Multiple Religious Belonging **Open Access**

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The Holy Versus the Sacred: Offering a Little Trouble for a Multiple Religious Belonging

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Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to illustrate a difficulty which may arise in the attempt to simultaneously identify with more than one religious tradition. Drawing upon the philosophical insights of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, I demonstrate how some of the most cardinal themes in one faith or theological perspective may set itself against the central notions of another. Along the way, Kierkegaard, the perennial philosophy, process theology, and even Frank Herbert's science fiction classic *Dune* are woven into the discussion.

Keywords: Theology, philosophy of religion, multiple religious belonging, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, perennial philosophy

1 Introduction: Making things difficult

I happily recall the first time I read Frank Herbert's visionary science fiction masterpiece, *Dune*. One thing that immediately appealed to me were the syncretic and hybrid forms of religion adhered to by the denizens of the far future. With names like Zensunni Wanderers, Mahayana Christianity, and Buddislamic, I imagined not so much tightly bounded sects with their respective dogmas, but loose and fluid marriages born out of the many long centuries of persistent cross-cultural exposure and communication.[1] In Herbert's universe, the many thousands of years from the present is dotted with the periodic spiritual revolution, ecumenical movement, and charismatic personality—not to mention the occasional pressing of a dogma and even a few savage persecutions (there is mention of "Jihads" long before and just after the events of *Dune*). But in my rather idealistic teenage mind, one in the thrall of a spiritual awakening, the titles of such intriguing denominations in *Dune* must largely have been the outcome of a slow and mature weaning of genuine insight from what is best and lasting in our collective religious inheritance.

Over the past eleven years of teaching World Religions and the Humanities in midtown Manhattan, I have occasionally entertained the thought that I am contributing to such a future—minus, hopefully, the political machinations and brutal holy wars which might even be closer to the real meaning of Herbert's novels. I have watched Christian students purchase a copy of the *Tao Te Ching* the day after handing in their final exams, and dedicated Muslims seek after *zendos* in order to begin *zazen* or Zen Buddhist meditation. Perhaps when the survivors of our race are strewn about the galaxies in some distant epoch our present denominations will have fused into the richly suggestive ones of *Dune*. But until then, and beside the vast majority of human beings who will continue to practice a single religion (and the much smaller number

1 These are outlined in the second appendix found in the back of the novel (500-508) and the glossary or "Terminology of the imperium" (513-533).

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who will embrace secularism), we may simply have on earth a series of multiple religious "belongings" in which an individual may practice elements of, say, Christianity and some form of Hinduism, Judaism and Confucianism. In this way, religious pluralism does not have to simply exist *between* ourselves, but *within* each of us—if something like this is not already the case for those living in the major cosmopolitan centers of this increasingly small planet.

There is a wonderful scene in one of Soren Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works wherein the narrator, Johannes Climacus, smokes down a cigar in a café and ruminates over how convenient everything has become in the late modern world. Lighting up another cigar, he decides to make things just a little more difficult for his contemporaries.[2] Given that this narrative is delivered in one of the sharpest and most influential polemics against the attempt to assimilate Christianity within the fashionable ideas of the day, it is safe to claim that Climacus has been somewhat successful in his plans.

My mission throughout the pages which follow is to continue in this Kierkegaardian (or Climacian) vein of making things more difficult for the desire to play too fast and loose with religion—although I focus not upon the subsuming of faith into the abstractions of philosophical idealism (Kierkegaard's main target) but on those who seek to live out a commitment to more than one faith at the same time. And my own penchant for making trouble draws upon a few Jewish thinkers who, heavily influenced by Kierkegaard, present a unique challenge of their own.

Since the combinations of religious identity are numerous, I do not pretend to address all or even most of them. My essential argument is that in the confrontation or meeting of different theological trajectories, one may occasionally demonstrate a negative, a voice of protest, a "no" to the others.

My strategy is, first, to outline one influential attempt to accord validity to all of the major religions of the world, a philosophy which may also be used to justify belonging to more than one faith. Second, I introduce another theological direction which, present within my own religious and cultural heritage, sets itself in opposition to the presuppositions of the attempt described in the section prior. Third, after unpacking the fuller implications of this second religious sensibility and briefly engaging another theological model, I conclude.

