

# Action and Contemplation as Categories of Religious Understanding\*

*Avijnātam Vijānatam Vijnātam Avijānatām*—Ken. U., II, 3<sup>1</sup>  
*Apolō Tēn Sophian Tōn Sophōn, Kai Tēn Sunesin Tōn*  
*Sunetōn Athetēsō*—I Cor. 1:19<sup>2</sup>

R. PANIKKAR

Action and contemplation have, since time immemorial and under one name or another, been invariant religious categories. Lest we become lost in the jungle of meanings and interpretations of the various religious traditions of the world, it may suffice for our purpose to use these words in designating two fundamental human attitudes: the centrifugal and the centripetal. The first is predominantly material exterior, 'realistic', historical and temporal; the second, predominantly spiritual, internal, 'idealistic', archetypal and atemporal. The active mood checks, interferes, experiments, reasons; it is mostly pragmatic, and tests an idea by its fruits. The contemplative mood observes, sees, experiences, intuits; it is mostly theoretical, and accepts an idea by its own radiance and power. The active is existential; truth is conquered (in making it). The contemplative is essential; truth is discovered (in the *simplex intuitus*).

Our contention here will be threefold:

1. To uncover the paradoxical fact that although contemplation, by and large, has been considered within the respective traditions to be a superior form of religious life, it has hardly played its incumbent role in the interreligious dialogue;
2. To demonstrate the valuable and indispensable use of the contemplative approach in the religious encounter, by means of two examples from the Hindu and Christian traditions;

\* This article was published in *Main Currents in Modern Thought*, 1973, Vol. 30, No. 2, and is printed here with permission.

<sup>1</sup> 'It is not understood by those who understand: it is understood by those who do not understand.'

<sup>2</sup> 'I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise, and nullify the understanding of the understander.'

3. To suggest that both approaches are necessary but insufficient, if taken in isolation; complementary, if rightly understood; leading to a cross-religious fertilization which may be one of the major hopes for mankind today.

## The Primacy of Action

*Yathā-cārī tathā bhavati*—B.U. IV, 4, 5<sup>3</sup>

*Ean mē peritmēthēte...ou dynasthe sōthēnai*—Acts 15:1<sup>4</sup>

### *The Results of Contemporary Events*

Men today have come much closer to each other, not only externally but also regarding a deeper understanding of the different cultures and religions of the world. This results from modern events, like the spread of a 'scientific' mentality along with the rise of technology (which makes possible mass communication) and the end of a certain colonial period in history, i.e., as fruit of historical and cultural actions generally. Every man lives in and from a human environment, which we may call tradition, culture or religion.

Gone, by and large, are those attitudes of arrogance and pride which used to make almost impossible any religious dialogue and cultural understanding. Ill-will and even antipathies are also waning in the world of intercultural and interreligious relations. Sincere respect and a genuine thirst for true tolerance, on the other hand, are waxing. All this is brought about by the historical fact of the unavoidable contacts among the peoples of the world, who can no longer afford to live in isolation. The problem of understanding the other becomes a burning issue in our society, East and West. One of the most positive features of our tortured present is the felt need for a truly human culture which would also make room for an almost indefinite number of sub-cultures with their respective variations. We breathe in everywhere a desire for tolerance, respect, sympathy and freedom. To be sure, we differ in understanding what respect or freedom may mean, where they are to be found, and even more, on the proper means leading to these values; nevertheless, a common language is emerging.

Yet most of these results are, by and large, the fruit of the almost compulsory situation in which man finds himself due to a certain historical dynamism, whatever the theory we cherish in order to explain the fact that the world is becoming one. Scholars, thinkers, writers, men of letters, as well as men of religion, simply follow the times. Most of the prophets in all fields are men of action.

In a word, action and the active mood dominate the modern scene. In the encounter of cultures and religions, the events themselves and the men who direct them play the primary role. But although

<sup>3</sup> 'As one acts, as one behaves, so does one become.'

<sup>4</sup> '... nisi circumcidamini . . . non potestis salvari.' 'Except you be not circumcised . . . you cannot be saved.'

mankind has come a long way and may be marching in the right direction, there is still an enormous and fundamental task to perform. It may be reserved for a more contemplative approach.

