

# THE PLURALISM OF TRUTH

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## **Our Human Situation**

### **The Geographic Panorama**

Let me reflect on the geographic upsetting of the modern world. Over a century ago 80 percent of people did not move more than fifty miles from their birthplaces. Now in North America, every family changes dwelling places every four and one-half years. The Atlantic is crossed by the millions. In eight hours you can be in Kathmandu, and here today there is an audience of an immense variety of races, languages, and religions. The geographic upsetting escalates in intermingling of people and cultures, but also in tensions and strife. Now we mingle, we are ready to tolerate the other, we are no longer scandalized by anything, we imitate, we reject, we are upset, but, after all, we have to go along with that and put up with as much as we can. We try to find our way within this jungle of varieties of all kinds of opinions and behaviors. We are forced to deal with each other, and, thus, in spite of our respective masks (for self-defense) we are almost obliged to try to understand each other.

### **The Question of Understanding**

In olden times people understood that they didn't understand one another. People understood that they did not understand those exotic fellows, those strange costumes, and those foreign religions, but since they did not meet them every day, it was not a great challenge. The foreigners lived in beautiful countries, primitive jungles, or neglected ghettos, but always far away, geographically

or spiritually. Now and then some anthropologists would tell us stories, which we found more or less interesting, funny, or irritating. The skirmishes were only among neighboring religions, often tinged with economic and political problems, or among some intellectuals worried with the negative results of religious divergences.

Now the problems are before our own eyes and we need to understand them. Please bear with me the only English philosophical pun that I allow myself: To understand is to stand-under the spell of the thing which we under-stand, it is to be got by the spell of the thing, and stand under it in admiration, or perhaps skepticism. It is an existential attitude, we stand really under the power of the risky act of knowing (*inter-legere*). To know, as the Upanishads and Thomas Aquinas (following Aristotle) explicitly said, meant to identify ourselves with the thing known. Now, due to the shift of meaning of the notion of knowledge, introduced and popularized by the modern so-called natural sciences, to understand has been reduced to being able to foresee, calculate, and dominate. In a word, we claim to understand by "overstanding." If we "overstand," we simply apply our own categories or superstructures. We superimpose them in order to recognize the object, and no longer to understand the thing. Should I interject here a footnote on the Kantian categories and Shankara's critique *ante litteram* with his notion of adhyâsa (super imposition)?

I am only preparing the ground to indicate that there is an unavoidably epistemological problem undergirding our question.

If we "overstand," like a pretended universal scientific "knowledge," we approach reality from a standpoint superior to that of the things themselves. We are not listening to the things, obeying them; we are integrating objects into our mental scheme. We "overstand" from a higher platform: Reason, Science, Revelation, or whatever, to which, of course, "we" have a privileged access. Intelligibility comes then from a single superior principle. On the other hand, if we truly understand we shall humbly recognize that, while we have access to a source of intelligibility, other people may tap on other sources as well, or on other streams of the same source. Human history has shown us that Man has many different self-understandings. Can we by-pass the different human self-understandings by our exclusive interpretation? We may recognize objects, but here we have to deal not with an object, but with Man, whose very nature is to be endowed

with self-understanding, so that to know Man includes to know Mans self-understandings-and not just to know our own interpretations of an object called *anthrôpos*. *This is the problem*.

Something happened to a Sicilian at the beginning of the century. He was caught, taken to court, manacled. It seems that he was innocent, but he didn't utter a word when the judge was asking him to defend himself. When the advocate later asked him why he didn't speak, he said, "How could I speak if I had my hands tied?" For him the word was still something more than meaning; it was gesture. How could he speak without using the hands at the same time as the tongue?

### **A Universal Understanding ?**

We have suffered and still suffer so much of fanaticisms, political, religious, and cultural, that we are legitimately thirsty for a universal understanding. A typical example of this mentality is the global village syndrome. Noble as the intention is, to me it appears as just another worthy successor to the colonialist mentality. Colonialism believes in the monophormism of culture: that there is ultimately only one civilization: "And now comes the unification of the world into a global village. Now we can have a universal theology which will make a comfortable little hole for the Muslim, another for the unbeliever, and everybody will be happy because we now are tolerant, we don't enforce anything, we accept everything, and everybody has a place. Everyone can welcome a universal theology which is based on openness, tolerance, and self-criticism." So far so good, but is it so easy to be really open to the fanatic, tolerant with the intolerant, and to accept the criticism of those who do not agree with our universal theology ?

Yet there is a thirst for real understanding. We cannot live compartmentalized. The other becomes a problem precisely because it encroaches upon my life and is irreducible to my views. If one extreme is that we are right and the others wrong, the other extreme is that we all can fit into a kind of global village. I submit that it is not given to any of us to encompass the universal range of the human experience. In a village everyone knows everybody and the different dialectics are understood. Do we still dream that a universal television will bring real "communication" to 5.2 billion people ? There is an *inertia of the mind* very visible in most of

the modern efforts to deal with this problem. I have the hunch that we have to face a radically new vision of reality.

