# Dreams fulfilled: The pluralism of religious ends

by S. Mark Heim in the January 17, 2001 issue

Imagine for a moment that we meet an angelic visitor who can tell us the future, and we ask whether some person we know will be "saved." Suppose our visitor says, "No, she will not be saved; instead she is going to get everything she truly wants." Suppose, on the other hand, that our visitor says, "Yes, she will be saved, though she will never come to know Christ or have communion with the triune God."

If we are Christians, both of these predictions may seem a bit odd. They point up an ambiguity in our use of *salvation*. We use the word as if it could refer to only one thing, containing all possible good, and as if there could be only one alternative to it, completely evil. Salvation as a Christian term, referring to a concretely Christian hope, is thoroughly blurred with the notion of some general positive possibility. But not all religions share the concept of salvation, nor would they necessarily find salvation all that attractive.

Both extreme liberal and extreme conservative theologies agree that there is and can be only one religious end, one actual religious fulfillment. They then fight fiercely over the means to that end: Is there one way or many ways? The dogmatic pluralist believes that the particularities of all religions are insignificant. The dogmatic exclusivist believes that the particularities of all religions but one are insignificant. There are good reasons to think that both these positions are mistaken.

It is hard to see how we can take religions seriously and at the same time regard all the distinctive qualities that are precious to each as essentially unimportant in terms of religious fulfillment. Religious traditions agree that the ends they seek are closely linked with the distinctive ways of life that they prescribe. We are often told that it is important to study traditions in their unique texture, to understand them on their own terms. But it is hard to see why that should be so if we already know in advance that specific differences do not correspond to any variation in religious outcomes.

Is there a perspective that honors the distinctive testimony of the various faith traditions as religiously significant? Are there conditions under which various believers' accounts of their faiths might be extensively and simultaneously valid? If we can give a positive answer to these questions, then we can affirm the various religious traditions in a much more concrete sense than either liberal or conservative theologians allow.

The key to gaining such a perspective is recognizing that religious paths may in fact lead people to the distinctively varied states that they advertise. If different religious practices and beliefs aim at and constitute distinct conditions of human fulfillment, then a very high proportion of what each tradition affirms may be true and valid in very much the terms that the tradition claims. This may be so even if deep conflict remains between the religions regarding priorities, background beliefs and ultimate metaphysical reality.

Two religious ends may represent two human states that no one person can inhabit at the same time. But there is no contradiction in two different persons simultaneously attaining the two ends. Adherents of different religious traditions may be able to recognize the reality of both ends, though they are not able to agree on the explanation of how and why the two ends exist or on the priority they should be given. On these terms, salvation (the Christian end) may differ not only from conditions humans generally regard as evil or destructive but also from those that specific religious traditions regard as most desirable and ultimate. We can avoid the stale deadlock of the instrumental question over what will get you there—"One way or many ways?"—by asking with real openness, "Way to what?"

Gandhi wrote, "Religions are different roads converging to the same point," and asked, "What does it matter if we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarreling?" (Actually, it is all too easy to quarrel even given exactly this assumption, as bitter conflict within a single religion shows.) But I ask, "What if religions are paths to different ends that they each value supremely? Why should we object?"

A famous verse of the Bhagavad Gita is often quoted on the presumption that it indicates the identical goal of all religions: "Howsoever people approach Me, even so do I welcome them, for the paths people take from every side are Mine." But Krishna's declaration in the voice of supreme Brahman would seem to be an equally good charter for a diversity of religious ends, affirming that people will receive

different receptions corresponding to their different approaches to ultimate reality. If human beings form their ultimate desires freely from among many options, and then through devotion and practice are able to see those desires actually realized, there is no reason to complain about the process but ample room to differ over which end we should seek. Pluralism looks real. The best explanation for this appearance is that it is real.

Salvation is communion with God and God's creatures through Christ Jesus. It is the Christian religious end, we might say. This does not mean that there are not other religious ends, quite real ones. It only means that Christians believe that God has offered greater, more inclusive gifts. Christians believe that salvation, the God who offers it, the relations it presupposes and its priority in divine purpose are objectively real. But salvation has to be accepted. It has to be evaluatively true, or it is not realized. Other religious traditions can legitimately take the same reciprocal view of their own religious aim: it is real and supreme, but it can be realized only by those who accept it as so.

A religious end or aim is defined by a set of practices, images, stories and concepts which has three characteristics. First, the set provides material for a thorough pattern of life. It provides a framework that encompasses all the features of life, practical and sublime, current and future. Second, at least some of the elements in the set are understood to be constitutive of a final human fulfillment and/or to be the sole means of achieving that fulfillment. For instance, for Christians, there is a texture of such elements making reference to Jesus Christ. Relation with Christ is believed to be integral to the deepest human fulfillment itself.

Some Buddhists may maintain that all the teachings and instruments used to follow the dharma way are ultimately dispensable, even the eightfold path itself. But they can only be discarded after use, and nothing else is fit to serve the same purpose. One may pass beyond them, but everyone must pass through them.

