit of reciprocity. A fourfold relation characterizes the de facto hermeneutic situation. Let us apply this fourfold hermeneutics to an interculturally interreligiously oriented discourse between European and non-European thought. First of all, there is the self-hermeneutics of the European mind. Secondly, there is the European understanding of the Non-European mind. This has been the case since the invasion of Alexander the Great in India and the "discovery" of America by Columbus. Thirdly, there is the self-hermeneutics of the Non-Europeans and fourthly, and this is something novel for the European mind, the Non-European understanding of Europe. Hermeneutics is thus no more a one-way road, and the question arises who understands whom, when, how and why better.

Europe is more surprised today to see that Non-Europeans are critically interpreting Europe because Europe, luckily or unluckily has hardly ever been an object of interpretation by non-Europeans. Of course, non-Europeans did interpret Europe but it was of little avail because of some other powerful factors like colonialism, imperialism etc.⁵

⁵ Cf. Mall, R. A.: Meditationen zum Adjektiv “europäisch” aus interkultureller Sicht. München 1990, pp.139-150.

The concept of an "analogous hermeneutics" which does justice to a de facto hermeneutic situation today is neither the hermeneutics of total identity, which reduces the other to an echo of oneself and repeats its self-understanding in the name of understanding the other or that of radical difference, which makes the understanding of the other rather impossible. It does not put any one culture or religion in an absolute position of generality and reduces all others to some form of it. Philosophical and religious theories which set up a hierarchical model of a linear series of development culminating in one favoured philosophy or religion, be it the system of Plato or of Augustine, of Kant or of Hegel, of Shankara or Nagarjuna, of Confucius or of Lao Tzu, of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism are to be rejected. There is no one universal hermeneutic subject over and above the sedimented cultural, historical subjects; it is rather a reflexive-meditative attitude accompanying the different subjects with a warning not to absolutize. Such a hermeneutic attitude helps us overcome the feeling of our being hopelessly involved in the hermeneutic circle. It further frees us from our tendency to define truth in terms of one particular tradition and this tradition in terms of truth.

7. *Tertium Comparationis* and interreligious encounter

The central thesis is a threefold one: 1. To fix 'tertium comparationis' in an a priori vein solely in one culture or religion is theoretically unsound and practically harmful. It is a wrong religious move, be it Western or non-Western. 2. Since the idea of total purity and radical difference of cultures, philosophies and religions is a fiction, all cultures, philosophies and religions, of course in various degrees meet to differ and differ to meet. 3. Thus, the real seat of an analogically constituted 'tertium comparationis' is the overlapping '**in-between**' among cultures, philosophies and religions.

In my attempt to answer the question concerning the conditions, possibilities and limits of intercultural and interreligious understanding, I find myself caught up in a paradoxical situation which I can neither really avoid nor fully resolve, for I am an insider and outsider at the same time. My exposition is thus going to be an impressionistic account of my constant effort at translating and comparing cultures and religions. I am, thereby, guided by the conviction that the two fictions of total commensurability and of radical incommensurability among cultures have to be given up in favour of a metonymic thesis of dynamically overlapping structures. Since no culture and no religion is just a windowless monad, all cultures and religions possess intercultural and interreligious overlappings in varying degrees.

Difference is not just difference. We may distinguish between two meanings of difference:

1. Two things are different as instances of a generic concept e. g. two philosophies, two religions, two cultures, two persons, two languages etc.
2. Two things are radically different when they do not share a generic concept. It is the first sense of difference, which supports our interculturally oriented framework of *tertium comparationis*.

Of course, the generic concept need not be a hypostatized privileging unity at the cost of difference as many cultures and religions often manifest. At the same time, the act of privileging differences at the cost of unity is no less metaphysical. What we need is a phenomenological description of the mode of givenness of *tertium comparationis* as the real seat of mediation between differences and unities. Indian epistemology goes even so far as to give comparison (Upamana) the status of an independent means of knowledge.

Till recently, the wrongly conceived and privileged paradigm of comparison has been a movement from West to East. Comparative philosophy and religion in this guise have mostly remained unfruitful because of their hegemonic bias. Comparison in a post-colonial and post-hegemonic era is no longer a one-way road. Today, philosophies, cultures and religions lend themselves to reciprocal comparison, both inter- and intraculturally.

