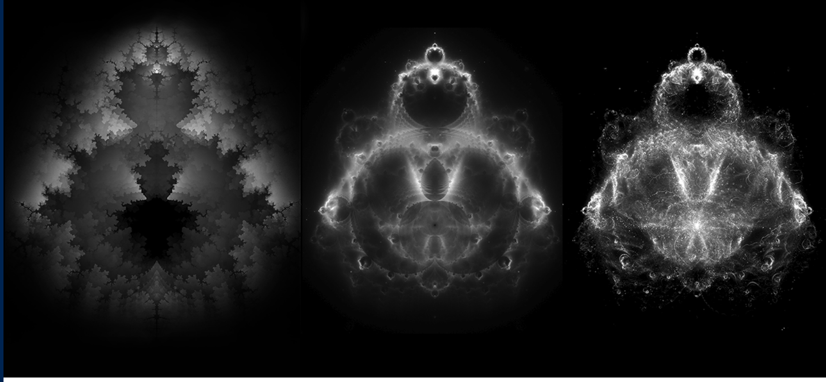

RELIGIONS IN DIALOGUE | 22

Melanie Barbato, Mathias Schneider,
Fabian Völker (Eds.)

Beyond Boundaries

Essays on Theology, Dialogue, and Religion in Honor of Perry Schmidt-Leukel

WAXMANN

Religions in Dialogue

Series
edited by Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse,
Founding Director of the Academy of World Religions,
University of Hamburg

No. 22

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Melanie Barbato, Mathias Schneider, Fabian Völker (Eds.)
with the assistance of Madlen Krüger

Beyond Boundaries

Essays on Theology, Dialogue, and Religion
in Honor of Perry Schmidt-Leukel

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Perry Schmidt-Leukel

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Paul F. Knitter

Foreword

It was way back in 1988 that I first came across the name of Perry Schmidt-Leukel. He was the author of a review of my first book, *No Other Name?*. In that review, I realized that we were fellow pluralists (there were not too many in Germany at the time), and we both were exploring how religious-cultural diversity can become a global intercultural opportunity.

Since then, I have eagerly read just about everything he has written. Over the years, we have collaborated in many a project and shared podiums at many a conference. Our relationship, as both professional colleagues and personal friends, has deepened – and so I am happy to introduce this *Festschrift* for Perry Schmidt-Leukel.

I can honestly say that as I look out over the contemporary international landscape of academic efforts to understand religious and cultural diversity, I see very few who have more significantly and steadily contributed to intercultural and interreligious awareness *and* engagement than Perry Schmidt-Leukel. With his specialized scholarship in two religions (Christianity and Buddhism), his broad knowledge of multiple religions, his resolute commitment to defending and promoting both academic and ethical exchange as well as cooperation between religions and cultures, with his ability to inspire young people with his vision of intercultural dialogue and collaboration, he clearly stands out within the academic community, both European and international. But let me provide some substance to this sweeping assessment: Schmidt-Leukel has promoted intercultural competence – i. e., multi-cultural sensitivity and engagement – in four interrelated and effective ways.

Firstly, he has gathered resources for, and has removed obstacles to, cross-cultural and multi-religious relationships. In the academy of Religious Studies, we call this the general area of “Theology of Religions.” In this first contribution, Schmidt-Leukel is identifying and addressing what can be described as a condition of possibility for intercultural competence: unless religions and cultures postulate a level playing field in which all can recognize each other’s values, they will not be able to engage each other in a life-giving, truth-searching way. Claims of cultural or religious superiority or supremacy hamstring intercultural competence.

So Schmidt-Leukel, throughout his career, but especially in his foundational and nearly exhaustive work *God Beyond Boundaries,* carries on the so-called “Copernican Revolution” begun by his mentor John Hick (1922–2012). This revolution calls upon all religions and their cultures to move beyond past claims of the superiority of one (that is, “my”) religion over all others and to embrace a pluralist perspective that affirms the value, as well as the diversity, of all cultures and the need for dialogue between them.

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This proposal has often been rejected as the imposition of a "Western value" on other cultures. In response to this criticism, Schmidt-Leukel has gathered empirical evidence that makes clear that there are resources not only within the Christian tradition but also *within all religions and cultures* that support and can nurture such a pluralist perspective. Far from a foreign imposition, pluralism and its call for dialogue is seeded in all cultures and religions – though such seeds may have been covered over by the infertile soil of imperialism and nationalism.

Schmidt-Leukel has researched and identified both the supremacist histories as well as the pluralist resources in religions other than Christianity. For Buddhism, he has done this in his edited book *Buddhist Attitudes to Other Religions* (2008) and, monumentally, in his four-volume series on *Buddhism and Religious Diversity* (2013). In more limited fashion, he has gathered the resources for inter-cultural and inter-religious competence and dialogue within Islam in his *Islam and Inter-Faith Relations* (2007), and within Chinese traditions in *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought* (2013).