*This is the challenge.*

## **Pluralism**

In between these two extremes, the word "pluralism" has emerged more and more as representing a third attitude ; and this is the second point of my presentation.

### **Accepted Pluralisms**

There are a number of pluralisms which are accepted today. A philosopher can be a good philosopher, and does not need to be a follower of Kant or whomever. One philosopher may disagree with another and yet both may be accepted as good philosophers. The pluralism of philosophy is accepted. Theological pluralism is also practically recognized. Cultural pluralism is also something which we boast of, although I don't think we have achieved it. What we have is a certain type of cultural tolerance which allows Greeks, Pakistanis and Gypsies to have their own folklores-but they all have to pay the taxes ... and accept *our* Laws and Constitutions. At any rate we are theoretically ready to accept cultural pluralism. Religious pluralism, which cannot be severed from cultural pluralism, is probably the last and most difficult notion to accept. It touches our personal identity.

### **Preliminaries to Pluralism**

We have become aware of *plurality*. This is a fact. But plurality is not yet pluralism. Plurality is the recognition of *different* ways, moods, colors. It is a quantitative notion.

A second step is *pluriformity*. There are not only differences, there is also *variety*. This is a qualitative notion. We become sensitive to varieties about which we cannot pass a quantitative measurement. Blue is not green and in no way can I say that green is nicer than blue. We cannot measure what is better, what is nicer, and it depends on the context. But this is not yet pluralism.

Pluralism goes a step further than the recognition of differences (plurality) and varieties (pluriformity). Pluralism has to do with radical *diversity*. This further step has had two forerunners.

The first step is *perspectivism*. Those conversant with the Indic fable of the elephant in a dark place remember how the one said that it was something like a bare bone, others said it was like a heavy pillar, a thick container, a rough skin and the like. This would be an example of perspectivism. Perspectivism is common sense. People see from different perspectives, and we have to respect them. The difficulty is, as in our example, that somebody has to know that it is an elephant. When I know the elephant I can say you are simply describing the tusk, you the foot, and you another member, but if no one knows the elephant, how are we going to defend perspectivism? Who knows the elephant? Obviously “we” the Vedântins, the Christians, the scientists, ... “we” know the elephant !

The second step is *relativity*, which should not be confused with relativism. Relativism defeats its purpose. Relativism is self-defeating agnosticism. You can not even know that you don't know. If there are no criteria for discernment, relativism is also not a criterion. Relativity, on the other hand, is a much more serious thing. Relativity tells us that everything depends on a set of collations in which that particular case, statement, fact, or situation can be expressed, and also falsified, verified or whatever. It abolishes any kind of absolutistic claim. But I dare say that pluralism in its deepest sense goes still a step further and this is what I would like still to describe in brief sketches.

## **Description of Pluralism**

In six points, I try to sum up what I mean.

1. Pluralism does not mean plurality or a reduction of plurality to unity. It is a fact that there is a plurality of religions. It is also a fact that these religions cannot be reduced to any sort of unity. Pluralism means something more than sheer acknowledgment of plurality and the mere wishful thinking of unity.

2. Pluralism does not consider unity an indispensable ideal, even if allowance is made for variations within that unity. Pluralism accepts the irreconcilable aspects of religions without being blind to the common aspects. Pluralism is not the eschatological expectation that at the end all shall be one.

3. Pluralism does not allow for a universal system. A pluralistic system would be a contradiction in terms. The incommensurability of ultimate systems is unbridgeable. This incommensurability does not need to be a lesser evil, but it could be a revelation itself of the nature of reality. Nothing can encompass reality.

4. Pluralism makes us aware of our contingency and the nontransparency of reality. It is incompatible with the monotheistic assumption of a totally intelligible Being, that is, with an omniscient consciousness identified with Being. Yet pluralism does not shun intelligibility. The pluralist attitude tries to reach intelligibility as much as possible, but it does not need the ideal of a total comprehensibility of the real.

5. Pluralism is a symbol which expresses an attitude of cosmic confidence which allows for a polar and tensile coexistence between ultimate human attitudes, cosmologies, and religions. It neither eliminates nor absolutizes evil or error.

6. Pluralism does not deny the function of the *logos* and its inalienable rights. The principle of non-contradiction, for instance, cannot be eliminated. But pluralism belongs also to the order of

mythos. It incorporates *mythos*, not, of course, as an object of thinking but as a horizon that makes thinking possible. Brevity compels me not to develop these points as I have done elsewhere.