Two fictions must be avoided if comparison takes place in the spirit of an intercultural and interreligious orientation, which does not give undue privileged treatment to any one particular tradition, takes “philosophia and religio [perennis](#)” to be a regulative idea, and abstains from any essentialist fixation. The idea of a total commensurability and that of a radical incommensurability between different frameworks is fictitious and endangers any communication and understanding because it either makes it redundant or impossible. The real bias lying at the root of both these two fictions is the belief in the total purity of a culture and religion. The paradigm of interreligiosity underlies the idea of a “situated unsituatedness” or “unsituated situatedness” and aims at a reciprocal understanding and communication in full recognition of differences. Having one religion and having another religion is still to have a religion.

One of the far-reaching insights in modern philosophy comes from [Husserl's](#) phenomenology. If extremes ever happen to meet in some common overlapping space, then this space is the habitat of *tertium comparationis* available to phenomenological method of description beyond all speculations. In our search for an overlapping *tertium comparationis* as the real seat of an analogical conceptual framework we must avoid the temptation of speculative metaphysics to find a generic concept common to all its instances. In case of a generic concept say of religion, the term may have a prefixed definition of religion and applies it to all cases of religion. In case of a generic concept of religion with an analogical import, all the different religions are instances of religion in spite of the fact that as concrete cases of religion they may sometimes be even very different. This is the reason why we attach the predicate religion to Christianity, to Hinduism, to Islam and to Buddhism. Religions are religions after all in spite of differences.

8. Attempt at an application of [Jain Logic](#) and methodology of non-onesidedness (Anekantavada) to interreligious and interfaith encounter today

In working out my concept of an intercultural and interreligiously oriented *tertium comparationis* I have drawn on many sources, for example, Husserl, [Ricoeur](#), [Plessner](#), [Mohanty](#), [Matilal](#) and, above all, the most suitable methodological approach of the [Jain idea](#) of manysidedness (anakantavada), conditional predication (syadvada) and theory of standpoint (nayavada). This methodology does not ontologize and essentialize and can be very well applied to our present needs for an intercultural and interreligious encounter. Added to this, this Jain methodology is de-constructive – deconstructive of absolutizing truth claims of particular standpoints (nayas). What Jain thinkers did in those days in Indian philosophical and religious context I have tried to do it in the modern global context by way of recontextualization and reconceptualization.

The Jain plaidoyer for a reciprocal recognition of different standpoints (nayas) is one of the best methodological moves in the service of an intercultural and interreligious understanding and communication, which are not exclusive but rather complementary to each other. One of the strongest methodological arguments in the service of a badly needed intercultural and

interreligious hermeneutics is the conviction of Jain philosophy that two standpoints may be contrary or even contradictory to each other but they still are standpoints. It is here that the category of difference becomes a binding force supporting interreligious dialogue.

It is not the unavoidability of the necessity of having a standpoint, which stands in the way of a harmonious interreligious dialogue; it is rather our temptation to absolutize our own standpoints.

This insight leads us to the recognition of overlapping interreligious contents and is the source of the logic of conversation beyond the two fictions of total commensurability and radical difference. The moment we universalize one particular standpoint (*naya*) we are led to a wrong standpoint (*durnaya*), which is not only violent on practical level but implies some sort of a theoretical violence. Jain thinkers did accuse Buddhists and [Vedantins](#) of such a onesided universalization. Religions may be and in fact are peaceful and violent both on a theoretical and practical level. Any religion which claims to be in possession of truth exclusively is violent already on the theoretical level. Some type of a theoretical intolerance, some sort of a theoretical fundamentalism is at work here. On the other hand, it is a welcome sign of tolerance if religions do not claim such absoluteness.

The true spirit of interculturality and interreligiosity proclaims as its motto that the *desire to understand* and the *desire to be understood* go hand in hand and are the two sides of one and the same interculturality and interreligiously oriented hermeneutic coin. The mere desire to understand the other may turn out to be empty and the mere desire only to be understood by the other may become blind. In the long period of colonization, whether in culture, religion or politics, the desire to be understood was most powerful on the part of the colonizers. A number of missionaries took great pains to learn languages like [Sanskrit](#), [Hindi](#), [Tamil](#) etc., in order not so much to understand say Hinduism but let others understand Christianity. Here the ultimate *tertium comparationis* was already fixed in Christian religiosity before any comparison took place.

In case we are on the verge of a very promising intercultural and interreligious encounter today in the wake of the global formation (and it seems we are) we are all committed to lead it to success. This is possible only when we give up all centrism and absolutistic truth claims. No culture, no religion is only an exporter or importer. There is a give and take ethos at work in every act of reciprocal understanding.