### *Limitations of the Active Approach*

In spite of the hope that human relations are improving, we cannot overlook the fact that we are far from a lasting and real understanding of each other. No amount of good will and sympathy, important as these ingredients are, will suffice. There is an underlying and unavoidable theoretical factor still to be considered. A change of mind has to follow an incipient change of heart.

For example, Christians feel outraged when Hitler and Stalin are characterized as baptized Christians; Hindus are uneasy when reminded that Gandhi was killed by an orthodox Hindu; Indians become weary when faced with the fact that Hindu and Muslim fall upon each other the moment they are free to do so. The problems of Ireland, Israel, South Africa, Vietnam, Uganda and many more are far from being explained merely by saying that some people want to dominate others. Are we prepared to accept the statement that over one hundred million American citizens are all criminals because they have supported the Vietnam War? Are all white South Africans inhuman because they put up with apartheid? Are all the Jews and Arabs, Irish and Russians, Chinese and Spaniards responsible for the respective situations they tolerate? Which human group—whether religious, cultural or historical—has only 'white pages' in its records? Not all is a question of personal animosity or individual greed.

There seems to be a built-in double standard for judging one's self and the other. First, we judge the situation of our group (of whatever kind) from *within*—from an attitude of participation and concern, having an insight (a contemplative vision) into the inspiring sources of the particular community to which we belong. But we judge others from *without*—deducing what they are from what they do (according, of course, to our own criteria of judgment), attributing their actions to their particular group, culture or religion. In judging our own group or tradition, we consider its positive values as the decisive criterion for interpretation; we judge what we are not from what we do, but from what we are supposed to be. Therefore, when Christians persecute, they are bad Christians, but when Marxists persecute, they are characterized (by Christians) as behaving in ways consistent with their beliefs.

But the misunderstanding goes even deeper, to the very doctrines. Can a Muslim be convinced that the Christian trinity is not tri-theism? Can a Christian agree that Hindu advaita is not monism? Can a humanist accept that Islam is more than just a theocratic form, or a Buddhist acknowledge that the Jewish idea of elect people is more than religious caste-ism? These random examples signal the enormous task. The problem transcends the realm of good will, desire to understand, mutual respect and sympathy (important and necessary as all these factors are), and is further exacerbated by very real commitments to one's community, to one's destiny, duty and *karma*.

## *Features of the Active Mood*

It would, however, be a distortion of the true perspective if we were only to underline the deficiencies of the active approach, for without its thrust, the world would still be living in compartmentalized and narcissistically self-satisfied little boxes, each thinking itself to be the whole universe and in possession of the whole truth. Were it not for the pressures of history and man's active spirit, brahmins, pandits, scribes, priests, and professors of all kinds would still be convinced that they held the keys to every human problem and the property rights over any lasting and transcendent value. Only the incursions of one group into another have brought about eclectic and syncretistic attitudes, which were the starting points for more permanent symbioses and syntheses among different cultural worlds and religions.

In the encounter of religions, the active approach seeks completion not by going deeper into oneself (with the consequent danger of finding only what one has previously projected) but by looking for fulfilment outside, or rather beyond, ourselves. The assumption is our own radical insufficiency; in point of fact, the active person is more inclined towards dialogue and learning from others than is the contemplative spirit, which instinctively mistrusts such methods, and looks for truth inwardly. This implies that the active mood is inclined towards a humble recognition that the other may also have something important to contribute: I do not assume that I have access to the universal range of human experience.

This is precisely what prompts the active spirit to its excursions, and spurs its curiosity into unknown realms. The active spirit certainly wants to dominate, but for this it has both to understand and to compromise. The history of man—and especially the history of religions—offers ample testimony to this fact, and exonerates us from pursuing the argument further.

## **The Primacy of Contemplation**

*tam yathā yathopāsate bhavati*—S.B.X,5,2,20<sup>5</sup>

*Ti dōsei anthrōpos antallagma tēs psychēs autoū*—Matt. 16:26<sup>6</sup>

### *The Contemplative Approach*

Assuming I succeed in understanding the other as other, this is insufficient, for the other does not understand himself as 'other', but as self. Therefore, I shall not really understand the other until

<sup>5</sup> 'One becomes that which one meditates upon.' Cf. also, 'He who knows (sees) the supreme Brahman becomes Brahman.' (Mund. U. III, 2, 29) Interestingly enough, it was this passage which Anquetil Duperron, the first translator of the Upanishads into Latin in 1801, put as the motto of the whole work: 'Quisque Deum intelligit, Deus fit.'