## **The Pluralism of Truth**

### **Truth Is beyond Unity and Plurality**

Pluralism affirms neither that truth is one, nor that it is many. If truth were one, we could not accept the positive tolerance of a pluralistic attitude and would have to consider pluralism a connivance with error. We could, at best, refrain from any judgement regarding disputable or irrelevant matters. But how can we abstain from condemning what we judge evil or error? How can we postpone practical decisions, all the more when mere postponement is already an uncritical decision?

But truth is not manifold either. If truth were many, we would fall into plain contradiction. We said already that pluralism does not stand for plurality, the plurality of truth in this case. Pluralism adopts a non-dualistic or *advaitic* attitude that defends the pluralism of truth because reality itself is pluralistic; that is, incommensurable with either unity or plurality. Being as such, even if encompassed by, or coexistent with the *logos* or a supreme intelligence does not need to be reduced to consciousness. In fact, the perfect self-mirroring of Being is truth, but even if the perfect image of Being is identical to Being, Being does not need to be exhausted in its image-unless we previously assume that Being is (only) Consciousness.

### **Truth Has No Center**

In theological circles these are today interesting discussions regarding whether christocentrism or theocentrism or any other center should be the point of reference for Christian theology. In

sociological and anthropological circles, questions of ethnocentrism, Eurocentric attitudes, and technocentrism are debated. All those discussions implicitly recognize that it has to be a center if we have to reach intelligibility. The center, if at all, is mobile. I say to "christocentrists" and "theocentrists" alike, "You are right!" But I emphasize the you, the context within which the particular theologian thinks. What is not necessarily true is that truth needs always the same center.

Let me cite the story of a wise rabbi who was heading a congregation long ago. Jews were quarrelling with one another, and one Party went to expose its grievances to the rabbi, who would say, "You are right! You are right!" The other Party of the congregation having learned that, went also to the rabbi and explained their plight. The rabbi listens attentively and says, "You are right!" "You are right!" Obviously the quarrel began all over again. So the intellectuals and scribes of the congregation, who knew better, formed a small commission and went to the rabbi stating with due respect: "Master, you have said today this was right, and yesterday that the other Party was right. Obviously both cannot be right." The rabbi said, "You are right ! You are right !" Who is right ? Or only the rabbi is wrong ?

The relation between the three statements is of course dialectical. But the relation between the two discussing groups of living people is not dialectical. The rabbi saw the relative completeness of each position, although it entailed the mutual contradiction of the intellectual statements, as the third existentially uninvolved Party saw.

What I am trying to say is that pluralism enters when we discover the mutual incommensurability of human attitudes. It is the recognition of incompatibility of ultimate beliefs. We should take seriously the human experiences and struggles of the last 8,000 years of historical memory, each Party thinking to do the right thing, and the other one believing that this is not so. We should hear once again Solomon's wisdom. Our many solutions want to cut the child in two when we cannot keep it for ourselves. Truth, like the child, is ours. But to keep the child alive, to keep humanity alive, to keep the polarity of the human realities alive, to keep the good faith of the people alive, to keep alive freedom as the highest dignity, we cannot judge by Reason *alone*. Solomon has shown us that his final judgement was the correct one, because when



love intervenes, when the child is yours, you prefer to lose, you prefer even to be trodden down, but the child should live. I guess that our present situation demands of all of us to be able to say, "I don't understand you too well, even I think you are wrong, but the fact that you are wrong does not tell me much about my being right, or my being perhaps also wrong."

We need this intercourse with one another. The "interfaith" meeting is not just a dialectical affair. It requires also love, dialogue, and human touch. We belong together, even if our notions and codes are incompatible. The radius and the circumference belong together even if they are mutually incommensurable. Pluralism belongs to the human condition.

### **Truth Is Polar**

The insight that truth itself is pluralistic may be described by saying that the very nature of truth is polar. Truth qua truth is itself a polarity. Whatever philosophical theory of truth we may espouse (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, and the like), one thing remains common to all. Truth is always a relation, be it subject/object, or subject/predicate, or knower/known, or user/used, etc. There is still more. One of the terms of the relation, explicitly or implicitly, is us. Men. Even if we speak of the metaphysical truth of Being or theological truth of the Godhead itself, we humans cannot be totally bracketed out. And this is all the more the case when dealing with religious truth. We are coinvolved in the enterprise. In other words, truth has always an element of subjectivity in the sense that we, Men, are somewhat sharing in that statement, entity, process, or state of affairs which we call truth. Truth is always a relation which makes reference to us Men, for which the truth is truth (and not only objectively true).