Secondly, he has laid the foundations for the possibility and the methodology of cross-cultural/multi-religious exchange. Again, in the jargon of Religious Studies, this would be termed either "Interreligious Theology" or "Comparative Theology." Having identified the theo-philosophical resources for affirming the validity of many religions/cultures, Schmidt-Leukel here moves to suggest why and how each religion *must* engage other religions in order to truly understand not only *them* but also *itself.* He elaborates an inter-cultural hermeneutics grounded on the presupposition that one cannot understand one's own religion and culture unless one is in dialogue with another. He refers frequently to the dictum of Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) regarding religions: "He who knows one, knows none."

He lays out the fruits of such an Interreligious Theology for Christians in his *Transformation by Integration: How Inter-Faith Encounter Changes Christianity* (2009). In 2017, a Chinese translation of this book has been published in Beijing and has sparked a debate among Chinese scholars about Schmidt-Leukel's ideas.

The volume Schmidt-Leukel edited with Andreas Nehring, *Interreligious Comparisons in Theology and Religious Studies: Comparison Revisited* (2016), is a rigorous defense of the methodology of Interreligious Theology. It is a solid and balanced response to the postmodern claim that cultural diversity and constructivist epistemology do not allow for comparisons and dialogue between cultures and religions. The book lays out the philosophical grounds that enable and require scholars to cross cultural and religious boundaries and seek "mutual illumination."

Schmidt-Leukel markedly advanced this pluralistic project when in 2015 he was invited to give the highly esteemed *Gifford Lectures* (which were published in 2017 as *Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Theology* and appeared in a German edition in 2019 as *Wahrheit in Vielfalt*). In his *Gifford Lectures*, Schmidt-Leukel not only reviews and clarifies but creatively expands the epistemological and empirical foundations for an Interreligious Theology. Drawing on the mathematical under-

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standing of fractals as developed by Benoît Mandelbrot (1924–2010), he develops his new and unique proposal for a "fractal interpretation of religious diversity" and provides both empirical and philosophical evidence that the stark differences *between* religions are to be found among the differences *within* religions. Therefore, the religions are similar in their very differences, and these similarities/differences provide the basis for and promise of "mutual illumination."

The significance of this *fractal* insight into the reality and the potential of religious diversity is so new and provocative that the editors at Orbis Books immediately agreed to publish the multi-religious evaluation of it in the book that Alan Race and I have edited, *New Paths for Interreligious Theology: Perry Schmidt-Leukel's Fractal Interpretation of Religious Diversity,* published in 2019. Most recently, he has elaborated his fractal theory in the field of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in a series of lectures held in 2020 at Minzu University, Beijing, published in the bilingual English-Chinese edition *To See a World in a Flower* (2020). In 2022, he further extended his fractal-based Buddhist-Christian comparison in his monograph *Das Himmlische Geflecht: Buddhismus und Christentum – ein anderer Vergleich* ("The Celestial Web: Buddhism and Christianity – a Different Comparison," 2022, English translation forthcoming).

Thirdly, Schmidt-Leukel has engaged and deepened the intercultural exchange between Buddhists and Christians. In this contribution, he applies the principles and guidelines of both his Theology of Religions and his Interreligious Theology to a concrete engagement between two religions and two cultures: Asian Buddhism and Western Christianity. And it is here, in my mind, that he truly shows his extraordinary "intercultural competence."

Much of the intercultural dialogue that he pursues between Buddhism and Christianity is primarily academic – to explore what Christians/Westerners can learn from Buddhists/Asians regarding fundamental questions about ultimate reality, the finite world, human nature, life after death. Such issues were compared and analyzed in his early and foundational book *Den Löwen brüllen hören* ("Hearing the Lion Roar," 1992), and more particularly in his comparative studies of creation and death in *Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation* (2006) and *Die Bedeutung des Todes für das menschliche Selbstverständnis im Pali-Buddhismus* ("The Significance of Death for Human Self-Understanding in Pali Buddhism," 1984). His book *Understanding Buddhism* (2006) has seen many reprints as well as an Indian and a German edition. It has become an often-used textbook (I used it myself in graduate courses at Union Theological Seminary).

More recently, Schmidt-Leukel has expanded (I would say deepened) his intercultural explorations into Buddhism into the area that can be described as *spirituality* (which includes psychology). I am referring to his book *Buddha Mind – Christ Mind: A Christian Commentary on the Bodhicaryāvatāra* (2019). This monumental work of more than 600 pages displays not only a depth of scholarship in Buddhist Studies, it also carries on inter-cultural and inter-religious conversation on the deep-

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er levels of personal experience. This is somewhat of a new direction for a scholar like Schmidt-Leukel, who generally moves on the more academic, socio-empirical levels. I suspect that this is an area where his scholarship will bear even more diverse fruit.