Much of this essay reflects the stages of my own spiritual and philosophical development. There may be limitations, one might argue, to such a personal approach. To which it may be replied that in matters of the spirit, the personal can be universal in relevance. If I can in any way contribute to the dialogue of a mutual religious belonging, even by way of offering a little trouble, then any larger purpose of mine will have been accomplished.

2 Non-duality

One way to justify belonging to multiple religions is to conceive of them as leading toward the same metaphysical and moral truth. And just as peering out of many windows in one's home may increase our appreciation and view of the sunrise, so partaking in these different religions may serve to reinforce our grasp of the divine.

This is a common strategy for many reflective spiritual temperaments, particularly for those with a proclivity toward the forms of religion which push beyond a literal interpretation of their inherited religious narratives. Surveying the world's scriptures, one sees commandments and chosen peoples, miracles and revelations. And since many of these elements differ among religions (was Jesus crucified and resurrected, as in Christianity, or did he ascend to the heavens unscathed by the cross, as in Islam?), taking such narratives on their surface means facing rival and contradictory claims. It is certainly difficult to appreciate let alone *belong* to different religions on this basis. But what if our inherited narratives and scriptures are parables to be decoded rather than read literally? Allegorical interpretations of scripture are a cardinal part of many contemplative and mystical traditions. States the author of the *Zohar*, a classic text of Jewish mysticism: "Woe to the human being who says that Torah presents mere stories and ordinary words! If so, we could compose a Torah right now with ordinary words and better than all of them!"[3]

2 This narrative is found in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, 186.
3 *Zohar*, 43.

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And what if the scriptures allude not to a volitional being who operates in history but an Absolute toward which we may commune—or even a source to which we may return? Another essential theme found in numerous schools of mysticism is a non-personal ultimate reality instead of a volitional and supernatural deity. The characteristics of playful Krishna and the austere Lawgiver of Exodus may contrast (or do they?), but what if they are just different forms of a more basic divine reality, one devoid of such qualities? A favorite model of this kind of religious thought is *Advaita Vedanta*—the most popular of the philosophical commentaries on the Hindu *Upanishads*. Here the ultimate reality is *nirguna brahman*—a transcendental and formless ground from which all worldly phenomena, planets and suns, trees and humans, are a manifestation. The deities and supernatural beings of the theistic traditions are *saguna brahman*: the ultimate reality *with* form, or the myriad masks worn by the Absolute in order to provide a face for the pious to prostrate before. The contemplative is to ascend beyond (or to descend beneath) such personal supernatural beings in order to realize that his or her true self is nothing other than the Self, the source that gestates and encompasses all that is.[4]

Advaita Vedanta fits very nicely into a theological scheme known as the *perennial philosophy*: the idea that all of existence is the manifestation of the One; that there is a layer of our psyche which is already part of this divine ground, and that the meaning of the spiritual life is to uncover this primordial unity. Since many high forms of religious life possess this interior and esoteric dimension according to perennialism, it is conceivable that one can simultaneously draw sustenance from, say, Taoism and Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. It is for this reason that Aldous Huxley's gracefully annotated *The Perennial Philosophy* can include quotations from representatives of all the major religions East and West.

An alternative to the Huxleyan version of perennialism is that of the Traditionalists, a group of philosophical theologians for whom an official initiation into a religious lineage is an indispensable condition. To unpack a key distinction from the German-Swiss thinker Frithjof Schuon, perhaps the central figure of this movement, the *exoteric* aspect of religion—the surface rights, rituals and dogmas—are an essential vehicle toward, and expression of, its *esoteric* or mystical and contemplative core. Traditionalists sometimes speak of Huxley's more eclectic approach—one that borrows the spiritual insights of all religions minus their outward observances—as a "counterfeit" form of perennialism.[5] Even then, the author of *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* demonstrated a multiple religious belonging of his own: Schuon was an adherent of Sufi Islam who participated in the rituals of the Native Americans.

A good part of the appeal of perennialism and similar religious philosophies is their focus beyond supernatural deities and historical revelations. It is attractive to think of the divine as not situated outside us (at least not completely), but as reachable through our interior, and even as identified with our fundamental nature when our minds are unsullied by the petty neuroses and selfish thought-habits of the small "I" or ego. The fourteenth century German mystic Meister Eckhart, who wrote of the godhead as found in the ground of the soul, is featured quite prominantly in Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*. And to return to the most influential school of *Vedanta*, *Advaita* means "non-dual." That one can find a similar sentiment in numerous other religions is the grain of truth in this kind of theological perspective, and the evidence for some—including the present author for many years—that a multiple religious belonging is by no means a difficult endeavor.