<sup>6</sup> 'Quam dabit homo commutationem pro anima sua?' 'What shall a man give in exchange for his self?' Cf. the previous sentence: 'What will a man gain by winning the whole world, at the cost of his true self?' (NEB)

I am able to perform on the intellectual-spiritual plane a feat similar to the moral injunction: Love your neighbor as your self (not *as* your neighbor but as your *self*). Traditional Christian morality used to say that this is only possible under the influence of divine grace, for man's 'natural' disposition is incapable of such a transcendence. We may add, similarly, that on the intellectual plane this is possible only if we transcend the field of reason and, without denying it, reach the realm of true contemplation.

In order to understand the other as he understands himself I have to become the other, viz., share in his experience, participate in his particular world. How can a Christian understand a Hindu if he does not become a Hindu? A Christian may perhaps understand a kind of objectified 'Hinduism', but this need not tally with what the Hindu accepts and believes as his Hinduism. Living Hinduism is constitutively linked with the Hindu understanding of it, which includes the Hindu's self-understanding.

And conversely, how can a Hindu enter into the world of Christian belief if he does not hold as true that same belief? Can I understand you if I think that what you hold to be true is wrong? I may perhaps understand you *better* than yourself, but certainly not *as* yourself. Or, to put it more philosophically, the belief of the believer belongs essentially to the religious phenomenon; it remains opaque for the observer until in one way or another it also becomes the belief of the observer.<sup>7</sup>

With the active categories, this enterprise is impossible. I cannot be in your place, just as my body cannot occupy the place your body occupies. If I am an active member of a particular religious group and that community embodies for me the concrete way towards my own ultimate fulfilment, I cannot belong to a parallel group. We may meet, like parallel lines, in the infinite, we may share in the same mystical body, but we should not blur the distinctions and commitments of concrete human groups and sociological bodies.

Now, contemplation means precisely the overcoming of the spatio-temporal categories as the only possible way of being consciously in the world and of participating in the ongoing process of existence. Contemplation does not seek to understand rationally, nor is it an act of the imagination; it is actual participation in the reality one contemplates, real sharing in the things one 'sees', dynamic identification with the truth one realizes. Contemplation is the actual building of the temple of reality, wherein the onlooker is equally part and parcel of the whole construction. This may be the reason why concentration, i.e., the factual crystallization of what is—the construction of the center of reality, the overcoming of the mere psychological state—is

<sup>7</sup> Cf. my forthcoming study, "Verstehen als Uberzeugtsein," in the fourth volume of the *Neue Anthropologie*, edited by H. G. Gadamer and P. Vogler, Stuttgart, 1974. One of the main thrusts of the author's ongoing Seminar at the University of California concerns this problem, which here is simply indicated.

in all traditions one of the most important features of the contemplative mode. Contemplation implies a vision of the totality wherein the contemplator becomes the contemplated reality. Nothing is then more obvious than that contemplation does not exclusively depend on the will of man or the nature of things. It requires a higher harmony as an integrating force. Contemplation is an ontological category.<sup>8</sup>

True contemplation is thus an experience, not an experiment. We may deny the truth-content of such an act, refuse to accept it or even refer to it as pathological, but if we speak of contemplation at all we have to take this claim seriously and deal with it accordingly. If there is any possible bridge between the different religious traditions (by which we understand ultimate forms or styles of life) only the contemplative can be in two or more such traditions, and thus perform a mediatorial and integrating role.<sup>9</sup> The fact that not all men have access to such an experience does not deny the possibility or even the plausibility of such an experience, since there is hardly anyone who has not been called upon to transcend his own limitations by an experience of conversion into 'something'—or rather 'some body'—else which will maintain alive his constitutive human openness.

Contemplation is not, properly speaking, an approach; neither can it be used as a tool for anything else or manipulated in favour of any cause, however good. Contemplation is an end in itself—that superior life of the spirit which certainly does not ignore or despise the life of matter, of the senses and of reason (for it is based upon them), but which transcends them. It is irreducible to anything else, like any primary reality.

This thesis may be expounded by means of two religious traditions which form the background of these reflections; Hinduism and Christianity.

### *The Nature of Karman*

No term is more central, more universal and more expressive of Indian religious traditions than *karman*; all forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and also many forms of Parsi and animistic religions, in one way or another, recognize its law and its power.