Finally, Schmidt-Leukel has made notable contributions to the promotion of inter-religious and inter-cultural Peace Studies. This he has done mainly through conferences and publications on the complex but crucial relationship between religion and violence. Always within the context of multi-religious conversation, he has explored both how and why religion can so easily be used (or exploited?) to confirm and promote national or tribal violence towards others. But he has also gathered and analyzed the resources and ethical practices that religions offer for peace-making through non-violence and calls for social justice. He has done this from a multi-religious approach in his edited *War and Peace in World Religions* (2004) as well as in articles such as "The Struggle for Peace: Can Religions Help?" (2007) or, most recently, "In What Sense Can Inter-Faith Dialogue Contribute to Inter-Faith Peace?" (2024). Specifically, he has studied both the potential for violence and for peace within the history of Buddhism in "War and Peace in Buddhism" (2004) and in "Buddhism, Dialogue, and Peace" (2009).

Perry Schmidt-Leukel's expertise and achievements in the area of intercultural and interreligious competence that I have tried to summarize are confirmed by his still growing reputation in the international academic community. Increasingly, he is "in demand." For research projects that become books, he can be depended upon for a contribution that will be as solidly researched as it is creatively insightful. For conferences and panels, he is sought after as someone who will be as engagingly vigorous in presenting his ideas, as he is genuinely open to listening to his interlocutors.

Perry, may this *Festschrift* affirm you in what you have done to promote intercultural and interreligious competence and engagement, and may it encourage and embolden you in your future work to turn cultural and religious diversity into a resource for global peace and well-being.

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Melanie Barbato, Mathias Schneider, Fabian Völker

Introduction

Perry Schmidt-Leukel has inspired, influenced, and challenged the academic study of religion with his new vision of interpreting religious diversity. As a systematic and fundamental theologian by training, he constantly reminded his students of the rational, critical-constructive nature of theology that has captivated him since his own intensive study of Thomas Aquinas as a young student of Catholic theology.[1] Given his personal contact and theological engagement with Buddhism at an early stage of his career, Perry realized that a theology understood merely as an exclusively Christian enterprise would be inadequate to address the urgent challenges posed by a globalized world. The way forward, Perry felt, was to reclaim old values. In the spirit of academic vigor and critical analysis characterizing his entire work, he describes the "maxims" of his theological vision as the "rationally controlled search for truth and elimination of errors" (Schmidt-Leukel, 2017a, p. 31). With these maxims in mind, theology is conceived, on the one hand, as a unified science that interprets reality *sub specie aeternitatis*. On the other hand, it acknowledges the fallibility of its rationally justified hypotheses and refines and revises them when necessary (see Schmidt-Leukel, 2012a, p. 65). Accordingly, as Perry understands scientific theology as one discipline, theology has to go *beyond boundaries*, that is, take the form of an interreligious discourse: for if "there is indeed truth in the different religions," then "it is not a matter of 'Christian,' 'Buddhist' or 'Hindu' etc. truths, but of 'truths in the universe' recognized by Christians, Buddhists or Hindus with the help of their tradition." In this objective anchoring of truth, he consistently maintains, lies the possibility to bring "knowledge of truth constructively into a global theological discourse" (Schmidt-Leukel, 2013b, p. 37, trans. eds.).

This interreligious theology is firmly rooted in a theology of religions pioneered by Perry's mentor and friend John Hick: both have demonstrated the rational plausibility of a pluralist interpretation of religion, fully appreciating religious diversity as a value and indispensable theological resource (see Schmidt-Leukel, 2017a; Hick, 1989). The application of the pluralist hypothesis has important ramifications for theological methodology. This becomes clear when Perry further develops and expands upon the seminal insights of another scholar who was equally influential for his own thought, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. As both emphasize, a pluralist foundation widens the "the data for theology" to "the data of the history of religion" (Smith, 1981, p. 126). Thus, scientific theology draws on interreligious dialogue as a colloquium of scholars from all religious traditions of the world: a theology of religions in the "subjective genitive … for which 'the religions' are the subject, not the

1 For an autobiographical account of his academic career, see Schmidt-Leukel, 2013a.

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object," which "will give intellectual expression to our faith, the faith of all of us" (Smith, 1981, pp. 124–125). It involves both the illumination of one's own tradition in the light of another and the "transformation by integration" (see Schmidt-Leukel, 2009) of theological "insights … gained from other religions" (Schmidt-Leukel, 2012b, p. 20). In this way, theology will be the result of dialogical encounter – *global* in its scope, *comparative* in its method, and *interreligious* in its nature. For his pioneering theological work and influential vision, Perry received various awards and gave the prestigious *Gifford Lectures* at the University of Glasgow in 2015 (see Schmidt-Leukel, 2017b). Here, he first presented his fractal interpretation of religious diversity, which has since been received and discussed by other renowned scholars in the fields of theology and religious studies (see Race & Knitter, 2019).