Third, for any individual or community the religious pattern is in practice exclusive of at least some alternative options. Living in accord with the set of stories and practices necessarily involves choices. "The ascetic life leads to peace" and "The sensual life leads to joy" may both be true reports. But we can practice one pattern comprehensively only at the expense of the other. For our purposes it makes no difference that some may claim that a combined practice of asceticism/sensuality will lead to peace *and* joy. This is itself a practice which, if followed, rules out either

the ascetic path or the sensual path in its particularity.

Some fulfillments may be similar enough that the paths associated with them reinforce each other to some degree, as typing and piano playing may both train the fingers. Some ends may simply pose no direct obstacle, one to the other, save the intrinsic division of finite effort needed to pursue both—like marathon running and single parenthood.

Yet other ends are so sharply divergent that a decisive step in the direction of one is a move away from the other: for example, strict nonviolence and participation in armed revolution. It is obvious that many goods or secondary goals may overlap on the paths to different religious realizations. Discipline is a quality essential to learning the piano or a new language. It is connected with both these different ends, but it is not identical with either of them. If discipline itself were the primary aim, then music or a language would themselves become instrumental means and not ends at all. What for some is an instrument is for others an end.

There is an interesting dynamic balance in the relation of religious ends. The more similar the aims, the more sharply contention arises over whether one path should supersede another. If the aims are nearly identical, this tendency is very powerful. To take a trivial example: If the end in view is word processing, few would not take sides between computers and typewriters as the more adequate tools. On the other hand, the more incommensurable religious ends appear, the less they contend for the same space. Losing weight and learning Spanish are separate aims with distinct requirements. Because they have less concretely in common, there is a proportionally smaller impetus to substitute one for the other. These dynamics are key elements in understanding religious conflict and the possibilities for mutual understanding.

It is certainly possible to fail to actualize any religious end. Instead of achieving one among alternative fulfillments, a person may attain none at all. There are human conditions, whether contemporary or eschatological or both, that no valid religious view seeks as its final end or regards as consistent with its end. Such would be states of perennial suffering, thorough ignorance, or malicious destructiveness toward self or others. On this point there is ample room for common cause among the faiths, for spiritual and practical cooperation to overcome these conditions, even from differing perspectives. There is an enormous difference between a lack of religious fulfillment of any description and the achievement of *some* religious

fulfillment.

In its simplest form, the hypothesis of multiple religious ends is not committed to any particular metaphysical view. Obviously, the universe does have some ultimate character or order. One or more of the religions may in fact describe that order more accurately than others. Each faith's conception and pursuit of its end is inextricably bound up with these ultimate empirical questions. The answers determine which religion or religions, if any, provide the ultimate and more inclusive framework for the truths in others.

Though we cannot now resolve the differences among religions at this level, religions may prove able to reciprocally recognize the actuality of multiple religious ends. The hypothesis affirms the reality of different experiential states of religious fulfillment. It does not require that all the elements a tradition associates with attainment of that state are empirically true. There is no logical reason why a universe with a single religious ultimate might not also encompass a variety of religious ends. The variety could arise because some people establish a primary religious relationship to something other than the religious ultimate, or because there are distinctly different ways to relate to that ultimate, or for both reasons.

Recognition of diverse religious ends is the condition for recognition of the decisive significance of our religious choices and development, a significance that the particularistic witness of the individual religions collectively affirms. We can expect a fulfillment in line with the "one and only" path that leads us to it. There is no cogent reason to assume that all people—the vast majority against their prior conditioning and desires—will experience only one among these religious ends or some undefined condition beyond any of them. Whether in an eschatological future or here and now, our conditions of religious fulfillment are significantly constituted by the expectations, relations, images and practices that we bring to them.

The lives that lead to the rewards of a Buddhist monastic, a Muslim imam, a Hindu brahmin priest or a Baptist deacon have unique textures. It is not hard to note generic similarities in these cases: textual devotion, communal structures, ritual practices. But for any person who wishes to attain a religious fulfillment, generic elements alone are entirely insufficient. The person will need particular texts, a specific community, discrete rituals.

In the characteristic religious dialectic, as we progress toward the realization of our aim, we at the same time develop an ever deeper and clearer desire for that end itself above all others. Religious consummation is the entrance into a state of fulfillment by one whose aspiration has been so tuned and shaped by particular anticipations of that state, and by anticipatory participation in aspects of that state, that this end represents the perfect marriage of desire and actuality. It is a dream come true for one whose dream has been tuned to the specific desire for that particular gift and no other. In other words, religious ends are not extrinsic awards granted for unrelated performances—like trips to Hawaii won in lotteries. To take a Buddhist example, no one is unhappy "in" nirvana or arrives at it unready. This is because the state of cessation of desire is an achievement that life on the right path makes possible. The end is not "enjoyed" until a person becomes what the path to the end makes her or him. The way and the end are one.

We can certainly point to great figures in varied religious traditions who exhibit some common moral and spiritual qualities. But we can hardly deny the different textures of these achievements. If our selected devotees all strike us as having a claim to be good people, it still appears that one would have to choose between one way of being good and another. It is also clear that people in various traditions pursue and claim to participate in religious attainments other than or in addition to moral transformation.