The study of cultures and religions from an intercultural perspective shows fundamental similarities and illuminating differences. This complex pattern of similarities and dissimilarities forms an important basis for intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Interreligiosity is, as mentioned earlier, the name of an ethos connecting all religions as their overlapping centre. In the absence of such an ethos all interreligious dialogues are samples of no real value. Methodologically and also from the point of view of conviction it belongs to the very essence of such an interreligious ethos that there are various ways to one and the same religious truth. The claim to absolute truth is not necessarily bad if it is just for the person or the group. But the moment it demands a universal following, it becomes absolutistic in a negatively fundamentalist sense. Absolutistic truth claims are, at the most proposals and must not be confused with ontological truths. Whoever sermonises with a conviction of the falsity of other religions misses the point.

An interreligious hermeneutics based on such an ethos of believe and let believe rejects not only the fiction of a total religious commensurability but also that of a complete

incommensurability among religions. The ethos of interreligiosity testifies to the fact of religious overlapping which is the sine qua non for any sincere religious dialogue. The interreligious hermeneutics we plead for here starts from the concept of overlapping as its methodological [postulate](#) and tries to realise it as its supreme goal. As an example of such an overlapping, we can mention that whereas Hindus and Buddhists appeal to the religious hypothesis of [karma-doctrine](#) and rebirth in their search for heavenly justice, Christians and Muslims do the same by taking recourse to the will of God. The hermeneutics, which is at work here may be termed *analogous interreligious hermeneutics*, which allows for polymorphic theological anchorage as against the hermeneutics of identity which is far too exclusive in nature.

If the hermeneutic dilemma consists in the seemingly paradoxical situation that we cannot understand without having certain prejudices and that we fail to understand if we have only prejudices, then the task of finding a way out is incumbent upon us. To say that we are caught up in this hermeneutic circle does not help much. The way out seems to lie in the interreligious conviction of one truth under different names. Such an attitude enables us to respect the plurality of religions. It also frees us from the worry we might have about the truth of our religion in face of other religions. From the premise: my religion is true does not follow the falsity of your religion unless I define the truth of my religion as essentially constituted by the falsity of your religion. Interreligiosity as we understand it here approves of experiential pluralism, which differentiates but does not discriminate.

The intercultural and interreligious hermeneutics we plead for stands not only for a way of thought but also for a way of life. It is wrong to think that such a polytheological anchorage betrays the idea of religious earnestness. Sometimes Buddhism and Hinduism are accused of such an attitude. But those who argue like this fail to realise that they mistake earnestness with a fighting spirit. Human history supplies us with enough examples for the thesis that polytheism is as a rule more tolerant than monotheism. The prefix "mono" has always been impatient and tends towards a deadly logic of either-or, leaving no room for compromise, cooperation and dialogue. That is why there lurks a danger in overrating the importance of consensualism. Reciprocal understanding needs acquiescence not because of consensus but because of dissensus. Dissensus is normally there, consensus is what we aim at and compromise seems to bet the golden mean. All that we should try to avoid is the dubious and empty character of the compromises. And this again is possible on the ground of cultivating the inner virtue of inter- and protoreligiosity.⁶⁶

9. Intercultural and interreligious orientation and the idea of a 'self-commitment' theory of tolerance

To tolerate is not just to endure, born out of the conviction of the sole truth of one's own position. It is not some sort of a behavioural correctness. This is a far too negative connotation of tolerance. Without going into any detailed and overly too academic discussion of this concept in the history of ideas, I would rather recontextualize it in the present multireligious situation. Real tolerance is born out of the conviction that one's own position is one among many alternative positions with no apriori, idealogical, and ontological, speculative or theological privilege.

⁶⁶ Mall, R.A.: Zur Hermeneutik des Einen mit vielen Namen. Eine interkulturelle Perspektive. In: Die Sprachen der Religion. Berlin 2003, 349-375.

To tolerate is thus to recognize and respect the category of difference without any fear of thereby not taking one's own position seriously or giving it up.

Tolerance is a virtue related to compassion and we are committed to it. Intolerance is a vice and we are committed to protest and fight against it in some form or other. Tolerance and intolerance take place at two levels: theoretical and practical.

- Tolerance at the level of theory (theoretical tolerance) is the conviction, for example that my religion for me is the only true religion without implying the falsity of other religions. Intolerance at the theoretical level (theoretical intolerance) consists in absolutizing one's own position and claiming universal validity and application for it.
- Practical tolerance is the consequence of the theoretical tolerance. Practical intolerance follows theoretical intolerance.