An exhaustive reconstruction of all of Perry's creative and pioneering achievements in theology, religious studies, and the philosophy of religion would easily exceed the scope of this introduction. We have therefore brought together a group of distinguished friends, colleagues, and former students to honor his vital and wide-ranging contributions to contemporary theological endeavor that have inspired, influenced, and also challenged their own thought. The essays collected in this *Festschrift* on the occasion of Perry's seventieth birthday constructively engage with the various facets and versatile concerns of his academic vision or relate to his areas of expertise from the perspectives of their own research. The first two sections are dedicated to the Theology of Religions and Interreligious Theology, arguably the two fields where Perry has gained the most international recognition. Section three contains contributions from the Philosophy of Religion and Religious Studies. Notably, he is equally qualified with a habilitation degree in theology and religious studies, and his professorship in Münster covered both fields. While his work has sought to contribute to a truly interreligious theology, he has also emphasized the need for interreligious engagement on many different levels as a way toward better understanding and peaceful coexistence between members of different religious traditions. These more practical aspects of interreligious encounter are included in section four, Interreligious Dialogue. A recurrent theme of Perry's reflections is the question of how Christian theology can do justice to religious diversity. For him, Buddhism has been the main reference tradition for these inquiries but also a research interest in its own right. Sections five and six are therefore dedicated to Buddhism in Dialogue and Buddhist Studies.

This project could not have been realized without the generous support of several institutions. We are grateful for the funding we received from the University of Münster as well as the foundations *Omnis Religio* (Nachrodt-Wiblingwerde) and *Apfelbaum* (Cologne). The boards of both foundations did not hesitate to lend countenance and aid to this project honoring Perry's lifelong commitment and ongoing dedication to fostering interreligious theology and dialogue. We thank all of Perry's companions and dialogue partners who have contributed to this *Festschrift*. We are also grateful for the invaluable support of the following friends and colleagues who put a lot of effort into this project at various stages of its completion: Paul Knitter for

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writing the foreword, Madlen Krüger for corresponding with the authors and assisting with many other tasks, Mirja Lange for co-editing the bibliography, Achim Riggert for being a great help to us during the funding process, Doris Schmidt-Leukel for being a highly reliable co-conspirator, Wolfram Weiße for including the book in the *Religions in Dialogue* series, and Beate Plugge and Maria Ritter at Waxmann for their support of this project.

As editors and former students of Perry, we are deeply indebted to his stimulating insights, intellectual encouragement, and tireless patience that we received during our time at the Institute for Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology at the University of Münster of which Perry was the director from 2009 to 2023. But more than that, we are exceedingly grateful for the way he consistently encouraged our projects and his unwavering support on which we can still constantly rely without reservation. Should Perry, at some day at a venerable old age, come to the realization that he, like his highly revered Buddhist master Shinran (1173–1263), only taught us "for fame and profit" (Shinran, 1997, p. 429), this could not diminish our deeply felt gratitude for the inspiring time we spent with him.

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Part 1
Theology of Religions

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Alan Race

Religious Experience in an Interfaith Context

1. Introduction

Plainly, religions are not all the same – they have different origins, histories, theologies, and spiritualities. Yet neither are they all different, in the sense that no family resemblances might be discerned between them. Followers from many traditions seek "transcendent vision and human transformation," no matter how variously these are shaped symbolically and worked out in practice.

I enter a mosque and instantly observe the absence of imagery, save that of qur'ānic inscriptions in the dome above, but the concentration on the transcendence of divine reality is not alien to me. I enter a Hindu temple, riotous in its impacts on the senses, and I am reminded of some forms of Christian worship that are equally focused on the senses as conduits to the worship of divine holiness. We inhabit one earth and we have powers to exercise human empathy across many boundaries. Yet the tension between the particularity and universality of religious tradition is real and persists. This essay is a contribution towards negotiating that tension between particularity and universality through reflection on the category of religious experience and the dialogue between traditions.

2. Religious Experience

I begin with the following extract from the novel *The Bell* (1958) by the philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch (1919–1999). One of the central characters, Dora, had come upon a painting by Gainsborough in London's National Gallery, a painting of two children with a butterfly:

> Dora was always moved by the pictures. Today she was moved, but in a new way. She marvelled, with a kind of gratitude, that they were all still here, and her heart was filled with love for the pictures, their authority, their marvellous generosity, their splendour. It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect … she felt that she had had a revelation. She looked at the radiant, sombre, tender, powerful canvas of Gainsborough and felt a sudden desire to go down on her knees before it, embracing it, shedding tears. (Murdoch, 2004, p. 196)

Dora has an experience which could be described as religious. In her own commentary on the passage Murdoch explains that there are experiences, such as Dora's, where it is appropriate to think that "the word 'truth' is in place, the discovery of

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truth, is the discovery of good, and this may be an experience of revelation … this cloud of cobwebs can be swept away by an experience of art, of an experience of nature, an experience of talking to somebody or seeing somebody working" (Lello, 1985, p. 88). What is at stake, Murdoch explains, is that experiences of exaltation present "an image of the death of egoism. Religion is about the death of the ego" (Lello, 1985, p. 88).