A certain idea of *karman* links it with reincarnation, and thus seems to deny the irrepeatable dignity of the individual, and the uniqueness of man's personal life on earth. As such, it seems radically opposed to any Christian interpretation of man and reality, and thus

<sup>8</sup> Among my studies on this subject are 'The Supreme Experience: The Ways of West and East.' *New Dimensions in Religious Experience*. G. Devine, ed., N. Y. (Alba House), 1970, 69-73 and "The Ultimate Experience," *Indian Ecclesiastical Studies*, Bangalore, No. 1, (Jan. 1971), 18-39.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. "A Multireligious Experience: An Objectified Autobiographical Fragment." *Anglican Theological Review*, Vol. LII, No. 4, Oct. 1971, 219-237, where I try to explicate the possible meaning of being a Hindu and a Christian at the same time and in an orthodox-traditional way.

a stumbling block between Christianity and Indian religions. One of the reasons for this impasse is the predominantly active approach which is taken to the question. A contemplative approach, on the other hand, may yield unexpected possibilities for a cross-religious understanding, and even for a mutual fecundation.<sup>10</sup>

To begin, the contemplative approach will have no difficulty in disentangling *karman* from its different expressions; it will not identify that mysterious force or reality with any particular doctrine. If one has had insight into what *karman* stands for and what its law expresses, one will not be satisfied with any given explanation, being aware that concepts are meaningful only within the particular context that has given them birth. This being so, in our discussion about *karman* we may think our partner's explanation is wrong or his integration of the concept into a coherent world-view is weak, but the discussion is possible at all only because both sides claim access to the insight of that reality, *karman*. This insight gives us the right to discuss, and the strength of our convictions. We know what we are talking about because our talk is about 'something' which has been disclosed to us prior to our talking about it. This attitude does not imply that there is a mysterious 'thing in itself' independent of our access to it, but neither does it imply that a mere subjective opinion is all there is. It implies that my conception of a 'thing' belongs to reality and even to the 'thing'. But because the same is true for you, it also implies that neither my vision nor yours is the total reality.

Thus a contemplative insight into the nature of *karman* will immediately separate it from the idea of reincarnation, which may be a way of exemplifying *karman*, but is by no means the same thing. If there is anything *karman* excludes, it is private property over 'my' life; to consider the 'next' life still as 'mine' amounts to the very negation of *karman*.

The central idea of *karman* relates to the cosmic solidarity of the whole creation, to the irrepeatable and unique value of every act, which never falls in the void or remains barren and without effect. It relates to the ultimate community of all beings, and it expresses also the idea of finiteness and contingency, for no being can escape the law of *karman*, i.e., interrelatedness with and responsibility to the whole universe. In contemporary terms, we might say that *karman* stands for the vision of the *unity* as well as the *contingency* of all empirical (or created) reality.

*Karman* is the link which connects us with reality, and restores our sense of *unity* with the whole universe, for all beings are, without exception, governed by the same cosmic law. This law is not a mere causal chain, for there are forms of dependence which belong to *karman* and are not necessarily causal, unless we expand the concept

<sup>10</sup> I may be allowed to draw the materials of the following paragraphs, as well as the supporting authorities, from various of my studies, among them "The Law of Karman and the Historical-Dimension of man," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Jan. 1972), 25-43.

of cause to any process of interdependence. Essential in this view is the universality of such a law. All that is, precisely because it is, has a relatedness to everything else. The chain of being is not truly a chain, for it also liberates; the communion of all existence is not exactly communion, for there is also strife; the unity of the universe is not precisely unity, for it is also disunity. All are *karman*. To discover how *karman* acts is the acme of wisdom; it is realization.

*Karman* is also the expression of the *contingency* of all beings. It expresses their interrelatedness and thus their unity precisely because no individual being—nor even the entire universe—is complete, full, perfect, achieved. The world is unfinished and, in this sense, infinite. It is this infinitude which accounts for freedom, and the imprevisible movement of all that is. Thus *karman* stands both for the unity and the freedom of the contingent creature. This freedom is ultimate, for there is nothing beyond, behind or more fundamental than *karman*, which is the very coefficient of creatureliness. *Karman* is not a physical law, which has to follow an intellectual or mathematical pattern (thus making the universe a logical or mathematical prison); it is the ultimate law of the universe, governed by the very behavior of the universe itself. *Karman* vouches for and makes possible a real freedom which allows us to jump 'outside' the realm of 'being' (of the universe) and reach the 'other' shore—which is neither 'other' nor a 'shore'. Here the freedom is so absolute that it is a liberation from being itself (*nirvana*, the Buddhists would say), for when *karman* is 'burnt', being is volatilized in the jump 'outside' existence; only nothing reaches Nothingness. *Karman* is coextensive with existence.