It is not true that an intolerant theoretical position may sometimes be quite tolerant in practice. But this is, in nearly all cases, some sort of a tricky strategic maneuver. On the other hand, a theoretically tolerant position may in practice be quite intolerant under the influence and pressure of some other very powerful factors in human behaviour.

European liberalism in its non-liberal forms in the days of colonialism and imperialism is a case in point. [Mahatma Gandhi](#) used to remind his British friends and interlocutors of this. European emancipation was not emancipated at all in its relation to the colonies in many parts of the world.

An intercultural and interreligiously oriented 'self-commitment' theory of tolerance is characterized by the following motto: *Tolerate the tolerant*. It is a tricky and hypocritical maneuver if intolerance demands tolerance from the tolerance because of latter's being tolerant. To be tolerant is not to be indifferent. To do this would be more than dilution. A tolerant position is duty bound to protest against an intolerant position if the latter endangers the very virtue of tolerance, which a tolerant position is committed to.

Although it is impossible to formulate some sort of a categorical imperative in the maze of the complex relationships between tolerance and intolerance, one thing is still binding: Our tendency to unity must not be allowed to degenerate into uniformity leading to some sort of an obsession. According to [Paul Ricoeur](#) 'unification of truth' is an act of violence, is the very 'first wrong step'.

10. Back once again to “tertium comparationis” embedded in an intercultural and interreligious framework

Let me ask two questions on my way to finding an answer for an overlapping framework in the service of a peaceful encounter of religions: **First, how similar must cultures, religions be in order to be comparable at all and second how different should they be in order not to be comparable at all?**

Comparisons are well nigh impossible if we maintain the thesis of total commensurability. There is a branch of an ill founded hermeneutics, let me term it *hermeneutics of identity*, which defines hermeneutics as a duplication of self-understanding. A *hermeneutics of radical difference* commits the same mistake with the roles reversed. A tells B: *you don't understand me if you fail to understand me the way I understand myself or the way I want you*

to understand me. But if identity of views defines understanding, there is hardly any fun in our pursuit of understanding the other. Total identity makes understanding redundant. If, on the other hand A tells B *you cannot understand me because your views are so radically different that understanding is not possible.* A does not undertake the trouble to start to understand. He rather deduces the failure of understanding from his assertion of radical differences. The better way would be the other way round. Both these frameworks are not in a position to supply us with a mediating concept of a *tertium comparationis*. Our search for an intercultural and interreligious overlapping framework tries to answer the question: How is it possible that two thought frameworks, otherwise very different, can still have something common so as to legitimately deserve the predicate to be a framework? The way out seems to lie somewhere in the middle. We should reject, as mentioned above, the two fictions of a total identity (commensurability) and of a radical difference (incommensurability) and search for mediating overlaps as the real seat of *tertium comparationis*. There are degrees of similarity and of difference. Overlaps recognise difference and make use of similarity. Of course, we should avoid the temptation of essentializing difference as well as similarity. There seems to be some sort of a Wittgensteinian ‘family resemblance’ here at work. It is true that there is deep-rooted desire in the human heart to start or to end with one picture of the one ultimate reality. But such an ontological or theological step, if it singularizes and absolutizes itself, stands in the way of any harmonious interreligious dialogue.

We all know that Buddhism and Jainism have always been and still are a challenge to all strictly theistic models of religion.

So the motto ‘[God has different names](#)’ (Hick) seems to ontologize the idea of God and fails to take notice of the incompatibilities in the names. There are other candidates claiming for one truth under different names, for example Otto’s category of the Holy and Eliade’s category of the Sacred. Otto makes an *a priori* move and he subsumes under it Buddhist ‘*shunyata*’ (*void, emptiness*) and Vedantic ‘*atman-brahman-non-duality*’. He, of course, separates the idea of the Holy from the idea of God, which furthers the cause of inter faith dialogues. But Otto raises the category of the Holy to an unwarranted level of generality, which really fails to do justice to the rich variety of religious experiences. Otto ontologizes and universalizes the category of the Holy, which may be based on an act of faith. Eliade’s idea of the Sacred seems to fare better because it is wider and takes into account the rich field of symbolism. To say that human beings are essentially religious by nature is true only when we are ready to attach this predicate not only to Hinduism, Christianity and Islam but also to Buddhism, Jainism and Taoism etc.