Interestingly, the philosopher and theologian of interreligious pluralism, John Hick (1922–2012), also thought that the notion of "truth" was philosophically applicable in the context of religious experience. Given the ambiguity of the universe in terms of its potential for interpretation as the product either of transcendent creativity/purpose or of naturalistic processes/causes, it remains legitimate – indeed rational –, believed Hick, to imagine and live on the basis that religious experience embodies its own legitimacy as a cognitive form of truthfulness.[1] Echoing Murdoch further, Hick also proposed that the "death of the ego" is indeed a universal theme across the religions, and he famously made it central to his pluralist philosophy:

> I take the function of religion to be to facilitate what I have been calling salvation/liberation, meaning by this the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to a new centring in the Real – which of course means in practice the Real as known in a particular way within some particular tradition. (Hick, 1995, p. 76)

While Murdoch espoused a naturalist interpretation of religious experience and Hick embraced a more transcendental interpretation, the notion of religious experience as such cannot be gainsaid and it clearly takes many forms:

a) non-specific reports of being caught up in a sense of increased well-being, oneness with the total environment, involving nature or human relationships, and stretching beyond the time-bound limitations we call normal existence, and often accompanied by feelings of compassion, joy, and self-giving;
b) reports of transcendent experience in the specific settings of particular sacred traditions: answers to prayer, experiences of personalities (e.g. Kṛṣṇa, Jesus, Buddha). Here we move towards the more mystical accounts of traditional religion – talk of transcending the ego in alignment with or as part of an eternal realm. In theistic traditions we could cite examples of the love poetry of Christian mystics, where mystical experience is likened to a marriage between the soul and God, and in the unitive traditions there are expressive sayings such as "I am Brahman" by Śaṅkara (7th–8th century) from the advaitic, nondual Hindu tradition.

The standard problem in philosophy of religion is how to classify all this material and to ascertain what cognitive value it might have – in other words, whether or not

1 Hick makes this argument throughout his many books and articles, see for example Hick, 2004.

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it really does tell us something about the nature of that transcendent reality which the religiously committed believes encompasses our world.

For the philosophical sceptic, the great variety of material that exists is evidence of not very much. Human consciousness as the means of awareness at the center of experience might seem real enough, but, the sceptic continues, it is more likely to be simply a function of the brain or of genetic factors. On the other hand, there are strong grounds for thinking that consciousness and brain function are correlative rather than the latter determining the former (Hick, 2010, ch. 8–9). In other words, consciousness is not possible without the brain but that does not mean that consciousness is simply the brain at work. In relation to religious experience, reported impressions and experiences need not be reduced to chemical releases in the brain or delusory forms of awareness.

Given that there is a seeming contradictory mass of reports, the task of distinguishing between all of them being true, some of them being true, or none of them being true, seems an impossible undertaking.

3. Introducing Dialogue

For religious experience to be of any value it needs to be sensitive to a whole range of expressed experiences in many contexts. Therefore, the first challenge is how to take seriously religious experience in the multifaith context.

Each tradition of course asserts the authenticity and truth of its own core experience, each convinced, with Murdoch, that "the word 'truth' is in place" (Lello, 1985, p. 88). This entails that we trust that what is offered through a tradition of experience is worthy of attention. That said, we do not have to trust that everything that has been perpetrated by a tradition is acceptable. Plainly, this cannot be right: critical studies have revealed how structural beliefs through the ages have perpetuated, say, patriarchy, scientific denialism, or religious violence. But in relation to basic experience, it seems reasonable enough to apply "terms of trust" across the board.

But accepting the reports and interpretations of religious experience across traditions in an act of trust does not solve all the problems; in fact, it opens up new ones. This newly established space of trust in religious experience, in the interfaith context, is characterized by pervasive ambiguity, or two shocks:

a) the *Shock of Belonging Together* – different religious experiences at first glance look as though they might well be variations on a generic sense of "transcendent vision and human transformation" – the offer of spiritual awareness plus response of human religious commitment;
b) the *Shock of Differences* – phenomenologically, traditions display characteristically different experiences together with different culturally conceptual architecture.

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In other words, we have a sense of traditions that relate by virtue of a "family resemblance" coupled with incomprehension and strangeness, such that scope for communication between them seems virtually impossible. In these circumstances, what is needed is a model of understanding that reflects this tension at the heart of trust.

The seesaw between emphasizing either differences or relatedness goes up and down. The emphasis at present in both religious studies and theology is on fascination with difference. Yet I would maintain that without the intuition also of a "primal field of reality" (cited in Race, 2001, p. 97), a trust in an underlying relatedness, we might question how we could even talk of difference. At some level, emphasis on pure difference is surely a fall into solipsism.