Significantly, it is in speaking about *karman* that the otherwise sober and concise Upanishads seem to open up not only to esoteric meanings but also to a more cordial and holistic approach to the mystery of life and death.<sup>11</sup> This is in point of fact the subject of the public dialogue wherein Jāratkāva Arthabhaga puts five questions to the famous sage Yājñavalkya: (1) What are the different organs of reality and how is reality modified by them? (2) What is the death of death, if all is mortal? (3) What is the destiny of *prāna*, the vital breath, when a man dies? (4) What is the only thing which does not abandon a man when he dies? (5) What becomes of the person, i.e., what is the mystery of life? It was at this moment, when speaking about the cosmic law connecting all the elements of the universe, that they went away hand in hand and in secret began to discuss and praise *karman*. The whole context helps us to realize that what is involved is not a philosophical subtlety but a fundamental query concerning the nature of the whole universe. The nature of *karman* is not open to mere dialectics; it is revealed in the ultimate dialogue with the master, in personal meditation, in the contemplation of the mystery of temporal existence. Many doctrinal problems of course remain to be articulated, but the primacy belongs to a certain intuition of this ultimate mystery.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. BU. III, 2.

Seen under this perspective, the nature of *karman* may even help to explain as fundamental a Christian insight as the connection of Adam and Adam's sin, as well as the relation of Christ and Christ's death and resurrection with the whole of mankind.

### *The Identity of Jesus*

A major stumbling block, for the other side, is the claim Christians lay upon Jesus as the unique savior, the only name, the single way.<sup>12</sup> It is here again that a contemplative mood might allow us to overcome the dilemma of either diluting the Christian message or making it a tool of domination over all the other religious traditions of the world.

If we put the question (as Jesus did) of who is this Jesus about whom such claims are made, we discover that the active approach, based mainly on spatio-temporal and thus logical categories, has tried to answer the query by means of a geographical and historical *identification* of Jesus: He was that young Jew, born of Mary, who lived in Palestine twenty centuries ago, died under Pontius Pilate, and still has historical and sociological significance. How to attribute to that man all that Christian belief affirms of Jesus has been one of the crucial problems of Christian theology: How is that man one of the Trinity, how was he before Abraham, how was he the Messiah, the Redeemer of the whole world, the *Alpha* and *Omega*, and thus the only Savior, Way and Name?

The contemplative approach will not minimize these problems, but will stress another starting point: not the *identification* of *what* Jesus did or is, but the *identity* of *who* he is. Now the *who* of Jesus may or may not be separable from his *what*, but it is certainly not identifiable with it. The *who* of Jesus is only disclosed in the personal encounter of faith, in the interpersonal relationship of finding a *thou* answering to the call (prayer) of the I; it will be found when the *metanoia*, the change of perspective and roles, takes place so that Jesus becomes the I and the seeker the thou, so that the Master's 'I am' becomes something more than a metaphysical or psychological statement. Then the Christian will utter: 'I live no more but Christ lives in me'.<sup>13</sup>

The *who* whom the Christian discovers may have been revealed to him in and through the *what* that tradition has handed down to him, but he will not confuse the two. For example, in the central Christian mystery, the Eucharist, he will recognize Christ's *Real Presence*, yet he will not believe he is eating the proteins or drinking the haemoglobin of Jesus of Nazareth, for he knows that communion

<sup>12</sup> Among the author's studies on this subject are "Christianity and World Religions," *Christianity*, Patiala (Punjabi Univ.) 1969, 78-127; "The Relation of the Gospels to Hindu Culture and Religion," *Jesus and Man's Hope*, Vol. II, (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary) 1971, 247-261; "Christians and So-called 'Non-Christians,'" *Cross Currents*, XXII, 3 (Summer-Fall) 1972, 281-308.