Now, if this referee is only me, or only us, in a particular spatiotemporal culture, this I or this we cannot exhaust the total relation. This for two reasons: First this I or we is limited and can never know that it has totally known the other side in question. Secondly, the subject (I, we) is in itself unobjectifiable and this with no guaranty it could not change. We are one of the poles of the relationship, and we cannot be "sure" we cannot change. We cannot have control over ourselves except from the objective pole, which at its turn is related to the subjective one. A clear example

is the so-called evolution of dogma. If the subjects change their perceptions and presuppositions, the "objective truths" of the dogma need to change accordingly, precisely to keep constant the relationship.

If this referee is not "we" but an infinite intellect, besides the fact that we can have only a limited human interpretation of this absolute intelligence, there is also no necessity whatsoever that this infinite intellect knows all Being. There is nothing hidden to an infinite intelligence; it is omniscient, and, as such, what it knows is the Truth. One could even grant that it is the very source of truth, so that truth is precisely what the divine intellect knows. Truth would then be originally on the part of the Subject, not being conditioned by any object. This would be all the more in favor of a pluralism of truth, for Truth would utterly depend on Divine Pleasure and there would be no objective foundation whatsoever for a persistence of the "same" truth, or rather, the sameness would be derobed of any point of reference to affirm itself as such. We could not say whether truth is one or many.

The traditional position will defend that truth is one because this infinite intellect cannot change. This line of argument already implies the identification of Being with Consciousness. But this is a gratuitous assumption not warranted by the acceptance of an infinite Consciousness. The divine Consciousness, in fact, should know All, Le., all that is knowable, but not all that is not all (of) Being, unless we identify previously Being with Consciousness. An infinite intelligence has no limits in its proper field: nothing is unintelligible to it, but this field does not need to be totally identical with reality. In short, it might well be that Reality has an opaque face impervious to Intelligibility. In Christian parlance the Divinity cannot be reduced to an infinite Logos. There "is" also an apophatic Source. There is also the Spirit, neither inferior to nor different from the Logos, but not reducible to it either. The Truth of God, the logos, to put it paradoxically, is not the Whole of God, because God being Truth, Logos, and infinite Truth, God "is" only this. It "is" Trinity.

We could formulate the pluralism of truth in a more yogic and Buddhist manner. We would comment then on the *citta-vrttinirodha*, or cessation of all mental activity, as in the beginning of the *Yogasûtra*, or on *ākimcanya āyatana*, or the abode of non-existence, as in primitive

Buddhism. In both cases the mental is overcome and the ultimate insight is beyond the tetralemmic dialectic (of A, non-A, A and non-A, neither A nor non-A). Truth is not abolished, but its dwelling place (*āyatana*) is no longer the mansion of language. Are you so stupid as really believing that your opinion is the correct one and all the others are in error, hints discreetly the *Suttanipāta*.

These latter considerations are only ways of speaking within particular schools. And yet almost all theologies, as Ibn 'Arabi so pointedly stressed with his theory of *jam' al-diddayn* (*coincidentia oppositorum*), are forced to use antinomic language and paradoxes when referring to the Divine: the truth of one statement has to be contradicted by another affirmation which is equally true. Truth cannot have a unique and univocal expression, stressed *al-chaykh al akbar* (the greatest master), as tradition called him. This would be an example of our point which is directly concerned with the problem of religious truth in the very encounter of religions. Let me spell some of the corollaries without now elaborating on the intrinsic polarity of truth and the fact that we are, at least, partially involved in one of the poles.

### **By Way of Conclusion**

The pluralism of truth entails among other corollaries:

1. The religions truth of a particular tradition can be properly understood only within the very tradition which has elaborated it. Each tradition has its language.
2. From one religious intellectual system one can legitimately criticize another system, provided one arrives at a certain common area where the dialogue and the critique is meaningful to both parties. We have to speak, at least partially, a common language.
3. At any given moment in human history there are prevalent mythoi which allow cross-cultural and transreligious criticism of held opinions. Human sacrifice and slavery can be fairly said to have elicited today a universal consensus which justifies calling them wrong straightaway. But

there are today burning issues which no merely intellectual approach should minimize. Unless we quibble about words, is violence to be avoided at all costs ? Is God a necessary hypothesis for a just world? Is present-day capitalism a dehumanizing force ? We may have our own strong opinions on these questions, but should not present them as non-negotiable "truths."

The pluralism of truth is an eye-opener, first of all, for contingency ; I don't have a 360-degree vision ; nobody has. Second, and here is the most daring notion, truth is pluralistic because reality itself is pluralistic, not being an objectifiable entity. We subjects are also part of it. We are not only spectators of the Real, we are also co-actors and even co-authors of it. *This is precisely our human dignity.*

I do feel that this brief sketch, imperfect as it is, touches an essential question of the very nature of Reality, and touching the nature of Reality rebounds, as it were, into the nature of all our enterprises. This third millennium of the Western world, pointing towards a mutation in our situation, requires from us a notion of what it means to be human, of what it means to be *divine*, of what is the *world* in which we live and for which we share the responsibility.