In face of two shocks, how might we explore this in our new interfaith context? The usual word for doing this is dialogue and it is to this that I now turn, and offer four principles for consideration: (1) affirmation of respect for the other, (2) expectation of insight from the other, (3) epistemological modesty alongside the other, (4) identity in proportion to relationship with the other.

Dialogue can and does proceed of course anywhere at any time. Yet a process is involved, one that assumes individuals and communities truly viewing one another as in some sense mutually accountable – not only as citizens and communities in wider society but also religiously. Some might think such mutuality an unnecessary imposition on the free exchange of religious ideas, proposals, and options. This would be to misperceive the meaning of dialogue. Mutual accountability signals a desire that participants learn from one another, and involves a person in a process of:

- Level One: Learning about the other
- Level Two: Learning with the other
- Level Three: Learning through the other.

In order to elucidate this further, let me now outline a processive model for dialogue, by way of an extended comment on each of these three levels.

4. Level One – Learning About

All religions are founded on a basic religious vision which is glimpsed in experience. This vision may be focused in a book, a person, sacred stories, or nature. In turn, the spiritual practices and beliefs of a tradition exist to re-present that basic vision for different times and places. The aim is to reproduce the evocative awareness of living in the presence of what we call generically "transcendent reality." In dialogue we want to learn *about* the reality and meaning of religious experiences.

Learning *about* the other is not simply a matter of acquiring textbook knowledge. At Level One, commitments, emotional attachments, openness, curiosities, etc. also become manifest. This was evident in one example of dialogue between a Jewish rabbi and a Jain monk. Rabbi Rami Mark Shapiro recalls being brought up sharp by the strangeness to him of his Jain counterpart:

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> A Jain monk was explaining that in his tradition the soul is fundamentally independent and on its own; there is no union with God or connection with other beings. Those of us in attendance did our best to rework what the monk was saying so that it more closely matched our own teachings about unity and unification. But try as we might the integrity of our dialogue refused to permit us to pretend to some agreement that was not in fact there. As this point dawned on me I began to laugh. … I laughed as an expression of "something awakening." I laughed as the idol of a false unity was toppled and the wonder of diversity was affirmed. I laughed with joy at our different paths and the fundamental pathlessness of Truth. (Shapiro, 1989, p. 36)

Two points emerge for me from this account: (1) the forlornness of trying to reinterpret the unfamiliar in terms familiar from one's own tradition, and (2) the arresting phrase "pathlessness of Truth" captures an insight that the reality or truth to which religious consciousness points lies beyond explanations and theologies. Shapiro expands further:

> regardless of Jainism and Judaism, regardless of sutras and scriptures, regardless of all the words spent on explaining our differences – there was in fact common ground: the here and now dialogue and sharing that we were involved in made a greater statement of Truth than any doctrine we might take up and examine. There was something in the act of listening, of speaking, of taking the other to heart that opened my heart to ineffable wonder. (Shapiro, 1989, p. 36)

The telling term here is "ineffable wonder." Dialogue for Shapiro had become a defining matrix of truth and not simply the name for a process of encounter. The awakening to "ineffable wonder" and "pathlessness of truth" represents a transformation of consciousness and transports the dialogue to a new level. Once we realize that all traditions recognize the inadequacy of human language in describing ultimate truth, we have become open to the possibility of religious truth in different religious guises.

The question arises: do interpreted religious experiences stem from a common source? We are not able to demonstrate this without reservation, for in order to say they spring from the same source one would have to demonstrate that they exhibit sufficient overlap in their contents, and this is not readily obvious. However, Perry Schmidt-Leukel has made a significant contribution in this discussion through his fractal observations/theory regarding the phenomenology of religious experience. Basically, the theory states that while religions appear to be constellations of experiences and explanations on the surface incommensurable with each other, this does not mean that there are no compatibilities. Analysis shows that the major core experience of one tradition may be reflected in others as a kind of minor key, in varying degrees, and across traditions which seem at first sight wholly incompatible.[2] This

2 See the multireligious exploration of a fractal interpretation of religious diversity in Race & Knitter, 2019, pp. 3–22, 177–193.

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observation of course is to be expected if the family resemblance theory between religions mentioned above has validity.

My example of Jain-Jewish encounter at the dialogical level of "learning about" one another demonstrates that there are characteristic Jain and Jewish experiences, yet how to make sense of the variety of experiences within an overall religious account remains an open question. Turning to Level Two deepens this question.

5. Level Two – Learning With

As dialogue progresses, we achieve a state of "parallel acceptance." The religious experience of the other has demonstrated its worth and we want to know what it is we might learn from one another that is beyond objectivization of the other. This in turn triggers a search for any "structural comparability" between traditions as fields of experience.