The point I want to make is that it is not the case that all religions talk about and refer to the self same truth only under different names. They do talk about different things but at the same they share a common protoreligious concern, which is to find out a way of redemption from our unsatisfying existential lot here on earth. The best candidate for this commonly shared ground is soteriology. I am, of course, fully aware of its being imbedded in the Western-Christian history of ideas because there is always a saviour (soter) at work and such an understanding would deny the predicate ‘religion’ to religions like say Buddhism, Jainism and the like. The issue is quite controversial and there are religious thinkers who are pro and contra. In the spirit of interreligiosity, I dare plead for an extension of the meaning of the term ‘soteriology’ essentially attached to an ultimate goal of liberation with the possibility of different paths, different means of redemption. Religions with a personified saviour are one of the paths but not the only one. The question can well be asked whether there is an authentic atheistic, humanistic, spiritual religiosity? Why not, if we allow for religious experience of the sacred in its theistic and atheistic forms.

There is a strong, rather homemade fear of [relativism](#). Of course relativism, which makes truth with a capital 'T' relative to only one gestalt of philosophy, religion or theology, becomes dictatorial because of its singularization and absolutization. Such relativism must be rejected as detrimental to interreligious dialogue. Here, relativism and absolutism seem to conspire together and represent two sides of the same coin. Is not absolutism some sort of a universalised relativism? But if relativism, on the other hand, means that we human beings, including philosophers and theologians, do possess different views, insights and convictions as to what is truth, knowledge, God, Holy, Sacred, then I simply wonder how one could avoid being a relativist. Added to this, such relativism is diffident, tolerant, open and conducive to any peaceful intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Such relativism is not only humane but also godly. Irrespective of the fact whether we are Christians, Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists, the *de facto* multicultural and multireligious situation in the globalized world of today has made one thing abundantly clear that there is hardly any theistic consensus in our talk of God. This has the further implication that any claim to a privileged standpoint is no more convincing today.

There is a question which I cannot avoid asking here. And it is this: Is the claim to absoluteness essentially constitutive of a religion or a faith or is it something due to tradition? In other words, is it a part of the *scriptura* or of the *traditio*, in Indian terminology of [shruti](#) or of [Smriti](#)? Irrespective of whether it is a part of the Holy Scripture or of the tradition, the claim to absolutism in combination with universal validity must be given up because of its detrimental effect on interreligious, interfaith dialogue and harmony.

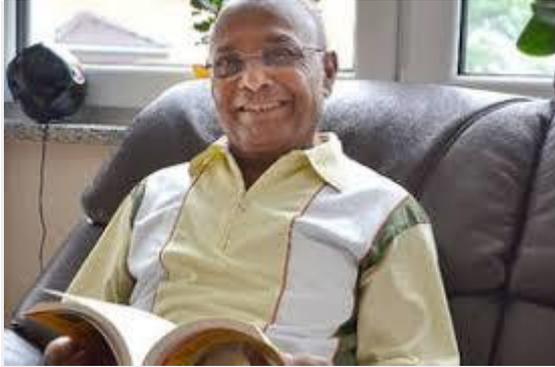
11. Concluding Remarks

What are the implications for praxis of the logic and methodology of protoreligiosity? The spirit of this logic requires us to

- give up all absolutist claims
- avoid all fixations of *tertium comparationis* in one particular religion
- refrain from the claim to be in sole possession of the 'virgin' meaning of the text all alone
- Differentiate between uniqueness and absoluteness
- give up the idea of an absolute religion or faith with universal acceptance
- take other religions and faiths as alternatives seriously
- keep in mind that absoluteness of the truth of your religion for you does in no way mean the falsity of other religions
- recognize and respect plurality of religions not only as a secular but also as a sacral virtue
- remember that no religion is sacrosanct because of its narratives regarding creation, reward, punishment, rituals, ceremonies and a host of dogmas but because of the binding protoreligiosity of 'non-violence' (Ahimsa), of love and compassion allowing for religions and faiths with or without a theistic anchorage.

I often ask myself: *What to do if a religion claims exclusive absoluteness along with universal validity and maintains further that this claim is not a human claim in the first instance but a commandment of 'God'?* I feel I can do no better than to approvingly quote the wise and cautionary words of the Indian poet-philosopher and neo-hinduist, [Tagore](#) in his message to the parliament of religions:

“The self-expression of God is in the variedness of creation...If humanity ever happens to be overwhelmed with the universal flood of a bigoted exclusiveness, then God will have to make provision for another Noah’s Ark to save His creatures from the catastrophe of spiritual desolation.” - *Tagore, R.: Boundless Sky, Calcutta 1964, p. 274.*



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Literature