<sup>13</sup> Gal. 2:20.

is with the real *who*, not with the *what*. Furthermore, in this light we will not say that *what* the Buddhist believes in is *what* the Christian worships; but we can admit that the *who* beneath the Buddhist's compassion or behind the Muslim's surrender is not other than the *who* of the Christian's *agape*.

If we apply the contemplative mood to the first question posed about Jesus, which concerns the trinitarian and the non-trinitarian basic understanding of the Christian and the Muslim, we may begin by emphasizing the traditional *perichōrēsis* or *circuminsessio* that puts in theological terms the staggering affirmation of Jesus: 'Philip, he who sees me sees the Father'<sup>14</sup>. Our main point refers to the disclosure of the *who* in an actual personal relationship, not to the crystallized concept or even to the intelligibility of the personal name. The personal relationship cannot be objectified without ceasing to be that personal relation. The *who* of the Muslim, assuming he is directing his prayer to Allah, is not the *what* of his theology, but the living reality with which he believes himself to be connected in a special way, and with which he enters into a very specific relationship. It is the ultimate 'I' of his thou-consciousness unveiled to him in and through the Qu'ran. We have no criterion whatsoever outside his personal world to affirm or deny the identity with the *who* of the Christian.

In the dialogue with the Hindu or Buddhist, the question of the *who* needs also an immediate qualification. Obviously, the *what* of Jesus is not the *what* of Krishna—in spite of the many resemblances which we may find in favour of a merely psychological or archetypal theory regarding the origins of religious cults. But neither do we need to entertain an anthropomorphic view. A personal relationship is any free and conscious mutual relationship which wholly or partially constitutes the existence of the persons who emerge by this act. We have used the personal pronouns (which happen to be the most universal linguistic symbols), but we do not assume necessarily a particular conception of a person. The I-Thou relationship does not need to be seen under the angle of two separate beings exchanging the overflow of their lives. We could equally consider the personal relationship in a more radical way, so that nothing of the I would be there if the thou were not also there.

In order to show the possibilities of the contemplative approach in the encounter of religions, just as we have quoted Yājñavalkya on *karman*, let us quote the Evangelist's witness about Jesus: 'He is not here, for he is risen', said the angel,<sup>15</sup> explaining with real insight what the Resurrection is all about to the courageous women, bewildered at the sight of the empty tomb. Avoiding the theology of the Resurrection, a contemplative insight into one of its dimensions might be: It is good and necessary that I go, that I disappear, otherwise the Spirit will not come;<sup>16</sup> otherwise you will make of me an

<sup>14</sup> Jn 14: 9.

<sup>15</sup> Matt: 28, 6; cf. Lk. 24: 6.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jn 16: 7.

idol, you will limit me to one idea of interpretation, in spite of my repeatedly saying that when the Son of Man comes he will not be here or there, but will be like the lightning which appears in the East and West alike.<sup>17</sup>

When it is said 'He is risen', we may be allowed to understand that he is not here, he cannot be located with geographical categories or within merely historical parameters. He is above limited human horizons, above theological and philosophical speculations, well above any kind of worship—and yet he is present in his absence, and we do not need to discover him in order for him to receive our acts. This Christ is certainly the living Jesus, yet this in no way prevents *him* from being present and active under as many different *whats* as there are religious traditions.

Not all problems are answered if the contemplative joins mind and heart with the active approach, but a breakthrough may be in sight.

### Religious Understanding

*Loke'smin dvividhā nistha pura proktā mayā'nagha jñāna-yogena sāmkhyanām karma-yogena yoginām*—BG, III, 3-5<sup>18</sup>

*Ou pās o legōn moi kyrie kyrie, eiseleusetai eis tēn basileian tōn ouranōn, all' o poiōn to thelēma tou patros mou . . .*—Matt. 7, 21<sup>19</sup>

### Categories and Methods

The contemplative sees, he intuits the truth, he attains a certain immediacy which makes of him a mystic; but the mystic ceases to be such the moment he speaks. Speech irradiates his experience, but also dissipates it. The Word is the Firstborn of the Father, the First-born of the Universal Order, but words are broken fragments of that Word, and each human language is only one channel, a given system incarnating a particular cultural and religious world.

How is the contemplative to express himself if he can do so only in the language of his time and place? Each word he utters will sound to him as a lie the moment that his speech is taken literally. On the other hand, the active method is equally as insufficient as it is necessary. Without it there would be little interaction, but by itself it achieves understanding only at the heavy price of the surrender of one of the partners, who must submit to the rules of the encounter proposed by

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Matt. 24: 23-27.