There are, of course, interesting cases in which religious traditions are combined—cases in which people may follow both Buddhist and Confucian paths, for instance. This only reinforces the point we have been making: Were they not exclusive paths to unique ends, there would be no need to follow two ways, since the same range of ends could be achieved in either one alone. Both are practiced because each constitutes a unique pattern, yielding distinct benefits, benefits in this case regarded as compatible and complementary.

If we give "religious end" an abstract meaning—the achievement of some religious fulfillment among several possible alternatives and/or the use of religion to serve some generic social role—then we can say that many if not all paths truly achieve religious ends. There is an "any way" sign at most forks on the religious journey. Each road will get you to a real destination—but not the same destination. If on the other hand "religious end" is a religious fulfillment of some determinate nature, as described by one of the traditions, then it is clear that it is constituted by certain features to the exclusion of others. There is an "only way" sign at many turnings on

the religious journey.

In either case we must acknowledge that all these paths link with each other, that crossover travel is a real possibility. At most points a “two-way traffic” sign is appropriate. Roads can bear travelers over the same ground toward different destinations, whether those travelers pass in opposite directions or go side by side for this overlapping leg of their trip.

This hypothesis of multiple religious ends offers the most coherent foundation to ground three elements I believe are essential for an effective understanding of religious pluralism, even if they are ordinarily thought of as incompatible. The first element is the religious significance of careful study of faith traditions in their particularity. The second is the recognition of distinctive and effective religious truth in other religions, truth that contrasts with that of my own faith. The third is the validity of witness on the part of any one faith tradition to its “one and only” quality, and indeed to the superiority of its end in relation to others. An authentic religious pluralism acknowledges a diversity of religious ends. This implies that religious witness is also in order. Where witness can have no meaning, it is doubtful that dialogue does either.

This approach shifts the focus away from flat claims of truth and falsehood and toward concrete religious alternatives. We ask not “Which religion alone is true?” but “What end is most ultimate, even if many are real?” and “Which life will I hope to realize?”

Let us presume for the moment that the following ends are actual possibilities: the cessation of self, the realization of an absolute single self which is “nondual,” and communion with the triune God. These are real human possibilities, whose attainment depends significantly on the practice and aspiration of the person who attains them. The ends are not identical, and in reaching one we will not automatically attain others. That is, in approaching religious differences emphasis falls on the contrast of their positive ends.

As a Christian, it appears to me to make perfectly good sense to say two kinds of things. First, we may say that another religion is a true and valid path to the religious fulfillment it seeks. We may agree with the Dalai Lama, for instance, when he says, “Liberation in which ‘a mind that understands the sphere of reality annihilates all defilements in the sphere of reality’ is a state that only Buddhists can

accomplish. This kind of moksha or nirvana is only explained in the Buddhist scriptures, and is achieved only through Buddhist practice." There is no way to the Buddhist end but the Buddhist way.

Second, we may say what the Book of Acts says of Jesus Christ, that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). There is a relation with God and other creatures made possible in Christ that can be realized only in communion with Christ.

On these terms, each tradition can acknowledge the reality of the religious end sought by the other, in terms largely consistent with those used by that tradition itself. After describing the Buddhist end, the Dalai Lama says, "According to certain religions, however, salvation is a place, a beautiful paradise, like a peaceful valley. To attain such a state as this, to achieve such a state of moksha, does not require the practice of emptiness, the understanding of reality. In Buddhism itself, we believe that through the accumulation of merit one can obtain rebirth in heavenly paradises . . ." The Christian end, then, is something like one of the pleasant interludes that Buddhists may enjoy between births as a reward for merit on their path toward true release. As a kind of mirror image, a Christian might say that Buddhists do not attain Christian salvation, as their aim does not lead to that personal relationship with God which is salvation. Instead they attain peace, cessation of all desire and emptiness of self. The Buddhist end is then something like a transitory mystical state that Christians might experience in the course of their path toward personal communion with God.

These are classically inclusivist views, which interpret other faiths ultimately in the categories of the home religion. But each recognizes the distinctive reality of the other's religious end, and so recognizes a diversity of religious ends. Each regards the other's ultimate as penultimate, leaving open the further possibility of transformation. There is no necessary contradiction in these two accounts of possible human ends, though there is a decisive divergence in their evaluative frameworks for these ends, and there are contradictions in the metaphysical assumptions associated with each framework. Both accounts could be flatly wrong. But there is no logical reason that both cannot be descriptively correct. In fact, if one of the writer's characterizations is correct, it implies a very substantial measure of truth in the other. Accepting different religious ends allows for mutual recognition of extensive concrete substantive truth in another tradition. Ironically, this degree of

mutual agreement about particulars is ruled out by those who insist that the Buddhist end and the Christian one must be the same.

As I have noted, the hypothesis of multiple religious ends is not committed to any particular view of the religious ultimate. My interest in the hypothesis is grounded in part in the way that it validates particularistic Christian confession, but as such the hypothesis also supports those in other religious traditions who are committed to the distinctive truth of their confession. I believe that the true order for religious diversity is rooted in the triune God of Christian confession. In my next article I will explore this explicitly Christian way of grounding the variety of religious ends.