3 The self and the other

One of the most formative moments in my undergraduate years occurred when I was corrected on Martin Buber's concept of an I-Thou relation. This is an open and receptive encounter with something in which our entire being is involved, whether it is a tree, a work of art, or another person. Such an approach is to be distinguished from the more mundane, if necessary, I-it relation in which things are approached for their utility. At the end of every full I-Thou relationship according to Buber is the *eternal Thou*, that which can

4 R. Puligandla expresses a good summary of *Advaita Vedanta*. See Puligandla, *Fundamentals of Indian Philosophy*, 227-254.
5 See chapter fifteen in Oldmeadow, *Frithjof Schuon and the Perennial Philosophy*.

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never revert back to an I-it relationship. Given that Buber was a great popularizer of Hasidism, an ecstatic and mystical movement, I began to speak in one of my classes about the capacity of the I to become one with the Thou, as if Buber expresses the same kind of unitary spiritual experience spoken of in many other traditions. The professor, a rabbi, immediately responded that this is something I *wanted* Buber to have said; and that the author of *I and Thou*, although deeply read in such spiritualities, had purposefully and carefully distinguished his own position from them. The truth is that there exists more than one religious sensibility, and not all hold a mystical form of non-duality—the journey of the self inward toward unity with an Absolute—as the apex and goal of the spiritual life.

Returning once more to one of Kierkegaard's most astute theological voices, Johannes Climacus distinguishes between two forms of religiousness: that of religiousness A and B. Religiousness A is the general communion of the self, by way of its interior, with God. In such a spirituality, the eternal is found within the temporal and the worldly, even if hidden, and our access to the divine reality requires no external aid or assistance. Kierkegaard labels this form of religion as one of *immanence*. In religiousness B, the eternal is held as having entered into time at a unique moment in history.[6] This is the main dogma of Christianity: the Incarnation, or what Kierkegaard (again, through Climacus) calls the Absolute Paradox.[7] Compare the sheer *specificity* of this to Huxley's approval of the mystics who "went some way towards liberating Christianity from its unfortunate servitude to historic fact."[8] Situated permanently outside the limits of both our intellect and our intuition, and confounding the efforts of the speculative thinker and mystic alike, such an event may only be approached with all of the risk and humility of faith. Climacus calls this form of religiousness, one which breaks with the immanent and the experiential, that of *transcendence*.

The idea that the true religious life is one in which the self is oriented toward, perhaps awoken by, something external to it—as opposed to unpacking what already lies within—is a common theme of several Jewish thinkers of the previous century. The version of transcendence that would rise among Jewish philosophers, however, would entail not so much our commitment to an article of belief followed by the appropriate kind of behavior, but first and foremost in our direct relationships with others.

If for Buber God is found at the end of every open and vital relationship, Emmanuel Levinas continues along this line, but sharpens it with a few distinctive features. The divine is purely transcendent for the Lithuanian-born French thinker; beyond everything, it leaves intimations of itself only through the faces of other human beings. If Buber was a popularizer of Hasidism before developing his philosophy of dialogue, the thought of Levinas is an infusion of the fiery righteousness of the Hebrew Prophets and the legal imperatives of the Talmud into the Western intellectual tradition. The encounter with other selves, for Levinas, is therefore laden with a heavy moral significance. In each case we find ourselves saddled with an inexhaustible obligation to provide for the individual standing before us, a relationship he labels as "height."[9]

In stark contrast to many contemplative and meditative-type theologies which deem the ego to be an illusion, the thought of Buber and Levinas insists upon a responsible and active "I." A full-blooded self is related to a Thou for Buber. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that the consolidating of an individualized self away from its dispersion in things—a process he calls "separation"—is a necessary and prior condition for our orientation toward the other.[10] In his later thought, the self is already informed, even unsettled, by the presence of other human beings, and even takes form in this state of ethical direction and response.[11]

It is not my purpose here to outline the philosophies of Buber and Levinas in full detail, including the relevant differences between them. I seek only to point out the two aspects of their thought which refuse assimilation into a whole of any kind, whether the conceptual architectonic of the philosopher or the pantheistic unity of the mystic. These are, to summarize, the irreducibility of the responsible self and the goal of the spiritual life as a thrusting forward of our concern to what is invariably other to us.

6 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 555-586.