<sup>18</sup> In this world a twofold foundation  
was proclaimed by me of old, O blameless one:  
The discipline of wisdom for men of reason;  
the discipline of action for active men.

<sup>19</sup> *Non omnis, qui dicit mihi, Domine, Domine intrabit in regnum caelorum; sed qui facit voluntatem Patris mei, . . .* 'Not everyone who calls me "Lord, Lord" will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father . . .'

the other, thereby reducing its role to serving the interests of the other. To ask, for instance, how Christianity can be better known in the Arabic world, and how it could learn from the Muslim experience so as to benefit from the positive riches of Muslim spirituality, would be one such example.

What is needed is a twofold approach. On the one hand we need the contemplative, steeped in more than one religious world, who has achieved this wider experience not as an interesting experiment but as an excruciating yet liberating personal experience, and also at the same time has the necessary skill and intelligence to express himself in more than one theological and religious system. We need the contemplative, further, to show us that, in the encounter of religions and cultures, harmony does not imply uniformity, and metaphysical oneness does not imply administrative union. Precisely because the contemplative vision discovers the underlying oneness beneath the variegated multiformity of things and appearances, it does not tend to render them uniform. External similarity is not essential for the recognition of a deeper unity. The contemplative, therefore, will not push for one single administrative ecclesiastical body, but will emphasize ecclesial and sacramental unity.

The contemplative will also offer a salutary corrective to the haste and desire of the active approach for tangible results. Many frustrations appear because we tend both to overlook the factor of time and to overvalue it. Peace, harmony and understanding cannot be achieved overnight. On the other hand, if the hoped-for results are delayed, the contemplative insight will prevent us from being discouraged. It is but natural that the spiritual realization of an interior oneness is closer at hand than its external manifestations. Moreover, the heart and mind of the true contemplative hold more than a private dream: It is an anticipation of a real state of affairs. The contemplative has thus a priestly-prophetic role: He mediates between issues previously irreconcilable, and anticipates a new age by realizing in his inner being what one day may also have historical repercussions.

But there is another task to be performed. Alone, the contemplative will easily overlook or neglect other important dimensions of reality. Man also needs systems of thought, structures for action, and institutions to live in. These are the province of the active approach. Therefore, the contemplative and the man of action have to be involved in a dialogue (not a dialectic encounter), in order that the contributions of both may play their part in the growth of man into the fullness of his own being.

What will be the criterion coordinating the active and the contemplative approaches? How is mere understanding going to affect actual life, how is active interference going to modify the contemplative insight? Acknowledging a certain transcendental unity of all creeds or the relative validity of all religions, important as this step may be, does not solve the problem of a divided mankind, for the ideological

aspect of the different traditions may be at variance or even in conflict. The two methods are complementary, but the complementarity cannot be articulated in any strategic or programmatic way.

### *An On-Going Process*

Recognition of the fact that we are in an on-going process of which we are not the masters amounts to an awareness of the radical relativity of our human situation, from which we can in no way escape. What we can do is to become more and more aware of our situation and thus of our insufficiency, maintaining ourselves in an attitude of hope, a mood of expectancy. It is this attitude that makes the interreligious dialogue and the common search for truth one of the purest religious acts today. It entails not only confidence in my neighbor (impossible without love and understanding), but also faith in something which transcends us both.

By way of summing up this complex problematic, we return to the two mottoes of this study.

Any ultimate problem—reality, truth, Brahman, the mystery of life, existence, human nature, God—is certainly 'not understood by those who understand', for their understanding of the mystery is reduced to their capacity to understand, and is thus incomplete. What does this mean? It means we know that our knowledge is broken, fragmentary and distorted; we know also that the refractions of our angles may be corrected by the diffractions of our brother's. We know that we have no right to despise anything, or discard anyone. We know that we must renounce the pronouncement of ultimates and final affirmations (including the ones made here), so as not to reject those who make them.

In such an awareness, action and contemplation can, as they must, join hands in an act of cosmic (or human, or divine) trust. No man, no religion, no mode has the right to set the rules for this encounter. We must all recognize our insufficiency; this humble but true recognition may then put us on the right path, leading towards a new step in human growth.