Let me cite one example of "structural comparability" by way of illustration. Following two years of prolonged dialogical listening and exchange, members of the St. Benedict's Monastery Snowmass (Colorado, USA) monastic dialogue group involving varying traditions – Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Islamic, Native American as well as Russian Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic Christian – consolidated their learning into "Eight points of agreement." Although they were published first as a simple list, I arrange them here in diagrammatic form in a bid to sharpen a structural common cycle of religious life between them:

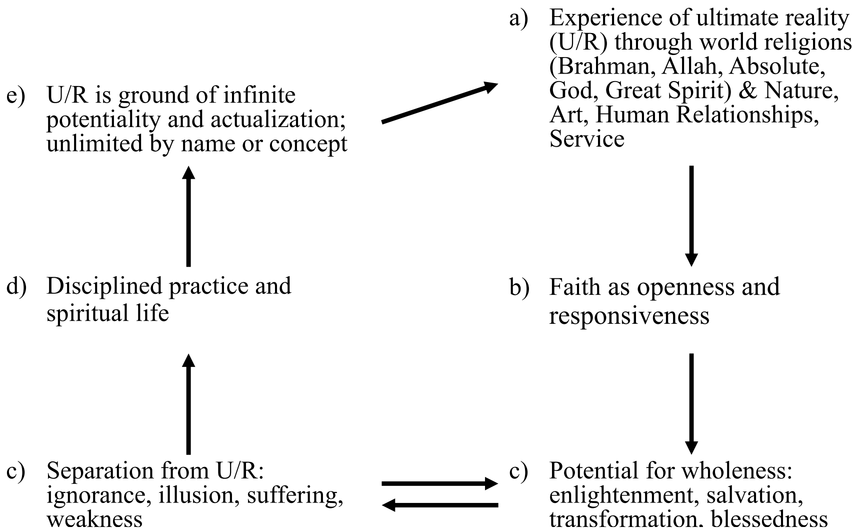

Fig. 1: Structural common cycle of religious life

This diagram illustrates one way of arranging a structural cycle of religious life and can be described following the arrows clockwise a) to e):

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a) The experience of ultimate reality is generated by virtue of the human awareness of living in an environment which is capable of being responded to either naturalistically or religiously.
b) Our access to transcendence is through human openness realized as faith, which is, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) observed, “a global human quality” (Smith, 1980, p. 171). Faith is the human capacity, again as Smith said, “to feel, to know, to live at more than a mundane level and in relation to transcendence” (Smith, 1980, pp. 113–114).
c) In light of the experience of transcendence through faith, we realize that “salvation/liberation” involves a struggle between negative and positive pulls as we seek goals in life.
d) The struggle is entered into and potentially resolved through a disciplined practice and spiritual life.
e) Religious awareness leads us to deepen our sense that ultimate reality is infinitely richer than one person’s or one tradition’s grasp of it.

In dialogical terms, we have moved from learning *about* the other to valuing the other as a partner, comparable in the sense of both pursuing “transcendent vision and human transformation,” in other words, to learning *with* or *alongside* different pathways. Yet, again, as in Level One, there is the reflective business of discerning what holds us together and what keeps us apart as human beings committed to the religious quest.

The Snowmass experiment does not assume that the representatives of the traditions are experiencing or reporting the same phenomenon. But it led Thomas Keating (1923–2018), the initiator of the dialogue, to ask:

> Are there truths on which the religions of the world are in substantial agreement? Having listened to the masters of other traditions, I am convinced that underlying the particular conceptual frames of reference is a unity that has never been sufficiently grasped. (Keating, 1989, p. 23)

Never been sufficiently grasped! If this is a foretaste of transcendental unity, it will be one based on the experience of dialogue itself. Moreover, it will not be a unity of each “experiencing the same experience” yet reporting it simply using different words. But there are grounds for speculating that the fruits of the Snowmass dialogue make a *prima facie* case for transcendental interreligious unity.

What emerges for me from the Snowmass report is that it suggests the need for a distinction between, on the one hand, ultimate reality as the ground of “infinite potentiality and actualization” and, on the other hand, the named Gods or Sacred/Divine principles – Allāh, God, Absolute, Great Spirit, etc. of the traditions. This is a crucial distinction in all mystical literature and in all traditions. From it, the next question follows: how then does the mystery of ultimate reality relate to any image of God glimpsed through humanly experienced means? The answer is usually given via a concept of revelation or realization. But revelation is a matter of creative and

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voluntary receptivity in human experience, with all its limitations and colorings. Once this non-coercive aspect about the notion of revelation/realization is taken seriously, it allows for variety and plurality in the naming of ultimate reality.

We require a theory that does justice both to the ineffability, the beyond-assertion-or-denial character of ultimate reality, and to the variously named ideas of ultimate reality arising from that which is experienced, and then affirmed and shared through dialogue. Without both of these elements, we end in a view that seems unable to do justice to the dialogical experience itself. The Snowmass experiment brings this out into the open. The religious worlds are in some sense parallel worlds, but once we have accepted the religious authenticity of the different religious apprehensions at the heart of the parallel worlds, we become dissatisfied with stagnant parallelism. So the further question arises: is it possible to move beyond even this parallelism in dialogue?