7 See, for instance, the third chapter in Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*.

8 Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, 52.

9 Levinas, "Transcendence and Height."

10 The notion of "separation" is found in a number of places in *Totality and Infinity.*

11 The most extended presentation of Levinas's later thought is his *Otherwise Than Being; Or Beyond Essence*.

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One of Buber's essential themes is a critique of the ego-transcending or world-transcending character of some spiritual frameworks, that which would nullify either side of the I-Thou relationship.[12] To the Buddha's statement that the creation and dissolution of the world occurs within our consciousness, Buber responds that a true encounter "detaches me from the world in order to relate me to it."[13] Likewise, a great deal of Levinas's authorship is a war against the tendency of philosophers to neuter all that is different or other to the self by reducing all there is into a single conceptual or ontological category. A Levinasian would appreciate the honesty of this passage from the Hindu *Upanishads*: "Fear arises from the other" (an alternative translation: "Where there is duality, there is fear").[14] But whereas the *Advaita Vedantin* would read this as an imperative to overcome all duality between "self" and "other" in order to identify with the One, the Levinasian would take the opposite track and embrace the difficulties and rigors of accepting the existence of what is foreign to ourselves.

Buber and Levinas are individual thinkers who, though influenced by their philosophical predecessors and contemporaries, also drew heavily from the Jewish tradition. Now there are certainly voices and movements in Judaism that would please perennialists and monistic mystics alike.[15] And we must also not ignore the heavy influence of Plato and Aristotle on some of the most influential Jewish thinkers (Philo of Alexandria and Maimonides to name a few). Every religion, in the end, contains pluralities. And yet there are powerful trends within each major religion, tendencies that will not be easily outstripped by the presence of these alternative directions. Judaism possesses a certain preoccupation with the ethical: with the encouragement of an enhanced involvement with the world rather than a release from it, with a pining for social justice, and with the cultivation of proper relationships between human beings. In articulating the worldview of the Hebrew prophets, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes of the "divine pathos"—the passionate concern of God for the human condition in all of its particularities and contingencies, a quality that is in sharp opposition to the impersonal ultimate reality of other traditions.[16] Even the theosophy of the Jewish mystics, the exploration of the inner dynamics of the godhead, has often envisioned a fractured deity for whom we are co-creators and assistants in the quest to heal the divine nature, and thereby perfecting the cosmos (*tikkun olam*, or to repair the world).[17]

It is this aspect of Judaism, one taking a novel shape through the philosophical arguments of Buber, Levinas and others, that has not failed to grab hold of the current author, however non-observant he may be. It is also makes itself felt when juxtaposed with other religions and theological perspectives.

4 Desacralization

Admittedly, it has been a few years since I have practiced *zazen* or Zen Buddhist sitting meditation. Whether I return or not, something in me will always resonate to Zen Oxherding Pictures: those ten pictorial representations of the stages of awareness from our ordinary and deluded mind to that of full-blown enlightenment.[18] The self which pines after truth is depicted as a boy, and the mind—that which gradually frees itself of all impurities as our zen practice increases—is symbolized by the bull. The eighth panel, that of an empty white circle, is something of a climax. Both boy and bull now vanished, it represents a state of consciousness beyond all dualities, one available within all of us.

To be fair, it was never the experience of non-duality alone that I appreciated in Zen Buddhism, but its stress upon suffusing this awareness throughout our day-to-day existence. The most significant

12 Much of this is found in the third section of *I and Thou*.

13 Levinas, *I and Thou*, 141-142.

14 Brihadranayaka Upanishad: I. IV. 2. My first translation is taken from Hiriyanna, *The Essentials of Indian Philosophy*, 22. The second is from Swami Krishnananda, found in the *Divine Life Society* website.

15 Leo Schaya for example, a perennialist Jewish author and disciple of Frithjof Schuon, interprets the central message of the Kabbalah as an ascent of our true self to the One. His major work is *The Central Meaning of the Kabbalah*.

16 Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* in two volumes.

17 See the seventh lecture of Gershom Scholem's classic *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.

18 This is available in Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism*. I have in mind Kaku-an's version of the Oxherding Pictures, introduced by Suzuki on 127-128.

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of the Ten Oxherding pictures, for instance, are its last two panels. While the ninth picture is that of a blossoming nature scene, the tenth is an image of the rotund monk Hotai strolling joyfully through the marketplace, doling out love to everyone he sees. The point here is that neither the world nor the active self are surmounted once and for all in Zen Buddhism; rather, both are restored upon a deeper and more meaningful basis. Indeed, one of the great and defining innovations of Mahayana Buddhism is the place of the *bodhisattva* or Buddhist-savior—both as a moral ideal (our mission to postpone the final nirvana until we save all sentient beings) and as a spiritual being to call upon for assistance. Some scholars have even drawn parallels between Mahayana Buddhism and the other-centered ethics of Levinas.[19]

And yet the realization of non-duality is a fundamental element of Zen Buddhism, even if mitigated by or combined with these other aspects. In a 1970's documentary on Mahayana Buddhism in Japan, host Ronald Eyre asks Yamada Mumon about the connection between Zazen meditation and "having compassion for other creatures." The prominent abbot and Zen master responds: "Sitting in zazen I become nothing and everything becomes nothing. That is to say, I and everything melt into one. So when I see a flower, the flower is 'I'. When I see the moon, the moon is 'I'. All things become 'I'. All things become 'I'. There is no greater love than this."[20] This is an undeniably powerful description of a non-dual awareness.

Roshi Mumon's description of meditative experience, however evocative, violates the I-Thou distinction insisted upon by Buber along with the dimension of *height* outlined by Levinas. For these Jewish thinkers it falls short of the conditions required for a more exacting form of the moral life, even if a certain loving kindness toward others is upheld as a means toward enlightenment. Returning to the tenth of the Oxherding pictures, Hotai's face speaks of a contentment untouched by the contingencies of the world. His love for the common people is a spontaneous outflowing of a liberated consciousness, and not quite the response of a conscience shaken to its core by a transcendent and insatiable demand. To the degree that Hotai's compassion is aimed more toward awakening others to a similar state of non-dual awareness than improving their concrete life circumstances, I am reminded of a few sharp words of Levinas on those who see ecstatic religion as the answer to a materialistic age: "as if the entire spirituality on earth did not reside in the act of nourishing."[21] The key word in this quote is *entire*.

Compassion, or *karuṇā,* and wisdom, or *prajñā,* are held as mutually reinforcing in Mahayana Buddhism.[22] Even if *prajñā* is not a discursive or analytical wisdom but a non-conceptual insight into the interdependence of all things and the illusion of the distinction between subject and object, it is a form of comprehension nonetheless. It is for good reason that scholar Damien Keown argues that Buddhism offers, among other designations, a "cognitive ethics."[23] This is far from the character of our moral relationship to another human being for Levinas, the undergoing of an event which will not let itself be encompassed within *any* form of cognitive totality—intuitive, intellectual or otherwise.

Those mysticisms and contemplative traditions which identify the ultimate reality with our truest or innermost self, are philosophies of radical immanence. The divine here lies within or just around us, and calls for the proper introspection, awakening, or meditative insight in order to disclose itself. It can be argued that Buber's religious philosophy contains aspects of an immanent-type theology, even if refuses a flat pantheism or an otherworldly mysticism. Along with Buber's notion of the spirit as found not *within* but *between* human beings, I have always been impressed by his idea of our correct relationship to the world as one of *hallowing* it—a disclosing of the divine through the mundane, instead of ascending from it directly toward a supernal source or a transcendental ground.[24] The philosophers Charles Hartshorne and William

19 Wing-Cheuk Chan draws upon the phenomenology of Levinas in order to support the beliefs of *Mahanaya* Buddhism (see: Chan, "The Primacy of the Other"). I discuss this article below. Gillian Rose also speaks of Levinas as offering a "*Buddhist* Judaism" (see: Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*). Both authors were brought to my attention by Drew Dalton (see: Dalton, "Desire and the Possibility of Escape").

20 "Zen Buddhism - The Land of the Disappearing Buddha."

21 Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, xiv.