6. Level Three – Learning Through

Again, Level Three is best illustrated with an example. In the dialogue between Rosemary Radford Ruether (Christian, 1936–2022) and Rita Gross (Buddhist, 1943–2015), Ruether outlines what she learned centrally from Buddhism:

> The Buddhist focus on letting go of the ego is more a recognition, on a deeply insightful level, of one's own contingency and interconnection with all things. … This acceptance of both the value and the transience of the self allows us to be awakened to a deep sense of kinship with and compassion for all the other transient beings with which we are interconnected. (Gross & Ruether, 2001, p. 152)

She contrasts this with a standard Christian substantialist view that fears the loss of self and confuses selflessness with an attack on self-esteem. But it is in relation to the concept of God that Ruether's remarks strike a more challenging note:

> Whatever I call God is not some ontological being, some ultimate Mind, existing invisibly in a disembodied form beyond the world. Rather, what exists is this very creativity of inter-dependent co-arising, out of which all the inter-related phenomena of contingently existing reality burgeon forth and co-exist with each other, returning ultimately into the Void, to arise in new forms. (Gross & Ruether, 2001, p. 151)

In light of these kinds of reflection we might ask: what prevents Ruether from becoming a Buddhist? What she affirms certainly seems closer to Buddhism than to classical theism. However, what Ruether is mainly objecting to in classical theism is a certain caricature of God as a super-person, residing externally to the world and intervening in it from time to time in order to adjust the flow of events. In fact, most responsible Christian theologians have long surrendered that caricature, if they ever

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held it in the first place. But it has to be said that classical theism finds it hard to shake off all of the caricature in Ruether's radical fashion.

So what can we say about this kind of learning through Buddhism, in Ruether's case? Two points can be made, briefly, that keep her recognizably Christian:

First, in the Christian-Buddhist conversation between Roger Haight (Christian) and Paul Knitter (a self-confessed dual-belonger, but Buddhist for this purpose) it became clear that even orthodox Christian belief could resonate with Buddhist belief in non-dualism. The dialoguers both celebrated the notion of God as specified by Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274): "Aquinas's notion of God is that of 'Being Itself' that is empty of 'any limiting form … pure energy with no definition … nothing … pure emptiness that is not negative but unimaginably creative dynamism and vitality … God the within of all finite being …" (Knitter & Haight, 2015, p. 94). Ruether's valuing of the Buddhist "creativity of inter-dependent co-arising" would surely be at home with Aquinas on this crucial affirmation of the "meaning" of God.

Second, although the languages of Buddhist and Christian vision might seem far apart, this is no reason for imagining that only an either-or choice remains between them. As Schmidt-Leukel has said: "I suggest that neither the similarities nor the differences between Buddhism and Christianity can be neatly segregated. There are no well-demarcated areas of identical assertions on the one side and clear-cut differences on the other" (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005, p. 205). Schmidt-Leukel goes further: it may be that the basic experiences at the heart of both traditions do indeed spring from a supreme reality that forms the ultimate concern of both traditions:

> There can be forms of existence in relation to the Ultimate that are different but nevertheless equally valid as different expressions of salvation/liberation. This can be so in view of the fact that this relation always concerns the existence of finite human beings, whereas the only all-encompassing reality is not found in any religious doctrine or narrative but is the infinite ultimate reality itself, always exceeding that which can be caught in our conceptual webs. (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005, p. 205)

So Ruether can still be a Christian, but with absorbed dimensions of Buddhism now as part of her spiritual quest. This is a case of learning through the other.

7. Conclusion

How does this add up in terms of dialogue, both as a process of interaction between people at the level of religious experience and even as a new way of approaching questions of religious truth? For me, it leads inescapably to a pluralist-type view, that is, one which is inductively built up in the following steps:

a) Trusting our religious experience is a virtue that is shared by all traditions.
b) Dialogue between people, embracing and acting on different religious experiences, is a process of learning *about*, *with*, and *through* the other.

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c) The distinction between the ineffability of ultimate reality and its awareness in concrete forms accounts for both the "resonance" and the "strangeness" existing between experienced religious commitments as these are played out in dialogue.
d) Religious experiences are shaped by conceptual histories and social/political contexts and are therefore refractions in time and space of the hidden common ground or primal field within which all reality is to be approached and interpreted.

Schmidt-Leukel's contributions to this picture have been substantial, creative, rigorous, and convincing, especially in the area of epistemology, spelling out how sameness and difference might be reconciled in relation to the ineffable or transcategorial (to use Hick's term) nature of ultimate reality (see Schmidt-Leukel, 2023). My aim here has been to describe how this is not simply an exercise in abstracted theology but arises from the dynamics shaping the processes of interreligious dialogue.

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