22 Keown, *Buddhist Ethics*, 17; Gowans, "Ethical Thought in Indian Buddhism," 429-452.

23 Keown, *Buddhist Ethics*, 31.

24 For the concept of the spirit as between human beings, see Levinas, *I and Thou*, 89. A graceful presentation of hallowing the world is offered by Buber in chapter two of *The Way of Man According to the Teaching of Hasidism.*

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Reese have gone so far as to label the Jewish philosopher a fellow *panentheist*: one who perceives God as both immanent and transcendent, including and yet extending beyond the empirical universe.[25]

The picture given to us by Levinas, however, is far more stark. The idea of the Absolute as found within nature is called by pejoratively by him the *sacred*, and its capacity to surround and lift us in a state of ecstasy is compared by him to a kind of violence.[26] In closing the gap between the world and the divine, the sacred permits an escape from the task of engaging with the messiness of things. What Levinas calls the *holy*, by contrast, is purely transcendent, and completely "otherwise than being"—to refer to a title of his second major philosophical work.[27] Faintly discernible only through the vulnerable faces of other human beings, it beckons us to a life of moral commitment. It is here, in this distinction, that I find as hard an opposition between two religious visions as I have ever come across.

Between those theologies which lead us toward a union with a transcendental unity and those which intensify our individuality and our responsibility before a transcendent cause or command, there may seem scant hope for a mutual belonging—unless we are trying to invoke a mood of schizophrenia. And it will not help to distinguish between doctrine and practice, as if one can be isolated from the other. From a Levinasian perspective the journey toward a non-dual awareness or an inner awakening is not easily meshed with the most rigorous forms of the ethical life, even when the latter is granted an ancillary role in bringing about the former. Perhaps this is only an issue if both ends of such a mutual belonging purport to send us toward the same Absolute, as in perennialism. What about a philosophy in which two or more divine realities may co-exist, each of which is reachable through separate and complementary means? I have in mind the Deep Religious Pluralism set out by the luminaries of a movement called process theology.[28]

I will spare the reader the details of this rather complex metaphysical system, except to state that it involves two essential features. There is, first, a God who sends suggestions into a perpetually evolving cosmos, a being who prods each and everything that exists, including human selves, to realize its fullest potential. Second, there is a ubiquitous activity by which new entities are incessantly formed out of older ones, a formless play without which this universe, indeed any universe, could not exist. In his *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*, David Ray Griffin labels these as the "personal" and "impersonal"ultimates respectively, a metaphysics which purports to do justice to both the moral injunctions and loving concern of a transcendent deity and our immersion within a transcendental and all-pervading divine reality.[29]

And yet on spiritual and moral grounds, the thought of Levinas eats away at any such theological compromise. Indeed, a certain "desacralization and disenchantment" of the world, in contrast with Griffin's championing of a reenchantment, is advocated by Levinas as a necessary condition for preserving the integrity of the holy along with the indispensability of the ethical life.[30] For him it is the very absence of the spiritual from what is tangible and perceptible around us which propels us toward the one avenue where the Holy can be discerned: namely in our moral service toward others. This sets flame to the ecstasies of the sacred, or any non-personal ultimate in which the mystic or contemplative may find a rest and repose from the struggles of the everyday world. And this makes it difficult, if not impossible, to join his "religion for adults" to many other faiths, particularly those which advocate an immanent understanding of the divine.[31] Levinas's theology simply refuses to play nice with others.

In an article employing the thought of Levinas in order to justify the claims of Mahayana Buddhism, Wing-Cheuk Chan argues that the development of the Mahayana from out of earlier forms of Buddhism is a movement from the generalizing statements of ontology to the commitments of ethics.[32] This is to assume that ideas like the *sunyata* or "the void"—one influential version of which holds that nothing in

25 Hartshorne and Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God*, 302-306.
26 "Ethics and Spirit," from Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays On Judaism*.
27 "Desacralization and Disenchantment," from Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*.
28 Griffin, *Deep Religious Pluralism*.
29 "The Two Ultimates and the Religions," chapter 7 of Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism*.
30 "Desacralization and Disenchantment," from Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*.
31 This is the title of the second essay in Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*.
32 Chan, "The Primacy of the Other."

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the universe enjoys a strictly independent existence—never comprise an ontology of their own.[33] Part of Levinas's polemic against ontology from Plato to Heidegger is its tendency to mediate our encounter with the individual through the universal, to always envision the other in light of some more primordial and underlying reality.[34] A rustic cabin hanging off a mountainside in an Asian landscape painting is situated against a broad stretch of empty sky or shrouded in white mist, an image signifying the world of phenomena as arising out of the ineffable *Tao* or Buddha-nature. This formless divinity in which we are enveloped is to a Levinasian perspective yet one more version of the sacred. To desacralize in the interests of sharpening the moral life means collecting the good away from all that is around and beneath us, and placing it solely behind the other to whom we owe our attention and assistance.

I have little doubt that some readers may question why a highly particular set of themes in a single faith should at all present a quandary for those wanting to belong to more than one religion. To which I respond as follows: if it is to be meaningful, a mutual religious belonging must respect real and abiding distinctions—including those teachings or features of each tradition which may not be so easily shareable. While it is certainly possible to practice the commonalities while quarantining the differences, we may ask the point of such a piecemeal take on religion—an approach the orthodox of each faith would understandably deem as frivolous. For some of us, it is precisely these distinctive aspects which are often the most valuable, but also which may not harmonize so well with the central tenets of other faiths. I have employed one set of themes from my own religious and cultural inheritance as an example of this.

I have never reconciled my infatuation with contemplative and experiential sects like Zen Buddhism and *Advaita Vedanta* with what I now find most compelling about Judaism. I have figures like Buber and Levinas to thank for this, among others. And thank them, I certainly do. For the honesty of an unreconciled sharing of two or more spiritual proclivities is better than either an illusory synthesis or a facile harmony which fails to retain each religion in its full uniqueness and integrity. It is in the founding text of my own tradition, after all, wherein the prophets admonish against exclaiming "Peace, peace; when there is no peace."[35]

5 Conclusion: A real and vital opposition

I have never given the rest of Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels the same attention as I did the first, nor have I ever read a word of the now voluminous extension of this science fiction universe penned by his son and a co-author.[36] And yet I couldn't help but notice that in the very last of Herbert's novels, the one written just before his death, there is one religion that has remained unchanged over the long eons of of time since the present. I take some pride in the fact that this one stubborn faith community is the Jews.[37]

A certain stubbornness within our religions means avoiding the temptation to dilute all that can be found within our inherited theological traditions. It will not work to suggest with the Perennial Philosophy that the differences may be acknowledged, but only as belonging to the surface, and that the world's religions converge on the interior or esoteric level. The Traditionalist version of perennialism may insist on the importance of adhering to the entirety of a religious practice. But in placing the Neo-Platonic One at the core of all faiths is to press for the values of a self-transcending contemplation over a world-engaging ethics. In *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Frithjof Schuon explains that morality is perfectly appropriate to a rather limited place in the scheme of things, and does not reach to where our essential self may identify

33 Scholars of Indian thought sometimes interpret Nagarjuna, a major formulator of the concept of the *sunyata*, as critiquing all prior ontological systems while offering no positive ontology of his own. Other versions of the *sunyata,* however, are indeed statements about the ultimate nature of things. For a lucid and succinct exposition on this, see Ram-Prasad, *Eastern Philosophy*, 30-33.

34 See "Is Ontology Fundamental?", one of Levinas's earliest critiques of Heideggerian ontology in favor of an ethics of the Other.

35 Jeremiah 6:14 (KJV). But also: Jeremiah 8:11, and Ezekiel 13:10, 13:16.

36 Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson, respectively.

37 *Chapterhouse: Dune*. Although the first novel does mention a sect called the Talmudic Zabur, showing an Islamic influence on one form of Judaism.

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with the supreme.[38] This is as far from the Judaism represented by the mature Buber and the thought of Levinas as one can go, and its influence upon me will not allow it. Judaism is certainly not the only religion with an ethics, and, as I have stated throughout, it possesses an ecstatic mysticism on par with what other faiths have to offer. What I have argued above is not the impossibility of a multiple religious belonging, but merely the difficulty of involving ourselves in more than one denomination when we are attentive to the most distinctive themes within each.

There is a question of whether or not Herbert's depiction of the Jews reflects an appreciation for them or a bit of antisemitism: his admiration for a venerable and ancient people or a disdain for their alleged clannishness. According to the author of one keen essay in the *Jewish Review of Books*, it is a mixture of both.[39] But I will not engage this topic.

Instead, I will run my imagination a bit and fantasize that perhaps in the centuries and millennia of attempted mutual religious belongings, that which would eventually result in new and synthetic faiths like Buddhislamic and Mahayana Christianity, there appeared the occasional pockets of resistance—the recognition of a real and vital opposition of some kinds of spiritual philosophies against others.[40] In one great departure from my teenage years, I now see this kind of future as far more interesting.[41]

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38 Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, 51-52.

39 Weingrad, "Jews of Dune."

40 In the second appendix to *Dune* (503-504), Herbert does write of a few anti-eucenemical movements pitted against the attempt to reconcile the teachings of these hybrid religions.

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